

VALENTINE'S DAY

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WHEN NORMAN DIED, I felt ontologically heartbroken. It was as if a category of existence itself had become defunct. I had two things to console me: the fact that I had been able to publish an essay celebrating Norman's splendor as a writer while he was still alive; and my subsequent meeting with Norman, when he invited me to his house in Brooklyn Heights for lunch. He invited me on Valentine's Day, which was perhaps his gracious, impish way of telling how much he appreciated what I had written about him. As for me, Valentine's Day was entirely appropriate because I fell in love with him.

They say that Goethe could feel an earthquake hundreds of miles away, and Norman had that kind of primeval intensity. I did not understand his writing better upon meeting him. What I suddenly understood was the source of his work in his force as a man. Energy is pure delight, said Blake, and Norman's writing, even at its darkest and most anguished, filled you with a vicarious sense of his own creative power.

In its essence, genius is generosity. Norman's warmth toward me that snowy day—me, who had merely written about him what everyone not too mediocre or envious to admit it knew to be true—was one little tributary flowing out from his oceanic being. We ate tunafish sandwiches made by the brave and beautiful Norris (it was quite a day for me—I fell in love with her, too) drank red wine and Norman, despite his ailments, set about entertaining me. He knew that meeting Norman Mailer was a great and rare occasion, and he set about living up to it, as though he were not Norman Mailer at all, but an emissary sent by Norman Mailer to present me with a day that I would never forget. Yes, genius is generosity, I realize it now; it is the fulfillment of one's destiny in the world by lavishing oneself on the world. There are days that stand out from the rest of life, like sudden flowers in a drab field. Norman gave me one of those days. I barely knew him. And I will always miss him.