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A Ticket to the Circus

Norris Church Mailer

THIRTEEN

An English teacher at Tech named Francis Irby Gwaltney (who wrote the memoir *Idols and Axle Grease* that I had illustrated) was a soldier in World War II with Norman Mailer. While I never had Francis (or Fig, as Norman called him) as a teacher, I was friends with him and his wife, Ecey (E. C., short for Emma Carol), another English teacher at Tech. Along with B. C. Hall and his wife, Daphna, we all subscribed to *The New Yorker* magazine and considered ourselves to be intellectuals—Russellville-style, anyhow. After I started teaching at the high school, we'd all get together once in a while to have a glass of wine (Russellville was in a dry county, so drinking wine was totally avant-garde—we had to drive thirty miles to buy it) and discuss literature and *The New Yorker* articles. We were big Walker Percy and Eudora Welty fans.

Often, Francis mentioned Norman. They had kept in touch after the war, and every couple of years they managed to get together. Francis became a writer after Norman published *The Naked and the Dead*. He said that if Norman Mailer could write, by God, he could, too. According to Norman, Fig had been a much better soldier than he had been, and Norman looked up to him. Fig was the inspiration for Wilson, one of the characters in the book.

Sweet, innocent Norman, straight out of Harvard, had somehow been assigned to an experienced, battle-hardened Texas outfit, and he tried to play dumb and be as invisible as possible so as not to be perceived by the good ol' boys as the Eastern Jewish intellectual he was. They were as tough as old leather, those Texans, skin burned a deep sienna from sitting around in the hot sun on the troop ship, endlessly sharpening their bowie knives on pieces of flint and painting their sores with iodine. One of them once said something about that "goddam New York Jew," and Fig jumped to Norman's defense.

"Who're you calling a goddam Jew? I'm a goddam Jew, too!"

"You ain't no goddam Jew, Gwaltney. You're from Arkansas."

"I am too a goddam Jew," the big, blond blue-eyed Southerner said, his

chin thrust out, his fists clenched. He stood ready to jump in and fight, but the bully just said, “You a crazy sumbitch, Gwaltney,” and backed off.

Of course Fig wasn’t Jewish, but he endeared himself to Norman that day, and they became best buddies. Norman tried his hardest to keep a low profile, but once in map-reading class, when he was daydreaming, the harried officer who had been getting nothing but “I don’t know” from the men asked him a question, and by accident, before he could think, he blurted out the correct coordinates of a position. He was busted. (Life was a little harder after that, but the officer was thrilled that he finally had someone who could read a map.)

It has been said that there are no coincidences in life, and I might just believe that. It was April 1975, and I had been divorced for more than a year. Frankly, dating a lot of different guys had begun to lose its charm, but I had no interest in getting serious about anyone. I liked having my own house and doing as I pleased. No man to clutter up my closets, no man to clean up after (except my big boy, Matt, of course). No man to tell me what to do, how to spend my money, what to cook. I was close to my parents, who adored Matthew and were thrilled to babysit for me while I worked. My life was pretty great.

Then I got a call from my friend Van Tyson, another teacher at Tech, who was having a film animation artist come speak to his class. He wondered if I wanted to bring my senior class over to the college to sit in. I was always up for something new to do with the kids, so we went, and it was interesting. But the most interesting bit of information I got that day was that Norman Mailer was next door in Francis’s class, and Francis and Ecey were giving him a cocktail party after school. To which I had *not* been invited.

Although I’ve always loved literature, books were a luxury I treated myself to sparingly, but I had been a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club for several years, getting things such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, or James Jones’s *The Merry Month of May*. But for some reason, even though Fig knew him, I had never read one of Norman Mailer’s books. Occasionally, I would forget to send in the Book-of-the-Month response card saying I didn’t want the selection that month. One such time was when Norman’s *Marilyn* was offered. It was twenty dollars, more than I could afford, but there it was in my mail, and I couldn’t resist opening it. After looking at the pictures and reading a few pages, I was hooked. “She was our angel, the sweet angel of

sex, and the sugar of sex came up from her like a resonance of sound in the clearest grain of a violin . . .” Oh, my. This didn’t sound like a rowdy war novelist at all. It sounded like a man who was sensitive and understood women, and who could write like the angels themselves. I read some of the sentences over several times, just to feel the words.

Now Norman Mailer was in Russellville! I called Francis and asked if I could stop by the party, just for a few minutes to get my book signed, and he said no, that he didn’t want to bother Norman with that fan crap. Fig never minced words. One always knew exactly what he thought.

“Oh, come on, Francis,” I said. “Don’t be like that. I’ll leave it in the car and won’t bring it in if it doesn’t seem right. I just want to meet him.”

I had heard over and over from Francis what a genius Norman was and I figured I’d never have another opportunity to meet a famous writer. I had aspirations to write myself. Maybe he could give me some tips or something. So, reluctantly, Francis said I could come. Since they had all been in the war, I knew Norman was as old as my father (in fact, he was one year older), just as Francis was, not to mention that Norman had been married a bunch of times and had a lot of kids. The *last* thing on my mind was romance, I swear. I was just going to stay for a minute to see if he minded signing the book, and maybe have a teensy little conversation with him. I didn’t even bother to change. I was wearing bell-bottom hip-hugger jeans and a soft cotton voile shirt tied at the waist, showing a bit of my belly button. I was also wearing huge platform shoes called Bare Traps that made me about six feet one. (I’m five feet ten in stocking feet.)

I was a little nervous when I walked in, realizing that everyone else was dressed up, and I wished I had gone home and changed. And then I saw Norman. He was sitting in front of the window, his curly, silver-shot hair lit by the sun as though he had a halo. (Saint Norman!) Amazingly, he was also wearing jeans, the most patched jeans I had ever seen in my life. There were patches on top of the patches. In fact, they were nothing *but* patches. His clear blue eyes lit up when he saw me. He had broad shoulders, a rather large head (presumably to hold all those brains) with ears that stuck out like Clark Gable’s, and he was chesty, but not fat, like a sturdy small horse. (I once drew him as a centaur, which delighted him.) He didn’t look old at all. Nor the least bit fatherly.

He stood straightaway, came over to me, and to his surprise had to look up into my face. He always said he was five eight, but I personally think he

was a hair under that, and I towered over him in my platform shoes. I introduced myself, we shook hands, and then he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. I was a little taken aback, but I figured he must have had a thing about tall women, so I just sighed and decided not to go out to the car and get my book.

I knew everyone there—all the English faculty, the men dressed in coats and ties, the women in little dresses or suits with tidy bows on their blouses and sensible low heels. Someone handed me a glass of white wine, and I started talking to Van. Then Francis came over and said, “Stay after the party and go out to Van and Ginnie’s for dinner with us.”

“Ginnie’s making pizza,” Van said. “Why don’t you come?”

“Thanks, guys, but I think that’s a bad idea,” I said. “I don’t think Mr. Mailer liked me much.”

“Liked you?” Francis said in his gravelly voice, full of displeasure. “Hell, *he’s* the one who wants you to go, not me!”

I didn’t know why he was being so grumpy to me. If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought he was jealous over Norman, that Francis was angry that Norman liked me and didn’t want to share him or something. Anyhow, I didn’t care. The fact that Norman wanted me to go out with them was a nice surprise.

The women teachers were all atwitter because Norman had brought along another pair of jeans just like the ones he was wearing, or even worse, which needed another patch, and they were all taking turns sewing on them, so pleased with themselves to be able to say “I sewed Norman Mailer’s pants!”

But there was no sign of the great man. I guessed he was still in the kitchen, for whatever reason. I couldn’t believe he was that shy. I went and sat on a low couch by myself, and finally Norman appeared. We looked at each other and I smiled. I patted the seat beside me, and he came and sat down while the other women gave me the evil eye, looking at me as though I was the hussy I was.

I don’t remember the conversation we had on that couch—something trivial, I’m sure—but I do remember the intensity of his blue eyes, and his charisma—not unlike Bill Clinton’s. He concentrated on me, that’s for sure, and he radiated energy like a little steam heater. He couldn’t sit still. Then, too soon, Francis came and got him so he could talk to the others, fearing I had trapped him long enough.

After a while, people started to go, but I stayed put. Another teacher had

just polished off her fourth glass of wine and was determined to wait me out. We chitchatted until everyone else had gone, and then, in an awkward silence, knowing she had to go, she grabbed me by the arm and started pulling me toward the door.

"Come on!" she said. "They need us to leave so they can go to dinner!"

"I'm going with them," I said.

"Oh, no, you're not!" she countered, pulling harder.

Thank goodness I was bigger, because she was determined to haul me out of there.

Ecey, bless her, stepped in and explained that I had been invited, so all the poor thing could do was sadly turn and leave on her own, weaving a little as she walked down the driveway. Norman and I piled into the backseat of the car with Francis and Ecey and headed to Van and Ginnie's house in the woods.

As we drove, we were chatting, getting to know each other, and Norman asked me when my birthday was.

"January thirty-first," I said, "1949," which made me twenty-six. He got all excited and started pounding on Fig's arm.

"Fig! Fig! When's my birthday?"

"Well, Norman, don't you know?" Fig drawled in a voice that indicated he thought Norman might have had one drink too many.

"It's January thirty-first! We have the same birthday!" He was beside himself. It turned out that we'd also been born within one minute of each other, he at 7:04 and me at 7:05 A.M. I later checked it with his mother. A mother always remembers exactly when her child was born. He was also fifty-two, precisely twice my age, the only time that phenomenon would occur in our lifetimes. It seemed like some big portent had just been swooped in and dropped onto us by twittering birds.

Van and Ginnie's house was built over a brook, and as soon as we got there, Norman and I went out onto the porch to take a look. The woods, with the brook gurgling underneath our feet, were magical. It was so beautiful and peaceful. The air was sweet and fresh with the smell of pines, and dragonflies flitted under the little stone waterfalls in the brook like fairies.

We were at first shy with each other, and I still had those monster shoes on, but it didn't seem to matter to Norman. He rather liked it that I was tall, and years later he would make me put on high heels if I tried to go out in flats.

“Put on your big shoes. I’m not going to have people towering over you!” he would say.

The rest of the lucky dinner guests were milling around in the kitchen, which has a beautiful stone fireplace, watching us through the window, waiting for him to come in and talk to them. But Norman wasn’t in a hurry, and neither was I. I had wanted an intellectual man who would talk to me, and I finally got one. Norman could go on for hours on almost any subject, and this time it was one of my favorites—me. He rhapsodized about my eyes, my hair, my skin, my nose. Finally it got to be a touch too much, even for me. I had to cut him off.

“Well, you really know how to deliver a good line, Mr. Mailer,” I said with an exaggerated Southern accent. “But that’s all right. I’ve always bought a good line, well presented.”

He roared with laughter, hugged me, and told me how marvelous I was. I had the passing thought that with that one remark, I had, perhaps, made a not necessarily small impression on him.

I did have to bring up the marriage thing, though. I wasn’t going to get tangled up with a married man. (Little did I know just what a tangle I would find myself in.) He presented himself as separated from his wife, which was technically true, and it was only later in the evening that I learned he was separated from his fourth wife, Beverly, but not quite separated from his present companion, Carol, and they had a daughter, Maggie, who had just turned four, six months older than Matthew. Since I thought I would never see him again anyhow, separated from a legal wife was good enough for a flirt, especially such an enjoyable one.

Finally, someone tentatively came to the door and asked us if we wanted any pizza. There were only a couple of leathery cold pieces left by that time, so we went in and ate them, and he talked to the rest of the patient group. It got to be nine-thirty, and I told Van I had to leave to go pick up Matthew, who was at his father’s house, by ten. My plan was for Van to drive me to Francis and Ecey’s. I would get my car, pick up Matthew, and go home. I’m sure by this time everyone wished me gone. I’d monopolized the guest of honor much too long for their taste, especially Francis’s. But Norman had other ideas. His plan was for him to drive me to Larry’s, pick up Matthew, and come back to the party.

He drove, and I sat across the bench seat next to the door, not too close to him. We pulled into Larry’s yard, and I went to the door to get Matthew,

who was sound asleep. I carried him to the car, and Norman got out and took him, holding him while I drove, since he didn't know his way around those country roads in the dark. Watching him hold my sleeping boy touched me.

We went back to Van and Ginnie's, and I put Matthew to bed in the guest room. I don't remember how it came up, but someone there knew how to do tai chi, so we all did it. I was my usual clumsy self, which Norman thought was endearing. That night, it seemed I could do no wrong.

Finally we left, Matt still completely snozzed out, and Norman asked Fig and Ecey if he could drop them off, borrow their car, and follow me home. I think at this point they were both beginning to worry a bit, about whom I'm not quite sure, but they had to say yes.

I'd never before had a man over while Matthew was in the house. I put Matt to bed and then we went into the living room, where I offered Norman a glass of Boone's Farm's finest apple wine (I think it was a bottle, but it might have been a box), which I'm sure appalled him, but I didn't know that then. We talked for another hour or more, about my desire to write, my marriage, and my divorce, and then he began to tell me about his life, his five wives and seven children. (He referred to Carol, his present companion, as his wife. They had been living together for five years, and had a child, after all.)

He told me how he hadn't lied to me when he'd said he was separated, but he was in a place where he was being pulled in a lot of different directions. He then told me about another woman—I'll call her Annette—with whom he had been having a serious affair for several years and who was pressuring him to leave Carol for her. He didn't want to live with Annette, and in fact really wanted to break it off with her, but he didn't want to hurt her, so he had suggested that they not see each other for six months while he had time to think things through. He felt he was already half separated from Carol, living two weeks in New York in an apartment in Brooklyn, which he used as a writing studio, seeing Annette and various "other" women, and then spending two weeks with Carol and Maggie in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He'd been continuously married or living with five women in succession, each waiting in the wings to take over from her predecessor, since he was twenty years old—something else we had in common, our marriages at twenty.

It was all rather overwhelming, but I appreciated his honesty. I told him

that the last thing on my mind was getting married again, after being with the same man since I was sixteen years old, and so we understood each other. At least I thought we did. That this was just a pleasant evening, an interlude in his lecture tour, was the unspoken meaning of it all. He said I was the nicest woman he had ever met, which I thought was just more of the line, but he might have meant it, at least a little; he said it a lot over the years, sometimes behind my back.

Then he leaned over and kissed me, at first just a casual, exploratory kiss; but the kiss ignited, and I knew I was going to make love with him. He was leaving the next day, I would never see him again, and I at least wanted to be able to say I'd done *that*, even if I hadn't been able to ask him to sign my book (which was still in the car). But I didn't want to go to the bedroom; too close to Matthew. I didn't want Matt to wake up and be scared by voices or strange sounds. So we did it on the living room floor. (Why did I always seem to wind up on the floor?)

It was a bit of a comedy, actually. I was jumpy and nervous trying not to make noise, listening for Matthew to wake up, and it was awkward and uncomfortable. I wouldn't fully undress or allow him to, as Matthew might walk in, and I was getting rug burns on my back. Finally, it wasn't that great. How could it have been? But then there are few great ones on the first try. Most guys never get *near* to great under any circumstance. Afterward, I was sorry we had done it, and I think he was, too. It was a slight downer to a magical evening for both of us, but he held me sweetly, and I felt close to him. As he was getting ready to leave, I thought once more about asking him if he would sign my *Marilyn* book, but after what had just happened, I couldn't. It would have been tacky. I'm glad I waited. It wasn't until the next February, when I was living with him in New York, that he finally signed it. The inscription read:

To Barbara

Because I knew when I wrote this book that someone
I had not yet met would read it and be with me.
Hey, Baby, do you know how I love
Barbara Davis and Norris Church?

Norman, Feb '76

FOURTEEN

I COULDN'T WAIT TO TELL JEAN JEWELL, my earth mother friend who lived down the street, that I'd made love (what a strange expression for an intimate act with someone you hardly know) with Norman Mailer. She was thrilled and wanted details, which I gladly supplied, and what particularly interested her was the fact that Norman and I had the same birthday, down to almost the same minute. She had a friend who did astrological charts, and immediately after she hung up with me she called the friend to get our charts done.

Among other things, the friend told her that Norman was going to die in 1978. This, as you remember, was 1975. That's why I have been leery of astrologers and seers and psychics ever since. I don't want to hear bad news. I was, of course, aghast at the prediction and didn't know whether I believed it or not. I read my horoscopes in the newspapers every day but had never taken them seriously. We tend to remember only the ones that come true. Still, even a stopped clock is right twice a day. I decided to forget it, but that was not to be so easy. Especially when 1978 rolled around. But that was three years away.

Norman had given me an address to write to, a post office box, which made me feel kind of sleazy. I was sure I wasn't the only woman writing to that box number. I worried over whether I should write to him at all, given his entanglements, but I didn't feel like I was breaking up a marriage. I didn't even know which marriage was there to be broken up, but whichever one (or two) it was, he made it clear it was broken before I came on the scene and wouldn't last whether I was in the picture or not. The bigger problem was that I didn't want to be just one of the harem, like with Bill Clinton, although it was way too soon to be thinking of being part of a harem or part of anything with Norman.

So between not wanting to tell him I had told Jean about our encounter (who then told some astrologist, who predicted he would be dead in three years) and trying not to assume a relationship where none existed, although

still wanting to have some kind of one, I frankly didn't know what to say to him. "Thanks for a lovely evening"? "Glad to have met you"? "My rug burns have healed"? But he was easily the most interesting man I had ever met, and in spite of his age and his convoluted personal life, I did want to get to know him better, no matter where it led, if anywhere.

I finally decided to send him a little poem I had written, one that I thought said nicely that he was great but I understood ours was a romance that was not to be. I'd actually written the poem for John Cool, who used to write me poetry, but what the heck. It *was* the seventies, and I was much influenced by Rod McKuen. And why waste a perfectly good poem? It's so bad that I blush with embarrassment to recount it here, but it's a part of our history, so please be kind.

ODE TO A FIRST ENCOUNTER

*You were there and
I was there
in a pocket
of sunshine
in a vacuum of space.
You poured your soul
into me
and I took it
knowing full well
I could not contain it.*

*And it was gone,
leaving me alone.
But I dared not follow,
lest I lose my own soul
and he lost forever
in a pocket of sorrow
in a vacuum of space.*

What was I *thinking*? Obviously, I wasn't.

But he wrote back to me:

STOCKBRIDGE, MA
MAY 12, 1975

Dear Barbara,

Your poem was waiting when I got back, and I would have written to you then, but there wasn't a moment to think and some work to get out, and I thought I'd wait until things were quieter and there was time to write a decent letter.

But no, it's the other way and things are in a rush and if I keep waiting, another couple of weeks will go by. So this is just to tell you a few things.

(1) You were an oasis on a long trip.

(2) Your poem was sad, and it was true—I knew what you were saying to me, and when we see each other again, maybe we can leave you with a somewhat different poem. I have to go to Denver for the Memorial Day weekend, May 24–26, and if you'd like I think I could stop off in Little Rock on the way back. Could you take off a day to meet me there or could you possibly stay overnight? I haven't said a word to Fig or Ecey that I might be in the area because we'd only have a day, and I don't want to share it. Depending on whether I do a lecture in the west or not, I'd be coming by somewhere between Tuesday May 27 and Thursday May 29.

Will you drop me a line right away—don't be like me!—and let me know how this strikes your beautiful auburn red head.

Cheers,
Norman

I wrote back immediately, YES, I'd love for him to stop off in Little Rock! I didn't worry about any of my concerns at all. (P.S. He'd sent back the poem, copyedited in red pencil. That should have been a clue, but I was too happy to care. Besides, it was a secondhand poem anyhow, so I figured we were even.)

A few days later, I ran into Francis at the Kroger store. After a few minutes of chitchat, I asked him if he had heard from Norman. He looked at me with a little pitying smirk—at least I imagined it was pitying—and said that yes, Norman had written him, but he hadn't mentioned me, so I shouldn't get my hopes up that I would ever hear from him again. Which, Francis said, to his mind was good, since I would have gotten in *way* over my head. He continued on in that vein for a while, how Norman was a *busy, famous* man,

little girl, and just because he spent one evening with you doesn't mean he will ever call you again. He has *dozens* of beautiful, sophisticated women all over the place, all over the *world*. Why would he be interested in a girl from the sticks of Arkansas? The bottom line was that he (Francis) was just trying to protect me, he didn't want me to get hurt, on and on, yackety, yackety. I just nodded, never once letting on that I had plans to meet up with Norman in just a couple of days. So Norman really hadn't told him. I smiled and said, "Thank you, Francis. I totally understand. You're absolutely right. I know you're just looking out for my welfare, and I promise not to worry anymore. I'm just glad I got to meet him."

He smiled and patted my hand, as if to his mind that little incident was over and done with.

Norman came off the plane from Colorado—where he had been rafting on the Dolores River with his two boys, Michael and Stephen carrying a big white stuffed dog that was dressed in denim overalls and a red shirt. He handed it to me with a grin, and it's fair to say I was speechless. I turned it over, and on its behind he had drawn a heart, in the middle of which he had printed our initials—NM + BN. It was so ridiculous and sweet I had to laugh. I discovered then and there that for the rest of my life I would never know what to expect from him.

We got his suitcase and went out to my yellow Volkswagen. He insisted on driving. It's a man thing some guys have, and I didn't argue, although it was the tiniest bit annoying, like having someone borrow your favorite pair of shoes. You know they are going to put their print on them somehow. It took him a few minutes to get the hang of the car, adjust the seat, which I was going to have to readjust, and we lurched out of the parking lot, our heads jerking, as he stepped on the clutch, gas, then the brake, trying to shift the grinding gears.

"You're not used to driving a stick shift, are you?" I blurted.

He got a little huffy and said, in his best Harvard accent, "I'm used to driving a *Porsche*."

A naughty part of me thought, "And I would bet money you drive it just like this." He had driven Francis's car kind of jerkily, too, the night we'd met, and Francis's car had an automatic transmission. He was one of those guys who have nervous feet on the pedals, he just couldn't help it. (He indeed did drive the Porsche like that, although he would violently disagree. When I first saw it, the poor thing was riddled with dents and rusty scrapes and

bumps covered with pieces of silver duct tape; we had an ongoing dispute during the next thirty years over who was the better driver. [I could write a whole chapter on his driving peccadilloes, like the time he wanted to get a closer look at a motorcycle and ran the guy off the road, but that would be dirty pool.] It was only near the end of his life one day, years after he had stopped driving and I had just finished the long trip to New York from Provincetown for the umpteenth time, with a few hairy moments like having to swerve to avoid a car wreck, that he told me he thought I was an excellent driver and he always had. It surprisingly made me cry to have him say that.

I'd made a reservation at the Sheraton, and we dropped our bags off, then went out to lunch. He didn't know Little Rock, so I took him to a place I thought he would enjoy, the old Marriott Hotel, where the legislators and important people in town ate, near the capitol. The food wasn't that memorable. I think we each had a piece of bland fish with new potatoes and broccoli that was boiled gray, and I didn't recognize anybody well known—except for a man sitting across the room who saw us, got up, and marched right over to our table. I could see Norman going into celebrity mode, bracing to be assaulted by either a fan or a crazy person. Instead, totally ignoring Norman, the man turned on me and said, "Where were you last night? I waited for an hour at the studio for you!" Urps. He was one of the local TV weathermen, whom I had been out with a couple of times. (He was one of the never-slept-withs.) We'd had a dinner date for the previous night, which I had completely forgotten about in the excitement of Norman's arriving. There was nothing I could do except say that I was so sorry, I'd gotten my dates mixed up, and introduced the two of them.

They politely shook hands, then the weatherman walked away shaking his head, maybe a little impressed in spite of himself, but frankly more annoyed. Needless to say, he never called me again; ask me if I cared. The weatherman was shorter than I was, but unlike Norman, he didn't handle it well and made me take off my shoes and dance barefoot the one time we went dancing. He also liked me to pick him up at the studio after he did the six o'clock weather, and he wore his TV makeup when we went out, which I found to be a little pretentious. I guess he would have just had to put it back on for the ten o'clock weather, but still, how weird is that, to kiss someone and get makeup on my face that wasn't my shade? Norman found the whole thing amusing, as he seemed to find everything about me and my life.

After lunch, we drove around Little Rock and I showed him the sights, such as they were, the most important being General Douglas MacArthur's birthplace, a house preserved as it had been in 1880, now situated in the middle of MacArthur Park. There was a legend that during the Civil War, a group of runaway slaves took refuge in a room dug out underneath the park, and they all got diphtheria or something and died. People said if you walked across a certain area in the park, you could feel a chill, but I never found it. Nor did we that day, although we walked around, trying to feel the cold.

In the park was also the Arkansas Arts Center. The Arts Center was run by a man named Townsend Wolfe, who knew me well, or at least well enough, but he had never really given me the time of day, speaking down to me from his lofty artistic perch. This time, however, when I walked in with Norman Mailer, his eyes lit up and he was suddenly my oldest and dearest friend. He gave Norman a personal tour of the place and couldn't have been nicer to me.

There was a show of handmade silver jewelry going on, and a smooth silver ring with a moonstone that reminded me of a whale's eye caught mine. I pointed it out to Norman, and asked him if he didn't think it looked like a whale's eye. He studied it for a minute and then told Townsend, who had been hovering, that he wanted to buy it for me. I was aghast. I would *never* have admired it to him if I'd thought he would buy it! I didn't want him to think I was a gold digger who hinted for a man to buy her things. I protested. But Townsend took it out of the case and urged me to try it on. It fit the middle finger of my right hand like it had been made just for it. I was lost. But it cost eighty dollars. That was more than my monthly mortgage.

"No, really, Norman, you are sweet to offer, but no thank you." I took off the ring and firmly handed it back to Townsend. Norman could have gracefully backed out at that point, but he didn't want to. He really wanted to buy it for me. My father never bought my mother and me gifts at all when I was growing up, except for Christmas, and when we went shopping, we had to sneak our packages into the house so he wouldn't know we had bought things, or they would have a fight. I remember one horrible fight they had over a new shower curtain!

My father was a child of the Depression and had strict ideas about what one needed and didn't need, which was anything that wasn't replacing something totally falling-apart worn-out. Mom and Dad had those fights often, as she and I both loved clothes and things for the house. It got better when

she opened the beauty shop and started earning her own money, and I began babysitting when I was eleven, but I never quite got over the feeling that buying things was bad. (I remember with the first money I earned, eleven dollars, I bought a watch, as my mother said I should get something I could keep forever to remember it. I have no idea where it is now.)

Even after Norman and I had been married for many years, I still sneaked my packages into the house, although he was always generous and couldn't have cared less. If I wore something different that he liked and he asked if it was new, I would say, "Oh, you've seen this before. It's been hanging in the closet for ages." I wonder what a psychologist would say about that? The poor man must have thought he was going crazy to forget so many of my outfits. Or perhaps he knew and just indulged me.

As far as the silver ring was concerned, never before had a man spent that kind of money on a casual gift for me. When I married Larry, I even paid for our wedding bands, as he was in school and I was the one working. I always had a strong sense of wanting to earn my own way; it was those early days of women's liberation. After I was divorced, I earned seven thousand dollars a year as a schoolteacher—a respectable salary for the time and place—and had an excellent credit history. Still, when I bought a house, I had to get a *man*, in my case my father, to cosign the mortgage before the bank would give it to me. The same with a credit card. I never had a credit card of my own until I had been married to Norman for many years. Until then, they were always in his name.

Protesting the ring got silly past a point, and I finally let Townsend write up the sale, but I was uncomfortable. Still, I loved the ring and didn't take it off for years.

As long as there has been literature and its naughty offspring, pornography, the sex act has been endlessly, exhaustingly described, but—like trying to describe pain or love—there are no words in any language to truly capture the phenomenon, and I am not going to try it here. Frankly, I had never been really attracted to many men in my life, even though I had slept with several. I was certainly attracted to Norman the first time I saw him, but it was as much mental and emotional as it was physical. I couldn't wait to hear what he would say next, and talking to him made me feel more intelligent, as I rose to the occasion of bouncing off his remarks.

Over the years, trying to one-up each other became our favorite game, much to the amusement and despair of our friends, but in the beginning

that kind of verbal play was new to me. We were in the Hepburn-Tracy mold, he making slight fun of me and me turning the tables on him. Sometimes he would win, sometimes I would. For example, I had told him I was one of the champion table tennis players at church camp, so one night at a friend's house, he skunked me in a game because he had a nasty little serve that barely cleared the net. "You were the champ of church camp, huh? That's mighty Christian of you to let me win, then," he'd say, and I'd reply that Christians didn't go "in for crooked cheap shots," and it would escalate from there. It all probably started with the remark I made about his driving, which just slipped out, and I got cheekier after that. To his credit, he was delighted when I got a good shot in at him, like his little protégé had done well.

I had never met anyone like him. He was fresh and enthusiastic about every subject, politics and religion being two favorites, but he had opinions on everything from how plastic was poison (it turned out that he was right, after decades of being laughed at) to how auto pollution was killing us (again, he was right). He had run for mayor of New York with some great ideas, like Sweet Sunday, which would be one Sunday a month when no cars except taxis and emergency vehicles were allowed in the city, and he proposed a better transit system, an electric monorail that ran around Manhattan that was nonpolluting. He had other ideas that were perceived to be totally off-the-wall, such as New York City seceding from New York, and becoming the fifty-first state, and people thought he was a clown who was running for fun, but over the years a lot of the ideas have turned out to be not so crazy.

Back to sex. As we went to the hotel, I was nervous and unsure of how compatible we would be in bed, given the last sad time on the floor in Russellville. But with all the inhibitions removed—Matthew safely at my mother and daddy's for the night—I was more than attracted to him, and he was determined to assert his reputation as the best lover in the world. (Where had I heard that? Maybe he'd told me?) Little Rock was only the beginning, of course. Through the years, no matter the circumstances of our passions and rages, our boredoms, angers, and betrayals large and small, sex was the cord that bound us together; it was the thick wire woven from thousands of shared experiences that never broke, indeed was hardly frayed and only got stronger, no matter how the bonds of marriage were tested. Even in the worst times we had many years later, when we almost separated—somehow, inexplicably, at night we would cling to each other, drawn like powerful mag-

nets, the familiarity of our bodies putting salve on the wounds we had inflicted during the day, until over time the warring ended and the love remained. The only thing that finally brought it to an end was old age, illness, and death itself, but that was years away from where we were then, on this first night of our life together, it was quite unimaginable to my twenty-six year-old mind.

He spent an extra night. For a girl who had previously never let a man who wasn't her husband spend the night in her bed—who couldn't, in fact, wait for them to get dressed and go home—it was something new. We woke up so entwined around each other that it was a task to disentangle ourselves in the morning. I had snuggled him against the wall, had him pinned there all night, and he was delighted. When we finally surfaced, rosy and happy, near to suppertime the next day, we went out to Cajun's Wharf, a great fish place where you could get peel-and-eat shrimp by the bucket, and fried catfish and hush puppies. We laughed all evening long, smug in our newfound attraction, as we peeled and ate an entire bucket of shrimp. By the time he left the following day, neither of us knew quite what had happened, or how it would play out, but we both knew it wasn't going to be a short-term thing.

JUNE 5

Dear Barbara,

Just got your letter. The timing was fine. I was in just the mood you were as you wrote it. We bounce into each other like sunlight. Off of red-rock walls. The time in Little Rock keeps reflecting back into the room for me so that no matter the hour or the place there we are swimming in that red gold light and there you are smelling like cinnamon. God, you're attractive. In Brooklyn, we used to say fucky (as in the way I used it in *Marilyn*). Barbara Cinnamon fucky Brown Davis Norris—there's a moniker for you.

I miss you in a good way. I'm dying to see you again, tomorrow if I could, but I know it's there between us. It'll be the same whenever we're in a room with one another. I think something has started, I know we'll get together in July because there's a week when I have to do a tour for the book [*The Fight*] (It's published July 21) and we'll meet on the trip. But I want to see you before then. Maybe in New York or Chicago. Could you get away for a couple of days in the third or fourth week of June? It would probably be the mid-

dle of the week. When you answer this, put in a few pictures. The man is getting greedy about you.

I agree about the next to last one. I'd like to be right back there again. Right through the door. Lambent is the only word for such an afternoon.

I haven't written to Fig yet. Hate to take him into our yard. I may just invite him up to Maine by phone. I'll be able to tell by his voice.

Kisses and further
honey, Norman

F I F T E E N

IT TURNED OUT TO BE CHICAGO. I had never been on an airplane before, and on top of that, I had to lie to my parents and tell them I was going with Jean to work at an arts and crafts festival. I hated to lie to them, but the plan was to wait until I got there and then call and tell them the truth—one, because I would already be there and they couldn't cry me into not going, and two . . . well, one is enough. But they had to know where I was in case something happened with Matthew. I was a conflicted, nervous, guilty, excited mess. I had again promised Norman not to tell Fig and Ecey that he and I were seeing each other. I think Norman really had Fig pegged as far as the jealousy thing went, but I just couldn't keep a trip as big as this to myself.

I was at the beginning of summer classes, taking an American literature course at Tech to complete my English degree, and we were reading *Moby-Dick*. My teacher, Ruth, wasn't much older than I was, and I had to tell her I would be missing a couple of classes and ask her if I could make up a test. I didn't want to tell her where I would be, but a part of me was just bursting to tell, so I hinted that I was going on a big trip to meet someone, and she weaseled out of me who it was. Of course, I made her swear that she wouldn't tell Francis or Ecey or anybody else, but the first thing Ruth did was call Ecey and ask her if they had spoken to Norman or me lately. When Ecey said no, Ruth said she thought she needed to talk to me. How Christian of her, to keep to the letter of the promise while doing the most damage. I don't think Francis ever got over what he saw as our betrayal. But for now, I couldn't worry too much about Francis and Ecey or *Moby-Dick* and Ruth. I was on my way to Chicago!

The closet in the back of my mind where I was cramming all the sinful things I was doing was pretty jammed, but there's always room for more. I couldn't even in good conscience pray for God to not let the plane crash, since I was on my way to commit adultery, but I did hope it wouldn't. It was hard to understand how something that heavy could float up in the air like that. I tried not to grip the seat arms too tightly, or gasp when there was some unexplained noise, so no one would know I had never flown before.

This was in the days when people were allowed to smoke in the back rows, and I was in the row just in front of the smokers. The smoke made me sick, and the food was like an overcooked TV dinner, but I was too excited to really care. It was thrilling when the plane left the ground and headed, nose up, toward the sky, when the cars on the freeway became like chocolate sprinkles, and the Arkansas River a snake across a patchwork of farmland. I had a window seat and watched every mile of ground we flew over.

Norman was in Chicago doing publicity for *Playboy*, which was publishing an excerpt of his about-to-be-published book *The Fight*. He had to do a radio show just at the hour I arrived, but he had given me the address of the Blackstone hotel and told me to take a cab—which I had never done, either—and wait for him in the room. I was trying to pretend I wasn't a total rube as the cabdriver threw my bag into the car and I gave him the address, although there was no hiding my accent. He took off with a screech, and I fell back into the seat like I had been launched from a bean flip. I wasn't too interested in the scenery of Chicago—I was too intent on the erratic way the cabbie was driving—but I got an impression of tall dark buildings, which made the streets seem narrow and canyon-like. I didn't know about tipping, and didn't give him one, so he nearly ran over my foot when I got out. I went into the hotel and asked at the desk for a key to Norman's room, as he had told me to do. The clerk wouldn't give it to me.

"Who are you, Miss? I don't have any instructions to let you go up to Mr. Mailer's room."

I was so humiliated. I guessed there were dozens of crazy women who tried to get into famous men's hotel rooms all the time, and he just assumed I was one more, but I was well dressed, not like a floozy or anything. I was wearing a big straw cartwheel hat and a nice beige pants suit and tall wedge-heeled sandals. I tried nicely talking him into giving me the key, but he wouldn't budge and became rude. I wasn't used to being treated like that. It made me feel like I was nobody, like some hooker or something, and it was all I could do to keep from crying. There was nothing I could do except sit in the lobby with my suitcase and wait for Norman. The air around my chair was thick with the ice I was sending over to the desk clerk, who ignored me.

"What are you doing out here?" Norman asked, an hour later.

"He wouldn't let me go up to the room," I answered, glaring at the clerk, who promptly called for someone to help me with my suitcase. Norman was embarrassed he hadn't told the clerk I was coming. He hadn't thought there

would be any problem. I was so happy to see him, though, it didn't matter, and he shortly made up for it.

I had brought along an African dashiki—a kind of batik short robe—that I'd bought in Mrs. Marshall's art shop, and when Norman saw it, for some reason he said, "Is this for me?" I, of course, had to say yes, and he put it on and wore it. I admit he did look cute in it. He had good legs, nicely muscled, if a little short and a tad bowed, and good posture. Cute little butt and a round belly I was particularly fond of—not too fat at all, nicely firm, like a soccer ball. I've always liked guys with little bellies, rather than those hard six-pack stomach things. Who wants to hug someone you bounce off like a brick wall? He was hairy, front and back, which I have always loved, too, and he walked with a kind of bearlike swagger, hands on his hips, which I thought was sexy. My own teddy bear. I was sorry to see the dashiki go, however, and I never saw it again. I have no idea what happened to it, but if he had come home to me from a trip with such a garment in his suitcase, I would have probably pitched a fit and then thrown it away.

Chicago was good practice, the hors d'oeuvres for New York, which came a few weeks later. It was a big city that wasn't too overwhelming but full of wonderful things I had never seen before. We went to fancy restaurants with flowers on linen tablecloths and maître d's in tuxedos, and I loved how the staff treated us like stars, seating us at the best tables, hovering around and offering us little treats as gifts from the chef. Norman knew a lot about wine, of which I was completely ignorant, and I discovered it was a totally different beverage than the sweet soda pop wine I had been drinking in Arkansas. "You don't have to get the most expensive French wine on the list. In fact, those are sometimes the most sour. Get a good medium-priced California wine. Merlot is good. Get a good merlot, or a chardonnay if you want a sweeter white wine. You never drink red wine with fish, you know, or white wine with meat."

"Why not? What difference does it make?" I really wanted to know. I could just about drink white, but red seemed beyond my capabilities.

"Red is heavier, and meat is heavier. You need the weight to wash down the meat. Besides, people will know you're a hick if they see you drinking the wrong wine, and won't respect you." Ah. The old "What will people think?" That I understood. Although I was surprised that Norman would care. He seemed like he didn't much care what people thought, but we all have our Achilles' heels, I suppose.

I didn't like red wine, but made myself sip it and pretend it was delicious, and after a while it got easier to tolerate. I have never liked any kind of liquor, except maybe a little rum in sweet juice punches like mai tais, or sweet amaretto over ice, and I usually put ice in my white wine. But Norman loved teaching me. He had a great time playing Henry Higgins to my Eliza Doolittle, introducing me to exotic things like escargot, which I ate enthusiastically, if with trepidation. I liked it, of course, for the garlicky butter sauce, as the snails themselves didn't have much taste, and I felt sophisticated pulling them out of their shells with the tiny, clever forks.

At one restaurant, we ran into a nice poet named Paul Carroll, who sat with us and talked for a while about the poetry center he had started, and about Allen Ginsberg, a poet I had hardly heard of who sounded absolutely crazy. (I met him later and discovered he was indeed crazy, but in a good way.) A lot of people smiled and stared at us, and I realized they were eavesdropping on our conversation as if they were at the theater. (That was one thing that always annoyed me, the way people would unabashedly listen in to our conversations in restaurants. Norman always loved to discuss things of a personal nature, too, in his big loud voice, and no amount of shushing him could ever get him to stop it.) I tried to listen with interest to Norman and Paul's conversation and not betray my ignorance of poetry. Norman used to say that I didn't open my mouth for the first three years we were together, which wasn't true at all of course, but I did subscribe to Abraham Lincoln's old adage "Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt." I resolved to read more poetry and try to wean myself from Rod McKuen.

After dinner, we went to hear jazz, another thing I had never done. In high school choir we had sung everything from show tunes to Russian dirges, and of course there was music at church and good old rock and roll, but I was totally ignorant of jazz and was a little nervous when we went into the smoky, dim club. Carol, Norman's companion at that time, had been an up-and-coming jazz singer in the fifties, and that was intimidating to me, too; I was an interloper in a world that was hers, with her man. I didn't mention my fears to him. I just pretended I was secure and confident, and he was happy to be there with me. I was wearing a tight pair of pale gray knit pants with an off the shoulder top and high-heeled lizard sandals, and my red hair fell in waves down over my shoulders. I instinctively knew that Norman

needed a strong, confident woman, and that was what I was determined to be.

In a spotlight on a small stage, a man named Sonny Stitt was playing a saxophone, with a couple of other guys on the piano and bass. There was no beat, no dancing, just cool people sitting and drinking, nodding their heads to some rhythm I couldn't seem to pick up. Norman ordered a white rum and tonic, with a topper of water and *lemon*—very important that it's lemon, not lime. A rum and tonic Presbyterian, he called it. It was his drink for many years. (I later pieced together that during his turbulent earlier years, of which at this time I was more or less ignorant, his drink of choice had been bourbon. Only once did I ever see him seriously drink bourbon. It was on the campaign plane with Jimmy Carter when he was running for president, and Norman absolutely turned into someone else, as opposite from the man I knew as Mr. Hyde was from Dr. Jekyll—someone I didn't like at all, rude and snide and argumentative, not only with me but with others as well. He was so bad, I seriously considered getting another flight and going home, and I might have if it had been in any other situation. He was contrite afterward, and said he wouldn't drink bourbon again. He seemed to know what it did to him. They don't call it "spirits" for nothing.)

At the jazz club, I ordered a white wine, which I sipped the rest of the evening. When the band took a break, Sonny put down his sax and came straight over to us. He and Norman embraced like old friends (he embraced me, too, a good one), although I don't think they really knew each other well, if at all. (Celebrities are always happy to see one another; it is as if you are the only Little Person in the room and suddenly you see another one. Aha! A member of my tribe!) Sonny invited us to hang around until after the second set and then go out with him for a drink somewhere else, but Norman said that would be impossible.

Sonny tried to convince him, but to no avail, so he finally had to let it be and go back and perform again. We left well before the second set was completed. I later learned that before she met him, Norman's ex-wife (the one he was still married to) Beverly had once had a big affair with Miles Davis, so Norman wasn't keen on history repeating itself, I suppose. All that history with the wives! Well, I vowed to make a little history myself, and try not to worry about it.

The next day, we went to the art museum. I saw paintings and sculptures I had only seen in books. At the Arkansas Arts Center, I used to pack up my

high school kids to go to look at a single Andrew Wyeth painting that they'd have on loan, and here were walls full of them! Norman bought me a necklace at the gift shop, a golden filigree pendant that was copied from a Spanish piece. He said he wanted to see me wearing it and nothing else, and later that afternoon I obliged. He kept saying I smelled of cinnamon—maybe it was some perfume I was wearing—and he jokingly said if I ever became a stripper, I should call myself Cinnamon Brown. (Remember the old game we used to play as kids, where you take the name of your first pet and the name of the street on which you grew up and put them together to get your stripper name? Mine would have been Blacky St. Mary, which actually is kind of better than Cinnamon Brown. His would have been Dukie Crown, which is also a pretty good one, come to think of it.)

When I got back home to Arkansas, I knew my life had already begun to change.

To Barbara Norris:

. . . Cinnamon Brown, that's your other female, the tall jaunty slightly mysterious red-headed woman who can't walk into a bar without turning it on since there's a sexual voltage comes off you then of which you may even be unaware, and that lady, of course, is a distance away from Barbara who is looking to have one love till she dies and wants to make an art of that love so that she gives strength and gains strength and tenderness passes forward and back. And I, of course, love those ladies because there's one of them for each of me, Barbara for Norman since he is probably as tender as she is (that is saying a lot) and as much in love with the religion of love which is to make it with one's mate and thereby come out to a place very few people visit and you can be true to that idea of love; then another side not so different from Cinnamon, a cold creation full of lust who might just as well have a name like Ace or Duke or some such hard-cock name far from Norman—and yet not a bad side, no worse than Cinnamon, for so much of the action is there, even an instinct for some of the better adventures.

I used to be that way when I was twenty-six; I still am. One past needs to be in love—the other can remain in love only so long as the love keeps changing, and so if it is the same woman, the ante keeps rising. There has to be more and more. Of course one cannot always name what *more* might be—it is rather that one has to believe it is possible. Then the two sides of my nature can come together. I know it is the same with you.

Sometimes I think of everything in the scheme of things which is not designed for us—the physical distance, Matt on your side and all my children on mine, my two years of chronology to each of yours, our cultures—for New York as you will see is a culture—and just as I might not be able to live for long in Arkansas, so might you not be able to endure the East; a cold and competitive place you will find if you live in it long enough, and then there's all you have to learn, and all I have to remember and to keep from losing, and yet I feel curiously optimistic, as if we will never lose the best part of each other for all those reasons, but only because there is finally not enough magic and/or balls in one of us or the other or both of us together to keep our opposites in that lovely tension which would not cease in Little Rock or Chicago. So I do not worry about our betraying each other . . . my happiness, and then my optimism is that at last I know a woman who understands love the way I do and has the same kind confidence and the same respect—it soon becomes fear—that such a love can make in its resonance toward everything about it. This kind of love is dangerous in its essence possibly because its potential harmony is so great that every devil in you and me will be disturbed by it, and the devils in others will hate us. Still we have our chance. We have that lovely balance between us and that fucky imbalance which keeps us pawing each other and exploring each other and looking to surprise one another—there's such delight in the surprises, and that funny confidence we each feel where we're just happy to be with each other.

So I don't worry. I think we have a little time at least in this happy state and the confidence that if we have it in us truly, nothing will grind it down, and if we don't, well God we've been blessed a little already and I love Cinnamon Brown and Barbara Norris, 'cause as you know they're both divine.

Hey, I miss you
right now,
Norman Kingsley

P.S. How did you know that Kingsley was my middle name? I wonder if I have a use for it at last.

P.P.S. Nope. It's no better than Ace or Duke. Call me Roger.