State of the Union

Douglas Kennedy

Part One

1966-1973

One

AFTER HE WAS arrested, my father became famous.

It was 1966 - and Dad (or John Winthrop Latham, as he was known to everyone except his only child) was the first professor at the University of Vermont to speak out against the war in Vietnam. That spring, he headed a campus-wide protest that resulted in a sit-down demonstration outside the Administration Building. My dad led three hundred students as they peacefully blocked the entrance for thirty-six hours, bringing university executive business to a standstill. The police and National Guard were finally called. The protestors refused to move, and Dad was shown on national television being hauled off to jail.

It was big news at the time. Dad had instigated one of the first major exercises in student civil disobedience against the war and the image of this lone, venerable Yankee in a tweed jacket and a button-down Oxford blue shirt, being lifted off the ground by a couple of Vermont state troopers, made it on to newscasts around the country.

'Your dad's so cool!' everybody told me at high school the morning after his arrest. Two years later, when I started my freshman year at the University of Vermont, even mentioning that I was Professor Latham's daughter provoked the same response.

'Your dad's so cool!' And I'd nod and smile tightly, and say, 'Yeah, he's the best.'

Don't get me wrong, I adore my father. Always have, always will. But when you're eighteen - as I was in '69 - and you're desperately trying to establish just the smallest sort of identity for yourself, and your dad has turned into the Tom Paine of both your home town and your college, you can easily find yourself dwarfed by his lanky, virtuous shadow.

I could have escaped his high moral profile by transferring to another school. Instead, in the middle of my sophomore year, I did the next best thing: I fell in love.

Dan Buchan was nothing like my father. Whereas Dad had the heavyduty WASP credentials - Choate, Princeton, then Harvard for his doctorate - Dan was from a nowhere town in upstate New York called Glens Falls. His father was a maintenance man in the local school system, his late mother had run a little manicure shop in

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town and Dan was the first member of his family to go to college at all, let alone medical school.

He was also one shy guy. He never dominated a conversation, never imposed himself on a situation. But he was a great listener - always far more interested in what you had to say. I liked this. And I found his gentle reticence to be curiously attractive. He was serious - and unlike everyone else I met at college back then, he knew exactly where he was going. On our second date he told me over a beer or two that he really didn't want to get into some big ambitious field like neurosurgery. And there was no way that he was going to 'pull a major cop out' and choose a big bucks specialty like dermatology. No, he had his sights set on Family Medicine. 'I want to be a small country doctor, nothing more,' he said.

First year med students worked thirteen-hour days, and Dan studied non-stop. The contrast between us couldn't have been more marked. I was an English major, thinking about teaching school when I graduated. But it was the early seventies, and unless you were going through the grind of med or law school, the last thing anyone had on their mind was 'the future'.

Dan was twenty-four when I met him, but the five-year age gap wasn't huge. From the outset, I liked the fact that he seemed far more focused and adult than any of the guys I had been seeing before him.

Not that I knew that much about men. There had been a high-school boyfriend named Jared - who was bookish and kind of arty and totally adored me, until he got into the University of Chicago, and it was clear that neither of us wanted to sustain a long distance thing. Then, during my first semester at college, I had my one short flirtation with freakdom when I started seeing Charlie. Like Jared, he was very sweet, very well read, a good talker, and 'creative' (which, for Charlie, meant writing a lot of what was - even to my impressionable eighteen-year-old eyes - really turgid poetry). He was heavily into dope - one of those guys who was usually smoking a joint with their breakfast coffee. For a while, this didn't bother me - even though I was never really into his scene. Still, in retrospect, I needed this brief descent into bacchanalia. It was '69 - and bacchanalia was in. But after three weeks of putting up with the mattress on the floor of the crash pad where Charlie lived - and his increasingly obtuse, stoned monologues from deepest Spacey Outer - there was an evening when I came over to find him sitting around with three friends, passing around a humungous joint while blaring The Grateful Dead on the hi-fi.

'Hey . . .' he said to me, then lapsed into silence. When I asked him over the din of the music if he wanted to head out to a movie, he just said 'Hey' again, though he kept nodding his head sagely, as if he had just revealed to me some great deep karmic secret about the life's hidden mysteries.

I didn't hang around - but instead retreated back to campus and ended up nursing a beer by myself in the Union, while tearing into a pack of Viceroy cigarettes. Somewhere during the third cigarette, Margy showed up. She was my best friend - a thin, reedy Manhattan smartass with a big shock of black curly hair. She'd been raised on Central Park West and went to the right school (Nightingale Bamford), and

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was super-smart. But, by her own admission, she had 'fucked up so badly when it came to opening a book' that she ended up at a state university in Vermont. 'And I'm not even into skiing.'

'You looked pissed off,' she said, sitting down, then tapping a Viceroy out of my pack and lighting it up with the book of matches on the table. 'Fun night with Charlie?'

I shrugged.

'The usual freak show over at that commune of his?' she asked.

'Uh-huh.'

'Well, I guess the fact he's cute makes up for . . .'

She stopped herself in mid-phrase, taking a deep pull off her cigarette.

'Go on,' I said, 'finish the sentence.'

Another long, thoughtful drag on her cigarette.

'The guy is high every moment of the day. Which kind of doesn't do much good for his use of words with more than one syllable, does it?'

I found myself laughing because in true New York style Margy had cut right through the crap. She was also ruthlessly straight about what she saw as her own limitations . . . and why, three months into our freshman year, she was still without a boyfriend.

'All the guys here are either ski bums - which, in my Thesaurus, is a synonym for Blah . . . or they're the sort of dope heads who have turned their brains into Swiss cheese.'

'Hey, it's not for life,' I said defensively.

'I'm not talking about your Mr Personality, hon. I'm just making a general observation.'

'You think he'd be devastated if I dumped him?'

'Oh, please. I think he'd take three hits off that stupid bong of his, and get over it before he exhaled the second time.'

It still took me another couple of weeks to break it off. I hate displeasing people and I always want to be liked. This is something that my mother, Dorothy, used to chide me about - because also being a New Yorker (and being my mom), she was similarly no-nonsense when it came to telling me what she thought.

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'You know, you don't always have to be Little Miss Popularity,' she once said when I was a junior in high school, and complained about not winning a place on the Student Council. 'And not fitting in with the cheerleading crowd seems cool to me. Because it's really okay to be smart.'

'A B- average isn't smart,' I said. 'It's mediocre.'

'I had a B- average in high school,' Mom said. 'And I thought that was pretty good. And, like you, I only had a couple of friends, and didn't make the cheerleading squad.'

'Mom, they didn't have cheerleaders at your school.'

'All right, so I didn't make the chess team. My point is: the popular girls in high school are usually the least interesting ones . . . and they always end up marrying orthodontists. And it's not like either your father or I think you're inadequate. On the contrary, you're our star.'

'I know that,' I lied. Because I didn't feel like a star. My dad was a star - the great craggy radical hero - and my mom could tell stories about hanging out with de Kooning and Johns and Rauschenberg and Pollock and all those other New York school bigwigs after the war. She'd exhibited in Paris, and still spoke French, and taught part time in the university art department, and just seemed so damn accomplished and sure of herself. Whereas I really didn't have any talent, let alone the sort of passion that drove my parents through life.

'Will you give yourself a break?' my mother would say. 'You haven't even begun to live, let alone find out what you're good at.'

And then she'd hurry off for a meeting of Vermont Artists Against the War, of which she was, naturally, the spokesperson.

That was the thing about my mom - she was always busy. And she certainly wasn't the type to share casserole recipes and bake Girl Scout cookies and sew costumes for Christmas pageants. In fact, Mom was the worst cook of all time. She really couldn't care less if the spaghetti came out of the pot half-stiff, or if the breakfast oatmeal was a mess of hardened lumps. And when it came to housework . . . well, put it this way, from the age of thirteen onwards, I decided it was easier to do it myself. I changed the sheets on all the beds, did everyone's laundry, and ordered the weekly groceries. I didn't mind coordinating everything. It gave me a sense of responsibility. And anyway, I enjoyed being organized.

'You really like to play house, don't you?' Mom once said when I popped over from college to clean the kitchen.

'Hey, be grateful someone around here does.'

Still, my parents never set curfews, never told me what I couldn't wear, never made me tidy my room. But perhaps they didn't have to. I never stayed out all that late, I

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never did the flower child clothes thing (I preferred short skirts), and I was one hell of a lot tidier than they were.

Even when I started smoking cigarettes at seventeen, they didn't raise hell.

'I read an article in The Atlantic saying they might cause cancer,' my mother said when she found me sneaking a butt on the back porch of our house. 'But they're your lungs, kiddo.'

My friends envied me such non-controlling parents. They dug their radical politics and the fact that our New England red clapboard house was filled with my mom's weird abstract paintings. But the price I paid for such freedom was my mom's non-stop sarcasm.

'Prince Not So Bright,' she said the day after my parents met Charlie.

'I'm sure it's just a passing thing,' my dad said.

'I hope so.'

'Everyone needs at least one goof-ball romance,' he said, giving Mom an amused smile.

'De Kooning was no goof-ball.'

'He was perpetually vague.'

'It wasn't a romance. It was just a two-week thing . . .'

'Hey, you know I am in the room,' I said, not amazed how they had somehow managed to blank me out, but just a little astonished to learn that Mom had once been Willem de Kooning's lover.

'We are aware of that, Hannah,' my mom said calmly. 'It's just that, for around a minute, the conversation turned away from you.'

Ouch. That was classic Mom. My dad winked at me, as if to say, 'You know she doesn't mean it.' But the thing was, she really did. And being a Good Girl, I didn't storm out in adolescent rage. I just took it on the chin - per usual.

When it came to encouraging my independence Mom urged me to attend college away from Burlington - and gave me a hard time for being a real little homebody when I decided to go to the University of Vermont. She insisted that I live in a dorm on campus. 'It's about time you were ejected from the nest,' she said.

One of the things Margy and I shared was a confused background - WASPy dads and difficult Jewish moms who seemed to always find us wanting.

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'At least your mom gets off her tukkus and does the art thing,' said Margy. 'For my mom, getting a manicure is a major personal achievement.'

'You ever worry you're not really good at anything?' I suddenly said.

'Like only all the time. I mean, my mom keeps reminding me how I was groomed for Vassar and ended up in Vermont. And I know that the thing I do best is bum cigarettes and dress like Janis Joplin . . . so I'm not exactly Little Miss Bursting With Confidence. But what has you soul searching?'

'Sometimes I think my parents look on me as some separate selfgoverning state . . . and a massive disappointment.'

'They tell you this?'

'Not directly. But I know I'm not their idea of a success story.'

'Hey, you're eighteen. You're supposed to be a fuck-up . . . not that I'm calling you that.'

'I've got to get focused.'

Margy coughed out a lung full of smoke.

'Oh, please,' she said.

But I was determined to get my act together - to win my parents' interest and show them that I was a serious person. So, for starters, I began to get serious as a student. I stayed in the library most nights until ten, and did a lot of extra reading - especially for a course called Landmarks of Nineteenth Century Fiction. We were reading Dickens and Thackeray and Hawthorne and Melville and even George Eliot. But of all the assigned books in that first semester course, the one that really grabbed me was Flaubert's Madame Bovary.

'But it's so goddamn depressing,' Margy said.

'Isn't that the point?' I said. 'Anyway, the reason it's depressing is because it's so real.'

'You call all that romantic stupidity she gets into real ? I mean, she's kind of a schnook, isn't she? Marrying that dull-ass guy, moving to a dullass town, then throwing herself at that smarmy soldier, who just sees her as a mattress, nothing more.'

'Sound pretty real to me. Anyway, the whole point of the novel is how someone uses romance as a way of escaping from the boredom of her life.' 'So what else is new?' she said.

My dad, on the other hand, seemed interested in my take on the book. We were having one of our very occasional lunches off-campus (as much as I adored him, I

didn't want to be seen eating with my father at the Union), slurping clam chowder at a little diner near the university. I told him how much I loved the book, and how I thought Emma Bovary was 'a real victim of society'.

'In what way?' he asked.

'Well, the way she lets herself get trapped in a life she doesn't want, and how she thinks falling in love with someone else will solve her problems.'

He smiled at me and said, 'That's very good. Spot on.'

'What I don't get is why she had to choose suicide as a way out; why she just didn't run away to Paris or something.'

'But you're seeing Emma from the perspective of an American woman in the late 1960s, not as someone trapped by the conventions of her time. You've read The Scarlet Letter, right?'

I nodded.

'Well, nowadays we might wonder why Hester Prynne put up with walking around Boston with a big letter A on her chest, and lived with constant threats from the Puritan elders about taking her child away. We could ask: why she didn't just grab her daughter and flee elsewhere? But in her mind, the question would have been: where can I go? To her, there was no escape from her punishment - which she almost considered to be her destiny. It's the same thing with Emma. She knows if she flees to Paris, she'll end up, at best, working as a seamstress or in some other depressing petit bourgeois job - because nineteenth-century society was very unforgiving about a married woman who'd run away from her responsibilities.'

'Does this lecture last long?' I asked, laughing. 'Because I've got a class at two.'

'I'm just getting to the point,' Dad said with a smile. 'And the point is, personal happiness didn't count for anything. Flaubert was the first great novelist to understand that we all have to grapple with the prison which we create for ourselves.'

'Even you, Dad?' I asked, surprised to hear him make this admission. He smiled another of his rueful smiles and stared down into his bowl of chowder.

'Everyone gets bored from time to time,' he said. Then he changed the subject.

It wasn't the first time my father had implied that things weren't exactly perfect with my mom. I knew they fought. My mom was Brooklyn Loud, and tended to fly off the handle when something pissed her off. My dad - true to his Boston roots - hated public confrontation (unless it involved adoring crowds and the threat of arrest). So as soon as Mom was in one of her flipped-out moods, he tended to run for cover.

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When I was younger, these fights disturbed me. But, as I got older, I began to understand that my parents fundamentally got along - that theirs was a weirdly volatile relationship which just somehow worked, perhaps because they were such fantastic polar opposites. And though I probably would have liked them around more as I was growing up, one thing I did learn from their sometimes stormy, independent-minded marriage was that two people didn't have to crowd each other to make a relationship work. But when Dad hinted at a certain level of domestic boredom I realized something else: you never know what's going on with two people . . . you can only speculate.

Just as you can only speculate about why a woman like Emma Bovary so believed that love would be the answer to all her problems.

'Because the vast majority of women are idiots, that's why,' my mother said when I made the mistake of asking her opinion about Flaubert's novel. 'And do you know why they're idiots? Because they put their entire faith in a man. Wrong move. Got that? Always.'

'I'm not stupid, Mom,' I said.

'We'll see about that.'

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