WHAT WOULD BE THE FUN OF THAT?

PETER ALSON

THE FIRST TIME I MET NORRIS was when she accompanied Norman to Harvard for a lecture that he was giving in the spring of 1976. I was a junior at the time. She was only a few years older than I. But she was tall and beautiful, with cream-white skin and red hair that, as Raymond Chandler might have described it, was "like a fire under control but still dangerous." In part because she was with my uncle, in part because she was dressed not like my fellow college students, but in a pretty spring dress and heels, she struck me as a full-fledged adult. By contrast, especially in her presence, I felt tongue-tied, nearly protoplasmic. Which didn't stop me from proudly introducing her and my uncle to my college buddies. I think it safe to say that my connection to her scored me more points with them than my connection to Norman.

Over the years, some of the nervousness and awkwardness I felt around Norris on that first encounter melted away–but not all of it. I was always a little intimidated by her. She was just so damned beautiful and sure of herself and grown up. At the same time she was very much in touch with her inner child. I remember my surprise when I found out that she collected Barbie dolls. I knew there were people who collected them and never even took them out of their boxes so as not to diminish their value. But as Norris pointed out, "What would be the fun of that?"

She loved Christmas with the same kind of kid-like joy. By the time she was finished decorating the tree, I was always surprised that the damn thing was able to stand up under the weight of all the ornaments. Even more impressive was how effortless she made the holiday celebration seem, cooking dinner for the assembled army of kids, nephew, sister, parents. There she'd

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be, sitting in her white wicker throne by the picture window of the Provincetown house, flipping through a magazine, not a care in the world, and a while later, dinner would be on the table, a feast of chicken or turkey with all the trimmings. If she felt the slightest bit of stress, it didn't show. I certainly never saw it.

She had a style and a palette all her own, which wasn't surprising given her painterly talent, and she took great delight in decorating the house in Provincetown to fit her vision—dark, gothic wallpaper, at one point, lots of eccentric lamps (it would take ten minutes to turn them all on and off). I will be frank and say that it wasn't my own vision of a beach house, but it was distinct and unapologetic, just like its creator.

If Norman was the king of the Mailer clan, as he surely was, then Norris was the queen without whom his kingdom—namely, us, his children, his sister and I—would have been much the poorer. She was so many things to all of us, and filled so many roles. For me, she was my aunt, my friend, the queen whose approval I would always want, artist, writer, wife of my uncle, the redhead from Arkansas, the giggly funny older sister I never had. She was Barbara. She was Norris. All those things. Now still.