

The Irving

POE BALLANTINE

—for Walidah

In the small Nebraska town where I live, I am known as “the cook.” People I don’t know will often stare at me fuzzily for a moment before a flash of recognition lights their face: “Hey, I know you. You’re the cook.” Which is reasonable enough, I suppose, since I am the cook at the Olde Main Street Inn, the chief dinner house in town. It isn’t exactly what I’ve dreamed of being all my life, however. To be honest, being the cook is an unwanted byproduct of my efforts to be “the writer.”

But recently, out of the blue, I was invited to an Oregon literary festival called Wordstock, at which I was to be *the writer* — a small fry flitting through the nets after the big ones have been landed, yes, but I was flattered nonetheless. The event was going to be televised by C-SPAN, and thousands of people would not only attend, but pay to be there. People were going to say to me (a few of them, anyway), “Are you Poe Ballantine, the *writer*?” even if it would only be for six days.

Norman Mailer was slated to appear at this event, along with Russell Banks, John Irving, Alice Sebold, Jean Auel (selling her cans of cave bear, or her caved-in beer cans, or whatever they are), and many other authors I didn’t particularly admire. I bought a rust brown blazer from a thrift store for sixteen bucks (I hadn’t worn one for twenty years) and began to formulate a plot to punch a celebrated author in the nose. If you get only one chance to make a splash, I say, make it a big one.

I wanted to strike a blow for the little guy. Everyone — or, anyway, every one of us have-nots, who make up 90 percent of the population — loves a revolution. It’s like the promise of a big party, free stuff, a chance to get out of the house or get off work, the stale and corrupt falling under the wheels of progress, the illusion of change, new blood rising to the top. Let’s kick all the stuffed literary lions down the stairs and shovel these old mastodon carcasses to the side of the road. The Boston Tea Party! Martin Luther! Madame Lafarge! Down with czarist Russia! (Leave us your vodka, though.) And why shouldn’t I be the one to light the fuse?

So I reckoned that if I punched Norman Mailer in the nose at some high-profile event — just stepped up to the podium, flashbulbs popping, and laid him flat, as he had done to Gore Vidal many years ago (or so the legend goes) — maybe I could pave the way for the new publishing world order. I’d be the hero of the rejected, the jilted, the oppressed, the ignored, the got-off-to-a-late-start-can’t-land-an-agent nobodies, the missed-the-boat prodigies, the unknown geniuses. Give the unlucky another roll of the dice! Get out of the way, you old dust bags!

I understood that Mailer was eighty-two (several friends asked before I left: “Is he still *alive*?”), but this was all the more reason to help him along. He’d gotten to bray about his bloated opinions for fifty years. He’d recently been paid \$2.5 million by the University of Texas for nine hundred boxes of crap (did I say “crap”? I meant “papers”), ranging from manuscripts to canceled checks to car-repair bills. Imagine being able to sell your car-repair bills. Think of how many struggling writers \$2.5 million could support. The old fossil deserved a pop.

Granted, Mailer is a monumental intellect who writes well about murder and war, but he has the soul of a Korean alarm clock. What beauty has he wrought? How many times has he made me laugh or filled me with the wonder of being human? Even if I never achieved acclaim as a man of letters, I would no longer be known as “the cook,” but as the guy who punched the millionaire dust bag and started the revolution. “Thanks to you,” my supporters would write, “our novels no longer weigh four pounds or read like car-repair bills.

“P.S. Hope you get out of federal prison soon.”

But then, just before my flight reservations were confirmed, I learned that I would be opening for John Irving.

In the literary world, Irving is a pop star, Captain Quirk, fluffy as the whipped pink sugar at the county fair. He opens supposedly serious novels with sentences like: “In the hospital of the orphanage — the boys’ division at St. Cloud’s, Maine — two nurses were in charge of naming the new babies and checking that their little penises were healing from the obligatory circumcision.” Captain Quirk has learned the art of keeping his readers’ attention with penises and spilled semen and women fellating horses.

Destiny had stepped in to direct me. Punching an eighty-two-year-old man who had spoken out early and vehemently against the Vietnam War would get me no sympathy at all. Quirk was my man. And I was going to be onstage with him, cameras rolling, the revolution like a spark in the tight darkness of my fist. True, Irving was an accomplished wrestler and still very fit for sixty-three, but he’d never know what hit him. I’d be in jail with my name splashed across the national papers before he was out of the dentist’s chair. Who is this Poe Ballantine? people would be asking. Who is this cheesy stunt artist, this sociopathic publicity hound, this brazen, hypocritical anarchist — and what are the names of his books? Yes, we’re going to read this dazzling rogue, this bodacious Young Turk, this delectably lawless scoundrel.

Rhonda, my publisher, met me at the Portland airport. A lean, energetic brunette with fifties-looking specs, she makes

her money brokering agreements between printers and publishers and then fritters it away on writers like me. She laughed when I told her my plan. She thought it was a good idea, she said, believing I was joking. *All the better for it to be a surprise*, I thought. Every one of the books on her list would soar up the charts. We'd be like Death Row Records, swaggering brigands with samurai tattoos and our own special hand signals, the public so frightened of us they'd have to call us geniuses.

I stayed with Rhonda in her fabulous ninth-floor corner loft overlooking downtown Portland and the Willamette River. On clear days, through her green-glass, ceiling-to-floor windows, you could see Mount Hood, the Cascades, and the fumatory Mount Saint Helens. I threw all my bags into the storage room where I would sleep, and Rhonda suggested we get something to eat. "I'm not going to drink, though," she added. This is what she always says, but I seconded her this time. We had a busy week ahead. The big reading — "the Irving," she had begun to call it — was tomorrow. We walked down the street for hamburgers. One beer with a hamburger is not drinking, so we each had just one. And then we went down the block for habanero martinis.

Have you tried these? Vodka infused with habanero peppers, then shaken with pineapple juice and poured fizzing into a martini glass rimmed with sugar. Not exactly a martini, but quite the little punch in the kisser. Let's have another, we said. I don't normally drink much, but how many days of the year did I get to be "the writer"? And how long before I'd be handcuffed and sent to a place where cocktails were prohibited? We were glowing by the time we got back to Rhonda's loft, where we decided to drink wine and finally went to bed at about two in the morning.

I slept on a futon surrounded by boxes and boxes of unsold books, many of them mine: books by the cook, gathering dust in that dark storage room with its exposed ductwork and roaring central-air fan. It was as dark as the cave of a clan bear in there. I couldn't see anything, not even the clock. I had to feel my way for the light switch. It was terrific. I felt like a lion in its lair.

In the morning I slept late and woke badly hung over, with tachycardia so severe I was convinced I would die before I ever got the chance to slug anyone. While waiting for my heart to stop thrashing around, I contemplated how I would punch John Irving. Left-handed? Right? Straight jab? Uppercut? Give him a slight warning? Perhaps make arrangements for him to take a dive? I didn't want to hurt him. I only needed him to be a symbol, to help articulate the anger of the have-nots. Later I would be interviewed and labeled crazy, but I'd tell them just what I'm telling you: Literature is fusty, it's clogged, it's anal, it's winded, it's fading, it's lost its heart, it's rehash. It's a cottage industry built around the creative-writing programs. It's too many goddamn historical novels. It's this third-generation immigrant writing "humorously" about the Holocaust, or that *New Yorker* prodigy blowing bagpipes about his supposedly daring life. In music you're only as good as your last hit. In literature you can write one decent-selling book and we'll have to listen to you until they zip the coffin shut or you sell your

nine hundred boxes of crap at the door of the rest home. I'm just doing my part, trying to clear the way for the ones who deserve to be here, the ones who have something to say, the ones who have gambled and lived.

After I'd recovered my normal heartbeat, I took a shower, drank a beer, and started getting nervous. In a few hours I would be reading in a giant hall filled with people, and then I was going to make a spectacle of myself, descend into that frightening chasm of anarchy in front of gentle, left-wing, scholastic types, the same kind of people who had started the last few American revolutions.

My friend Scott Nadelson, another meager-selling writer in Rhonda's stable and a gloomy, well-dressed man of thirty (no thrift stores for Scott), would go first among the three warm-up readers. He came over about five, and we drank some fifteen-year-old Scotch to loosen up. The reading was at seven. "What are you going to read?" I said.

"Half a story," he said gloomily. His stories are all long. "You?"

"My dead-guy chapter."

"Oh, that's a good one."

"More Scotch?"

"Just a touch."

The Scotch wasn't enough to calm my nerves. Each sip seemed to evaporate before it got to my lips. Oh, how I suddenly dreaded this night. I couldn't tell Scott about my plan. He didn't like Irving either, but he had recently won an Oregon Book Award and had no need for cheap stunts. I began to feel like a bad actor. I began to feel like John Wilkes Booth.

At six o'clock a troop of us — writers, publishers, and husbands and wives of both — strolled across town through the wind, all joking nervously in our snappy duds, ready for the biggest night of our small-time literary lives. My plan had grown complicated. First of all, Irving was flying in late. He would not even hear us warm-ups read, but would stroll in at the last minute, have his hand kissed, comb his hair, read, answer a few questions, attend his fifty-dollar-admission party, and be off again through the ticker tape, back to the powdered, rosy anuses of high society. Second of all, after we warm-ups had read our fifteen minutes each, we would exit the stage area, leaving us effectively partitioned from the headliner. (He'd probably requested as much, sensing a revolution in the wings.) To get to Irving in the spotlight, I'd have to sneak around and lurk backstage, or else come leaping out of the audience. Maybe I could jump down from the balcony, as Booth had done. At least they would know who I was when they saw me: "Hey, that's the *writer* who read earlier." I thought of the headlines back in my small town: "Cook Attacks Beloved Author."

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