

LEO'S REAL LIFE

A novel by R. A. Conti

The Child is father of the Man
-William Wordsworth, *My Heart Leaps Up*

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PART 1

Chapter 1

Nathan Cummins unlocked the heavy front door, walked in, flipped the light switch, looked at his father's living room, and sighed. Nothing had changed since the last time he was here, except that his father Leo was now gone.

This living room belonged to Nathan and his wife Marilyn now. She wanted to move into Leo's house but refused to live with his junk. For most of his life, Nathan had thought it was junk, too. Now that both his parents were gone, the junk had become family heirlooms. *Getting rid of stuff is gonna be hard*, he thought.

Nathan flopped down in Leo's favorite chair and sighed again. *Where do I begin?* He looked around the room. There were shelves crammed with books, a vinyl record collection, an old stereo that had 'the best sound ever made' according to Leo, and a wall filled with photos Nathan's mother Alexandra made over the years. *The photos are treasures, obviously*, Nathan thought. *I'm never getting rid of them. Maybe I should pack them away in the attic for a while just to get them out of the way.*

His thought of the attic gave him a new idea. *I should start there. That stuff's probably been up there for decades. It's stuff mom and dad forgot about long ago, so none of it is probably important. If I clean it out, I could make space for things I want to keep somewhere but need to get out of the way so I can make Marilyn happy.*

Nathan got up from the chair feeling proud of himself. Only a few minutes into this daunting project and he'd already devised a plan for how to proceed. *I'm making progress!* he congratulated himself. His feeling of achievement helped mask his grief.

Long ago, when Nathan was a boy, he and Leo had taken to referring to each other as 'my favorite son,' and 'my favorite dad,' although Nathan was an only child. Those words were the last they said to each other before Leo slipped into the coma that preceded his death.

Nathan was grateful that Leo managed a weak smile when he spoke the words for the last time. Now he held on to the precious memory of his father's final smile. It was but one of his countless great memories, but more special than most all the others because it came at the end. He believed Leo knew it was the end and was signing off with the joke they shared for most of their lives together. *That's the kind of guy he was*, Nathan thought. *He was always thinking about other people and making them feel good.*

Nathan suddenly recalled a long story told by an impromptu speaker at his father's memorial service two weeks earlier. As he was winding up the service, someone in the audience stood up to interrupt him. "He saved my life," the woman began. People turned to look at her. Embarrassed by suddenly being the center of attention, she went on. "Well, I felt like everyone including God had turned against me. I was panhandling in front of a Wawa convenience store and getting chased all the time. Leo saw me before I saw him and came right up to me. He smiled. 'It's nice to see you. How are you doing today?' he said.

"I felt like shit but he was so kind I didn't tell him that. 'Hungry?' he asked. I nodded. 'Let's see what they have inside.' He put his arm around me and we walked through the doors. The staff looked at me. One of them started to say something but then backed off.

"Leo took me to the hot food bar. 'Anything look good to you? I hear the chicken is really special. Would you like some?' I nodded and he handed me the chicken tongs. 'Take all you want.' I filled up a large Styrofoam container. He watched, smiling. I wondered if this was a huge joke and I would be hearing the punchline soon. 'You're sure that's enough?' he asked. I nodded. 'Let's find something to go with it. How about some bread? Would you like

coffee or tea? How about dessert? I love their little pies. Have you tried the peach pie? It's delicious.'

"I just nodded. He handed me a pie and steered me to the coffee bar. I poured the largest cup they had and grabbed some creamer and sugar. 'That looks like a great meal. I haven't eaten lunch yet. Do you mind if we share it?' I was stunned. No one had eaten with me for a long time. I thought I would never share a meal with another human being for the rest of my life, which I assumed might not be very long.

"He grabbed a coffee for himself and then paid. The cashier started throwing my food into a plastic bag but Leo glared at her. The woman slowed down, and packed everything carefully. She mumbled 'Have a nice day' as we left. 'Thanks. I'm having a wonderful day. I hope yours is just as good,' Leo replied cheerily.

"We went back outside. It was a cool and pleasant day. There was a picnic table behind the store. 'I reserved a table just for us,' he said smiling. We sat down. I took out the chicken. Leo sipped his hot coffee. I opened the box of chicken and reached for a piece. Leo took a piece for himself. He waited for me to start, then he ate too.

"We talked for two hours. Then he looked at his watch, apologized that he was due in class, and thanked me for a delightful afternoon. 'Enjoy the rest of your chicken,' he said as he left. After he was gone I wondered if I had imagined the entire experience. Maybe my low blood sugar from lack of food was getting to me. The truth was *he* got to me and I never forgot him.

"I found out later on who he was. It turned out he went back inside the Wawa and told them to give me whatever I wanted and just bill him. I tried to only go in when I was really desperate, but his generosity lasted long enough for me to get back on my feet." Self-conscious about her long story, the woman sat down. Nathan heard people sniffing in the audience. The woman's story had gotten to them. It had gotten to him, too.

Nathan brushed away a tear and headed upstairs to the huge attic. It was an old house, the one he grew up in, and his parents lived there 'almost from before it was built,' as Leo used to joke.

That wasn't literally true. Leo and Alexandra were the third owners but had occupied the house longer than all the previous owners combined. It was theirs, and they knew it the moment they first saw it. 'It's as if it was built especially for us,' the young couple agreed when they took their first tour. It was not only everything they thought they wanted but much more. It had characteristics and features they never dreamed of looking for but fell in love with as they discovered them. They were so enthralled that the realtor felt obligated to warn them that it was an old house and was prone to the problems most old houses had. Leo and Alexandra didn't care. They rented it immediately and later bought it.

It had been theirs for nearly sixty years, and now it belonged to Nathan and his wife. He felt grateful Marilyn wanted it. He didn't know what he would have done if she told him to get rid of it. It occurred to him he might have to get rid of her instead but never told her that. Nathan knew it was best to keep some musings private.

The attic was cool but bearable. Nathan turned the ancient rotary light switch and looked at the packed space. The cleanout he thought would be easy suddenly looked impossible. *Maybe I should just hire someone to cart this stuff away without looking at it,* he thought. He rejected that idea a moment later. *There's a reason this stuff is up here. They kept it all these years. I should at least look at it before I trash it.*

It was time to begin. Nathan sighed for the third time since he walked in the front door. He hoped the ordeal wouldn't be too difficult or painful. He reminded himself that he needed space for the stuff downstairs that he wanted to clear out but not get rid of. It had to go somewhere.

But where to start?

Nathan walked wherever he could find clear floor space to step on. There wasn't much. He surveyed the objects he found as he moved through the attic. It seemed bigger and more crowded now that he explored it than he recalled noticing before.

Some stuff was old pieces of furniture Nathan assumed were outdated, unusable, or broken. For some reason, his parents refused to part with these pieces even though they would likely never use them again. *Maybe they thought furniture pixies would repair and refinish this old junk so they could sell it someday*, he thought. *Looks like those pixies never got the message they were needed.*

That stuff would be easy to let go of. All he needed was a couple of guys to help him carry the stuff to the curb on trash day. Nathan felt good about making some progress, even if it was only coming to an easy decision about stuff that had no value whatever.

He started looking around to see what else his parents had squirreled away and spotted an ancient steamer trunk. Its brass corners, hinges, and clasp were once shiny but years of attic dust and neglect had made them look shabby. The trunk looked sturdy, however, and Nathan wondered if anything was inside. He moved some old cushions his mother had stored in plastic bags and swung the hefty lid upwards to reveal a pile of books and several worn cardboard boxes. *It figures I would find books up here*, he thought. *My father never had enough room for all his books. But, what's in those boxes?*

Nathan lifted the top box and sat it on the floor. He opened the flaps and found typewritten pages. *Probably drafts of some of my father's old papers*, he thought. *Not worth keeping. This stuff's all outdated, anyway.* He pushed the box to the side and took out another.

Nathan wondered why this box was tied carefully. *What could be so important?* he asked himself. He hoped for old prints or newspaper clippings that might have some nostalgic value. *That would be fun. Marilyn might like it if I framed a few of the best ones.*

He untied the twine and pulled the flaps open. The box contained old black marble composition notebooks. They might be from when his parents were children and Nathan thought they could make entertaining reading sometime. He took out one book, opened it, and read 'Leo Cummins' printed neatly on the first page. Below the name, Nathan read a year- 1959. Nathan assumed it was his father's old schoolbook. *Let's see- that would have been when he was in junior high school, I think.*

Nathan became excited. He turned the page to discover what subject Leo used the book for. There was a date at the top of the page and raggedy but legible handwriting filled the space. *Must be English class*, Nathan thought. He read the first few lines.

'Those damn niggers were at it again. They packed the school bus and wouldn't shut up. You can't say anything to them because they're looking for an excuse to beat us white kids up. I wish they would all go back where they came from- all the way back to Africa if that's possible.'

Nathan couldn't believe what he read. He examined the handwriting more closely. *Maybe it's not dad's*, he thought. *Maybe it belongs to some other kid.* Then he remembered his father's name was on the first page. *Maybe somebody was messing with my dad. He*

would never have written something like this. He got along great with everyone. I heard him gently chastise people who expressed prejudice or bias many times. He had a Black Lives Matter sign on his front lawn since the day after the movement began.

More writing filled the next page: 'That Jew-boy talked to me again. I don't know what his problem is. Why would he think I'm interested in anything he does? I don't know why we can't just send all the Jews and niggers back where they came from.'

This entry startled Nathan more than the first one. Alexandra, his mother, was Jewish. Leo often praised Jewish culture and the long history of devotion and scholarship that marked Jews' commitment to their religious and cultural roots. Nathan thought he recalled his father saying at least one time that he wished he had been born a Jew.

What is this book? he wondered. *Who did it really belong to? If it's not dad's, why did he save it all these years?* Nathan had no idea. He had stumbled on a mystery he didn't want to explore, but felt compelled to. The boy who wrote these horrible journal entries was not the father Nathan loved. Who was that boy? Nathan knew he would have to read more of the journal. He flipped ahead several pages and stopped two months later. The date was July 4, 1959.

'I finally got that cunt alone. She didn't like what I did to her, but I didn't care. She deserved it. She was nothing but a prick-teaser. Well, I showed her what being a prick-teaser gets you- a good fucking. And I did fuck her good. I used a rubber so there wouldn't be any evidence. I left her crying and told her if she told anyone I would kill her. I think she believed me. I also think maybe I'm gonna get all the pussy I want now that she's afraid of me. Girls are so weak and stupid. They're only good for one thing.'

This was too much for Nathan. He slammed the notebook closed. How could anyone have written such horrible words? He didn't want to believe they described something his father actually did. Perhaps it was just a teenage boy's turgid fantasy, but it was still ugly and disgusting. He dropped the idea of perhaps publishing excerpts from his father's teenage journals. There was nothing worthwhile for the world to learn from them. However, there was much Nathan could learn, so he planned to read them through before he decided what to do with them.

He put the notebook back in the box and turned away to continue inventorying the attic clutter. He could not stop thinking about what he read, however, and went back to the box, took out the journal, and held it unopened in his hand. *Maybe I should just get rid of them,* he thought. *Burn them in the backyard before anyone else sees them.*

He couldn't do it. He had to read more. He had to find out the truth. Had Leo written these? Were they true?

Nathan recalled another impromptu speaker at the memorial service. "He always had a couple dollars for me. I don't know how he knew when I was down, but he somehow saw me and made a point of handing something to me. Then he wished me luck and went away. I wondered if he was some kind of apparition, but he showed up enough that I knew he was real. Later, I found out who he was, but I was too embarrassed to find him and thank him. When I heard he died, I came to thank him today. He saved me."

How could that Leo and this Leo in these awful journals have been the same person? Nathan thought. He needed to figure it all out. He wasn't sure why, since Leo was dead and the world would move on without him. Nathan realized he could not move on. What if the father he knew had been fake and these pages revealed who the real Leo Cummins? *Maybe that's why he kept them,* Nathan thought, *to remind him who he had been.*

Nathan thought more about the journals after he went home but didn't tell Marilyn about them. Mainly, he tried to figure out what he ought to do with them. He went back the next day with a red pen, took out the first journal, and opened it to the first entry. He wanted to read it again and then note his reaction to what he read.

Under the first entry, he wrote, 'I was stunned by this. I can't believe Leo wrote it. It's so unlike him.' Nathan couldn't think of anything else to add. He read the note and thought it sounded insipid. *What difference will my reactions make?* he thought. *This is the ancient past and dad is gone, anyway.* He closed the journal, put it back in the box, and spent the rest of his time planning how he would go about clearing out the house.

He couldn't stop wondering about his father's journals, however. *Are they all like that?* Nathan understood that as distasteful as the reading could be, he had to find out more. He stopped working, took out the first journal again, and opened it. As he flipped past the first entry, he noticed more writing beneath his comment in red ink. *What the hell?* he thought. *Did I miss something?* He stopped at the page and read the new entry.

'Who the fuck is writing in my journal? You better keep out or when I find you I'll kill you. It better not be you, Daisy. I'll do more than kill you, sister, I'll rape you senseless before I do it.'

Nathan's new shock nearly overwhelmed him. *I must be hallucinating,* he thought. *Maybe dad's death and my grief have taken more of a toll on me than I thought. Maybe it's too soon to clear out the house. Maybe Marilyn and I should take a cruise with some of that money dad left us.* Nathan considered closing the journal and putting it away, possibly for a long, long time.

He couldn't do it. He decided, instead, to read on.

'This nigger kid took my Oreos in the lunchroom today. When I challenged him, he laughed and handed them back to me. I told him I didn't want them now that he had touched them. I wanted to call him a nigger to his face but he was with a couple other jigaboos. He laughed, popped the cookies in his mouth, and walked away. I was so pissed. I wished I'd brought my switchblade to school. I would have cut him right there and then.'

Nathan took out his red pen. 'Niggers, jigaboos, switchblade?' he wrote. 'I never in all my life heard Leo use such words. He loved black people. And he hated violence.'

Nathan closed the journal and put it back in the box. He wanted to see if something new appeared inside. He went to the bathroom, came back, and reopened the notebook. 'I'd kill all the niggers if I could. They're worse than dog shit. If I find out who's writing in my journal I'll kill you, too. You better stay out.'

Nathan didn't understand how it was happening, but he had started a dialogue with someone. He still didn't believe it was his father, or that it was with someone in the distant past, but what if it was both? He had to know more.

He forgot about working in the house and considered ways of interacting with the person communicating with him through the journal. The first question he thought of was finding out who was doing the writing. He went back to the recent page and wrote, 'Who's writing this stuff? It can't be Leo. He would never say things like this. Is his house haunted? My parents never told me anything about a ghost. Who are you, ghost, and why are you here? What do you want?'

Nathan left the journal open and went to get a beer from the refrigerator. He rarely drank beer. Marilyn liked it more than he did. His father had kept beers around for her, mostly.

Leo had adored Marilyn and praised her whenever he could. She used to tease Leo that he had a crush on her. Leo would laugh and deny it, but Marilyn saw the twinkle in his eye.

“It would never work because of the age difference,” she teased him, “I’m too old for you, Dad.” Leo always nodded, laughed, and walked away happy. *He must have been a real charmer when he was young*, Marilyn often thought. *He’s still got something, although I don’t know what it is. Why hasn’t he met someone his age? Alexandra’s been gone for years.*

Leo didn’t want someone his age because, to him, Alexandra wasn’t gone. Her presence in his life had transformed from physical to spiritual, but she was still with him. He felt her enfolding love and devotion throughout the house. That was why he never changed anything. He didn’t move furniture, change photos or paintings on the walls, or remove any of her books and records. It was why he kept as many of her old vinyl LPs as he did.

Marilyn was a passionate jazz devotee and loved the (now-classic) albums that came out in the fifties and sixties. Leo rarely played them anymore, but he liked seeing them where they had lived for the decades Alexandra treasured them. She had been his treasure, and he would never let go of her.

‘I ain’t no ghost. Who the fuck are you and why are you fucking with me? You got no business in my journal. I know Daisy’s handwriting and it’s not her. Are you that nigger bitch maid that works for my parents? You’re always nice to me but I know how fake niggers can be. If you are, I’ll find a way to get back at you. My mom likes you but I don’t. STAY OUT!!!’

Nathan couldn’t resist. ‘I’m your son,’ he wrote. *Let’s see what he does with that bombshell*, Nathan thought. He walked away and came back a half-hour later. Nothing new had been written on the page.

Chapter 2

Nathan didn’t want to believe he was communicating with someone in the past yet there seemed no other explanation. He also assumed whoever it was in the past wouldn’t want to believe they were communicating with someone in their future. He thought he ought to try to find a way to convince whoever it was that their correspondence through time was real.

He read ahead in the journal and found an entry that disturbed him even more than those that contained bigotry, misogyny, and hate. It was from September 19, 1959, the day his Aunt Daisy was taken to the hospital. Leo had never told Nathan much about his Aunt Daisy. There were photos around the house, but Leo never talked about them. His mother Alexandra told him what little she knew about who Daisy was and what happened to her.

‘Those fucking doctors aren’t telling us anything. And one of them is a fucking nigger. I know he’s just happy to have white people to torture. All we know is that something happened to Daisy at school and she’s in a coma. They won’t tell us when she’ll come out or what they’re doing for her. She just lays there, barely breathing.

‘I’m going to find out who did this to her. The school is lying, I just know it. Somebody hurt her. I don’t care who it was. I’ll kill them when I find out. I made a promise

to my sister when she was lying there unconscious and my parents were outside talking to the nigger doctor. I'll kill everyone who fails to bring her back, and burn down that fucking school and that hospital, too. I'm serious!

Nathan thought he should warn Leo about what was going to happen on September 19. *Maybe that will convince him I'm his son in his future*, Nathan thought. *But, how will he react to what I have to tell him?*

He decided to hold off revealing Leo's future and instead interact with him by commenting in the journal. There was plenty to comment on. The girl Leo raped on July fourth was mentioned several times, although Leo never revealed her name. He referred to her as 'that cunt,' and followed through on his threat to take her whenever he wanted. He described manipulating her and then fucking her senseless with glee. Nathan couldn't decide what Leo liked more- screwing her or controlling her. He could have forgiven Leo for manipulating the girl if he mentioned how pleasurable the sex was, but he never did. Leo seemed to relish his cruelty.

Nathan recalled his parents' sex life. They never discussed it. From when he was old enough to understand what was going on behind their closed bedroom door on lazy weekend afternoons, he knew they had a healthy sexual relationship. They always glowed when they came out of that bedroom after a few hours alone. He assumed it was because of more than lovemaking; they glowed because they were so much in love.

How could Leo the man relish love so much when teenage Leo relished abusing and controlling the girls he had sex with? Young Leo's disgusting pleasure seemed to come from hate while mature Leo's joy was grounded in love. Where had that love come from? Did his mother Alexandra change his father somehow? Nathan wondered if he would ever know.

He didn't know how far his father's journal went. There were several notebooks, but he didn't want to look ahead to the last one and see the year it was written. There was a story here and Nathan wanted to follow along step by step. Maybe he could learn something valuable.

First, Nathan had to prove to Leo that he was who he said he was.

'I really am your future son. I know your future, and I can prove it, but you won't like it. Something serious is going to happen to your sister on September 19. You can't do anything to change what's going to happen, and I don't know what the outcome is. But, it's big.'

'If you hurt my sister I'll kill you.'

'I can't do anything to hurt her. You can't do anything to protect her. I just wanted to warn you. It's the best I can do.'

'What's going to happen? You have to tell me that, at least.'

'I don't know any of the details, but she ends up in the hospital in a coma.'

'You are a sick motherfucker. I'll find out who you are and punish you for hurting my sister.'

'You can't hurt me. I'm not in your time. And I had nothing to do with what happened.'

'You must think I'm a complete dope.'

'I knew you as the smartest man I ever met.'

'Knew me...?'

'My father just died.'

'You're crazy.'

‘No, I’m perfectly sane, and I want to help you.’

There was no reply. *Maybe I told him too much*, Nathan thought. He wondered if he would ever hear from Leo again. It occurred to him to flip to September 19 in the journal. Sure enough, there was a new comment on the page.

‘How the fuck did you know about this? Was it because you hurt her? Who the fuck are you? You can’t hide from me. I’ll find you somehow.’

Nathan felt he had to be honest. ‘I found your journals in a box in your house after you died. I’ve been reading them. That’s how I know. But, I only know as much as you’ve written. And now that you know about me, I expect you will change what you write.’

‘That’s bullshit. Do you think I’m stupid? How can you be reading stuff I’ve never even written yet? No, something else is going on. I’ll find out who you really are and when I do, you are dead.’

A couple of pages later, after some trivial entries about what happened at school, or what Leo’s parents said, Nathan read a message directed to him. ‘My sister’s still in the coma. Please, I beg of you, if you know what happens to her, tell me. It’s driving me and my parents crazy. The doctors aren’t doing anything. Please.’

Nathan read every page to the end of the first volume. It went well into early 1960 but there was no mention of Daisy. He feared the worst and didn’t know what to tell Leo.

It wasn’t until he opened the second volume that he found out. The first entry made him cry for someone he never even met. ‘Those fucking useless doctors let her die. I can’t believe how stupid they were. They did NOTHING to save her.’

Nathan wrote on the diary page. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you. I know it’s hard, but there was nothing you or anyone else—even the doctors—could have done. Even in my time comas are difficult to treat and there isn’t much that doctors can do.’

‘There might not be much doctors can do, but there is something I can do. I can make them pay for killing my sister.’

‘They didn’t kill her, Leo. She just died. It happens sometimes. There’s nothing anyone can do.’

‘I can punish them, and I will. Starting with that nigger doctor. First, I’ll cut his balls off. Then I’ll keep slicing off pieces of his skin until there’s no black left and he’s just all red blood. Then I’ll wait and watch him die. Maybe he’ll understand how it felt for me and my parents to watch Daisy die.’

‘Please, I beg of you, don’t do anything. What happened was not the doctor’s fault. Nothing you can do will bring her back.’

‘I know. But, somebody has to pay.’

‘I know how you feel, but there’s nothing you can do. She’s gone.’

‘I hate you.’

Leo didn’t write about Daisy’s funeral or the aftermath. It was too painful, probably. Nathan read on in the second volume. There were scattered rambling entries. Some were just disassociated fiery words. Leo’s rage didn’t subside, nor did his intense sorrow. He chose not to write in detail about either one. Nathan understood. He read on, hoping Leo would become more articulate again. There were several journal volumes and they must contain more than short incomprehensible entries. The writing must have meant something to Leo, or why would he have kept the journals?

Then it occurred to Nathan to intervene. Maybe he could help Leo recover from his grief. He found an entry three months after Daisy's death. It contained few words. 'Couldn't sleep again. Those fucking dreams. Can't take much more of this.'

'Talk to me,' Nathan wrote. 'I'm here for you. Let me help. Please.'

'What do you want? Can't you leave me alone?'

'I just want to help you.'

'What can you do?'

'You can write to me and I can write back. Tell me how you feel. I have feelings, too. I know what life is like.'

'Life sucks. I'm not sure I want to hang around to see any more of it.'

Nathan panicked. Was Leo thinking of killing himself? Nathan knew he didn't, but he worried meddling in Leo's life was changing his timeline somehow. Should he continue their dialogue? Was he messing where he shouldn't be?

He decided it was time to share the journals with Marilyn.