

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 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.'

Douglas Kennedy, *Leaving the World* (2010)