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Leaving the World

Douglas Kennedy

ON THE NIGHT of my thirteenth birthday, I made an announcement.

'I am never getting married and I am never having children.'

I can remember exactly the time and the place where this proclamation was delivered. It was around six p.m. in a restaurant on West 63rd Street and Broadway. The day in question was January 1st 1987, and I blurted out this statement shortly after my parents had started fighting with each other. Fuelled by alcohol and an impressive array of deeply held resentments, it was a dispute which ended with my mother shouting out loud that my dad was a shit and storming off in tears to what she always called 'the little girls' room'. Though the other patrons in the restaurant gawked at this loud scene of marital discontent, their fight came as no great shock to me. My parents were always fighting – and they had this habit of really combusting at those junctures in the calendar (Christmas, Thanksgiving, the anniversary of their only child's arrival in the world) when family values allegedly ruled supreme and we were supposed to feel 'all warm and cuddly' towards each other.

But my parents never did warm and cuddly. They needed shared belligerence the way a certain kind of drunk needs his daily eye-opening shot of whiskey. Without it they felt destabilized, isolated, even a little lost. Once they started baiting and taunting each other, they were in a place they called home. Unhappiness isn't simply a state of mind; it is also a habit . . . and one which my parents could never shake.

But I digress. New Year's Day, 1987.We'd driven in from our home in Old Greenwich, Connecticut for my birthday. We'd gone to see the New York City Ballet perform the famous Balanchine production of The Nutcracker. After the matinee, we adjourned to a restaurant called O'Neill's opposite Lincoln Center. My dad had ordered a vodka Martini, then downed a second, then raised his hand for a third. Mom started berating him for drinking too much. Dad, being Dad, informed Mom that she wasn't his mother and if he wanted a goddamn third Martini, he'd drink a goddamn third Martini. Mom hissed at him to lower his voice. Dad said he was not going to be infantilized. Mom retorted, telling him he deserved to be infantilized because he was nothing more than a little baby who, when reprimanded, threw all

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His toys out of the crib. Dad, going in for the kill, called her a failed nobody who—

At which point she screamed – in her most actressy voice – 'You pathetic shit!' and made a dash for 'the little girls' room', leaving me staring down into my Shirley Temple. Dad motioned to the waiter for his third vodka Martini. There was a long awkward silence between us. Dad broke it with a non-sequitur.

'So how's school?'

I answered just as obliquely.

'I am never getting married and I am never having children.'

My father's response to this was to light up one of the thirty Chesterfields he smoked every day and laugh one of his deep bronchial laughs.

'Like hell you won't,' he said. 'You think you're gonna dodge all this, you've got another think coming.'

One thing I've got to say about my dad: he never spared me the truth. Nor did he think much about cosseting me from life's manifold disappointments. Like my mom he also operated according to the principle: after a vituperative exchange, act as if nothing has happened – for a moment or two anyway. So when Mom returned from 'the little girls' room' with a fixed smile on her face, Dad returned it.

'Jane here was just telling me about her future,' Dad said, swizzling the swizzle stick in his vodka Martini.

'Jane's going to have a great future,' she said. 'What did you tell Dad, dear?'

Dad answered for me.

'Our daughter informed me that she is never going to get married and never have children.'

Dad looked right at Mom as he said this, enjoying her discomfort.

'Surely you don't mean that, dear,' she said to me.

'I do,' I said.

'But a lot of people we know are very happily married . . .' she answered. Dad cackled and threw back vodka Martini number three.

Mom blanched, realizing that she had spoken without thinking. ('My mouth always reacts before my brain,' she once admitted to me after blurting out that she hadn't had sex with my father for four years.)

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An awkward silence followed, which I broke.

'No one's actually happy,' I said.

'Jane, really . . .' Mom said, 'you're far too young for such negativity.'

'No, she's not,' said Dad. 'In fact, if Jane's figured that little salient detail out already, she's a lot smarter than the two of us. And you're right, kid – you want to live a happy life, don't get married and don't have kids.

But you will . . .'

'Don, really . . .'

'Really what?' he said, half shouting in that way he did when he was drunk. 'You expect me to lie to her . . . even though she's already articulated the fucking truth?'

Several people at adjoining tables glared again at us. Dad smiled that little-boy smile which always crossed his lips whenever he misbehaved.

He ordered a fourth Martini. Mom strangled a napkin in her hands and said nothing except: 'I'll drive tonight.'

'Fine by me,' Dad said. Martini number four arrived. He toasted me with it.

'Happy birthday, sweetheart. And here's to you never living a lie . . .'

I glanced over at my mother. She was in tears. I glanced back at my father. His smile had grown even wider.

We finished dinner. We drove home in silence. Later that night, my mom came into my room as I was reading in bed. She kneeled down by me and took my hand and told me I was to ignore everything my father had said.

'You will be happy, dear,' she told me. 'I just know it.'

I said nothing. I simply shut my eyes and surrendered to sleep.

When I woke the next morning, my father had gone.

I discovered this when I came downstairs around eleven. School wasn't starting for another three days – and, as a new-fangled teenager, I had already started to embrace twelve-hour zone-outs as a way of coping with that prevalent adolescent belief: life sucks. As I walked into the kitchen I discovered my mother seated at the breakfast bar, her head lowered, her make-up streaked, her eyes red. There was a lit cigarette in an ashtray in front of her. There was another one between her fingers. And in her other hand was a letter.

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'Your father has left us,' she said. Her tone was flat, stripped of emotion.

'What?' I asked, not taking this news in.

'He's gone and he's not coming back. It's all here.'

She held up the letter.

'He can't do that,' I said.

'Oh, yes, he can – and he has. It's all here.'

'But this morning . . . he was here when you got up.'

She stared into the ashtray as she spoke.

'I cooked him his breakfast. I drove him to the station. I talked about going to some barn sale in Westport this Saturday. He said he'd be home on the 7:03. I asked him if he wanted lamb chops for dinner. He said: "Sure . . . but no broccoli." He gave me a peck on the cheek. I drove to A&P. I bought the lamb chops. I came home. I found this.'

'So he left it before you went to the station?'

'When we were walking to the car, he said he forgot that Parker pen of his and dashed back inside. That's when he must have left the note.'

'Can I see it?'

'No. It's private. It says stuff that—'

She stopped herself and took a long drag off her cigarette. Then suddenly she looked up at me with something approaching rage.

'If only you hadn't said . . .'

'What?' I whispered.

She raised the letter to her face. And read out loud:

'When Jane announced last night that "no one's actually happy", the decision I had been pondering – and postponing – for years suddenly seemed no longer inconceivable. And after you went to bed I sat up in the living room, considering the fact that, at best, I will be alive for another thirty-five years – probably less the way I smoke. So I couldn't help but think: enough of you, enough of this. Our daughter got it right: happiness doesn't exist. But at least if I was out of this marriage, I'd be less aggrieved than I am now.'

She tossed the letter onto the counter. There was a long silence. I felt for the very first time that strange traumatic sensation of the ground giving way beneath my feet.

'Why did you tell him that?' she asked. 'Why? He'd still be here now if only . . .'

That's when I ran upstairs and into my room, slamming the door behind me as I collapsed onto the bed. But I didn't burst into tears. I simply found myself in freefall. Words matter. Words count. Words have lasting import. And my words had sent my dad packing. It was all my fault.

An hour or so later, Mom came upstairs and knocked on my door and asked if I could ever forgive her for what she had said. I didn't reply. She came in and found me on my bed, curled up in a tight little ball, a pillow clutched against my mid-section.

'Jane, dear . . . I'm so sorry.'

I pulled the pillow even closer to me and refused to look at her.

'My mouth always reacts before my brain.'

As you've told me so many times before.

'And I was so stunned, so distraught . . .'

Words matter. Words count. Words have lasting import.

'We all say things we don't mean . . .'

But you meant exactly what you said.

'Please, Jane, please . . .'

That was the moment I put my hands over my ears, in an attempt to block her out. That was the moment when she suddenly screamed: 'All right, all right, be calculating and cruel . . . just like your father . . .'

And she stormed out of the room.

The truth of the matter was: I wanted to be calculating and cruel and pay her back for that comment and for all her attendant narcissism (not that I even knew that word at the time). The problem was: I've never really had it in me to be calculating and cruel. Petulant, yes. Irritable, yes . . . and definitely withdrawn whenever I felt hurt or simply overwhelmed by life's frequent inequities. But even at thirteen, acts of unkindness already struck me as abhorrent. So when I heard my mother sitting on the stairs, weeping, I forced myself up out of my defensive fetal position and onto the landing. Sitting down on the step next to her, I put my arm around her and lay my head on her shoulder. It took her ten minutes to bring her weeping under

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control. When she finally calmed down, she disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes, re-emerging with a look of enforced cheerfulness on her face.

'How about I make us BLTs for lunch?' she asked.

We both went downstairs and, yet again, pretended that nothing had happened.

My father made good on his word: he never returned home, even sending a moving company to gather up his belongings and bring them to the small apartment he rented on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Within two years the divorce came through. After that I saw my dad sporadically over the ensuing years (he was usually out of the country, working). Mom never remarried and never left Old Greenwich. She found a job in the local library which kept the bills paid and gave her something to do with the day. She also rarely spoke much about my father once he vanished from her life – even though it was so painfully clear to me that, as unhappy as the marriage was, she always mourned his absence. But the Mom Code of Conduct – never articulate that which is pulling you apart – was clung to without fail, even though I could constantly sense the sadness that coursed through her life. After Dad left, Mom started drinking herself to sleep most nights, becoming increasingly reliant on vodka as a way of keeping at bay the low-lying pain that so defined her. But the few times that I danced around the subject, she would politely but firmly tell me that she was most aware of her alcohol intake – and she was well able to control it.

'Anyway, as we used to say in French class: "À chacun son destin."'

Everyone to their own destiny.

Mom would always point out that this was one of the few phrases she remembered from her college classes – 'and I was a French minor'. But I'm not surprised that she kept that expression close to mind. As someone who hated conflict – and who went out of her way to avoid observations about the mess we all make of things – it's clear why she so embraced that French maxim. To her, we were all alone in a hostile universe and never really knew what life had in store for us. All we could do was muddle through. So why worry about drinking three vodkas too many every evening, or articulating the lasting grief and loneliness that underscores everything in daily life? À chacun son destin.

Certainly, Mom put up little resistance some years later when, at the age of sixty-one, the oncologist to whom she had been referred told her she had terminal cancer.

'It's liver cancer,' she said calmly when I rushed down to Connecticut after she was admitted to the big regional hospital in Stamford. 'And the problem with liver cancer is that it's ninety-nine percent incurable. But maybe that's its blessing as well.'

'How can you say that, Mom?'

'Because there is something reassuring about knowing nothing can be done to save you. It negates hope – and also stops you from submitting to horrible life-prolonging treatments which will corrode your body and destroy your will to survive, yet still won't save you. Best to bow to the inevitable, dear.'

For Mom, the inevitable arrived shortly after her diagnosis. She was very pragmatic and systematic about her own death. Having refused all temporary stop-gap measures – which might have bought her another six months – she opted for palliative care: a steady supply of intravenous morphine to keep the pain and the fear at bay.

'You think I should maybe get religion?' she asked me in one of her more lucid moments towards the end.

'Whatever makes things easier for you,' I said.

'Jessie – the nurse who looks after me most mornings – is some sort of Pentecostalist. I never knew they had people like that in Fairfield County.

Anyway, she keeps talking about how if I was willing to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I'd be granted life ever after. "Just think, Mrs Howard," she said yesterday, "you could be in heaven next week!"'

Mom flashed me a mischievous smile which then faded quickly as she asked me: 'But say she turns out to be right? Say I did accept Jesus? Would it be such a bad thing? I mean, I always had comprehensive automobile insurance when I was still alive . . .'

I lowered my head and bit my lip and failed to control the sob that had just welled up in my throat.

'You're still alive, Mom,' I whispered. 'And you could be alive for even longer if only you'd allow Dr Phillips—'

'Now let's not go there again, dear. My mind is made up. chacun À son destin.'

But then she suddenly turned away from me and started to cry. I held onto her hand. She finally said: 'You know what still gets to me? What still haunts my thoughts so damn often . . . ?'

'What?'

'Remember what you said to your father on the night of your thirteenth birthday?'

'Mom . . .'

'Now don't take this the wrong way, but you did say—'

'I know what I said, but that was years ago and—'

'You said: "I'm never getting married and I'm never having children," and followed it up with the observation that "nobody's actually happy" . . .'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing – and found myself thinking:

She's dying, she's on severe painkillers, ignore what she's saying, even though

I knew that she was having one of her rare moments of perfect lucidity right now. We had spent years sidestepping this issue. But in her mind I was still to blame for my father's departure.

'You did say those things, didn't you, dear?'

'Yes, I said them.'

'And the next morning, what happened?'

'You know what happened, Mom.'

'I don't blame you, dear. It's just . . . well, cause and effect. And maybe . . . just maybe . . . if those things hadn't been said at that specific moment . . . well, who knows? Maybe your father wouldn't have packed his bags.

Maybe the bad feelings he was having about the marriage might have passed. We're so often on the verge of walking out or giving up or saying that it's all not worth it. But without a trigger . . . that something which sends us over the edge . . .'

I hung my head. I said nothing. Mom didn't finish the sentence, as she was racked with one of the small convulsions that seized her whenever the pain reasserted itself. She tried to reach for the morphine plunger that was attached to the IV bag by the side of her bed. But her hand was shaking so badly that I had to take it myself and press the trigger and watch her ease into the semi-catatonic euphoria which the morphine induced. As she drifted into this chemical stupor, I could only think: Now you can fade away from what you just said . . . but I have to live on with it.

Words matter. Words count. Words have lasting import.

We never spoke again. I did take some comfort in the knowledge thatmy parents could never stand each other and that my long-vanished father would have ended it with Mom no matter what.