

A SUMMER TO REMEMBER

MICHAEL MAILER

I REMEMBER THE SUMMER NORRIS WAS INTRODUCED TO THE FAMILY. It was the year of 1976 and as usual we were congregating en masse up at Fortune Rock, the house my dad rented every Summer in Mount Desert, Maine. August was always a special month in the Mailer family as it was the only extended period of time where we lived under the same roof. They were good times and, despite our occasional mini flare-ups, we cohered well under the direction of our paterfamilias.

However, this particular Summer we had new blood introduced into the family unit: Barbara Norris. I had met my future stepmother the winter before up in Provincetown. She was introduced to Stephen and me over a dinner at the restaurant *Ciro's* as my dad's secretary's best friend. Even at the naïve age of ten I knew somehow the story lacked the ring of credibility, but I was immediately charmed by her and did my best to show her the very best of my limited table manners by using a fork and knife and occasionally wiping the spaghetti sauce off of my chin.

But it wasn't till the following August that I got to know Norris well. Into the maelstrom of seven children she walked. I suppose we were something like the Von Trap family without the singing nanny and the fancy ironed uniforms. In fact, we were all a little rag tag, particularly the younger ones, including myself, and I vaguely recall going a few weeks the Summer before without brushing my teeth.

Looking back, becoming a "mother" to eight was no easy task but she made it seem effortless. Indeed it was as if she possessed some psychic compass that gave her an uncanny direction to find the point of interest that broke the ice for each and everyone of us. For me, she won me over in a leg-wrestling contest. It was something I had never seen before or since. It involved lining up side by side, hip to hip, on the floor at opposite ends to each

other. On the count of three, the two competitors would raise their right leg up to vertical position, hook the other, and try to push your opponent over onto his neck.

I was no match for the long-legged Arkansas girl, who had clearly honed her craft in the hard scrabbled background of the Ozarks. Over and over again I would be punished for my limp-leggedness and over and over again I would re-challenge trying to regain some shred of my incipient manhood but to no avail; I finally accepted defeat. However, I was infinitely charmed at having a stepmother who would come up with such fantastic games of strength—clearly a winning strategy for a preteen boy.

Norris's fun of games and gameness didn't end there. She would bravely line up for just about every physical challenge thrown her way by my dad. Whether it was rock climbing, jumping off of high decks, or doing all day climbs up Mt. Katahdin, she lead by example and somehow made a scary, sometimes impossible endeavor seem manageable.

Her spirit was indefatigable and not only did it extended her life in her battle against cancer far beyond what most normal mortals would have sustained, it kept the family together as well. She was our matrix. If pop was the Sun, she was the connective stream of astrological glue that kept the family orbiting in a consistent pattern. Losing dad was hard but losing Norris was in many ways more difficult. I will forever miss her.