Replacement Child - A Memoir

Written by Editor

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Prescription Filled

Replacement Child

In his heart, my father wasn't at all sure they should have another child. He missed his little girl terribly—was bitter about her death. He blamed himself for not being there to protect his family. He replayed his revised scene in his mind a thousand times: my mother rushing out of the apartment with Linda rolled in the quilt while he ran back to push the beam off of Donna, lifting her up over the flames and smoke, carrying her down the steep stairway just before it collapsed. There could be no replacement for Donna. He didn't want one. And he thought Linda would need their undivided attention for many years.

But, he wanted his wife back. He needed her smiling again. If a new baby would do it, he would comply.

My father chose the Blumenkrantz Hotel in Lakewood because he knew how much his wife loved the ocean, and because it was an affordable way to get away to the beach for a few days. They needed a change of scenery. Different surroundings to shift their perspective, lift their spirits—their souls—from the oppressive daily grind. "A perfect beach day Flurry!" my father declared as they pulled in to the hotel parking lot. Entering the lobby, my mother took in the wood paneling, the leather upholstery, the Victorian grandeur of the place. She noted the indoor pool, adjacent to the formal dining room. Her hope for the weekend was renewed. Until now, she had been doubtful, but she didn't show it for my father's sake.

She knew he was more fragile than he let on. She remembered the night his claustrophobia kicked in as they rode through the Lincoln tunnel to New York City. They were stuck in traffic in the tunnel for 45 minutes. An endless black netherworld. Suddenly, my father couldn't catch his breath and was hyperventilating—he said he couldn't breathe at all. My mother took his hand and calmed him. She talked to him about their plans for the next day and told him when to take a breath. They would breathe each breath together until they got through the tunnel.

They checked in to the hotel, unpacked their suitcases, changed into bathing suits and headed for the beach. My mother wore her black one-piece suit, cut in an octagonal shape at the top with a small tasteful skirt at the bottom. My father was in his only green and blue plaid bathing trunks. His boney white chest screamed for a sunburn.

They drove to Bradley Beach and picked a spot midway between the water and the boardwalk to lay their hotel towels out next to each other.

"We should've brought an umbrella," my father said, squinting. "The sun is so strong today, no clouds to block it at all."

At that, my mother dug into her beach bag and produced two hats. A Yankees baseball cap for him and a floppy brimmed canvas one for herself.

My father smiled, leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek. "That's why I married you —you're always taking care of us."

My mother reached her arm over his shoulder and gave him a squeeze, "I try."

"What other hazari do you have in that bag? A hot dog maybe? Some mustard and a coke? How about one of those big salty pretzels?"

"Now you're making me hungry," my mother slapped him on the chest.

They left their towels and walked to the boardwalk, bringing back hot dogs and cokes and two big pretzels.

"This isn't helping me keep my girlish figure," my mother said, taking a bite of pretzel.

"Me neither," my father said seriously. He stood and posed, hands on his hips, tilting his chin to the sky. Looking at his skinny physique, my mother burst out laughing, nearly spitting out her mouthful of coke. Suddenly, she was uncontrollable. Shaking, laughing—tears streaming. She put down her soda and folded her arms in on herself, to hold herself together. My father was momentarily stunned, but knelt next to her to put his arms around her to calm her down. He instinctively pulled her toward him.

Their hats had fallen off and lay in the sand and their hotdogs were getting cold. My parents found themselves in an unexpected embrace, holding each other tightly, neither one willing to be the first to let go.

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