

how i survived the hindenburch disaster and acquired a lucky charm.

IN RETROSPECT, ONE WOULD HAVE to concede that it was clearly a matter of blind coincidence. The war raged on. Plans were hastily executed. Actions were taken for which no one had to account. Events were advancing faster than anyone could predict, and the outcome was unclear. Mother, however, would have none of that. For many years to come, as we occasionally brought I up the matter in a lighthearted way over large plates of pumpkin seeds and peanuts, she would glance at the jagged lump of steel the size of a large fist, collecting rust and dust on its plastic tray by the front entry door. Finally, she would intervene in an assured, dismissive voice, "You have no right to speak this way. None of you were here when it happened, except for him, of course." She would then point in my direction and give me a penetrating look to make sure I backed her up. "And I *know* he agrees with me one hundred percent!" Somehow, she always failed to mention Yael, her granddaughter, who was there, too, but who was only a few months old at the time and had no recollection of the event. To be sure, I knew my mother was right, even though I did not like to speak much of it. I *was* there, after all. I *saw* what happened. It had to be a message. It was something meant for us only; a good sign. An omen perhaps.

It happened on the night of the second day of the Six Day War, June 8, 1967. I was twelve. This was not the first war, nor was it the last, but it was certainly the shortest and most decisive in our history. Some have coined it "glorious" and "heroic;" I will never speak of war in those terms. The war surprised no one. For weeks, armies were amassing at the borders from all directions, and the rhetoric was heating up as time went by.

We lived in a quiet, exclusive neighborhood on the outskirts of Tel Aviv; it was a suburb, populated mostly by high-ranking army officers, government officials, and their families. We had large back yards, and we were encouraged by the authorities to dig deep trenches and surround them with sand bags for use as shelters, if needed. Most of our neighbors obliged. People stocked their shelters with food, flashlights, and other necessities. Some installed cots and mattresses in them. Teenagers discovered newfound lovers' lanes. We had fun going from place to place, inspecting and comparing our neighbors' handiwork, speculating on what might happen to it when the rainy season came.

My father knew better, of course. "What sheer nonsense," he muttered. "If a bomb fell on our house, what good would a silly little ditch do?" And so, it came to be that when the shelling began, it found us at home, sitting in the dark, guided only by our intuition and the sounds of destruction. There was only one public bomb shelter in the area, and it was much too far to be of any help to us.

The day started, as usual, with nervous preparations, a jittery routine we grew to know well. The streets were empty. All men and women of fighting age had joined their units long ago. Left behind were the old, the young, the infirm, and the women who took care of them. At home, my mother was looking after my sister's baby daughter, Yael.

My sister was a career officer in the army, and so were my father and brother. We had not seen them in days, and we had no way to communicate with them. We did not have a phone in our house at that time. As the evening drew nearer, people went to their homes and prepared for the night. Darkness fell quickly. There was a complete and absolute ban on all light sources; the war had started only a day earlier, and no one could predict what would happen next. Some people spent the nights in their homemade shelters; others preferred to stay in their houses. We had no choice but to do the latter.

Days earlier, my mother devised a strategy. She observed that the most secure place in our house was a tiny square space, a corridor, which led to the kitchen on the right and the bathroom on the left. It was the only place in the house protected by inner walls on all sides, with no openings to the outdoors. She hung heavy blankets in it and had a chair and a small mattress at the ready. In the event something happened, we were to scramble in, close all the doors, and wait there until the all clear sign sounded.

Shortly after dinner, the civil defense siren began wailing; its piercing multi-octave vibrations bounced off the darkened buildings and gathered strength as they traveled, amplified by the quietude of the empty streets. I was already in bed, reading my beloved book, a thick, heavy volume, chock full of riveting stories about the history of Aviation: the Wright Brothers, Charles Lindberg, Amelia Earhart, the Enola Gay. The list was long and courageous.

I obediently got up and went to our little shelter. My mother was there already, holding her little granddaughter in her arms. We didn't say much. My mother sat in the chair, and I put the mattress on the floor and went back to reading my book to the light of a small lantern. Everything was quiet for now.

...The Hindenburg, the great flagship dirigible of the German Reich, is slowly approaching Lakehurst, New Jersey, after a successful Atlantic crossing. It is May 6, 1937 11:40 a.m. On board are ninety-seven passengers and crew. It is a grand sight, as the ship lumbers along, fighting head winds and low clouds three hundred yards up, its huge, cigar-shaped body glistening in the light rain. At 805 feet long, this pride of the German People is the biggest ever built, and is buoyed into the air by over seven million cubic feet of Hydrogen gas..

Then we heard something out in the distance. A faint thunder-like sound, too far to cause alarm. Seconds later, we heard horrendous, high-pitched shrieks, right over our heads, and then, immediately, came the explosions, stunning us in their surprise arrival. Yael started crying. I looked up at my mother. From my vantage point on the floor, she looked like a great statue of motherhood incarnate, holding on to the baby as one might hold a fragile bird to keep it from flying away. Her face was as white as marble. She gave me a faint smile and said, "We are being shelled. Just sit still and be quiet. There isn't much we can do now." It dawned on us that we were the targets of Jordanian artillery—the border was only a few kilometers away—because they wanted to strike at the heart of the Israeli Leadership, which resided in high numbers in our neighborhood. It would be a great morale boost for *them* if they could boast a successful strike on *us*.

The shelling continued sporadically. There was pattern to it. We could hear the exit rounds barking in the distance as the heavy artillery emptied its load, then there was silence, and we counted...twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three...then the horrible shrieks...the explosions...the silence...and the cycle repeated.

After a while, I tried to get back to my book.

...The Hindenburg is approaching its mooring site at Lakehurst Naval Station. Over a thousand people have gathered to witness the landing. Herbert Morrison, a radio reporter with WLS in Chicago, is recording the event for a later broadcast. His dry, staccato speech is typical of reporters of that era. Suddenly, flames appear at the tail, by the fins. Within seconds, the whole ship is ablaze and falling to the ground. People are jumping off in a desperate attempt to escape the inferno. People on the ground are screaming and running for their lives. Herbert Morrison's voice breaks as he sobs while describing the horrific scene. The famous words, "Oh, the humanity..." are uttered for posterity.

One of the shells fell very close to our house. The explosion shook us to the core and made us jump with fear. A split second later, something hit the house with tremendous force, as if a boulder had been hurled at us by a giant slingshot. We could not see the object, but we knew it came in through the roof and hit somewhere very close to us. We heard it bouncing around, and then all was quiet. The shelling continued for a while longer and stopped as suddenly as it started. We could hear emergency vehicles in the distance. Jets were flying above. Noises came and went, but the all clear sign never sounded, and we did not dare step out of our little shelter into the dark night.

At first light, we opened the doors and inspected the damage. Just a few feet away from us, by the back porch, there was a large hole in the ceiling. On the floor, next to broken tiles and a jumble of furniture, lay a strange metallic object. It was a large shell fragment, its jagged edges sharp and menacing. I picked it up and showed it to my mother. She examined it briefly, and told me to put it in a safe place. "You must not lose it. Ever," she said. "This is a gift, a charm. You are protected from now on." My mother always had a notion that bad things must happen to us in life, to protect us from **real** catastrophes. A kind of cosmic inoculation process. This, to her, was a prime example. We were hit, but not hurt. From now on, we had nothing to fear.

I must admit that I felt a bit uncomfortable contemplating this idea. In our home, Science reigned supreme, and there was no room for the supernatural. My father would scoff at the mere mentioning of religion, superstition, and the paranormal. If you could not prove your point over and over again using the Scientific Method, he would immediately classify it as anecdotal rubbish and relegate it to the annals of human frailty. One was always careful not to swim against the current for fear of ridicule. There are very few atheists in the foxholes, however, and my mother, who came from a very religious background, saw Divine Intervention all around her, and could not care less about my father's opinions. She was the only one in our family who dared stand up to him. Indeed, science and religion danced a very delicate, tender dance around each other in our home.

As the day wore on, my friends and I went to inspect the damage in our neighborhood. There were a few direct hits. Some people died. Amazingly enough, most of the shells fell in an undeveloped area, about half a mile away, and did not cause any harm.

Years passed. I grew up, joined the armed forces, and in October 1973, participated in a brutal war. I was in harm's way many times, but none of that fazed my mother. She knew I would not be touched. We kept the shell fragment on display on a shelf by the entryway. People would pick it up, admire its heft and jagged edges, and wonder why this strange object was on display in our home. The answer was always forthcoming. Over time, it has lost its shine in the humid Mediterranean air, and a rusty patina took hold; but to me, many years later and oceans apart, it has never lost its magic and luster. The memory of that night, and the events surrounding the arrival of the steel messenger and its supernatural powers, will always stay fresh in my mind.

