

NORRIS MAILER

NANCY COLLINS

I CALLED HER MY SOUTHERN GIRL . . . since we both were, more or less. Arkansas-born. Norris was landed gentry. I, spawn of a rebellious Alabama Mama who ran off with a brilliant, exciting Yankee—right up Norris’s alley—a Dixie half-breed. Subsequently, our friendship was grounded in our south-of-the Mason-Dixon-Line humor . . . a shared maverick philosophy where adventure trumped security . . . heart . . . logic . . . passion . . . common sense. We loved transcendent writing, complicated men, great books, good food, glamorous anything . . . jewelry, clothes, furniture, trips. “Ordinary,” we agreed, “is our enemy.”

But then Norris Mailer was never, ever . . . ordinary. Informing that ridiculously gorgeous, movie star persona was a fierce, if soft spoken, intelligence, titanium will, the most tender of hearts, the kind of brutal, unembarrassed candor that rendered her literary *pièce de résistance*, *A Ticket to the Circus*, the gold standard for any aspiring memoirist.

Running into each other over the years, Norris and I would, invariably, repair to a corner, engrossed in conversation as the party swirled around us. “You’re the best friend I never see,” she said. I couldn’t have agreed more. That changed during the last couple years of her life when our closeness made up for lost time—alas, not on our side. Wary of making people uncomfortable, Norris resisted talking about her illness, exactly what I, hands-on veteran of my own mother’s pancreatic cancer, wanted to do, providing, I hoped, a discreet, understanding outlet for any unexpressed feelings—or pain—she wished to spare others. Eventually, Norris took me up on it. And though the topic was sometimes hard, it could also become, in our hands, ironically hilarious. Cancer may have been claiming her body, but it never diminished her spirit.

Perhaps the most profound gift that a friend can give is the invitation to

help her gracefully leave the earth. So honored by Norris, the gracious generosity of her extraordinary sons, John and Matt, indeed all the Mailers, made me feel like family as we surrounded her with love. Norris's last days, far from being sad, were as original, uncomplaining, interesting, courageous, dignified, love-filled—even theatrical—as the rest of her remarkable life. She laughed, ate well, watched videos with her adored grandchildren and put on her makeup—daily. “Southern girls,” she deadpanned, “don’t even die without lipstick.”

She also reminisced about her passionate, high-flying, oft tumultuous but never boring relationship with Norman Mailer, the grand love of her life. She wanted a fascinating man and she got him. “In the end,” she mused, “I had a very good marriage. I *liked* it.”

On her last Friday evening, Norris and I were awaiting the imminent arrival of her boys when, suddenly, unexpectedly, she took quite ill. A less gutsy human being no doubt might have called it a day—make that night—and soared off into the celestial. But Norris wasn’t about to leave without kissing her two favorite people on the planet good-bye. And, so, bravely hunkering down, she gave Matt and Johnny almost two more days with their mother, whereupon, I suspect, Norman, by now impatient at being denied his glorious Norris, swooped down and, throwing one of the world’s great dames over his shoulder, absconded to literary parts unknown.