GROWING UP WITH NORMAN

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ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO AT A DINNER PARTY, I was asked by the man sitting next to me, "What was it like growing up as Norman Mailer's sister?"

If I had ever been asked this before, I had not considered it answerable. It was the kind of question that at best seemed desperate and at worst an invasion of privacy. My answers, if any, were probably flippant and dismissive. At this particular juncture of my life, however, I had heard enough tales from other women of how badly their brothers had treated them to have realized how lucky I had been to have Norman for my brother. For once I was delighted by the question. "It was wonderful," I said. As an instance, I talked about how, when I was an early adolescent and awkward and unsure of myself, he kept telling me how attractive and intelligent I was. My dinner partner looked dismayed and said ruefully, "Oh I didn't do that for my sister." It was clear he wished he had, which sharpened my sense of how lucky I had been.

Of course I adored Norman. And had, ever since he'd overcome the shock of my being there at all and had begun to accept me. I'm not sure when we started doing things together. I was still quite young when he dutifully took me on Saturday afternoons to the local movie house for the double bill and serial. And we sometimes walked around the streets of Brooklyn on cold winter days, carrying our ice skates and trying to find a tennis court that was flooded and frozen over. I remember nothing ever seemed to get frozen except our feet. By the time I was ten, I was included in the Monopoly games he played with his friends. A couple of years later, when he wanted to learn ballroom dancing, he got a book that diagramed the fox trot and other dance steps with pictures of the feet, and we practiced together. I learned to dance. I'm afraid he didn't.

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That he was good to me I probably took for granted when I was a child. What made him special then, and always, was his presence. He was exciting to be with. He was so full of knowledge, of ideas, of understanding, of enthusiasm. He was iconoclastic and unpredictable, and always interesting. He made the air vibrate. He still does. One feels more intensely alive when he is in the room.

He loved to teach. He told me what books to read (everything from Jeffrey Farnol and Sabatini to *Moby-Dick* and Sigmund Freud). He liked popping the balloons of shibboleth and cliché. If he had a new theory, he expounded. I believed everything he said. But I was not the only one he instructed. My oldest friend still talks today of how he changed the course of her life by the way he talked to her when she was thirteen. "And," she says, "*he* was only sixteen."

Even at a young age I was aware that no one else I knew had a brother like him, and so I felt very proud, and maybe a little smug, that he was mine. And even if I did not dream that he would become the writer that he is, it has not exactly been a surprise.

I'm very glad he did not become famous until I too was an adult. Since he was so influential in giving me a strong sense of self, it took me years after *The Naked and the Dead* was published to come to terms with the fact that people could no longer see me as myself alone, and not my brother's sister.* I used my married names to preserve some measure of anonymity. But I came at last to realize that being Norman's sister is a part of my identity. Whatever its displeasures, it has from the beginning, made my life more interesting, more complex, and more fun.

For Anne Gregory

Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.

*With a deferential nod to W. B. Yeats.

But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.

I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.

–W. B. Yeats