

THE NORRIS I KNEW

CHRISTOPHER BUSA

TEACHING TENNIS AT THE PROVINCETOWN TENNIS CLUB DURING THE 1970S, I gave lessons to members of the Mailer family. I enjoyed playing with Al Wasserman, a television producer for *60 Minutes*, married to Norman's sister Barbara, and her son Peter Alson. Michael and Stephen Mailer, the sons of Beverly, had formed childhood roots in Provincetown, as had Danielle, whose mother was Mailer's second wife Adele.

I met Norris not long after she married Norman in 1980. She only took a few lessons from me, but I still recall the feeling of rallying with her and her nimble adaptation to small movements to keep the ball in play. We shortened the court, using the service line as our baseline, and guided the ball back and forth with the idea of sustaining a rally in the forecourt. We were playing mini-tennis and ball control was our goal, taking small steps and making abbreviated strokes with the racquet. I would take a single ball and attempt to keep it in play for a dozen exchanges, and then we took another ball and kept it going for twice as long. A rally in tennis is like a conversation, a combination of communication and scoring points in a gentle sparing manner. Norris was a beginner, but she had a sure touch, so my method was not to compete but cooperate by keeping the ball in play.

Much of Norman Mailer's knowledge of the body came from his interest in sports, especially the principles of dynamic balance of a performing athlete. Like the footwork of a boxer, his characters, both within themselves and with others, are moving through complicated turns from balance point to another balance point, maintaining their center of gravity through evolving alignments. But Norris was a lady. She preferred not to perspire. We bantered a bit in the shade of a courtside beach umbrella, and I said flirtatiously, knowing she would be quizzed by Norman, "Norris, your skin has not been

kissed by the sun, you are so pale.” And she said softly in a voice redolent with the earthiness of her Arkansas upbringing, “I like to be fish-belly white.”

Norris had read her husband’s book on Marilyn Monroe and was drawn to his effort to portray something essential about femininity from a male perspective. Mailer believed that what was poignant about Marilyn was her desire to become a lady: “Elegance was elusive and fearful and attractive and as awesome to her in these somewhat sordid early years as the hidden desire to be macho can feel to a young and wimpy intellectual.” Mailer defined wimpy as having muscles like cooked spaghetti that were limp and cold. If elegance was elusive for the young Marilyn, Norris grew up secure in the knowledge of being a natural head-turner; yet she pursued intellectual understandings, teaching art in a high school and subscribing to the *New Yorker*.

She forgot to return the box she had checked “Don’t Send” on her Book-of-the-Month Club subscription, and a copy of Mailer’s *Marilyn* arrived. She was shocked that a book could cost twenty dollars. But she gave deep attention to the photographs. She started reading Mailer’s text and noticed at once that this so-called war novelist had a lot to say about women and a woman’s view of the world. She met Mailer on the famous occasion of Norman’s Arkansas visit to see his old Army buddy, Francis Gwaltney, who had become a writer teaching English at a nearby college. Norris had been a student in Gwaltney’s class.

Norman told me that when he first met Norris that he felt “a great shock of anxiety.” He mocked himself for his fear of tall women. Already statuesque, she was wearing hip hugger jeans and standing in three-inch sandals. Her white blouse was tied in a gypsy knot just above her belly button. Norman would learn that night that she was born January 31, his birthday. They shared a natal bond, despite being born twenty-six years apart. He was twice her age at 52. In an interview published in *Provincetown Arts* in 1999, Mailer said, “We looked so unlike and were so different that it was interesting to have something in common. But it wouldn’t have mattered what her birthday was. Over time I’ve learned that we not only have the same virtues, but the same faults.”

Wicked rumors circulated in Provincetown that, after meeting that night, they shacked up in a house trailer and did not emerge for three days. But it is a fact that in less than three months, Norris had quit her job, sold her yellow Volkswagen, and moved to New York to live with Norman. She was a

year older than Norman when he published *The Naked and the Dead*; just as *Naked* altered Norman, transforming him from an aspiring talent to a major author, so did Norman alter Norris, encouraging her surging ambitions to develop her varied talents and find her forms in theater, painting, writing, and mothering. Often, the first task of an artist is to create the persona that will create the work. So Barbara Jean Davis, who married Larry Norris, now became Norris Church Mailer. In an almost perfect understanding of this process of profound change, Coco Chanel said, "Elegance is not just the prerogative of those who have just escaped from adolescence, but of those who have already taken possession of their future."

Where Norman rushed in, Norris did not fear to follow, but she declined to become a fool, reminding her husband that he was a great American author and not an ill-mannered ruffian. During the New York symposium where several prominent feminists beat up on Norman for saying that women should be kept in cages, he was shocked by their lack of humor. Norris said she knew that Norman was trying "to be funny," forgiving him, as usual, for his offish remarks, but not taking him seriously enough to be offended.

In a lengthy interview in *Provincetown Arts*, I asked Norman, "Do you know a woman named Cinnamon Brown? Rumors say you know of her."

"Yeah, sure," Mailer said. "That look of panic you just saw in my eyes was me wondering if I knew two Cinnamon Browns."

Shortly after Norris moved to New York, Mailer had cast Norris in the role of Cinnamon Brown, his date for a small dinner party in New York. Wearing a blonde wig and brazen makeup, she was introduced as a girl from the South who had moved to New York to enter the adult film industry. "The real art," Mailer explained, "was that we did it with two extremely sophisticated people, Harold and Mara Conrad. Mara was one of the smartest, hippest women I've ever known. The idea was precisely to fool her. As I remember, Harold was in on it, or I don't think we could have pulled it off."

If Bea was a college sweetheart, if Adele was a most Spanish passion, if Lady Jean was regal, if Beverly was the consummate actress who could not play the role of wife, if Carol, mother of their lovechild, would become wife for a day, then Norris proved to be the mother who was as powerful as his own. Freud said, "A man who is loved by his mother will always retain the feeling of a conqueror." In her thirty years of marriage to Norman, Norris integrated the chaotic legacy of five previous marriages and several broods of

children suffering from shell shock of the cultural wars between their sequences of parents. She became friends with former wives, and found a zone of comfort by “avoiding” past mistresses. Family matters were scheduled smoothly. Ironically, Norman wrote the check for Norris’s lessons, which bounced. Norris took over many household matters, including paying bills.

For an exhibition of paintings by Norris Church Mailer, at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, Norman wrote an appreciation of his wife’s painting, posted on the wall beside *Leaving California* (1982), a somewhat surreal celebration of yellow as a hue, depicting an irrepressibly happy tourist heading home, back East, having become deeply tanned from California sunshine:

I admire and am intrigued by the little mysteries that my wife, Norris Church, evokes in her best work. It is genre, and the painter’s tale she tells is usually of middle-aged men and women from middle America, people one would not necessarily sit next to on a train or a plane, tourists, housewives, or peppy grandmothers with a small but crazy light in their eye because they are on vacation. There they are, much like this woman dressed in yellow, optimistic, unafraid, and so innocent that one’s case-hardened heart feels for her. Full of the glow of brilliant sun and big sky, she is nonetheless fixed in all the interred time of a family snapshot. Blissful, she is as American as her pocketbook, which looks very much like a portable radio. From the white plastic frames of her eyeglasses, down to the sturdy set of her legs, she is our perfect and absolute American, sweet, optimistic, a little bewildered—oh, boy!—the vastness of space in which she stands, and wholly unaware of that faint shadow of the sinister that rides along that outgoing American highway down which we travel for the rest of our lives, off on our vacations, full of snapshots for which we posed that never told us who we were, and what the shadows had to say of that other highway that winds beyond our means to the mortal mystery of our ends.

Yellow was Norris’s favorite color, a honey-colored yellow that contained a dose of her husband’s dark syrup. Her elegance was the equal of her husband’s machismo. When I read Norman’s remarks about his wife’s

painting, I began to see why Norris once said, “He had a crazy brain, endlessly fascinating.” In the epilogue to her memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, she confirms her belief in their enduring affection: “I’m anxious to catch up to him.”