

The Young Norman Mailer

1923 - 1955

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Part One

The two people who brought Norman Mailer into existence met at a modest resort lodge in Lakewood, New Jersey, in April of 1920. ^{Jan or Feb} Isaac Barnett Mailer, a twenty-nine year old South African national, had been discharged from the South African command of the British army in London the previous August. An accountant who had done duty as a quartermaster, he was in the United States under the sponsorship of his brother-in-law, David Kessler, a successful candy manufacturer in Brooklyn and husband of Barney's slightly older sister, Anne. The Kesslers had rented space at the lodge throughout the winter while Anne recovered slowly from the dreaded influenza that had ravaged the country in 1919, and were introducing their relative and house guest for the first time to the Schneider family--proprietors of the unassuming kosher-menu boarding house--and, most pointedly, to the two unmarried Schneider daughters, Rose and Fanny.

Within a month Fanny, the youngest of four daughters and then about twenty eight years old, was exchanging letters with the man everyone called Barney: he from New Orleans, where he had found work as an accountant with the United States Shipping Board; she from Long Branch, New Jersey, where she and her family lived and where, that summer season, they had just begun to lease and operate the Phelandro Hotel. Barney returned to stay with the Kesslers the following September, pursued his suit with Fan successfully, and, when he departed in October to a still better job in Milwaukee, was secretly engaged to be married. The two developed their relationship, and eventually their wedding plans, in an extended, tirelessly detailed correspondence that--broken by one dramatic visit home from Barney--lasted for nine months. Returning finally to Brooklyn in late July of 1921, Barney embarked upon a quickly successful job search in New York city, spent a great deal of time in Long Branch, and worked out with Fan and her family the final nuptial arrangements.

The two were married on February 12, 1922, at the Broadway Central Hotel in Manhattan. After a week-long honeymoon in Atlantic City, they moved into the Schneider family home at 15 Morris Avenue in Long Branch, where Fan re-immersed herself in the hotel business while Barney commuted daily to New York. The first of their two children, Norman Kingsley Mailer, was born in Monmouth Memorial Hospital in Long Branch on the morning of January 31, 1923, just two weeks short of the couple's first

Mr. Reception

wedding anniversary.¹ It was a high forceps, breech delivery birth, accomplished after twelve hours of extremely difficult labor. When the tiny mother--the diminutive Fan stood no more than 4' 10"--was delivered of her seven pound infant, she had weathered the first great crisis of her married life. It was to be neither the last nor, by any measure, the worst.

Which is not to suggest that the prospect of crisis, in itself, was new or especially intimidating to Fan; she had grown up in a family and a community that identified pessimism as worldly wisdom, and that spoke routinely of the worst being yet to come.

Crisis-directed though it was, however, such dark thinking did not in her world serve to polarize family members. On the contrary, a shared sense of life's impossible difficulties was a more or less conscious bonding device that served to bring loved ones together in united alliance against the forces of external adversity. But the crises that would begin to punctuate the lives of Fan and Barney and their children--a daughter, Barbara Jane, was born in 1927-- were of a kind new to Fan: newer than sex, newer even than childbirth. These last, after all, she had known about, and knew that they would one day come to her. In many ways she had looked forward to them.

¹In the family, the baby's names were recorded as Nachum Malech (literally "King"), but the birth certificate reads Norman Kingsley Mailer.

What was brand-new to her was the idea of living with someone who led two completely separate lives: one of them all surface, conventionally respectable, conventionally intimate; the other one underground, fantasy-driven, totally narcissistic, and ultimately criminal. Unheard of to Fan though it was, this was exactly the situation she discovered in her life with Barney, and all the more baffling was the fact that, even in retrospect, there was so little apparent sign of it in the days leading up to the marriage.

Certainly Fan and her close-knit, always vigilant family felt no ominous vibrations when Anne and David Kessler brought Anne's younger brother to Fairview Lodge that April in 1920, carefully steering him toward the unmarried daughters. The couple was matchmaking, obviously, but married people in the Jewish community were always matchmaking; it provided their only comfortable mechanism for relating to single friends and family of marriageable age. The Schneiders were confident that they understood what was happening, and, when they saw that Fan was receptive, the only important thing to be discovered was whether or not Barney was an acceptable prospect. He was Jewish, he came well represented, he was presentable on the face of it. Thus far, so good. What else was there to consider?

A major potential impediment was the problem of money. Fresh from the army, Barney owned no property, claimed no patrimony, and had almost nothing in the way of savings. On their side, the Schneiders were not at all well-secured. The parents' small Morris

Avenue property was heavily encumbered, and they were living from season to season off of a modest grocery/market shop and the resort business. In place of money, however, they had achieved to distinctly significant standing in their community; standing that derived not from their modest mercantile enterprises, but from the fact that Fan's father was the functioning Long Branch Rabbi. His position was unpaid, but in compensation for that it placed Yehudda Schneider and his wife at the very head of the town's small Jewish community. In that position she was honored and he was positively revered; for every testimony confirms the family folklore that what he lacked in shrewdness as a businessman he more than made up for as a rabbi. By 1920, he had administered his wise, caring, even loving stewardship to that Long Branch congregation for over a period of twenty-five years.

Ten years before Norman's birth, Fan's sister Jenny had been married to Harry H. Michelsohn, son of a father who had amassed a small fortune in the liquor business and who had been eager to affiliate his family with the penniless Schneiders. Jenny's older sister, Rebecca, had in 1906 overcome her mother's objections and married a young entrepreneur named Louis Shapiro. By 1923 he was one of the leading Jewish businessmen in Long Branch, had opened his own bank, and was in the act of buying and extravagantly renovating the beautiful old Scarboro Hotel. The Schneiders had something to offer that was to many people more valuable than money, and when Barney Mailer, sponsored by his sister, showed

earlier

that he could attract Fan's attention, the legitimate first question was whether the family would think he was good enough.

Their decision that he was really quite suitable, reached upon due deliberation, stemmed from their conclusion that he would bring a great deal to the family besides money, and that he had every reasonable prospect of making a good living without the need for capital. He was, after all, a man with a profession. The many things that Barney had to offer added up to what could properly be called a touch of class. His family was South African, and the testimony of his sister and her wealthy husband, both themselves immigrants, painted a reasonably accurate family picture of first-generation prosperity. Three of Barney's brothers were still quite young, as were ^{four} three of his sisters, but his brother Louis, just two years his junior, was already showing promise in the South African securities market. Barney's parents were respected and active in the Johannesburg Jewish community, and his mother in particular, once the preliminaries were past, was ardent in flooding the Schneiders with letters proposing alliance and solidarity between the two families. Barney's parents had come out via steerage from Lithuania to Johannesburg--where it is said that the immigration officer had impatiently shortened their unpronounceable name to "Mailer"--but their notable success had been achieved in what the Schneiders identified as the Western European Old World, a legendarily hard nut for penniless Russian Jews to crack. This was impressive to a family that also had set

out from Lithuania, had arrived in steerage at Ellis Island--the father first and the mother and five children later--and that after thirty years was still struggling to get established financially. It was also impressive that Barney, born in Johannesburg, had prepared for his profession in a Johannesburg university--Transvaal University, Class of 1912, he said²--an education that went vastly beyond anything to be matched in Long Branch. Fan's sister Rose, trained in the Trenton Normal School, approved of Barney both as a professional man and a cultural ambassador, and she set such standards for the family.

The newcomer's experience as a world traveller struck them all. He had been posted in London for two years, and had crossed to New York as a cabin passenger on an ocean liner (where he had been one of the organizers of the Third Class grand ball and entertainment program the night before landing.) He talked in a familiar way of countries and cities and experiences that the Schneiders had encountered only in books, and the way he talked was important to his new friends as well. To Long Branch, Barney's South African accent seemed British, and in fact his years in London had given him the opportunity to affect something of an authentic British tone. His speech, that is, seemed elegant to a family whose mother and father still spoke broken English after thirty years, and all but the youngest of whose members had

²Do a check on the university degree, and any record of Barney at the place.

suffered in American streets and schools while having to learn their new language.

Consistent with Barney's speech, surpassing it even in elegance, was the way he dressed. He impressed not only the Schneiders but virtually everyone he met with his special gift for cutting a sartorial figure. Barney was short, perhaps no more than 5' 4" when he met his tiny Fan, with a trim, full-chested build that he outfitted impeccably: carefully chosen suits, always spats, always gloves, a stick and a Homburg hat. He would have looked very fine if he were not particularly handsome, but in fact he was, and handsome in a way that strikingly recalls so far-distant a contemporary as F.Scott Fitzgerald. Barney had a strong, cleft chin, broad brow, arresting eyes, with a fine, if perhaps slightly thin mouth.

Finally, however, the thing that the family must have discussed at greatest length was that he never--not in his looks nor in his speech, not in his background nor perhaps even in his name--betrayed the fact that he was Jewish. Whatever else that might have meant to Fan's people, it certainly meant that they thought he could get around the worst of the rampant anti-Semitism of the time and be free to flourish in his profession. In sum, the family not only saw nothing wrong with this prospective member, they judged him to be one who would both add to and appropriately draw upon the inner strength of the Schneider clan. They were thus ready to welcome him into their ranks.

Yet, when all of that was said, Yehudda Schneider, liking Barney--without exception, the most casual acquaintance always liked Barney--also said that Barney was "The strangest Jew I ever met."³ He said it gently, not only because Yehudda was himself gentle but because he cared so much for his youngest daughter, and Fan, apart from all other pros and cons concerning her suitor, was absolutely crazy about him. That fact alone would probably have decided the question of his suitability in the family's eyes, for by 1920 Fan had made them all aware that she felt they owed her something. The women in the family had always taken up extra burdens when the men found their own too difficult to carry, and Fan had, she felt, labored longest and hardest in this connection. With her brother and two sisters married, and her other sister teaching school, Fan alone was left at home to serve as project manager, planner and supervisor of the hired help season after season in the resorts and inns that her father leased, catering to kosher vacationers from New York and New Jersey.

Indeed, in the summer of 1921, during which her engagement became public and plans for the wedding began to move forward, Fan managed a second season at the rented Phelandro Hotel so successfully that in October, all bills paid, her parents had

³ After Barney's death in 1971, Fan was encouraged by her children to try writing an autobiographical memoir, and over a period of three or four years she produced a modest, incomplete manuscript. Much of the detail in the present chapter is based upon her recollections in that source, including her father's reflective remark about Barney.

No the line is from
NM's "First-born"

ended with a net profit of ten thousand dollars on the season. It was almost three times more than the year before, and though the crush of serving so many guests had been a great burden for Fan, the profit changed her parents' lives. They paid off the mortgage on their Morris Avenue home, invested in the purchase of a cluster of three cottages on the corner of North Bath and Ocean avenues, and began acting for the first time in their lives as if they might actually be spared financial ruin. Though she felt a great sense of responsibility for her parents, and was glad for their good fortune, Fan now wanted deliverance. She wanted to function, like the other children, from a position of independence, and to join her brother and sisters as an equal partner in a kind of family consortium, jointly looking after the parents while individually pursuing goals and lives of their own. When she met Barney, all of the important things seemed to come together, and Fan intended to let nothing stand in the way.

Least of all was she deterred by Barney's own initial protestations that he was not good marriage material. She more than agreed with the rest of the family that his strengths were compelling, and she was self-confident enough to feel that his new secret weapon as a married man would be that he had her for a wife. Raised from earliest childhood to address the daily adversities of family existence as life-or-death struggles, she knew in herself the power of a trained and seasoned fighter. She

sometimes allowed herself to daydream about a life that included leisure, recreation and self-indulgence, but she actually knew these things only as the beleaguered resort-town worker knows them: at second hand. Her personal experience had prepared her not for pleasure but for striving, and she was positive that with a home of her own, shared with a man she loved and who loved her in return, she could break free from what she recognized as the tyranny of traditional Jewish weltschmerz and discover for herself a kind of personal promised land: the compensations of success.

If, in this vision, Barney proved tough enough to take the lead in moving his family forward, so much the better. But even if he should falter, if in the unlikely event his capacity for dealing with the world were to show itself less than great, Fan had no fears. She knew all about the classic Jewish scenario in which kind, loving husbands and fathers, precisely because of their positive qualities, failed adequately to answer the challenge of the world outside their families. This had after all been the drama of her parents' marriage, and Fan had joined her sisters in putting the balance right. But Barney seemed such an unlikely candidate for the role of failure, seemed indeed to be so altogether a self-sufficient man of the world, that the idea of his falling into such circumstances served less as a warning to Fan than it marked the outside measure of her capacity to imagine marital misfortune. How could she have imagined greater?

A considerable amount of imagining was required, in any case, when Fan and the rest of her family undertook to acquaint themselves with Barney. He had met Fan just once, in the spring of 1920, before he left for New Orleans. While there, he corresponded with her and they flirted a little back and forth, so that when he returned in September they could approach each other with some seriousness. Still, they had perhaps only four meetings that month before he left for Milwaukee, spent very little time alone, and, when she accepted his proposal and his kiss in parting, he remained very much of a stranger. The only people who could even claim to know him were his sister Anne and her husband David Kessler, and their agenda in representing Barney to the Schneiders did not permit of much freedom to be candid. nb

On the contrary, their agenda required that they conceal beneath a facade of conventional matchmaking enthusiasm the fact that they were actually engaged upon a full-scale reclamation project; one that had been under way for at least a year before they first brought Barney to Fairview Lodge. In the spring of 1919, when the time for London-based Barney's discharge from the South African military began to approach, Anne and Dave had begun to plan with him by overseas mail the outlines of his new life. He would petition the army to discharge him in London rather than Johannesburg, and ask that his boat fare be applied instead to a steamer ticket to New York. He would petition the United States Consul for a hard-to-get entry visa, with his short-term support

and long-term assurance of employment guaranteed by Dave Kessler. Barney would come to New York, live with the Kesslers, find a good job, discover a strong wife from a strong family in the context of a traditional Jewish community, and he would put his prewar past where it belonged, behind him, forgiven, forgotten and filed away under the heading of Wild Oats.

The Kesslers were not able to be candid because the Schneiders couldn't be allowed to know that when Barney originally went into the army in South Africa he did so as a 27 year old family pariah. He was a gambler, a reckless one, and when his father agreed to pay off his very considerable debts it was on the understanding that Barney would join the army, apply for overseas service, and never again return to his homeland. Anne and Dave were undertaking to prove that Barney's stern father had been wrong, that the son's adoring mother had been closer to right, and that with them in charge of the rehabilitation, all would be well in the end. They were jubilant when Barney told them about the engagement (which he and his fiancée had agreed to keep secret) because they thought that Fan and the Schneiders and Long Branch were exactly the medicine their patient required.

Unlike the Kesslers Barney apparently felt that he should tell Fan, if not everything, at least something. So when he came up from New Orleans that September, he began what turned into a courtship by explaining that he really shouldn't think of marriage because he not only had no money and no prospects beyond what his

profession might permit, but also because he gambled. Fan heard him out and kept it to herself--she was very much inclined to keep things to herself--but she didn't take it seriously. She told him that he was too much inclined toward self-deprecation; that in the context of their relationship he would come naturally to see that the risks of gambling made no sense; and that even if it turned out to be a weakness with him, she would help him to overcome it. In short, without actually having been consulted on this matter by the Kesslers, Fan shared their belief that she could handle it.

But the truth was that none of them--not the Kesslers, not Fan--knew Barney well enough to have the least insight into how he would deal with marriage and the family life. Anne hadn't seen her brother since well before the war; she knew the details (whatever they may have been) of the legendary Johannesburg gambling crisis only at long distance; and had no knowledge at all of how her brother had passed his time in the army (his scant surviving private papers indicate that he passed much of it by gambling and by calling upon young ladies.) Fan, of course, knew infinitely less than this. She had only Barney's letters from Milwaukee, in which he assumes the identity of a serious, professional man, trying at long-distance to get his overemotional fiancée to calm down and grow up. (No more than one year older than Fan, he treated her at this time as if she were at least ten years his junior--which she may well have told him that she was.) He apparently never again spoke voluntarily to her about gambling, or

about any other impulse or inclination that might suggest social or psychological aberration. When he returned from Milwaukee it was as a reassuring combination of earnest job-seeker and ardent fiancee, and Fan very probably concluded that the gambling he had spoken of was a false alarm, perhaps intended to add a finishing touch of glamour to his man-of-the-world bachelor identity.

The facts would show, however, that gambling was Barney's private door into a secret world, and presumably had been since adolescence. When he was a boy, one of the great stage melodramas to be presented in Johannesburg theatres was "The Amateur Cracksman," whose debonair criminal hero was "Raffles," the title character of E. W. Hornung's bestselling novel of 1899. It is not unlikely that the younger Barney would have had a taste for the stage. His brother-in-law, Dave Kessler, had been a theatrical producer in Johannesburg before marrying Anne and coming out to the States. Raffles is the romantic personification of the outwardly respectable man who secretly leads a criminal, if rather kind-hearted life, and the personal habit that most characteristically identifies him is gambling. Whether an adolescent Barney had ever actually seen and been smitten by this particular image, or whether he--perhaps with his younger brother Louis--discovered a personal hero-figure in some other way, there is no doubting the fact of his secret identity.

He was one of ten children--five sons and five daughters--who

scrambled furiously in their first-generation South African world, seeking their fortunes while sustaining the conservative forms of Jewish family life. It was in this context that the division within Barney must have developed: the division between being a recklessly plunging gambler, ready to risk everything, and at the same time being the kind of super-responsible citizen who might become an accountant. After all, in their emigree world his whole family was engaged in an immense gamble, risking everything on the bet that they could make it into their new society and find places both stable and responsible. Barney was not the only plunging gambler to be found among the Mailer brothers. On the face of it, the deep division between two parts of a single self such as his own might suggest a fragile emotional structure that might quickly break down under the pressures of real-world marital responsibility. But Barney was no mere arrested adolescent, and no such breakdown, in him or even in his marriage, was to come about. Somehow he put his underground and his surface lives into a juxtaposition that synergized vitality for him; vitality enough to permit commodious movement in each of the separate spheres. In both of them he seemed to feel altogether at home.

All Fan and the family saw at first was the slightly aloof, slightly conservative husband and parent. For the first three or four years of his marriage he worked for the Manhattan importing

firm of Henderson and Company, and all seemed to go well. There is no evidence that the income he brought home to Fan ever seemed to her to be anything less than she expected. Indeed, in these early years he may well have kept his own business accounts separately from hers. As he departed Long Branch every morning on the ferry shuttle to the city, his knife-edge wardrobe always distinguishing him from the other passengers, it was as if a gifted actor were moving across a steeply raked stage, making his difficult balance seem easy. Both at home and at the office he seems conscientiously to have done all that he was expected of him, while at the same time he was doing something altogether otherwise.

Gambling, for Barney, was not a compulsion that he tried but was too weak to resist; it was not an obsession that reduced or victimized him. From what little we can learn about his social associations --in Johannesburg, in the army, and now in his various postings in the United States, gambling represented for Barney a world of good fellowship, full of people whom he liked and who liked him (Fan would complain later that he "cared more about some stranger that he met in a bar than he cared about his own family.")⁴ The occasional messages to each other that the players would jot down concerning their winnings and losings suggest a society of skilled players coming together in comradely

⁴"Memoir" manuscript.

contest, like gentlemen who made up the membership of a particularly convivial club. In South Africa, Louis, the younger brother he had grown up with, had early discovered such a world and cultivated such a style, and it seems likely that the two boys, during their adolescence, had shaped the same social self-model together. Their style was to admire winning with modesty and losing with insouciant good humor, and they required nothing more of themselves and their fellows than that. If they also relished the thrill of an illicit, outlaw identity while simultaneously inhabiting a propriety-bound hearth, home and profession, they did so quietly. They did not need to display their gambler-identity in order to savor it.

As gambler, Barney related to the hard-working middle class in very much the way that a secret stock-market plunger might relate to the world of his day job in a bank. He intended to hit it big, sooner or later, and then he would move magically from the middle to the top of the heap. Without the gambling, Barney might have felt flat and two-dimensional in the undramatic institutional grids of family and office. But with it, running every dangerous risk, he commanded a vantage point that permitted him always to see the ironic contrasts between where he was at the moment, where he had been a little while before, and where he had every intention of being a little while hence. Commanding such a position, he was a force to be reckoned with.

If only he had sufficient cash reserves, or sufficient skill

at the tables to stay ahead of the game, it is at least theoretically conceivable that Barney might have gone along indefinitely with his double life, like a married man with a manageable mistress: feeling at home wherever he finds himself. Then his wife and children might have known him only as a kind and concerned, if slightly stuffy man, who was in certain situations unapproachable and even invisible; a man who needed to keep a certain amount of time free to be by himself. But of course Barney had no cash reserves, and--all fantasizing aside--his actual skills as a gambler were at best too limited for his means.

He would sometimes lose on a scale that he couldn't begin to afford, and when that happened he would obtain money from one of his worlds to pay off his losses in the other. He would borrow, he would beg, and when all else failed he would steal.

[End Part One, Chapter One]

CHAPTER ONE

Part Two

i

This was the stage whose set the infant Norman Mailer entered on January 31, 1923. His parents had been married for only a year, and it was too soon for Fan to have yet learned about Barney's gambling. The pattern, established almost from the start, was that a crisis involving unconcealable losses would surface every two to four years; and in fact it was some time in 1925 that the bad news first started to break. Until spring of 1924 the new family continued to live at Morris Avenue with Fan's parents, at which time they moved into the three-cottage cluster at Beach and Ocean Avenues, called "Kingsley Court" because Kingsley was Norman's middle name.

They lived there for well over a year, renting it for four thousand dollars from the parents while Fan managed it for two summers as a lodge, and while Barney continued to commute into New York. The first summer they did little better than break even; the second they did, as Fan put it, "well." Then, abruptly, they pulled out of Long Branch and moved to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, to an apartment at 2902 Cortelyou Road, about two miles

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distant from one occupied near Crown Heights by Anne and David Kessler. It was from this time forward that some of Fan's family, notably her older sister Beck (as Rebecca was always called), began noting and commenting about Fan's closeness with the Kesslers, whose style had begun to seem offensively extravagant in Long Branch. Fan's in-laws had showered the infant Norman with a sea of gifts and then made a little too much of having done so, prompting Beck to suggest that Fan ought to be careful not to become in any way dependent upon such people.

The problem, however, was that Fan had been dependent upon them from the start. She depended upon their representation of Barney's sterling character--congruent as it was with what she wished to believe--and now, in 1925, she depended upon them to keep her secret. Fan's natural inclination to be secretive, even within her own family, was immensely heightened when the first gambling crisis broke, and her initial instinct had been to flee from Long Branch so that it would be easier to avoid revealing the real circumstances under which Barney had lost his job with Henderson and Company. No coherent details survive to document the episode beyond establishing the fact that it involved a misappropriation of funds, and that only a full restitution saved Barney from prosecution.¹

¹ The Henderson organization liquidated in late 1924, and it may be that the attendant audits during the following year uncovered Barney's irregularities. Fan recounted her secret version of some of these events to Norman ten years later.

The restitution was provided by Dave Kessler. He would continue to be the Mailer banker in this connection, producing unrepayable "loans" every few years all through Norman's childhood and adolescence; in each crisis covering obligations as large as two, five, sometimes perhaps as much as ten thousand dollars. Barney's entire salary, even in his best situation, could not have brought him so much as five thousand dollars a year. In fact he seems between 1925 and 1928 to have held various positions only with the Manhattan accounting firm of Phillip Kamras, who was a personal friend. Little in the way of salary would appear to have come from this association, and gambling problems in the form of debts to professional bookmakers continued to arise.

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The loyal Kesslers employed Dave's substantial business-community network to seek out a second chance for the prodigal, and fortune smiled in 1928: Barney obtained a district accountant position with General Motors. His luck held for just three years, however, for in September of 1931 he was fired, evidently again for irregularities with funds, and by this time an eight-year old Norman was all too able to retain detailed memories of the attendant family crises. Under the cover of a "special auditor" position with Kamras, Barney then passed the following three years looking in vain for a real accountant's job, but in the environment of a deepening Depression and the absence of appropriate references, he was never successful. Fan went on as she had since they moved to Brooklyn, managing summer-season properties in Asbury Park and Long Branch with her sisters Beck

and Jenny, both of whom had come upon hard times of their own. By 1928--the year Ida and Yehudda died, bequeathing their properties to their five children--Beck and Jenny had begun struggling against deterioration in the health and business fortunes of their husbands.

Norman's Uncle Louis Shapiro was slowly dying of heart disease at the same time that his Scarboro Hotel, still the showplace of increasingly unfashionable Long Branch, was failing to pay off his over-investment in its renovation. Also at this time, Jenny was watching her once prosperous husband, Harry Michelsohn, go to pieces under the strain of losing his patrimony in a liquor business made all but impossible by prohibition. Both men would die in 1936, but long before then their wives were effectively supporting their families in what was left of the tourist business. Working with them, Fan was trying to support hers. Of course the great difference between the couples was that both Louis and Harry, reduced in fortune though they were, had unambiguous identities in the eyes of their family and their community: they were innocent, well-intending victims of circumstance. While Barney, though perhaps seeming innocent to Beck and Jenny and the rest of the Long Branch family, actually operated in the context of his immediate family as a forceful and even frightening victimizer.

Which is not to suggest that he was conventionally brutal. Though he was subject to flashes of rage, these were never more

than brief and perhaps did no lasting damage.² On the whole, his day-to-day behavior in the family circle was usually considerate, often exquisitely so. From his first appearance he had been noted in Long Branch for an ability to interact well with children, and his genuinely great pleasure in having a son was if anything surpassed when, two years after the move to Brooklyn, his daughter Barbara Jane was born. He was solicitously attentive to Fan in a way that simultaneously gratified and angered her; a combination of conflicting feelings that hereinout would characterize her response to the whole marriage. He declined, in the most dignified way, to so much as discuss his gambling with her, always saying when pressed that he had of course given it up. He attributed his inability to find work to anything and everything but the actual peculiar cause, and every morning of the working week he sallied forth as a figure of impeccable executive presence, evidently intent on cracking Manhattan's corporate wall.

In fact, of course, where he went every day and what he did remains even more of a mystery now than it must have been at the time. He was allowed to use the Kamras^S firm as a mailing address, but he had no real work there. The most probable guess is that for three or four years after leaving General Motors he settled into a routine of checking out the daily want-ads, and then visiting the games and gambling operations where he was able to play when he

²But cite the letter to Bea, adjacent to the "Portrait" letter, where he recalls Barney's rages--"even more terrible than mine"--and a childhood apparition of terror in the face of a Barney-like figure of menace..

could scrape together the money to sit in. In later years his private associates included women, some of whom were willing to lend him money, but whether this was true in the earlier years is impossible to know. All we do know is that he somehow charged his daily quest with an air of transfixed determination, and some self-strengthening energy must have come from it. Nothing less could have armored him against the furious efforts at reform that he encountered every day at home. In this way and in this respect, he achieved to a virtually iron control over his wife, who more and more came to feel that she was helpless.³

Fan characteristically hid the truth from the Schneider family, who noticed only that Barney was often in need of small, confidential loans. From the modesty of these requests they concluded that he had a gambling habit (there had always been rumors about that) but supposed it to be a matter of comparatively small change. Even Fan and the Kesslers, who after all knew very well how deeply Barney could plunge, were slow to grasp the full truth of the situation. Barney had been so convincing in his denials and reassurances, and his wife, sister and brother-in-law were so anxious to believe him, that it may only have been after the General Motors debacle that they were required to accept the fact that he might well turn out to be irreclaimable.

Since none of them felt ready to abandon their relationship with him, they were forced at this point to turn to a strategy of

³ Fan dwells upon this period in her post-1972 memoir fragments.

damage control. Dave and Anne began long-distance strategic consultations with Louis Mailer, Barney and Anne's slightly younger brother, who was at this time a successful speculator in the South African securities market, but Fan fixed her attention closer to home. Uppermost in her strategy was controlling damage that might touch the children, and she accordingly proceeded to convert her Flatbush apartment into a theatre for the acting out of necessary fictions.

The children were encouraged to see their father off on each morning's job-search, and to commiserate with him each evening upon his return. Money, though in alarmingly short supply, was never officially acknowledged as a potentially disastrous problem, and the ongoing struggle between the parents was masked by a busy conversational keeping-up on correspondence and news from all members of their large extended family. Barney rather formally presided at the evening meal--unless "business" kept him away--in the person of a caring but conservative paterfamilias. He was serious about such things as schoolwork and personal hygiene, cautious about the dangers of everyday life on the streets of a gentile-dominated city, but still jocular and knowledgeable about sports and movies and the comic strips. He would cheerfully chat about anything, in fact, except the subject of himself.

Barney's past was a firmly closed book, and the conventional questions from Norman about his father's experience in the Great War elicited only one anecdote, in which Barney was featured as being caught in the shower on a troopship during a submarine alarm

in 1918. Any inquiry beyond this--the war, foreign travel, post-adolescent experience, and any subject at all that might lead into autobiography--Barney would always turn aside. After a time Norman stopped asking, but the veil of mystery and separation that hung between father and son operated for the child as a constant and baffling source of anxiety.

Norman had entered first grade at Public School 181 in Flatbush when he was five years and seven months old, in the fall of 1928. Since that was the year both of his maternal grandparents died in Long Branch, the attention of the Brooklyn family was particularly directed toward the shore community, with its dense infrastructure of aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends. Indeed, Long Branch was at all times a major influence on Norman, providing him with a singular identity and offering him an assertive model of how the world worked. The identity was that of the favored son figure, and the model of the world served to demonstrate why such a favored, indeed such a messianic heir should be so urgently needed. The history of the Schneider family in Long Branch revealed a world where the women had been required to form into a matriarchy in order to compensate for the failure of their men to deal with the institutions of American commerce.

Yehudda, his eldest child and only son Joseph, along with his sons-in-law Louis and Harry, had one by one failed capitalism's trial by ordeal, and the Schneider sisters, perhaps guided at the start by their mother, had stepped into the breach. They found in themselves the strength and skill to make a living out of the

tourist business, and they found in their men a quality that adequately compensated for their ultimate inability to prevail in business affairs. The men were kind, always striving, touchingly contrite concerning their worldly inadequacy, and above all they were faithful. For this their women loved them and, indeed, protected them against the consequences of their vulnerability.

For the favored son figure, however, the adult community and especially its women reserved a different kind of love: transmitted with liquid warmth, it nevertheless revealed at its core a white hot intensity of pure exhortation, calling for nothing less than that the sons prepare themselves to go forth and conquer the forces that had defeated the fathers. Barney, of course, did not actually match the description of a martyr fallen in the fight for domestic security, but Fan never stopped trying to fit her peculiar marital situation into this ethnically conventional framework, and she certainly never ceased to identify Norman as an authentically anointed messianic figure. The original favored son presence in Long Branch, however, was not Norman but his cousin, Cy (Charles) Shapiro. Eight years older than Norman, he served the younger boy as a model in much the way that Beck, his mother, had broken the trail and set the standards for Fan. Beck intended for Cy to smash the mold of the good masculine figure who, in some way because of his goodness, fails in the world.

Beck professed a rich distillation of classic immigrant wisdom: not only must supplicant outsiders in an alien culture

learn how to become accepted insiders, but they must accomplish this without the loss of dignity or integrity. Beck believed, and Fan believed and their children were on some level thus forced to believe that while acceptance in the gentile world must not be purchased at the wrong price, rejection by that world spelled practical ruin. The sisters determined that their sons would so excel as to make it impossible for them to be rejected. They would attend great universities and would so master the life and the curriculum there as to win the necessary degrees and honors that would constitute their passport into the territories beyond. The goodness the sons brought to this effort would combine with the power their success would earn for them, and they would thus be different from the good but powerless men whose fate had shown them the way.

In Cy's case, even his name would be different. While entering Columbia's law school in 1935, having just graduated from Harvard, he had his name legally changed to Rembar, deriving it from his dying father's original last name. Louis had been naturalized under the name of his mother's family--Shapiro.; but his father's name was Zaremba. Cy's Rembar both retained and changed that. It was as if the change symbolized how Cy and his mother and older sister (who changed their names too) meant for him to keep his father's inner excellence, but to stand free of the fatal incapacity. Louis, in turn, vulnerable though he may have been, gave his son something that it is difficult for sons to derive from mothers: he gave him a strong sense of masculine self-

confidence. Cy's formative years corresponded to his father's time of heady, if temporary success, as well as of robust good health, and the handsome, charming Louis was especially open to and intimate with his son.

Norman, by contrast, struggled throughout his pre-adolescent years with the enormous problem of establishing a usable identity for his own mysterious father, and thus for himself. In the absence of any adult male figure that the boy could both clearly see and deeply identify with, Cy very probably meant more to his little cousin than any man alive. Forty years later Norman would salute the relationship: "He was very much of an older brother all through my childhood, and I worshipped him (with enormous funds of love and envy) because he was a hero." Cy and Norman shared the rapturous admiration and indulgence of the family women, and the intensity of that experience imposed upon both boys the traditional emotional confusions, but Norman did not share Cy's body-builder's physique, his champion athletic prowess, his rugged good looks or, still less, his masculine self-confidence.

There is a frankly mythic quality to the details of a middle-aged Norman's recollection of his boyhood cousin:

He was one of the few people I've ever known who had a happy look on his face when he came to bat in the late innings with men on base, his side behind, and the need for a homer prominent in everyone's head. Indeed he had his smile because it was slightly better than even money he was going to hit that homer.

We then learn that Cy usually did hit it, just as he usually won the tennis tournament there at the Scarboro Hotel, which was the setting for all this, and won at football and won at "getting the

best looking girls." He became a sort of spirit of the place for Norman, banishing all of the prior generation's Old World gloom: "He was the only figure I encountered in my childhood who seemed to believe it was more natural to win than to lose, and that life was therefore to be enjoyed rather than decried."

Dissuaded by his high school advisors from applying to Princeton (his mother's choice), Cy went up to Harvard in 1931, the fall Norman was entering fourth grade, but the two cousins shared Long Branch in the summers well into Norman's adolescence. Cy had no brother of his own, and tried to be helpful to his cousin, whose need for a role model he recognized. But a Scarboro friend of Cy's, Aaron Goldman, who teamed up with him there during the summer years that Norman was seven, eight and nine years old, remembered the younger boy in unflattering terms. Norman was at least five years younger than Goldman, who saw him as something of a momma's boy, physically unskilled, quick to cry if excluded by the older boys, and often with his nose buried in a book.⁴ Cy was kinder in his view of Norman, but his cousin was so much younger, and so different both physically and emotionally, that he hardly knew how to profit from the encouragement. Surely Cy's warm and open relationship with Beck and Louis at the seashore taught Norman little that could help him in dealing with his own parents.

⁴Goldman's recollections, offered at the age of 83, are far from sharp and less than generous, but they do confirm other indications that Norman's childhood years, even in the sanctuary of Long Branch, were largely spent in a struggle against feelings of insecurity.

He had to deal with them in Brooklyn, and he had to do it alone.

Very early on and certainly before the time he entered school in 1928, Norman had become aware that his parents were guarding a secret of apparently terrible proportions. Their Brooklyn apartments were not large, and though Fan was always trying to "move up," even within the same building, their accommodations never allowed for anything more than marginal privacy. Thus Norman was able to listen to the rise and fall of the voices when, every two years or so, the Kesslers would appear for what he came to regard as the trouble times.

Anne and Dave would visit often enough at other seasons, but the boy could always identify the ominously special occasion by the way the evening was structured. A meal would be served and quickly eaten, the silence of the throttled adults barely sparing Norman from the histrionics of an outright scene. Immediately after dessert, itself treated with uncereemonious haste, the children would be delivered to their beds, and very shortly after that the four adults would begin upon a passionately whispered discourse. Straining to make out their words, Norman could always tell that Barney was on the defensive, that the other three were angry but, what was more, frightened at something that Barney had done, and the eavesdropper could never quite identify what the awful deed had been. This scenario showed itself only periodically to Norman, but the threat of it came to be with him always, and he regarded it not as a peripheral but rather as the central drama

in the life of his home.

As such it both terrified and excited him long before adolescence: almost from the start he found himself hypnotized by its action in a way that over time came to be virtually pornographic. He was, after all, witnessing a profoundly sexual exercise in the dynamics of domination. The force that dominated here was nothing like the force that ruled in Long Branch. There, the locus of power was feminine, and it asserted itself in the most open, if not always the most simple way. But from his darkened bedroom Norman could divine that some kind of masculine force was at work in his own household, and that it drew much of its potency from what he took to be its shocking, dangerous and perhaps even criminal character. On each occasion he would trace the impassioned scene up to a climax of stormy departure, with his Uncle Dave's voice at once cajoling and issuing threats. Then, after the door slammed behind the Kesslers, his mother's sobs would fade finally into silence and Barney, seldom himself out of control, most often reasonable in tone, endlessly offered his mysterious explanation. However many pieces in the puzzle remained missing, the central piece was in place: Norman knew that his father was a man of great power.

It was a power so secret that it could only be discussed in whispers, with doors shut and curtains drawn; it was commanding enough to reduce strong women to tears and pleading; and it was commanding enough even to overturn the authority of Uncle Dave himself. The whole thing frightened Norman at least as much as it

excited him, and the residual effects of this fear would play a determining part in the life of his childhood outside as well as inside the family. Frightening though it was, however, the sensing of such power was also exotic; Norman knew that it was only a matter of time before he would break the secret's code and discover its inner story. When he learned it he knew that he would have found his true alternate world, as different from Long Branch as Mars, and he knew also that he would finally have found his father.

ii

The first and most obvious external effect of the imaginative stimulation provided by his father's drama was to make Norman a fearful initiate into the outside world of Brooklyn, hesitant and apprehensive when joining the kind of school and street-game societies that his cousin so heroically dominated in Long Branch. It would seem to follow, however, that Norman's domestic drama also served to accelerate him into discovering what proved to be a still more enduring identity. He began to show signs of being a story-teller, according to his mother, even before he learned how to wield a pencil. Fan claimed that Norman started making up and narrating tiny stories before he was old enough to write them down, and it is a matter of record that he began to do so almost immediately after.

On ragged scraps of lined paper, lovingly preserved, we can

trace the earliest recorded form of his narrative voice. When a seven-year old Norman had just finished the second grade he scrawled out three pencilled manuscripts, each of them increasingly long and structured into numbered parts. "A Plucky Boy," tells in its Part I ("The Fight") how a little boy opens fire with a pistol on two bad men who are trying to take his father away. Part II ("Life and Death") breaks off in mid-sentence, but "Pony Express," a companion manuscript, has three separate chapters recounting its wild-west tale of lawmen and outlaws. The third of these early manuscripts is the most ambitious, offering an incomplete, six-chapter series of episodes detailing the adventures of Bob and Paul, who with their father go on a camping trip, on a visit to the Statue of Liberty, and "to europe on a boat." It might be hard to credit these efforts to an author so young were they not accompanied in the family archive by a collection of much more sophisticated stories, plays, and design-sketches that can be dated either one or two years later, but all of them still before the age of ten.

Two parallel histories provide a kind of frame for Norman's life during this period: on the one hand there was his father's continuing evolution as the family's unnerving anti-hero, and on the other was his own year-by-year development as an imaginative creator. The Mailers continued to live in Flatbush until just before his tenth birthday---they moved out at the end of 1932, fifteen months after Barney lost the General Motors job--and the record indicates that, whatever its tensions, Morman's life in

these seven years was passed in a sustained, if sometimes shaky balance between the twin histories of anxiety and creativity that framed it.

He passed without apparent difficulty through the first four grades at P.S. 181, entering 5-A there in the fall of 1932. Though a better than good student, he was not so remarkable as to be accelerated, in accord with the common practice then, ahead of his age group. Fan was impatient with this, but his teachers may well have been sensitive to the fact that he was, after all, six months younger than the average student in his class already, and his obvious shyness could only have been made worse by requiring him to join a still older group. Shy--which is to say fearful--as he was, he succeeded in getting on well enough with his peers, both in school and in the neighborhood games. Though the materials for his writing derived chiefly from the juvenile fiction and popular science that he read enthusiastically, and from the movies that he saw whenever he could, at this stage the writing itself was mostly done in the Long Branch summers.

An exception to this general rule, however, occurred during his eighth year, when a serious case of Scarlet Fever kept him in bed for an extended period of school time, allowing him to indulge his Popular Mechanics-inspired passion for aviation technology. While bedridden, he completed an eight-sheet "Plan Book for Making [A] Glider That Will Cross the Atlantic," as well as part of the manuscript of a futuristic air-combat story called "The Dare Devil Patrol." At the same time, he sketched plans for "The Return of

Jack Denyards," whose fictional hero may have been based on his cousin Cy (and whose "Part I" alone was intended to contain twenty-one chapters.) At this time Norman also completed a set of plans for his own private Boy's Club, which was to be entirely underground: three stories complete with gymnasium, library and, on its lowest level, a sinister swimming pool. Years later he would explain in a letter the purpose of his secret design:

The point of departure was the Flatbush Boy's Club which [I] wanted to join, and yet was afraid to, because the kids in it were so tough. (As I remember it was a three-story brick building with a pool and gym and library). So [I] built [my] own club!⁵

Norman wrote this letter when he was twenty-two, and his recollection makes clear that, from the start, an important part of imaginative creation for him was the defense it provided against the threats and fears he faced in other parts of his life. He continued writing stories and movie-derived plays through his ninth summer, returning in September of 1932 from Long Branch to Flatbush with what had grown to be a fat file of material--

⁵ While stationed in the Philippines, Norman wrote this letter to his then-wife on August 6, 1945. She had been reading a cache of his childhood writing, and he was offering her what he called a "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man."

Of his Boy's Club swimming pool, he wrote that he had been worried about how to fill it "until [I] had [my] great idea. Giggling with delight [I] drew about ten people urinating into the pool."

fiction, drama, aviation designs and sketches--accumulated over the three previous summers. Such as it was, his confidence in himself had grown along with his imaginative development, and his Brooklyn neighborhood--where after all he had lived in the same building since he was two years old--apparently posed for him no unmanageable threat. He may have been afraid to go into the Boys Club there, but he after all had found a satisfying way to deal with problems of that kind.

This situational stasis lasted through the fall of 1932, only to be broken in early January when, abruptly, the family pulled out of Flatbush and moved two miles to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, requiring the children to transfer from P.S. 181, where Barbara had entered kindergarten the previous September. Years later, Fan said that she made the move because she had been having trouble with the neighbors, which of course could mean anything. Given the family situation, the most likely problem would have been something about Barney, either regarding the General Motors affair or some new difficulty. In any case they moved to 555 Crown Street, enrolling the children in Crown Street's P.S. 161, where Barbara stepped up into first grade and Norman joined the second term of fifth grade. Their early-January shift, however, left them between schools until the new term began on February 1. Barbara was too young to be bothered by the problem, but Norman was placed in the position of having to walk out on Crown Street into a society of youngsters among whom he as yet had no friends. Forty-five years later he would refer back to

his Brooklyn childhood in an interview:

"Go out in the street and you know if you didn't have friends you got beaten up. It was as simple as that." ["Sanction" soundtrack.]

Not surprisingly, Norman spent a lot of his non-school time indoors for a while, during which period he could turn to Uncle Dave's recent Hanukkah present of a very elaborate chemistry set. Having created a workbench-desk in their new bedroom, he--with his little sister as admiring laboratory assistant--began cultivating still further the scientific side of his imagination. Simultaneously, though, he brought his literary imagination into play by allotting time through almost the whole month of January for writing "The Collision," a twelve-hundred word action story about the championship season of a high school hockey team. Never having seen an actual hockey game, Norman depended for his knowledge upon his extensive reading of sports-fiction (after he had seen a real game he would repudiate this story), but it is in itself a notably effective narrative. So much was it admired at home that Fan typed it into finished form, heading it:

"T H E C O L L I S I O N"

by NORMAN K. MAILER

(Written in January, 1933, at the age of ten).

The author joined Mrs. Bernstein's 5-B class at P.S. 161 (located just three blocks down Crown Street) the day after his January 31 birthday, and promptly submitted "The Collision" manuscript for credit. His teacher, in turn, was so impressed that within a month she decided to accelerate him into the sixth grade.

Like other successes that would come to him in later life, this accomplishment had an ironic double effect. It was, of course, a kind of triumph, bringing him praise from the outside and, doubtless, a welcome measure of inner self-confidence. In addition, however, the promotion added another complication to Norman's social situation: not only were his 6-A classmates strangers but, being somewhat older than he, they were less likely to draw him into their street-game culture. Furthermore, his access to that street culture was impeded anyway by the fact that having reached the age of ten, he had to enroll in Hebrew School, which required a part of six afternoons a week and which he quickly grew to hate. Thus the whole Crown Heights move would have added up to a challenging experience for him, even without the ongoing development of his father's situation at home.

At least for the moment, however, Norman showed no notable signs of being daunted, and within the wider family circle the change of neighborhoods was treated as a social advance. Crown Heights may or may not have been a more prosperous area in those difficult economic times, but it was certainly more unicultural than the Flatbush population mixture of Jewish, Italian and Irish. Crown Heights was altogether Jewish, and sheltered its citizens in a honeycomb structure of synagogues, stores, shops, kosher markets and delicatessens. There were movie houses, a library, duplexes, apartment houses and areas, both formal and informal, for the endless games of touch football, stick ball, and roller hockey that adjourned only for meals, school, and the fall of full

darkness. The library drew its share of card-holders, Norman prominent among them, but the movies were the only thing that could compete with sports for serious universal attention.

A casual observer might have identified the Mailers as perfect for the new area, peas in the Crown Heights pod: two children, a four room, two-bedroom apartment with the children sharing a room, an ambitious, slightly grim-looking mother and an elegantly laid-back father who was said to be an accountant in the city. There was so little to distinguish this family from its neighbors that even after the emergence of Norman's fame--which automatically sent everyone who had known them into a retrospective search for early signs of distinction--the Mailers still struck outsiders as having been more ordinary than otherwise. Perhaps the thing that seemed most different about them was their deep involvement with Long Branch, where Fan and the children always went in the summers, at least while the fading tourist business continued to exist, and where the children always went anyway.

Norman must have made some social progress in Crown Heights during that first season--even if his reading and writing programs were somewhat larger than they had been during earlier school-years--for he was the very opposite of subdued when he got down to Long Branch in late June. In a dutiful letter to the Kesslers, welcoming them down for an anticipated visit, he wrote that for the first time he was playing on the Scarboro Junior Baseball team, whose opening game had ended in a 4-4 tie. Uncle Dave

especially liked to encourage his scientific interests, so while the chemistry set had not been brought to the shore, Norman made a point of mentioning that he was also working on an airplane model "of my own design," and added that his family's new, first and only dog, Dukie, was chewing on his shoe as he wrote. The dog was a present to Barbara for her sixth birthday, and it added to that summer's sense of being especially filled with good things. Besides the usual pleasures of unlimited swimming and full access to the local movie houses, there was the baseball and the new airplane project and something still more exciting: Norman was writing a novel.

"The Martian Invasion, by Norman K. Mailer" consists of eighteen of a projected twenty-five chapters, and its twenty-four thousand words are introduced by a separate page: "Dedicated to my loving mother who wanted me to write a good book." Having got access to an old typewriter in Long Branch a year or so before, Norman had rough-typed a few of his shorter manuscripts, but the novel was composed entirely in pencil. The surviving draft is clearly both the first and the final one, inscribed onto the lined pages of two cardboard-bound "Composition" books. Besides the relative scarcity of corrections and erasures, one of its most remarkable features is its assured, unhesitating command of syntactic and paragraph structure.

This blood-and-guts science-fiction adventure story spins itself out from a central core structured first around the relationship of Bob Porter, the 19 year old pilot-hero, with his

professor-father and, later, with his friend Ben ("Bob's mother had died when he was a little boy so the only two people in the world that he loved was his father and Ben"). Bob and his father are flight leaders of a fleet of Earth rocket ships, whose invasion of Mars precipitates a long, episodic war with a native, highly advanced Martian society of bellicose defenders. Norman began his novel just after completing a reading of Edgar Rice Burroughs'

Martian novels⁶, which posit an altogether different if equally ferocious Martian military population. A war-like Martian presence was also a staple in most of Norman's other literary sources: the comic-strip adventures of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, as well as Buster Crabbe's movie-serial dramatization of the latter.

As Norman's war with the Martians develops, the Earthling invaders--being far outnumbered--frequently suffer the experiences of capture and imprisonment, escape and pursuit. At one point, when Bob Porter is fleeing his enemies through the subterranean

⁶Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) published a total of eleven science fiction novels set on Mars, and Norman probably read the first four or five, which were heavily reprinted: A Princess of Mars (1912), The Gods of Mars (1913), The Warlord of Mars (1913), The Chessmen of Mars (1922) and Thuvia, Maid of Mars (1922).

Years later, remembering the composition of his own Mars narrative, Norman mis-told an interviewer that he had read all of the Edgar Rice Burroughs Tarzan books in preparation for it, thus precipitating a mild confusion concerning his story that has persisted ever since. ("Portrait of a Man Reading," by Charles Monaghan, Washington Post World, 11 July, 1971, 2. In Lennon, Conversations, p. 188.)

canals of Mars, he wonders "what Jean Valjean would do in this situation," thus revealing Norman's familiarity with Les Miserables. (Indeed, the Martian language strikes Bob as similar to French, and when he first is taken prisoner he asks his captors: "Parle vous Francaise?") Reviewing in his mind "the books of escapes" that he knows best, Bob thinks about both Les Miserables and The Count of Monte Cristo, which supplies his strategic answer:

How had Dantes escaped? Out through the Abbe's sack. But how had he tried to escape before that? By the passage he had dug out with the Abbe'.

'I've got it!' shrieked Bob--'Dig a passage to the underground tunnel.'

What is clear from the novel is everywhere evident in all of this child-writer's production; from the beginning, the act of reading a story or seeing one on-screen triggered the reflex in him to make use of it in a story of his own. This basic reaction no doubt defines the essential reader-response of many writers, and it certainly would continue to characterize Norman's writer/reader experience for the rest of his life. For him to be using at the age of ten the material of Edgar Rice Burroughs and the comic strips is not surprising, but for him also to be reading and using Victor Hugo and Alexander Dumas is worth remarking. It measures the rate at which writing was driving him not only to absorb the writing of others, but ambitiously to escalate the level of his own reading, climbing beyond the norms of his age

group to enhance his powers.⁷

Norman's manuscript distinguishes itself for its allusive dimension, its ambitious length and its narrative complexity, but what sets it completely apart from everything he had written before the summer of 1933 was something else. He produced the text manuscript under circumstances that were virtually the opposite of those in which he had done most if not all of his writing up to this time. We know that, hitherto, he would repair to the act of writing as at least in part a way of extricating himself and retreating from a problematic or threatening social environment. In the summer of 1933, however, his writing project was pursued in an environment of the opposite sort. Norman's outside, socially demanding activities were so unthreatening and indeed so inviting that he had to discipline himself in order to find time to get away and address his writing. While their parents remained in Brooklyn, he and Barbara were staying with their Aunt Beck at the Scarboro, where Norman asked for and was given his own writing room. "I remember," he wrote twelve years later, "how [I] would work [on the novel] two hours each morning (or almost each morning) for most of that summer."⁸

Surprising as it is that a ten-year old could take on a project of this scope, his disciplined structuring of work-

⁷Two other "books of escapes" he is known to have read by this time are Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

⁸Norman explained this to his wife in his 1945 "Portrait of the Artist" letter. (See note 4, above.)

schedule is in some ways more surprising still. He completed the first eighteen chapters, filling 234 carefully numbered pages with twenty-four thousand words. Working better than five days a week for five weeks, he was averaging well over 600 words a day when time ran out at the end of August and he had to stop. Far from petering out, the narrative was in full flight at the stopping point, and Norman's sense of an ending for it is recorded in the table of contents, where we find the titles of the final seven chapters. If it needed proving, he had proved that he was a storyteller not as a substitute for being an active participant in real life contests on the playing fields, but at the same time as he was such a player. He didn't have to choose between story-telling and science, but could design and build his plane while inventing the interplanetary science fiction of his novel. Coming out of this summer, he had brought it all together through his writing.

Indeed, in anticipation of the following summer he even drew up a new composition book intended to contain his next project in fiction. It opens with a title and a table of contents:

BOOK OF SHORT STORIES OF SPORTS STORIES

THE SNAP (Football Story)

FIERY CENTER (Ice Hockey Story)

KID BROTHER (Football Story)

SIGNALS ON (Football Story)

THE COLLISION (Ice Hockey Story)

[by]

NORMAN MAILER

Of the five stories listed, only "The Collision" had already been written, but he was ready to start writing the rest as soon as the opportunity and the inspiration combined. Only the summer before he had appeared to Cy's friend Aaron Goldman to be a nine-year-old still too withdrawn, too hidden in his books and too timidly unengaged with the other children for his own good. But as a ten-year old Norman looked to have broken past this identity and come at last to taste a little of the all-round self-confidence that rested upon his realized accomplishments as a writer. All the signs of the summer of 1933 point to the expectation that Norman was looking forward to a good year, and that his return to Crown Street would be an auspicious one.

End of Chapter I, Part Two

CHAPTER I

Part Three

i

Though the children could not bring Barbara's Dukie with them when they returned to Crown Street--Fan had consigned the new dog to Long Branch for the winter--Norman must surely have brought back some sense of personal satisfaction. He had reached a measurable level of accomplishment as a team player, registered an advance in his airplane-designer skills, and, like an authentic secret weapon, expanded his writing portfolio beyond the bounds of even his mother's expectations. Perhaps he intended to get started on one of the sports stories in his projected collection as soon as the business of rejoining his sixth-grade class was completed, but he soon discovered that 1933 was not to continue for him as a creative year. At some early point in the fall term, Barney's underground life seems to have produced a gambling problem of an entirely new magnitude; something so large and threatening that it not only called the Mailer household to battle stations, but persuaded its domestic defense system that it could not handle the challenge alone.

We cannot know this certainly, of course, because the more serious such episodes were, the more they were kept secret. With few exceptions, we must infer their occurrence from coincident recorded fact: an abrupt move from one address to another, the loss of a job, a fragment of fact from someone's later recollection. In this case, we have the fact that something derailed Norman from the positive, self-confident track he had been travelling, and we have assumed from the start that family conflicts involving Barney's gambling were the root cause of Norman's ubiquitous temperamental fearfulness. When we add the fact that two of Barney's brothers from South Africa, Norman's powerful Uncle Louis and the agreeable young Chemical Engineer Uncle Ernest, suddenly announced that they were booking New York passage for a previously unplanned visit, there is reason to suspect that a serious family conference had been called. Finally, Fan's conversations with Norman over the next two years about his father, and the growing marital trouble caused by his gambling virtually confirm our surmise. Some new crisis had been created by Norman's renegade father, and fear of his destructive power was calling the international leadership of the extended Mailer family into emergency session.

There had, certainly, been selective consultation with Uncle Louis by mail in the past, but this was the first time that he felt required to see to the problem in person. Louis was just two years younger than Barney--who was 41 at this time--and in temperament quite like his errant brother. Both were gamblers, in

fact, and the high-rolling Louis was to lose several substantial fortunes, often at famous international casinos, during the course of his long life. The difference was that he had it to lose, because Louis, on balance, was impressively successful at what he attempted otherwise. Certainly there was nothing unsuccessful about his trading on the South African securities market, where he had developed a substantial investment base that at this stage was making him a truly wealthy man. Like David Kessler, he spoke always with the authority of his wealth, and would thus have been Dave's natural consultant when things with Barney reached a critical stage. It seems almost certain that Louis had been the Kesslers' confidant in their nearly fifteen-year campaign to secure Barney a place in America, and that at least in recent years he had helped Dave defray the expense of bailing Barney out. The fact that Louis brought his young brother Ernest along to this family conference suggests that from the outset he already had at least part of a plan in mind.

Neither conference nor plan could come about, however, until the brothers actually arrived, and though all signs suggest that the crisis took place early in the fall, the passage could not be arranged until November. So it seems likely that Norman passed the better part of that fall in a household more full than it had ever been with hushed anger, dread and subterranean melodrama. The effect of all this on him can only have been intimidating, and when he left the apartment every day, one of his major obligations was to report to yet another place that for him contained little

besides stress and anxiety. Hebrew School had seemed awful the previous spring, but Norman had been forced at that time to be the new boy also in his street society and his public school. In such a comparison, the synagogue problem might not have been the worst of the three. By the fall of 1933, however, with things comparatively peaceful both at public school and out on Crown Street, he found that his initial impression had been all too accurate: Hebrew School tutors were at once without dignity and without earned authority over students; the students were at once sadistically subversive of their tutors and without generosity to one another. More than anything else in his relationship with adults and peers Norman hated and feared bullying; and now he saw that Hebrew training turned both tutors and students into bullies.

His fellow ten-year-olds at Hebrew School were for the most part a year behind him in public school, where Norman's acceptance as an accelerated sixth grader must have been aided by the harvest of work he brought back from the summer. He certainly showed his teacher "The Martian Invasion," and since his quick promotion into sixth grade had been occasioned by an earlier story, his writer-identity must have been earning him real acknowledgement, perhaps even from his fellow students. No one could have remarked that, in fact, he was now beginning to withdraw from his writing, and was turning altogether toward his model airplanes and chemistry set for solitary recreation. His only recorded tale from this year was a brief sketch, written just after the first of the year as a school assignment, of an episode

that took place at Long Branch the previous summer. It tells of how Norman, swimming alone, had almost drowned: "I got caught in a cross current so that although I kept on moving my hands and feet it was useless and I was too tired." This chord of defeat sounds strange after a summer of such energetic success, but it would prove prophetic for the seasons that followed. Indeed, it would prove more prophetic still when identified for what it actually was: the last narrative effort he would undertake for the next six years.

In November, Uncles Louis and Ernest arrived for their conference with Barney and Fan and the Kesslers. Whatever sympathy Louis may have felt for the brother with whom he grew up and so much resembled, the conclusion of the conference was foregone. The apparent amount of money lost, and the attendant circumstances of losing it, were not to be forgiven. Norman no doubt found a way to audit as much of the proceedings as possible, but he still had not quite discovered the specific identity of his father's crime. We know this because we know that he had made up his mind to find out. Barbara was still too young to be sensitive to these disturbances, and was in any case preoccupied by the devastating news of Dukie's death in a Long Branch motorcar episode.¹ The

¹Barbara in those years would remain largely oblivious to the drama over Barney's behavior. Years later, when she began to realize that there was a problem, she tended to accept her mother's presentation of her father as merely a weak, disappointing male. Most people in the family seem to have accepted this identity, just as most people interested in the family still do.

results of the conference no doubt involved a reckoning of the financial losses involved and some kind of attempt to impress upon the culprit the gravity of the crisis. Whether or not all this had a significant effect upon Barney, it certainly had one on his son: it demonstrated to Norman that his father's mysterious power to strike fear into the heart of his world had grown greater than ever.

Since Fan and Barney were to spend the next two years in even worse financial shape than they had been in for the two years previous, it is likely that they were at this point cut off from all but the most subsistence-level financial aid from Dave and Louis. What little money may have been allowed, would have been consigned strictly to Fan's care. In addition to subjecting them to a Spartan diet, Louis further expressed his lack of confidence in Barney by arranging for a kind of surveillance: Ernest was to be crowded in as a house guest in the Mailer four-room apartment. It cannot have been comfortable to move another adult into this space, but the younger brother somehow stayed with the family for the next two months.

Twenty years younger than Barney, Ernest had been perhaps six years old when his brother went off to the army, and it is doubtful whether he could now have served as much of a moral mentor. If there was a point to his presence at all, it was as a reminder of the warnings and threats of Louis and Dave. In any case, Ernest was warmly welcomed by Norman, who had corresponded with him for at least a year and would have been delighted to have

such an experienced and sympathetic chemistry instructor. The admiring boy would continue corresponding with this uncle for years to follow. While a sophomore at Harvard, in fact, he would write Ernest a critically important career-advice request, as part of his then-renewed determination to become a writer.

After he got to Harvard and resumed his commitment to storytelling, Norman not only wrote letters to this favorite uncle but actually began writing some stories that harked back to the very moment of his household visit. One of these tells of an eleven-year old boy (Norman turned eleven while his Uncle Ernest was visiting) riding the subway while carrying on his lap a small, model-airplane gasoline engine. When he is approached by a "tough" older boy who sits next to him and asks him faintly menacing questions, the story depicts the mounting, finally almost hysterical fear of the younger boy, and closes with him frozen in his seat, praying for the arrival of his subway stop. In his covering letter to his Harvard instructor, Norman identifies the story as autobiographical.

Uncle Louis returned to Johannesburg after a very short stay, but young Ernest settled in for his two-month household stint, making friends with the children and doing whatever he had been assigned to do with Barney. No doubt he was also exploring career opportunities for himself in the field of chemical engineering. Norman, meanwhile, despite the troubles that plagued him in the house and at Hebrew School, was trying to find a place in the curbstome society of Crown Street. His subway story and others

that he would later write about this period show that he had to approach other children while burdened by a long-nurtured, nightmare perception that he was a physical coward. As he came to know his neighbors on the street he did not seem to them particularly timid--he was ashamed of his feelings and hid them well--but neighborhood children did notice that he never got into fights.

Later interviews record the fact that Norman recognized himself best, in those Brooklyn years, as a kid on the block, never a part of any class or clique at school. In an unpublished novel he would describe the neighborhood streets with images of lattice-scrolls of chalked game scores, and one funny story (also unpublished) would recollect his exhilaration at playing touch football in the streets. Then, in an interview that was largely about other things, he would recall: "When you were playing roller hockey, if you bodychecked somebody hard they'd go flying across the sidewalk and ... had to go scrambling up a lawn that was banked. If that ever happened to you you'd come out with fire in your eyes and your skates full of dirt." Street sports, movies, his model airplane and his science projects, along with his regular visits to the local reading library, apparently accounted for most of the time Norman had available outside his schedules at public and at Hebrew schools.

At public school, having entered seventh grade at mid-year, he was facing an interesting crossroads. At the end of spring term he would be half-way through the seventh grade, working with a

group of peers whose average age was already one year more than his own. Would his teachers accelerate him into the eighth grade class that was to start out in the fall of 1934 and graduate in the spring of 1935? His new classmates in this, his final, year would on the average be a full two years older than he. Or would he stay with his classmates in seventh grade, carry over into the fall with them, and thus postpone his grade school graduation until the end of calendar 1935 or even the spring of 1936? The question was not at all idle, because the answer would determine his age at the time of his entrance into the world of high school, where the entering freshman class size was to be 650--all boys. The eighth grade class size at P.S. 161, boys and girls together, was to be just under 150.

As things stood in the spring of 1934, Norman's social time out on Crown Street tended to be passed slightly more with children a year behind him in school than with his classmates, but the distinction did not mean much. Even if separated by a grade, Crown Street children all went to P.S. 161, were neighbors, and bonded across grade lines without much concern. Two years difference in age, however, even among neighborhood grade school boys and girls, is a significant separator, and if Norman were to be moved up into the eighth grade in the next fall he would pass his classroom time among people with whom he had comparatively little in common. Those boys whose family could afford it would have celebrated or be making final preparations for their age-13 Bar Mitzvah ceremonies--Norman's would at that point be a year and

half away--and the girls could be no more interested in him than he, realistically, could be in them. Norman was a notably slight child at this time, even among his age peers, and further acceleration in grade level would complete his separation between classroom and curbstone society.

This might operate on Crown Street as something of an inconvenience, but it could nevertheless be accommodated. At Boy's High, however, such an age disparity within a class would be more than inconvenient; it would force him to either face-up to the challenge of his youth and slight stature, or suffer the consequences. Since Boy's High was located a good two miles from Crown Street, he would be required to make the journey without close friends, and to enter there into competition with a society composed largely of physically superior strangers. There is no indication from the record that anyone was anticipating these problems, not even Norman. He, of course, had stopped producing the imagination-charged manuscripts that might have revealed his feelings about such questions. His mother was on record as believing that acceleration in school was a demonstration of Norman's superiority over ordinary children, and she therefore supported it. Barney, politic as always, firmly supported her. The only person who was, in effect, officially responsible for thinking the problem through was Marguerite A. McBride, the teacher who was scheduled to teach eighth grade in the fall of 1934. She had to decide whether he should step up in age-group, or continue on the level he occupied in the spring of 1934.

Miss McBride told the Mailers that she would consider the acceleration question over the summer--consulting with Herman Schreiber, his seventh-grade teacher--and make her decision at the start of the fall term. Little survives to document that summer's course of events at Long Branch, where Norman and Barbara stayed with their Aunt Jenny at her New Howland Hotel lease. In a letter to his father, Norman writes about swimming and going to the movies, but says nothing about team sports or writing. He also mentions building a model airplane, from a kit presented to him by Anne Kessler, and he kept a notebook that was a kind of parody of the novel-manuscript notebooks of the previous summer. He titled it "Inventors Picture Notes, by Norman K. Mailer," and it consists of 96 pages of pasted-up articles and pictures cut from the pages of magazines like Popular Mechanics and Popular Science. Many of these cutouts concern airplanes, often military, and there is one long section on "Chemical Solutions" for the home chemistry set. The book contains not a word or a drawing by Norman himself.

At summer's end the Mailers got the news: Norman was to accelerate into the eighth grade class, and he graduated from P.S. 161 in June of 1935. Perhaps while being lectured on the need for him to assume additional maturity in his new station, Norman took his mother aside and asked that she tell him the truth about Barney. It was a desperate appeal, since he had scant hope of breaking through Fan's characteristic wall of secrecy, but he had reached the point where he needed to know his father's story. Perhaps his mother perceived this. In any case, fifty years later,

Norman would still remember how surprised he was at his mother's response. She listened to his plea, looked at him, and proceeded to tell him everything. In a cathartic flood, she took Norman back, crisis by financial crisis, job-loss after job-loss, threats from employers, creditors and enforcers, until his mind reeled from the sheer detail of it. In turn, he told her of his apprehension concerning so many half-heard, partly understood family conferences. Like a pair of combat veterans from different places in the field, they shared their harrowing moments until they both felt that everything they wanted to know or needed to say about the Barney problem had been aired.

Mother and son, of course, continued to feel the emotional effect of the experiences they had undergone, but both must have been relieved in their different ways: she of keeping the secret over such a span of years, he of the far more damaging burden of living so much of his life in the dark. Unquestionably, this exchange opened a new way for the two of them to communicate, and Fan especially seemed to welcome Norman as her ultimate secret-sharer. If his mother felt that her son could henceforth have access to her innermost heart, however, the eleven-year old Norman felt a little different about affording her access to his. He was grateful to his mother for her candor, but he knew her well enough not to tell her the truth about his own reaction to Barney's secret life. She, of course, reacted to Barney's deception with anger and fear. Norman, by contrast, was absolutely delighted; he was filled

with romantic admiration that Barney, beneath his studied disguise, could be living such a brilliant adventure.

Almost surely, the heart that Norman yearned secretly to share was not his mother's but his father's. If this new knowledge about Barney could have opened a bridge between father and son, and Norman could have crossed over somehow to join Barney as an ally in the endless war he fought, the ultimate boyhood fantasy would wonderfully have been realized. In fact, however, Barney never for a moment let down the mask of bland denial that had served him so well for so many years. It was proof against any approach from anyone, certainly from Norman, and the boy had to make do with the after all considerable satisfaction of savoring his father's performance from a distance.

Norman seems not to have shared his delicious secret with anyone: his Cousin Cy was out of range at this time--graduating from Harvard and heading toward Columbia Law School-- and the only person he is on record as telling is his little sister. This, however, was some years later, when Norman judged she was old enough to learn. Then, with an air of high confidentiality, he advised Barbara that she might be surprised to discover that her father was actually a great man. Surprised indeed, she received the news with no transformation whatever in her already unromantic vision of Barney's character.²

²When her brother told Barbara that her father was a great man, her first, startled reply was: "Who *is* my father?" She simply didn't believe that Norman could have been referring to Barney.

As an eighth grader, Norman passed his final year at P.S. 161 predictably. He did steady work in the classroom, where his grades remained at a solid B+ level; he did his homework, endured Hebrew School, and spent most of his Crown Street social time with children of his own age playing ball, going to the movies or frequenting the library and the corner hangout. Whatever other effects his new knowledge about his father produced, Norman, as he approached adolescence, still lived a more or less fearful life on the street. He positioned himself behind a screen of privacy, coming out to bond with those neighborhood peers he could trust to treat him decently.

Eppy Epstein and Harold Keisel were the ones he liked most in the fairly large group of boys his own age, and there were two eighth grade classmates who were actual friends. One was Joseph "Slip" Slipyan, reported to have been the quietest boy in the school, as well as one of its fastest runners. When Norman entered the marathon neighborhood ball games he would usually do so with Slip, in a kind of alliance. Outside the games, reading books at

the public library was an engrossing social activity. Norman would often visit the library and sit for hours reading with his other eighth grade friend, Jerry Reimer, who lived on the block and who suffered from epilepsy; his legs and feet had been deformed, thus excluding him from the games. As subsequent developments would show, Jerry--marked by himself and by others for exclusion--was the Crown Street boy with whom Norman secretly identified.

Mailer family folklore preserves an image of Norman in these years somewhat at odds with his own recollections as well as the documentary evidence preserved in school records. Family and near-family memories recall him as the Boy Genius, whose legendary academic achievements foretold all the great things to come. One story has it that at graduation Principal Floyd R. Smith announced that Norman's I.Q. of 165 was not only the highest in his class but in the whole history of P.S. 161. Some such word of praise may have been directed at Norman by Mr. Smith, who no doubt tried to distribute as many distinctions as possible in his graduation addresses, but no bouquet from the Principal could alter the fact that Norman was out of his class in every sense when he joined this eighth grade in the fall of 1934. No matter what his I.Q. may have been, he stayed a full cut below the academic top of his class all through the year--as, indeed, he had since first being accelerated at school--and he could gain no social or athletic status in competition with these classmates. His real strength, his secret weapon, had remained untouched on his writing-portfolio shelf for two years by the time of his graduation.

This ceremony was scheduled for June 24, 1935, and in preparation Norman purchased a customized autograph book, its leather cover embossed with "Public School 161", containing full-page photographs of the school building and of Principal Smith. In addition to collecting some autographs, Norman recorded on these pages certain basic information, filling in a blank to identify his best friend in the class as Slip Slipyan. He also noted that his favorite song was "Dixie," that baseball (which he never played well) was his favorite game and that Lou Gehrig was his personal hero. He listed NYU as his college of choice, Aeronautical Engineering as his intended profession and "Much haste, more waste" as his motto. His most telling entry came under the heading of favorite author/book, for he listed Dumas and The Count of Monte Cristo.

The entry is telling because, first, we know he had read the book before starting to write "The Martian Invasion" two years before; and we know that in the two years following his retirement from writing he had been reading steadily in the public library. Nothing he had read for the previous two years, apparently, struck him as suitable for inclusion now as his favorite book. This is one of a number of signs that tell us how unambitious Norman's reading had become since he stopped writing. We know from his use of Les Miserables and The Count of Monte Cristo in "The Martian Invasion" that in 1933 he not only was reading well ahead of his age-curve, but was making direct use of the most advanced of his reading in the process of his writing. It seems that when the

writing stopped, so did the escalation of his personal reading level.

He continued to read a lot of books, ranging over sports, adventure and detective stories, but nothing drove him toward increasing the density of his reading-page. There must have been an "Adult" section in his library, but there is no sign that he ever tried to obtain any books there. The situation would remain the same throughout all four years of his high school, where he continued to consume the same kind of literary junk food that attracted him in the late grades. When he finally did resume serious reading at Harvard, Norman demonstrated that he read ambitiously only when he was writing. Another way to put it is that in these writing-less years, Norman's reading may have given him a place to hide but it did nothing to strengthen his sense of himself as an important person. It was his sense of self-importance that had been subverted by the forces that stopped his writing; and that sense would continue to elude him until he rediscovered his writer-identity.

The autographs Norman's book accumulated were respectable in number, but hardly supported the family notion that his grade school years concluded in a blaze of public salute. Each grade was gender-segregated and divided into sections; Norman's 8-B (section 4) contained twenty-three other boys, of whom half signed his book (one of them revealing that Norman's classroom nickname was "Bacteria.") He had filled in blanks identifying Section Four's "Brightest," "Wittiest," "Most Popular," "Most Cheerful,"

"Best Athlete," "Best Looking," and "Best Dresser," of whom just two signed the book (one of them mentioning the nickname). Six or eight teachers, the Principal, Eppy Epstein and nine-year old Barbara rounded out the remaining signatories. Perhaps the most telling commentary was preserved not in words but in the class graduation picture, where Norman posed in a row of boys positioned immediately below a row of girls. He is so dramatically dwarfed by surrounding students, especially the two heftily mature girls behind him, that he looks as if he has strayed by mistake into the wrong photograph.

A flurry of congratulatory telegrams and letters from relatives and family friends marked Norman's graduation, following which he seems to have spent an unusually quiet Long Branch summer, the first in years from which no children's documents of any kind were preserved. His return to Crown Street set him into motion again, however, since he at the same time had to address himself to finishing Hebrew School and starting Boys High. If this last faced him with an intimidating prospect, the other must have been welcome enough. He had hated the Hebrew training so unreservedly for the previous two and a half years that seeing light at the end of the tunnel could only have cheered him, and this final phase did break up the endless routine there of rote history recitations, rote memorizing of prayers and calligraphy practice. He was assigned a tutor to prepare him for the specific service

that would celebrate his own Bar Mitzvah, when he would read the speech he was now to begin composing. His mother scheduled the ceremony for February 15, two weeks following his thirteenth birthday.

In addition to the proceedings at Temple, there was to be an all-day reception at the Mailer apartment with close friends and the whole Long Branch family in attendance. In November, Fan was already worrying about the need for new furniture, new clothes for the children, the unavoidable hire of a waitress and ordering scores of engraved invitations. She knew that these would have to be paid for, and that the accumulated cost of it all would be beyond them. Up to this time, the family seems to have supported itself only by whatever Fan could earn working with her sisters in the hotel business. There had been better seasons earlier in the decade, and perhaps savings from those times were put to use as times got worse, but when the tourist trade started actually to disappear, Fan had to look elsewhere. She took a turn at trying to sell insurance door to door, but, intrepid as she was, this experience was too much for her. When Fan finally gave it up, she did so with a sense of defeat that came close to overwhelming her, and in this frame of mind she began to reflect upon her life in a way that was, to her at least, entirely new.

By the autumn of 1935 Fan's sisters, Beck and Jennie, were preparing for what by then had become an undeniable inevitability: the approaching deaths of their two husbands. Ever since the men started to decline, Beck and Jennie had borne the brunt of

supporting their families, and Fan--joining them in their labors--had always acted as if her marriage was essentially like theirs. Now, as she saw that her sisters were about to become widows, it may be that their situations put a new idea into Fan's mind. Wherever it came from, the idea of getting a divorce was starting to grow on her, and as it did she began to consider it seriously.

Utterly uncharacteristic as it was of her, unprecedented and presumably unthought of anywhere in the family, Fan liked the idea well enough to feel that she had to find someone, some true confidant, with whom she could discuss it. The Kesslers had been her conspirators on the subject of Barney from the start, but to propose such an idea to them might have seemed reckless. They, after all, represented Barney's side of the family, and to propose leaving him could have seemed like a proposal for leaving them as well. Or at least Fan, whose unrelenting rule was never to trust anyone any farther than she had to, would very likely have concluded. She could have talked to her sisters, of course, or to other family members in Long Branch, but after all she had fled that community rather than expose Barney's weaknesses in the first

place. Certainly there is little evidence that she ever did discuss the idea with any of the Schneiders, any more than she did with the Kesslers or other members of Barney's family.³

We know all this because we know that, sometime during the fall run-up to the Bar Mitzvah, Fan decided to discuss the possibility of divorcing Barney with Norman himself. Perhaps she assumed that her cathartic conference with him the year before had bonded them on the subject of Barney's intractable treachery, and that Norman was the most natural consultant in the world. It may also be that the spirit formally associated with the ceremony of Bar Mitzvah had a kind of influence on her. The traditional call to the Torah was supposed to mark the boy's moment of separation from childhood, when "all responsibility on your parents' part ceases, and you are yourself to guide your own destinies."⁴ Whatever impelled her, Fan proceeded to take Norman aside one day, making sure that they had privacy and plenty of time to talk, and eased him into a discussion of the hitherto undiscussable.

Her approach probably would have involved quite a lot of preliminary explanation, but she may well have tried to avoid emphasizing that, apart from anything else, Barney was ruining the

³Norman thinks he remembers that she discussed it with the Kesslers, and of course she may have done so.

⁴The words are from a Bar Mitzvah letter to Norman written by his Johannesburg Aunt Babs.

four of them financially. All of her later life Fan would claim that she successfully kept the seriousness of their financial situation from troubling the children, so on this occasion she may indeed have tried to direct the conversation away from the merely financial. Her primary intention in turning to Norman, in any case, was to find out if he thought that he and his sister might live happier lives if they could be free of the apprehensions that Norman had emphasized in his consultation with his mother the year before.

Fan evidently had come close to concluding that she herself would feel a lot more secure if she did not have to go on living under the gun, always aware that the coming of the next crisis was only a matter of time. She now knew that Norman himself had suffered from this endless apprehension of impending disaster, and supposed that he still suffered from it. So it must have seemed simply logical to ask him if he shared her feeling that the best solution might be to make a break, cut off the source of the problem, and fashion a life free of its threat. One thing that Fan never doubted was that all of their anxiety and grief, both hers and Norman's, had been Barney's fault entirely. Didn't it follow that the solution was to get rid of him?

Norman remembers this, and remembers how forcefully he argued against the idea. His own attitude toward his father at this point may have fallen somewhat short of outright hero worship, but he greatly admired Barney's wickedness and delighted in his ability to frustrate his would-be governors. They were, after all, the

same people who governed Norman himself. He knew enough, however,

not to press his case in terms that would reveal these feelings. Instead, he took a kind of expert-witness posture on the subject of his own and his sister's feelings of security. Testifying for them both, he argued passionately that Barney's continued presence was a necessity for the preservation of family well-being.

Norman stipulated that he loved his father, his sister loved her father, and as children they needed to be with him as well as with their mother. If it was true that Barney did cause a certain amount of difficulty from time to time and was not a perfect person in every respect, he was still a wonderful father, recognized among the Schneiders as well as the Mailers as a man who loved his children. Perhaps as the children got older they could help their mother in devising ways to soften the effects of their father's occasional lapses; and even now the trouble he caused had produced the good effect of bringing mother and son together as confidants. So, Norman argued, his mother had to give up this terrible, unthinkable idea of getting a divorce.

Fan, of course, still had all her own reasons for wanting relief from her life with Barney, but she had no answer for Norman when he stated his case in terms of the family's need for love. More than anything else, this same need had got her into the marriage in the first place, and it may well be that the fire of her son's plea called back her own once passionate commitment to her husband. If the initial form of this had passed, the

possibility for its replacement by something of value surely still existed, and her feelings for the family were passionate still. If Norman's argument had made her feel that she might be placing her own needs before those of her children, the idea could only have filled her with dismay or, still worse, with shame. Confidential consultation with Norman would become one of Fan's most depended-upon resources for the rest of her life, and this one seems to have told her exactly what she needed to know. From that day forward the subject of divorce from Barney remained closed: Norman never heard or saw another sign of it, nor did his sister, who of course knew nothing of this consultation.

Though Norman would never forget the drama of this crisis with his mother, and though he must in a way have been reassured when he proved able to keep her from, so to speak, setting his house on fire, he must also have felt shaken by the experience. The effect of it could only have added weight to what was already proving to be a burdensome season. His initiation into the alien world of Boys High ought to have been his primary concern, since it certainly was posing serious problems for him, but the press of his immediate family concerns put school consideration quite to the side. In addition to his mother's alarming flirtation with the divorce idea, his approaching Bar Mitzvah put even more pressure upon him, not the least of which was the event's predictable effect upon the family's sense of its specifically Jewish identity. At the same time that Norman's experiences in Hebrew School had been making him more and more uncomfortable with his

Jewishness, the family's consciousness of the approaching event was moving it in the opposite direction.

Fan had not kept a kosher kitchen (except in the summer hotels) since the death of her parents in 1928, and though she did not return to the practice as the Bar Mitzvah approached, she returned to something like the spirit of it. So did most of the other members of the extended family, for it seems that a heightening of the family's consciousness concerning its Jewish identity was the most broadly felt effect of Norman's coming of age. Which is not to say that Jewishness had been merely forgotten up to this time; say rather that it had tended to be somewhat more secularized. Few of the family went regularly to synagogue, certainly not Barney and Fan, though she often lit candles on Friday night and offered sunset prayers. Much more important to her were the sisterhood organizations of the Congregation, whose meetings and social events she attended regularly.

In a broader context, the family took its Jewishness as axiomatic, affirming it as the most important identifying element in its composition--except perhaps for the element of family itself. They were all keenly aware of the problems posed for them by anti-Semitism--Cy had perceived a good deal of it at Harvard, for example--and were always ready to close ranks whenever that threat appeared. Intense as Norman's feelings became during his Hebrew School experience, and ready though the family usually was to indulge him in any special wish he might express, he would

never have thought of asking to be excused from this preparation or, still less, from the whole Bar Mitzvah culmination. He told friends on Crown Street he was going to go this far along with the tradition, but that once the ceremony was over he intended to put it, and the whole matter of his Jewishness, as far behind himself as possible. Until then, he apparently resolved to walk through it and, in effect, honor for one last time the feelings of his family on this matter.

Norman's tutor began working with him on the composition of the ceremonial speech, and the more material preparations for the event were taken care of as Barney, if no one else, must all along have known they would be. Things were at their darkest, and the family sat down to a Thanksgiving dinner for which their two guests, the Kesslers, had to buy the groceries. After the meal, as the adults talked, Dave Kessler mentioned that while Uncle Louis would be unable to attend the Bar Mitzvah, he planned to offer a substantial cash gift in his absence. Fan notes in her memoirs that she said she wished she might have it in advance, and within two weeks she found herself with a check for five hundred dollars. It not only underwrote the new furniture, the clothes, the invitations, and a waitress to serve the homemade buffet, but provided a small cash reserve for later needs.

The whole of the Bar Mitzvah preparation went forward, with one hundred guests invited for the ceremony at Congregation Shaari Zedek at ten o'clock on the morning of Saturday, February 15, as well as for the noon to 6:00 P.M. reception at the Crown Street

apartment. The night before brought a heavy snowstorm, prompting Norman to predict that nobody would come, but the turnout was quite substantial and there certainly was a blizzard of telegrams, letters, cards and gifts to mark the moment from which Norman was to guide his own destiny. At the Temple he read aloud the eccentrically spelled text of his typewritten speech of about five hundred words. Parts of it were pure convention while other parts lifted a few family eyebrows:

How great is my joy to become a member of the people of Israel, the people that have spread morality, righteousness, poetry, love and light....The nation of the prophets and of great men like Maimonides, Yehuda Haleivy, Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marks, and Professor Einstein, and many, many more.

He went on to pledge resistance to the Nazis and participation "in every good and progressive Jewish undertaking," called down blessings on his parents and on the audience, and as soon as possible thereafter left the premises.

The eyebrow-raising references in the speech to Spinoza and Marx and progressive causes were attributed by the Long Branch family to the perverse influence of Norman's Hebrew tutor, since the family itself normally distinguished quite sharply between its ethnic and its political loyalties. Though Fan was an FDR admirer, Aunt Beck was in fact chairman of the Monmouth County Republican Party, and the business background of both sides of the family was proof against the "street socialism" so richly represented in the Crown Heights community. Back at the apartment, Norman presided over a long afternoon of congratulation and accumulation of gifts that Fan carefully cataloged so that he could send out notes of

acknowledgement. There were fifteen cash contributions, ranging from a grand-uncle's five dollars to Louis's five hundred (the Kesslers gave one hundred) and a pile of packages that included books, clothing, a talith, a "skullcap," a camera, three separate sets of military brushes and combs, and two watches.

One of these, and quite a fine one, was sent by a Mr. Aronson, whom Fan had never met nor heard of. Her suspicions aroused, she pressed an on-the-spot investigation until she discovered that Aronson was a gambler who ran a poker game in which Barney was a regular player. Such a confirmation of the existence of Barney's other world could not have been especially rare, but whenever she encountered one Fan tried to rise to the occasion. She was capable of a ferocity that perhaps only Barney's unique defensive strategy could withstand, and it is as if her failure to defeat him in their lifelong contest redoubled her fury when she directed it at others. She waited until the reception was over, but the next day she called Aronson's home, not to offer thanks for the watch (Norman presumably did that by mail)

but, as she would recall thirty years later, "to curse him out of existence." Mrs. Aronson happened to answer the phone, and Fan "did not spare either of them." When Mrs. Aronson "begged me not to say those things, that her husband had a weak heart, I followed it up by saying that he could drop dead that minute and I hung up."

iii

Welcome as it was in that season, Uncle Louis's Bar Mitzvah gift served to dramatize the financial depths to which his older brother's family had fallen, and it soon became clear that Louis and Dave Kessler intended to do something to remedy the situation. Having been required to undergo a two-year period of punishment at the hands of his brother and brother-in-law, Barney was now to be offered a carefully supervised chance to redeem himself. Dave Kessler, presumably in consultation and perhaps even in partnership with Louis⁵, had designed a business opportunity for

⁵There is no evidence to show that Louis was involved in an actual partnership with his brother-in-law, but it is hard to imagine that such a hard-headed businessman as David Kessler would have failed to require some serious cooperation from him. All those years of indemnifying a brother-in-law's excesses, while an increasingly affluent younger brother stood idly by, would have

the Brooklyn Mailers. Dave's Continental Candy Manufacturing Company, located near the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, had made him wealthy through his production and marketing of various locally popular chocolate-covered fruit candies. He had established the business before the war, and one story tells of how, when a sugar shortage developed at the war's start, the large commodity reserves at the Continental Company enabled its owner to make a major killing.

Another commodity the Company always kept in substantial reserve was heating oil, for its ovens, and early in 1936 Norman's Uncle Dave proceeded to establish a small independent heating oil supply company. The firm, fielding just one or two delivery trucks, could at once service the ovens at his factory and also develop a limited local market of resident and small company consumers. Such an enterprise could serve as a tax shelter for the Candy Company, and at the same time could offer the Mailer family an opportunity to develop a regular household income. So the office of the Sunlight Oil Company was established, at ⁶56 Court Street in Brooklyn, just across from Borough Hall, and along with shopping for a general manager and a secretary, Dave installed Barney as both company accountant and customer contact representative.

It is unclear who was first hired to serve as the Sunlight

been unacceptable to Dave. Louis, for his part, would almost surely have found placing the whole burden on his brother-in-law to be inappropriate as well.

Company's manager--perhaps Dave himself tried to do it--but it soon became clear that if the business was to get anywhere, a full-time and firmly effective manager was needed. Barney was unsuited to such a position, and did not want it anyway, having immediately failed to accomplish anything as a customer contact representative. In its early stages, the only significant customer the oil company had was the Continental Candy Company itself. Perhaps as early as the summer of 1936 Dave agreed to give Fan a crack at the manager's job, and the result was dramatic. Within a year she had the business operating at a profit, accomplishing this by a combination of the most excruciating economies, including cutting office and driver staff to the minimum, and the most imaginative marketing strategies. Dave, who was after all the owner, must have taken some share of the profit, but most of what was not needed to pay for the business expenses, which would have included Barney's salary, seems to have gone to Fan as salary and/or commission. So supported, she found herself able for the first time to start controlling the factors that produced financial stability for her family.

The threat, of course, continued to be Barney; but by this time all the players understood that he was the threat, and, so identified, he could be defended against if not totally held in check. Not only did Fan devise tactics to control her husband--she oversaw his work in the office, for example, so that she could keep an eye on him--but Dave and Louis seem to have determined that Barney-created crises should be kept quarantined. By 1937

everyone must have understood that these crises would sometimes occur, despite the most careful defenses against them. When they did happen, they were settled without reference to the Oil Company's continuation, thus establishing that Sunlight was to be kept free to serve as the support for the Mailer family.

We cannot know how concerned Norman was with all this change and restructuring in the world of his parents, but we can be sure that, however seriously he took it, he also had other things on his mind. The little boy who stepped out of his P.S. 161 class photograph in June of 1935 had started attending Boys High the following September; and even before completing his Bar Mitzvah he knew that he was in for an experience that would diminish him. He could deal with his classes well enough; indeed, he worked harder than he had in eighth grade and he did better. Boys High offered a standard curriculum of four years each of English, History/Social Science, and Mathematics; three years each of Laboratory Science and Language study (Norman elected French); and two years each of Music and Drawing. Though Norman would decline the study of a second language (Latin was the prestige election), he periodically was cited for excellence in French and History, and he won special honors in Mathematics in every term of his four years. His Science grades may well have been the highest in his class, and he made the comprehensive honor roll summa cum laude in all but one of his eight terms.

Academic classes, therefore, were not the source of the

problem in his new world. Considerably closer to the source, one suspects, was the requirement that he take "Health Education" for each of the four years, since during at least the first two of these the classes set standards altogether beyond Norman's reach. His grades in Health Education were not just lower than his academic grades; in the first two years they were so much lower that they in effect disputed the original administrative decision to send a boy so young into competition with classmates so much more mature. But of course "Health Education" is a legendary killing ground for the egos of physically fragile students, and Norman must have been far from the only such victim in his huge freshman class. Provided with such ready-made comrades, he might have bonded with his fellow-sufferers in defiance of what after all amounted to traditional gym-teacher bullying. The problem apparently was that Norman did not feel confident enough to try bonding with strangers or fighting back against the bullying of authority. Instead, he seemed to accept the gym class grades as proof that he really did not belong; not in the gym class and not anywhere in the wider Boys High community.

Except for his academic classes, where he kept his head down and tried to do everything that was asked of him, he behaved as if he stood completely outside the inner structure of his school, and he turned his back on the place the moment his classes permitted. His life in the two years before coming to high school had conditioned him toward this academic self-isolation; even without the rejection of his gym teacher he might well have handled his

new world in this old way. Immediately after his last class he would join the one person in the school who, he knew, felt even farther out of it than he did, and together with the epileptic Jerry Reimer he would walk the two miles back to Crown Street. They did not walk alone, of course. Boys High was like all such schools, supporting separate populations of students who for a great many different reasons either did or did not enter deeply into the maze of elective classes and extra-curricular activities that created its community superstructure. One population would remain after class and, through the dynamics of active participation, come into effective possession of the student life there. Meantime, conceding this ownership, the other population would simply go away.

Thus Norman soon became one of the Boys High fade-aways, attempting instead to remain in every personal and emotional respect a denizen of Crown Street. After finishing his homework in his empty apartment, while his parents were at the office, he would join his neighbors in playing games out on the street. The neighbors were mostly still students at P.S. 161, and measured against them Norman apparently felt that he had comparatively little to fear (though the fact that they were not also classmates separated him from them.)⁶ Indeed, a simple strategy of following

⁶ In 1983 he told an interviewer about feeling excluded at Boy's High but not wholly included on Crown Street: "I felt straddled between my friends who were my age at home and were two years behind me in school. So I didn't feel I particularly belonged in one life or another."

the dictates of his fears was probably how he proceed, unconsciously, throughout his high school years.

He could hardly have been conscious of the fact that what he was really doing was arresting the development of his own character, and that he had been doing very much the same thing ever since he broke off his connection with the act of writing two years before. Presumably it was some combination of fears that drove him away from his sense of himself as a writer in the first place. When he lost touch with that sense, the most central and substantive elements in his character were, as he later would put it, frozen by the separation.⁷ They would remain frozen during all the years of his early adolescence, through which he would proceed to make his handicapped way like some sort of self-appointed invalid.

The once crowded pages of Fan's scrapbook, where she had always preserved every evidence of Norman's accomplishment, are notably modest in their memorials during the Boys High years. After the bundle of memorabilia that marked the Bar Mitzvah in his freshman year, there are to be found only the proudly preserved citations for classroom accomplishment, and a few other scraps of paper attesting to this or that minor marking on his usually blank personal record. We know from other evidence that there was a steady stream of increasingly large and intensely assembled model

⁷ In his 1945 "Portrait of the Artist" letter to his wife, he refers to his six year period of not-writing as "the great freeze."

airplanes, often with working gas engines, and there were piles of aeronautical and popular science magazines. But from his countless hours spent at the school over a four-year period, so little survives that we examine with real interest an accidentally preserved set of notes and papers from the final weeks of an English/Speech class that he took in the first semester of his junior year.

At this time Norman was approaching his fifteenth birthday, and the novocaine-dead tone in which he continues to cling to things aeronautical, twisting every class assignment so as to confine himself within its limits, is probably the most striking thing revealed by this material. For a descriptive essay he uses "Gas Model Airplanes" as his subject, and for an assignment to outline a speech of introduction he writes of one Warren Niles, an expert on military aviation. Another speech-outline covers the accomplishments of Wilbur and Orville Wright. All of this prose is flat, passively descriptive, crammed with fact, completely monotonous and ironically illuminated by Norman's uncomprehending notes from the teacher's instructions, warning the class that "imagination" is crucial to good speech "because imagination causes emotion." Norman dutifully records in his notebook: "If voice is monotonous [it] means [that it] needs vocal training or has little imagination or feeling. Yield to the imagination!"

Like an invalid whose affliction is located precisely in his crippled imagination, Norman plows forward in his leaden, conscientious way, offering a criticism of his own style of public

speaking by noting that he uses the syllable "er" too often, and that he shows

very often a hesitancy. Besides this I have a slight lisp and am inclined to be indistinct. The lisp is not noticed unless some particularly tricky sentence is used, and I think I shall be able to overcome my indistinctness by careful practice.

Some feeling had to be buried beneath the sand of such prose, and we perhaps get a hint of what it was from additional pages of notes, which reveal that the class was asked to write against the clock in composing sentences that use the same word twice: once and a verb and once as a noun. "I will detail the work to you because you know it in enough detail," he wrote as his first example; and his second was "The Literary Digest is hard to digest." But the test called for ten sentences, and Norman's last two, written quickly to finish, allow a crack of light into his feelings about himself and his situation as his approached age fifteen. For number nine he wrote: "The insult was uncalled for; he had no right to insult me." And he concluded the exercise with: "I object to being made an object of ridicule."

Ridicule and insult appeared often enough in Norman's early fiction, as did fear, but they were always conquered by the redemptive presence of courage. Courage was the sovereign virtue of his childhood fictional characters, just as it continued to be in the swashbuckling pages of adolescent reading he consumed as an escape from high school. At this very time Norman was reading the pages of Spicy Detective, along with Jeffrey Farnol's The Amateur Gentleman and Raphael Sabatini's Captain Blood (discovered by way

~~1940~~
of the 1935 Errol Flynn movie, which was Norman's personal favorite). All of these fictions, of course, offer their audience fantasies of courageous heroes. What they do not offer is any insight concerning how a fearful young reader might himself acquire this virtue.

The final page of Norman's notes for his English/Speech class is occupied by a poem he copied out as an assignment, and it is titled "Courage." If we are correct in surmising that most of Norman's actual emotional life at this time, cut off from any useful form for his own imaginative expression, was directed largely by feelings of fear, we must note with special interest that the poem he chose for his final class exercise dealt not only with courage but with aviation. The reason he clung during these years to the paraphernalia and idea of aviation may not have been merely to seek sanctuary there (though it must have been largely that). In the days of his writing, after all, he had always "done" aviation along with the fiction, and often even wrote stories about it. Maybe now, confused and frightened by the subject of who he was, unable to know that what he needed was his writing, he imagined that if only he could fly it would make him brave. The poem he chose to copy for the class was by aviator Amelia Earhart Putnam, lost in the Pacific the previous summer. Its opening lines are the most applicable to Norman's life:

Courage is the price that life exacts for
granting peace.
The soul that knows it not, knows no
release
From little things....

The same junior-year semester that Norman took this class, his age-group from Crown Street was joining the student body at Boys High. During two years without their presence Norman had, of course, settled into his narrow groove at the school, but the appearance of his neighborhood cronies created a welcome new element. One persistent story tells of how Norman soon teamed up with two of his favorite game-playing pals to form a musical trio: Eppy Epstein on drums, Harold Kiesel on trumpet, and Norman Mailer on clarinet. Had they actually known how to play these instruments they could easily have joined one of the many performing groups at the school; but since they did not know they took their act back to Crown Street, where they pretended to know.

Their rehearsals, to which Norman's Uncle Dave contributed a new clarinet with carrying case, were ear-splitting parodies of actual sessions; but their make-believe allowed them to imagine for themselves an identity with some kind of creative distinction. They day-dreamed about playing the Catskill resort circuit and making money and meeting girls; they listened to jazz records together and pored over the wisdom of Downbeat. The whole business only lasted one winter--Norman seems to have tired of it and dropped out--but the instructive point is that in the culture of Boys High itself, where the really serious striving took place for the really glittering prizes, Norman never even tried to compete.

The BHS Senior Recorder yearbook for 1939 reveals in the school a structure of institutional contests and competitions for

distinction that would be comparable to a junior Olympic Games, except that only part of it had to do with athletics. Norman's profile there is far from the lowest in the class; Jerry Reimer, picture-less and without a word of record added to his name and Crown Street address, was one of the invisible hundred and fifty resting at the anonymous bottom of a graduating class of 650. Norman's profile in the competitive annals was low enough, however, to merit some remark. Not only did he play no music, he didn't act, he didn't orate or debate, he didn't edit or photograph or write significantly for any of the myriad publications. He didn't hold office in class or in the school government, and he didn't join any of the public affairs forums. Of course he participated in no athletic activities.⁸

Even in the area of scholarship, where his level of classroom accomplishment should virtually have obliged him to bid for serious team distinction, he apparently refused every invitation and opportunity. He ultimately was enrolled in the academic honor society, the Arista League, but he did not enter until his final term, and he engaged in none of its activities and held none of its many offices. His yearbook photograph caption identifies him as hoping to go to Harvard as an Aeronautical Engineer, and notes his "Honorary President" office in the Aviation Club, which seems not actually to have existed. He is also listed as an editor of

⁸ Quite apart from his life's work as a writer, Norman would later be prominently--and it sometimes seemed compulsively--involved in all of these things.

"The Physical Scientist," a mimeographed publication that printed his 400-word essay, "Model Airplanes," in December, 1938 (and which does not list him as an editor on its masthead.) The essay was the only thing he published while at Boys High, and as a piece of writing it is distinguished by being wholly without image, metaphor, figure or feeling of any kind. He had written with far more verve and flair when he was ten years old.

When Norman went up to Harvard the following autumn, his Crown Heights classmate Martin Lubin went with him, and the two would become close college associates and good friends. They were acquainted, and they seem to have had some Boys High classes together, but to compare their identities in high school is to see the difference between two entirely different sorts of adolescent experience. While Norman positively recoiled from the life of the school, Lubin was one of the students who ran the place. Younger than Norman by three months, and physically even more slightly built, Lubin joined Norman's freshman class at mid-year, and quickly developed from anonymous outsider to school celebrity. Indeed, by the time the yearbook was published he towered on its official list of "Class Celebrities," where he was named twice: as co-editor of the Latin journal ("Euclidian") and of the "Literary Recorder." Norman was not on the celebrity list at all, though even silent "Slip" Slipyan made it as co-captain of the Current Events team. Lubin was also pictured in the "Scholastic Hall of Fame" for his better than 96% overall scholastic average, and won first prize for oratory in the Declamation competition. He

competed for his final two years as a "Mathalete" on the school team that won second place junior year and then won the Borough-wide mathematics championship cup in senior year.

Norman had taken all the mathematics courses the school offered and had accumulated in them a stunning average of 97.8. His refusal of the "mathalete" identity had nothing to do with his ability, but everything to do with his sense of himself. Lubin was inducted into the Arista League in his junior year, and held office in the organization, while the yearbook editors remarked of him in one of several special asides concerning him:

An innovation was created this term when Martin Lubin and Leo McDonald were selected co-valedictorians. Since they had maintained the highest averages, 96.6% and 96.5% respectively, and since both had an outstanding record in extra-curricular activities, the faculty was unable to choose between them. [p.51]

Norman's overall scholastic average was nearly as strong as those of the two valedictorians, and he was, presumably, admitted to Harvard as readily as Lubin (the other valedictorian went to Syracuse). It could only have been his fear of being tested against peers in the arena of public competition that reduced him to the level of a near-nobody at the school. Though the Mailer and Lubin family apartments were less than three blocks apart, it was as if the two boys had lived on different planets for the whole of their time at Boys High.

Norman would not have to wait long for the dawning of some real self-understanding concerning his high school experience, but for the moment the best he could do was present to his family and

friends on Crown Street, and to the admissions offices of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a personal identity that, crafted with some care, he hoped would be believed in and received with admiration. For all we know, he at that moment admired and believed in it himself. First, there was his reputation for high academic achievement, with its focus not simply on math and science, but on the specific goal of aeronautical engineering. In 1939, after all, those words rang for many people with excitement and romance; not only was the aircraft industry emerging as a great new industrial frontier, but it was expanding its design-capability in dramatic anticipation of full wartime production. These considerations added at least a measure of glitter to Norman's professional ambitions.

In the social arena, Norman still maintained his old friendship with Jerry Reimer, but it had shifted so that now Norman overtly assumed the posture of compassionate sympathizer helping a boy less fortunate than he. Other friends on Crown Street report that by his senior year Norman was developing a certain air of private maturity, especially in regard to the sexual realm. He began keeping company with Phyllis Bradman, a girl his age from the neighborhood, but well behind him in high school. She was attractive and wore powder and lipstick; and because of Norman's advanced status in school their relationship seemed on the street to be comparatively grown-up. He also was ready to offer advice and a certain wisdom during the sexual bull-sessions among the neighborhood boys, who tended to believe that

he knew more than they did. Further, Norman regularly gave Dutch-uncle counselling sessions to his sister and her young girl friends, all of whom looked up to him and assigned to him a self-confidence and maturity whose authenticity they never for a moment doubted. On Crown Street, that is, Norman cut a much more impressive social figure than he did at Boys High.

In presenting himself as a Harvard College applicant⁹ he of course relied mainly upon his academic achievements and interests. He handled the matter of extra-curricular activities in a tone of self-deprecatory good humor, and went fairly far in misrepresenting his interests and accomplishments in the area. His clarinet escapade, for example, he converted into a serious musical pursuit--eight weeks of recent practicing, @ five hours per week--and he claimed to have purchased the instrument itself out of savings. Similarly, his thirty-six weeks of work in the B.H.S. Aviation Club are almost certainly imaginary. Years later, he would remember that he submitted a pretentious list of reading done during the previous year, despite the fact that he had actually read few of the titles on it. The list he in fact submitted in his Harvard application is perhaps most striking in its innocence of what might represent, whether actually read or not, a really literate level of reading for someone asking to be admitted to Harvard College. Norman's selections, thrown together

⁹Norman successfully applied to both Harvard and M.I.T. for undergraduate admission, but the surviving files contain only the Harvard application material (along with the M.I.T. letter of acceptance.)

in no discernable order, seem to be little more than random stabs in the dark at what might constitute something like literary cultivation. Whatever the literary circles at Boys High might have been, among both students and faculty, it is clear that Norman knew nothing of them, or of the models of sophistication they might offer for imitation on his college application.¹⁰

It is not in Norman's representation of himself as a reader that his application tells us most about his sense of himself, but in his representation of himself as a writer. In his personal statement he reviews his past interests, affirming his continuing enthusiasm for gas model airplane building, and says of his loss of earlier interests such as writing stories:

Some activities that I was greatly interested in a few years ago,

¹⁰In 1971 Norman recalled for Charles Monaghan in The Washington Post Book World ("Portrait of a Man Reading," in Lennon, Conversations, p 188,) that in high school he had read little but

Jeffrey Farnol, Raphael Sabatini, Spicy Detective and "Model Airplane News." Therefore in preparing his application to Harvard "I had to prepare a reading list and had to fake the thing from beginning to end. I put on all sorts of worthy books--The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells. The Americanization of Edward Bok. I don't even know what their first pages look like."

In fact, neither the Howells nor the Bok books are listed.

The list, whether more or less unread, does include Thomas Hardy's Return of the Native, Upton Sinclair's Boston, Thornton Wilder's The Bridge of San Luis Rey, A. J. Cronin's The Citadel, Booth Tarkington's The Gentleman from Indiana, as well as Nordhoff and Hall's Mutiny on the Bounty and Men Against the Sea. Also included, along with Sabatini, Farnol, and the Model Airplane Year Book, are assorted reading-list texts from high school courses--Macbeth, Idylls of the King, She Stoops to Conquer, The Wild Duck--and science, biography and history selections, many of them apparently textbooks. There are forty-four items listed in all, twenty of which are underscored to identify them as "books on which you would be willing to answer general questions."

have undeniably waned. I used to write stories at the 'drop of a hat,' [but] my proficiency ? in [this activity] has greatly diminished, as may be witnessed by this 'literary transgression.'

In trivializing his now-abandoned writer identity Norman presumably spoke his conscious mind, and in doing so he permits us to see, in hindsight, just how far he had travelled away from the buried self

that he was soon to resurrect.

The substitute-self he was for the moment offering, however, proved perfectly adequate to the task of getting him accepted into the colleges chosen for him by his family advisors. Uncle Dave continued to favor M.I.T., but the fact that Cy had gone to Harvard was probably the determining consideration all along. Perhaps to clinch the question, Norman went down to Washington, D.C. after his graduation to talk things over with his cousin, who was then a lawyer with a government agency. They concluded together that Harvard was the best choice, despite the fact that Cy had not been particularly happy there, and so it was settled to the satisfaction of all.

The whole production of moving Norman into the world of great universities was, despite wide family participation, largely his mother's creation¹¹. Fan was firmly in the family driver's seat by

¹¹ Norman's mother would have resented and tended to reject the suggestion by an M.I.T. admissions officer that Norman spend a year in prep school before coming to college. But even if the M.I.T. acceptance had been more inviting, the idea of sending Norman to Harvard on the track of Beck's son would have had strong appeal to Fan. The two sisters had always shared their dreams for their sons, and they would continue for years to consult closely

this time, with a good control over the family purse and, at least for the moment, an acceptable degree of control over Barney. Characteristically, she would conceal her Sunlight Oil managership on Norman's various financial statements to Harvard, identifying herself as a "housewife" and awarding Barney the breadwinner-distinction with an annual salary of \$3,000, as well as custody of some alleged cash savings accounts. Harvard reviewed the family application for scholarship aid and turned it down, but it is hard from this distance to gain any insight into how the overall aid policy was administered in Norman's particular case.¹² Basic costs at Harvard in 1939-40 were just over a thousand dollars a year, including room and board, and Norman's formal statement of expenses for everything in the first year came to \$1,167.00. Whatever the Mailers were earning by this time out of the Sunlight Oil Company--and other evidence indicates that it was probably something more than \$3,000--Norman's actual Harvard expenses were obviously insured. If the need should arise, his uncles could be counted upon to see him through.

As he prepared for the move, Norman had to be hoping that this time he would not prove too young and unready to hold his own

together.

¹²He has testified that he did not feel discriminated against in the area of financial aid, or indeed in any other important area, because of his Jewishness. Try to research this enough to at least say something generally knowledgeable about what the aid policy was and how it worked, not only in terms of Jewish quotas, but certainly including that. There must be a lot on it in print. Also try to find out if Martin Lubin got aid.

on a new terrain peopled by older and more established inhabitants. Cy had no doubt given him some suggestions, but, at this stage, Fan's presence so generated authority, and his own history at BHS had so leached away any authentic sense of independent identity, that he had little choice but to approach his new experience in something like his mother's terms. "All you need do," she wrote to him in Long Branch in the summer of 1939, "is give your very best at all times because the ultimate reward is for yourself, the benefits, satisfaction and happiness that you will enjoy. . . ." Her tone.

of course, echoes that of all cautionary mothers whose children are

leaving home for the first time, but it is worth remarking that in Norman she was not taking to a soon-to-be rebellious undergraduate troublemaker, Events would prove that though the act of self-discovery at Harvard would revise his sense of "ultimate reward," Norman actually did proceed to do his very best when he got there. To that extent, he was from the start of one mind with his mother.

It is even possible that Norman began at this point to move away from his hitherto romantic vision of his father. Fan's vision of Barney was so utterly in opposition to the one Norman formed some four years earlier, and the power of his imagination had so manifestly collapsed during his passive years at Boy's High, that he may have begun as early as this to start building in his mind a different version of his father. We know for certain that at some future point Norman's original romantic perception was subverted,

and that he was drawn into the concerted family effort to disempower Barney. The chief family weapon was to deny that he had ever wielded over them any significant power at all; let alone the almost absolute power that he often did and, in truth, would sometimes continue to wield. In the end, Norman's conscious conclusions would come to resemble those of his sister and his mother; after Barney's death in 1972 the son would often speak of the father as having been a charming but essentially weak and ineffective man.

The unanswered biographical question, however, is not whether Norman eventually constructed a conventionally mature view of his father. We know that he did, and that he may even have begun this slow process as early as 1939. Nevertheless, the vital question remains: would the original burning vision of Barney as unregenerate outlaw remain buried in Norman's imagination, still alive there and still silently beckoning son to follow father? And would Norman, under pressure created later by radical crises in his professional career, find himself responding to this beckoning invitation and following it? Few other explanations could so completely account for the reincarnation of Norman's adult self into the outlaw identity it would one day assume.

Something that certainly was buried in his imagination in the summer of 1939, in any case, was about to be brought to light in surprisingly short order. Looking back on high school many years later, Norman would recall that though his loss from the lack of

normal social development at Boys High had been immense, he simply had not known at the time what he was missing. He seemed to suggest that only in retrospect did the sting of what he had lost make itself felt, and though he later registered that sting sharply, he implied that for a long time following his graduation he had somehow continued to remain unconscious of his loss.¹³ In fact, however, it did not take long at all for the novocaine to begin wearing off.

Almost as soon as he got out of Brooklyn he started to regain feeling, and in well under a year he would come alive to the reality behind his facade of model airplane-building and pretending to be an aeronautical engineer. All it would take was the reactivation of his fictional imagination. When that began again to function, almost the first thing it would produce would be a piercing vision into what he had been doing to himself during those years he had spent in hiding.

To reach this revelation, however, he had first to get away, and to begin this complex process he felt that he had to outfit himself properly. His mother advised him to wait on the matter of wardrobe; to shop for new things only after he had seen for

¹³"There was no high school life [for me] as such," he told an interviewer in 1983. "Later I began to realize that for many people high school was the prime experience in their lives. It was the dating period and all that...." (p. 309.) "Twelfth Round: An Interview with Norman Mailer," Harvard Magazine, 85 (1983). Reprinted in Lennon, Conversations, pp. 306-329.

Norman's late-life recollection of details of his high school life, and of his childhood life before high school, frequently are qualified and sometimes contradicted by early-life documents.

himself what the other students at Harvard were wearing. Norman disagreed though, so they bought new clothes for him in advance, guided by whatever fashion plates Brooklyn and Long Branch were able to provide. It was his first false move in connection with Harvard, and, though it would not be his last, at least it got him started on what would prove to be the essential journey of his life. Once begun, the journey would return him to the track he had found and followed from early childhood until the age of ten, and he would never abandon that track again.

[End Chapter One]

CHAPTER TWO

Part One

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Norman made the classic Harvard wardrobe mistake. Every outsider, according to the folklore of the period, bought and brought the wrong clothes to Harvard; suffering through the process of getting rid of the wrong things and acquiring the right things was one of the rites of passage that made almost every freshman^a kin. There were, of course, levels of rightness and wrongness, just as there were social stratifications in the class and the community that identified different needs for different people. Freshmen who received invitations to Hasty Pudding-Institute of 1770, and hoped for or expected later invitations from any of the smaller, "finals clubs," would require more and different clothes than did those who had no such ambitions. And freshmen who had never even heard of these legendarily exclusive fraternal organizations needed still less, as was certainly demonstrated by the little circle of marginalized peers that Norman joined in Gray's Hall in the Harvard Yard one late September afternoon in 1939.

He had been a passenger up from Brooklyn with his Boy's High classmate Martin Lubin--himself assigned to live in Thayer Hall--

whose father had made the drive. Norman discovered that in his two-bedroom, one-bathroom suite in Gray's he had been assigned two roommates, and that the three of them, along with a good percentage of people on their hall, shared at least two things in common besides having chosen the wrong clothes: they had all been educated somewhere in the American public school system, and they were all Jewish. It was not Harvard's residential policy to segregate people from minority backgrounds in separate buildings, but being Jewish and having attended a public school seem to have been usual criteria for roommate assignment in any given Hall.

Norman and his two roommates in Gray's 11-12--Maxwell Kaufer, from Kingston, Pennsylvania, and Richard Weinberg, of Memphis, Tennessee--made a sort of circle with Seymour Breslow, from Westport, Connecticut, and his two roommates in Gray's 3-4, and various of them were often joined by or went over to Thayer Hall to visit Lubin and his Hoosier roommate Harold Katz. Though Norman's gold and brown jacket and his green trousers with the vertical blue or perhaps even orange stripe were to become a beloved and permanent joke in the Mailer family folklore, none of his freshman friends recalls that Norman's new clothes were worse than anybody else's. What a number of other students do remember noticing about Norman was his age. Virtually all of the boys were eighteen, and some were older, but the two Brooklynites were not: neither Norman nor Marty Lubin would even turn seventeen until the second semester.

Though Marty was a month and a half younger than Norman, it was Norman's age difference that people were aware of and still remember. They recalled how, when he was out of the room, they might use it to account for his shyness, his initial hesitancy to engage much in the dynamics of their modest social life, and for his combined air of seeming grimly determined and at the same time slightly lost. He had the single in his suite, and he promptly put up over his desk a full-sized Petty Girl poster, upon which roommates and visitors periodically inscribed ironic commentary. Some of the boys found girls to take out, but for the most part these new freshmen had neither the time nor the opportunity for that.

Early in the semester a big Saturday night out would more typically be a visit to a burlesque show. Norman's own recollection includes a story about going that fall to the Old Howard burlesque house on Boston's Scollay Square with a Gray's Hall group, and being checked for age at the door. Knowing sixteen to be too young, he lied and told the doorman "seventeen," only to be turned away because the minimum age was eighteen. Frantically producing his Harvard identification card and pleading a slip of the tongue, he cried out "I'm really eighteen! You have to be eighteen to get admitted to Harvard!" The doorman let him in, but for the rest of the year it became a standard Gray's Hall routine to interrupt him during dormitory arguments by waving identification cards at him and shouting "I'm really eighteen! You

have to be eighteen to get admitted to Harvard!"

Years later one member of the class of 1943 would refer to Norman as "the baby of our class," but the reference was affectionate, and it slowly became clear to Norman that, despite his initial apprehension, he was in no serious danger of having his youth held against him at Harvard. Everyone that he knew in his class, after all, was afraid of having some inadequacy or other held against him in this extraordinary new environment--it was another of the things that bonded them. One sign of self-assurance appeared in late November, when he began asking a waitress from the Harvard Union out on Saturday nights for ice skating or the movies.

To be sure, he encountered one rejection that felt unpleasantly familiar. Perhaps the most crushing experience at Boy's High had been delivered by a Mr. Hiney, the first of a number of Physical Education teachers who said in effect that Norman was too small and too young and should never have been accelerated into high school. At Harvard he was eager to prove that he did belong, athletically as well as every other way, and as a way of satisfying the Physical Education requirement in his new environment he went out for the 150-pound crew--a sport he knew nothing about-- with something well beyond mere enthusiasm. He had not yet got his full growth, which finally would measure a scant 5'7", his arms were disproportionately short, and if he had heard he had not accepted the conventional wisdom that crew men

had to be tall and long-armed: after all, he probably reasoned, basketball players could be short.

His posture of furious commitment alarmed his family, but despite their pleas he structured the demanding crew schedule into his crowded time-table and pulled with his short arms on the long oar of the practice shell throughout almost the whole first semester. Then he was cut, without a word or even a glance from the coach. A more experienced acquaintance at this point explained to him that, except for the position of coxswain, people with his build were automatically and always excluded from the shells--it was nothing personal. True enough, no doubt, but Norman took it personally enough to identify the experience forty years later as the only distinctly unpleasant thing that Harvard, as an institution, ever did to him.

Of course forty years can screen out a lot of detail, and as a student he found more things to criticize about Harvard than the policy of the crew coach, but even at the time he did not identify the residential segregation or the admissions office quota (about one fifth of his thousand man class was Jewish) as the tip of any anti-Semitic iceberg. It is not even clear that he identified these institutional policies at all, so preoccupied was he in those first months with acceptance into the community of his peers, with the problems posed by his responsibilities to his family, by his academic/athletic schedule, and--beneath all this--groping to re-discover his identity in his own eyes.

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In those eyes, Norman's responsibilities to his family loomed very large. His parents and the Kesslers had confidence in him to an almost problematic degree, freighting him with the most solemn sense of the seriousness of his mission; and despite his mother's insistence that the importance of his success was "for yourself," he could not fail to understand that it was actually, to a very significant degree, for them as well. Certainly his parents were making a financial sacrifice. He had been admitted to Harvard on the understanding that his family could afford the costs, and with the aid of the Sunlight Oil Company's continuing profitable operation perhaps they very nearly could. Indeed, the previous year Fan and Barney had even acquired a used car, that they used for personal as well as business purposes, and Harvard had turned down their first-year request for reconsideration of financial aid. ✓

In applying for such aid in anticipation of his second year, Norman noted The University's Tuition and Infirmary fee in 1939-40 was \$420.00, the Gray's Hall room was \$200.00 for the year, and board at the Freshman Hall of the Harvard Union was \$350.00. With modest amounts itemized for laundry, clothing, books, room furnishings, and earmarking \$105.00 for the year's recreation and travel, Norman arrived at his \$1167.00 total expenses figure, and anticipated his second-year expenses as \$1202.00. His family income was listed as \$3,000 from Barney's salary. Continuing to list his mother an unemployed, Norman had taken a job of some sort

Eng. drafting
job

upon arriving in Cambridge, but it evidently paid very little and interfered with his work, so he dropped it almost immediately. He accepted from home an allowance of four dollars a week, as well as coverage of all his expenses, in return for which he agreed to do his utmost to distinguish himself on the new testing ground.

The family communications system devised to track his progress toward this goal was elaborate: he was committed to writing a letter every Sunday, to writing a postcard (from a massive supply pre-purchased by Fan) every Wednesday, and to calling on the telephone every Thursday--and this was only for his parents and sister. He was also expected to stay in close touch with Dave and Nan Kessler, and to write with decent frequency to his aunts Beck, Jenny and Rose, as well as to his cousin Cy. His more extended family, including his father's people in South Africa, was to a certain degree attended to by his parents, though he was always expected to do his part.

Barney continued to be a significant source of threat in the family, though his style when he was present in family circles was to defer, humorously// and affectionately, to Fan. Even so, he ventured to suggest that, based on his own experience, there was a tendency in the family to over-monitor the behavior of the males, and he warned that Norman should not be tracked too closely.

In characteristic reply to this, Fan proceeded to arrange for monthly trips to Cambridge for herself, usually in the company of Mrs. Lubin. Fan would work at the Sunlight offices until the end

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of the day on Saturday, close down the office, join Mrs. Lubin in catching the late-night, bargain fare train and arrive in Boston at 5:00 on Sunday morning. Having sat up in the day coach, the two mothers would rent shower facilities at the depot, and then take the subway out to Cambridge to spend the day--often separately--with their sons. At day's end the women would ~~together~~ take another night train back to New York together. Norman had only been in residence a month before he was arguing with his mother--in cards, letters and on the telephone--about her proposals to increase the frequency of her visits, and he was able to hold her down to a once-a-month schedule only through the repeated display of stubborn resistance.

Part of his argument against increased visits from Fan was that he was busy with his work. He was carrying a five course load as a beginning Engineering student: Math, Mechanical Drawing, Physics, French and English, and along with his heavy commitment to crew, on the one hand, and communicating with his family, on the other, he really didn't have much spare time. He tried to keep Wednesday nights free for his beloved movies, and Saturdays, particularly Saturday nights, were saved for recreation, but otherwise he was either in class or addressing himself to one or another kind of assignment. The academic work, in which he had so excelled at Boy's High, was a serious challenge for Norman and his friends.

They had all been very good students in high school, but the

level of competition created by their Harvard classmates daunted them, just as the quality of undergraduate instruction sometimes disappointed them, in response to which they all worked very hard. Marty Lubin, and his roommate Harold Katz and Seymour Breslow from Gray's, consulted regularly with Norman and his roommates, Richard Weinberg and Maxwell Kaufer, and they had other friends from elsewhere in the halls and from class, some of whom were dependent upon financial aid and all of whom strove for academic distinction. Casually accepting the "Gentleman's C," along with the occasional D, as was the practice of some student devotees of the club life, was simply unheard of in this secluded world.

Norman's biggest problem was with his inadequate preparation in Physics ("The Physics course at Boy's High is notoriously bad," he told his family in October) and his first impulse was to transfer into another Math section: he couldn't believe, until investigation persuaded him otherwise, that all the freshman sections had in them such an alarming number of brilliant students, or that none of the sections was taught any better than any other. His French course stunned him with the quantity of work demanded, but otherwise left him cold, and Mechanical Drawing--the only Engineering Sciences course in his schedule--served not at all to reawaken his old appetite for designing and building model airplanes. Indeed, his sole reference to that long-lived hobby was in a sort of housekeeping letter to his mother in early December, asking that the accumulated copies of his "Model Airplane News"

magazines be forwarded, and indicating that he intended to have the subscriptions sent directly to Harvard. No mention of the hobby ever recurs in his Harvard correspondence.

The course that really mattered to Norman was English Composition. It didn't have its strongest effect immediately, since it not only took him a while to settle into the course, but he needed as a first priority to make certain that the Harvard community was going to forgive him his youth and his cultural inexperience and accept him into its midst. It seems not to have taken him more than a month or six weeks to conclude that in this respect he could rest assured, and that though he might develop difficulties of one sort or another, he was not starting with many more than anyone else. That established, and despite the false hopes being built up by his participation in the crew competition, Norman found that the English course began to bring back from wherever he had been storing it his capacity for associating writing with large imaginative stimulation.

For just over six years ~~he had been storing~~ his imagination had been subsisting on the meager drama of sports and movie spectatorship, along with quantities of low grade adolescent fiction. Now, almost suddenly, he found himself swept up and away by the power of serious modern American literature. He was required to read a certain amount of fiction, and was assigned a regular writing exercise in response to it, with the writing increasing in length and complexity of assignment as the semester

250 progressed. A young Wallace Stegner, who was serving that year as the Briggs Copeland Assistant Professor of writing, was the faculty member in charge of the whole, sprawling course, and Norman's section man was a young Harvard Ph.D. named Claude M. Simpson. The reading was in contemporary American fiction, and leaned heavily in the direction of such authors as Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Hemingway and James T. Farrell. The insulating walls that Norman had constructed around his once great passion for narrative crumbled like magic under the power of these story-tellers, the first and strongest of whom was Farrell.

There were differences between Farrell's Chicago and the Brooklyn of Norman experience, but they didn't matter, and in fact Norman would associate Chicago (which he had never seen) with Brooklyn for the rest of his life. What Farrell offered to this wide-eyed reader, who had never until now even heard of him, was the proposition that the creative, indeed the fictional imagination was exactly the tool that could dominate the gritty worlds where both Farrell and Norman had been reared. The perception struck the boy with the dramatic force of a conversion experience. At first he responded by writing papers that both analyzed and extolled what these writers were doing. They were dealing with the world--not running from it--engaging it in ways that took it in, containing and thus controlling it. Whether or not he remembered having this perception start to dawn on him when he was a ten-year old, he certainly seized upon it now.

His little black Remington portable typewriter flew as he turned out his increasingly long assignments, and he soon enlisted his mother, ever vigilant, to type his longhand and rough-typed manuscripts. She, and various staff workers from the now-expanded Sunlight Oil Company office, would come to play a larger and larger role in her son's production plans in the semesters and summers that followed. This and subsequent English courses provided Norman with critical opportunities to push forward with the processes of self-discovery and self definition, but of course these processes were in no way confined to the classes. Harvard had got him away from Brooklyn, where the twin threats of ruinous family crises and humiliating high school rejections had driven him into a kind of psychic hiding. With his family now too far away to throw the full shadow of its inner conflicts over him, and with Harvard failing to confirm his high school pariah identity, he was finally free to begin asking basic questions.

First, he now could assess on its intrinsic merits the self-image that had hitherto served him as a kind of psychological and social disguise: was he really an engineer, deeply bonded to the worlds of mathematics, science, and the principles of aeronautical design? He had been representing himself in this way for so long, and had persuaded so many people (perhaps himself included) while doing so, that the question must have genuinely troubled him for a time. Indeed, he and his friend Seymour Breslow signed on as staff assistants in the science fair sponsored that winter by Elizabeth

Peabody House in Boston. But by as early as the end of his first semester he could discern a compelling alternate direction, and while he continued for a semester or two to tolerate the idea that he might, as a practical matter, be required to put some of his scientific training to vocational use after graduation, he took it less and less seriously.

He would probably have transferred out of candidacy for the Bachelor of Science--which is what the Engineering Program graduates earned--and into the Bachelor of Arts group at some point, but for the fact that he had not taken Latin at Boy's High and was thus unable to meet the prerequisites for the A.B. A less determining but still significant reason for staying with the S.B. program was his concern for family expectations. He well realized that however quickly he himself could adjust to the idea of a life outside the boundaries of engineering, it would take some members of the family, especially his mother and his uncle Dave, a lot longer. Being a fledgling engineer, after all, had been Norman's way of showing both himself and others that he could be located somewhere in the lexicon of conventional identities: it was a goal that he knew he could reach.

He abandoned it as part of a process that led him to discover, and none too gradually, that there was something wonderfully better: something that he not only could be but had to be. That was the difference. The goal of engineer was not charged with a sense of the necessary or the ultimate; at best it had

always served him only as compensation for the things that were not available to him, as they seemed to be available to certain favored others. A sense of high drama in one's life, lust, the fury of the storm and--yes-- the courage to so engage experience; these were the things he really wanted as he approached the age of seventeen. Now, when like a vision they began to appear before him on the pages of the novels he was reading he was more than thrilled. He began to be reborn as the writer he originally sensed himself to be. If he had never written this way himself, he felt that he could learn to do so--indeed, it seemed as if the purpose of serious literature was to teach him to write in this way--and once he imagined that this was within his reach he never looked back. The great six year freeze was over, the thawing had begun, and the Norman Mailer who emerged would never stop discovering the self that lay so long buried.

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Though he knew by the time of the Christmas vacation that he was going to do it, Norman didn't actually start writing fiction until the early February beginning of his second semester. Throughout the first semester he drove hard on his courses, sustaining high hopes to the end for his chances at crew, supporting the football team by helping tear down goalposts after

the wins--he played host to his father and Cy for the Princeton game on November 24--and, like all of his friends, experiencing significant homesickness around the time of Thanksgiving (the New York and Massachusetts dates for the holiday differed, and he couldn't make it home on either calendar¹) and at the approach of Christmas.

For that vacation he planned a hero's return to Crown Street, where most of his friends were still finishing high school, and a few, like Jerry Reimer, were enrolled in local colleges. He used his mother as booking agent, arranging for her to buy him tickets to various Broadway plays ("The Little Foxes," "Margin for Error") and New York Rangers hockey games, to which he would be taking his friend Phyllis Bradman. Phyllis had not yet graduated from high school in Brooklyn, was about Norman's age, and would remain quite close to him throughout his first two years of college. In the course of his correspondence he regularly recommended movies to his father, among them "We Are Not Alone," with Paul Muni, John Houston's "Key Largo," and the Marx Brothers in "At the Circus," which he thought Barbara would enjoy.

The first item of business when he did get home for the holiday was, indeed, new clothes: a suit, as well a sport coat and slacks. They were mailed, after the final fittings, direct to Cambridge, and a card from him there, postmarked January 7, 1940,

¹Do a note on the dual dates for Thanksgiving resulting from FDR's initial executive order.

records that as he writes he is wearing the suit ("It really fits well & looks even better.")² After a highly satisfying vacation he was working wildly on paper and exam preparation for his five courses, but he found time to inquire into some possible affiliations for the second semester that would afford writing opportunities.

Wallace Stegner was organizing a section of English Composition that permitted the writing of fiction instead of themes, in addition to which Norman identified the *Crimson*, the tabloid daily newspaper; the *Freshman Red Book*, which was his annual class yearbook; the *Lampoon*, the prestigious undergraduate humor magazine; and the *Advocate*, the college literary magazine. All of these required that one apply, in contexts of varying complexity and with very significant possibilities of rejection in each, and the Boy's High recluse who had for years been afraid to apply for anything, decided he would have a go at them all.

His six-day semester break on January 25, after the dreaded finals, required him to travel back to Cambridge on his seventeenth birthday, January 31, and the early days of February found him readdressing his courses--all of which continued on from the first semester--exploring his writing options and, over a

²Norman would tell an interviewer in 1983 (Beglebing, p. 313) that Harvard made him appreciative for the first time of the reality of personal style as expressed by manners and by clothes. He studied the manners and wardrobes of people around him, discovering the ones who possessed the power to project themselves through such expression of personal style.

period of time, learning his grades. These were provisional, and final grades for the courses would come at the end of the year, but he found himself just barely on the Dean's List by having been given a B+ in Math, a B in English, a B- in the Mechanical Drawing, and C+ in both French and Physics. He professed himself satisfied, and predicted to his family that he would improve the record by year's end, especially in the new fiction-writing section to which he had been admitted.

He probably tried out for the Crimson by writing a story of some kind, and when it was rejected decided not to explore this avenue further. At the same time he tried and failed to execute a humor piece for the Lampoon, ("I can't write humor") and, daunted also by the group's \$100 initiation fee, stepped back from that possibility. He made contact with the editor in charge of The Red Book, was assured that if he would carry his share of the load he would be most welcome to work on the volume, and Norman was pleased to agree. He wrote a 425-word account (the words counted carefully in the margin) of the fall season's cross-country track team, and it was actually published at year's end. But the yearbook was nothing much more than a project, the practical point of which was to set down for the record a commemorative account of the class's first year. Norman was looking not for a project but for a home base, a sphere in which he could start his development as a writer. He discovered it on the evening of Friday, February 12, when he went to the Advocate offices for an open house, and

there, amid information and beer and the musty smells of unaired upstairs rooms, he at once felt himself wonderfully at home.

In Advertisements for Myself in 1959, Norman maintains that the first fiction he wrote at Harvard was in September of 1939, the first week, when during a speech by Archibald MacLeish about the beginning of the Second World War, he wrote the following:

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We were going through the barbed-wire when a machine gun started. I kept walking until I saw my head on the ground.

"My God, I'm dead," my head said.
And my body fell over.

It is of course possible that these lines actually were written in Norman's first days at Harvard, and it is certain that the vision they convey would, for years, recur in his work like an insistent, inscrutable birth recollection. But the autobiographical accounts in Advertisements can be artful, and the probability is that this "shortest story I've ever written" started going through the first of its many drafts not in September 1939 but months later, sometime after February of 1940.

In early February he wrote a 600 word story for his new English fiction-writing class and noted on the margin that this was "the first story written" at Harvard. The story was called "The Lady Wears a Smile," and records the grim thoughts of an aging burlesque queen as she moves onstage through a striptease

routine.

Norman wrote the story at just about the time of the Advocate open house, and he began another, much more ambitious writing project immediately after that evening. At the open house he had met and very much liked Bruce "Pete" Barton, Jr.; son of a famous advertising executive³ and a member of Norman's class, he was an announced candidate for admission to the magazine's board of associates. Barton explained that to be invited onto the staff, applicants needed to submit three pieces--fiction or otherwise--that the editors thought worthy of publication (space limitations would almost always prevent such material from actually being published in Advocate pages.)

Barton also explained the financial details, which Norman passed on to his family in a letter two days later: "You have to sell 10 subscriptions and pay an initiation fee of \$40.00," he reported. At a dollar apiece, the subscriptions were normally purchased by the candidates themselves, and the forty dollars was refunded if an invitation to join the staff was not extended. He explained to his parents that the Advocate was like a club, that it enrolled people it would be good for him to know (he mentioned Barton's name), but he also told them repeatedly that if the expense was too great he didn't want to do it. Their reply was a check for fifty dollars.

For his part, Norman at once began a serious, multi-

³Identify Bruce Barton, Sr.

dimensional writing project aimed, on one level, at producing the manuscripts he needed for his application the Advocate. On another level, however, the project was aimed at both obtaining and recording an insight into the emotional ordeal Norman had been experiencing in his strangled pre-Harvard years, when he had neither an imaginative outlet nor an understanding of his need to reclaim one. In the form of a story and a follow-up poem, Norman proceeded to throw an immensely clarifying light on his years of Boy's High exile, and in the process supplies dramatic evidence of how his long-dormant narrative powers could, once awakened, show him the way to self-understanding.

He first wrote the story; he then wrote a poem that is a decoding of the story's secret theme; and, finally, he kept to himself and hid from the reader of both story and poem their still more secret autobiographical history. The story is called "Pick Them Up and Lay Them Down," a reference to the evidently splayed, flat-footed gait of "Jerry Reddle," the character about whom the narrator is talking. This autobiographical, 2,500 word story presents Norman's epileptic Crown Street friend and Boy's High classmate Jerome Reimer as its focal figure, and depicts a Christmas vacation visit home to Brooklyn by the narrator, college student "Dave," (self-identified as Norman on the manuscript margin). Little in the way of dramatic action develops in the story; the two boys walk the streets of their Brooklyn neighborhood, past the chalked scores of the punch ball games and

roller hockey sites, bringing each other up to date on what has been happening to them. For Dave that means a successful four months away at college; for Jerry it means a deterioration into increased epileptic seizures, impending failure at City College, and a growing sense of being marked, not only for sickness and early death, but for expulsion from the society of healthy people.

As Jerry rages against the social isolation his condition has brought to him, assuming a hostile posture toward the society of local young people, the story goes on to document his outcast identity through the eyes of a neighborhood girl who is depicted as the cruel, unsympathetic voice of the healthy community. "After all, there was so much suffering going on, and so many worse-off people who at least stayed fighting even when they were licked that she couldn't see why he had to go to pieces like that. So rude to everybody, and so nasty to all the girls." At story's end, Dave is hating the girl and, ineffectually, feeling sorry for an ostracized Jerry. If the story lacks dramatic structure, it still delivers a vivid characterization of Jerry and, especially from a biographical point of view, presents a notable attitude on the part of Dave. Though his strong sympathy for his pariah friend is not strong enough to close the gap between them, the story does not attempt to explain why, and Dave is left seeming to be a conventionally friendly person who simply doesn't know how to bond with the lacerated Jerry.

But Norman had in mind another explanation for the distance

between the two boys, and he provided it in the second dimension of this project, a poem he called "Allegory" (a title he apparently understood to mean "key to the hidden meaning.") In the poem, as in the story, Jerry's illness is made the object of ridicule and the cause of his rejection, but now the "I" speaker ("I have a friend:-/Jerry Reddle/Who is sick sometimes")--who is clearly Dave/Norman-- is not so sympathetic. Though he knows he should be kind, and tries not to laugh at Jerry's affliction, he needs, as a much more important first priority, to distance himself from the other's illness:

So I laugh at him too.
not because I
want to,
but because I
have to.

After all it's his sickness
and ← not → mine.
He was born sick,
so it's all
right for him,

But I was a healthy child,
and it's bad for my
kind
to become like him.

So now the reader sees that the nasty-spoken girl in the story was actually reacting in a healthy way to Jerry's illness, and that the Dave in the story was a sentimentalist who failed to appreciate the need for keeping health and illness separated, even at the cost of isolating or actually ridiculing the unhealthy

figure.

Taken together, story and poem constitute a complete thesis/antithesis unit, and require no third dimension, but since we know that Dave is Norman, and that Jerry Reddle is his once-close friend Jerry Reimer, we also know why the lesson of "Allegory" is such an important one for Norman to have taught himself. In the years when he lived on Crown Street and graduated from P.S. 161 and Boy's High with his friend and companion Jerry Reimer--epileptic, invalid, and therefore outcast--Norman Mailer actually did "become like him." He did so not because he was "born sick," like Jerry, but because of the emotionally crippling effects upon him of family, school and whatever other demons deviled him. The stories do not reveal the specific identity of the demons, to be sure, or exactly how they exercised their authority, but they are effectively disempowered only by the retrospective alchemy of Norman's reactivated narrative imagination. Whatever they were and however they operated, these things made him appear in his own eyes as the disfigured Jerry appeared in the eyes of the peer community.

While the story and the poem, taken together, do not publicly record they nevertheless biographically reveal Norman's retrospective judgement that his years-long invalid condition at Boy's High was of his own creation. His apparent sympathy for Jerry had in fact been a profound empathy, having little to do with his positive feelings toward Jerry, and everything to do with

his negative, self-pitying feelings toward himself. At last, with his ego on the road to restoration, Norman could not only return to writing but in the act of doing so could penetrate into the misery of those years and thus understand that all along he had actually been "a healthy child." The emotional implication of his being blind to that fact was what came home to Norman at this time. Both story and poem, in their content but also simply in the fact that he has been able to write them, document his discovery of the truth about himself, hidden away for six years behind piles of Popular Mechanics and Model Airplane News.

"The Lady Wears a Smile," "Pick Them Up and Lay Them Down," and "Allegory" were the three pieces that Norman submitted in his application to the Advocate, hoping that they would be regarded as of publishable quality. As he did so, communicating with his family on the subject three times a week, he built up a sort of Crown Street cheering section that began to take on a life of its own. Young Bruce Barton was one of the freshmen who seemed sure to be selected for admission, and his father, Bruce Barton, Sr., was an acquaintance of Norman's uncle Dave. Fan and Dave thought that the elder Barton might somehow advise them on how to get their candidate admitted as well, and Norman had to beg his uncle not to intercede.

He also found himself having almost constantly to calm his mother, who had begun raging simply at the possibility of his rejection. When that rejection actually came, in early March, it

precipitated something close to a family crisis, and no explanations from Norman about the infrequency of freshman admitees (Barton, in fact, was admitted) and the probability of admission in the sophomore year could comfort Fan or quiet her smoldering suspicions of anti-Semitism. Norman's own response was to swallow his disappointment, agree with his Advocate critics that neither of his two submitted stories offered enough in the way of dramatic action, and to write, in the next three months, six more stories.

Four of them were major efforts. One was a 3,500-word account, strangely titled "Some Miss Their It," of three boys going to a brothel, one of whom is hoping that the experience will cure him of a traumatically induced castration fear. Mr. Simpson-- to whom most of the stories were being submitted for credit in the special English section-- thought it was a little crude, but gave it a B+. A 4,500 word story called "Life is Where You Find It," presents a fledgling writer from Brooklyn, now attending Harvard, who is in search of material to write about: "He hadn't eaten with Okies like Steinbeck, or fought in Spain like Hemingway, or lived like Dos Passos. And he couldn't copy Farrell." The story reintroduces a now uncrippled Jerry Reddle, and features, as the kind of material Norman is qualified to write about, an argument in a Brooklyn candy store about a pinball machine.

In "Prelude to Sleep," a girl breaks off a sexual affair with a boy who is, like Norman then, possessed of a "theory of free

love." The approximate point of the theory is that people should cast off inhibition and freely cultivate the impulse toward sexual and other kinds of union. (At this time Norman, not having yet experienced sexual intercourse, had the subject very much on his mind.) Mr. Simpson gave the 2,500-word story an A-, remarking: "I still feel the need for more restraint at the verbal level." The last of the major efforts was "No, Mother," a one thousand-word conversation between a mother and her stenographer daughter, in which the mother advises the daughter to fake a pregnancy in order to snare a reluctant boyfriend into marriage. All of the stories owe a strong debt to Farrell, but all of them show too, elementary as they are, a certain headlong quality, very much in keeping with their author's attitude of throwing himself into his new commitment.

As the semester ended, Norman was working on "Oh, Night That Covers Me," an ambitiously sub-titled, four-part manuscript--"1. Joys 2. Ideas 3. Love 4. Life"--that reprises earlier material, including the experiencing of an epileptic seizure by a Jerry-like character, and which dwells in some detail upon the tiny short-story of the soldier whose head and body are separated. In this first of many reappearances of those lines in his work, Norman broods over and finds frightening their central idea of a nightmare division in the individual; a capacity to be both actor and commentator-observer at the same time.

Norman had also written a little non-fiction narrative that