

REMEMBERING NORRIS

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I MET NORRIS WHEN I WAS ABOUT FOUR YEARS OLD, at my grandmother's house in Brooklyn Heights, and I'll always remember the feeling of ease and fun and friendliness that she immediately projected. Even though I was too young to understand what divorce meant, it was easy to embrace her and her son Matthew, who was my age, as part of my family. I have many warm memories of those early days when Norris had just moved to Brooklyn, and the nights when she would read to me and Matthew, or recite Greek myths from memory, enchanting us with stories about Odysseus and Zeus. I think that her versions may have been slightly different from the originals, but they are the ones that I remember.

My childhood visits to see my father in Brooklyn were full of fun and adventure with Norris. She often took me and Matthew to Soho, and Pearl Paint, which was just down the block from her painting studio off Canal Street. Then we would all go to our favorite coffee shop for a burger, or make a special trip to see the knights in armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It seemed we were always planning and doing something exciting.

Norris was an art teacher before meeting my father, and had all kinds of wonderful supplies and equipment that she would present as entertainment. She used to set up her miniature kiln on the kitchen counter in Brooklyn Heights, and we would all make enameled plates and jewel-like objects out of powdered glass. She showed us how to set up a still life when we were five or six, and the painting I made of a green apple is in my studio to this day. Matthew and I became such a pair in our creative endeavors that she lovingly referred to us as "MaggieMathew." Later, when John Buffalo was born, Matthew and I jumped up and down with joy for half an hour in our excitement over having a little brother. I hope that Norris knew how thrilled we were.

After John was born, Norris still managed to lavish attention and support our desire to make art, and would generously lend me her easel and art supplies during summers in Provincetown. I still have the oil set she gave me one Christmas, with her handwritten explanation of how to use colors, and which pigments were right for skin tone, or foliage, or sky. She always encouraged my love of painting, and came to every show she could manage, through college and on into my adult life as an artist.

During the summers, when all nine siblings would congregate in Provincetown, Norris gave us a feeling of home and summer camp at the same time. She was witty and lighthearted, and had a way of making everything seem fun, even if it weren't. She used to put the Andrews Sisters on the record player in the evening, and then we knew it was time to get ready for dinner. Making dinner was like running a small restaurant, with a minimum of ten guests (the children, plus Dad and Norris), and sometimes as many as thirty of us, especially as the family started to expand with spouses and grandchildren. Trips to the market were major events, and Norris would effortlessly orchestrate teams of siblings to help with the many trips back and forth from the car to the house, carrying endless paper bags, or unpacking them in the proper order in the kitchen. If anyone complained, she had a way of making light of the situation until you remembered that you were having fun.

She was such a trooper, finding ways to entertain seven stepchildren and two of her own during those summers in Maine and Provincetown. We used to have great times celebrating all the birthdays that happened to fall during the summer months, with Norris and Danielle making elaborate drawings in icing on the birthday cakes, and all of us gathering at an extremely long table. Then Norris would start a round of Happy Birthday, and end with her memorable, "And Many More . . ." in a deep voice that sounded comical coming from her.

Now that I am a mother I have even more respect and gratitude for Norris and her outstanding generosity. I know she cared about us and went out of her way to connect to every one of the Mailer clan. The fact that she was able to keep her equanimity and sense of humor with seven stepchildren and five ex-wives in orbit seems amazing to me in retrospect.

Not only did she keep her balance, but Norris had real projects going at all times, whether it was a solo painting show, a novel, or a book tour, and her stamina was incredible. The idea of beginning to write while being mar-

ried to my father would be creative folly for many, but Norris had an effortless confidence that saved her from falling into the trap of artistic comparison. She had a clear and stable sense of her own abilities, and this must have allowed her to stay highly productive, even throughout an illness that could squash the healthiest of creative energies.

In fact, for the duration of Norris's bout with cancer, which lasted over a sixth of her life, there were many times when it was hard to believe that she was navigating such treacherous terrain. Her indomitable spirit and optimistic attitude made it almost possible to forget the illness. And that is how she walked through life. I never heard her complain about physical pain, or anything for that matter. She was buoyant.

I am lucky to have had Norris in my life. She left all of us with her amazing courage and ability to embrace life to the fullest and, most importantly, a sense of unity as a family. It's still hard to believe that she is gone, and I offer these words in tribute to a brave and beautiful woman who died too young.