

A TRIBUTE TO NORRIS CHURCH MAILER

DANIELLE MAILER

BEGINNINGS

Sitting across from my father, in a restaurant right by the sea, I waited. There would be silence between us I knew, as he anticipated the arrival of his whiskey sour. Sipping the drink, pleased with the concoction, he disappeared momentarily into thought, his bulky silhouette punched out against the pale backdrop of the ocean. It was the fall of 1975, and I had just started college and my father had insisted on making the seven-hour drive all the way up to Brunswick, Maine. I guessed the urgency of his visit had to do with a woman. In my nineteen years I had known many of his ladies; some he had married while others were just passing through. Listening then, as he nursed his second drink, his eyes bright, I sensed this was something big. And when he finally handed me a small Polaroid photo of her, I thought, not unkindly, “Oh boy Dad, here we go again.”

Back in Arkansas she had been Barbara Norris, but with the signing of a top-modeling agency in New York City, she was to take on the name of Norris Church. My sixteen-year-old sister “Betsy” had already met her and was charmed. Now that I was home from college it was my turn. “She’s really nice,” she had insisted. But I was dubious. I wearily conjured up the photo still clear in my memory: a redhead with a leopard-print bikini posed in front of a waterfall, impossibly young. I would try, I promised myself to accept her, but I doubted I had any room left, to embrace one more of my father’s women.

They arrived at my mother’s upper Westside apartment, a curious pair: a short and tall combo that seemed to fit. She was modest and funny, long-

limbed and very pretty, a contrast to his stocky, brooding demeanor. Her shiny cap of copper-colored hair reminded me of pennies, a lucky penny I thought. She was so down to earth, so utterly without affect that in spite of my concerns, I felt myself wanting to offer a welcome.

Swept up with the sense of goodwill and confidence, I ventured to tell a story. Showing off a bit, and calling upon my flair for exaggerating, I was enjoying the amused laughter coming from my audience, until my father interrupted. "For God Sakes, Danielle," he said irritably, "Don't be like your Grandmother, May Morales, 'The Department of Misinformation.'" My penchant for exaggeration always set him on edge. I was embarrassed and hurt and feeling a tightening in my throat. I retreated to the kitchen with the excuse of bringing back drinks.

I allowed the tears to come, pouring his Bourbon on the rocks through blurry eyes carefully counting out cubes, not wanting to risk yet another reprimand. I wished they would leave. Then I felt her hand tentatively rest on my shoulder; her eyes, a lovely shade of gold, spoke of kindness. Wordlessly, she poured us both a glass of milk giving me time to collect myself. In an attempt to offer solidarity, she offered bits and pieces of her own life story: a messy divorce, her little boy whom she would bring east as soon as she was settled, a good art teaching post she had left behind.

And then my father's voice gravely and distinct. "Honey," he called, "Where's my drink?" We giggled conspiratorially, realizing that we had momentarily forgotten him. As he engulfed me in a bear hug, contrite and wanting to make things right, I caught her eye. She was a friend now, I felt certain. And in that moment, I knew what I could not yet articulate but merely intuited—that this woman, who had so captured my father's heart (who would later capture all of ours), was here to stay.