

REMEMBERING NORRIS CHURCH

J O H N B O W E R S

NORRIS CAME ALONG LATE IN MY LIFE, but she represented the kind of person I've known about for most of my life. She was that tough Southern girl that is often cloaked in the sunshine of beauty and affability. She could change a tire on the highway at three in the morning, I bet, as well as strut down a runway in a beauty parade. She knew how to bat her eyes. What drew my everlasting admiration to her, though, was that she knew where she came from, who she was, and most impressively had an instinctive sympathy for those from a hard scrapple background or from a similar inherited place where one has to fight for every inch of ground to get ahead. In her journey she kept inside her what Hemingway so apply called "a built-in shit detector." She was nobody's fool. She'd give until there was no more to give but no one was ever going to walk over her.

I come from the hills of East Tennessee and that fact, and all it means, never leaves me for a second (although I try at times.) Norris of course came from the Ozarks. We met at a small get together in an apartment that Mike Lennon and his wife Donna were briefly ensconced in Lower Manhattan. I remember the moment as if it were last night. She was seated on a lounge chair, long legs crossed lady-like, eyes raised shyly, as her husband Norman Mailer sat in great bonhomie and authority a short distance away, showing some stiffness of legs and not able to spring up as of yore. Conversation swirled around gossip, drinks, and possibly politics. Before long, though, Norris and I began the necessary. We had to trade facts to gauge how hillbilly Southern we were, a ritual similar to Armenians far from home who must share their bona fides to set the record straight. We talked about fried chicken, biscuits and gravy, fat back and green beans. We tested each other on Baptist hymns, sang a good one together (very quietly) and shared the info that we both had been submerged in baptism. Not many you meet in a

literary gathering in the Big Apple have “gone under” in such a ritual at puberty. It’s not exactly a Bar Mitzvah. We confirmed that we had given up the faith but would never forget the power it had once held over us. Norman was in a good social form that evening, attentive, not a bone to pick with anyone, generous, a little shy himself (if that can be imagined), and I thought, what a pair the two of them make! How do they make it work? I found out when I read *A Ticket to the Circus*.

Norris and I traded emails after that evening. I began to think of her as “Barbara” as she was before she reinvented herself as “Norris” in New York. We saw each other at Wilkes University where she came to be honored, and we spoke occasionally by phone. When she came down with the brutality of cancer I was aware of how it took away the heretofore soft contours of her body, but a minute later forgot it. Really I did. She remained her radiant self through the greatest of pain, as if, in fact, this disability was either a joke or inconvenience she’d soon get rid of. I held that thought, up until I heard that she’d, as they say, “passed away.” Among the healthy and the lame, she was the most alive person I’d ever met. We emailed each other about work and life a few days before the end. She had a showing of her designed jewelry where my wife was lucky enough to pick up a piece. There was a book party in a palatial Upper East Side apartment that looked out over the lights of Manhattan in which she read from her latest work. She came to a dinner party at our place as if the last thought in her head was that another would not follow. So talented she was, in so many fields—acting, modeling, writing, painting, and on and on. She certainly complemented her multi-talented husband in that regard.

Right now her number is in my address book. I’m not going to take it out. I want to feel I could call her up any time and she would answer.