

# A TEAR SHED INTO A CUP OF SORROWS

STEPHEN BORKOWSKI

I LIVE IN PROVINCETOWN ON A HIGH HILL with sweeping harbor views. My neighbors are Mike and Donna Lennon, who live in the same cluster of townhouses. We are a brisk walk from the Mailer home. I met the Mailers for the first time in the Lennon's home, along with Doris Kearns and Dick Goodwin. I knew that Norman, before his mobility became an issue, would use the Lennon's top floor study to write. Our condominium complex was principally inhabited only on weekends, and even less so in the winter months so it was a perfect retreat for Norman. He was also a familiar sight at our corner market, walking with his two canes, when he was out to buy the daily paper. Our intersections were rare but always cordial. I also knew Norris through our involvement in the Provincetown Theater. She was always gracious and kind, and I began to feel a special kinship with her.

I was interested in Russian history long before I traveled to St. Petersburg and surrounds in 1998 with the Provincetown Art Association. My Slavic senses were heightened on that trip, and I felt a strange sense of oneness with the culture. I seemed to effortlessly blend into the life there, however briefly. I felt very much at home.

Years prior in Paris, and again in rural Maine, I had purchased a Khodinka Cup or Cup of Sorrows. I had been shown one while living in San Francisco in the late 1970s and I knew that the front of the enamel beaker depicts the crowned ciphers of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna above the date 1896. The reverse depicts the Russian Imperial double-headed eagle. It is decorated with a rust-colored and pale blue strapwork design below a gilt band. Contemporary accounts differ, but it is said they were to be distributed as a souvenir in the Khodinka Field in Moscow, to be filled

with beer for the satisfaction of the hordes of loyal acolytes waiting to celebrate the coronation. The rumor that one contained a gold coin caused the crowd to rush forward impulsively, and the ensuing stampede killed many thousands. This tragedy was a black cloud over the last Romanov Emperor and his family, later brutally murdered.

At a private dinner with Norman, arranged with the Lennons, Norman and I talked about another *fin de siècle* character, the Empress Elizabeth of Austria known as “Sissi.” He and Norris had collaborated on a screenplay about her at the behest of an Austrian patron. I was relieved not to be the only one to examine this fascinating, complex woman who unhappily reigned beside Emperor Franz Joseph. Sissi had been infected with syphilis by her husband very early in their marriage, and was attempting a cure by ingesting mercury, the only known remedy at the time. I was gratified to make Norman aware of that fact, which seemed to have escaped him during his research. The revelation seemed to satisfy some lingering questions that he had pondered over during his work, and he said “That explains much!” Clearly, we shared an interest in history and my enthusiasm was not looked upon with vague condescending amusement.

Norris later followed up with an email thanking me for sending the reference to the mercury cure, and mused about Sissi that “rich and powerful people are unhappy, too, just like the rest of us.”

Well into his work on *The Castle in the Forest*, I was made aware of Norman’s interest in Rasputin, and I asked Mike Lennon to pass along books I had absorbed the information from, but also made a gesture I had hoped might intrigue that staggering Mailer mind. I sent one of the beakers for Norman to examine and to “absorb the energy” that only holding such a talisman in your hands can generate. It was later returned with the customary thanks and my copy of *Castle in the Forest* inscribed: “For Steve, til we break bread again, Cheers, Norman.” The cups were safely stored in a leather-bound box awaiting a future disposition.

Following Norman’s death, when Norris returned to Provincetown, I helped her to pack personal items in preparation for the house being used for the Writers Colony and her transition to the Brooklyn apartment. Months passed into years, and we intersected later during her visits to Wilkes University, where I functioned as an administrator during the Creative Writing residency programs. We shared a love of bargain hunting and often shopped rather than eat a proper lunch. She spoke candidly of her health

battle, and her desire to “tell her story” while working feverishly on her book. I saw her at the Mailer Colony Gala in 2010, and again the following night at a party where she brought her handmade jewelry for sale. We spoke briefly and promised to see each other soon. She slipped into the night on John’s arm and we kissed goodbye; my strong sense told me it would be the last time.

In early December, following lunch with Mike, I was pained being in the house for the first time since her death, memories of that sad packing day flooded my head. I arrived from an errand for Mike while he was working with the vast library of books left behind by Norman and Norris. In an effort to push sadness aside, I jokingly inquired as to whether we might slip my name into the books about Rasputin that I had given to Norman during his research for *The Castle in the Forest*. Mike gave me the arched eyebrow “NO” that I had come to know after years of friendship. Looming behind us was a vitrine, which showcased Russian dolls and lacquer boxes that Norris had selected on her trips to Russia with Norman.

I was reminded of those intersections as I mourned the loss of my neighbors and (dare I presume) friends, the Mailers on that chilly December day with the vast sandbar created by the receding tide as I stood on the deck of the now Norman Mailer Center. I am grateful for the memorable moments in both their lives and the richness they added to my life in Provincetown, not fully appreciated until I knew it would never be repeated.