

MY FRIEND NORRIS

B A R R Y H . L E E D S

NOW I KNOW WHAT “A COURAGEOUS BATTLE AGAINST CANCER” REALLY MEANS. I used to think that it was a compliment haphazardly applied to everyone who, once diagnosed with the dread disease, made a half-hearted attempt to protract their remaining time through a bout of surgery and a course of chemotherapy or radiation. Now, after the struggle of more than a decade waged by Norris Church Mailer against her virulent and relentless illness, I know there are exceptional cases. Norris was a paradigm of dauntless courage. I miss her. We all miss her.

At some point during the forty years Norman and I were friends, our meetings widened to include our wives and children. Now those happy occasions run together like a film montage of the high points in a biopic. Some examples follow.

In 1995, I had the fine experience of dinner at the house on Commercial Street, with my wife Robin, Norman and Norris, their daughter Maggie, and my artist/poet daughter Leslie, who had recently graduated from Connecticut College. After dinner, while our wives and daughters chatted, Norman and I sat up late in his bar overlooking the ocean drinking single malt scotch. When we ran out of time and energy but not talk, and had exhausted the patience of the women, he suggested we meet for breakfast at Michael Shay’s restaurant, which has since become one of my favorite Provincetown haunts. Together, we walked back to the house so I could say goodbye to Norris, where the two engaged in an impromptu repartee that put grins on all our faces.

After Leslie’s death in February 1996, the summer found us in no mood to return to Provincetown. Instead, Robin and I began to understand the statistical dictum that the vast majority of marriages in which a child dies end in divorce. When, in 1997, Robin showed no interest in accompanying

me to visit the Mailers, I went alone. I was always made to feel keenly aware of my welcome, alone or otherwise. By this time, Norris had begun to feel close enough to me to offer helpful advice on life and love, and her warm sympathy was unparalleled.

By the summer of 1998, with our marriage sadly eroded after more than thirty years, Robin and I separated. On this visit, which had begun to be an annual event, I was accompanied by my long-time friend Beth, with whom friendship had ripened into something more. After a wonderful dinner and a restful sleep in the recently renovated guest room, we slouched downstairs in rumpled T-shirts to enjoy a great breakfast cooked by Norris in her sweat-suit. At the time, she must have weighed a good 150 pounds. She looked beautifully healthy, and packed in a big breakfast herself. For me, the high point of the morning was Norman's complaint:

"Norris, just because Barry asked for onions and green peppers in his omelet, why do I have to have them in mine?"

"Shut up and eat your omelet, Norman."

In October 1999, I took a group of graduate students from my Mailer/Kesey seminar on a pilgrimage to Provincetown to meet Mailer and have a three-hour seminar in his living room. They were so grateful, excited, dazzled to the point of awe, and so intelligent in their questions, that I realized the experience was analogous to how I would have felt if one of my professors had taken my class to Key West to visit Hemingway at his home. I was very proud of them, and very grateful to Norman and Norris. Amazingly, when I spoke to Norris to plan this trip, she offered to cook dinner for us all, which I refused, particularly since she had recently undergone a hysterectomy. Little did any of us suspect that this was only the beginning of her escalating health problems.

The year 2000 brought another fine visit. By now, Beth and I had decided that autumn visits were preferable to summer. That fall, despite Norris's cancer (and the consequent surgery, chemotherapy and radiation) and Norman's painful arthritis, they were not merely stoical and self-deprecating about their own travails, but, as always, warm hosts. Over cold vodka and sushi, followed by hearty, hot Russian borscht, we had the pleasure of discussing Norris's fine first novel, *Windchill Summer* (2000), and of having two Mailers sign their books for us.

In publishing *Windchill Summer*, Norris added to her demonstrated tal-

ents as teacher, model, actress and artist, that of novelist. In achieving this, she showed great confidence and courage on several levels. It is impossible to estimate the pressure upon someone writing her first novel in the same house as her Pulitzer-Prize-winning husband of twenty-five years and forty books.

The book itself is rooted in such literary antecedents as *As I Lay Dying* (in terms of shifting, multiple points of view), *The Scarlet Letter* (a guilt-ridden clergyman takes responsibility for his illegitimate paternity), and even *The Catcher in the Rye* (in the authenticity of the first person narrative voice of the young protagonist). Further, it is a murder mystery replete with red herrings.

More significant is the fact that the novel is a daring exercise in pushing the limits of incorporating real-life characters into fiction, like E. L. Doctorow in *Ragtime*, or Norman Mailer in *Harlot's Ghost*. Specifically, Norris Mailer is defiantly bold enough to make two of her principal characters participants in the My Lai massacre: not a "My Lai-like" event, but the actual killings, with the presence of Lieutenant Calley, Captain Medina and the heroic helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson, who stopped Calley at gunpoint in mid-massacre. As she told me, she had to fight her editor on this point of authenticity (Norris Church Mailer in conversation, October 7, 2000).

This coming of age novel, set in Arkansas in the 1960s, but with "no mention of Bill Clinton and no autobiography" (NCM), coincidentally features as its protagonist a twenty-one year old woman named Cherry. Another interesting parallel to Norman's work is Cherry's independently realized conclusion that God cannot be both omnipotent and all good:

In fact, it was getting harder as I got older to figure out the whole business of what God does control. I am almost scared to say it out loud, but it seems to me like either God is all-powerful or He is all good, but He can't be both. You know what I mean? How can He really be omniscient and omnipotent, like they teach us in church, and still let things happen like Carlene getting murdered or babies getting cancer or all those Jews getting killed by the Nazis? Is it the Devil that causes all of it? If God could stop it but allows it to happen, then maybe He is not all that caring about us. (*Windchill*, 104)

This passage of incipient Manichaeism was disarmingly explained by Norris in that the Mailers did see eye to eye on some philosophical issues. *Windchill Summer* may not be *The Naked and the Dead*, but it was one hell of a novelistic debut.

So in October 2000, after my second reading of *Windchill Summer*, I sat at the Mailers' table and while Norman and Beth looked on, told Norris in detail what I liked about the book.

She thanked me, then flashed a puckish grin and asked, "What if you *didn't* like it, Barry?"

I looked into her eyes. "Is the question, would I perjure myself about literature to please a friend?"

She nodded.

"Never."

It's a part of Mailerian literary history now that the sequel to *Windchill Summer*, *Cheap Diamonds* (2007), represents a worthy continuation of Cherry's story. What is more interesting, however, is the autobiographical book, *A Ticket to the Circus* (2010), which is, in a very real sense, the third in a trilogy. As I wrote at the time of its publication:

This remarkable and wonderful book by a remarkably courageous and wonderfully warm woman is a must-read for anyone interested in great loves, bravery in the face of cancer, or Norman Mailer. Norris Church Mailer was Norman's sixth wife and (as she always stated) 'the last one.' During their 'warm and wonderful' (Norman Mailer) and sometimes turbulent thirty-three years together, Norris showed herself to be a loyal and loving wife, a fine mother to two and stepmother to seven, an accomplished teacher, artist, model and occasional actress. She is also an excellent writer, as readers of her two novels, *Windchill Summer* and *Cheap Diamonds* can attest. This is her best book by far: funny, witty, candid and self-effacing. Above all, this volume is magnetic, engrossing, infused with the fire of a unique personality. I couldn't put it down.

After reading this, Norris wrote me in thanks "for removing the thorns from my paws." I wish I could have done more for her health.

At the conclusion of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Catherine

Barkley on her deathbed says, “I’m going to die. . . . “I hate it!” and a little later, “I’m not afraid. I just hate it” (330). The same defiant spirit was shown by Norris, a lover of life who fought death to a standstill for over a decade. She did not go gentle into that good night.