

PEOPLE WHO LOOK ALIKE
ARE ALIKE

K A T E M A I L E R

Kate Mailer, daughter of Norman Mailer, gave this keynote address on October 3, 2015 in Provincetown at the Thirteenth Annual Conference of The Norman Mailer Society.

HELLO, MY NAME IS KATE. KATE MAILER. GOOD AFTERNOON. Just to get you all oriented, well, you probably all know this already, as I am sure you are all very familiar with the all the details, but I'll just go over it anyway, even if it is just to remind myself. I am the 4th daughter as well as the 4th child of the third wife of Norman Mailer. First, there was Bea, Wife #1, who had Sue, then there was Adele, Wife #2, who had Danielle and Betsy, and then there was Jeannie, the British wife, Wife #3 who had me.

Now, let me be totally honest with you all. When Mike—Mike Lennon, that is, not Mike Mailer, invited me to do this, I just thought, and said, Oh, no, no no no no no. I can't do that, Mike. I don't have anything to add, Mike, to what you and all of your esteemed fellow Norman Mailer Society friends and colleagues know and have studied and read and pondered and expressed *vis a vis* Dad.

But Mike was adamant. "All of the kids have to speak at the Norman Mailer Society conference. The kids give a different perspective, which is vital to the whole picture. It is very important for you to do this, and besides, Kate, it is your turn."

You see, Sue had gone, and Danielle had gone, Betsy had gone, oops, I mean Elizabeth, Elizabeth had gone, even Stephen had gone—way out of turn, I might add, and I think Mike—Mike Mailer that is, not Mike Lennon, had gone, also out of turn too—oh, and, ugh, oh, God, John had gone too,

Johnnie, the baby. As a matter of fact all the boys, save one, Matthew, had gone—in fact the boys had gone first, before the girls, (of course the boys had gone first, it is the Norman Mailer society after all, so of course most the boys had gone first). All out of turn. So it is just me, Maggie and Matthew left of the offspring to go, and I am the oldest of those, so it was definitely my turn, no getting out of it this time. But I still did not feel qualified and I am still resistant and have a deep inferiority complex about it all, just so you know!

I mean, I have to make a confession, I have not read all of his books, ok?—I mean I have read some, and I really, really liked them and I thought they were really really good, and super deep, but I have not read them all. Ok? And then, in hearing some of these talks here by you people, I said to my aunt and my sisters last night, “You know, I just have begun to feel like, hey, I wish I had never heard of Norman Mailer and just happened to pick up one of his many many books and had an amazing mystical spiritual creatively inspiring experience like you all did instead of just being his darn 4th daughter.”

Plus, I did not even meet the guy till I was like four almost five—but more on that later—that is a whole story. Finally, encouraged by my sisters who said you were all really nice and interested and supportive people, which has been confirmed by all these wonderful incredibly informative panels. I mean for example, who knew about those Lipton journals? I am getting myself a copy of that! I thought, oh what the hell. I mean Dad and I had our differences and our conflicts but it might be kind of nice to revisit that whole thing, the Thing of my Father, and who he was to me. And so, I have found that in thinking about what to say, I have had the chance to ponder some of Dad’s, well, shall we call them, theories and views on the importance of criticism and superstition in relationship to parenting. Then, how that affected our relationship as a father and daughter. So I thought I would tell some stories in that vein and how partly because of these theories of his, we often misunderstood, but then, on the other hand, at times, very much understood each other.

Now let me say this, first. All of Dad’s children look a lot like him. I think so anyway, and I am no exception. There is kind of like an unspoken contest, though, between the siblings over who looks the most like him. For instance, whenever the siblings are engaged in discussing who looks like Dad the most, Stephen and I, who look almost exactly alike, I don’t know if you remember

what he looks like, but we are like twins, sort of, even though we are from different mothers—it is really weird, as he is the sixth child from the fourth wife, Beverly, and I, as I mentioned, am the 4th child from the 3rd wife, Jeanie. Stephen and I, we have this thing, and so we always kinda wink at each other and whisper, “We look the most like him, us and Johnnie a little bit,” behind the others’ backs, but I would venture to say that though Johnnie does look like Dad when he was a young buck, *Naked and the Dead* time and Stephen looks like him when he was a derring do 38 to 40 with his suave smile, *Deaths for the Ladies and Other Disasters*, or *An American Dream* time, and I am the one who looks like him when he was 83, *The Castle in the Forest*.

Dad always said, “People who look alike are alike. There are about 38 types in the world, and the people who look alike are alike. Think about it. The way you look has a vast amount to do with how you are treated, so people who look alike are alike.” My mother used to always say to me when I was being emphatic, which was often, “Oh, my goodness, you’re just exactly like Daddy.” How am I like my father? Well, I used to think we were not at all alike, and I disagreed with many of his theories: as a matter of fact, he often infuriated and annoyed me. But as I have gotten older, I think of the line in the Sharon Olds poem, “Finally I just gave up and became my father.” And that is the truth of the matter. I give up. I am him. I mean I really am. And it is not in any rational or linear way, but in this strange instinctive way that makes for this feeling of knowing him in a sense I was not really aware of for most of our lives together.

I think perhaps we got off to a rather tense bumpy start. My understanding of my early life with him was perhaps different than his actual experience and attitude, partly because of how he conveyed his first impressions of me to me versus how he conveyed them to others. The way he always relayed our early time together was that right from the get go, he said I took one look at him, out of the birth canal, and seemed to say: “And who do you think you are?” He then went on: “I wanted to watch your birth, for God’s sake, was that so much to ask? Now Fathers film their babies’ births, which is an insult and belittling to the sacred nature of event. It is atrocious. But a father at least should be able to watch his child coming into the world. The doctor would not let me in, which I found to be such bureaucratic automatic bullshit, but I stormed through anyway and got a glimpse of you and thought ‘Man, she is a tough one.’” Whenever he told me that story, I just shrugged. A tough

baby girl? Isn't that a contraction in terms? Dad wanted a boy. I was the fourth of four girls. No wonder he wanted to think I was tough.

In the first weeks after I was born, Dad did an experiment on me. He placed under my nose, in ascending order of bitterness and sourness, a series of scents. First, a sliced lemon, then a clove of garlic, and finally a piece of onion. He wanted to see how I would react, and I did not react well. I think I screamed or squirmed or something in that arena, as most infants would be likely to do. I am not sure if that made him think I was more or less tough, and if that was good or not good, and if the experiment was supposed to increase exponentially how tough I was, or break me. But I always got the feeling when he told me these stories, that he was conveying some kind of disappointment that he had that I did not smile as he placed them under my nose or that he wanted me to know that in his eyes, I fell short as an infant.

But I discovered many years later, when reading a letter that was brought to my attention, that I think in actual fact, it was quite the opposite. In writing to a friend in Japan, shortly after my birth, he did not say, as I might have imagined he did: "We have a tough little baby girl born to us who I wish was a boy, and who winces lamely at the smell of onions," instead he wrote, "We have a lovely daughter, Kate, who is three weeks old. You see, Elichi, I fear I am now the father of four girls. I must possess some exceptional virtue or vice to be so curiously blessed." I should have guessed that secretly he was pleased to have that fourth girl, as my mother had taped in a photo book which I often stared at quizzically over the years, a telegram he wrote to my great Grandfather Lord Beaverbrook: "Like a lion looks the lass of Mother Jean." The man had a way with words.

We had a short time together, us two toughies, as my mother and Dad were too much of a tempest in a teapot to stay together. So Mum moved out when I was three months old, and went to live in the Delmonico Hotel with me and my nanny Louise, and as my mother said, "Daddy would come and visit. And he was lovely, on very good behavior. Your father was lovely for lunch, but impossible to live with." But after a time, whatever the reasons were, mostly custody issues, they both decided it was best not to see each other at all. So from the age of about 5 months, I didn't really know for some time that he existed, or that I even had a father. I grew up till the age of 4, almost 5 years old, with my mother who was full of light and possibility and

charisma. I think of her lying on beautifully colored couches, purple and red, with silk pillows surrounding her and a huge radiant smile. Once a friend of mine from school came over and asked, "Where is your Dad?" and I said, "Oh, he is at work." "Where does he work?" I immediately said: "He's a doctor." I honestly had no idea, so that seemed as good as story as any.

And then one night he arrived, wearing a blue button down shirt and seeming shy standing in the door and the way he described it to me later said: "I heard you were something and that I oughta meet ya. I also heard that your mother was pregnant again, and that intrigued me."

Again, right from the first encounter, there was tension. As I said, my mother had not mentioned that I had a father—she had simply forgotten to inform me of that detail. So when he came, in the middle of the night, and they woke me up, I was a little, shall we say, skeptical or hostile, even. I slept under a bright red bedspread, which had red pompoms on it, and I was having a dream that the red pom poms were rising up out of the blanket and metamorphosing into devils doing the can can. Devils dancing. And there was Dad in the doorjam. "Go away," I said, weeping, afraid of the Devils. The weird thing was, I knew he was my father. He looked completely familiar even though I had not seen him since I was an infant. I just knew him. I think he was rather discouraged at my unwelcome welcome, so they retreated, a bit sheepish. The next morning, Mummy said to me, "Now that was your Daddy, and he is lovely. He is coming back to see you this morning, and you mustn't hide your head in a bucket."

"I didn't hide my head in a bucket."

"Well, you did. Oh, and by the way, he is going to take you on a lovely trip tomorrow, to a lovely seaside place called Provincetown, where you will meet your brothers and sisters. Imagine, you have 3 beautiful sisters and 2 wonderful brothers. And of course, there is the lovely new one that is coming soon." She may have rubbed her pregnant tummy. Or maybe not, since she was British.

I was very intrigued by the notion of the brothers and sisters, and asked her what they looked like. She told me as much as she knew. I decided to make drawings, which I cut out to form paper dolls. And then, since I was already using the scissors to cut out the sibling pictures, I painstakingly, with the scissors in hand, made some snow flakes, which I guess I had just learned how to do in school. I put them all in what I remember as a pale blue plastic bucket, which I presented to Dad when he arrived. "See," I said, "I did not

hide my head in a bucket.” He was wearing a grey suit and fancy leather shoes with tied up laces and he seemed somehow familiar, sympathetic even vulnerable. His eyes were so blue, I noticed, and crinkly at the edges, and I thought it was nice that he kneeled to look at the cut outs with me, crouching to my height in his formal trousers, rather than just putting the bucket on a table that was too tall for me to see. He took each cut out and looked at them carefully with the nice eyes.

“These are good. You know, they look like the real sisters and brothers. Susie has very blue eyes, like this one here, and Dandy has long straight hair and brown eyes, and Betsy, Betsy has very curly dark hair, and the boys—they are both toe heads!” I did not know what a toe head was, but it sounded kind of funny. Then he paused. “But these, these snow flakes, I am not crazy about them. What do you need these for? It takes away from the distinctness of the portraits.” I guess I nodded—what could I say? I liked my snowflakes and thought it was cool that no two snowflakes are alike. But thus began Dad’s and my relationship to criticism: him criticizing me, because he thought it was important for me to know, and him to state, the truth, and me not liking it and craving more support.

Once Dad was talking about one of my siblings being in a play and when I asked how they were in it, he said, “Good, but not great.” “Dad,” I said, “You should be more supportive to your children. Why do you have to say ‘good but not great,’ why not just say, ‘it was good,’ and leave it at that?” To which he would retort: “Because The Good is the Enemy to the Great.”

This relationship to criticism also had a cousin—a kind of habit he had of insulting his kids out of the blue. I think of one particular moment when I found out the reason for this. We were all at Joe’s Restaurant in the theater district sitting at a round table after seeing a reading at Actor’s Studio. It was a small portion of the family, a mere 10, maybe, rather than the usual 30. It was back when Dad still wore blue suits and ties and fancy shoes to events, back before he walked on two canes, back when he was still a bit chubby, when his hair still curled, though I think it was already white. Someone, one of us kids, made a joke at the table and we all cracked up. He laughed too, and then he stopped and said, “God, you are all so fuckin’ ugly, every last one of yas.” We all stopped laughing. “Why do you do that, Dad,” I said, righteously, because I felt it was my job to challenge him if I thought something he said was wrong. If I had known the term “buzzkill” then I would have

used it. “What buzzkill, Dad.” He did not answer, just sipped his drink and looked around at all of us and smiled. I pressed the issue. I did not think he should get away with this. “No, really, why Dad?”

“Because,” he said, leaning in close to me and whispering, “I am suspicious of compliments. If I think something good, such as ‘Geez, we are all having such a good time,’ or ‘God, my kids are terrific,’ or ‘Man I love them,’ I have to say something bad, something the very opposite of what I am thinking instantly to dispel the evil eye, the evil forces that will come down and put a curse on you if I say something aloud that is good. I am protecting you. I am Jewish. This is ancient Jewish mysticism, Kate.” From that day onward, I began to get a window into the barrage of insults that would often be hurled our way. “I see you took your ugly pills today.” Or “Why are you behaving as if you are stupid?” or “Your talents don’t run in the direction of domesticity.” Or, most devastating to me when I was about 16, “I will never tell you you look good when you don’t. And you know why? Because I hate bad looks.” But I tried, after the post theater dinner, to believe him, and to excuse what I had always experienced as criticism by getting on board with the idea that he was protecting me by insulting me.

But sometimes it would backfire when he actually was giving me a compliment and I did not know it. For example, there was an evening a few years ago at a dinner at Aunt Barbara’s of her consummate roast chicken. Dad always liked to trot out his ideas on who looked like who, expounding on his theory that people that look alike are alike.

“Hey, I finally figured out who Natasha looks like,” He was talking about my daughter when she was about 4: “Edna St Vincent Millay, the poet. She is just exactly like her. But don’t tell her I said that—if you give her that compliment, it will bring a curse on her. She is a great kid, extraordinary kid, but don’t even get me started, shhh, shhh. I don’t want to even utter anything good about her.”

“Ok, Dad,” I said, “I will be sure not to give her the compliment.”

“And you, I have finally seen someone who looks just like you. It is this poker player, Annie ___” (He said the last name, but I forget it.) “She is the champion Texas Holdem player right now, and I was looking at her, and thought, who does she look like? Who does she look like? (inbreath) It’s Kate!”

I was furious. “A poker player? Wow, well, thanks a lot, Dad, that is so nice.”

“Actually, Kate,” said John, “Annie is really hot. It is a compliment.”

“Yeah, sure, sure.”

I talked to Guy, my husband, about it later at home. “I am so hurt. He thinks I look like some big fat poker player woman. He is just so mean. He has such a skewed view of women.”

“Well, sweetie,” said Guy, “John said she was really hot, How do you know she is fat? Maybe you should look her up. Maybe she is really hot.”

“No, John was just saying that because he is sweet and he is always trying to reconcile us.”

“I would look her up and not just sit here being paranoid.”

“No, that would be stupid and vain of me to look her up.”

I looked her up. She was truly beautiful. Dark hair, light eyes, very hot. I thought, “Oh that’s sweet. That is how my Dad sees me. I mean, I do not look at all like that woman. She is so much prettier than me. But that is how Dad sees me. That’s so sweet!”

A few days later, I was talking to him on the phone, a kind of rare occasion, but he had called to ask me something about asthma, which he thought he was getting, and which I had already. “Dad,” I said, “I looked up the poker player, and that is sweet that you think she looks like me. She is so pretty.”

“Yeah, ok, ok, ok, enough enough. You are alright, kid, just alright. Let’s not talk about this anymore.” He just could not stand that he had given me a compliment. One of the sources of this difference between us might be that he was an Aquarius and I am a Leo. Aquarian’s philosophy of those they love is, they tell you they love you once and they mean it, and that is enough for life. Leos on the other hand, need constant reassurance and to be told they are loved and fantastic all the time. Dad and I were opposite signs.

And yet, People who look alike are alike. How were Dad and I alike? Well, there were some small things. We both loved Paris. We both loved lemon drops. We both disliked intensely Modern Architecture. We both loved Guy, my husband, with whom he was always having deep conversations about Heidegger with, and we both loved Natasha, my daughter, who seemed to take his criticism as jokes. He once said to her, when she was telling a story, at the age of about 3, “Look, Natasha, you’ve written your letter, now mail it.” I went into a state of rage, “How could you do that to my daughter? You can say these critical things to me, but not to my daughter,” But she, meanwhile, just laughed and ran away.

Other bigger ways we were alike: both very opinionated, both overbear-

ing in those opinions and both incredibly bossy. We both thought we always knew what was the best thing for our kids when often our kids did not agree. My daughter once said to me, “You know what, Mama, you are the bossiest person that I know,” and I know that Dad was the bossiest person I ever knew. Finally, another thing: Dad loved his children, I can say this without doubt, and freely, without bringing a curse on anyone. And I too, love his children, my siblings. Dad used to say to me, “You are like a cop, and you have your beats, and one of your beats is, I protect my brothers and sistas.”

And sometimes I realize that in relation to the criticism and the fear of compliments, I have become more like him. I used to think it was so important to say good things about those I love, almost in rebellion to Dad’s culture of criticism and bad luck insults, but I have realized that I don’t do this so much anymore. I have settled into, by osmosis, a kind of skepticism about always stating the good. When someone compliments those who I am closest to, say Guy. “Oh, Guy is so wonderful,” they say. Instead of joining in to the celebration of his many fabulous qualities, I just say, “Yeah, he is good.” Or if someone compliments Natasha, I will just say, yeah, she’s a nice egg. With my siblings, and my aunt and cousins I do the same thing. “Oh, my God, she is a goddess,” someone will say about one of my sisters. “Yeah, she is fine,” or one of my brothers, “Oh my god, he is so adorable,” “Yeah, he’s ok.” About Aunt Barbara, people often say, “Oh my Lord, she is so amazing, and I just say “Yeah, she is impressive.” It is not that I don’t think all of my people are the best, it is just that like my doppelganger, Dad, I just don’t want to always be stating the obvious and bringing them bad luck.

One of Dad’s favorite sayings was a quote by Andre Gide. “Please do not understand me too quickly.” I certainly spent a lot of time not understanding my father, and I think he often did not understand me. In the late summer before he died, though, it was the end of a visit to Provincetown, I think in August, and everyone was about to leave the house, he made a plea to me. I stood in the kitchen saying goodbye. He was weak, thin and vulnerable in a way he had not been before. He was wearing strange clothes, a white tee shirt that was an undershirt and boxers, no shorts. And Uggs. Uggs in summer. He had his canes, and he was having trouble breathing. He looked at me and said: “Look, why don’t you just stay here with me. I want you to stay up here with Guy and the baby. (The baby was six by then.) And we can spend time together alone and talk and talk and really talk everything out. BECAUSE WE MISUNDERSTAND each other and we need to work it all out. You need to work it all out.

Look, Kate, I am all you've got." He had said that phrase to me several times since my mother had died that June "I am all you've got." I did not really get it. "What do you mean, you're all I've got," I wanted to, and did not say. "You are not all I've got. I've got Natasha, I've got Guy, I've got my sisters and brothers, my aunt, my cousins, Guy's family, my friends. You're not all I've got." But now I understand what he meant. "I am all you've got in terms of parents." And there is no one else LIKE a parent. Because a parent, for better or worse, has been with you since the beginning, even if briefly, as he was. A parent, for better or worse, even if they don't seem invested, they are invested in a way no one else is. I recalled what he had said to me when Natasha was born. " "Oh, my God, I feel for you, I really do." " What do you mean, Dad?" "It is just that having a child, it has its good moments, but the obsession that ensues from it is OVERWHELMING." "What do you mean, you are obsessed with your children? I never knew." "Of course I am. I think about each one of yas and worry about each one of yas every day. It is, well, it is all consuming." I remembered being shocked by this. But now I do understand, the obsession with one's child is overwhelming, perhaps much more overwhelming than the obsession with one's parent. And yet, once they, the parent, goes, there is no one who is as obsessed with you.

"Well, Dad, I have to go now, we can't really stay."

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Bermuda?"

"Bermuda, What the hell's in Bermuda?"

"Um, Guy's family. Beautiful water."

"Well, ok. Ok, go to Bermuda. But when you come back, come up here later in the fall, you Guy and the baby. We gotta talk."

"Ok, Dad, I will try."

I remember Guy took me aside and said, "Kate, maybe we should stay. We don't have to go to Bermuda, you know. He's—well, maybe—"

"No, we should go—we can come up later in the fall."

Dad moved back to New York that fall, and then he was soon admitted to hospital, and then there for weeks before he died. We never did have the talk in Provincetown, and I so wish we had. But since he died it is as if we have had the talk, an ongoing, unspoken talk that has made us understand each other—not too quickly, but perhaps quite well.