

A PERFECT DAY

LEGS MCNEIL

LAST SUMMER NORRIS AND I WERE SHOPPING in an upscale men's store along Provincetown's Commercial Street.

Norris was shopping for her sons.

I was shopping for myself.

Norris was appalled in my taste for loud Hawaiian shirts, so she suggested a more moderate approach.

"I think you'd look nice in this." Norris pulled a hanger from the rack with a rather handsome but bland shirt on it, and held it up to me.

"Naaah," I declined, "I don't think so Norris, I'd look too gay in that . . ."

"SHHHHH!" she hushed me, "*Legs you can't say that!*"

"What?"

"That it looks too gay," Norris frowned, "You might offend the salesman . . ."

She looked over her shoulder to see if he had heard me.

"Oh Norris, *he knows* what I mean," I explained.

"I don't know," Norris said, still frowning. She was very skinny from the cancer, but still amazingly beautiful; delicate, but graceful and oozing class.

"Not *that* gay, the *other* gay," I continued, feeling like I was trapped inside an episode of *South Park*.

"You know, not like *faggot*-gay," I searched for the words, "but like *I'd-feel-like-a-wuss-in-that-shirt*-gay."

Norris stared at me, and then graciously changed the subject.

"Back in the seventies," Norris giggled, whispering conspiratorially, "did you really pour Coke-a-Cola on your Captain Crunch breakfast cereal in the mornings?"

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“Well, sorta,” I lied, not wanting to shatter the myth, but breakfast cereal was a bit of a luxury in the East Village in those days—and as anyone with a killer hangover knows, only a nice cold Coke can dissolve the Styrofoam that has become your mouth and throat.

“Hold the Captain Crunch; pour in the ice-cold Coke . . .”

Now I changed the subject.

“You know Norris,” I started, “You really gave the Organization some class. I mean Norman was great and everything, but *the guys he hung out with!*”

Norris laughed.

“I mean, there was me and Jeffrey Michelson, Harold Conrad and Jose Torres, Tom Piazza and Rudy, I could go on and on—I mean, we were the biggest collection of weasels and con-men you’d ever want to meet. And you know—**YOU** made it seem less dreadful for us to be seen in public with Norman . . .”

“Oh, I liked all you guys,” Norris remembered. “We had a lot of fun, didn’t we?”

“We sure as hell did,” I answered, remembering Norman’s grave, which I had visited earlier in the week. Ann Wood had driven me there, and as we smoked a joint and I quietly thanked Norman for inviting me into the chaotic fun that was his life and said a prayer, I was shocked to see that there was a place in the grave for Norris.

I don’t know why I was so shocked to see Norris’s name and date of birth on the granite—but her date of death sat there, blank—just waiting to be filled in.

Shit.

I knew the clock was ticking for Norris, and that she would be joining him way to soon.

I dismissed the thought, and instead took Norris to some art store along the pier and bought her some rocks that she needed for a jewelry project. They were polished stones, very cheap and, I thought, quite inconsequential.

Indeed, except for the way Norris clutched the rocks, bouncing them in the frail palm of her hand, inspecting them as if they were precious gem stones.

“Look at this one,” Norris held up a brown-speckled stone, “Isn’t it *beautiful?*”

It was, I agreed.

Norris could always see the beauty in the everyday stuff that surrounds us.

A minute ago, it was just a fucking shiny rock, now it was something to be treasured. It reminded me of Spalding Grey's *Swimming To Cambodia*, when he's talking about not being able to leave Thailand until he's had a perfect moment—and then I realized *we are having a perfect moment!*

I paid for the rocks, which Norris kept thanking me for, as we drove over to her old house that was now the Norman Mailer Writer's Center, for a reading of a class of playwrights.

The playwrights seemed like a bunch of losers who were pretending to be writers, and I thought their stuff sucked dead monkey balls, but after each one read—Norris offered kind words of praise and encouragement.

"Geez, is she vying for Sainthood?" I thought to myself, believing that Norris could be *too nice*. If I could bottle her essence and sell it, I'd make a million bucks. Norris was *that* special; she could make time stop for brief moments, which allowed me to suck in the beauty that always seemed to surround her.

After the writer's charade, I followed her through the house as she picked through trinkets and artwork she wanted to bring back to New York.

We were in her and Norman's bedroom when I asked, "Hey Norris, what's your favorite book by Norman?"

Without missing a beat, she answered, "*Ancient Evenings* . . ."

"Really?"

I always believed that *The Armies of the Night*, *The Fight*, and *The Executioner's Song* were Norman's best works.

"Did you ever read it?" Norris asked.

"Uh, no," I said sheepishly, "I hate fiction . . ."

"Oh but Legs, you'd love it," Norris gushed, "It's so rich and textured, and there's even some dirty parts in there for you . . ."

"Am I that obvious?" I thought.

Later we found ourselves in the basement of the house, where John Bufalo and some hot chick from the Writer's Center had joined us. Norris was telling them the story of me in the clothing store, and me saying the shirt was too gay, and everyone was laughing—and I really wished it hadn't been twenty years since I was last with Norris.

As I was driving her home, there was a long moment of silence, so I asked, "Do you ever talk to Norman?"

"Yeah, sometimes I do," Norris blushed. "Sometimes I really do . . ."

“What do you say?” I asked, thinking, and hoping, she might have all the answers to the questions about where we go after we die.

Norris just turned to me and smiled.

Instead she said with that Norris Mailer charm; genuine and relaxed, “It really was a perfect day, wasn’t it?”