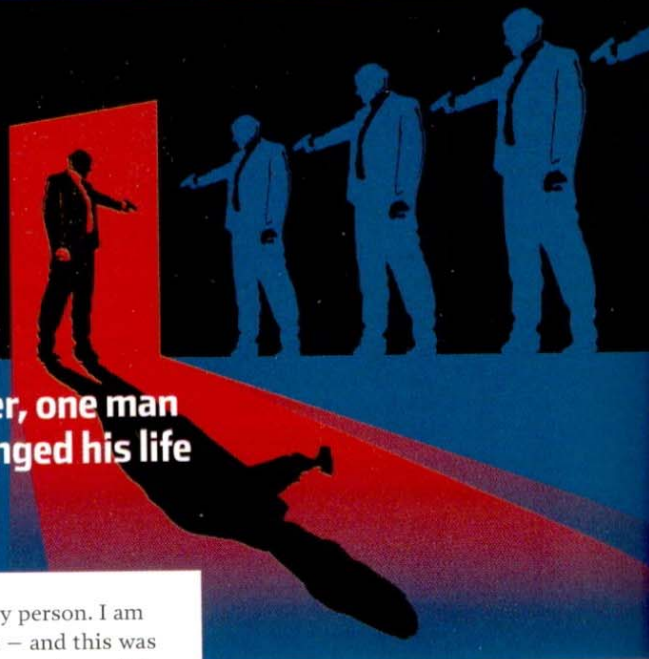


# Biting the Bullet

It's a miracle he survived. Now, a year later, one man looks back at the armed robbery that changed his life



**T**hey're coming down the passage!" her voice bullied me from sleep. Time expanded — almost motionless as they burst through the door. But nothing could slow that door. Nothing could slow them. They were fast — I was slow. They were there — in my bedroom, at 3.15 in the morning.

Lights. Voices. Eyes.

"Give us your guns! Where are your fucking guns!" I'm not a morning person, so my first thought was *Why are you doing this? This is childish. I'm trying to sleep so just leave me alone.* I had been transported back to days when friends would come home from a party and wake you up, just because. They'd grab the duvet from the bed while drunkenly trying to prop themselves up on the door. But these weren't friends, especially not when they pulled the duvet off the bed leaving my girlfriend and me lying naked. Friends knew better than that. And I remembered all those terrible newspaper articles about women being raped during burglaries. Surely a beautiful 23-year-old would be more appealing than some poor elderly lady.

The mind is unpredictable, as are our actions. I'm no hero. I'm not particularly strong and I'm not aggressive. But I couldn't allow them to touch her.

The duvet was off. She grabbed a pillow to cover herself and I swung my legs over the side of the bed, reaching for the duvet to cover her up, knowing I had to get between them and her. Get them out of the bedroom, away from her.

I'm not a reactionary person. I am usually calm in a crisis — and this was no different. As I swung my legs off the bed and faced them, still stark naked, I said: "Let's calm down guys. Let's go downstairs and talk."

I was thinking tea. Let's go downstairs and talk over a nice cuppa tea. I tried to remember if I still had green tea. Strange, since I'd never had green tea before. "Let's talk about this," I said rationally. Apparently they didn't like tea, because they lifted the gun to my head and pulled the trigger. Note to self: don't offer burglars tea. Next time... try coffee. And perhaps some biscuits.

There was a bright flash close to my head, slightly up and to the right. The bang was not impressive — it was just a bang. Balloons had given me bigger frights. I didn't feel the bullet go into my face and I didn't know I'd been shot.

I immediately jumped towards them, chasing two of the five intruders out the bedroom. Away from Monique\*. As I ran out the room just behind them, I saw another intruder coming out of the bedroom at the top of the stairs. They ducked downstairs where they joined two others and then ran out.

I stopped at the top of the stairs. Monique was behind me. Housemate Bill\* had run out of his bedroom when he heard the shot. His hands were tied with one of his ties — they had been to his room first where they pinned him under his duvet with the weight of their bodies and pistol whipped him.

I stood naked at the top of the stairs relieved that all three of us were safe.

I noticed the blood pouring from my head. *Shit*, I thought. *Get to the bathroom — don't bleed on the carpets.* Then the throbbing started; in my left leg. I looked down and saw a hole in my calf.

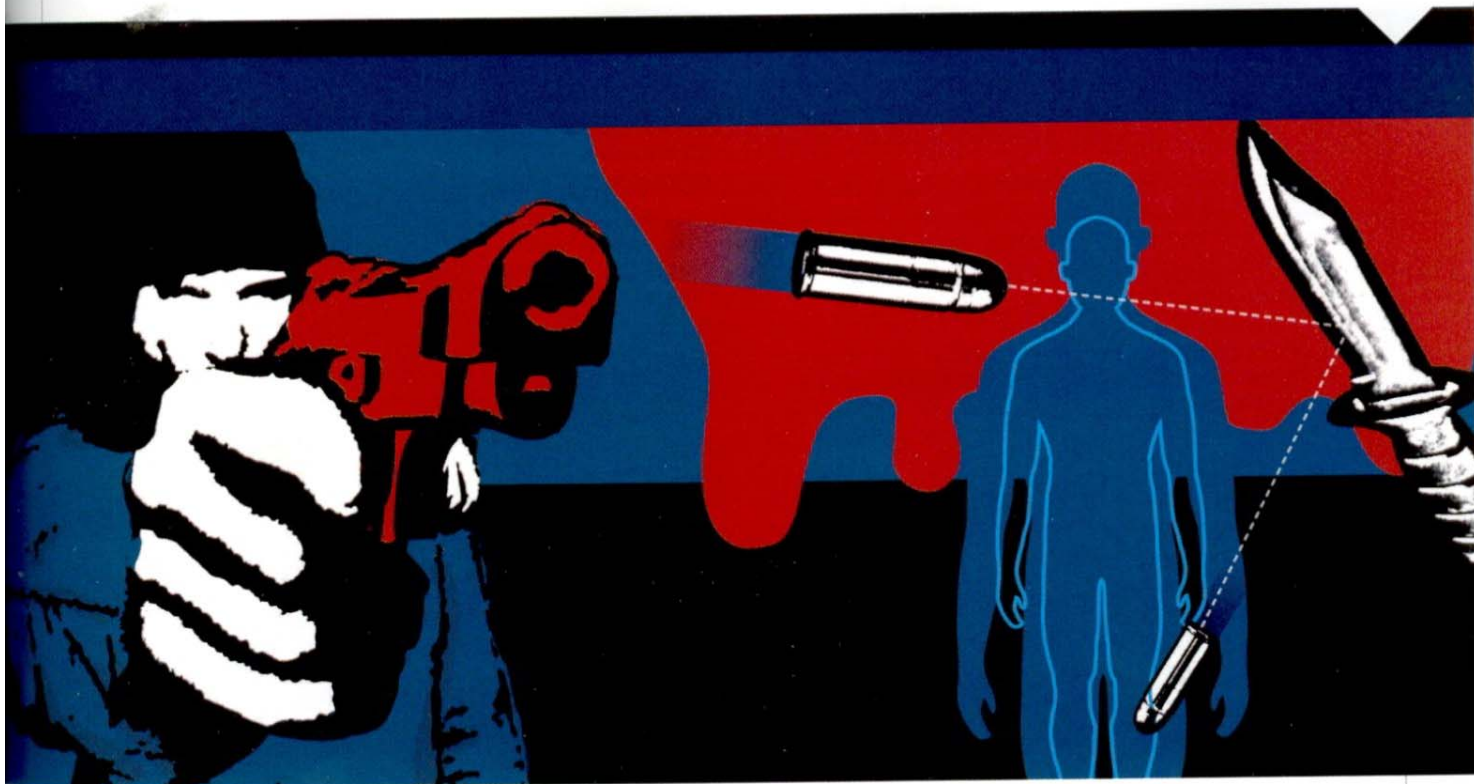
I cupped my hands under my face hopelessly trying to catch the blood. I scuttled to the bathroom. I flicked the light switch as I entered and bent over the sink. Blood poured out. *My blood.* As I stared at my face, I couldn't understand. There was one shot. I could see the bullet hole in my leg — no exit wound, so it was still inside. I could feel the bulge inside my calf. So what had happened to my face? Why all the blood? They didn't hit me. They just lifted the gun and shot.

Then I felt something was loose inside my mouth. I put my fingers inside and started pulling out bits. Bits and pieces of me. Bone fragments, parts of teeth. I lined them up on the edge of the basin, still wondering how, or what, or....

My leg was heavy. I was losing a lot of blood and couldn't stay upright. *Climb into the bath*, I thought. *Contain the blood — contain the mess.* Typical practical me. But there was no way I could lift my leg over the edge of the bath. It didn't care too much for what I had to say.

*The floor, it's tiled, it will do.* I lowered myself down onto the ground — the throbbing in my leg getting worse. Throbbing in my head competing for attention. Bill and Monique had been in to check on me. Monique eventually





managed to untie Bill and call for help. Bill shouted for the landlord who lived next door in our four-unit complex. Bill returned but didn't know what to do — other than sit with me. All I could do was bleed. *Pull yourself together*, I thought as I chuckled to myself while collecting pieces of me. Monique was getting impatient with the emergency services operator. They didn't know the alphabet code, which she knew off by heart. The one time we really needed it — and it's of no use. "Number One Bruce Gables," she was saying. "Bravo, Romeo, Uniform... no, no, no! B as in Bravo, as in Bob. Yes! Romeo. No, no, no — R for rain, Ralph."

This was going to take a while.

Bill darted to my room and grabbed some shorts for me, came back and started slipping them on. "Nooo!" I objected. "Not those ones, man. Those are new. Get some old ones!" He obliged, but not without argument.

Monique kept coming back into the bathroom to see me, but couldn't stand to watch her boyfriend in this fast-growing pool of blood. She could handle blood before this, but not anymore. She diligently stayed on the phone — dealing as best she could with the surreal chaos. Each time she peered into the bathroom, I weakly lifted my hand in reassurance and said, "It's okay, babe. I'm fine." I'm not sure who I was trying to fool with that act. The police station is five kilometres from our home — it took them

20 minutes to arrive. Another 20 minutes before the ambulance arrived. It was now almost 4am.

I had lost much blood already. The paramedics ambled up the stairs and started with their evaluation. I was beginning to drift but was still awake. I was thinking, *is this it?* Is this how it ends. No climax. No real ceremony. I get to die on a bathroom floor — half naked lying in a pool of my own blood. Is this my destiny? Was that my life?

"I thought you said this was a gunshot to the head," one of them said as he took my face in both hands and squeezed. I tried to explain that it hurt. Blood just bubbled out of my mouth, my head.

"Something for the pain," I mumbled. "Just give me something for the pain." They tried for a vein — both arms, both legs, both feet, both hands. Bill started getting really annoyed: "Guys, come on. Stop using him as a damn pin cushion." The look in his eyes — he was ready to smack the paramedic holding the needle.

The mood was far too serious, so I told the paramedics a joke. Can't remember what it was but I think they all laughed. It's probably an unwritten rule somewhere — laugh at the dying man's joke.

They inserted the drip and added some morphine. They prepped me for transport and brought in a stretcher-board. I looked at it, at the angle of the stairs and said: "I think I'll walk down. Come on guys. It's too steep. I'm sure I can still walk. Tie me to the plank at the bottom of the stairs."

It appears emergency services are not a democracy.

### THE MIRACLE

In the hospital, new faces crowded in over another gunshot victim. They took X-rays and I remember the doctors puzzling over the entry-exit wounds. They kept coming back and asking: "Are you sure there was only one gunshot?"

"Uh-huh. Just one. The gun was here," indicating about one foot from my face, above and to the right.

They were puzzled. The bullet had entered less than two centimetres from my right eye, on a line between my eye and the bottom of my ear. The bullet exited through my lower jaw, headed straight for my upper chest, around the top of my rib cage. Funny thing was that the bullet had somehow been deflected and had ended up in my left calf, where it remains to this day.

**57.6** Percentage of South Africans involved in robberies with aggravating circumstances

Source: SAPS 2004



## Case Stats

Victims often feel their cases are left to collect dust. Here's what the SAPS suggest you do

If your case has not received any response and you would like to report poor police service, call SAPS Service Evaluation line: 0860 13 0860.

### What to do

It's easy to come up with ways to get out of any sticky situation. But crunch time is a different story. Here's what the SAPS suggest you do when faced with such danger.

1. Remain calm in order not to make the offender nervous and cause you serious harm.
2. Take note of the perpetrator's identifiable features (anything that'll help solve the crime).

The doctors studied the X-rays and discussed them among themselves, but they couldn't figure this one out. A dinner knife was later discovered on the floor of my bedroom and it turns out that one assailant had put the knife to my throat as I jumped up and the other pulled the trigger.

The bullet entered through my upper right cheek, obliterating my lower right jaw and teeth, and exiting through my lower jaw. Just before entering my chest, it ricocheted off the one-centimetre wide knife, and was deflected into my calf. I still have the knife with the impacted metal mark.

# 260 082

Number of South Africans assaulted with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm each year

Source: SAPS 2004

## FIRST PERSON

### ONE YEAR LATER

It's been just over a year since I was shot. I've spent six months with my jaw wired up – living life through a straw – and endured four surgeries. One to go. The police have come up empty-handed, despite collecting numerous quality fingerprints from my home and despite cellphone tracking technology (the assailants got my phone). The only phone call I ever got from the police was after 10 months, requesting to close the case. We still have the same security – electric fence, security gates inside and out, alarm system. We're just more fastidious about imprisoning ourselves at night.

But there's another side to this story – the true cost of crime to South Africa. It's not just exorbitant medical and emergency services bills, wasted time in recovery, engendering of anger, loss of life and loss of innocence. This incident had far-reaching collateral damage that didn't affect just me and my family – the company I was in the process of setting up ground to a halt when I bit the bullet, costing maybe a hundred future jobs. This is what crime is really doing. The snowball effect of a simple housebreaking has serious repercussions beyond the obvious. And these intruders – they were children of 14, 15, maybe 16 years old – had no respect for life or property. And they're still out there. Five kids looking for their next target, next victim, next thrill, next score.

### THE AFTERMATH

Every event teaches you something. I learnt that I'm not a coward in the face of danger. I learnt that adrenalin is a great painkiller and that your true instinct can only be revealed when there's no time to think. I learnt that romantic dates are not that romantic

when you have to suck your dinner through a straw, but you must still try.

Mentally I've never had a problem with the incident. I dealt with it that first morning I lay in hospital. I ran through the events in my mind and I put it in its place – an unfortunate event, like an earthquake or car accident.

I survived cancer at 19 and, like disease, this wasn't something you could take personally. Anyway, if you break, they win. That won't happen. I have not and will not let the selfishness of others destroy my life. Those 60 seconds of terror will not wear me down or make me nervous in my home. But I am affected. My life has changed.

Monique changed after that night – she lost the innocence in life that allows you to relax, laugh and believe. The counselling she went to never changed that and after one year she moved away from Johannesburg, down to the coast to be with her parents where she'll hopefully find herself again, with a little help from her therapist. Bill was initially okay. Like me, he didn't feel the need for counselling. He chalked it up as bad luck. But he's noticed a change in himself over the last year; a growing anger deep inside. A disquieting feeling when he lies in bed at night.

Despite dealing with the consequences, I never realised how angry I had become until I wrote this article. Having watched kidnappings and murders get massive police attention, I feel undervalued and ignored because nothing outside the standard docket was compiled. Not one additional piece of paper was added and the case was closed.

There is no resolution in this matter, but life goes on. I live, I learn, I adjust. I am alive! No more straws for me... **MH**

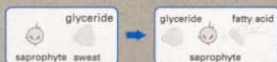
\* Names have been changed

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With Silver Nano Technology the AG+ ion kills the saphrophyte. Without it, sweat cannot decompose to emit an unpleasant odour.



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