



Brandel France de Bravo

I 'll Make Room

I .

OK, so Bill and I are at Norman Mailer's summer place in Provincetown a couple of months after the end of his and Jimmy Breslin's campaign for mayor of New York and there's a bunch of more polite-type people and we're having dinner at a big dining table but Bill's been drinking and he's pretty drunk and he's talking about having sired many children (did you ever hear about the twins that he supposedly had with Suki?) and people around the table are kinda shocked and arguing with him (a ridiculous waste of energy) and one woman, who apparently was big on the overpopulation issue, wags her finger at him and says, "How can you be so irresponsible? What are you going to do when there's no more room?" And your dad lifts himself expansively and spreads his arms wide and says, "I'll make room."

Ron is the first of the 11 children my father boasted of having. At least we think he is. In seven days, I am going to meet my brother for the first time.

He's my half-brother: he is one sock, an empty moon, my B side. Add us up, one plus one, and we make three: one father and two mothers.

But he is the only brother I have. Ron is a jazz musician and composer, and I'm listening to one of his CDs right now: *Photograph*. In photos, and he has heard this from others, including a stranger in a North Carolina post office, he looks like our father. He looks like Bill Walker, if Bill had lived long enough to have gray hair, put a daughter through college, or learn complacency.

Ron never met our father and I only saw him a few times that I was old enough to remember. When I was little, he visited whenever he was in town.

Maybe the next time I come down, we can, if I can arrange wheels, do a little picnic scene. Perhaps I can teach Brandel some of that communing with nature jazz (of course I wouldn't override your teachings on crabs and sea life). Just good old North Carolina bare-foot stuff. I could also tell her about all the pirates of history; to date.



And also, I could describe the few statues of saints that I've seen. Or something. I think that in connection with Brandel suspecting me as her Father (?), unless she openly asks, it would be best to wait until I become a much more familiar figure. Even if she secretly suspects, I'm sure she can't understand until later.

When I was 13, Bill showed up in Washington, D.C. Six months later he would be dead. He said he wanted to teach me how to fish. One Saturday afternoon he took me to meet a painter who must have been about 6'6." The friend turned from his easel to look at me and said, "So you're Bill Walker's daughter." Then he bent down, and placing his hands under my arms, hoisted me above him until my head grazed the ceiling, staring at me all the while like a cross between Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Charles Manson. We never did go fishing.

Ron and I are going to meet in New York at Washington Square Park, under the Arch. He is 54 and I am 48. I am afraid I am going to fall in love with him.

I I .

We have spoken on the phone. Only once but for three hours. He told me he was a year old when our father drove him and his mother to the little town 40 miles outside Charlotte where his grandparents lived and left them with two suitcases on the porch. Bill told

Ron's mother, "he couldn't do the marriage thing," just as he had told her two years earlier that "proms were a drag." When Bill and Ron's mother met at Myrtle Beach, she was a high school senior who liked big hair, bad boys and jitterbugging. Bill invited her to a party at a friend's house. They got into a car—she never knew if it was his—and drove past the city limits. They pulled up to a dark house and knocked. "I guess they're out," said Bill, pulling a tool from his back pocket.

She thought about that first night together as she watched Bill drive off—north to hipper pastures. It was 1956.

Beatnik Gets License to Be Himself, at Last (*Washington Post*, 1959)

Beatnik William A. Walker finally got a license to run his "Coffee 'n Confusion" club yesterday, but confessed to some unbeatsmanlike conduct in the process.

"I'm a non-conformist," he answered. "I do and say what I want to. But during this bit I've had to put on a tie, slick down my hair. I had to shake hands. And smile. Often. I've been a regular diplomat.



Walker, 26-year-old George Washington University freshman , author of the yet to be published book of verse, "Aww, Hell," and proprietor of the coffee retreat at ninth and K streets, N.W., had what he hopes is his last brush with conventionality—government-style—yesterday morning.

I have always known about Ron, that is, ever since my father told me about him.

That night, Bill came to our apartment unannounced when my mother and stepfather were out. He sat, he talked, he apologized for what he had done and what he had left undone.

I reached into his jacket pocket, as he had instructed me, and instead of finding his address book pulled out a sandwich bag of marijuana. "No, the other pocket," he said with fatherly calm. And then, he, with bloodshot eyes, and I, wondering when the hell my real parents were going to come home, called the grandparents I had never spoken to. First "Pops" in Arkansas and then "Gypsy" in Oregon. It was unnerving but also "groovy." That was a word my father used; it made me wince. My grandmother wrote me for a time before I lost her again. She sent me a silver locket with a picture of her and my father, but it fell off the chain.

Bill wistfully told me that Ron's mother had forbidden all contact with the boy, his son. Chances are if it had just been the mother's wishes, my father would have flouted them. Ron explained that when our father called interested in seeing his now ten year-old son, Ron's stepfather took the phone from his mother and told Bill he would shoot him if he ever came anywhere near "Ronnie."

III .

I didn't know where Ron lived or what his last name was but I knew he existed. For 35 years I dreamed him: we shared the same alleged Apache blood but only he could walk through woods noiselessly, know how many hours earlier a deer had passed, and which way it had gone. I could shoplift a roasted chicken from Safeway. He could tell the difference between a milk snake and a copperhead. I could stick a pocket mirror into a fan, tinsel daggers flying at my eyes, without flinching. He could siphon gas from a pick-up truck with his mouth. I kissed a druggie boy who looked like Jimi Hendrix. He played Hendrix. But it never crossed Ron's mind that he might have a half-sister. I wasn't a book never opened, I was a book never written. Until two months ago.

This past Memorial Day was, for once, memorable. I was at home working when my press forwarded me an email:



Please let Brandel know that I was a very good friend of her late Dad Bill Walker and that her half-brother Ron Brendle is a good friend now. He is a premier upright bass jazz musician.

Ron had a website and finally, finally, he had a surname: a last name almost identical to my first.

IV .

The man whose email was forwarded to me was an acquaintance of Ron's. Years ago Ron had read an article by him in a local newspaper called, "The Beat Goes On." Ron contacted the author who told him that Bill Walker "was the first cat I ever met who wore shades at night."

Fast forward and Ron's acquaintance—friend now—sees an article in an electronic poetry journal. It's a special issue about Washington, D.C.'s jazz and poetry coffeehouses. I was interviewed for the article and supplied the photo of my parents, the owners of Coffee 'n Confusion: Bill in his paisley shirt and goatee; my mother, hoarfrost skin, auburn hair, black leotard. "The King of Do Thy Own Thing" and his Vassar Queen, presiding over their underground lair.

Coffee was a dollar a cup and people lined up around the block to get into Coffee 'n Confusion; others came to stare. Brawls broke out; arrests were frequent.

Beatnik and Friend Fined After Fight (*Washington Post*, 1959)

Beatnik William A. Walker was fined \$20 yesterday after an argument with a friend over Shakespeare and Voltaire. Walker was for them. The friend was against them and for Hemingway.

"I popped him in the mouth," Walker said. "We went through the kitchen, up the dining room, up the steps, across the lawn and out on the sidewalk—man did we wail it. Then the law came."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not putting the other cat down. He happens to be a very tremendous man. In fact, he paid my fine."

Thelonius Monk, Mississippi John Hurt, and Miles Davis played, and Bill and his growing posse of rebels and rabble rousers recited poetry. It was there that my father took Jim Morrison, still in high school, under his wing and with boozy bonhomie urged him on stage to read from his notebooks, to perform in public for the first time.

In Eisenhower's Washington, Bill made room.





V.

Ron's friend forwarded the article on the jazz and poetry coffeehouses to him. I am a P.S. in the email that accompanies the article: "P.S. Brandel is a writer in D.C." But he didn't write "P.S. YOU HAVE A SISTER!!!!" so Ron put off reading the article and put it off. It sat on his bedside table for weeks. He didn't really care to know more about the father he never met, the deadbeat dad who he knew was dead but little more.

When Ron's teenage son died, he asked the psychic if in addition to seeing his son in the after life, she had seen his father, Bill Walker. Yes, she said but your son doesn't like spending time with him. He says he's too immature. "Can you pass him a message?" said Ron. "Tell him to fuck off."

One night, with no gig to go to, Ron climbed into bed early, put on his reading glasses and reached for the article. He read it three times. The next morning he looked again at his friend's email, the friend eagerly awaiting Ron's reaction—like a seven year-old who's handed his parent a wrapped present. Ron felt like an idiot:

Oh yeah, the P.S., I don't know how I missed that, been really busy lately. She has a Facebook page. I don't, but maybe I should make one to get in touch with her. I could hardly sleep last night after reading that in the article. I googled her name and a lot came up. Anything you could find would be welcome. It's not every day you find out you have a half sister.

I decided I wouldn't wait for Ron to find me. I located an email address and began to compose a message although I could scarcely compose myself. Tap, tap, wipe, wipe, wipe. I didn't want to scare him off. Perhaps I needed to approach him gently, slowly, as if he were a rare and shy bird camouflaged among the leaves. A brusque movement, the wrong word, and he might fly away. What must it be like, I wondered, to not have a sister, and then Aladdin-like to have one? To start reading an article as one person and to finish it as another. I suddenly laughed through my tears. I threw off my binoculars and raced toward the bird:

I am one of Bill Walker's children. My mother is Ruth Murray from Washington, D.C. I am copying my (our) half-sister, Mariah Walker, on this email. She lives in Paris, her mother is...

VI.

Mariah and I were like some ill-conceived art-rock band: *The Sudden Sisters*. We would call to Ron with our over-amped and screeching guitars,



fill him with our fuzz and feedback, and Ron could, if he chose, respond with his sonorous and distant upright bass. But would he overlook my casual, almost bureaucratic reference to Mariah (For the record, let it be noted that...), just as he'd overlooked his old beatnik friend's P.S.? I might as well have said, "By the way, this most intimate exchange between two strangers is being viewed through a peephole." Was I debasing our bond, turning it into reality email?

Mariah and I found each other almost 20 years ago—again thanks to an article about our father, published years after he had died, in *The Washingtonian* magazine. The writer, a onetime friend of Bill's, describes burying Bill's ashes next to the Rappahannock River in Virginia, in a "place more peaceful than any he ever knew in his life." The article eulogized Bill while cataloguing his every character flaw and crime.

He became briefly famous as "Shotgun Bill" in Los Angeles for blowing off the head of a pimp who tried to muscle in on him, and spent a couple of years in reform school for that; traveled back east to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where he was a small-scale pimp, racketeer, and, for a couple of years, jitterbug champion; married at 19 and fathered a son; at 21 was sentenced to a year on the road gang for shooting his wife's lover; ran a North Carolinian's successful campaign for U.S. Congress, out of Charlotte; came here at 22 as administrative assistant to the man he'd help put in office; lost that job when his criminal record was found out, and went back into rackets again; was making \$75,000 a year at a con game, got caught at it, and beat the rap by squealing on a couple of his friends; and in order to get away from them, moved early in 1959 into a carriage house behind George Washington University's fraternity row, where, he was convinced, the fellows he'd ratted on would never think of looking for him. He was 23, and had lived centuries.

On top of being a pimp, a snitch, and a murderer, Bill was, according to the author, a dilettante, incapable of the discipline and hard work it takes to be a writer. But where had this "journalist" gotten all his information? From Bill, of course—a notoriously unreliable narrator. After the piece in *The Washingtonian* appeared, the "real friends" rallied to set the record straight, writing letters to the editor, publishing a series of rebuttals in a local newspaper, and hunting me down to make sure I knew "the truth" about my father. They threatened to send "King Size" out to bust the *Washingtonian* writer's knee caps but they didn't have to: the writer died six months later.





When the last-beats-standing found me, they regaled me with stories and substances until I could barely stand. Most importantly, they put out the word that I was looking for Mariah.

VII .

For Thine is the Thingdom

and the sour

and the story

forever and never

Ab-Women

—“The Horde’s Prayer,” Bill Walker

Mariah’s mother, a stylish and impassioned French woman, met Bill in Tangiers, Morocco. It wasn’t long before the two of them, along with Bill’s ever present entourage, were plotting Franco’s assassination. The plot involved smuggling hash into Spain, supposedly to pay for guns. The plot obviously failed, and Bill and his new French girlfriend landed behind bars in Barcelona. Mariah’s mother spent the first months of her pregnancy throwing up in a jail cell, while Bill, in solitary confinement, wrote *A Spanish Prison Poem*. No copies of the play still exist but everyone agreed it was Bill’s masterpiece, proof that, if sober, he could write. Even his “friend” from the *Washingtonian* called it “compellingly excellent.”

As it turned out, Mariah was also looking for me. One of Bill’s old buddies gave her my address. We agreed to meet in New York, where Bill had drunk his last drink, and where, in a coma at St. Vincent’s, he died at 38. Our mothers—mine single again and hers about to be—had met once when the two of us were little. Now it was our turn. Three years younger than me, Mariah is my afterword, just as Ron is my prologue.

Tall—a former model turned stylist—Mariah looks nothing like me. With her wide-set brown eyes, she could be Slavic. She collects vases, wears amulets and sneakers, and is terrified of rats. When she speaks English, which she does without a French accent, she sounds like she is ten years-old. A ten year-old who lived with the Black Panthers. But we both have freckles, are heavy sleepers—slow to wake—and both of us cry when someone else does. Mariah dresses models for photographs, she takes photos, and photography books fill her shelves. When we are deciding which museum to visit, she chooses the one with the Bruce Davidson exhibit. She is a picture and I am the words, the caption below. We might as well have grown up together, only it was better: we were the siblings we would have chosen.





In New York, we visit the White Horse Tavern, buy matching diaphanous dresses, and rent *The Longest Day*, starring John Wayne, to catch a glimpse of our walk-on father, running across the screen, rifle in hand.

On the phone, I ask Ron if his eyes are green. Yes. Are they pale green—kind of like a cat's? Not really. I tell him how Bill's were otherworldly, riveting, sickly. Ron and I trade intimacies. He cries; I cry. We make plans and for two months emails are exchanged about these plans, and now the three of us—Ron, Mariah and I—will be united. We will meet under the Arch, in the city where our father spent his last days, bilious, comatose, his eyes, like Crème de menthe and milk, closed.

VIII.

I am an only child and for the first time I must contend with sibling rivalry. Will Ron like Mariah better than me? I want him all to myself. But I also want to share him with her because I am her older sister and feel ... responsible for her. I bring him to her like a mother brings fresh meat to her cubs. I eat first but we will all eat.

Mariah's first language is French and she is a little dyslexic. Because she is a stylist and always on the streets of Paris, looking for the right pair of jodhpurs or picking up a toucan for a shoot, she responds to my emails on the go, with her thumbs. After Ron, her messages became a string of misspelled manic exclamations and questions.

Well he wrote!

And he wants to talk!!

He seems to have no doubt about the fact of being Bills son an there for our brother!

I can't wait to talk to him and meet him but I do think that its best that you start slowly? By yourself. Step by step. so that he doesn't get the feeling of loneliness in front of us 2.

I think that he had integrated the emotional feeling he had a sister... but 2!

You had mentioned me in the 1st email but he makes no remarks...

Yes he gives the feeling in his email of being "shy"(in french I would say Reserve)...

But, he is all so a man and maybe we are discovering how a man (? Or certain men) reacts in such an emotional situation!





I am wondering if he has kids?

If he has brothers or sisters?

And what about his mother?

Once again many questions ?!

I remember that before we met in NY you sent me a envelope with many pictures ! An introduction to yourself !!

It was so great !!I had a feeling of discovering you !!

Maybe that's a good start?

Let me know

A plus Biz

Mariah

Yes, Ron was “all so a man.”

IX .

As soon as I hung up the phone with Ron, I called Mariah. “He is a *good* man. He put his first wife through school—after they divorced.” Open, respectful, a man who understands the give and take of talk. “He’s a democrat...and he has a strong southern accent,” I laughed. He was familiar, approachable, but also exotic—a rare bird camouflaged among the leaves. I explained to Ron on the phone that I had written about him in a poem, which I would send. I asked him to forgive me for the “regional profiling.” I couldn’t conjure him any other way. The graveyard of rusted cars, the front porch that could swallow a foot, and the boy, now a man, inside that house, invisible to me. The poem is called “Mariah” and it was written before finding her. It was a summoning spell.

*Mariah, there may be many more of us.
I know of one other, older than us, a boy,
born to a woman, probably only a girl,
in rural North Carolina. One of the few times
I saw our father, old enough to remember,
he told me about this half-brother, sad
that the boy, his son, didn't even know about him
the little I know, and I suppose you know.
His mother didn't want our father “coming around.”*





*Our half-brother's world sounded so moonshine
and shotguns. Knowing nothing of country life
I imagined him—Li'l Abner, and his mother
smoking a pipe, popping out of a ragged midriff.*

Ron's stepfather, Paul Brendle, gave Ron a shotgun when he was ten. He taught him how to shoot, but said that whatever Ron killed, he had to eat. One day Ron aimed at a beautiful bird in the sky and to his amazement the whippoorwill fell at his feet. He watched, red-eyed, as it was plucked and roasted, and chewed dutifully, forcing himself to swallow. He loved his stepfather. During that meal, he swore to himself he would never point a gun at a living creature again.

Of course, we're nervous, I tell Mariah. We have no father, no brother until now. Raised most of our lives by single mothers, neither of us has ever been close to or let ourselves be cared for by the men in our families—the stepfathers, grandfathers, and uncles. Mariah left home as a teenager to escape her domineering stepfather; mine escaped by committing suicide. There were men friends who filled in, like the one who, hallucinating walked through the glass doors of our apartment building. Twice. And some of the men in our families, whom we saw regularly, weren't the ones you would want a child to see regularly. Maybe they dabbled in heroin or maybe they thought it was okay to seduce a young niece because, after all, they weren't related by blood—only marriage.

X.

Ron's mother married Paul Brendle a few months before I was born. Could my father, wherever he was, have known that his ex was re-marrying? My father who is rumored to have killed a man for sleeping with his wife. My father, an onion of self-perpetuated myth. According to Ron, my father had no contact with him or his mother after he left.

When Bill finally called saying he wanted to see Ron and was warned by Paul Brendle to stay away, I was five years old.

My father wasn't around for my birth. He'd already left D.C. My mother and I spent an extra day in the hospital because she couldn't decide on a name and the hospital wouldn't release her until she had. No one by her side to make lists, argue with, no one to insist that the baby be named after his great aunt. My father may have been in Provincetown or he may have been in Paris. Anywhere but here.

*Left my mother and me still in my mother,
to skip the slow parts, leaf ahead,*





*crack open a new book, make some other women
a mother, until the mothers, sons, daughters piled up
like bottles after a long, long party.*

He'd sold Coffee 'n Confusion to a mob contact, someone he probably owed money to, and beat it out of town. Maybe he called my mother in the hospital but she insists he wanted to name me "October." "Brandel," she says, was something *she* made up—out of desperation. A mix of "O where ha you been, Lord Randall, my son?" and a line of designer clothing she was fond of, Brannel.

Ron suggested Washington Square Park as our meeting place. But I was the one who said, "Just the three of us." No wives, husbands, or children at our first meeting. Mariah worried that Ron, the new kid on the block, would feel outnumbered. After all, Mariah and I now had a history together of shared vacations, long lunches at long tables, with mothers, mother in-laws, their lovers, and friends. The triangle doesn't have to be perfect, I tell her.

XI .

In a biography of Norman Mailer, his former secretary says:

Walker had come across the Mexican border with a sixteen-year-old pregnant tomato—an American—and the trunk of the car was loaded with pot. He was charged with dope dealing and statutory rape. Five thousand dollars' bail. Norman had me wire the money.

What will happen to the triangle when we find *that* child...or Suki's twins? What shape will we become? What do you call something with 11 sides? We are a strange geometry.

Unsteady on his feet, Bill Walker spread his arms wide. We are his children. We are eleven, and we will make room.

