

A FLOPPY HAT AND A BENCH

JOHN WILEY

I LOOKED UP AS A STUNNING AUBURN-HAIRED LADY walked into Gay's beauty Shop . . . the gossip ceased. All eyes gazed in the direction of Barbara, Gay's daughter, as she asked her mother the difference between baking soda and baking powder. Her mother explained that Barbara was learning to bake cookies from scratch. The ladies laughed, explained the difference, and the young lady returned to the kitchen. The gossip resumed with "she is so beautiful—she should be a model." Consequently, all of these ladies lived to see their statement validated as she worked as a runway model and played roles in a popular daytime soap. Years later, I was not privy to the "inner circle gossip" . . . as everything on the street was considered second-hand information. However, the little old blue-hairs usually had their levels of accuracy confirmed before it hit the street. Yes, that lovely young lady is seeing that Norman Mailer man and she has moved to New York. "There was drama . . . and fear for her life." Yet, history demonstrates that the soft spoken little girl from Atkins managed to provide new direction for the outspoken Mailer.

In 1980, I owned the gift shop at The Capitol Hotel in Little Rock where one evening Norman and Norris made an appearance. The hotel manager, a former food and beverage manager from the Waldorf, flipped out stating that he thought that Norman Mailer was at the base of the stairs . . . and there was Norris. In my calm demeanor, I asked Mr. Stermur if he would like to meet Norman and Barbara. "Come on . . . let's go." But you just cannot walk up to people like that and politely introduce yourself. He was not aware that I grew up with Barbara so I said just watch. To the stairs I traveled waiving and extending my hand to Norman and to Barbara. I got a hug and looked back at Mr. Stermur who almost passed out with embarrassment. I then asked if they would like to meet the hotel manager and they

both consented. Introductions were made and Mr. Stermur charmed the couple with a personal tour of the elegant restoration.

I had not seen Barbara for many years, but happened to be in Atkins one day when my mother told me that I should go down to Gay's and see Barbara, as her father had died. Barbara was still as beautiful as ever and Matthew was growing up. Norman and Buffalo had already returned to New York. It is strange how death re-unites friends as was the case with Barbara and me. We corresponded and spoke of book signings and finally she arrived in Eureka Springs for the signing of *Cheap Diamonds*. The temperature was brutal that August day as we casually strolled from store to store shopping. She purchased an elegant summer hat—wide-brimmed and floppy. We then sat on a bench in Basin Park where Norman and she sat and watched John Buffalo play when he was about seven. "I've always dreamed of retiring here, of buying a small log cabin with a view so I could just sit in my rocking chair and enjoy nature." Her phone rang . . . it was Norman. "Hello Sweetie, you will never guess where John Wiley and I are sitting? We are sitting in the park on that same bench we sat on years ago."

Following the call, she stated that Norman was in poor health but "Ohhhhh, he still has that brilliant mind . . . I suppose that is really what attracted me to him." She spoke about what a wonderful father Norman was and how she wanted me to get to know her sons—they are great guys. Several visits to Eureka Springs followed where I met John Buffalo and many of Barbara's friends. My final visit with Norris was for the signing of *A Ticket to the Circus* at the New Delhi and then in Memphis for John's Birthday.

Living memories become images privately held in our minds. Each friend shares an image of Barbara/Norris and the vision continues. What a lasting impression a floppy hat and a bench can make.