

AN UNSPOKEN TOAST

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER

The following pages were written by my Mother, intended as a toast at my wedding reception on South Padre Island, Texas in 2005. She never read it. The crowd at the beachside bar and grill, the site of our reception, were somewhat loud and not given to sitting still and listening. Norman got up and delivered one of his infamous wedding toasts, commanding the crowd enough to get a few laughs, whistles and applause, bringing the toasts to a halt as nobody wanted to follow his act. Mom gave me her notes with an apology before taking leave for the hotel. A long period of my childhood was faithfully reconstructed in these pages and it brings back warm memories of growing up in Brooklyn.—Matthew Norris Mailer

There are few images as deeply burned into a mother's memory as the moment she first sees her baby's face. All the months of imagining what he or she will look like becomes reality with that first cry. And the shock that registers first is—this is a totally separate human being from me. This is not some extension of myself, although for the past nine months it was as much a part of me as my heart, beating, alive inside.

Matt came to me in my young years, when his father was in Vietnam, and was my hold on reality, my link to the future. He was formed while I ate everything within reach and watched Walter Cronkite on the news, searching the pictures for a glimpse of his father's face in the jungles of Vietnam; he grew while I read the morning papers, full of trepidation and dark fears. Whatever the genesis, he was, even as a small child, ferociously talented and creative and LOVED horror movies, which terrified me. Against my better judgment, I allowed him to watch them while I cringed and covered my eyes as he absorbed everything with big brown eyes, like a little sponge.

Then life changed for us, his father and I parted ways and we came to live with Norman in New York when Matt was four. We bought Bony Bennie skeletons and figures like Creature from the Black Lagoon and Frankenstein and Dracula, which were his favorite playthings. His little brother, John Buffalo, came along and as soon as he could walk and talk, was

enlisted in Matt's play world. Matt was a great big brother, inventing board games and making costumes and hats from brown paper bags for them to play Civil War or Revolutionary War, and of course GI Joe, which was their favorite. We watched Star Trek and Twilight Zone every night, and all the while Matt was absorbing the movie business. Even at age three he wanted to be a movie director and make his own monster movies. At five he devised a way to draw a series of pictures on long strips of paper glued together, roll them up on two pencils and view them through a match box. I was constantly astounded at his talent and inventiveness.

We bought a home movie camera when he was twelve, and with his able assistant, John, who was by then six, he began to make movies. His first one was a werewolf transformation, himself as the unfortunate werewolf, John the camera man. I still don't know how he did it—the fangs and long hairy fingers seemed to grow right out of his body. He had figured out how to do stop action while none of us even knew how to turn the camera on.

Class Reunion was his first feature, made while he was in the 7th grade. It was a thriller where everyone in the class gets murdered in interesting ways, like being cooked in an oven. Next was The Deranged, more sophisticated, done when he was seventeen, about a group of well, deranged, psychos who share an apartment with a beautiful clueless therapist. Of

course, everyone gets slaughtered. In interesting ways.

The amazing thing is that Matt was always the sweetest, most gentle and kind boy there ever was.

I am still astounded at what I let him do during this period, but then he was a kid I always trusted. One night he was filming at Columbia University, where his partner in the movie's father was a professor. They had neglected to tell the campus police they were making a movie, and left the props downstairs with their able assistant, John Buffalo, then nine, while they went upstairs to film a scene in the bathroom. John got bored and decided to come up and watch, leaving a machete out to warn anyone not to touch the props, and of course the cops burst in, saw the machete and nearly arrested all the kids. It was in the days before cell phones, and when they didn't get back until two in the morning, I was walking the floor. When they came in, their concern was for me—"Mom! What are you doing up? You should be in bed!" My hair would have turned gray if I had allowed it to. Thank goodness for Clairol.

The Deceased

He applied to only one school—Tisch, New York Film School—which is the best in the country. He was so sure he would get in that he didn't even apply to a backup school, and of course he did get in. He learned his craft well, and his senior thesis film *The Money Shot* won the Wasserman award and went on to win many awards at Film festivals across the country. His brother, Michael, produced a feature version of it which he directed.

which is like the Oscars of NYC

Matt

I believe he will get to become a famous director.

Growing up with Matt, which is what I did, since I was 22 when he was born, was always a delight. I was his guinea pig for special effects makeup, and he, John and I spent our weekends at the Metropolitan Museum with the knights and the paintings and the Egyptian artifacts, and then we scoured the antique toy stores for GI Joe and Barbie—back in the days when you could still buy them for very little. We have great collections.

Then there comes a time when, it seems, overnight, a boy becomes a man. He is suddenly taller than you are, you find yourself asking his opinion on things, relying on his judgment, and the dynamic changes.

When his grandfather, James Davis, was dying, I could not have gone through the five months we spent with him in Arkansas without Matt. He was there to bathe him, to give him his medicine, crushing it up and sending it through a tube, taking care of the intimate details of that long sad ending, and he did it with ultimate patience and love, never once losing his temper or his sweet nature. He was a solace for PaPa and a rock for his grandmother and me.

Again, when I had my own health problems, Matt was there for me, as was John, loving, patient and kind. I have been blessed with two of the best human beings I know for children, and I don't know what I did to deserve them. *(Neither of them has ever said a kind word to me.)*

And now, I have a daughter joining the family. The first time I saw Salina, I said, Wow! What a beautiful girl! Over the years I have discovered that she is just as beautiful on the inside, warm, loving, gracious. And she is ~~so~~ much fun to go shopping with! We're pretty bad for each other, though, always saying, "Oh, that looks so great on you! You have to get it!"

She has been so good for Matt, adding an element of pizzaz and fun to his life, and I am so happy they are getting married. What beautiful babies they will make! And we already have a collection of GI Joe and Barbies for them to play with.

So, I lift my glass in a toast to Matt and Salina, my son and daughter. May you have happiness and wonder every day of very long lives.