

A LONG FRIENDSHIP

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IN A STOP TIME MARVELOUS MOMENT Norman's felt presence dominated the stage at the Carnegie Hall memorial to him. Yet afterward I felt in limbo. I missed mulling over the details of the evening with Norman, in the way, off and on, for many years we had talked about this and that, and suddenly it occurred to me that I must be one of Norman's oldest friends, and even more astonishing, our friendship, which lasted sixty years despite the huge upheavals in both our lives, went the distance without a real quarrel. In popular imagination Hemingway's relation to Spain is remembered for his love of bullfighting rather than his even greater love of the Prado and, in a similar fashion, the stereotype of Norman is that he is macho—a macho who blossomed into a family man. What does tend to get lost is that Norman always had close friendships with intelligent women and valued their opinions.

I first met Norman Mailer in the spring of 1948 in Paris. I was just a kid, a mere high school graduate. (I had conned my parents into letting me live in Paris “to experience the post-war,” thus bypassing college.) When I was in high school during World War II Europe had seemed further away than Mars, and I was dazzled by the Paris of Sartre and Camus, and the Americans I met there. First I met Norman's sister, Barbara, then Norman.

My original place in life was that I was always considered to be the youngest, the brat, the feckless one. My older brother Mark Probst, like Norman, had graduated from Harvard, but I was considered too young to join Mark and his friends at their gatherings. Yet Norman and Bea immediately invited me to their parties on Rue Bréa, near Raspail. This was a huge leap for me. I met the Trotskyist intellectual Jean Malaquais, and smart American literary critics like Mark Linenthal, Stanley Geist, and French and Spanish kids orphaned by the war—Norman never stuck with one clique.

At one of those evenings I met Paco Benet (later we lived together in Paris), the brother of the future novelist Juan Benet. Norman had met Paco's friend, Enrique Cruz Salido (his father, a Socialist Deputy from Jaen, had been in the group, along with Luis Companys, handed over by the French to Franco to be executed) through friends who had attended the Salzburg Seminar. It was Paco and Enrique who hatched the plan of rescuing Manolo Lamana and Nicolas Sanchez Albornoz from the Cuelgamuros slave labor camp employed in the building of the Valley of the Fallen near Madrid, and Norman (*The Naked and the Dead* was just published and he and Bea were leaving for New York) offered them his car, and two decoys. His sister Barbara and me.

Norman and Bea had made a previous trip to Spain with Paco, and had met with members of the resistance there, so our trip was a continuation of his interest in the political conditions in post-Spanish Civil War Spain. As Norman thought it would be prudent to test my actual driving skills, we took a short trip with his parents to Chartres to do so. What pleased me was that he treated me like an adult. He was awestruck by Chartres yet at the same time juggled other thoughts, other ideas. He wondered—what would my Spanish experience be? How would it affect me? There we were, two Americans suddenly stunned by the Rose Window. Architecture, when it's amazing and has soul, affected Norman (he was enthralled by the visual) as profoundly as politics and literature, and in that magical golden spring afternoon he talked and talked, telling me tons of stuff about Chartres.

By early fall (the prison rescue was successful) *The Naked and the Dead* and Norman were world famous. Later, he often would ruefully remark that his early extreme success had put him out of touch with the normal ups and downs in the transition between youth and true adulthood. Indeed, he often quizzed me—how come my parents let me go to Europe right after high school? How come I was so nonchalant about not going to college? He felt that my post-Depression generation would be quite different from his own, freer.

And there was another transition Norman was driven to make. Early on he had been influenced by a sort of nineteenth-, early twentieth-century Dreiserian strong sense of social justice, but now he needed to add the hipster to Dreiser. Though not one to get stuck in the past, or nostalgia for the past, Norman never dumped Dreiser, and these permanent dichotomies often puzzled his public. His true muse, the unifying thread that connects his

fiction, reportage, and documentaries was America itself, and he had to define for himself—what was going to happen next? With his family and his Harvard friends, he maintained a stance of being a sort of well-mannered Harvard rebel, but his intense curiosity led him to know many different worlds—he was never content just to be a literary lion in an effete literary setting.

Norman was fascinated by actors and Hollywood, and soon I was meeting his new friends at his New York parties. I see in my mind's eye Marlon Brando standing with his back to the kitchen wall of Norman and his second wife Adele's East Village apartment—Brando was quiet, he seemed to be bemusedly sizing up the rest of us. Still, the next period was darker. Suddenly the radio was blasting the news that Norman Mailer had stabbed Adele; Norman's inner demons, nightmares, and pressures to be, at all times, America's numero uno writer, ended in this horror.

But Norman was a fighter, he struggled with his inner demons, and the scorn heaped on him by the chic perpetually faithless literary world. Eventually, he recovered his equilibrium and entered his best writing period. Unlike Bellow, Roth, and Updike, whose work is more directly autobiographical, Norman was forever gazing outward: at Egyptian pharaohs, the moon landing, American elections, murderers, and—in his most recent novel—at Hitler's childhood.

And yet in our personal lives loyalty trumps talent. When I was in my mid-thirties my husband, Harold Solomon (he was a Harvard classmate of Norman's, but I had met him through my brother Mark), died suddenly of the sort of young man's heart attack that might have been preventable just a few years later. I had our two young daughters to take care of, but I was in shock. Nearly every day for months Norman would phone—get up early, do this, do that. And, inevitably, my sweetest memories involve summer days and nights with the Mailer brood and Barbara and her family in Provincetown. Barbara, like Norman, was one of my closest friends.

Occasionally Norman and I would work on interviews that I did with him concerning his work. We often would have lunch in an East End restaurant near his house on the bay—at that time I believe it was called The Penny Farthing. Over a lemony broiled lobster or freshly caught piece of swordfish, the air smelling of salt, Norman would talk and talk. True, Frank Sinatra claimed the nickname "Blue Eyes," but for me the real owner of the twinkly blues was Norman. His eyes matching the clear Provincetown sky sparkled with delight

in anticipation of a round of good talk. What was he thinking—what was I thinking? I remember the way he smiled after I had read early chapters *Of a Fire on the Moon*, one of his best and most underrated books: “So—so, what did you get from it?” Eventually, Norman had the great luck to meet and marry Norris Church, a southern beauty, a model, an artist and a writer—as I said Norman valued intelligent women—who brought order into the last thirty-five years of their life, and into the lives of their collective brood of nine children.

A few years ago I began to worry. Perhaps it was the deaths of Saul Bellow and Larry Rivers, perhaps it was Norman’s increasing illnesses. In the back of my mind I knew time was running out. I felt that these amazingly talented Jewish American artists and writers had emerged from World War II with an oddly split psyche. On one hand they had claimed their American identity, which made them the triumphant victors of the world, on the other, as Jews, their kind had been the victims of genocide and nearly wiped out in Europe, and out of these contradictions, they created a powerful new way of seeing things. Norman has been an essential part of the American landscape for sixty years, which put him, in terms of endurance in the public eye, in a class with Victor Hugo and Picasso, so we thought he would always be there. Now there is a feeling of lostness. As for me, Norman has been in my life since the beginning. And, though I feel suddenly orphaned, there is the power of the voice, the power of the books. And there are nights when I turn the pages and start reading.