

Replacement Child

A Memoir

Judy Mandel

Seal Press

Some names and identifying details of people described in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. This is a work of memory, and at times imagination, based on the true story of the plane crash depicted in the book and the author's life experiences. The essential facts of the story are true.

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**WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23, 1952**

**28 PERISH IN AIRLINER'S FALL ON WILLIAMSON STREET HOMES . . .**

**ELIZABETH, N.J.**—Elizabeth's second aviation holocaust in thirty-seven days today had claimed at least twenty-eight lives . . . The ship plunged into the two houses near the southeast corner of South and Williamson streets at approximately 3:45 PM. Before firemen could subdue the roaring, orange flames that leaped nearly 100 feet into the rainy sky, three dwellings and a garage had been destroyed and a fourth house was damaged severely. Nearly a score of persons were homeless.

Killed on the plane were Captain (Thomas J.) Reid and all twenty-two others aboard. Police . . . announced the following list of Elizabeth persons missing and feared dead:

DONNA MANDEL, 7 years old, 310 Williamson Street . . .

The hospitalized Elizabethians and their condition at 8 o'clock this morning at St. Elizabeth Hospital:

LINDA MANDEL, 2 ½, of 310 Williamson Street, "poor."

MRS. FLORENCE MANDEL, 35, her mother, shock and burns of both hands, "fairly good."

. . . Mrs. Mandel picked up Linda, her clothes afire, and rolled her down the stairway to the street, her husband Albert Mandel said. Mrs. Mandel, her own garments ignited, attempted to struggle back into the house to seek Donna but was restrained by an unidentified man.

## Prologue

I was born of fire.

The flames licked my mother's kitchen clean.

It happened at 3:45 PM on a foggy winter afternoon—January 22, 1952.

The American Airlines Flight 6780 that crashed into my parents' home at 310 Williamson Street was the second of three crashes in Elizabeth, New Jersey, within three months. Newark Airport was just three miles from their apartment.

I never met my sister, Donna. My other sister, Linda, was burned nearly to death. I was conceived as the salve on the burns, to fill the abandoned chair at the gray Formica table. My place in the family was cauterized by the flames.

This is the story of my family's trials and triumphs as a result of a tipping of fate, and my own struggle to live up to the role burned into my psyche from the time my mother first dreamed me up as her salvation.

## Chapter One

**2005**

The Rahway River cuts through town, modest houses line its banks, and small yellow and green canoes poke out from wooden docks. The Canoe Club in the center of Cranford rents canoes by the hour for the meandering ride up the river. This river, in this town where my parents raised two daughters, is where we will scatter my mother and father's ashes.

We lost my father in small bits. His sharp wit, his political opinions, and his sarcastic jibes had been fading with several small strokes. He would forget what he had for breakfast, or that he had to shave—but then he remembered full quotes from Shakespeare. When he hurt his shoulder after a fall, we had no idea it would turn into his final hospital stay. At ninety years old, he went downhill quickly once he was in the hospital, and finally congestive heart failure claimed him.

My father's last words to me were "be careful." As far as I know, those were his first to me too. His fear for my safety was one of the only ways he knew to express his love. All through my childhood, and into my adulthood, he would read me the newspaper accounts of tragedies befalling people out of the blue.

"Listen to this," he'd start. "This little boy and his mother were walking along Elmora Avenue, probably going to Goodman's Deli, when a piece of scaffolding fell right off a building and killed the kid. Just walking along! You have to be so careful, Judy!"

Or, after I got my driver's license: "This car was just travelling along, minding his own business, when a tractor-trailer cut him off and sent him head first over the rail."

I would nod and tell him I'd be careful. By the time I was an adolescent, I saw it as my sacred duty to prove the world was a safer place than my parents believed, that I could take risks and survive.

He always had one or two books he was reading at a time and would tell me about them, give them to me after he read them. When he narrowed down to a book at a time, it should have been a clue to us that things were changing.

But his sense of humor never left him—right up until the end. "If you lose your sense of humor, what's left?" he'd say. "Your health?"

My Dad's honesty was legendary. I remember when four solid gold bars were delivered to his jewelry store from the government by mistake. We

conjectured as a family how we could melt them down and make bracelets out of them, but Dad was deadly serious about finding a way to quickly return them.

He always put the needs of his wife and girls first. I never saw him indulge himself in a single whim or purchase of fancy. No boat to play with, no nights out with the boys. My mother had to goad him into buying a new suit when he needed one.

But demonstrating any affection, physically or verbally, came hard to him. He was reticent with his compliments, particularly with me. Mom pushed him to say and do the things she saw I needed from him.

"Tell your daughter how nice she looks for the prom."

"Give her a hug before she leaves."

"You make the call, she likes to hear from you."

He loved us, but he thought we should just know it. "If you don't know, I can't tell you," he'd say.

It made some kind of sense that I was designated as the bad guy to my father in his last years. I was the one who had to take away his car keys when he was eighty-seven and my mother confided that he would go out and come back hours later after being lost on his way to the grocery store. I was the heavy, too, to decide that they could no longer live by themselves in their apartment. My sister Linda couldn't break away from thinking of my father as her knight, the one who made her feel like she could do anything she set her mind to. I had experienced a different side of my father growing up. His code with me was that I was the daughter who was blessed, who didn't need his praise.

In the hospital days before he died, he looked at me, pleading for an answer.

"Why am I going through this? I've been a good man. I would give my right arm for any of my kids. Why is this happening to me?"

I wished then that I had an answer for him that would ease his fears, but he was beyond any of the religious platitudes that gave some people comfort. To him, this was his punishment.

Toward the end, I selfishly wanted to know if I had made him proud in any way.

"So Dad," I said to him in one of our last conversations in the hospital. "Am I doing okay, do you think?" I thought I was on safe ground—finally happily married, a good career, a great kid.

A shake of his head, a wrinkle of his brow, pursed lips, a pause, "Sixty-

forty," he said without looking at me.

That was it: sixty–forty. I knew from my sister that he gave her a much more glowing report just an hour before. She told me that he said he was always very proud of her and what she was able to accomplish, how she raised her daughters. I didn't push it—he was tired—and there were more immediate needs to tend to.

There's an old photo of my father, in his early forties, in his undershirt at the kitchen table, holding a cigarette. He never let us see him in his underwear—or even his undershirt. Neither Linda nor I could imagine who could have taken such a picture of him.

That modesty is what I thought of when I went back to his hospital room late one night. It was after visiting hours, and I had come back after dinner because I was worried about him. He had called my mother and complained that the pictures on his wall were all moving, and that they were having parties in the hallways. Then the calls had stopped.

Purposefully walking past the security guards, I made my way to his room a little after 10:00 PM. I found him screaming and writhing naked in his bed. Instinctively, I backed away and ran to get a nurse, sure that he would be mortified to have me find him that way.

It was only seven months after my father died that I found myself in an ambulance with my mother, on our way to a hospice. The driver's name was Angel.

"Dad would've gotten a kick out of that, the driver being named Angel," I said to my mother over her moans, the noise of the street, and the rumble of the vehicle. Trying to calm her, I kept talking. She yelled at each turn because that was the only means left to her, reaching a new pitch with each bump in the road.

I believed I understood what she was trying to convey to me through her wordless wails: "What are you doing? Don't move me. I don't need anything anymore; this is not necessary."

Later, Linda insisted I imagined the communication.

"She couldn't have been trying to say anything. She was so far gone by then, and on so much morphine."

But I know my mother's voice.

That voice had cut into me a few days back in the hospital when she screamed as they changed her bedding under her. That was the day too that

her skin burst from the pressure of fluid gathering at her ankles. It was the first time in years I had seen the real shape of my mother's fabulous legs. And I was shocked to realize they looked so much like my own.

Now those legs were still, swaddled in tight sheets to keep her stable on the gurney for the ambulance ride. In fact, she was nearly rigid on the narrow bed, only twitching at each bump in the road.

Two days ago she was still lucid and could sit up enough in her hospital bed to take sips of soup and water. Mushroom or tomato soup were all she would eat, so Linda and I took turns harassing the hospital cooks to supply those. We each went down to the basement kitchen and waited until they found the right cans, heated up a bowl, and let us take it back up to my mother's room. Between the soup, tracking her meds, and trying to make her comfortable, we watched her in the way she had always taken care of Linda in the hospital—once a year, every year of her life from the ages of two to twenty, when she had surgeries for her injuries from the crash, the skin grafts to be sure she had mobility in her arms and legs, the operation to create a neck where her chin had been burned down into her chest, the failed attempt to reconstruct her ears.

Before and after each of Linda's surgeries, my mother was at her battle station, flagging nurses for pain medications, dressing changes, and bedpans. She asked question after question until she was satisfied with the answers: Why did one skin graft work while another did not? Why wasn't Linda healing at the donor site as quickly as they thought she would? Why was she still in pain?

My mother intuitively knew that specialists were not all equal, and she wanted the best. At least in this, she had some control. When one doctor said they needed to break both of Linda's legs and put her in a body cast for four months to straighten her bowing legs, she and Linda made the rounds to surgeons in several top hospitals, traveling by bus to New York City and Boston to find the right one.

"You're lucky to have us, you know," Linda told her while we sat vigil at her bedside.

"You were lucky to have me!" she said, and we laughed because it was true.

On one of the last days we could really communicate with her, I came into her hospital room without my sister. My mother quietly introduced me to her



roommate as “my beautiful daughter” just as Linda re-entered. I instinctively turned to the wall. They exchanged glances, and Linda sat down next to her bed and leaned close to her.

“It’s okay Mom, you can call her that.”

But she never did again.

In the ambulance, Angel yelled back to me, “We’re almost there,” before he took a perilously sharp right turn and my mother let out her loudest cry yet.

At the rehab hospital, they had tried to make her comfortable. The aids and nurses, I believe, did their best. But there came a point when I ordered them to stop handling her. She seemed in such distress each time they changed the dressings on her legs after her skin had burst.

We brought her family pictures and hung them in the hospital room where she could see them. I brought magazines and the butterscotch candies she liked. I made her a CD of me singing the songs she liked, and I played them on my CD player for her. Mom was obsessed with the smell of the room, so I brought an air freshener to keep it smelling like lilacs. I wanted to comfort her, to hold her hands, but they were swollen with fluid and she cringed each time I touched her.

To make her smile, I would dig up stories about the family or invent new ones. My voice was the only comfort I could offer.

“Hey, can you take it easy up there!” I called up to Angel, throwing an arm around my mother to quiet her. And I asked myself, *Is this all I can do? What would she do in my place?*

Even recently, I knew, my mother would talk to Linda about looking into new procedures that might help her. When my sister started having trouble with her hips and knees several years ago in her forties, my mother was just as worried as when Linda was ten. She helped counsel her on what to do, even though Linda is quite medically savvy. My sister still turned to my parents for help and advice when she needed it. They were still very involved in each other’s lives.

When we arrived at the hospice, I felt a calm come over me as the nurses worked to get my mother settled and were able to quiet her cries. I told the hospice nurse, “She lost a child.” That is what she survived, who she was. Somehow it was important that they knew.

I pick a secluded spot by the riverbank nestled in the trees where we used to feed ducks and have picnics. A small entourage of family is gathered there to meet me.

I hand my father's urn to my cousin to hold, and I keep my mother's crooked in my arm like a newborn. We take out the prayer book with notes loosely folded in the front and recite the Kaddish.

I look at my Aunt Sylvia and see my father's face. His serious squint, his resolute thin-lipped pout. She is the only one left of his five sisters to say goodbye.

When I had picked up the black box of my mother's remains at the post office, the heavy weight of it overwhelmed me. The brown paper wrapper and postal stamp seemed ludicrous. I carried the package gingerly to my car and cried.

Now, I open up the box to find a plastic bag of ash, closed with a green twist tie. I am a little apprehensive. Will there be chunks of bone? Teeth?

My son Justin takes my father's urn and lifts off the top, releases the plastic bag's twist tie. We lower our packages toward the water and pour both sets of ashes together into the river.

It takes longer than I expected.

"More to us than you knew!" I hear my mother's voice.

The fine gray ash mingles with the brown river water, and we watch as the gray cloud is carried downstream.