

THE KNIFE'S EDGE

KATE MAILER

IT IS HARD TO REBEL AGAINST YOUR FATHER when your father is Norman Mailer. But because of my genetic proclivity toward rebellion—I am his daughter after all—I did, as a pugilistic and disagreeable teenager, do my damndest to rebel against our Dad. I was most often terribly unsuccessful at this effort because Dad, as we all know, was convincing.

Dad had the task of rallying and entertaining us kids during our Augusts in Maine, and he did so with required projects and physical challenges. Each summer we had something new to take on. We started out with artistic endeavors. One summer he gave us all movie cameras, to film, splice and edit our own creations. Another summer we were to work on scenes from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, cast and directed by him, and yet another summer he handed us copies of *The World According to Garp*, and we had to “read and discuss,” as this author was “a formidable talent, one to be reckoned with.” I was perfectly amenable to these activities, as they suited my layabout temperament. But then an unfortunate convergence hit: my adolescence and Dad’s shift of emphasis from the arts to sports. Dad would say something about “improving our souls by going beyond what we thought we were good at.” On the whole, the other kids responded well to the new sports regimen. Dad was so enthusiastic about it that it became infectious for everyone but me. Each and every suggestion of a sports activity was met by me with various non-verbal grunts. Tennis—“phaw,” running—“ugh,” and sailing—“nawww.” Dad wanted to take each of us out on our own sail with him, on the Luter 16, to sail the “brig” as he affectionately called it, so that we could really “get to know each other under dire circumstances.” Everyone came back from their individual sails with Dad sea-salt kissed and glowing from the great wind on their faces. On my turn, the boat ended up totally in irons, and I was solemn and sweating. He urged us to jump off of

the deck of the house fifty feet into the ocean upon arrival to the house, so that “we’d really feel we were here,” and once he even walked the edge of the roof as it “scared ’im,” and was something he “hadda do.”

“We have to face our fears by engaging our fears,” he would say.

“Dad,” I complained, “I don’t really feel like facing my fears by engaging my fears. Please. I just want to read my book.”

Then there was the perennial mountain climbing. These were no mere walks in the woods. These were the rockface kind of hikes, with ladders. A favorite of Dad’s was called The Precipices. One summer, the one in which I turned sixteen, Dad decided we had to take on Mount Katahdin. The climb involved an overnight stay in a motel the night before, in another part of Maine, as it was a good five hours up and five hours back to the mountain. The morning of the planned hike there was a thunderstorm, crashing rain at the foot of the mountain, and a sign up warning: “Climb in inclement weather at your own risk.”

“Dad,” I whined in my high-pitched tone, “We cannot climb the mountain, we will all be killed, it says so on the sign.”

“Oh come on, Katie, Katoosh, you have to learn to question authority, we should all be so lucky to die on a mountain top. This will clear up in no time. We’re here, come on gang, we are going up!”

So, with me grimacing and grumping, we headed up

The weather soon cleared. Betsy and I pulled up the rear chatting with Norris, our gorgeous new stepmother who was holding hands with the little ones, Maggie and Matthew. Danielle, Susie, and the boys were miles ahead, cantering along Dad like mountain goats and gazelles. Norris was good humored and totally game, although she looked mysteriously overwhelmed, and kept gracefully disappearing into and then reappearing from the pines on the side of the path. Betsy and I kibitzed and gossiped like two old biddies thinking she was out of earshot. Of course she heard everything: “Um, Katie, do you think that she is—you know—pregnant?”

“Oh, she is so pregnant, Bets, she is so pregnant.” We giggled and huffed up for about three hours until we arrived at the plateau, where the ultimate challenge faced us: a passage made up exclusively of random rocks thrown helter skelter onto the narrow—15-foot-wide—path, and on either side, a drop, directly down to—the clouds, beneath us. It was appropriately named the Knife’s Edge. I stood at the entrance to the path, planted my feet quite

firmly, and snorted with a guttural sound. "I am not going across there. No way. I am headed back down."

"Honey, honey," Dad said, his feet also planted, us at a face off in a twin stance of righteousness and determination. "Honey, Katie, we have to go across in order to go down. We can't go back."

"I am not doing it."

"Come on, this will be good for you in ways you never dreamed of. You will grow and change and this will develop parts of you that you never knew were possible. It will be good for your karma."

"My karma, my karma? I don't care about my karma. You might care about your karma. You're fifty-five years old. You have lived! You've written thirty books, You've had six wives and soon to be nine children, I am sixteen years old and I have never even been kissed! I have never even had a boyfriend! I DON'T WANT TO DIE, I WANT TO HAVE SEX!"

"God, you're cute when you're mad, Katoosh. Of course you're gonna have a boyfriend, Boober, I have no doubts about that, but if you cross this Knife's Edge, you will have an even better boyfriend. C'mon, let's do it." His blue eyes blended with the blue sky. The man's will and charm were no match for mine, and so I begrudgingly got across. And he was right, I felt none the worse for it and even a bit better, although I would never quite admit it. And indeed, I did graduate eventually to the status of a girl with a boyfriend and, after a while, I even got the best boyfriend who then became the best husband anyone could ever dream of, and I think sometimes it had something to do with Dad and the mountain, courage, and will.

Over the years, I continued to argue with Dad. I somehow felt it was my duty to do so, even though I hardly ever won. It is hard to win an argument with your father when your father is Norman Mailer. Most often we fought if he made the slightest comment or critique of a member of the family. I would come, almost in an automatic way, to their defense. He once said to me: "You know, you're like a cop, and you have your beats, and one of your beats is: 'I protect my brothers and sisters.'" But when Dad died, I cried for five days straight, the taut wire of our connection slackened as it does with death. Who would I turn to with my objections? Who would stand and take it in his same disarming, charming way?