BLESSINGS

MATTHEW MAILER

AS A KID I WAS OFTEN ASKED, when someone recognized the last name, "Any relation to Norman?" "Yeah," I would reply. "Your Grandfather?" they would likely ask. "My father," I'd say. Then the real question would come; "What's *that* like? Having Norman Mailer for a father?" They might have said, "You were raised by wolves? What's *that* like"? I never trusted the question so I never truly answered it.

My relationship with Dad was a little different. I'm the only stepchild. When I came into this family at the age of five, I had two brothers and five sisters to contend with and it was pretty damn intimidating, and then there was Dad, who I tiptoed around with a mixture of fear and respect. He spoke about our getting to know each other in a toast he made at my wedding three years ago:

> *If you don't love a stepson automatically, you get to love them or you don't get to love them. If you love your wife, you do your best to love the stepson, if you don't love your wife, the stepson has no chance. Well, I love my wife, so I studied Matthew and he studied me. I got to love him over the years.*

The last dinner I had with Dad, one on one, I expressed my concern about him being alone for a stretch of time in Provincetown. He shrugged it off: "*What's everyone so worried about? If I fall down the stairs and die, then it's my time to go. It's okay.*" I answered; "Well Dad, I love you and you have a lot of people who care about you." To which he said; "*Hey, we have love for each other. Come on, we don't have to say it, we know it.*" That was typical of our relationship; a mutual love and respect quietly acknowledged.

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I took my wife and one-year-old daughter to Provincetown last July. While there, I could feel Dad watching me, studying my daughter Mattie as I changed her diaper or whatever I happened to be doing to keep her entertained. One night I went up to Dad's studio, where he was working, to tell him that dinner was ready. He beckoned me over to his desk and told me how impressed he was, what a great father I had become. That praise meant so much to me, more than anything, because for the first time, from one father to another, I felt on equal ground with him.

No one I know knew more about the pitfalls of marriage or the rewards a large family can bestow. He called mine "*A marriage to watch*" and I know he was and perhaps still is pulling for my wife and me to make a go of it. As he put it in his blessing at our wedding;

"*If this marriage works out, I'll be blessing you from up there, or down there, I don't know where I'll be, but if they allow you to bless people in Hell, watch out.*"