

THE WAY WE WERE

S U S A N M A I L E R

THE FIRST TIME I SAW NORRIS was at Barbara and Al Wasserman's place on Bleecker St. She was wearing a white wool dress, high heels and had just had her long hair cut and styled, as part of her rite of passage into Wilhemina's model agency. Every now and then she would turn to the window to see her reflection not all sure she approved of the outcome. That evening, Dad's seven kids had gathered to meet his new girlfriend. Maggie, then the youngest, was four and I, the oldest, was twenty-six, the same age as Norris.

A few weeks later we went to Bloomingdale's to get an outfit for one of those cocktail parties Dad thought were sensational and I used to dread. After two hours we left. I was exhausted and empty handed; Norris was completely satisfied with a black velvet jumpsuit. We decided to see *Saturday Night Fever* and on the way she mentioned she was confused because Dad wanted her to succeed as a model but wasn't at all pleased with the idea of her traveling to Europe for photo shoots. "What would you do Sue?" she asked in a conspiratorial tone that invited us to be friends. "I wouldn't marry someone like Dad," I answered. To which she said in her still southern flavor, "Oh, Sue don't be so mean." We looked at each other, a spark of mutual acknowledgment in our eyes, and smiled. The ice had broken.

Norris wasn't only beautiful, my father's girlfriend, and my age to boot: the perfect recipe for a classic stepmother-stepdaughter saga. She was also lonely and vulnerable and seemed eager to join our family, even if it meant dealing with seven stepchildren of all ages, and one of her own. She did it with elegance and not without pain, weaving her own patterns into our early family tapestry.

Recently, Mike Lennon found a note. It was taped under Dad's desk, which my husband had used daily while we lived in Brooklyn Heights and

which was later to be Norris's worktable. At my request, Dad had left it to me. One evening while my husband, Norris and I were sipping a glass of white wine with a spot of cassis at the Brooklyn apartment, I reminded her of Dad's gift. With time, that evening and our conversation were forgotten. Or so I thought. But Norris, in spite of her illness and growing frailty, had left a message: "Sue and Marco's desk with chair." This simple handwritten note taped under our shared desk reminded me of all the meaningful gestures she had made in the course of our thirty-five-year friendship.

It's in the realm of the uncanny when your same age stepmother and friend dies. I can imagine her "rage against the dying of the light," her frustration at all she would miss: her grandchildren, her kids, her friends, the apartment, her writing, shopping, dressing up for balls and dinners. We never lived close by but it didn't prevent us from being close, having rituals and developing a piece of life in common. When she died, I thought she had slipped away from my life, to be remembered as a loved but absent one. But I was wrong, for I am often aware of her presence at odd moments, in subways, in dreams, or in a note left under our writing table.