

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER: A VOICE IN THE DARK

G U Y W O L F

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER WAS CERTAINLY MORE IMPORTANT TO ME than I was to her. She was a friend. Norris was a teacher of the best kind, without judgment, and not fully aware of her impact. She was a gentle, quiet, companion voice in the dark.

My first face to face with Norris came about when she asked me to have lunch with her at Fannizi's, a waterfront restaurant in Provincetown. In 2002, she had taken on the role of Artistic Director of The Provincetown Repertory Theatre, a professional theater company, and I served in the same capacity for The Provincetown Theater Company, a community theater. She asked me to lunch to mend past grievances. On that front, lunch was very successful. But the most important topic of conversation had nothing to do with the hard business of producing theater. We discovered our mutual love of Walmart and stores like B.J.'s and The Price Club. We agreed that there was both a hand-clapping excitement, and a sense of security, in *knowing* you can buy forty-eight rolls of brand-name toilet paper in one plastic-wrapped package. We established a casual friendship over the next three years, Norris always inclusive, inviting me to parties in her home, even hiring me to perform with The Provincetown Repertory Theatre.

In October of 2005, my life-partner Paul Soodsma was diagnosed with HIV-related, Burkitt-Like Lymphoma—an aggressive and speedy killer if not bombarded with chemotherapy. Norris had met Paul when he came with me to receptions and parties at the Mailers' Provincetown home. At theater events, I would see them in brief conversations. Paul told me they usually talked about art. We lived five minutes away and one day Paul walked down the street and gave her one of his large, handmade, silk scarves. He rarely

gave scarves away, not even to his own family. He told me, "She is just too beautiful not to have one."

Paul had cancer and I was terrified. I wrote an email to Norris and asked her what I could do. I wanted her perspective as a cancer patient. I was too crazy with fear to figure anything out by myself. Sometimes, it was simple, practical things, like, putting wet wash cloths in the freezer for the fevers, and Kool-Aid ice chips for thirst. Other times, Norris's guidance was invaluable. No matter how afraid, she told me to spend as much time as possible with Paul, in the hospital when he had his chemotherapy, and as much time at home, since no matter what cancer protocol you are on, it gets messy and the body revolts. I remember her saying something like, "Better to have someone you love clean you up than to suffer the humiliation of waiting for a nurse or until you get home from work."

I often wrote to Norris in the middle of the night from the Oncology floor's computer. She almost always responded immediately. Even with the intensity of the hospital's white light, I always felt that I sat in a tiny, dark corner. Hunched over the computer, in the felt darkness, I would cry as softly as I could. After a particularly difficult phase of chemo, Paul began to waste away and resemble, without exaggeration, a cadaver. I was certain he was going to die. I emailed Norris. Norris replied within minutes, writing, "I am praying for Paul." She also wrote that she had already asked her "prayer groups to pray for him." She told me that she had a lot of prayer groups praying for her because "I need all the help I can get." She said the groups included, "Jews, born-again Christians, and Wiccans." When Paul got better, he called all his art school friends and bragged, "Norman Mailer's wife, Norris is praying for me."

Perhaps the greatest wisdom Norris shared with me relating to Paul's illness and his possible death was to "have no regrets." I recall the meat of what she said, "No matter what the prognosis, don't leave anything unsaid or undone." Twice they told me Paul was going to die, and each time, including the morning he actually died, there was no panicked need to hover over him and tell him what he didn't already know or regret that I had not held him enough.

After Paul died in March of 2006, Norris would "check in" with me every so often and ask how I was "managing." I could never find the right combination of words to answer. I don't think she expected a response. The care was expressed in her repeating the question.

In 2008, I was hired as the Site Manager of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, (a job she helped me get), located in her Provincetown home. There were daily details and files and papers she needed, but with each of those emails or calls, in the years that followed, she still asked, how I was “managing?”

After Norman died, I had wanted to ask her the same question but never did.

I think I got my answer in an email dated, December 24, 2007.

“Not sure what my life will be like, but I do have such fond memories of you and Paul, and I wear the pretty scarf he gave me. I just hope and pray that one day our bread will land jelly side up. Keep in touch, love, Norris.”