

MELLY AND SCARLETT

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IT WAS A BOAST I HAD MADE TO COUNTLESS INTERVIEW SUBJECTS in my twenty-five years as an entertainment scribe, but Norris was the first and only one to ever challenge me on it. We met in 2000 when I interviewed her for *People* Magazine about her first novel, *Windchill Summer*, a yarn about a beautiful, plucky, Southern gal much like herself.

Sitting in their Provincetown living room, surrounded by Norris's paintings and Norman's tomes, I tried to think up an intriguing icebreaker. Though born and bred in the great white north of Canada, I knew all about feisty Southern girls.

"You know," I bragged, as she handed me a sweet tea, "when I was thirteen I memorized all four hours of *Gone with the Wind* . . ."

She was immediately fascinated. She wanted to know, did I still remember any of it? *Oh, sure*, I told her. Gimme a scene, any scene, and I can do it.

We laughed at my bravado and went on with our interview, zigzagging our way through her childhood, her love life, her dreams. Three hours later when I packed up my tape recorder, I assumed that my GWTW reference was long forgotten.

"I thought of what scene I want you to do!" she piped up. "My first choice was the 'God is my witness' bit . . . but that's too easy." She really wanted to test me, so had settled on the scene when Scarlett meets Melanie at the barbecue at Twelve Oaks. And fiddle-dee-dee if that wasn't one of my faves.

"Melanie Hamilton," I began, "what a surprissssse to run into *you* here . . .!"

I intended to take on both parts—wimpy Ashley, too, natch. But in jumped Norris, on cue, her drawl doubling in size.

"Aah hope I shall stay looong enough for us to become real friennnds, Scarrrrrrlett. Aahh do soooo want us to be!"

She had upped the ante! In that moment our friendship—and nicknames—were born. For a decade, she was Miss Melly and I was Miss Scarlett—two unlikely sisters, together roaming the streets of New York among the carpetbagger Yankees. Though I continuously argued with her that we should switch roles.

“You’re the beauty and you have the tiny waist,” I insisted, as we sat on her Brooklyn Heights balcony, staring at Lady Liberty and sipping kirs.

“But I’ll go before you,” she always said. That was something I never wanted to talk about. She had been dealing with cancer since the day I had met her and finally, the day came too soon when I had to admit she was right.

Thirty minutes before she moved on to join the love-of-her-life, I squeezed her hand and we said goodbye in the best way we knew how, the same way we had said hello—in GWTW-speak. But we didn’t act out Melanie’s somber farewell scene . . . that was “too obvious,” I told her. Instead, I chose a triumphant send-off and Norris’s first choice back in P-town. It had been a tough day; we needed an “easy” one.

“GOD IS MY WITNESS,” I raised my fist, heavenward, “. . . as God is my witness, they’re *not going to lick me* . . .”

I could see a little smile through her labored breaths. She moved her lips; she knew what came next. And she was right on cue.