

NORRIS MAILER

D O T S O N R A D E R

IN AUGUST, 1975, NORMAN MAILER PHONED from out of town and asked me to go to his Brooklyn apartment and meet Barbara Davis, a swell girl he had met a few months before in Arkansas. He said she didn't know New York from a rat's ass, didn't know anybody in town, so would I look after her while he was away? Here we go again, I thought, Norman got himself another bimbo.

"Is she your new girlfriend?" I asked. I was under the impression that Carol Stevens was still his official girlfriend, more or less.

"Stop by and meet her," he laughed. "You two can talk about Jesus."

I did, and we did.

Barbara (Norris) was from the Bible Belt, as am I, and she was haunted by Jesus all her life. From the first day we met in 1975, until our last conversation a few days before she slipped away to Heaven, we talked about Jesus and how much He had sometimes disappointed us, and we Him, and what He was really like and what joy we would have when we finally met Him in the Sweet Forever when they rang the golden bells for us. We wanted to believe that we would hear the peal of those glorious bells calling us to Heaven someday, even if everything we knew told us it probably wasn't true. We were two believers held hostage by doubt, and that never changed.

I mentioned to her that my father was a Fundamentalist evangelist, more Southern Baptist than anything else. I bragged that we had Gospel preachers in my family going back to The Great Awakening in the 1730s.

"My ancestors came over here in the early 1700s, running from the law," Norris countered, unimpressed. "I was raised a *Free Will* Baptist. Southern Baptists say that once you're saved, you're *always* saved. But that isn't true if you're a Free Will Baptist. If you're a Free Will Baptist and you backslide and sin after you get saved, you might still go to Hell."

Most Fundamentalist Christians believe in “eternal security”—once “born again” as a child of God, you are in the club for good. That is not what Norris was taught. This continuing doubt about the permanence of her salvation really bothered Norris for a long time. She took this stuff seriously. She believed in God. So did Norman. Their shared concern about what Divinity has in store for us when our number is called was one of the interests that bound them together.

“Hell wins very large in the religion I grew up in,” Norris said. “Every word of the Bible is true, that’s what I was taught, and you got to believe it or you’ll go to Hell for sure.” She smiled at the absurdity of it while half-believing it might be true. In time she would give up on the idea of Hell, and the rest of the Fundamentalist claptrap, and cling only to the promise of an eternal soul and the incomparable grace and love of Jesus. Years later, in his 1997 novel *The Gospel According to the Son*, the Jesus whom Norman describes was *her* Jesus. She still believed in Him, all the way to the end.

In my memory, on that warm August afternoon in Brooklyn Heights in 1975, a soft breeze was coming through the open terrace door and gently ruffling the silky flowered summer dress that Norris wore when I first beheld her in the place that would soon be home to her. I was staggered by her beauty, and utterly captured by the sweetness of her soul. She was, and still is, perfection to me—bright, loving, beautiful, generous, kind—and no one’s fool. On meeting her I immediately thought what everyone who came to know her believed—she could have any man in the world she wanted, and yet she chose Norman. She was no gold digger, God knows. She was the prize.

“I didn’t know a lot about Norman when I met him,” she said, “I knew he was a famous writer and had been married a bunch of times, and had a bunch of kids, and had been in World War Two with Francis Gwaltney (her former English teacher), who introduced us. With Norman, the thing that impresses me is his mind. I’ve never run across a mind with a motor like his. He’s fascinating and surprising, like he’s in his own new world every day. He doesn’t see things the way other people do. He’s like a little boy. He sees with new eyes.”

So did she, and in time Norman would come to see the world anew through Norris’s eyes, and be fascinated and surprised by how much and how clearly they saw. He would be changed by what he saw through her eyes, changed, mellowed, made more loving and wiser. The truth is, she changed Norman far more than he did her, and it was all to the good. She became a

wonderful mom to Norman's kids and she brought him two adored sons, Matt and John. She made working possible for him. She never left him, although he gave her the cruelest reason to leave. She loved Norman. She was incapable of betrayal. She kept her promises. It was as simple as that.

During the four hours or so of my first visit to Norris in Brooklyn, we ended the day by singing hymns together: *In the Garden, Just as I Am, What a Friend We Have in Jesus*.

Thirty-five years later, as we concluded the final phone conversation that we had at the close of her life, after we had spoken of our unbroken friendship and love, as we bid our final good-byes, we did what we had initially done decades earlier when we were both young and our friendship was born and the world seemed so unbelievably pretty and new and happy—we sang a hymn together:

*Can't you hear the bells now ringing?
 Can't you hear the angels singing?
 'tis a glory hallelujah jubilee.
 In that far off sweet forever,
 just beyond the shining river,
 they ring the golden bells
 for you and me.*

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