

REMEMBERING NORRIS

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IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT, AND WE MET CUTE. It was at a 2004 PEN dinner in Boston. My husband and I were seated at the Mailers' table. A man was seated between Norris and me. After talking to each other for about ten minutes, basically leaning in in front of this man, we told him to move. We continued to talk to each other through the whole dinner; rude, to be sure, but there you are. At the end of the evening we exchanged contacts, and each other's books, and thus our friendship was born. I had, for whatever reason, always thought middle-aged ladies did not make new friends; they had the old ones. But Norris not only became a cherished friend, she became more. We called each other "the red-headed sister." I was the big sister, of course, being nine years her senior—and both of us were only children.

The unusual thing about our relationship as girlfriends was that, though we did see each other in Boston, Provincetown, and New York, we did most of our talking in emails. We went through a lot together, in the ether, as it were. For me to even *meet* Norris, let alone become close, was amazing to me because I had been aware of her for many years as someone who was covered in the press. The Mrs. Mailer I was used to seeing in photographs was a curvaceous, Rubenesque beauty. The Mrs. Mailer I met was reed thin—and still gorgeous. She told me, soon after we met, that she was duking it out with cancer, and she had been winning for a lot of years. Her approach to her illness was quite matter-of-fact. There was no complaining, no self pity. But I must say there was a good bit of humor. At one particularly rough juncture after Norman's death, having more to do with anger than grief, she wrote me, "You know, dying wouldn't be such a bad thing." If there was a lull in the e-mail conversation and her phone didn't answer at home, I knew she was back in the hospital. I would then email, saying I had X-ray vision and knew

where she was. She would e-mail back and say, “Oh, sweetie, they have locked me up again.”

Norris had my admiration in so many areas. She was truly multi-talented, level-headed, and so much more than “the great man’s wife.” Whereas I had been a mediocre-to-pretty-terrible stepmother, she had woven together Norman’s children from more different mothers than you can imagine. Along with her own two boys, all the Mailer kids were a family, and that was Norris’s doing. She had wonderful humor and wisdom, and I loved her. She was a gift to my later life that was taken away too soon. Except that she doesn’t seem that far away. When I want to tell her something, I find myself looking heavenward and saying, “Hey, good lookin’, listen to this!” And I have her picture on my desk . . . along with my mother, my children, and my husband. I mean, where else would you put a sister’s picture?