

REMEMBERING NORRIS:
EXCERPTS FROM AN
UNPUBLISHED ACCOUNT OF
NORMAN MAILER'S LAST DAYS

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The following entries are taken from a log I kept for the last three years of Mailer's life when my wife Donna and I were living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, not far from the Mailers' large brick house on the harbor. Entries were made every few days, along with occasional reflections. While the log focuses on Mailer and his table talk, Norris is on almost every page, and it was easy to select three dozen entries in which she is described and/or quoted. Note: Norris Church Mailer is identified as NCM; Norman Mailer as NM.

6-11-05

NCM is down to 110 and looks beautiful, although it is the medicine that is keeping her weight down. She says she cares more about clothes now that she is so slender. We had a good discussion with Dotson Rader about Tennessee Williams, who Dotson knew well. I told him that the Tennessee Williams Society may come to P-Town for its meeting.

06-13-05

Thinking about NM's word to describe himself: improvisational. Yes, but with a big dollop of impetuous. Half the time at least, almost always in conversation, he says the first thing that comes to mind. This is especially true when he is talking to NCM. On hundreds of occasions he has blurted out some sarcasm to her—"That's how southerners think," for example. She

gives as good as she gets, and they tend to do it in front of me all the time. I am flattered that they do not feel the need to be socially correct in front of me, but it is embarrassing. They really get into it. Both of them say, "Will you ever let me finish a sentence before interrupting?" He interrupts just as much as she does. He can also be extremely sweet and flattering; he is always telling NCM how beautiful she is, what a fine actress, how no one can play Lulu [from *The Deer Park*] better than she can, despite her age. This latter compliment worked beautifully in my presence a few weeks ago, and she agreed to play the role in one of their upcoming readings.

07-22-05

Donna and I visited the Mailers for a couple of hours today at midday. At first, NM said he didn't want us to come over because he was going to begin reading the penultimate draft of his new novel [*The Castle in the Forest*] from start to finish, a week's job, today. But then he relented, called back, and we went over. Donna swam while NM and I talked and he signed books and magazines. He said he has changed the title of his book with his son, John Buffalo, from *Hodge-Podge* to *The Big Empty*. He said the original title was "mangy." He invited us to dinner with William Thompson, Master of Timothy Dwight at Yale, tonight at 7. Sitting on the porch with NCM and me, NM began talking about his sloppy habits and called himself, jokingly, a "sloborono." NCM told us how appalled she was when she came to his apartment in Brooklyn Heights back in the mid-70s. She said everything was grungy and needed cleaning and there was a room full of broken furniture and old lamps, etc., that she and Myrtle, their maid, cleaned out. When she was done with a day of hard, dirty work, NM came home just after she had placed his newly cleaned suit on the bed. When he said, "At least you could have hung it up," she slugged him. He turned red then purple and, as he later explained, "for the first time since I was a little boy, I prayed, asking the Lord to keep me from breaking that beautiful head of my wife's."

NM read all of James Atlas's 1979 profile of him in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, and NCM leafed through it, admiring the photographs but little else. She felt Atlas was inaccurate in spots, especially the story of NM speaking at Harvard and the audience being bored. "Not true," she said. NM thought that Atlas had been given some general editorial directions to rough him up a bit. He added that he now liked Atlas. NCM remembered how she got back at him: at a Jean Stein [editor of *Grand Street*] party, Stein

brought him over to NCM, who is somewhat taller than Atlas. She looked right over his head and said, “Oh yes, where is he?” NM decided to go for a swim after Donna told him how warm the water was. He said he just did not feel like starting the novel today. He plans to read it through and then begin writing again. NCM told us that because of her stent, she could never swim in the ocean again, or even take a bath. But then she smiled and shook it off. No complainer, she. None of the Mailers are, a family trait.

9-05-05

Arrived in P-Town yesterday and went to dinner at the Mailers’ last night. Steve Mailer, NM’s sister Barbara and John Buffalo were there for dinner. NM was fast asleep on the couch in the TV room until just before dinner at 7:30. I chatted with Barbara and then with NCM. She is going in for her PET scan to check the state of her two tumors, and to see if she has any more. She is remarkably calm about it. Her novel [*Cheap Diamonds*] has gone nowhere this summer because of all the visitors. She told me today that she wants to finish it by year’s end and have it come out next fall, or even the following summer. Today we discussed briefly the possibility that advance excerpts from her novel might be published in *Mademoiselle*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, or *Vanity Fair*. NCM told me that she had once published a piece on how young models should prepare themselves for their career and that her agency, Wilhelmina, used to give it to new models. Need to get a copy.

She and Norman and John will drive up to Boston tomorrow, he for NM’s surgery on the 8th and for her scan on the 7th. This is not the first time both of them have been in the hospital in Boston simultaneously. NM is calm. He has a new set of uppers that don’t fit and he is gumming his food with gusto. He looks like an old Irish stevedore out for fish and chowder on Friday night.

9-5-05

The whole clan sat on the back porch this morning and talked about Bush and the suffering caused by Katrina and whether it would help or hurt the Democrats. NM was just finishing a humorous rant in a brogue when I arrived. NM and NCM did their usual funny faux fight for us with NCM saying what I have heard her say 50 times: “We never fight when others are not around; Norman just likes to put on a show.” With a big toothless laugh showing his eyeteeth, he agreed. Laughter all around.

10-16-05

NCM told Donna that she fears she has another tumor. She said that she expects to have another operation to replace the stent in her kidney, and perhaps get rid of the bag she has to wear. But she does not ever dwell on these matters, and can be quite funny and warm and energetic. She has sold her parent's house in Arkansas to a cousin. John Buffalo joined us and brought down a dozen of NM's books including *The Time of Our Time*. The idea was to select some passages for the Mailers to read on the 4th of November for the Mailer Society conference in P-Town. This might or might not include Stephen and Kate Mailer. The selections included passages from *The Armies of the Night*, *An American Dream*, *The Executioner's* and "Our Man at Harvard," which John might read. NCM read aloud, copying Marilyn Monroe's voice from a section from *Of Women and Their Elegance* about Amy Greene and her underwear, ending with Monroe's admission that she did not wear any. Beautifully done. NM followed her performance with relish and laughed heartily when she was done. It was a lovely moment as they forgot for the nonce their ailments and worries.

10-26-05

NM said that his mother was "always giving me good practical advice, and I never took any of it." He has said to me many times that NCM has more common sense than anyone he has ever met. Well: "I want a girl just like the girl who married dear old Dad."

11-12-05

Much has happened since last entry. NM has been improving daily. He has thrown himself into the Mailer family reading for the Norman Mailer Society, running rehearsals, selecting entries, re-writing my brief introductory remarks, checking out the theater's lights, etc. The Friday, November 4th reading was a great success. Reading were: NM, NCM, Steve Mailer, John Mailer and Christina Pabst (a family friend who filled in for Kate Mailer who had bronchitis). Each read two selections from NM's works, and NM concluded the 90-minute reading with the embalming scene from *Ancient Evenings*. I muffed one of my lines and was embarrassed, but all else went smoothly. NCM was tremendous as Marilyn Monroe and Steve Mailer really thrilled the audience reading from *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Then we all moved to the Mailer home where NM sat in a chair and folks lined up to

speak to him and have him sign their books. He was very tired by around 11:30 and went to bed. NCM stayed up until midnight, and said she felt like the Queen Bee. There were about 100 people at the party.

12-30-05

NM talked at some length about the place in Mt. Desert, Maine where he spent several summers back in the 70s and early 80s. He said that diving from the deck in Soames Sound at high tide—the tide shifts are 10 to 12 feet—was not something he was eager to do, but then when he was away, he learned that both of his young sons, Steve and Michael, had jumped in. Michael is the older, but it was Steve who jumped in first. Then he saw NCM jump in. NM said, “When I saw that long-legged creature jump in, I knew I’d have to go.” He said he dove in “like a sack of potatoes.”

1-30-06

NM and NCM then got into a comic argument on the merits of his British accent, which he was happily displaying for a good chunk of the meal. Donna and I were in stitches as he took on the role of a British Lord. Earlier, I had jokingly said that I wanted to write a comic play called “Norman and NCM.” “The restaurant scene could be Act II,” I said, “and all that is needed now is a conclusion.” NCM told Donna later that NM always feels that he has to “be on” when he is at table. He loves to perform.

4-5-06

When we returned last night after NM beat us in poker, Donna said, “All the Mailers talked about were death and dying.” This is correct, although it did not hit me until she said it. NM repeated what he has said before: “My guardian angel has kept me from winning too many prizes and awards in order to keep me writing.” NM and NCM joked about what they might tell whoever meets them after death about the one who remained on earth; they had various scenarios for exaggerating or diminishing the other to God, or whoever, all done in broad joking terms.

NCM was tired and had a cold. She is just back from Arkansas where she broke up her parents’ home. Some of the furniture will go to Gaynell’s [her mother] apartment in Orleans; the rest was sold. John Buffalo helped his mother accomplish this. Today, NCM is in Boston getting her monthly checkup.

4-6-06

NCM received a couple of big FedEx boxes this morning, stuff from the family home in Atkins, Arkansas. In one of them was a photo of her parents when they were young; Mr. Davis in a suit and fedora and Gaynell in a dress with big hair. He had his arm around her and they looked like the tallest couple in the state. The photo has been touched up in color, which makes it all the more a period piece. NCM loves it.

NM needs a haircut. Hair is hanging over his ears and shirt collar. He is without vanity and is invariably a bit rumpled. This morning his collar and favorite vest were all tangled and I told him about it. He laughed and tugged at them ineffectually. NCM will make him get a haircut soon, no doubt. NCM always cuts his hair.

4-18-06

Dinner with the Mailers on Easter Sunday included Gaynell, NCM's son Matt, and his wife Salina, and their infant girl, Mattie James. NCM cooked a real southern meal: corn muffins, okra, beans, potatoes and her delicious chicken with peppers and potatoes. NM came down after I arrived; he was preoccupied with his final revisions to *The Castle and the Forest*. It was all delicious and we ate heartily.

7-6-06

NCM told me yesterday that Random House wants to publish her novel next summer, and so she intends to "stop lollygagging" and get to work. This is wonderful encouragement for her and could give them a financial shot in the arm, which the Mailers always will need with their multitudinous obligations.

7-12-06

NM just called to see if I wanted to play poker again tonight. I told him we were going to see the film *The Devil Wears Prada*, and couldn't make it. He was disappointed; he loves the game. But I can't lose another \$100 for a few days and we do want to see the movie, which NCM raved about. She feels it shows that there is still a lot of curiosity about the fashion industry and this augurs well for her novel-in-the-works, "Cheap Diamonds." She is working hard to finish bit by the end of this year.

8-5-06

When sitting alone with NCM the other day, she told me that she missed NYC and that all of her children and grandchildren are there. The expense of keeping two houses up is getting difficult. But she does love P-Town and would prefer to keep both homes. NM, on the other hand, has trouble breathing in NYC and would rather stay here. If the Mailers were not here, I suspect we would sell and move, perhaps.

8-14-06

The Mailer kids have hit P-Town: Kate, Betsy, Maggie, Steve and Danielle are here with their various spouses and kids and boyfriends. Danielle is having a show at a local gallery on the 18th. The Mailer family is very supportive. Last night Peter Alson [Barbara Wasserman's son] read at the DNA Gallery, and one-third of the audience were family and friends, including almost all the above, plus Barbara and Norman's cousin Sam Radin and his wife, Pam. Peter was witty and cool and got some laughs. It is a fine memoir.

We played poker at NM's from around 3:45 until six. Peter, as usual, cleaned us out. I lost \$60 and NM lost \$40. Jim Baker was visiting and staying with the Mailers and he played like a kamikaze, as Peter put it. I think he lost at least \$100. NM called today to tell me about a game tonight at nine, and I called some friends to tell them. But I'm sitting this one out. NCM warned me not to become NM's "poker pimp."

8-28-05

Colum McCann [novelist] was thrilled to meet the Mailers, and was awed by the beauty of NCM. I took him up to the third floor, which is usually off limits, except to family and a few others. The three of them exchanged compliments about their books and NM told him how he tried to compliment Saul Bellow on *Humboldt's Gift* when he ran into him in Chicago in 1975. [Bob Cromie was interviewing them, seriatim, on his radio program, and raved about Bellow's new novel. When NM bumped into Bellow, who was succeeding him on the show, he said to the immaculately dressed Bellow ("he looked like an Italian count"), "Well, Saul, I hear you've written a terrific novel." Bellow answered, "Well Norman, Why not?"

9-27-08

NCM has finished, as of yesterday, a first draft of her novel. NM is very pleased that she has submitted it to Random House, more or less on schedule. Her work ethic this summer has been impressive. She disappeared every day after breakfast to write. Her first drafts are quite polished so there should not be that much editing to do.

10-01-06

We had a fine lunch at the Wellfleet bookstore and seafood restaurant—NM and Hans Janitschek [family friend], Donna and me. Hans asked NM if he would ever write a memoir. NM said no, but if he did, it would be from the point of view of his six wives, with NCM's the longest and most important. He is always thinking about narrative form and—especially—point of view. What a wonderful book it would make! I must pursue this with him. Perhaps he could dictate it.

12-10-06

NCM called the other morning, the 8th, I believe, about the copies of NM's books in the second floor bookcase, about 150–200 books. She said that an inscribed copy of *Naked* was missing and she was worried. It may have been one of those returned to the Mailers from Texas. I told her that I'd come over and inventory the books and then recommended that she buy a locking glass-front bookcase. I went over on the 9th and spent a couple of hours writing down the books and the inscriptions. NM has inscribed copies of most of his books to NCM, a treasury of moving inscriptions.

11-18-06

NCM told Donna and me on the 16th when we were chatting in our living room: "Norman can't open the door with his key at 142 Columbia Heights. It requires a jiggle and he can't do it." NCM talked again about the idea of moving to a place in Connecticut where they could be close to all the kids and grandkids, an hour or two from NYC. But she doesn't know if this will ever happen. NM told her to visit NYC more, but she says she can't leave him alone here for extended periods. We all sighed. I told NCM that I thought NM was "the most impetuous person I have ever known, and one of the most diligent, hard-working." She didn't disagree.

12-29-06

The first copies of *The Castle in the Forest* arrived and NM inscribed one to Donna and me. He also signed some magazines and other books, including a couple associated with *Marilyn*. He said that it is probably the book that most Americans know him by most, and the first one of his that NCM had read. She got it for joining the Book-of-the-Month Club. When NM was visiting Fig Gwaltney [army buddy] in Arkansas, she called up and asked if she could come to the party that he was having for NM, as she was intrigued after reading *Marilyn*. Fig wasn't overjoyed about having this young woman join the party of older faculty members that he was throwing for NM. "He suspected something might come of the meeting of Barbara and me," NM said. "He was right," I said. This brought on a big laugh.

1-16-07

NCM emailed me that she and NM are thinking of putting the house in P-Town on the market in February 2008. A lot could take place between now and then, she noted. She is considering her own mother (who is in a nursing home in Orleans), her sons, daughter-in-law and grandchild living in Brooklyn, and the rest of the Mailer kids, most of whom she helped to raise in whole or in part. But NM's asthma is not getting any better, which argues for staying in P-Town. She is torn and anxious about this, wanting to be with NM but also missing her children and granddaughter, not to mention her stepchildren. The loss of signed books is also troubling her, and she has bought a large locking bookcase to store the valuable books now housed in an open bookcase on the second floor of 627 Commercial Street.

1-19-07

NCM flew to Boston to have her kidney problem examined, and is on her way home as I write this. NM told me that she is okay, but that one kidney is failing. No operation, however. The other one will pick up the slack.

2-4-07

NCM has emailed both Donna and me about her desire to move to NYC. She has found a place for her mother and now hopes to sell the big house here and perhaps rent an apartment so they can be here in the summer. NM has apparently acquiesced, but says he'd like an apartment closer to the center of town. When NCM gets her mind made up, she moves forward.

2-15-07

NM was very, very tired and panted and grunted as he climbed the three flights of steep stairs to his Brooklyn apartment. It was excruciating to watch him. But he was chipper the next morning around ten when he emerged stark naked from his bedroom as NCM and I were chatting over coffee. She told me later that he had walked out this way before the cleaning lady, and she made him put on a robe when the plumber was coming. Like Lear, he is beyond personal vanity.

NCM is moving her mother to a Brooklyn assisted living facility this spring. She is spending a lot of time there now. NM will be in P-Town, which he prefers, and they will both shuttle back and forth a bit. The fact that NCM's family, including three new babies, are in New York is the key factor. A secondary factor is the presence of some many friends there. NCM told me that she needs interaction and the love she gives and gets from family and friends. She also said she wanted to be closer to doctors—driving to Boston was getting difficult. She wants to put the P-Town house on the market this year and then perhaps buy a waterfront apartment where NM can stay. Several times she has used the phrase “rattling around that big house” in P-Town to describe how she feels about being away from New York.

2-22-07

I helped NCM load up the new bookcase with NM's leather-bound editions and about 25 inscribed to her. The inscriptions are lovely, very moving. NM signed about ten leather-bound copies, and inscribed a first of *Naked* that I had obtained for her. He wrote: “After 30 years, still my beloved.” Now all of the most valuable copies of their books are under lock and key. We included a couple of hers, her Dad's autobiography, and NM's copy of James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*, inscribed as follows: “To my most feared friend, to my most beloved enemy. Jim.” There are about a dozen more for him to sign or inscribe and then she will have a complete set, save for a first of *Deaths for the Ladies* and the 35-cent copy of “The White Negro,” both of which I am going to try and find for her.

4-20-07

NCM emailed me to say she was really enjoying being in NYC, and that Matt and Salina's daughter, Mattie, was going to be a model for GAP, the clothing company. She also said that David Ebershoff [NCM's editor] was very excited

that some of NM's love letters would be in the edition. She said she'd get them to me soon, perhaps with some of the erotica excised. NM was smitten by her, and his letters are passionate.

6-11-07

Thinking about how to divide up NM's life: NM giving up writing about himself and getting together with NCM is no coincidence. He reinvented himself again with her, and for the last time. During their 32 years (so far) together, she brought tremendous stability to his life. Her energy, charm, youth and flexibility—not to mention her great beauty—were all he could handle, and all he needed to move into the final phase. I'd divide his life into four major periods with two before 1965 (when he was 42), and two after. They are: 1) 1923–48: Brooklyn, Harvard, Army; 2) 48–65: fame, failure, rebound; 3) 65–79: maximum achievement, exposure, new fame; 4) 80–07: the biographical period, when NM wrote about Lee Harvey Oswald, Picasso, Jesus and Hitler. NM never wrote much about himself after he met NCM; by 1975, he said that by then that he was bored with himself.

6-28-07

NCM arrived at Wilkes University yesterday to do a reading from her new novel. We sent a car to pick her up in Brooklyn and she came with Carole Schneider of Random House, who also spoke. NCM's reading went beautifully and she was warmly received. She read the opening of the novel where Cherry arrives in NYC, lapsing easily and convincingly into the drawl of her protagonist. We didn't have much chance to talk until I drove her to her hotel. She was teary and worried about NM's health. It is now believed that NM has congestive heart disease, something NCM has long suspected. He was diagnosed as having asthma, but this was incorrect, it now seems.

NCM said that NM stated during the event with Günter Grass at the New York Public Library that this might be his last public appearance. Several of the Mailer kids were with him before the event, and Kate said they shouldn't be bringing him to the Library but to the hospital. Apparently, he has weakened considerably since I saw him last. The scheduled trips to Georgetown University, University of South Carolina and University of South Florida this fall will be cancelled unless something dramatic happens. NCM said she will make no long-range plans and intends to spend the summer in P-Town. "Day by day from now on," she said.

7-14-07

NCM came in while we were chatting and he told her, as he regularly does, how beautiful she is. It is true; she is rail thin but as gorgeous as any fashion model. She complained about her wrinkles, which aren't many. NM said, with a twinkle in his eye, "There's one good thing about wrinkles; they remind me of vaginas." His metaphor pool is rich, but half of them are sexual. NCM received the first copy of her novel, *Cheap Diamonds*, and we all cooed over it. It has a great cover shot of NCM when she was a model, with big dark eyes and red glossy lips, and dressed in bib overalls. Very sexy. She goes on a publicity tour in early August. The book could do very well, better than *Windchill Summer* even.

7-29-07

NM is up and down, weak and dispirited one day and feisty and grumpy the next. He took a sleeping pill on the evening of the 25th when he arrived back from Boston and was out of it the next morning. But on the 27th, he was much better when I stopped by in the morning. He wanted to talk about the book title for the edition of his letters I'm working on, and wanted to read over the manuscript. He said to NCM, "Okay, you can go know," which made us all laugh. "He's back," she said, "ordering everyone around, bullying us." NM joined in the laughter. NCM is remarkable in her good spirits and refusal to bicker with NM. She told me in an email that he would have to go to NYC in the fall so that he would be near a hospital, and she is right. But he does loathe the New York air.

8-01-07

Donna drove NCM to the airport this morning; she is off on her three-week promotional tour for *Cheap Diamonds*, starting in Cincinnati tomorrow. She will also go to D.C., NYC, and Atlanta, where Jim Lennon [Lennons' son] will take her to dinner. He did this for her last book, back in 2000. Then she goes to Chicago and the West Coast. She is excited about the tour and we are all hoping for a smash. I'm reading it now and it moves along at a lovely pace, all marshaled by the wonderfully beguiling voice of Cherry Marshall, the heroine. NM asked me for my frank opinion and I said that it was not quite as good as her first novel, *Windchill Summer*, but might do even bet-

ter because of the fashion stuff in it, which will appeal to women readers. Also, the 1970s NYC scene is sharply drawn.

10-6-07

NM can't swallow and they have put in a feeding tube to get nourishment into him. He is in a private room where the lights can be lowered and he can get some rest. He has a full-time private nurse. Thank God, he has good insurance. He got mad at NCM because she skipped a day visiting him so that she could visit her aged mother and get other things done. She is getting pretty worn down, but soldiers on bravely, rarely complaining.

On Friday night, NCM gave a reading at Barnes and Noble at 66th and Broadway. A big crowd of around 80 attended. She gave a bravura reading and answered about a dozen questions. It was a wonderful event, and nine of us went to a late dinner: NCM, me, John Buffalo, Joe Lennon [Lennons' son], his fiancée, Marika Beneventi, Dotson Rader, Rick Stratton [family friend] and a lady friend of Dotson's whose name I have forgotten. It was a jolly evening and the combination of NM's successful surgery and NCM's successful reading buoyed us up considerably.

11-14-07

I saw him on November 7th, about 32 hours before he died. I was there with Norris and Barbara Wasserman and Christina Pabst, and then John Buffalo arrived. I told NM that an excerpt from our new book [*On God: An Uncommon Conversation*] was the lead article in *Playboy*. He nodded and his eyes lit up a bit when I told him. Then NCM read him a chunk of it. NCM told him, "You were here before and you will be here again," and later that he was "the bravest man I've ever known." All of his children and many friends visited him in the hospital; some could not bear to come. NCM was there almost every day, missing only when she was doing a reading from her new novel, or seeing her mother in assisted living.

Norris was worn down to a fine point when NM died on November 10, 2007, but she was regal at NM's funeral in Provincetown, and at the memorial to him in the spring of 2008 at Carnegie Hall.

She died three years later on November 21, 2010. To the end, she was in good spirits and refrained from talking about her medical problems. She retained her poise, beauty and curiosity, and her capacity for work, producing a beautifully

written memoir, A Ticket to the Circus, published by Random House in 2010. Besides seeing her extended family regularly, she insisted on going out for meals with friends almost until her last week. She also returned to Provincetown every summer. I interviewed her seven times after NM's death, and she provided full, frank and nuanced descriptions of her life with him. She had a pilgrim soul, and we loved her.