

NORRIS REMINISCENCE

S A M R A D I N

WHEN I FIRST SAW HER, SHE WAS A TALL, BEAUTIFUL REDHEAD, about my age, across a crowded room. I walked over to introduce myself—and then I remembered: this gorgeous person was never going to go out with me. We were, after all, at a wedding—and it was hers. Barbara Norris was marrying Norman Mailer, my cousin, who was almost thirty years older than I.

She was Barbara then, but by the time we next were in a crowded room she had made the transition to Norris. A glamorous personality and a great beauty, for those who knew her, Norris still retained the spirit that was Barbara. Down to earth and sincere, she was possessed of a unique intellect, talents for painting, acting and writing—and all with a lively wit.

I came to know Norris well over many fine dinners with Norman and Norris. I remember a celebratory dinner in Austin after the University of Texas acquired Norman's papers. They were both asked to say a few words to the fifty guests. Norman told them that he was delighted to have his papers in Texas, a big state. Norris stood at her table, and looked around the room measuring the guests. She smiled and in her best velvet voice said, "Being from Arkansas, it's wonderful to be in a place where I can say 'y'all'." She brought the house down.

After Norman's death in 2007, we began another phase of our relationship, as co-executors of Norman's estate. Norris looked to me for advice and support in business affairs and legal matters. And I looked to her as an advisor because her instincts were so right and her thinking so perceptive.

Norris had a gift for making her views known in ways that were often subtle. If I had to send an email to someone about estate matters, I would first send it to her in draft. One day Norris called me to discuss such an email. She began by saying that she agreed with me about how we should deal with the issue at hand. Then she said, "But Sam, you can't send that email. It's too

cold. They'll misunderstand and get upset." She explained that the email was too lawyerly and curt. To be effective, it had to be warmer and more conversational so that the recipient would consider our position. Of course, she was right and I rewrote it. In one minute, she taught me to hear my own voice with a subtler ear.

After Norman's death, Norris moved from Provincetown to Brooklyn, where she flourished despite her illness. She was a true hero in a time when "heroism" has been reduced to a mere buzzword. She tried to ignore her challenging health and to enjoy life. She loved to be with her children and grandchildren, to spend time with interesting friends, and to write. It was in New York that she wrote her memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, perhaps her finest book.

Despite her illness, I think Norris was never happier than in those last years in New York. At last she could focus on herself, her interests and her purposes. As for me, we now were contemporaries, not just friends and colleagues. I was lucky to have been able to spend so much time with her. I miss her calls and her laughter. I always will.