

# Life, and My Evil Ex-Boyfriend

Katha Pollitt's essays on family, mortality and one particularly infuriating man.

BY TONI BENTLEY

**H**AVE you heard the latest? "Men are rats." This directly from the desk of Katha Pollitt, a longtime feminist columnist at *The Nation*. It's an absolute scandal. But with the recent surge of courageous investigative journalism from certain formidable women working around the clock at the front lines (which can involve detailed linen reconnaissance as they hunt down suspicious laundry), the news is finally seeping out. It still sounds

## LEARNING TO DRIVE

*And Other Life Stories.*

By Katha Pollitt.

207 pp. Random House. \$22.95.

a bit shrill, but I'm sure it will soon find its stride as the shock of it all wears off.

Groaning and moaning from clever, sassy women has become a genre unto itself, the righteous revenge of the liberal, pre-, during- or postmenopausal woman (anyone missing?) in the post-chick-lit age (it is over, isn't it?). Perhaps this heralds the birth of fourth-wave feminism? (Or is it the fifth?) Or maybe it's not something political, but just plain old biblical revenge: God knows women have centuries of wrongs to catch up on. An enraged, educated woman (*Vagina dentata intellectualis*) with her arsenal of experience, observation, self-deprecation and indignation is a force to be reckoned with, a kind of intellectual Mike Tyson — though, apparently, she is still not as likely to be seduced into bed as the bombshell bimbo, one reason she's so irate. Not only is she entitled to be angry, but it is virtually the bedrock of her independence, and pugnacious prose is her lethal weapon.

Among the cornerstones of the genre is some very good stuff, both entertaining and provocative. Back in 1996, with her scandalous essay "Unlikely Obsession," Daphne Merkin was in the vanguard, announcing, in a literary way, her right to be both spanked and respected. Four years ago, in "Against Love," Laura Kipnis declared monogamy unnatural, impossible and hypocritical, which, though not exactly news to Hugh Hefner, left the monogamous feeling strangely guilty and lazy. Two years ago, out promoting "Are Men Necessary?," Maureen Dowd fessed up to her intelligence problem, telling an interviewer, "I don't know how much more I'd get asked out if guys weren't scared of me." One does wonder.

And now Pollitt's up at bat. Her three previous essay collections gathered brilliant commentary on welfare, abortion, surrogate motherhood, Iraq, gay marriage and health care, mostly from the pages of *The Nation*. But with "Learning to Drive," she gets personal, and shameless. She has

*Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books, most recently "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir."*

decided to wave her dirty laundry (among which she found unidentified striped panties) and confesses to "Webstalking" her longtime, live-in, womanizing former boyfriend. (Take that, you rat!) It's hard to tell if she's coming into her own, trying to sell more books or has lost it entirely. Or perhaps she's giving up her dignity in a generous motion of solidarity toward the rest of us who have already blown our cover? Whatever the reason, she's entitled.

Pollitt wonders endlessly, aimlessly, obsessively, why her boyfriend, referred to only as "G.," was so relentlessly unfaithful. "Was he thinking what a drag it was to have a girlfriend who couldn't pass a simple road test," she asks in the title essay, "who did not care about the value-price transformation problem" and never once woke him up with oral sex, "despite being told many times that this was what all men wanted?" She relishes the moment when he will betray his new girlfriend (he marries her, fingers — his and ours — crossed) and attempts to read his e-mail by guessing his password: "'marxism,' 'marx,' 'karlmarx,' ... 'belgium,' 'chocolate,' 'godiva,' 'naked,' 'breast,' 'cunnilingus,' 'fellatio.'" She might as well just tell us his name.

Pollitt often uses her considerable imaginative dexterity to soften and divert her even more impressive rage. She imagines, for example, that the "world-class womanizer," his new girlfriend and one of his other girlfriends are walking across Riverside Drive, and she, her newfound driving skills still a bit shaky, runs all three down. "I could," she reflects, "settle into comfy middle age, reorganizing the prison library and becoming a lesbian." But in the end, this kind of "what if" mulling, which Pollitt indulges in frequently — the poet trapped in prose — is anticlimactic. Neither pure vitriol nor pure wit, it feels uncommitted, and one longs for a touch of either Elfriede Jelinek or Oscar Wilde to tip the balance. It's not that I'm against killing unfaithful men — especially one like Pollitt's, who "walks out the door after seven years with a wooden spoon, a spatula, a whisk." It's the loss of self-respect that bothers me. Isn't there a better way for women to show their superiority? If not, maybe we aren't superior, and who wants to consider that possibility?

In the essay "Sisterhood," Pollitt looks for solace by befriending Judith, who "had been sleeping with G. virtually the entire time I had known him." Judith reassures Pollitt: "I'm sure he loved you. ... Or at least if he didn't, he repressed it." Girlfriends are such a comfort.

In "After the Men Are Dead," Pollitt muses, wishfully, on a possible future of "manlessness" that awaits most women, when, among other things, she might stop "thinking someone was brave when he was just tall" and might find it "restful, not having to think about love, romance, sex, pleasing, listening, encouraging, smiling at the old jokes." Here, as in "Beautiful Screamer" (about her daughter's birth



Katha Pollitt, New York City, 2007.

20 years ago) and in "End Of" (about being in what Saul Bellow called "departure mode"), Pollitt is reaching. Her noble experiment in looking inward does not have the punch or conviction of her social and political essays. Her substance requires more substance to thrive.

I found most interesting and moving the essays on her parents, to whom the book is dedicated. Her father, Basil Riddiford Pollitt, a lawyer, was a kind of real-life

## Pollitt ponders aging, motherhood, plastic surgery and why her boyfriend was so relentlessly unfaithful.

Communist Atticus Finch, complete with an F.B.I. file about "five inches thick." People had been informing on him since his high school days, and he lost his scholarship to Harvard as a 17-year-old freshman for "'making communistic speeches and engaging in communistic activities.'" As a lawyer he argued that "grand juries were unconstitutional because they systematically excluded blacks and women." (Decades later, the Supreme Court finally agreed with him.) He sounds like a man who lived up to his wonderful name.

Pollitt's mother, Leanora Levine Pollitt, was Jewish and also had an F.B.I. file, which revealed that she had had an illegal abortion and had protested against segre-

gated restaurants and Nazi collaborators. She was beautiful and had received nine proposals before marrying Basil, played classical piano, could recite Heine in German, knew what President and Mrs. Roosevelt were doing at any moment of any day and had begun (though did not finish) law school. She had, Pollitt writes, her "dream self," which included being a journalist and a "fiery revolutionary." In a poignant legacy, the daughter has manifested the mother's dream. Beautiful Leanora, however, drank herself to death by the age of 54.

After the passionate essays on her parents, Pollitt ends her book with a whimper. In "I Let Myself Go," we hear about weight gain and loss, letting her hair go "seriously two-tone between colorings," and the familiar dilemma: to have plastic surgery or not. She doesn't see much dignity in surgery, resorting to the old line that your "unexplained folds and angles" tell the story of your life. "The important thing is to live," she instructs in her closing lines, "to be yourself, this moment, now. To be the captain of your soul, and know that sooner or later the captain goes down with the ship." Not being in drowning mode, I, for one, am bringing a cliché-proof life jacket to the party.

Ultimately, a sharp tongue, a quick wit and ample intellect provide a powerful defense but little consolation for women in search of that phantom that is freedom from men and the vulnerability of love. They can trap the rats — with the impunity feminism ordains — but jailers are in prison too. □