

Kevin BLOOM

excerpt

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To Protect the Baby

As she does most days, on the last Saturday of January 2006 Lisa Solomon gets out of bed at 5.30am. She walks down the passage and over to the cot where Tomer – the youngest of her four boys and already eight months old – is belting out a high-pitched wail. She picks him up and feeds him and changes his nappy. She rocks him and coos to him. She plants kisses on his forehead. When Tomer has settled, she places him back in his cot and returns to her bedroom.

Daniel Solomon is just getting up. He stretches and yawns and swings his legs to the floor. He scratches his beard. He says good morning to his wife.

Lisa sits down on the edge of the bed. ‘Did the alarm turn off?’

The Solomons have a timer that automatically arms and disarms their alarm: it saves them from having to flip an electric switch, which would be a desecration of the *shabbos*. But this *shabbos* morning, Daniel has not heard the device turn off. ‘I must have been asleep,’ he says.

Lisa shrugs. It’s probably nothing, she thinks. Maybe she was in the bathroom when the signal sounded, or the baby was crying.

She stands and walks from the bedroom. She glances in again at her two younger boys – the older boys spent the night at her sister’s place – and she unlocks the internal security gate that divides the sleeping section from the rest of the Glenhazel house. As she steps into the home’s eating and living section, the sharp smell of smoke assaults her nostrils. Her first thought is that she has left the heat on too high and burnt out the crock-pot (a twenty-four-hour cooker, another device for *shabbos*). But in the kitchen she sees that the pot is fine. Then she thinks that maybe the *shabbos* candles have fallen over and set the carpet alight.

It’s ten short steps to the living room, a journey she makes countless times every day. Today, though, something isn’t right. It’s a strange sensation, as if the place is not as she left it – as if the kitchen floor is dirty, or the cutlery holder is not next to the bread bin. She ignores the feeling.

She reaches the doorway of the living room and she stops. She sees a man she doesn’t know. She sees that the man is holding a knife. It’s a knife from the dining room table. He’s got one of my *shabbos* knives, Lisa thinks.

She’s wearing her short summer nightie. To appear this way before a strange man is immodest. She sits down on the kitchen floor. And she starts to scream.

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There are four of them. I park the Alfa on Long Avenue, forty metres off the intersection with Ridge Road. From this distance I can tell that the information I’ve been given is wrong: they are armed with shotguns, not semi-automatics. The barrel of each weapon is as thick as a hosepipe; there is a pump-action handle, a ribbed plastic grip, where the multiple-cartridge magazine should be.

The air, as I step out, throbs and burns. Insects drone in walled gardens; it smells of pine needles and begonia. The heat comes close to defusing my anxiety. Still, one last time, I remind myself why it will be fine.

This is Glenhazel. The four armed black men are paid to protect people like me – they will hear my accent, assume I belong, gladly answer my questions.

They are gathered in the shade of an acacia tree, dressed in identical black fatigues. Black Kevlar vests shield their torsos and black sunglasses cover their eyes.

It is midday on *shabbos* and nobody else is on the street; they swivel on their big black boots to watch me.

I smile. From five paces away, I extend my hand to the least intimidating – the shortest, the one with the paunch – and introduce myself.

‘Pietersen,’ he says.

I deliver my next sentence like the opening line of a joke. ‘How come you men get to carry those guns when the guys from the normal security companies are lucky to get batons?’

Pietersen is deadpan. ‘We got a competency licence from Sandton.’

Maybe the informal approach isn’t going to work. Maybe they don’t get my accent. I hesitate – I had planned on waiting until we were further along – and then I tell them I am a journalist.

Their shoulders flare, their backs tighten – suddenly they are on parade. In minutes I know they all have special military training. One mentions 44 Parabats, one Section 20. They all fought in the Angolan civil war, as part of an elite underground unit that I’m asked not to name. Two of the men – the darker skinned, with the Portuguese accents – are in fact from Angola.

‘Selezi,’ the bigger Angolan says, shaking my hand. He’s a giant, a head taller than me, with a neck like a buffalo. ‘Military people,’ he adds, ‘they always give surnames.’

I ask Selezi about the three letters that appear in large white print on his vest, the ‘G’ and ‘A’ and ‘P’ that declare the purpose and status of his mission. He looks down. His buffalo neck folds into his chin and he underlines the letters with a fat index finger. ‘Short for Glenhazel Active Patrol.’

GAP. The full version is as tame as the acronym. But what I’m thinking is that these former soldiers, these elite fighting men, are the fierce response of a fed-up community. Pietersen confirms it. ‘Most people here, they’re gatvol of the police services.’

In Glenhazel, ‘most people’ could be anyone in my family. Just past 1pm, a middle-aged white woman with shiny black hair and big sunglasses eases up to the corner in a BMW X5. She smiles, hoots and waves. The men all smile and wave back. They watch the BMW until it disappears around a bend.

‘We know her,’ says Pietersen. ‘She is a Jew.’

Here’s where I could tell the men that I am a Jew. But, whatever the advantage to be gained, I don’t. Instead, I introduce myself to the two soldiers who haven’t yet spoken.

The other Angolan is Maria. He patrols in a team with Selezi. ‘It’s like buddy buddy, attack attack,’ he says, referencing a military technique that’s clearly second nature.

Maria tells me a story. ‘We stopped a bakkie in November, in Lyndhurst Street. There was a robbery, they stole a computer. We gave the registration number to the police.’

I don’t say anything. Maybe Maria thinks that I think it’s a lame story, because he tells me another one. ‘Some days back they locked an old man in his house. He had nothing to eat. They stole money and jewellery. He was in there for three days. We banged down the doors and rescued him.’

The worst of the stories I’ve personally heard about this suburb is the story of the Solomon family, which, I know, is part of the reason the new security company was formed – but if these guys know the story too, they choose not to tell it.

The last of the four to speak is Godfrey (he has a surname with four difficult syllables, so he uses his Christian name). Thinner than the others, handsome, with a shaved head, Godfrey points to a shop up the road. ‘This bakery, nearly every Tuesday or Thursday, there’s been a robbery. But since we’ve taken over, there’s been nothing. When they come, they terrorise the people with AK47s.’

I squint into the sun and look at the bakery and picture what Long Avenue would be like during a gunfight. Then I turn back and ask the men about GAP’s resources.

There are twenty-eight members, says Selezi. They have four double-cab XLT Rangers, four regular undercover cars, and one unmarked Ninja. The headquarters are close by, at number 2 Elray Street, where they have a large control room equipped with state-of-the-art technology.

Godfrey extends his arm and shows me the surveillance cameras on the roof of a building across the road. They can record a registration plate from twenty metres, he says.

I ask about the shotguns. 'If you have them,' I suggest, 'surely you must use them?'

Godfrey says they shoot to stop crime. He repeats it. 'We shoot to stop crime.'

Pietersen is more direct. 'If we kill, we kill.'

No, Selezi says, they haven't killed yet. Godfrey takes a shell from his pocket and shows it to me. 'This one's got pinballs inside, but we can use real shot as well.' Pietersen explains why killing may sometimes be necessary. 'We are judged on our failures.'

At 1.15pm a red Ford Bantam bakkie, bonnet and doors emblazoned with the logo of a rival security company, tears past at high speed. The driver is speaking into the mouthpiece of a two-way radio, his forehead knotted in a frown, his left hand straining at the wheel.

'Would GAP ever hire someone like him?' I ask, as the Ford's tyres squeal around a corner.

'For them to come and join us they need to be retrained,' says Selezi. 'We prefer former military.'

Godfrey nods and indicates a shady spot down the hill. 'Like what we found the other day. A guard from that company was sleeping down there, and somebody came and stole a vehicle.'

Later, a pattern emerges. Every twenty minutes, a white man, as big as Selezi, with a crew cut and large 1980s-style Ray-Bans, drives past the patrol post in a double-cab XLT Ranger. He slows down and glares at the men and then guns the big engine up Ridge Road.

'Who's he?' I ask.

'We call him the Boertjie,' says Pietersen. 'He gets three times our salary. They've got the old apartheid system here.'

The Boertjie, I learn, is also ex-special forces - his primary job is to check on the men; check that they're doing what they're supposed to do.

At 1.30pm synagogue is out. Men in black hats and women in *sheitls* fill the street, heading home for a cold lunch or a nap. I focus on a young family walking east on Ridge Road. The bearded father is pushing a pram, the mother is one step behind in billowing skirts. Two small boys with *peiyot* scamper up ahead.

'The way you see them walk now,' says Godfrey, 'they are free.'

Pietersen elaborates. 'Like the other day when that Jew lady comes, and takes a photo of us. They just come to talk to us, to see if this thing is really happening. Because they can't believe it.'

And now, I am told, the GAP model will be copied in the crime-ridden Jewish suburbs of Savoy and Waverley. Using the same inoffensive naming rule, the new force will be called SWAP.

Says Pietersen, 'These Jew okes want blood by blood. You can call it blood sport.'

'An eye for an eye,' I say. 'From the Bible.'

He turns away and laughs. 'Ay, you must not talk about an eye for an eye to the government.'

An old Toyota Corolla filled with five black men idles past, windows down and radio blaring. The conversation stops. Pietersen, Selezi, Maria and Godfrey look up. They squeeze their handgrips. Godfrey steps toward the car and peers at the driver, his head inches from the window.

He watches the banged-up Toyota rumble slowly down Long Avenue. 'Ja, there's trouble there.'

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The man Lisa Solomon has seen in her living room, the man who is the reason she is sitting on her cold kitchen floor - the reason she is still screaming - is now standing over her and telling her to shut up. The man is demanding that she hand over her jewellery. He is shouting and spitting and swearing.

Lisa stops screaming. She breathes in deeply and regains her composure. She removes her engagement and wedding rings and hands them to the man. Now he demands money.

‘I don’t have any money,’ Lisa says.

From somewhere a second man arrives. He is more aggressive than the first. He has a more abrupt manner, he shouts louder. *He* now asks for money. The second man touches Lisa’s thigh. ‘Show me where the money is.’

The two men lift Lisa to her feet and point her in the direction of the bedroom. They walk her up the passage. Tomer, the baby, is crawling down the passage towards them. He is looking up at Lisa and howling.

The following few minutes are erased from Lisa’s memory. In the weeks to come her mind will tell her that, logically, she must have heard a gun shot go off. But she does not remember the sound, nor how two of her children came to be in the bedroom with her.

Lisa is now sitting on her bed. She has her baby, Tomer, and her four-year-old, Akiva, on her lap. She is comforting them. She rocks Tomer and pats Akiva on the back.

Strange, Lisa thinks to herself, Akiva’s back is wet. She looks down and sees blood. She lifts Akiva’s pyjama shirt to trace where the blood is coming from. There is a large hole in her son’s back. She doesn’t know how it happened.

She scans the bedroom and sees a third man has bound Daniel’s hands and feet. This third man has a gun.

One of the men – neither the man with the gun nor the aggressive man – walks over and sits on the bed next to Lisa. He begins to bind her hands and feet with rope.

‘I need to hold the children,’ Lisa protests.

The man hesitates, then tightens the ropes anyway. He is not rough and he shushes and calms the baby. Lisa points with her head at Akiva.

‘Look at him,’ she says. ‘What have you done?’

The man sees that Akiva is hurt. It seems to Lisa that he is upset and that he wants to help the boy. He calls to his colleagues in a language that Lisa does not understand.

His colleagues are not interested. They are searching the cupboards and the drawers for money.

Lisa is desperate. She tries to convince the man on the bed that she has pushed the silent panic button and that security is on its way. ‘You need to leave right now,’ she says, ‘before the security company gets here.’

Four or five times, the man next to her looks out of the window to the driveway. But he can’t leave because his colleagues want to continue searching the room for money.

Lisa screams, ‘My child is hurt, I need a doctor!’

The men take a pair of ties from the rack in the cupboard, which they use to gag Lisa and her husband. Some minutes later, the man with the gun loosens Lisa’s gag and asks her where she keeps the key for the bedroom.

‘I don’t have a key for the bedroom,’ Lisa says. ‘The key for the gate is in the gate.’

The man with the gun says, ‘Stay in here. Be quiet. We’re going for breakfast.’

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Athol Square, a small office and shopping complex on the corner of Katherine Street and Wierda Road East in Sandton, is all chrome and glass and white tile. The clientele in its ground floor restaurants and atrium cafés have clean pores and deep, even tans. They wear sunglasses that cast their faces in exotic shadow; woodgrain red and dark tortoiseshell frames that stretch from below their cheekbones to halfway up their foreheads.

At the gift shop in Athol Square, a neon-green vacuum jug made by Alessi sells for R950. On the shelf below the jug, a black plastic Ritzenhoff tray is going for R925. Four doors up from the gift shop is ‘Matispa Paris’ – an embossed sign on the window announces its standing as ‘Best Beauty Salon in SA’.

In the parking lot outside are two double-cab XLT Rangers. They are just like the

ones in Glenhazel, except they are white and say ‘Status Security’ and the men inside are armed with assault rifles instead of shotguns.

On a Friday in summer 2007, a few weeks after my time in the field with GAP’s Pietersen, Selezi, Maria and Godfrey, I pass the Status trucks on my way to a meeting. It’s the first time I have seen such a formidable security presence in a Sandton shopping centre, but then it’s possible I haven’t been looking properly. I expect I will get more detail from the person I have come to visit: a former classmate, a prominent businessman, who will talk to me as long as I don’t use his name.

Let’s call him Bradley Miller.

Miller is an associate, a ‘lieutenant’, in the direct but not entirely formal employ of an influential and reclusive Jewish billionaire. Miller has an office on Athol Square’s first floor, but he takes his meetings in a booth in the burger restaurant downstairs. His routine involves canvassing young entrepreneurs who need finance for their projects, sorting out the hopefuls from the hopeless, and presenting the former to his boss.

Two such young men, whose faces I vaguely recognise – they may have been a few years below me at school – are about to leave as I arrive.

Miller introduces us. They have expensive shirts and unnecessarily strong handshakes and shoes with two-inch soles. They look at me with their heads tilted back, with a nod that comes from the jaw, and they say, ‘*Huzzit, boet.*’

‘Hello,’ I say.

They leave. If Miller can tell what I think of his mendicants, he doesn’t let on.

He hasn’t changed much in the last fifteen years. The calm blue eyes and stocky physique are the same; he has kept most of his hair. The gentle manner is also there – although behind it now is the unmistakable weight of power.

He places his hand on my shoulder and steers me to his booth.

We study the menus and order and catch up on mutual friends. Then I remind Miller why I am here.

‘Like I said on the phone, bud, I want to talk about your business interests in GAP. But I also want to know where you think the Jews stand in this country, specially since we’re now funding a private army in suburbia.’

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The men leave the bedroom. Lisa hears the key turn in the gate. She looks down at Akiva – he is getting pale and losing blood. She tries to staunch the bleeding, but with her bound hands she can’t apply enough pressure.

Lisa twists herself into a position near the headboard and reaches for the panic button. The alarm wails sharply through the house. The sound surprises and frightens her – she had been told it was a silent device.

‘Lisa, what have you done?’ Daniel says, through the flimsy gag in his mouth. ‘They’ll come back!’

Lisa and Daniel, panicked and wide-eyed, shuffle as fast as they can to the bedroom door and push against it with their backs. They wait, breathing heavily. A few minutes elapse. ‘We’ve got to get Akiva to a doctor,’ Lisa says.

‘What?’

Daniel looks over to the bed and sees his son is covered in blood. He knew Akiva had been hurt, but he had assumed it wasn’t serious – the boy was talking, he was not comatose.

Lisa pulls herself up and hops over to the stationery drawer. Shaking and sweating, she slides it open and takes out a pair of scissors. She cuts the ropes on her hands and feet and frees her husband. Then she picks up the phone to dial the emergency services.

The phone is dead. The men have severed the line.

The couple decides not to leave through the front door – the men may still be inside. Daniel unbolts a small hinge in the burglar bars and shimmies through the bedroom window. He walks carefully around the house, keeping close to the walls. In less than five minutes he calls, ‘They’ve gone.’

In the bedroom is a spare key for the internal gate. Daniel comes down the passage

and they both throw on some clothes. Daniel picks up Akiva and Lisa grabs the baby. She begins to shove nappies, wipes and formula into a bag.

‘We need to go!’ Daniel screams. ‘We need to go! We can’t take Tomer with us!’

Lisa picks up the bag and runs to the car, where Daniel is waiting with the engine running. As they leave they see a security patrol vehicle, a small Toyota. They explain to the driver what has happened. Then they speed to Lisa’s sister’s house, where the older two boys are. The house is also in Glenhazel, on the way to the Linksfield Clinic, and is the obvious place to leave Tomer.

But it’s *shabbos* and it’s complicated. Lisa’s sister is *shomrei*. Her cellphone is off and she won’t answer her buzzer. So Lisa decides to give the baby apparel – and the baby – to Daniel, the security guard in the street.

Lisa knows Daniel and trusts him. As she hands Tomer over she sees he is covered in his brother’s blood – she had been holding the boys together on her lap. ‘Tell my sister that Tomer is not hurt, but Akiva.’

Lisa gets back in the car and Daniel drives as fast as he can to the Linksfield Clinic emergency ward. He parks outside and Lisa runs in holding Akiva and says to the doctor, ‘He’s bleeding. I don’t know if he’s been stabbed or shot.’

She asks, ‘Can you just stitch him up, or do you need to admit him?’

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Miller holds my gaze. He spreads his hands, palms upwards, in a (near Italian) gesture of goodwill. In a reasonable and measured voice he begins.

‘I don’t know how this looks to you, but I think the Jews are in a precarious position in South Africa. Our government has a problem. There are forty million poor people in this country, and they’re black. If the government is going to preserve its power and save the economy, it must act fast. It must deliver on its promise of transferring twenty-five per cent of the wealth into the hands of the disenfranchised.’

He breaks off. ‘Okay, park that.’ A waitress has arrived with our burgers. She slides the steaming plates onto our placemats. She opens the flip-tops on two cans of Coke and empties the contents into a pair of ice-filled glasses. Miller waits for her to leave before continuing.

‘There are sixty thousand Jews in the country, give or take,’ he says, turning his plate around, so the vegetables are on the far side. ‘One of them is Donald Gordon. When I was finishing up my articles I did an exercise. I unbundled the assets Gordon indirectly controlled, through the Liberty group. You know, the holdings in the OK, the breweries, the hotels, Standard Bank. What I worked out is this. In 1999, based only on the figures that were publicly available, Liberty had a controlling share in more than fifteen per cent of the total market cap of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.’

Miller leans into his burger and takes a bite. He picks up a serviette and wipes his mouth.

When he has swallowed, he continues. ‘I got thinking. If Gordon is this powerful, what do the Jews control? Today, conservatively, I’d say it’s twenty per cent of the economy.’

Miller takes two chips in his left hand and dips them in a bowl of mushroom sauce. He bites the tops off and repeats the process. I watch him closely.

A *fifth* of the country’s wealth. There’s no point making up a statistic like that, I’m thinking. Besides, while the number may be awkward, discomfoting even, the prominence of Jewish industrialists in sectors like retail, motoring, property and steel – not to mention banking, insurance and finance – is an incontestable fact. In early 2007, difficult as it is to prove, twenty per cent can’t be far off.

Miller comes now to his hypothesis. ‘So the government has this problem. It can solve it by dealing with the Jews. Everywhere else in the world, where money and politics clash, money always wins. Here, politics always wins. I’m absolutely certain that if politics and money clash again in South Africa, politics will win again.’

I ask Miller, ‘What does *dealing with* mean?’

‘Who knows?’

He tells me a story. A few months back he travelled with his boss to a game lodge

north of the border, for a private meeting between senior cabinet members and leading businessmen. He was privy to a debate about the wealth imbalance and the position of South African Jewry. It was clear some cabinet members were losing patience, he says.

I nod. Miller had this career of his mapped out at school, I'm thinking. He was quiet then, serious. He sat at the front of the class, his head deep in his books. His subjects were mathematics and the sciences. While I was cutting class, smoking, drinking, Miller was planning a life in high finance.

The waiter returns to remove our empty plates. I order a double espresso and a glass of water. Miller orders a cappuccino. We lean back and make use of the toothpicks.

We talk about all the Jews we know who have left. We agree that four generations in South Africa, measured against what came before – seven centuries in Eastern Europe, a millennium in Western Europe, countless years in Babylon, Egypt, Persia – doesn't count for much. We talk about the myth of belonging. Then, when the coffee arrives, we talk about GAP.

I ask Miller, 'What does it say about a country when some people think the best way to protect themselves is to hire professional soldiers?'

He replies, 'If the state is not providing you with education or medicine, you provide it yourself. Why can't we do that with security?'

'It's not the same thing.'

But Miller thinks it is. 'Most families in Glenhazel spend three thousand rand a month on private schools. Have a look at what they spend on medical aid. This is the next logical step.'

I quote Miller a line from the notebooks of Robert Frost, something I read a few weeks before in an American magazine: 'All the state is for is to protect the baby.' What that means to me, I say, is that protection from physical harm is the first and last job of government. When it goes, everything goes.

Miller shrugs. 'The state *should* have a monopoly on physical violence. In South Africa, it doesn't.'

I'm silent for a moment. Then I play out a scenario: the rich throw more and more money at private security; the middle class are forced to keep up as best they can; the criminals are driven back to the dirt-poor slums where most of them were born. South Africa becomes a post-apocalyptic tapestry of sparkling blue swimming pools and ungovernable feral zones.

'The ethical questions are difficult,' says Miller.

I knock back my espresso, which has gone cold. 'Dude. C'mon.'

Miller says his boss is *not* the money behind GAP. He says, 'GAP is a non-profit entity funded by the community to achieve the solution to violent crime in the area.'

'Dude.'

'We are service providers. GAP is a client.'

I don't say anything. He goes on.

'We provide GAP with armed response services. The difference between our armed response and an average armed response is that we drive better cars. And we believe, we *hope*, we've got better qualified people.'

I listen, wanting to understand.

'Most of the time, we can't afford the most highly trained staff because we can't compete with the mercenary services in Iraq. All the security companies do this, but GAP has been the best marketed. There is a firm starting the exact same thing in Sandhurst. It's not just the Jews, bud.'

I ask Miller what he knows about the XLT Rangers I saw in the parking lot on my way in, the Status Security trucks.

'That's my point, those guys are the same as GAP. The only difference is they use Ruger Mini 14s.'

One more time, I return to the consequences. 'Maybe these private armies are just the next symbol of why we are where we are. Maybe all they do is shift the problem someplace else. It may sound naïve, but what if the bottom line really is that people like us have too much when there are so many with nothing?'

Says Miller, 'Breaking into a house and torturing somebody for four hours is a

social problem, not an economic problem. To solve the social problem will take fifty years.'

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There are over twenty synagogues in Glenhazel, from the large halls at Yeshiva College and Ohr Someach that accommodate hundreds, to the small front rooms in the houses of rabbis that take no more than thirty. By 10.15 on the morning of January 28th 2006 - even though it is a *shabbos* morning, and it is forbidden to use cellphones - the congregations in the majority of Glenhazel synagogues know about the shooting of Akiva Solomon. The community is united in prayer.

The prayers recited are *tehillim*, because it is said by the sages that in moments of crisis the psalms of King David are pleasing to God.

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The doctor on duty at the Linksfield Clinic prods Akiva's abdomen. He suspects the tautness he feels is a sign of internal bleeding. He orders X-rays, and finds one bullet lodged in the boy's stomach and a second bullet in his leg. The doctor tells Lisa that his facility is not equipped to handle the emergency, and he instructs an aide to call for an ambulance to take Akiva to Milpark, a private hospital near the city centre. In the interim he administers fluids, blood and oxygen.

The ambulance arrives. Two paramedics jump out and attach Akiva to a life-support machine in the rear of the vehicle. One of the men warns Lisa to hold tight. 'We need to go fairly quickly, we need to put on the sirens.'

In what appears to Lisa like seconds, the ambulance banks hard into the casualty entrance at the Milpark Clinic. Two doctors are waiting: an older man with graying hair and a neat appearance, and a younger man in shorts and a collared sports shirt, as if he had been on the golf course when the call came through.

'Just tell me it's going to be okay,' Lisa says to the older man.

'I can't give you any assurances.'

Her thoughts turn to God. She remembers again that it's *shabbos*, and that she's not supposed to write. She asks a person standing beside her in reception to sign the admission documents on her behalf.

Akiva is rushed into surgery and Lisa and Daniel are ushered through to a private room. A man brings *siddurim*, so that they may *daven*. Daniel recites *tehillim*. Lisa doesn't do anything formal, she prays in an instinctive way.

Three hours pass. The door opens. A man wearing a *kippah*, a *frum* Jewish doctor, walks into the room. '*Baruch Hashem*,' he says. 'Akiva is going to be okay.'

The *frum* doctor explains what has happened. The first bullet fractured Akiva's ribs, travelled through the lung, through the diaphragm, through the spleen, and lodged in the colon. He says that Akiva is very lucky; the gray-haired doctor is one of the best paediatric surgeons in the country. 'It's a miracle, given everything that could have been.'

The surgeons, the *frum* doctor continues, have decided to leave the second bullet in Akiva's leg. They don't see it as a priority. They will deal with it later, when the boy's condition is stable.

Akiva is transferred to a ward. Lisa and Daniel go through to see him. The gray-haired surgeon is standing by the boy's bed, holding a clipboard and ticking off items with his pen.

'Will he be okay?' Lisa asks.

'He will be fine,' says the surgeon.

She falls into a chair and sobs violently.

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Frangelica's on Long Avenue, Glenhazel, is a place of bold aromas: *latkes*, cheesecake, chocolate brownies, *cholent*. Black tablecloths with pink fringes cover seven pinewood

tables, and behind the counter, in a rudimentary frame, hangs a portrait of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (of blessed memory), the last great leader of the Lubavitchers. In the corner of the establishment, against the large window fronting the street, is a makeshift shop selling stationery and *tchatchkes* – plastic beads, bottles of glue, sarongs, scissors, big sheets of coloured mounting board.

I take a seat at the table furthest from the door. There's a fridge beside me, a small white Defy, and soon a woman emerges from the kitchen to peer inside; she apologises and asks me to move my leg so she can reach for something at the back.

I swivel to the left and look out the window. A black XLT Ranger passes down Long Avenue. The woman closes the fridge door and walks back to the kitchen holding a bottle of milk. When I look towards the front again, Lisa Solomon is waving at me, approaching the table.

She places her bag on the floor and takes the seat opposite, a woman in her mid-thirties with a *sheitl* and an attractive, open face. We have already spoken twice on the phone, so she knows about my relationship to Richard Bloom – which is why, like Miller, she is adamant I use pseudonyms.

'People in Glenhazel will guess that it's us,' she says. 'But I need to insist. Mostly because I think our story is exceptional, and because I think it's miraculous. I don't want to undermine what's happened to someone else. I don't want to meet your family and have them think that this is not typically how an assault in South Africa ends. Because it's not.'

We settle on the surname Solomon, which, we agree, is appropriately generic.

It's also because Lisa knows the story of my family, though, that she's willing to share in unabridged detail the story of her own. I listen to her relive the incident, in a voice incongruously calm and detached, and at some point it strikes me how strange it all is; how I am moved but unsurprised, how odd my questions might sound to an outsider, how the sheer abundance of such stories has almost robbed the individual case of its (necessary, rightful) power to astonish.

Later, as a metallic winter dusk descends on the city, I come to my final question: Why has the family not emigrated? Daniel was born in the United States, he has a mother in North Carolina and a brother in Milwaukee. From 1995 to 1999 the Solomons lived in the States; from 1999 to 2003 they lived in Israel. Why, fifteen months after the shooting and 'miraculous' recovery of their four-year-old son, are they still in South Africa?

Lisa offers two answers.

First, she says, 'Tomer's *bris* was in Frangelica's. Every day that Akiva was in the hospital, the owners sent us a big box of food. Someone else from Glenhazel wanted to cover our medical bills. He said to Daniel that he'd had a great year financially, and that he wanted to help.'

By the time they moved back into their house, six weeks after the attack, burglar bars had been installed on all the windows. A gardening service had cut down the shrubbery; lighting and electric fencing had been set up around the perimeter; the old carpets, with Akiva's bloodstains, had been removed and replaced; palisade fencing had been erected between their property and the neighbour's.

'There wasn't a single detail we needed to take care of,' Lisa says. 'I have never lived in, or visited, a community in the world quite as selfless.'

Then there's Lisa's second answer. Soon after the incident, she says, the chief rabbi paid the family a visit. He agreed that the situation in Glenhazel had become urgent; that Akiva's escape was a waste if something was not done. The very next week the meetings began, bringing together businessmen and rabbis and community leaders. At one of the first meetings, a security force staffed by elite former soldiers was mooted (and accepted) as a solution.

'I'm not sure, if GAP wasn't around, that we would have stayed.'

Before I leave, I ask the thirty-six-year-old mother of four if she has any thoughts on GAP's downside. I test out again the scenario of the ungovernable feral zones.

'Saying "please" doesn't work any more,' she says. 'I don't see a negative to GAP. Not one. I don't see what they do, I just see that they are successful.'

*

A Monday morning in June 2007. I park the Alfa outside Rael Lissoos's 'church' in Nellie Road, Norwood. A car guard, a man with a boxer's hooded eyes and an Orlando Pirates jersey, taps on the window. 'Here, they will bash you, *foh shoh*,' he cautions. I move the Alfa to a bay a bit further off the corner.

I am early. The radio is tuned to a talk station and I listen to a middle-aged white woman tell the presenter that she really hates the malls of Johannesburg. The boulevards of Europe are more her thing, she says. 'I have family there, you know; I really love window shopping in Paris.'

This woman has called into the show before, I'm thinking. I turn off the radio and cross the street and enter the former church.

Rael is hunched over his desk, surrounded by circuit boards and disemboweled electronic gadgets. He has some obscure software running on his Mac, and without turning away from the screen he lifts his right hand and shows me his palm. He needs five minutes.

I look around. Light gray monitors and open PC towers lie across the space where the pews used to be, an old public telephone with exposed innards stands in place of the pulpit.

Rael has been running a handful of tech companies from this repurposed church for some years now; recently he has added a new business to his repertoire - he installs the wireless networks that connect the surveillance cameras to monitors in GAP's headquarters.

He rises abruptly and pats his pockets. 'Right, let's do it.' I follow him outside to a dirty-green Jeep Cherokee and climb in the passenger seat.

'There's a difference between filter points and plain cameras,' Rael says, as we make our way east through the late afternoon traffic. 'The filter point is for when you're coming home, and you think maybe someone's following you. What you do is you drive slowly through, and you signal the guards. Cameras are more for after the fact, they record registration plates.'

On 9th Street, just past the BP garage, as the Italian and Portuguese suburbs of Orange Grove and Highlands North become the Jewish suburbs of Sydenham and Glenhazel, Rael shows me the roofs where his aerials and transponders suck greedily at the irradiated air. He talks about the merits of line-of-sight. 'You learn quickly in this game how hilly Joburg is,' he says.

We drive down a quiet avenue. He points to a camera at the corner of 3rd and Sandler. 'In this place, I'm telling you, they've basically got rid of crime.'

And then we come to number 2 Elray Street. We stop at a thick metal gate topped by razor wire. Behind the gate is a three-storey concrete structure, its small barred windows framed in blue paint. A sentry approaches the Jeep. When he recognises Rael, his closed face bursts into a smile.

'For the cameras,' Rael says.

'Ja, ja, the cameras.'

Inside, 2 Elray is as neat and regimented as an army base. Three black XLT Rangers are arranged in a row on a new patch of tar and a series of heavy cement barriers lie at right angles by the exit. There are no cigarette butts or sweet wrappers on the ground.

Rael parks the Jeep. I follow him up a ramp to the main building's entrance. There is a sheet of white paper pasted to a heavy glass door, offering information about combat classes in the dojo. We walk across a threadbare carpet, past open-plan offices filled with young white men in tight shirts that display their biceps and pectorals.

In the control room, GAP's nerve centre, a young man rises from his post and greets Rael. The two immediately begin a technical discussion about the cameras. I focus on the monitors. There are more than a dozen screens, some showing the position of the security vehicles on GPS tracking grids and others showing cars driving through suburban intersections. It's a mesmerising show, wholly addictive, and too soon I must turn away to take in the rest of the room.

On the back wall I see a large whiteboard marked up in a thick blue pen. 'June' is

written in wide capitals at the top. Just below are three sub-headers, each above its own vertical column. Arrests. Incidents. Suspicious Activity. I start at the first column, reading through the terse account of the month's activities. 'Arrested, one illegal'; 'Arrested, two illegals'; 'Possession of a stolen cellphone'; 'Possession of marijuana'.

A tall blonde man in his early twenties is watching me. I don't acknowledge his presence and continue taking down what I see on the board. Next to the date June 16, still under the arrest column, it says, 'A drunk couple fighting over their child'. As I write, I consider asking the blonde man how this couple - no doubt a black couple - threatened the safety of the residents of Glenhazel. I consider asking him what he makes of the fact that June 16th is Youth Day in South Africa, a day that recalls the police excesses of 1976.

But it isn't 1976, and the culpable are no longer so easily identifiable. And so I don't ask.

*

It is just after 11pm and we are returning home from dinner at my girlfriend's parents' place in Houghton. At the corner of the M1 on-ramp and Houghton Drive, as a standard precaution against a smash-and-grab attack, I stop a few metres before the traffic light. I inch forward, leaving space for a quick pull-off, and I look around to make sure that nobody is stalking us.

Tonight, one of the coldest nights of the winter, a man has us marked.

He is crouched, bent low. He is wearing a black woollen beanie and a blue tracksuit top. He is three paces from the Alfa's back left door and he is carrying a brick. I swallow hard. I point at him with my left hand. He sees me. Maybe it looks to him as if I am pointing a gun. He stands up straight, presses his gloved hands together, and bows. We stare at each other. Then he reassumes his crouch and steps back into his hiding place in the foliage.

[...]