An Unfinished Love Story

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE 1960s

Doris Kearns Goodwin

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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AN UNFINISHED LOVE STORY

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE 1960s

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

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To

Michael Rothschild

Short Story Writer ~ Sculptor

Print-Maker ~ Orchardist

Farmer

Dick's Best Friend

and

Mine

Introduction

THERE WAS A BUZZ OF excitement when I arrived at my Harvard office at 78 Mt. Auburn Street one June morning in 1972. Richard "Dick" Goodwin had just taken an office on the third floor of our old yellow building to finish a book project. We all knew who he was: He had worked in John Kennedy's White House in his twenties, served as Lyndon Johnson's chief speechwriter during the heyday of the Great Society, and been in California with Robert Kennedy when he died. An acquaintance who knew him said he was the most brilliant, interesting man she had ever met but that he was sometimes brash, mercurial, and arrogant—in short, he cut a scintillating and unpredictable figure.

I had just settled in my office at the top of the stairs when in Dick wandered, plopping down on one of the chairs reserved for my tutees. His appearance intrigued me: curly, disheveled black hair, with thick, unruly eyebrows, and a pockmarked face. Several large cigars stuck out of the pocket of his casual shirt. He introduced himself and asked if I was a graduate student. "No, I am an assistant professor," I countered. "I teach a lecture course on the American presidency. I conduct seminars and tutorials."

"I know, I know!" he laughed, holding up his hands to stop me. "I'm teasing you. You worked for Lyndon after I left."

So began a conversation about LBJ, the Sixties, writing, literature, philosophy, science, astronomy, sex, evolution, gossip, the Red Sox, and everything else under the sun—a conversation that would continue for the next forty-six years of our lives. We had missed being together in the White House by three years. I had become a member of Johnson's White House staff in 1968; Dick had left in the fall of 1965, already concerned that the escalating war in Vietnam was sucking energy from the Great Society.

Away from Washington, Dick told me, his misgivings about the shriveling funds and focus on domestic policy were supplanted by increasingly strong qualms about the war itself. When he made his first public statement against the war, he was assailed by criticism from the administration's foreign policy establishment. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy told him that, as a former member of the White House team, he didn't leave in the right way. He should have left silently, keeping his dissent to himself. And from Ambassador Averell Harriman had come the curious accusation that he was biting the hand that fed him.

"What did you say to that?" I asked. Dick's eyes flashed at the memory of his response. "I told him Lyndon didn't feed me. I fed myself." I wasn't sure if his tone displayed ironic humor or harbored a real contempt.

We talked for five hours straight. He had an edgy nonconformist streak, as well as a distinct gravity, a world-weariness, a sharp wit, yet in his eyes and gestures a kindness.

He suggested we continue our conversation over dinner that night at a restaurant on Beacon Hill in Boston. We had just settled at our table and chosen a bottle of wine when he leaned toward me. "Tell me," he began. "Where did you get your ambition? What were your parents like? How many times have you been in love?" What struck me was the intensity and eagerness of his inquiry. Given his prompts, I was off and running.

I told him I had grown up in the 1950s in Rockville Centre, a suburb of New York, where the neighbors on our block formed an extended family. With almost a dozen kids the same age as me, we ran in and out of each other's houses all day. Our street was our playground. I told him stories about my parents and my sisters, my love of history and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the joy I had always found in school.

Dick interrupted me several times but only to ask further questions about my mother, who had died when I was fifteen, and my father, who had died only a month before. Finally, I took a deep breath. I realized how artfully he had turned the tables. I was usually the one asking questions when I met people.

After we finished dinner, he told me about growing up in Brookline, Massachusetts, and attending Tufts College and Harvard Law School. His

account was far more condensed than mine. He had recently returned to Cambridge from rural Maine, where he had moved not long after Robert Kennedy's death. His six-year-old son, Richard Jr. (called Richard), was ready for first grade, and he wanted him to be schooled in the Boston area. He spoke very little about his wife, Sandra. A gifted writer, she had studied at Vassar and the Sorbonne but had struggled with mental illness and been hospitalized for long periods of time. They had been separated for some years.

Clearly, there was far more to the story, but he abruptly changed the subject: "What about the Red Sox?"—the baseball team he adored despite a lifelong expectation they would fail, the team that had also become mine after the Brooklyn Dodgers abandoned me and I had made my home in Massachusetts.

When he dropped me off at my house, he cupped my face. "Well, Doris Kearns," he said, "a friendship has begun." He hugged me and said good night. With Dick's office in the same building as mine, we did indeed become good friends, the deepest friendship of my life.

Half a year later, Sandra had left the hospital and taken her life. In the months that followed I spent as much time as possible trying to help Dick and Richard hold their hectic life together. I came over in the mornings to take Richard to school. Dick and I juggled our days and nights, my teaching with his writing, my writing with Richard's care, school, and friends. We improvised as best we could during this chaotic, unstable time of great stress and sorrow, teamwork and fun. Before long, I came to the realization that I had fallen in love with Dick and I knew that he loved and trusted me.

But the turmoil and upheaval of Dick's life made it impossible for him to make a long-term commitment, which he knew I wanted. He worried about his son, his work, and his finances. Most importantly, he feared the consequences for the three of us if our relationship didn't work out. Until he pulled himself together, he said, it would be better for him to get his bearings, and to focus on Richard.

I understood, but nonetheless, I was devastated. My love for Dick had become a full-blown obsession. Before we had met, I had felt fulfilled by

teaching, colleagues, family, and friends. I had been hard at work on my first book—the portrait of Lyndon Johnson that would enable my professional and academic advancement. My self-sufficient life had suddenly begun to unravel.

Indeed, I was so filled with confusion, passion, and anxiety that for the first time I sought support from a psychiatrist, Dr. Grete Bibring, who had trained under Sigmund Freud. I wondered if my obsession with Dick was simply because he was unavailable, or because my father had recently died? I had always had confidence in my ability to make things work. I'd been born with an irrepressible and optimistic temperament, which I liked to think I had inherited from my father. But that confidence had begun to waver. Dr. Bibring allowed me to understand that I had genuinely fallen in love with Dick but that if I wanted a lasting relationship to develop, I would have to wait, to accept his decision to stay apart for the time being.

Dick and Richard soon moved to Washington, where Dick had become political editor at *Rolling Stone* magazine. In their absence, I worked hard to put my life back together without them—until, a year or so later, when I ran into Dick on a street in Cambridge. He had come to the city for a meeting. On the spot, he invited me to dinner that night, and we resumed our long-interrupted conversation. The next day, he called and asked me to return with him to Washington and stay with him for the rest of our lives.

On December 14, 1975, a little more than three years after our first meeting, we were married. The wedding ceremony was held in the great meeting room of the two-hundred-year-old colonial house Dick and I had rented when we had moved in together earlier that fall. I walked down the aisle to *Man of La Mancha*'s "The Impossible Dream." Dick's best man was fiction writer Michael Rothschild, down from the mountains of western Maine. An Irish tenor sang "Jerusalem," the wedding hymn based on a poem by William Blake, one of Dick's favorite poets. Richard, now nine years old, and a group of his friends cut our four-tier wedding cake with a sword.

The Boston Globe's front-page story described the guest list as "A Great Society Reunion," combining "New Yorkian style, Washington power, and Boston brains; but most of all it was fun and friends." Senator Edward Kennedy, Boston mayor Kevin White, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., William vanden Heuvel, and

several LBJ cabinet members were there, along with Norman Mailer, journalist Jon Bradshaw and his girlfriend, Anna Wintour, *Rolling Stone*'s Hunter Thompson (who left the tub running in Concord's Colonial Inn, flooding two floors), and a circle of my Harvard colleagues.

Where would we make our permanent home? I longed for the bustle of big-city life, while Dick sought the tranquility of the country. Our debate was finally resolved when we struck a perfect compromise in Concord, Massachusetts, a town of eighteen thousand residents twenty miles west of Boston—close enough for easy access to the city, but still a country community with a long, winding river, wooded areas, walking trails, plentiful farms, and a classic main street. We were both drawn to the town's historical richness: the footprint of the antislavery movement, the circle of mid-nineteenth-century writers who had once dwelled within walking distance of one another—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott—and whose homes were still standing. Dick revered Emerson's essays and poetry, particularly admired Hawthorne's tales (as much as he despised his politics), and was fond of Thoreau's writings on civil disobedience and *The Maine Woods.*

Furthermore, Concord was the seedbed of our country's formative days during the American Revolution. Dick was a boisterous patriot from the top of his head to his toes—a lover of fireworks, parades, and songs. In the years to come, he would drag visitors to the North Bridge and in his deep theatrical voice recite "The Shot Heard Round the World," Emerson's stanza carved below Daniel Chester French's Minute Man statue. I confess whenever I heard Dick's booming recitation of Emerson's words, I couldn't help but associate "The Shot Heard Round the World" with Bobby Thomson's ninth-inning home run off Brooklyn's Ralph Branca to win the 1951 pennant for the despised New York Giants, extinguishing the hopes of my beloved Dodgers.

Our marriage brought the joys, pressures, and exhaustion of an instant family. I had long wanted to have children and now, within two years, our family had grown to five. Richard was ten when I gave birth to Michael. Fifteen months later, Joe was born. During these early years of marriage and family, I

was moving toward the decision to stop teaching and try my hand at becoming a full-time writer. Chance had given me the opportunity to write my first book on LBJ and its positive reception led to a contract for a second book. I didn't think then (though I might think differently today) that I would be able to teach with the intensity and absorption I demanded of myself, research and write books, and still spend the time I wanted with my young family. I barely made a dent on my to-do lists and could only dream of what seemed that mythical place—a "room of one's own."

I had confidence in my teaching and lecturing, but found defining myself solely and simply as a writer of biography and history unsettling. Dick strongly encouraged me. "You are a natural storyteller," he assured me again and again. "Write like you talk, only not quite so fast," he needled.

Dick's worry that I would write too fast proved way off the mark. Despite my rapid mode of speaking, it turned out I was an agonizingly slow writer. My second book on the Kennedys took eight years to complete, even though I was no longer teaching. At a Harvard party one afternoon, I overheard one student ask another, "Whatever happened to Doris Kearns anyway? Did she die?" What happened, I wanted to shout, is that I have three young boys!

Two writers under one roof offered unique problems and pleasures. Even though we eventually created our own writing rooms, working in the same house meant small separation between work and family. When Michael and Joe were toddlers, we hired a nanny to allow me greater time to write, but whenever the boys wandered into my study wanting to talk or play, I found it impossible to turn them away. I found a solution to my dilemma by creating a workspace in the stately Reference Room of the Concord Public Library. There, writing in longhand on a beautiful oak table, surrounded by sculptures and busts of the great Concord authors and a painting of Abraham Lincoln, I could focus for three or more hours each morning until one of the librarians would come to tell me that my husband had called to announce that lunch was ready.

My love of libraries had begun when I was still in middle school. One of my treasured memories was the privilege of walking to our town library each week, with my mother's adult card in my hand, along with the list of books she wanted for that week. The rheumatic fever she had suffered as a child had left her with a

damaged heart, keeping her housebound. Although she had only an eighth-grade education, she read books in every spare moment. Through books she could travel to places she could never go. And what a joy it was for me to turn left into the adult room instead of right into the children's room. I felt older, taller, wiser.

Once all three boys were in school, I settled back into my study at home. Proximity allowed Dick and I to engage in one another's books and articles. We would often exchange pages in the late morning and then go over them at lunch. If we had reached obstacles in our writing or thinking, we would always put our heads together, and more often than not, work things out.

Book after book of my career as a historian, the practical knowledge Dick had gained during his years in the political cauldron of the Sixties filtered into and enriched my own comprehension of the pressures, limitations, and actual parameters of political choice and action. Though his full-time role in public service had come to an end many years earlier, the issues that had motivated Dick's political career sustained him for the rest of his life as he continued to write books, articles, and columns, searching out the passions and achievements that had animated change in the Sixties.

For the first half of our married life, we lived on Main Street in Concord. The library, bookstore, coffee shops, restaurants, playing fields, and schools were all within walking distance. Dick was the coach of Richard's Little League team. I was the team's scorekeeper, having learned to keep score from my father when I was six years old so I could record the plays of Brooklyn Dodger games on summer afternoons while he was at work. When he came home, I would recount for him every play, inning by inning of the game that he had missed. He never told me then that official box scores were published in the newspapers the following day. Without my scoring, I imagined, he would never have known the details of the games he missed.

Many weekends, we took the kids to Red Sox games. Seated at Fenway Park with my children, I could sometimes shut my eyes and remember myself as a young girl, sitting with my father at Ebbets Field, watching Jackie Robinson, Pee

Wee Reese, Duke Snider, and Gil Hodges. There was an enchantment in such moments, for when I opened my eyes, I felt an invisible loyalty and love linking my sons to the grandfather whose face they never had a chance to see but whose heart and soul they had come to know through the stories I told.

When the boys were in high school, our lives were filled with wrestling matches, lacrosse games, school plays, guitar lessons, baseball card auctions, *Star Trek*, and comic book conventions. Our house became the nucleus of activity for dozens of our children's friends. We turned a garage into a big playroom with a pool table, pinball machine, air hockey game, and a giant TV screen. Many afternoons our boys came home from school to find a half dozen friends lounging on our couches, waiting for the action to begin.

The only problem with our choice of the Main Street house was that there was no extra space to accommodate the more than three hundred boxes of memorabilia Dick had accumulated over the years. He had saved everything—handwritten letters, mementos, and remnants of his life from his college and law school days through his years in the White House and beyond; there were reams of White House memos, his diaries, myriad drafts of speeches annotated by presidents and would-be presidents, clippings, newspaper editorials, old magazines, scrapbooks, photographs—a mass that would prove to contain a unique and comprehensive archive of the Sixties. What was inscrutable to me at the time was that Dick had such intensely conflicted feelings about the contents these boxes held. They represented a time that he recalled with both elation and a crushing sense of loss.

We hastily selected diaries, some drafts of important speeches Dick had worked on, personal letters, and memos between Dick and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The vast remainder we put into storage. But even that cursory overview was sufficient to recognize that his jumble of boxes was significant, not only to Dick, but to history.

When all our boys were off to college, graduate school, and the pursuit of career, Dick and I moved from Main Street down Monument Street past the Old Manse where Emerson wrote *Nature* and Hawthorne prepared his *Mosses*,

past the North Bridge of the revolutionary battlefield, to the rambling old house where we lived the last twenty years of our lives together. The Monument Street house had a basement and a post-and-beam barn attached to the house which we converted into a gym. Between the cellar and barn, we finally had enough room to accommodate the train of cardboard boxes and plastic containers that had followed Dick through his life.

After decades in storage, the boxes and various containers arrived on a truck and were lugged down to the cellar until they encroached on the furnace and threatened to climb the cellar stairs. And when there was no more space, the remainder were sent off to the barn, to be stacked along the walls of the gym. Still, Dick resisted the idea of starting the process of excavating the files. He was not ready to go back. For him, the end of the Sixties had cast a dark curtain on the entire decade. Scar tissue remained. He was determined only to look ahead.

One summer morning, seven months after he had turned eighty, Dick came down the stairs for breakfast, clumps of shaving cream on his earlobes, singing "the corn is as high as a elephant's eye" from *Oklahoma!*

"Why so chipper?" I asked.

"I had a flash," he said, looking over the headlines of the three papers I had laid out for him on the breakfast table. Putting them aside, he started writing down numbers. "Three times eight is twenty-four. Three times eighty, two forty."

"Is that your revelation?" I asked.

"Look, my eighty-year lifespan occupies more than a third of our republic's history. That means that our democracy is merely three 'Goodwins' long."

I tried to suppress a smile.

"Doris, one Goodwin ago, when I was born, we were in the midst of the Great Depression. Pearl Harbor happened on December 7, 1941, my tenth birthday. It ruined my whole party! If we go back two Goodwins we find Concord Village roiled in furor over the Fugitive Slave Act. A third Goodwin will bring us back to the point that if we went out our front door, took a left,

and walked down the road, we might just see those embattled farmers and witness the commencement of the Revolutionary War."

He glanced at the newspapers and went to his study on the far side of the house. An hour later, he was at my door to read aloud a paragraph he had just written:

"Three spans of one long life traverse the whole of our short national history. One thing that a look backward over the vicissitudes of our country's story suggests is that massive and sweeping change will come. And it can come swiftly. Whether or not it is healing and inclusive change depends on us. As ever, such change will generally percolate from the ground up, as in the days of the American Revolution, the antislavery movement, the progressive movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, the environmental movement. From the long view of my life, I see how history turns and veers. The end of our country has loomed many times before. America is not as fragile as it seems."

I had been wrong to consider Dick's concept of one "Goodwin" to measure an eight-decade span of American history as simply whimsical. The light of optimism in his eye was in earnest. During the first half of the Sixties, a great window of opportunity had been opened. It had long been his dream, he told me, that such a window might open again.

So it was not out of the blue when he turned to me and said: "It's now or never!" The time had come to unpack, collate, and examine his treasure trove, box by box, file by file. We hired our friend Deb Colby to work as his research assistant, and together, they began the slow process of rummaging through the boxes and arranging them in chronological order.

Once that preliminary process had been completed, Dick was hopeful that there might be something of a book in all the material he had uncovered. He wanted me to go back to the very first box with him and work our way to the end.

"I need your help," he said simply. "Jog my memory, ask me questions, see what we can learn from this, find out what we can do with this."

"You've got it!" I exclaimed.

"I'm an old guy after all. If I have any wisdom to dispense, I'd better start dispensing."

That afternoon I joined him in his study, and we started on the first group of boxes that covered the Fifties and the early Sixties. We made a deal to try and spend time on this project every weekend to see what might come of it.

Our last great adventure together was about to begin.