

AFTER
THE
SUCKER PUNCH

a novel

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Chapter 1

January 5, 2002 – the journal of Leo Curzio:

One is obligated by moral duty to love one's child. One is not obligated to like them. A conundrum when it comes to my fourth, my third daughter, Teresa – or Tessa, as she insists we call her now.

Recently I searched through my journals of the past several years looking for an entry about her but could find nothing. Perhaps that's not so strange; she has been an enigma to me since she finished high school. As I look back, it seems her senior year was the pinnacle of her life...from that point on little has happened to bear out her great promise.

Convinced of her own abilities, which do seem apparent or, at the very least, measurable, she decided to try for a job in the movies, TV, or perhaps the recording business out in Hollywood. She insisted that if after two years she had gotten nowhere she would try something else. Well, it's been more than three years and she has nothing to show for it except some amateur acting classes and self-produced plays. In September she will be twenty-five.

So what's the problem with Teresa? For sure, I don't know. She is a great disappointment. Not simply because she's failed up to now, but that endowed with so much talent she hasn't employed it for anything useful and doesn't show signs of improving.

On a day when all she wanted to do was mourn the father so often longed for and buried just hours before, Tessa Curzio sat on the bed in which she was surely conceived and felt posthumously sucker punched. She looked down at the twelve-year-old journal splayed across her lap and realized it truly was a Pandora's box come to life, a dubious gift from a dead man who had little to say while living but clearly plenty upon departure. She snapped it shut and threw it across the room with enough force to shatter her mother's purple vanity lamp.

A clock that followed to the floor doggedly kept ticking time. 5:17 pm.

It was the beginning of the next uncomfortable phase of her life.

Chapter 2

Because no tantrum could go unnoticed in this house, the door flew open and oldest sister Michaela, tight chignon and Ann Taylor classics all in place, swept in with a frown and a large tray of hors d'oeuvres. She and Tessa, though only four years apart, were opposite in so many critical ways they struggled to be even marginal friends, a status they'd admirably put aside to "rise above" during this challenging week. Noting the purple shards on the Oriental she'd vacuumed earlier that morning, Michaela stifled a retort only when she caught the look on Tessa's face.

"Oh, honey, I know, I know," she whispered, miscalculating the motive behind the lamp's demise. She left her tray on the dresser and came to Tessa with sympathetic arms. "It's so hard to lose him...I know."

With Michaela patting her rigid shoulder for what seemed far too long without comment, Tessa finally took a deep breath. "Um, Mickie...thanks, but I think I just need to be alone for a while, okay?"

Relieved, Michaela quickly pulled away. "Absolutely, I understand. Just do me a favor and clean up the lamp before you come down. Mom doesn't need anything else to be upset about today." Rising from the bed, her eyes caught the box of journals Tessa had pulled out from underneath; the tone shift was sharp and immediate. "Wow, really? Well, don't let her know you're already rifling through Dad's stuff. She'd actually like to look through everything first, if you wouldn't mind."

"It's just some...books," Tessa glared. A swift jerk of her ankle kicked the box back under the bed. Michaela picked up her tray and, with an icy shot back, swept out as she'd swept in.

Tessa had found the box of mildewed date books at the behest of second eldest sister, Suzanna, a sibling of a totally different color and an ass-kicker whom Tessa adored. Suzanna was the agent provocateur of the family, a role sparked decades earlier by their parents' inflamed response to her ill-conceived, if accidental, premarital pregnancy (a blessed event that jumped her wedding by less than a month). The word "whore" was invoked, her divorce a year later was "God's retribution," and Suzanna was never quite able to forgive them for it all, even years later when they offered awkward apologies about dogma and overreaction. Revenge was exacted by her phenomenal success in business, far exceeding that of her father's, and by raising a lovely boy despite his one fetal month of bastardhood.

In her self-assigned mission to keep the family legacy honest, Suzanna, exasperated by an uncharacteristic bout of Daddy-idealizing on Tessa's part the night before, had suggested her little sister find the box of journals he'd so copiously recorded over the years and read at least one of them, "particularly 2002" with its insights about Tessa specifically. "You need some

perspective,” Suzanna had ominously declared.

So Tessa dutifully looked and regretfully found the box under the bed. Apparently there were other boxes somewhere, no one knew where, but this one held at least twelve or thirteen years of minutia spilled onto the pages of yearly date books given to the employees of the bookbinding company where Leo had spent the bulk of his adult working life. Date books meant for appointments and note keeping but utilized by Leo for his introspective ramblings over the last fifty years. As instructed, Tessa found *2002*, which now lay on the floor amidst dust and purple glass.

Suddenly exhausted, she curled up in the perfumed sleep habitat of parents who now seemed intangible, realizing, after many years of wondering, that she finally knew what her father thought of her. Interesting how a dead man could so easily suck breath from a living solar plexus, like the mythical cat and unsuspecting baby.

A quick rap at the door snapped her reverie. She sat up, fluffed her hair and trilled, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Tess. What are you doing? Got someone in there with you?” Ronnie, Tessa’s younger brother and closest sibling, was already slurring as he cracked open the door, his face goofy with a grin. “Are you having sex on Mom and Dad’s bed to assuage your fear of death?”

Tessa couldn’t help but smile. There was just something about Ronnie. “Go away, idiot.”

“Okay, sis, I got it...you’re processing your grief by rolling in Dad’s sheets. Gross but strangely titillating.”

“Ronnie!”

“Hey, who am I to judge? Just don’t take too long, whatever you’re doing. Mom’s tilting and Michaela’s about to snap. It could get ugly.”

As the door clicked shut and he stumbled back down the hall, Tessa sighed at the second interruption of the hour, realizing, mostly, that she didn’t want to go back down there...down into the swirling eddy of sobbing, dramatic folk seeping into the small Chicago brownstone to mourn a man who now felt like an imperfect stranger. The rising cacophony was unavoidable, however, signaling the arrival of aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, surely a priest or two, and plenty of neighbors. No choice but to postpone internal combustion for a more solitary time.

Straightening the bed, she was perversely pleased to see mascara streaked across her father’s starched pillowcase. That would have annoyed him. She went to the vanity. Examining herself in the mirror, Tessa noted that her smeared eye-makeup lent a sort of punky irreverence to her face, appropriate, perhaps, to her new assignation as Failed Daughter. She left it.

She picked up the family portrait that held center stage in this private corner of her mother’s world and studied it as if for the first time. It had always been one of her favorites, all of them lined up in birth order, for those, her mother once scoffed, who struggled to keep the six Curzio children straight. Suzanna once joked that they should wear permanent nametags but Audrey, the indomitable matriarch, insisted it wasn’t the family’s obligation to facilitate the memory of others. “People ought to take the time to differentiate.” The most she would accede to was their positioning. Still, people typically mixed them up, especially the girls.

But there they all were, matted, framed and in birth order: oldest brother Duncan was on the left, then Michaela, Suzanna, Tessa, Ronnie, and the baby of the family, Isabella, whom they endearingly called “Izzy.” Audrey stood with her arm around eighteen-year-old Duncan, chin raised in Joan Crawfordian aplomb, eyes sharp and a smile wide as the sky. Leo, the stern patriarch, stood on the other end, Izzy leaning slightly into his side, his handsome face set in a cool, inscrutable expression. Michaela and Suzanna were tall, mature young women gazing calmly at the camera, while Tessa and Ronnie appeared to be giggling at some private joke. It was a perfect image; an exact distillation of her family, and Tessa couldn’t help but smile as she put the frame back under the amber lights.

She bent down and retrieved the assaulted journal from the floor, opening the pages once more to Leo’s crinkly handwriting: *“She is a great disappointment. Not simply because she’s failed up to now, but that endowed with so much talent she hasn’t employed it for anything useful...”*

At least he said she had talent.

Chapter 3

Chaos reigned downstairs. Children, large and small, ran about screaming and laughing without a thought to the somber theme of the event. The adults crammed into every corner of the house and the ambiance was oddly electric, as if they were waiting for a rock star who would never show up. Mounds of food covered the table, Leo's favorite Sinatra loudly soundtracked the proceedings, and a significant crowd huddled around the weeping Audrey who, despite honest grief, was reveling in the white-hot focus of her nascent widowhood. Michaela and Suzanna whisked about making sure everyone was taken care of, while older brother Duncan, now "man of the house," as Audrey had anointed him the night before, held court in the dining room, expounding on his father's virtues to a rapt circle of church groupies. Izzy, red-eyed and reverted to "baby girl" status, tucked against her mother's shoulder, while Ronnie slumped in a corner chair taking it all in with cynically dry eyes. He was the only one who noticed Tessa coming down the stairs with a look that signaled the plates had shifted. She squeezed into the chair with him and he gave her a blurry once-over.

"Why do you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you wanna throw up."

"I was reading."

A long pause until it struck him. "Is *that* what you were doing up there? You found the box?"

"Yep."

"You read *2002*?"

"The first page that had my name on it."

"Damn, let's get you a drink."

"It'll just give me a headache."

"Aw, sissy, don't you already have one?" He put his arm around her and squeezed. The shot of empathy threatened to unleash a crying jag or some other unseemly bout of hysteria but Tessa thought better of it. Michaela approached, again with the hors d'oeuvres tray.

"Is that thing attached to your arm?" Ronnie asked as he stuffed a crostini into his mouth.

"Someone's got to help around here, Ronald, you might want to try it sometime. Hungry, Tess?" Tessa's grimace was apt response. Michaela reached down and patted her shoulder, still convinced of the shared nuances of their grief. "We all miss him, Tessa, it's just going to take time."

Ronnie lurched from the chair, stomping off to the bar set up on the breakfront. Michaela looked after him, bewildered. "What's wrong with him?"

“He’s turmoiled.”

“More like loaded. Little shit. Have you talked to Mom yet?”

“What do you mean, *yet*? Of course I’ve talked to her.”

“I mean, since we got back here.”

“No. Why?”

“She’s on her fourth drink, carrying on that it wasn’t a stroke.”

“Oh, really? What was it then?” This was not a new conversation.

“Well, let’s see...‘the doctors don’t know what they’re talking about, the last meds probably poisoned him, maybe we should sue’...you know the drill. I wish Duncan had been quicker to put out that fire.”

Their brother Duncan was a highly successful product liability attorney who’d made a name and several million in a case involving a child’s death caused by a drug later recalled by the FDA. He had become somewhat of a celebrity and certainly an expert, garnering a pulpit style that often edged toward high-pitched pontification. There was talk of politics and much consensus that he was a bold and righteous crusader. Tessa thought he might just be an ambitious prick but odds were that was sour grapes. Duncan’s financial and general life success stirred bona fide envy in her, as did his inexplicably close relationship with a father who seemed far less interested in her. Her current pique had to do with his receptiveness to certain church folk who had ridiculously queried, “What *really* happened to Leo?” as if some grand conspiracy was at work rather than a simple, unfortunate stroke. Duncan’s brief consideration lent it weight, foolish in light of Audrey’s predilection for drama, and though he ultimately quashed the theory, the damage had been done. Audrey was rolling.

Tessa looked over at Duncan, still on his jag in the adjoining room, and sighed. “He can’t help himself. Ask a question; get a speech. And what’s wrong with dying of a stroke anyway? Is there some shame in it? Would the man be any less dead?”

“She’d prefer he not be dead at all,” Michaela remarked, not without sympathy.

“She’d prefer he not be so *mundanely* dead. A faulty drug, some exotic disease, anything to get the saint one more paragraph in the obits. He’d still be dead so what the fuck difference does it make?”

Michaela threw her a sharp look. “A little harsh, don’t you think?”

“Sorry.” Tessa sank deeper into the chair. “I’m not enjoying the hoopla.”

“Our father just died; hoopla is required.”

Suzanna swaggered up with a drink and a scowl. “I may just embrace the family legacy and become a drunk.”

“Why?” Michaela retorted. “Run out of Oxy?”

“Don’t be a bitch, Michaela. I only indulge in Oxy when there’s opportunity to enjoy the buzz. Suffice it to say, I’m drug-free at the moment.” Suzanna plunked down in the chair across from Tessa. “She just asked me for the tenth time if I’d thanked her lately.”

“Yes, for ‘giving you the perfect father,’” Michaela knew the thread. “I got that a few times myself today.”

“She better not ask me,” Tessa growled.

Both girls looked at her with surprise; Suzanna took the bait. “Are your teeth actually grinding?” Before Tessa could answer Suzanna squealed, “Oh my God, you found the box! Did you read *2002*?”

“What are you talking about?” Michaela had missed that particular conversation.

“The journals, Dad’s journals. After that ridiculous wake with Duncan’s homage and all the rest of that hearts and flowers bullshit, I figured Tessa could use a reality check. She’d never read any of his journals so it seemed the opportune time.”

Michaela was genuinely horrified. “Jesus Christ, Suzanna, can’t you even let your little sister grieve without pulling her down into your muck?”

“Have you read any of them, Mickie?”

“No, and I don’t intend to. Sneaking into private journals after a man dies is pretty close to unconscionable in my book, but maybe that’s just me.”

“Don’t be an ass. He wanted us to read them.”

“Really? Who told you that?”

“He did! It’s even on the cover page, read it! It says, ‘I want my children to know me better than I knew my own father, these journals are my gift to them.’ Or some bullshit like that.”

“Why do I find that so hard to believe?” Michaela snapped.

“Because you’re a denier. I can show you, for God’s sake. Stop chasing the good daughter award for five fucking minutes and I’ll show you.”

Michaela picked up her tray and huffed off.

Suzanna looked at Tessa and rolled her eyes. When no reaction was forthcoming she put her drink down and took Tessa’s hand. “Is this going to completely screw with your head?”

“What, Dad dying?”

“No, reading the journal.”

“I don’t know. It could, I guess. I hope not.” A pause. “Probably.”

“Then I’m sorry I suggested it.”

“Yeah...me, too.”

“Well, and Dad dying *is* a bit of a mind fuck.”

They shared a rueful smile. Suzanna squeezed Tessa’s hand as they both got up and walked into the fray.

Chapter 4

As funeral nights go, this one was apocalyptic.

After the buffet was depleted, speeches were made, and one last tearful sing-along to “I Did It My Way” came to a resounding crescendo, the friends, family, associates, husbands, wives, children, and priests made their protracted exodus. Once it was down to the six siblings, their mother, Audrey, and Aunt Joanne, Leo’s younger sister (who had the distinction of being a bona fide nun, albeit a “non-habit forming” one, as Izzy had cutely pointed out in third grade), the façade came tumbling down.

Audrey, who’d imbibed as heartily as she’d wept, had, as Ronnie warned, gone into full-tilt meltdown, screaming through tears that she’d been abandoned by her husband, by her father (who’d fatally crashed into a tree shortly after Duncan’s birth); by God Himself. Ronnie was practically unintelligible at this point, while Suzanna and Michaela maintained their ongoing snit about pretty much everything. Izzy, always a weeper, was sobbing, if less vociferously, along with her mother, and Duncan, exercising his newly ordained role as family spokesperson, offered redundant speeches about love, letting go, and the meaning of life, until Ronnie said something about puking all over everyone and Tessa almost did, having ultimately joined him at the bar. Ronnie’s slurred vulgarity seemed to pry apart the tacit détente between various factions and all hell really did break loose.

“So you’re just going to be a shit every day of your life, even the night of your father’s funeral, is that it, Ronnie?” Michaela hissed.

“Hey, at least I’m keepin’ it real instead of throwing bullshit on top of more bullshit. Which is more than I could ever say for you...or him.”

“Oh, lovely, here we go. Which baseball game did he miss that’s behind your tenth drink tonight...or that idiotic comment?” Michaela slammed a magazine hard on the coffee table.

Ronnie turned with some admiration. “Whoa, feisty, Mick.”

Suzanna rose from the couch to pull a cigarette from her purse. “You know, Michaela, not everyone chooses to revise history as a general coping strategy.”

“Don’t you even *think* of lighting that thing,” their mother barked, breaking from tears long enough to enforce house rules.

Suzanna sat back down with the cigarette dangling defiantly from her lips, but Ronnie waved off her interjection. “Thanks for the assist, Suze, but let me get this.” He turned deliberately to Michaela. “Mickie, I love you like a sister, but you are one kiss-ass, brainwashed, daddy-damaged motherfucker.”

This ignited an explosion of response, some more horrified than others, with Audrey shrieking about foul language, Michaela charging out of the room, and Duncan stepping up to

defend his sister. Aunt Joanne broke through the din most successfully. “Jesus Christ, Ronnie, I know you’re upset but –”

“Wow, Auntie, you just kinda swore right there,” he grinned.

“Yes, fine, but let’s please keep this civil. Everyone has their way of dealing with loss and there’s no point in attacking each other when we could be offering solace of some kind.” Aunt Joanne was a counselor at the St. Anselmo Catholic Center in Thousand Oaks, California, where she provided therapy and heartfelt facilitation to wayward nuns, frustrated students, and other Catholics in need. At the moment, she was a less-than-effective family interventionist. As Audrey sobbed louder, carrying on that Leo’s departure doomed the clan to imminent disintegration, Suzanna jumped back in.

“Auntie, let’s get serious. How do we offer solace when no one really knows what we lost?”

“What does *that* mean?!” Audrey roared. “You lost your father, YOUR FATHER, for God’s sake! If there ever was a saint on this bloody earth, it was that man. You should be on your knees thanking God for him and I will not sit here and listen to you ungrateful punks –”

“Oh, now we’re punks?” A red cape trigger to Ronnie, the grin was gone. “You and Dad bitch-slapped us our whole lives but *we’re* the punks?”

It was *on*.

Audrey started screaming that Ronnie was the Devil’s kin and God had punished her by his birth; Izzy, a hard-as-nails lobbyist who could steamroll with the best of them was now blubbering into her mother’s shoulder as if it was all beyond her (which it was). Aunt Joanne was stunned into silence, while Michaela went in and out of the kitchen, loudly gathering every dirty dish she could find. Suzanna continued to dangle her unlit cigarette from her lips, watching the battle like the tennis match it had become, and Tessa sat in shock as Ronnie shook his finger in Audrey’s face, matching her decibels with, “What’s the point of having so many kids if you have no fucking idea how to parent them?” To which Audrey shrieked, “Satan, Satan, Satan!” like a street corner madwoman.

Duncan finally roared from across the room, “ENOUGH! Dear God, everyone shut up and take a deep breath!” Oddly, they did. Clearly there was something to this spokesperson business. “We’re all tired and sad and some of us have had too much to drink and this is *not* the time to analyze our family history.”

“Oh, that’s what this is, analysis?” Suzanna snorted.

Duncan shot her a look so fierce she actually shut up. He continued, “Look, we love each other, we loved Dad, and we’ve had a rough week. Let’s leave it there for now. I’m going home to get some sleep and I advise everyone else to do the same. I love you, Mom, but you need to go to bed. Everyone else, good night!” He gave them each the “stern headmaster” look Tessa particularly hated, grabbed his camel trench and marched out.

Audrey stood dramatically and announced, “I, too, am off to bed. My heart is shattered and I hope I wake tomorrow to find my children back to their lovely, sweet selves.” Wobbling, she took Izzy’s arm and they slowly and precariously made their way up the stairs.

Ronnie yelled after them, “Night, Iz, good talkin’ to ya!” Izzy responded with a raised middle finger. He laughed. “She makes a good point, doesn’t she?”

“Ronnie, you really are a royal pain in the butt.” Suzanna sighed. “Please go up and go to bed; you definitely should not be out on the streets.”

Ronnie tottered to his feet, smartly saluted his sister, and stumbled up the stairs. Michaela finished in the kitchen and, without a word, put on her coat and stormed out the front door, slamming it hard behind her. Suzanna collapsed across the couch and said, “Well, wasn’t that a nice little party?”

Aunt Joanne gathered herself, clearly shell-shocked. “You are one rough bunch, that’s for sure. I’m going to have to think some about all this, but I’d say there are some things here that really need talking about.” She looked at Tessa, who had remained strangely silent throughout. “Tessa, you’re here for the weekend?”

Tessa nodded.

“Let’s be sure to talk before you go, all right?”

Tessa nodded again. Words continued to elude her.

Aunt Joanne looked around the old house, shook her head, and said, “Good night, girls,” as she headed out the door.

Suzanna finally lit her cigarette.

(To be continued...)