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The Pursuit of Happiness

Douglas Kennedy

Part One

Kate

One

I first saw her standing near my mother's coffin. She was in her seventies - a tall, angular woman, with fine grey hair gathered in a compact bun at the back of her neck. She looked the way I hope to look if I ever make it to her birthday. She stood very erect, her spine refusing to hunch over with age. Her bone structure was flawless. Her skin had stayed smooth. Whatever wrinkles she had didn't cleave her face. Rather, they lent it character, gravitas. She was still handsome - in a subdued, patrician way. You could tell that, once upon a recent time, men probably found her beautiful.

But it was her eyes that really caught my attention. Blue-grey. Sharply focused, taking everything in. Critical, watchful eyes, with just the slightest hint of melancholy. But who isn't melancholic at a funeral? Who doesn't stare at a coffin and picture themselves laid out inside of it? They say funerals are for the living. Too damn true. Because we don't just weep for the departed. We also weep for ourselves. For the brutal brevity of life. For its ever-accumulating insignificance. For the way we stumble through it, like foreigners without a map, making mistakes at every curve of the road.

When I looked at the woman directly, she averted her gaze in embarrassment - as if I had caught her in the act of studying me. Granted, the bereaved child at a funeral is always the subject of everybody's attention. As the person closest to the departed, they want you to set the emotional tone for the occasion. If you're hysterical, they won't be frightened of letting rip. If you're sobbing, they'll just sob too. If you're emotionally buttoned up, they'll also remain controlled, disciplined, correct.

I was being very controlled, very correct - and so too were the twenty or so mourners who had accompanied my mother on 'her final journey' - to borrow the words of the funeral director who dropped that phrase into the conversation when he was telling me the price of transporting her from his 'chapel of rest' on 75th and Amsterdam to this, 'her eternal resting place' . . . right under the LaGuardia Airport flight path in Flushing Meadow, Queens.

After the woman turned away, I heard the reverse throttle of jet engines and glanced up into the cold blue winter sky. No doubt several members of the assembled graveside congregation thought that I was contemplating the heavens - and wondering about my mother's place in its celestial vastness. But actually all I was doing was checking out the livery of the descending jet. US Air. One of those old 727s they still use for short hauls. Probably the Boston shuttle. Or maybe the Washington run . . .

It is amazing the trivial junk that floats through your head at the most momentous moments of your life.

'Mommy, Mommy.'

My seven-year-old son, Ethan, was tugging at my coat. His voice cut across that of the Episcopalian minister, who was standing at the back of the coffin, solemnly intoning a passage from Revelations:

God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes;
And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow
Nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain;
For the former things are passed away.

I swallowed hard. No sorrow. No crying. No pain. That was not the story of my mother's life.

'Mommy, Mommy . . .'

Ethan was still tugging on my sleeve, demanding attention. I put a finger to my lips and simultaneously stroked his mop of dirty blond hair.

'Not now, darling,' I whispered.

'I need to wee.'

I fought a smile.

'Daddy will take you,' I said, looking up and catching the eye of my ex-husband, Matt. He was standing on the opposite side of the coffin, keeping to the back of the small crowd. I had been just a tad surprised when he showed up at the funeral chapel this morning. Since he left Ethan and me five years ago, our dealings with each other had been, at best, businesslike - whatever words spoken between us having been limited to our son, and the usual dreary financial matters that force even acrimoniously divorced couples to answer each other's phone calls. Even when he's attempted to be conciliatory, I've cut him off at the pass. For some strange reason, I've never really forgiven him for walking right out of our front door and into the arms of Her - Ms Talking Head News-Channel-4-New-York media babe. And Ethan was just twenty-five months old at the time.

Still, one must take these little setbacks on the chin, right? Especially as Matt so conformed to male cliché. But there is one thing I can say in my ex-husband's favor: he has turned out to be an attentive, loving father. And

Ethan adores him - something that everyone at the graveside noticed, as he dashed in front of his grandmother's coffin and straight into his father's arms. Matt lifted him off the ground and I saw Ethan whisper his urination request. With a quick nod to me, Matt carried him off, draped across one shoulder, in search of the nearest toilet.

The minister now switched to that old funeral favorite, the 23rd Psalm.

Thou prepareth a table before me in the presence
of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

I heard my brother Charlie choke back a sob. He was standing in the back of this sparse congregation of mourners. Without question, he had won the award for the Best Surprise Funeral Appearance - as he arrived at the chapel this morning off the red-eye from LA, looking ashen, spent, and deeply uncomfortable. It took me a moment to recognize him - because I hadn't seen him in over seven years, and because time had worked its nasty magic, rendering him middle-aged. Okay, I'm middle-aged too - just! - but Charlie (at fifty-five, nearly nine years my senior) really looked . . . well, I guess mature would be the right word, though world-weary might be a little more accurate. He'd lost most of his hair, and all of his physique. His face had become fleshy and loose. His waist bulged heavily at both sides - a spare tire that made his ill-fitting black suit appear even more of a sartorial misjudgment. His white shirt was open at the collar. His black tie was dappled with food stains. His entire countenance spoke of bad diet and a certain disappointment with life. I was certainly on cordial terms with the last of these concepts . . . but I was still stunned at just how badly he had aged, and that he had actually crossed the continent to say goodbye to a woman with whom he had only maintained nominal contact for the past thirty years.

'Kate,' he said, approaching me in the lobby of the funeral chapel.

He saw my face register shock.

'Charlie?'

There was an awkward moment when he reached to hug me, then thought better of it and simply took my two hands in his. For a moment we didn't know what to say to each other. Finally I managed a sentence.

'This is a surprise . . .'

'I know, I know,' he said, cutting me off.

'You got my messages?'

He nodded. 'Katie . . . I'm so sorry.'

I suddenly let go of his hands.

'Don't offer me condolences,' I said, my voice curiously calm. 'She was your mother too. Remember?'

He blanched. Finally he managed to mumble, 'That's not fair.'

My voice remained very calm, very controlled.

'Every day for the last month - when she knew she was going - she kept asking me if you had called. Towards the end, I actually lied, and said you were phoning me daily to see how she was doing. So don't talk to me about fair.'

My brother stared down at the funeral home linoleum. Two of my mother's friends then approached me. As they made the requisite sympathetic noises, it gave Charlie the opportunity to back away. When the service began, he sat in the last row of the funeral chapel. I craned my neck to check out the assembled congregation - and briefly caught his eye. He turned away in acute discomfort. After the service, I looked around for him, as I wanted to offer him the chance to ride with me in the so-called 'family car' to the cemetery. But he was nowhere to be found. So I traveled out to Queens with Ethan and my Aunt Meg. She was my father's sister - a seventy-four-year-old professional spinster who has been devoted to the destruction of her liver for the past forty years. I was pleased to see that she had remained sober for the occasion of her sister-in-law's send-off. Because on those rare occasions when she was practising temperance, Meg was the best ally you could have. Especially as she had a tongue on her like a pissed-off wasp. Shortly after the limo pulled away from the funeral home, the subject turned to Charlie.

'So,' Meg said, 'the prodigal schmuck returns.'

'And then promptly disappears,' I added.

'He'll be at the cemetery,' she said.

'How do you know that?'

'He told me. While you were pressing the flesh with everyone after the service, I caught him on the way out the door. "Hang on for a sec," I told him, "and we'll give you a ride out to Queens." But he went all mealy-mouthed, saying how he'd rather take the subway. I tell you, Charlie's still the same old sad asshole.'

'Meg,' I said, nodding toward Ethan. He was sitting next to me in the limo, deeply engrossed in a Power Rangers book.

'He's not listening to the crap I'm talking, are you, Ethan?'

He looked up from his book. 'I know what asshole means,' he said.

'Attaboy,' Meg said, ruffling his hair.

'Read your book, darling,' I said.

'He's one smart kid,' Meg said. 'You've done a great job with him, Kate.'

'You mean, because he knows bad language?'

'I love a girl who thinks so highly of herself.'

'That's me: Ms Self-Esteem.'

'At least you've always done the right thing. Especially when it comes to family.'

'Yeah - and look where it's gotten me.'

'Your mother adored you.'

'On alternate Sundays.'

'I know she was difficult . . .'

'Try genteelly impossible.'

'Trust me, sweetie - you and this guy here were everything to her. And I mean everything.'

I bit my lip, and held back a sob. Meg took my hand.

'Take it from me: parents and children both end up feeling that they're the ones who landed the thankless job. Nobody comes out happy. But at least you won't suffer the guilt that your idiot brother is now feeling.'

'Do you know I left him three messages last week, telling him she only had days left, and he had to come back and see her.'

'He never called you back?'

'No - but his spokesperson did.'

'Princess?'

'The one and only.'

'Princess' was our nickname for Holly - the deeply resistible, deeply suburban woman who married Charlie in 1975, and gradually convinced him (for a long list of spurious, self-serving reasons) to detach himself from his family. Not that Charlie needed much encouragement. From the moment I had been aware of such things, I always knew that, for a mother and son, Mom and Charlie had a curiously cool relationship - and that the root cause of their antipathy was my dad.

'Twenty bucks says Charlie-boy breaks down at the graveside,' Meg said.

'No way,' I said.

'I mightn't have seen him in . . . when the hell did he last pay us a visit?'

'Seven years ago.'

'Right, it may have been seven years ago, but I know that kid of old. Believe me, he's always felt sorry for himself. The moment I laid eyes on him today I thought: poor old Charlie is still playing the self-pity card. Not only that, he's also got hot-and-cold running guilt. Can't bring himself to talk to his dying mom, but then tries to make up for it by putting in a last-minute appearance at her planting. What a sad act.'

'He still won't cry. He's too wound tight for that.'

Meg waved the bill in front of me.

'Then let's see the color of your cash.'

I fiddled around in my jacket pocket until I found two tens. I brandished them in front of Meg's eyes. 'I'm going to enjoy taking your twenty off you,' I said.

'Not as much as I'm going to enjoy watching that pitiful shithead weep.'

I cast a glance at Ethan (still buried in his Power Rangers book), then threw my eyes heavenward.

'Sorry,' Meg said, 'it just kind of slipped out.'

Without looking up from his book, Ethan said, 'I know what shithead means.'

Meg won the bet. After a final prayer over the coffin, the minister touched my shoulder and offered his condolences. Then, one by one, the other mourners approached me. As I went through this receiving-line ritual of handshakes and embraces, I caught sight of that woman, staring down at the headstone adjoining my mother's plot, studying the inscription with care. I knew it off by heart:

John Joseph Malone

August 22, 1922 - April 14, 1956

John Joseph Malone. Also known as Jack Malone. Also known as my dad. Who suddenly left this world just eighteen months into my life - yet whose presence has always shadowed me. That's the thing about parents: they may physically vanish from your life - you may not have even known them - but you're never free of them. That's their ultimate legacy to you - the fact that, like it or not, they're always there. And no matter how hard you try to shake them, they never let go.

As my upstairs neighbor, Christine, embraced me, I glanced over her shoulder. Charlie was now walking towards our father's grave. The woman was still standing there. But once she saw him coming (and evidently knowing who he was), she immediately backed away, giving him clear access to Dad's plain granite monument. Charlie's head was lowered, his gait shaky. When he reached the gravestone, he leaned against it for support - and suddenly began to sob. At first he tried to stifle his distress, but within a moment he lost that battle and was sobbing uncontrollably. I gently removed myself from Christine's embrace. Instinctively, I wanted to run right over to him - but I stopped myself from such an outward show of sibling sympathy (especially as I couldn't instantly forgive the pain that my mother silently suffered about his absence over all those years). Instead, I slowly walked towards him, and lightly touched his arm with my hand.

'You okay, Charlie?' I asked quietly.

He lifted up his head. His face was tomato red, his eyes awash in tears. Suddenly he lurched towards me, his head collapsing against my shoulder, his arms clutching me as if I was a life preserver in high seas. His sobbing was now fierce, uninhibited. For a moment I stood there, arms at my side, not knowing what to do. But his grief was so profound, so total, so loud that, eventually, I simply had to put my arms around him.

It took him a good minute before his cries subsided. I stared ahead into the distance, watching Ethan (having just returned from the toilet) being gently restrained by Matt from running towards me. I winked at my son, and he repaid me with one of those hundred-watt smiles that instantly compensates for all the exhausting, endless stress that is an essential component of parenthood. Then I looked to the left of Ethan, and saw that woman again. She was standing discreetly in an adjoining plot, watching me comfort Charlie. Before she turned away (again!), I momentarily saw the intensity of her gaze. An intensity which made me wonder: how the hell does she know us?

I turned back to look at Ethan. He pulled open his mouth with two fingers and stuck out his tongue - one of the repertoire of funny faces he pulls whenever he senses I am getting far too serious for his liking. I had to stifle a laugh. Then I glanced back to where the woman was standing. But she was no longer there - and was instead walking alone down the empty graveled path that led to the front gates of the cemetery.

Charlie gulped hard as he tried to control his sobbing. I decided it was time to end the embrace, so I gently disentangled myself from his grip.

'Are you okay now?' I asked.

He kept his head bowed.

'No,' he whispered, then added: 'I should've, I should've . . .'

The crying started again. I should've. The most agonizing, self-punitive expression in the English language. And one we all utter constantly

throughout this farce called life. But Charlie was right. He should've. Now there was nothing he could do about it.

'Come back to the city,' I said. 'We're having some drinks and food at Mom's apartment. You remember where it is, don't you?'

I immediately regretted that comment, as Charlie began to sob again.

'That was dumb,' I said quietly. 'I'm sorry.'

'Not as sorry as me,' he said between sobs. 'Not as . . .'