

NORRIS, MY FRIEND

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I KNEW HER ONLY SLIGHTLY THE EVENING I BUMPED INTO HER in the dance bar at the Atlantic House in Provincetown in 2002. She looked simultaneously out of place and as if she owned the joint. Gay guys huddled near her, laughing, drinking, hanging on her every soft word. She held a glass of wine—something rare for one to drink in a room that lent itself more to over-priced plastic cups of hard liquor.

I meandered over to where she was holding court and smiled. She smiled back and sort of tipped her wine in my direction. That was my chance to crash her little party. I don't remember what the occasion was; likely an impromptu gathering after an art opening or the like, but she had come to the A-House (as we in Provincetown call it) with the man who hung wallpaper in her and her husband, Norman Mailer's, house. She and her handyman had become friends. That's the way it is here in Ptown; it doesn't matter what you do it's who you are as a person.

"Nice to see you again," she said. "Do you know John?"

I did. He happened to be my downstairs neighbor.

"I'm surprised to see you here," I said to her.

"Really? I love a good dance club," Norris Church Mailer said to me, with a devilish wink. She knew she was in safe harbor among the gay boys gyrating all around her in this bar and indeed in this town that she and her husband now wore on their personas, after decades of New York City glamour, like a comfortable old glove. I first understood that evening that Norman and Norris, in their own distinct ways, had come to Provincetown because it was home and it was *the* place for Norman to settle into his twilight and both of them live life to a sort of hum-drum hilt.

Everyone knows about her husband, Norman Mailer. What more can be said? Well, perhaps one thing: Norris was the love of his life, and he was hers.

But Barbara Jean Davis Norris Church Mailer still lingers as a bit of a puzzle to most people who encountered her. Not that she ever hid behind her husband—surely not! She was her own woman, a complete woman. However, she wore mystery like most people wear clothing. She had a flintiness about her; shocking beauty, sly wit, bawdy-perfect comedic timing, and an ability to wrangle a tear from you with a story about her meager beginnings without stooping to the maudlin or manipulative. No one ever quite understood where that ability sprang from—hence the mystery of her. Norris could relate a tale with unadulterated style, which is copiously evident in her writings, two finely honed novels and a memoir of staggering honesty.

As mother to two boys, Matthew and John Buffalo, and stepmother to Norman's seven other children, she had to discover "middle-age responsibility" if you will, quickly. That in itself is no easy deed for a young woman of twenty-six to do, which is how old she was when Norman and she first met. There they were; the Famous Writer and the Art Teacher from Atkins, Arkansas. Arguably, theirs was not an uncomplicated mix. Norris did it, though, and she did it well. She found the proper balance of being "mother" at such a young age to his kids, two of whom were nearly her age, by taking the odd path: she became a friend to them, which spawned respect. The prevailing notion one retains when reflecting on Norris is that she did "friendship" better than most. When she decided that you were her confidant, she treated you like treasure.

It must be noted that her last years were not easy ones. She'd been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer around the turn of this new century and fought it intensely, yet privately, until November 21, 2010. A decade of struggle, but not one moment of self-pity. Those close to her, of which I became one in 2003, witnessed the tough days and helped appropriately. We also played to her wishes that pity not be a viable option. Norris had little patience with self-indulgence when it came to vanity—I do not mean the vanity of beauty because she was indeed beautiful, knew it, and used it to her benefit when necessary. However, the vanity of neediness, of all consuming self-importance, no, that was not Norris.

Some years later when our relationship had deepened, I found myself with nine very loving pseudo-siblings. The days and years had mixed the sands of us all rather as the tide does on the beach. Norris and I would often sit in the evening and look out the window at the expansive flats in front of the Provincetown house and talk.

"It's the blue hour," she'd say.

"I never get tired of this," was usually my response.

"I will always be here, I think. Even when I'm not anymore."

We'd watch the sun wane and the blue cultivate, and then fade to green-black against a slate ocean that had no limits.

But people do have limits.

Norris Mailer died some years later, after Norman, after some fun of feeling "Like a school girl again," as she wrote to me in an email. "I can do what I want, sleep when I want, eat what I crave and write when the work takes me over." She could and she did. She had loved her husband and their life deeply, but she also relished in the relief that comes after a loss of a period living with someone. She flourished in her last years and she was bountiful for a woman plagued. Moreover, her inner bounty she spread wildly thin to those of use who needed it. Her elegance was like sugar from a packet; she sprinkled it about and we were all the better for it.

When I left the apartment in New York the day after she died, I recall sitting on the train feeling particularly lonely. An hour later, now well outside of the city, my less expensive Northeast Express had to stop for ten minutes to let the higher priced Acela pass—perhaps I should have paid the twenty extra bucks?

I went out to the platform to get some air and stood next to the large African American conductor of my car of the train.

"Good visit to the city for you," he asked.

"My sister died," I said. "But not really my sister."

"Did she tell you what was what, and how to behave in life?"

"Yes, sir, she did."

"Then you have lost family."

The man then reached over and shook my hand and said the train was about to head out again.

"We gotta go. The other train has passed. What was her name? Your sister-friend?"

"Barbara Jean Davis Norris Church Mailer." I said, using her full name because I missed her terribly and I had no edit for my wounded tongue.

"That sounds like a hell of a woman. Wait . . . Mailer? Is that the lady in the *New York Times* today? One of Norman Mailer's wives, right?"

"No," I said. "Norman's wife. Norris was his wife for thirty years. And she was my friend."

“So I’m right,” he said.

“Yes, you’re right. But she was more than just number six.”

I got back on the train heading North. Norris was there, traveling with me; sometimes one can feel a presence as palpably as the rumblings of iron wheels against steel rails. We were aiming for Provincetown, back to look out at the beach again. Both of us were going home.