Book 1 - Beginnings

Although their time together was comparatively short, Theodora was The Love of Justin's life. He always said that he had known from the moment they met , that they were destined for each other. After her death, he lived every day in her memory.

To understand Justin, therefore, it is necessary to understand Theodora.

To understand Theodora, one must understand her history. Justin King has often alluded to a memoir and record of her life that Theodora wrote later in life. That history, if it exists, has never been made public.

Robert Carot - Justin King - Empire Builder (2006)

Theodora King- A memoir

1966

On my sixth birthday, December third, nineteen sixty-six, my life split into Before and After—and my father was at the pivot point.

He was a big, solid man. I remember—or at least I think I remember—how he would sweep all three of us girls up in one go. One on each arm, and one on his back.

The terrible truth is, though, he’s little more than a shadow figure. When I catch the rich scent of oiled leather or the odour of stale beer, I think of him. Yes, that's all he is: a blur of memory stirred by smell and longing.

He was a drayman. They still called them that, though it was all lorries; there hadn't been horses for years. That's the Teamsters for you, with their rules and traditions. My mother told me he was born to it. He loved it all—not just the clubs and bars he delivered to each day, but the fierce energy of the streets, where he gave as good as he got. Most of all, he loved the people. Hard people, only as honest as they needed to be—but you knew where you stood with them.

Not like the boardroom.

What I do remember, no matter how much I want to forget, are those last moments of *Before*.

I was sitting at the tall wooden table in the kitchen, singing a song, and my little legs were swinging in time. Nette and Carol were there too, dressed in their best clothes and giggling as they whispered to each other. We were going out—the five of us—to celebrate my birthday.

I heard steps on the stairs leading to our floor; the whole second floor of that big house we had then. At first, I thought it was him coming with a present for me—he'd promised. But it was too early. Mum was still in her slip, hair wet. She'd never let herself get caught out like that.

Then the door didn't swing open with his usual shout and laugh. Instead, there was a knock.

I stopped singing.

When the landlord came, he'd knuckle the door with confidence—but soft enough not to annoy Dad. Friends would call out, "John, John! We're late, shift it!" Dad would shout back that he was coming, or tell them to come on in, or whatever.

But this knock—it was different. It wasn't loud or hurried. It was determined but hesitant too, as though the person knocking didn't want to be there.

Mum pulled her old blue gown tight around her and went to the door. Nette and Carol kept playing, unaware. They weren't as tuned in as me. When you're the youngest, you learn to notice everything.

I watched over their shoulders. If I'd known, I'd have gone to my room. Maybe then I wouldn't keep dreaming it.

It was a policeman at the door. His dark uniform gleamed in places—bright shiny badge, his worn shoes that looked like they'd just been brushed. He twisted his cap in his hands as he spoke, his words low and careful.

He asked to come in.

They said Dad was drunk. Probably he was. Give a drinker a job delivering beer, and what do you expect? But his truck—drunk or not—the brakes still would have failed.

So, okay, he was an accident waiting to happen. Only the accident didn't just happen to him. Not really. Him, chest stove in on the steering wheel because they didn't have belts back then. He got off lightly. Death—that was getting off lightly.

We—what were we? Collateral damage, I guess you'd call us.

We never stood a chance.

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1967

When my mother took me and one of my sisters to the ice-cream parlour, it was always the third carton that held my attention.

I still remember the first time. I was eight.

The trip had been an unexpected treat, and although I was clumsy working the strange, small wooden spoon, I finished first. But when I reached for the unclaimed tub—by then soft and slowly melting—my mother snapped at me.

"Leave it be. That," she said, "is for Annette," who hadn't been selected for this particular outing.

After thirty minutes or so, as Carol and I scraped the edges of our tubs and my mother's long spoon made clinking noises on her sundae glass, she looked up at the clock. Maybe something passed across her face then—a mix of resignation and resolve—but not guilt.

No, never guilt.

"Well, we'd best go see what's holding up your sister," my mother said, as though an eight-year-old could have found some unexpected prior commitment. She got up, and we knew to follow. The third tub was now melted; it had leaked a little, leaving a dull grey ring on the blue Formica top. Another mess left by my mother for someone else to clear up.

She paid at the old-fashioned till near the entrance, handing over a grubby one-dollar bill. She always used the note that Uncle Frank had given her as we left our apartment. I don't know if she thought that made everything okay. More likely, by then, she was just doing what we were doing—looking for a way to survive.

"We'd best get back, check everything is okay," she said, using the voice she had for telling us something she didn't actually want to say—the one she used when the Child Protection people or police came round.

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1968

The child is the mother to the woman, and I chose to kill that child.

No. It wasn't a matter of choice. It was a matter of survival. There is no need, here, for all the details; I don't have the strength to prise the lid from that Pandora's box of memories.

Yet that time, before I was born, it did exist. I must accept that. I call it my gestation. It was a difficult pregnancy and a hard birth, but I endured.

What lies we tell ourselves in order to survive.

Did I understand? That first time?

I don't know. I don't want to know. Don’t want to remember.

I was only eight. I should be allowed to forget. But if a memory comes scraping at the back of my head, if it insists on being heard, then I stand to one side. I watch it as a soul might watch a just-dead body, looking down with compassion and love, yet doing nothing.

Everything I see is in the brown sepia of memory. The apartment—two bedrooms, we three girls shared one. A kitchen area that was also a living room. The bathroom with the broken lock on the door. My Uncle Frank.

Was he even just one uncle, or one of many? I am not entirely sure.

"We're going to the ice-cream parlour," my mother said. Did I hear a tiny note of something broken in her voice?

I looked up from the table. I had been filling in a colouring book, Uncle Frank sitting next to me, passing me crayons, his hands touching mine each time he did. I remember him leaning in close to point to bits I hadn't got quite right.

My mother was wearing her coat—the scruffy red one with the coffee stain on the sleeve. Beside her were Carol and Annette. Both were looking at me, small sorry faces. I put the crayon down. I probably smiled and went to join them.

"No," my mother said. "We're going. Not you. You—you can keep Uncle Frank company."

Annette, quiet brave Annette, said something. Something like:

"I don't like ice-cream anymore."

I think I saw her twisting the top button of her little summer dress as she spoke, looking at Uncle Frank at the same time.

All these things I don't remember. All these things are someone else's memories.

"Is that right?" Uncle fucking Frank had said. Uncle Frank had said. Anger can throw the lid off the box. I don’t need that.

"You want to stay too, with your sister?" he asked.

His voice—it was both slow, like how you might talk to a foal so as not to frighten it, but also had the sense of something else. Something rustling in the corner of a dark cellar where you don't want to put your hand.

"No, I—" Annette said. There should have been tears, but I don't think there were. Her eyes were already too old for tears.

"I know what you meant. And I think you'll find you like ice-cream just fine. Me and your sister." He placed a sweaty hand on my shoulder, and I felt his fingers touch my collarbone through the dress.

"We are doing just fine, aren't we, little one?"

He squeezed my shoulder and pulled me into him.

I nodded. No—the unborn me nodded.

"Come on," Mother said, in that way where she'd drag both words out to make them sound like a tunnel, at the end of which there's a fairground and candyfloss.

But there never was.

Then they were gone. Just like that, and Uncle Frank turned to me and took the crayon from my hand.

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1968-1975

In our apartment there was a large dark brown mat, which my mother had taken from a skip. I hated it.

It looked as it felt: brown and scratchy, dirty, impossible to clean. I remember it had one long jagged rip, with tattered twists of whatever material it had been made of, waving and trembling at the slightest movement. When I needed to escape, I would look deep into that rip. I would imagine falling into its gap and tumbling away into darkness.

I don't need to talk about what he did. That didn't happen to the me who is writing this; she died long ago.

When you shrink into yourself, curling up and hiding away within your own body, you leave a shell. You peer out from within, and what people see is not you, but the brittle façade you have built.

That is a good thing. It keeps the real you alive. But it does something else too. You begin to believe that everyone else is the same—buried deep within their own shells, impossible to find.

And if every person is just a shell, you don't care about them.

I would watch my sisters. I would see one of them being left behind as we others went for ice-cream, and I'd just be glad it wasn't me. We were all like that by then. Like mother, like daughters.

You see, she was never strong, my mother. And Uncle Frank—Uncle Union Man, *"I'll see you right and build you up, and rip you down when you're defenceless"*—fucking Uncle Frank, knew that. He knew everything about us: what we were thinking, how to keep us in our shells.

I remember we adopted a cat. You know how they are. It was one of those hot July days, and it snuck in through the open window, demanding to be fed.

Uncle Frank was in what passed for a good mood. He saw how we liked it, especially me. I think the Social Services were there too, and he did the whole nine yards—pretending we were a real family. Pretending he cared. He said we could keep it, said it would be a pleasure to have in the house.

That didn't last long. In a few days, we all started itching and had little red bites on our legs and arms. It had fleas.

So, Uncle Frank got a little screw can of petroleum from the gas station up the road. He put some on a cloth, held the cat down—sort of squashed it—and started rubbing it in. It stank and filled the place with fumes.

Of course, the cat struggled. The more Uncle Frank rubbed it in, the more it whined. And the angrier he got.

As he worked, he had a cigarette in his mouth. I started to wonder what would happen if he dropped that cigarette. Would it burn up? Would it, I thought with excitement, catch him in the flames?

Every time he breathed in, focusing on the cat, the cigarette flared bright, and I hoped. He saw me watching, and I could see something click in his head—an idea.

He held the cat up between me and him and stared into my eyes. All its fur was slick and matted by then, and he'd shaken all the fight out of it. Then he sucked on the cigarette, the tip glowing red.

"What? You think I'm going to burn up, do you?"

The shell of me shook its head, but I was shouting yes.

He studied me, nodded slowly, that nasty little smile on his lips.

"You do. I know you do." Then, still looking into my face, he brought the cigarette to the tail of the cat, where a drop of petrol had formed as it ran down.

I breathed in, held the breath, prayed inside.

Of course, nothing happened. It would take more than a cigarette to light it. So he dropped the butt in the ashtray. The disappointment sucked the strength from me.

Then he picked up a cigarette lighter, flicked it into life. I caught the gas smell and saw the bright yellow of the flame as it flickered. The cat squirmed; it could feel the heat.

I think he expected me to say no, to shout at him. But by then, I just didn't care. It wasn't real—the cat, the home, what he did to us—none of it was real.

Did he set light to the cat? Did those flames leap across and take him with them? Sometimes I dreamed that's what happened; other times, I didn't even know. But no, it couldn't have been like that, because I have other memories. Later ones. Worse—and better.

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1975

If you can pretend it's not really happening, you can put up with anything. If you're good at hiding—from yourself and from the world—you can endure for years.

But not forever.

The breaking point comes slowly. You begin by trying to talk to your friends, if you have any. You try asking if they'll speak to the brittle shell you've built around yourself. But it doesn't work. They don't want to hear. They don't want to be drawn into the swamp of your life. And slowly, you realise it's you they blame.

The older boys hear somehow. Or maybe they just know—in the way a pack of hyenas knows when wounded prey is near. They follow you from school and invite you to join their games.

But they're not playing.

Even though you know, you tell yourself that with them, maybe it will be a little better. Because they wrap it up in kind little words. And for a while, it's nice to be asked—even though you can't refuse.

Change can come, though, when you understand that the thing you have—the thing they want—can become something you use.

Don't judge me. I know you won't. Not you.

Yes, I used what I had. The only thing they valued. And something that meant little to me. I don't regret it. I'm proud I did. So many others escaped into drugs or drink. That way led only downhill.

I grew. I became the one with power. And with power, you can plan.

Annette had left by then, escaped with that no-good bastard who eventually killed himself. Carol—she was spending most of her time with friends. So it was really just me and my mother. Frank would send her out for cigarettes or a fifth of bourbon, and we all knew what that meant.

Only—**they were to find out. They didn't know everything.**

I waited. Then came the time I was ready. I was fifteen. I thought the plan would be hard, but I just dropped into the other place a little earlier than usual.

This time he came to me in the kitchen. He had to—I was pretending to do my homework. Books laid out. Glasses on. I was wearing the loose clothes he didn't like because they hid my figure—but did like because they were loose.

He'd already grown more careful. More cajoling. As though we both wanted it. As though we were sharing something.

Maybe he believed that.

I don't give a fuck.

As Frank crossed the room, I stood up. Maybe I smiled—I don't know. I turned behind me, like I was coming around the table. Then I picked up the pan of water I'd just boiled and threw it in his face.

For a second, he didn't even understand what had happened. Then he started to scream. It was the most beautiful noise I had ever heard.

As he reeled, I lifted the heavy iron pan and crashed it onto his head. There was blood—then silence—as he collapsed to the floor.

I stood above him, raised the pan again, ready to smash his skull until both he and I were covered in so much blood that no one could tell who was who.

But the other me—the one who had stared into the carpet thread canyon and hidden herself—she shouted:

"Run. Go. Now!"

I hesitated, breathing over him. He lay there, blood running across the floor in a dark pool.

"Go—now—run." A voice said. It must have been mine.

Something took hold of me. A sea of calm where there should have been panic. Shock, I guess. But it didn't stop me from thinking.

I went to my room, got my backpack and my money, and left him groaning on the floor. Twenty minutes later, I was at the bus station, buying a ticket to New Orleans.

There, ticket in hand, backpack tight on my shoulders, I went into the toilets—and threw up.