

NORRIS

B O N N I E C U L V E R

THIS EXCERPT IS TAKEN FROM A ONE-WOMAN PLAY based upon Norris Church Mailer's memoir, A Ticket to the Circus. The show is schedule to premier at The Edgemar Center for the Arts in Santa Monica, CA in 2020, directed and produced by Michelle Danner and starring Anne Archer.

The photos listed and all stage directions are placeholders for the final choices. As with any production, the director and actor will find the exact piece/time/place for her handling of any (if used) props or sets. The photos represent Norris's memories, she never "sees" them as they are projected on a screen above the stage throughout the play.

SET: A podium is center with a curtain closed behind it. Time, September, 2010. Projection screen shows the cover of Norris's book, *A Ticket to the Circus*.

AT RISE: Norris stands at the podium, frail, bone thin. She wears a scarf around long flowing red wig and a bright, billowy, long dress. She has begun her reading.

NORRIS

I'm reading from the chapter where I first meet Norman. It all takes place in Arkansas. Francis Gwaltney (aka Fig to Norman) was an old Army buddy of Norman's and I was a friend of his wife, Ecey. All they talked about for weeks was that the great Norman Mailer was coming to Arkansas to visit and speak to Fig's writing class. They went on and on about Norman. Pulitzer prize winner. Best-selling author of more than twenty novels, including THE war novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. Of course, I was anxious to meet anyone who was as famous as Ecey and Fig said he was, so I wormed my way into

coming over to the party they were throwing for him. My excuse? I'd bought Mailer's book *Marilyn* and I wanted him to sign it. Crazy thing is I'd bought it by mistake. You know those Book-of-the Month Club cards? I'd forgotten to send mine back and *Marilyn* arrived and I kept it. I'd heard of Mailer, but I'd never read any of his books. Not even this one. (*pausing, coughing, sips some water*)

Uh . . . So, I arrive. Late. Wearing hip-huggers and a voile shirt tied up, showing some belly. Wearing these bear trap shoes that add over an inch to my height.

SCREENSHOT OF NORRIS IN OUTFIT

I'm closer to six feet tall that night. Everybody else is dressed up. I think that's all you need to know up to this point. (*putting on her glasses, reading*)

"And there he was. St. Norman!" (*laughing, as an aside*)

Really! (*pausing, reading again*)

"He was sitting in front of the windows, his curly silvershot hair lit by the sun as if he had a halo. St. Norman. He was wearing jeans, too. The most patched jeans I had ever seen. Patches on top of patches . . . His clear blue eyes lit up when he saw me. He had broad shoulders, a rather large head (to hold all those brains). He was chesty. Not fat. Like a sturdy little horse. (I once drew him as a centaur, which delighted him.) He didn't look old. Even though I knew he was a year older than my own dad. He stood straightaway and came over to me and he had to look up. He always said he was five eight, but I think he was a hair under that. I introduced myself and he turned on his heel and left. I figured he had a thing about tall women, so I decided I shouldn't bother to get the book. I was leaving when Francis came up to me and said I should go out with them for pizza after the party. 'I don't think Mr. Mailer liked me much.' (*as Fig*)

'Liked you?' Fig shot back. 'He's the one who wants you to go with us.' Well, Norman and I piled in the back of the car with Fig and Ecey up front. Norman asked me when my birthday was. I told him. January 31, 1949. Norman got all excited. Turns out we had been born on the same day. One minute and twenty-six years apart. He was fifty-two. I was twenty-six. Exactly half his age. The only time in our thirty-three years together that would happen numerically.

For Norman, it was like some big portent had swooped in like twittering birds. . . . I wanted an intellectual man who could talk to me and Norman could talk. About anything. For hours.” (looking up, as an aside) Tonight? The subject was me. My hair. My skin. My eyes. *(in a broad Southern accent)*

‘You really know how to deliver a good line, Mr. Mailer. But I’ve always bought a good line. Well presented.’ Norman roared then, hugged me, and called me, ‘marvelous.’ Later that night, I found myself, driving my VW with Norman beside me, holding my son in his arms, Watching him cradle Matthew touched me. When we got to my house, I put Matt to bed and offered Norman some wine. Boone’s Farm’s finest apple.” *(removing her glasses, looking up, as an aside)*

I think it was in a box. *(reading again)*

“I told him about my dream of writing. My marriage. Divorce. I brought up the marriage thing ‘cause I didn’t want to get tangled up with some married man. He told me his life was all tangles. He told me about his five wives, his seven children. How he’s living with one woman, but married to another while a third one “Annette” has asked him to live with her! He said he’s being pulled in lots of directions. He’d been continually married or living with a woman since the age of twenty. Something else we shared. Being married early. I appreciated the honesty, but it was . . . well . . . a little overwhelming. Then he kissed me. It ignited and I thought, well . . . he’s leaving in the morning. . . . *(coughing, sips more water)*

Quickly it became a comedy. I was jumpy. I never had a man in the house when Matthew was home and I was afraid he’d wake up and hear us, so I wouldn’t let Norman undress or undress me. I wouldn’t go into the bedroom. It was too close to where Matt slept. I got rug burns on my back from the carpet. In the end, it just wasn’t that great. But he held me and I felt close to him. I thought about asking him to sign my book. I’m glad I didn’t. It wouldn’t be until next February when I had moved in with him that he would sign it. The inscription read” . . . *(Lights down. Podium moves offstage and NORRIS walks into a now bare stage.)*

SCREENSHOT OF NORMAN

Norman said once that when you write your life? Words are like the light you shine through a crystal. The patterns you find. Shape. Colors. They be-

come their own story. Partly real memories told by some character you put on the page. Andy Warhol said I should wear a tape recorder around the house and record all of Norman's sayings. (*imitating Warhol*)

"Every word that comes out of Norman's mouth is a pearl. Change the tape every hour and you'll have a complete record of your life." He was serious. Only I didn't think that every word out of my husband's mouth was a pearl—what wife does? (*laughing*)

I wrote to Norman. Not a letter. A poem really. (*giving oratory!*)

"Ode to a First Encounter." (*as aside*)

It was the seventies and I loved Rod Mckeun, (*reciting*)

"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 be lost forever

In a pocket of sorrow

In a vacuum of space. (*pausing*)

I didn't tell Norman this was a hand-me-down poem I wrote for a boy I was seeing along with some others when I met him. (*pausing*)

Norman sent the poem back to me, covered in red lines and comments. That should have been a clue! But I was so happy he wrote to me. I knew it was a beginning. Norman loved to talk about my Arkansas roots, a country far outside of NYC. At our dinner parties, he loved to wait until the talk lagged and toss in some story I'd told him. (*As Norman*)

"Norris lived in a house with no hot water and an outhouse until she was six"! "She walks around singing Baptist hymns to me, can you imagine?"

Best, he'd wait until everyone was eating, "Did you know that Norris's grandpa was a mule skinner?" (*pausing*)

He loved to see those NY smiles around the table disappear. Guess they imagined someone like the Texas Chain Saw Massacre guy skinning out a mule and nailing its bloody hide to the barn door. I'd explain that a mule skinner was really a mule trainer. There probably was a flick or two of a black snake whip in the training. Mules being one of the most stubborn creatures God ever put on Earth. But they were valuable. Not to be hurt or abused. That talent. Of training some stubborn beast? That skill never dribbled down to me. At least not in my ability to "skin" or train Norman. He told me he loved my ancestor stories. Said it was like being married to the great American novel.

SCREENSHOT OF ANCESTORS

My great great great grandfather fought in the revolutionary war. My great grandpas, on both sides, fought for the rebels for the War between the States. What you northerners call the Civil War? They started in Virginia and the Carolinas before ending up in Arkansas. They were characters in my parent's and grandparents' stories. Judges. Doctors. Bootleggers and drunks. Sharecroppers and cotton gin owners. Truck drivers. Coal miners. Most dirt poor farmers who worked the land and did the best they could. Some were good-hearted. Some hard as new whiskey. While Norman was having his fun at those dinner parties. Or more often when we were out somewhere. There'd be the question from a dinner guest. (*pausing, assuming that voice*)

"Which wife are you?" I sometimes wanted to shout. I was Norman's sixth wife, the mother of his eighth (he adopted Matt) and ninth children, step-mother to the other seven. I made peace with the other five wives over the years. I made a family and a home with that man. "Which wife are you?" (*pausing, draws herself up, smiling*)

I'd look that person in the eye, "The last one!" I didn't even knock wood. I knew. Well most times believed it was true.