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My Life is But a Handful of Fragments: The Death of Superman

There comes a time in every child's life, when he realizes his father is no longer immortal. No longer infallible. No longer Superman. Such an epiphany is natural, healthy, because then the child recognizes that he has to live for himself, as himself, rather than in his father's shadow. The fact that his father has become mortal is not something to fear, just another mile marker on the serpentine road of life. How I wish it had been that way for me! How I wish the discovery of my father's mortality was natural, healthy, painless! How I wish it could have never have happened! But it did. It did happen.

1927: I was born Emmanuel Alper, son to educators David and Shoshana Alper, brother to Alvia Alper in Poland. But I would die a faceless face, an identity long forgotten, just another one of the millions of Jews wiped clean from the face of the Earth by the Nazis' bloody hands. My memories all fall into place like that of a stained glass window: piece by piece. In my hands I hold the fragments of my life, so few, for my life was taken before I turned sixteen. The first fragment is dark and grey, grey like the storm clouds the Russians brought with them, as they marched unstoppable, into my world.

1939: I had a family, I had a life, I had stability, I had hope. Hope for a future, for happiness, for new, exciting things. In Pinsk, my home, not much seemed to change when the Russians occupied our home. In our minds, they were a product of a distant war, of problems that had little relevance to us. Granted, these Russians who watched us, leering at us as though we were thieves were not particularly pleasant to deal with, but all things considered, life went on with a relative degree of normalcy. We knew that the Germans had invaded Poland, and now sought to control it, but until now, there had been no truly disturbing changes in our lives, so we didn't think much of it. That is, except for my father.

I remember my mother singing in the kitchen while she juggled various pots and pans, casting worried glances at where my father sat brooding in a corner, lost in thoughts far beyond me, his twelve year-old son. Many called him a Zionist, and it is true that being Jewish was something he was extremely proud of, something he was willing for die for. In his mind, he was part of a people whose struggle was not eternal, but rather a struggle that would one day bring to fruition the dream of a Jewish homeland. I adored my father. I wanted to think the thoughts he thought, I wanted to breathe the air he breathed; he was my hero in every way. When he spoke, he painted the most beautiful pictures with his hands, his voice rising and falling like an unspoken lullaby, his tongue swollen with confidence and wisdom. I would sit at his feet for hours just listening and letting the sound of his voice wash over me, filling me up with what seemed to be an infinite

supply of knowledge. Then, when the Russians came, that voice became a little bit tighter, a little more strained, as though holding something back, something ugly. Concerned with the arrival of the Russians, my father spoke less and less retreating within himself more and more. I would later come to understand that he was struggling for control. He knew that as a people, we would have a great deal of difficulty controlling what befell us at the hands of the Nazis, and the lackadaisical attitudes of his neighbors made him even more uneasy. Perhaps the most frustrating thing was that all he could do was wait.

1941: And wait we did.

From the pile of my fragments I pull out a brilliant blue shard of a memory.

They came marching in perfect rows, under a perfect blue July sky. Their perfect expressionless faces sat atop their perfect khaki uniforms. Their perfect arms cradled perfect, deadly guns. And in the midst of all this perfection, my father uttered a soft curse followed by an almost inaudible, “perfect.”

From that point on, we knew ourselves to be anything but perfect. We were Jews, we were burdens, but most of all, we were imperfection, and therefore subhuman. Swiftly, and without significant complaint, we were stripped of our professions, and reorganized into a society dictated by the Nazis who reeked of perfection, and practiced brutality. It was they who now took the places of the Russians, leering at us, beating us if we came too close, and going out of their way to make each day a living Hell. Before anyone, even my father, had enough time to ascertain what was going on, our captors had taken control, and as one of their first moves, established a Jewish Council, which my father, because he was such a respected figure, was chosen to head. The Nazis told my father that it was up to him to distribute a limited number of rations to what seemed like an unlimited number of people as well as carry out any decree the Nazis felt the need to issue. However, it soon became apparent to my father and the other members of the council that their only true function was to select Jews for the Nazis to murder.

A red fragment slips between my fingers, falling back onto the pile of my sad, stained-glass window of a life. It's red like a fiery sunset, like passion or zeal, like innocent blood spilled.

My father refused. He would not kill his neighbors, his brothers, their wives, their children. He came home, tall as mountain, unyielding to even the fiercest wind, and he pulled my sister and I close to him and promised over and over that he would not let them take us away. He wouldn't. For a time, we believed him with every part of our being. We believed that because he said so, it was so.

They gave him ten days, ten too-short, precious days before they killed him. He never came home. My mother crumbled, dust beneath our feet. I ran through the town screaming, crying, searching for him, for a just a whisper, just a word of where they had taken him. There were much more than whispers. There was crowd, gathered with heads bent, eyes averted, spirits broken. I pushed my way through, cut through the thick silence with my body like a knife. They would later tell me he went quietly, no fuss, no fighting, just staring straight ahead angry and quiet, but not accepting. How I wish he had fought! How I wished he had shown them who he was! How I wish he had shown them what he could do! But he didn't. I now understand he couldn't. But at that moment, standing colder than I had ever been in my entire life at the edge of the crowd, all I knew was that this man swaying eerily before me, this man whose head lolled sickeningly to the side with a rope beneath his chin was my father.

1942: My life's fragments lay scattered at my feet. I am trying to reconstruct them in such a way as to tell my story. With a quiet 'chink', another piece falls into place. Here I am, building back up what I can never actually get back. My favorite color among the fragments is green. Green like the pastures in the countryside, the pastures I never saw again.

The final brick was shoved into place, the walls stretching higher and higher towards the sky, mocking us, daring us to climb them, catch a glimpse of freedom, and be shot. I stood beside my mother, helpless with anger, hating every oppressor around me, every reason why my father was gone, why my mother too, was drifting away. I knew my father would become human, he had to, but I didn't think that he would have to be made mortal by having his blood stain the hands of murderers. Now he was gone. And my mother stood beside me silent like the hideous wall that closed us in. Though unlike the wall, she was fragile, and my sister and I feared her shattering like a porcelain doll when it is thrown against the wall too many times.

Food was a problem. There never was enough, and I felt as the man of the house, it was my duty to get it. When, on very rare occasions, I procured a half-eaten piece of bread or a few pathetic vegetables, I would race home past emaciated faces and sunken lifeless eyes, tripping over naked

corpses that lined the streets of the ghettos, their identities unknown, identities sold for their bread rations. Even when I ran into our sad, freezing little room, those naked corpses still burned in my mind, and I saw on them the faces of my mother, my sister, my father. Such was life: You starve quickly and die, or starve slowly and wish to die. We were all dying. There was no sanitation, no real home, no real sense of hope to keep us human, we only had each other, and the worst part was we were waiting to see who would die first. In truth, we didn't have to wait long.

The window is almost complete. Black spidery veins hold the colorful fragments in place; the morbid glue holding my life together. I hold the final three fragments in my hand. They are tiny clear squares, and do not distort what a person sees with color or shape. They show the truth, the truth that can not be denied. The truth that what the Nazis did is unspeakable; an atrocity beyond words, almost beyond comprehension. And so I fit these last three pieces into my life, and I see the truth through them. The truth that killed me, the truth that destroyed my family, the truth that still has the potential to destroy the world.

When we didn't move quickly enough they hit us. So I took my sister's hand and we moved faster. Our mother was long-gone, swallowed by the sea of frightened faces crashing around us. We ran, faster than we've ever run before. They were shouting now, their perfect voices echoing above the crowd, their perfect guns flashing in the sunlight. They are shouting for us to stop. We kept running. Maybe we could run so fast, we could fly. Maybe then we could fly far away, so far away we'd forget this terrible place even existed. I never saw the Nazi who took perfect aim at me with his perfect gun, and fired a perfect shot.

My window stands erect against the blue sky, every piece of my humanity, every injustice, every memory waiting to sparkle, to burst forth and dazzle the world. The fragments have come together and created something whole, something with substance. Now all I need is a little bit of sunshine...