THE REPLACEMENT

Monterey Park, California: 1956

When I was nine years old, my father tried to commit suicide and murder my baby brother. I found them after I had got my younger sister ready for her bath and went to look for my brother. The door to my parents' bedroom was closed, and when I entered, I smelled gas coming from the 1950s-style gas heater. My father was lying on the bed with my brother next to him. They had plastic bags over their heads.

I stopped him. Ripping the bag of my brother and grabbing him away from my father, I got my sister and we ran to the neighbors' house to phone the police. I stopped him because it was my responsibility throughout childhood to feed and care for my twin siblings, a brother and sister who needed constant attention. It was also my job to impose some sort of sanity on our household, and to constrain my father's lunacy.

This wasn't the first time I called on our neighbors for help because of my father's psychotic behavior. But unlike the other times, when the police only issued a stern warning and left, this time they took my father away to the psychiatric ward of Los County Hospital, where he was ineffectively treated with electroshock therapy. A week later he was home again, initiating a new cycle of terror and abuse that our family would endure for another decade. Like an ocean swimmer battling an inescapable undertow, I struggled by the minute through childhood to keep my head above water, and was pulled each day into an endless, swirling vortex of drudgery and mental anguish that would have consumed most adults. I wish I could tell you that this memory—of my father trying to take his life and that of his children—is my worst childhood remembrance. But it's not. Our lives of surviving the survivors were just beginning.

Berlin: 1947

My mother pushed and groaned with every contraction, deter- mined to bring a healthy child into the world. is baby, she insisted with every fiber of her body, would not die.

There were no delivery beds in the makeshift American Red Cross hospital, the basement of a bombed-out church in West Berlin that served thousands of refugees displaced by World War II. Sick and injured children, men, and women sprawled out on sheets draped over warehouse pallets made of splintered wood slats, rising just inches above the hard-packed dirt floors. With the help of a female doctor, my mother exerted her strength for one last push, and gave birth to a baby girl.

She named me Ruth, after the biblical survivor of hard- ships, the friend and companion to others, the devotee to Judaism. It was February 20, and my sister Sarah, who had been born in a Russian camp while my mother was in hiding in Siberia, was three years old.

By 1945 the American Red Cross was providing aid in Germany in the form of food, clothing, and other goods shipped from less devastated countries in the European theater. In

Berlin, hospitals such as the one in which I was born were hastily set up to meet the medical needs of the hordes of refugees and displaced persons arriving battered and shaken. As horrible as the hospitals were, their disorderly, overcrowded, and sparse conditions were an improvement for people who survived the war living in forests and in concentration camps, prisons, or labor camps for months and years.

Throughout her life, my mother spoke reverently of the luxury of giving birth in an actual building after the war. “Ruthie was delivered by a real doctor from Philadelphia,” she used to tell people. “We had nothing. Yet a woman came all the way to Germany to help the European refugees.”

Perhaps her praise for the doctor came from her own dreams to become a pediatrician, an ambition dashed to pieces when Hitler invaded her Polish homeland in September 1939. Or perhaps she was awed by the doctor’s ability to keep me breathing, since I was born prematurely and weighed only three pounds. This was long before the days of neonatal incubators, and the survival of such a tiny infant was an extraordinary event even with the best medical care, much less under sordid conditions.

I also had black hair all over my face, and my upper lip was still attached to my nose, my tongue to my upper lip. The Philadelphia doctor told my mother in six weeks she could operate on me to correct the defects, but fortunately I eventually transformed into a normal-looking baby. In an e ort to con- sole my mother, who was distraught over my appearance, my father smuggled a terrier-mix puppy named Rex into the hospital under his trench coat. My mother loved dogs and was delighted to see the tiny puppy peeking out from my father’s coat pocket. Even as a puppy, Rex had a job—to be stationed next to me and protect me from insult and injury. In the refugee camps it was common to place babies in carriages out-of-doors to give them fresh air, since the lagers, or sleeping quarters, were not conducive to health. My mother was comforted knowing that Rex was always there to serve as my dutiful shield when people passing by my baby carriage stopped to stare.

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I was part of the “survivor baby boom,” so named because the world’s highest birthrate at that time was found in these displaced persons camps, where those who had not perished felt an unconscious yet powerful Darwinian drive to replace family members killed during World War II.

As so many other babies in these camps, I was ordained at birth to be a substitute for family members who had been murdered by the Nazis. Throughout my childhood this became an eerie and oppressive burden to bear. Desperately wanting to please my parents and live up to their expectations, I would grow up to become a straight-A student and an accomplished musician. But it wasn’t enough. I was doomed to fail as a surrogate for all they had lost.

City Terrace, California: 1951

The piano stood like a lone soldier in the middle of our meager living room. Sunlight from the dirt-smudged apartment window cast dust motes that swirled in the air and landed on the piano’s smooth, polished surface. Sarah and I stood agape before it, unable to believe our eyes, afraid

to touch it. Our apartment had no furniture other than a kitchen table and one treacherous sec-secondhand bed. Our parents could barely afford to purchase food, much less furnishings. We were hungry and broke, a post-Holocaust refugee family living on public assistance in the United States of America.

Yet now we had a piano.

It was a miracle—albeit a miracle Daddy had no means to pay for. Even at the age of four, I knew this wonderful new instrument was an impulsive extravagance, although by then I had given up trying to understand why Daddy did the things he did.