

LOSING MY VOICE

D O N N A P E D R O L E N N O N

IN 1976 MY HUSBAND, MICHAEL, SAID THAT WE WERE INVITED to visit Norman Mailer in Maine that summer. We left our three young sons with my parents in Newport, Rhode Island, and drove up the coast road to Mt. Desert Island. I was 30 and nervous; for me, Norman's reputation definitely preceded him. Not sure what to expect I tried to be nonchalant, but it didn't work. I was overwhelmed and completely lost my voice. *People* magazine was there photographing; Michael and Stephen Mailer were running around; Maggie Mailer was playing; Carol Mailer was cooking; Fan Mailer was supervising and seemed to be checking us out; and Norman was absolutely charming. We blamed my laryngitis on allergies—and Norman had remedies. Our next summer visit was better. I could speak and we brought our sons, Steve, Joe, and Jim. That summer we met Norris Church Mailer, Matt, Danielle, and Betsy Mailer. In later years we met Kate, John, and Susan Mailer. A long family friendship was taking form.

Our sons came to know Norman as a family friend, someone they would visit in summer. In 1983, at Michael's invitation, Norman came to speak at our university in Springfield, Illinois, when *Ancient Evenings* was published. In order to get front row center seats, we arrived early to the displeasure of my boys. As they curiously watched the 1,500 seat auditorium fill they asked, "Are all these people here for Norman?" Followed by, "We didn't know he was *that* important." Yes, Norman was, is, important because he ultimately cared and spoke out about the state of the world, about people, about words, about the environment, about the harm of plastic. He was interested in what people thought. He took risks. He could become annoyed, shout, and start an argument sometimes just to see the reaction. If he thought he unnecessarily hurt someone's feelings, he would later apologize. He would reiterate his point when he thought he was right.

Over the past thirty-plus years, we have watched his and our children grow, marry, and have children. We have dealt with parents' deaths, worked through illnesses, gone for hikes, argued politics, and talked about books, movies, and people. We laughed and cried and shared many meals. We carried oyster shells home so Norman could discover the embossed faces. We did things friends and families do. Michael and I bought our condo in Provincetown in 1997 and moved there permanently in 2004, allowing Michael and Norman to work closely on several projects. It was during these last ten years that some of our extended family and friends came to know Norman, as he and Norris welcomed them into their home.

On one occasion my parents, Tony and Nickie Pedro, came for a visit and we went to the Mailers for dinner. My father told me years before that he and my mother were worried about us being involved with Norman. After all, he was the "bad boy" of the 1960s and 1970s. While their view somewhat mellowed over time because of our friendship, they were still a bit apprehensive. All of that changed during dinner. Norman was gracious and put everyone at ease. He and my father learned that they both had served in the Philippines during WWII and had much to share. Dinner was lovely—pot roast, a favorite with my mother and Norman. After dinner, my father's camcorder kept the conversation going as he and Norman took turns shooting the bay and Norris made my parents feel at home.

Since 2004 we would see the Mailers three, sometimes four times a week for dinner and Texas Hold 'Em. These dinners started earlier than the 9 p.m. dinners of the past when Norman worked, on the third floor, until early evening. Norman had decided that he would teach me how to play the game. He explained it with great patience. He lent me poker books, marked pages that I should read, and then finally bought one for me. He took to calling me "a calling station" for not folding. He played the game seriously and I learned it. When I started winning, he would call in the morning to discuss and analyze the previous night's game with Michael, usually saying, "I can't figure her out." What he didn't realize (or perhaps he did) was that he had taught me well. I learned that game and much more from Norman.

Norman's body was aging. He told my mother in August of 2007 that he was "ready to go." He would watch the sea gulls and pigeons take off

and land outside his bayside windows and one night thoughtfully said, "They must be reincarnated pilots." Right to the end his quest for knowledge, his spirit, curiosity, and compassion for life were vibrant. These are qualities that kept him going. The spark was still in his blue eyes. Eyes now shut, but the spark lingers in memory. I cried when he left. I had no words. I miss him.