

The Red Book: Gisela Koehl

Maybe it was the deep dark red cover that caught my eye. In a row of neatly arranged photo albums, various shades of blue, the coarse scarlet fabric burnt like a flare in a nighttime sky. Attracted me. Drew me in. Or maybe it was the skinny black ribbon tied around the book that enticed me to pull it open and explore it. Photographs of another child. A child I had never met. My brother. A brother that my family had loved and lost, leaving behind an empty space like the red picture book on the shelf.

I am a replacement child. I have called myself by that name long before I learned its official meaning. *Replacement Child: a child born shortly after another child has died.* I was given life after he lost his. And my job was to fill the void he left behind.

Sitting on the living room floor, legs criss-cross-applesauce, the heavy red photo album rested on my skinny short legs. I pulled open the black cotton string. The house was eerily quiet. No one was home. My heart beat fast. Looking at my brother's pictures always filled me with a mix of fear and excitement. The black ribbon signaled: Do not open! Yet I couldn't help but look. Again and again. I so desperately wanted to understand this dead boy with whom I shared such an unusual connection.

When finished, I always placed the album back in its proper place on the shelf. The dark void it had left behind filled again. I tried to make sense of the pictures I had seen. His ghostly body on the deathbed, eyes closed, hands folded on the white sheet that was covering his

naked body. I remember wondering if he was cold. My cheeks red hot from feeling guilty and confused.

Growing up, my family never explained the pictures of the little boy living in the red book. No one told me the story of Gerhard, my brother. And so I became a collector of his memories, floating like minute specks of dust in the silent vacuum around me.

A photograph in a black wooden frame on my mother's nightstand. Black and white, it showed my father and brother at the beach. My father, young, with his distinctive features, his eyes full of life, his happy face glowing in the sun. Only wearing his swim trunks, he is lying on his side facing his son. Fine sand around them. The bright light of the midday sun leaving no shadow on their slightly bronzed faces. The boy, four years old, protected by a sailor's hat, sitting on a small towel next to my father, his eyes fixed on the dinky car he is playing with. Both radiant with contentment and simple happiness.

My brother drowned at that very beach only days after the photo was taken. He was vacationing at the Adriatic Sea in Italy with my parents and my oldest sister in the summer of 1967.

I was conceived shortly thereafter in the aftermath of the tragedy. A gift. A joy. A curse. The birth announcement in my pale blue photo book read *"The cloverleaf is complete – V. and M. have a little sister".* A trifecta of sisterhood. The fourth leaf for good luck. My two older sisters, my brother, and me. It never felt complete. Forbidden to ask. Forbidden to look. Forbidden to be.

My light blue photo album next to a red one. Same design, same cover, each containing their own memories and moments in time. Both having their distinct place on the bookshelf of my parents' home. One filled with life, the other with ghosts.

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