

Missing Norman

*(remembering Norman Gortdon, a classmate of mine
at Cleveland Heights High School
1960-1963
for my page
in the 50th Reunion's
memory book)*

Everybody remembers Norman. When I'd walk through the halls with him we could barely talk he had so many people to say hello to: hello! how's your arm? did you get that homework done? God knows what else. He seemed to know everyone and everyone seemed to know him.

I met him at Roxboro. I guess I was surprised when I discovered where he lived. It seemed too far east for Roxboro. But I also knew kids who lived in Cleveland and went to Roxboro

What classes did we share? I don't know. I remember Norman from lunch, not that I was ever cool enough to eat lunch with him, but we spoke to each other. We must have had classes together, but if so ... they're gone.

But at Heights we shared homeroom. It was a shop classroom down in the basement of the old building. It didn't have regular desks but tables with stools. For three years every morning we sat together and talked. And when homeroom was over we walked together until our paths diverged. That's when it was hard to talk because of all the people he had to say hello to. It wasn't just that he knew their names. He seemed to know everything about them.

He was president of our class. Was he also president of the school? I don't know. He could have been. He should have been. He was *so* popular.

I think he ran track.

And of course he was a great student. Straight A's? I have no idea, but he went on to Harvard. I *applied* to Harvard. I didn't get in. I went to Western Reserve.

I kept a journal in high school. There's not much in it about Heights, but on the last day of our third year I wrote: "Today is the last day of school. All the things I take for granted, like walking away from homeroom with Norman and Linda everyday, little things like waiting, sitting on the air vents for A.J. to open his room – all these little things will be no more." Those are two of the maybe five or six things I commemorated, the rest as slight.

Or as momentous.

Did we have classes together? I don't remember. We must have. Physics maybe. English. Did Norman take Latin? If he did, we shared that. What did we talk about every day in homeroom? I don't remember. I just remember talking.

Once I invited him over for my birthday. My mother made elaborate birthday meals and afterwards we showed a movie on my dad's 16mm projector. It was late July. The movie would have been Howard Hawk's *To Have and Have Not* with Humphrey and Lauren and Hoagy. It was my birthday movie. I saw it every year. I think Norman had a good time.

Do you remember how he called everyone mister? I was Mr. D. My brother, Chris, was Mr. C. Now that I think about it, how did he call girls? Miss So-and-so? He opened his letters that way too: "Mr. D., ..."

We wrote each other in college. Not often: he was way too busy for that. His first year he had a "dining hall job, physical training requirements, and a burdensome mass of studying." Though he appreciated the opportunity, he didn't like Harvard, certainly not at first: "You could hang yourself in Harvard Square, and perhaps excite the sensationalist Cambridge papers, or have one of these intellects paint you, but human response is a bit steep for nearly all I have come in contact with." He called his classmates "zombies."

It wasn't that he missed home. "I do not miss 'home' or anything attached to it (except my brothers)," though he missed those he'd become close to. In his first letter he said, "I would like to have a home room type conversation with you at Christmas vacation."

I wonder what we said to each other.

We stopped writing as we worked our way through college, and during graduate school I more or less lost track of him. Then, in 1976, my mother, Nancy, came down – I was teaching at North Carolina State by then – to help out after the birth of my second son, Chandler. She said something about Norman being dead. I knew I would have known if Norman had died and I laughed at her. She insisted. I called his home and asked to speak to him. I told whoever answered who I was and Susan came to the phone. She was so sorry. She thought she'd told everyone.

I was writing a lot of poetry in those days and a couple of days later I sat down at my typewriter to put down something of what I was feeling:

Mr. N

It's been a dozen years
at least
since we who'll never meet again
last met,
but seldom were you
far
from my thoughts.
Once a day,
once a week,
I would make a note
to tell you ...
this or that
when we should see each other.
Very ambitious
you made it to the staring gate
while I lingered in the paddock.
But I didn't mind:
you were always innocent of malice
and full of care.
I wonder
if
before the end
you learned to keep your shirt
tucked in?

I carried you
with me
a constant compass.
It didn't matter
that we didn't meet:
we would.
But you have set
a morning star
in the dawn of our beginnings
while I

a sun
have just begun to rise.

All these years later I still find myself collecting things to tell him. I never missed Heights. I'll always miss Norman.