

“The Bodyguard’s Tale”

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Fiction

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The gunfire began just seventeen minutes into Polyana’s set. Big Don, at first, thought the staccato popping sounds were firecrackers that someone had smuggled into the arena or, more innocuous, the crackling of a malfunctioning speaker. But soon, from his vantage stage left, he could see that members of the audience had begun to panic. Then there was a stampede of fans and a mass of bodies pressing against the steel barriers at the foot of the stage. Something was gravely amiss.

The popping sounds continued and something caught Big Don’s eye – a series of brief flashes up in one of the skyboxes. More flashes came from a different part of the arena, the east mezzanine. He turned his attention to the band who, in reaction to the chaos, ceased playing in the middle of their song. Now, there was only the sounds of shrieking fans and the sharp and hollow reports of gunfire.

People began scrambling onto the stage. Big Don rushed to Polyana who appeared frozen with fear. He wrapped her in his arms, using his massive body as a shield, and began shuttling her to the wing. Then, a loud bang to his right. Big Don looked to see the bassist, Joel Friedel, collapse to the floor, half of his cranium blown off. A man in all-black clothing was standing

nearby with an assault rifle in his hands and was now firing indiscriminately into the crowd. Big Don shoved Polyana behind a giant stack of speakers, then turned and bolted toward the gunman. He lowered his shoulder and drove it into the man's back with all of his might, causing the man to flop face first onto the stage with the mountainous security guard on his back. Big Don wrapped his beefy arm around the man's neck and squeezed and twisted and strangled with all of his might until he felt a bony crack and the man went limp.

A complete frenzy: volleys of gunfire; desperate men and women and boys and girls climbing over each other. Big Don popped to his feet and grabbed the rifle off of the floor next to the shooter's body. Then he ran to where he had left Polyana. She was kneeling and clutching herself. Her silver bodysuit on the left side of her abdomen was soaked with viscous, scarlet blood, which was streaking down her hip. She looked up to Big Don with tear-filled eyes. He swiftly scooped her over his shoulder, effortlessly, as if she were a sack of fruit, and ran to the stage exit.

Three hours earlier they were eating pizza at a casual joint not far from the Jaffa Gate: Polyana, her mother-slash-manager Sandy, her stylist, two of her Israel-based girlfriends, and Big Don. Normally, Big Don would have protested; he was generally opposed to pre-show outings at restaurants where he could not strictly control access to the young rock star. He would have insisted upon a private room or a roped-off booth, but Polyana was adamant that they go somewhere "regular" this time. She agreed to tuck her long locks, which were died a silvery blue, up into a bun underneath a knit cap and to wear a rather frumpy sweater, which would cover the trademark tattoos of mermaids and marine life that ran up the length of her right arm. Big Don remained uncomfortable with the crowded, mid-range restaurant Polyana's friends had selected, but ultimately he relented and the meal went off without a hitch.

Big Don had been Polyana's head of security ever since her first major tour back in 2018. She had become an overnight sensation after the release of the first two singles off of her debut album, which was entitled *Edge of the Universe*. She had quickly entered the ranks of some of her megastar contemporaries – Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish among them – and was roundly heralded by leading critics. One referred to her as “the second coming of Stevie Nicks, only better,” while another asserted that she “might singlehandedly resuscitate the flatlining rock and roll genre in America.” Big Don – fifty-five years old at the time of their introduction – did not care much for her music at first. He had always been a classic rock purist, who insisted that 1969 was the absolute apex for the music industry, and that we, as a broader culture, had been sliding toward dystopia ever since. However, the more time he spent around Polyana, the more he appreciated what she was trying to achieve. At the time of this Jerusalem show in 2022, he was fully aboard the hype train and earnestly believed that the girl might change the game, might be the harbinger of a musical renaissance of sorts.

It was Polyana's idea to schedule a tour date here in the Holy Land. She was Jewish on her mother's side and had been here several times before. She had also participated in a study abroad program in Tel Aviv during her junior year of college and had nurtured several very close friendships. She often asserted that she would have already relocated to Israel had her career not required that she spend most of her time in Los Angeles. Polyana's publicist had doubts about whether they could fill an arena here, but Sandy pushed hard for it and the show sold out in two days.

Big Don had never been to the Middle East prior to this trip. Before working for Polyana, he was head of security for a heavy metal band called The Visigoths for fourteen years, but that band never became one-quarter as big as Polyana and, grown men with rather settled family

lives, they were disinclined to go out on international tours. Anyway, they did not have much of a fanbase outside of the United States and Germany.

Prior to this tour stop, Big Don had consulted with the American Embassy, who assured him that the security situation in Israel was relatively stable and that Polyana should not expect to run into trouble unless, of course, she were to visit the Palestinian territories. The young star, in the past, had taken some controversial political positions – she was far left on abortion and immigration – but had stayed away from the Israel-Palestine debate. “I can see both sides,” she had explained to her mother in Big Don’s presence. “I just don’t feel strongly enough to wield my influence in one way or the other.” This was a relief to Big Don. It made his work a bit easier.

After their pizza dinner, Polyana and her retinue made their way to the Pais Arena in two large SUVs. A crowd had already gathered at the VIP entrance to the venue. Polyana instructed the driver to stop so that she could roll down her window and sign a few autographs. Big Don stepped out of the vehicle and did his best to prevent the crowd from pressing too closely. It was mostly young men and women and teenagers, although he did notice at least one man who must have been in his fifties. Balding, clean-shaven, in a dark green button-down shirt over blue jeans. Big Don eyed him closely, because, counterintuitively, it was these older types that were most likely to cause problems. Sometimes they wanted to propose some sort of business venture to Polyana or to insist that she sign a dozen glossy photos that they would later resell on the street. On a few occasions she had been approached by stalker-types who proclaimed their love and tried to touch or embrace her inappropriately. Big Don had zero tolerance for those schmoes. He’d rough them up enough so that they would think twice or three times before attempting another such move.

While Polyana went into her dressing room with Sandy and the stylist, Big Don stood outside in the hall. He did not always feel the need to guard the door, especially at familiar venues. But he did not have the lay of the land at this particular arena, and he felt slightly unsettled for whatever reason, and he had learned early on in his career to always act out of an overabundance of caution.

In the late-80s, he was part of a team that worked security at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The ultra-popular hair metal band Spearhead came into town for a weekend of shows. The venue had been warned that the band's fanbase tended to get rowdy, even violent. However Rick, the head of security, opposed calling in extra manpower. He was already over-budget for the year. Besides, he had full faith in his crew. They had previously worked shows for The Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath, and Pink Floyd to name a few, and those went smoothly.

However, during Spearhead's encore, all hell broke loose. A cadre of at least two dozen young men forced their way onto stage and began smashing equipment and diving into the crowd. One poured booze on the drum set and lit it on fire. Flip Selig, the bassist, got into a scuffle with one of the miscreants and fell off the stage and broke his arm. By the time security brought the melee under control, seven people required transport to the hospital and twenty-thousand-dollars-worth of gear had been destroyed. Rick, along with Big Don and most of the crew, was summarily fired.

Polyana did not attract that sort of mayhem, to be sure, but Big Don knew that nutsos often popped out of the woodwork. He not only wanted to keep his job, but also cared deeply for the girl. He had no children of his own and only one niece, with whom he hardly maintained any sort of a connection. He had been married briefly in his late twenties but, now, had virtually no

family to speak of and only a couple of old friends that he saw on rare occasion. When he wasn't on duty, he was typically sitting by himself in a skiff on Lake Gregory, angling for rainbow trout.

Polyana was really all Big Don had going for him, and the older he got, the sooner that relationship would come to an end. He'd be sixty in a year. At some point it would not make sense for an old man to be her first and last line of defense. He'd put himself out to pasture if Polyana didn't take the initiative within the next few years.

As the fracas in the arena continued, gunshots rattling like battered snare drums, Big Don hauled Polyana down the service tunnel behind the stage. The girl groaned from time to time, but said nothing. Wild-eyed people sprinted past. Screams carried down the passageway from both directions. They came upon two policemen, guns drawn, running toward the arena.

"Where can I take her?!" Big Don yelled to them.

"Just take cover!" One responded without slowing down.

"Here! Here!" Someone yelled. It was a middle-aged woman in a hospitality uniform: tall and trim, her hair knotted on top of her head. She was holding a door open, waving to Big Don.

He hustled through the door into a large commercial kitchen. The woman led them through a maze of stainless-steel tables and equipment to a walk-in refrigerator. She opened the door. Big Don went inside and lowered Polyana to the floor. She was bleeding heavily, her face ashen, her breath shuddering and shallow.

He set the rifle off to the side then assessed Polyana's wound. The entry was a small hole just above her hip. A larger exit wound near her kidney poured blood onto the tile floor.

"Oh my God!" the kitchen woman gasped.

"I need towels and scissors!" Big Don yelled. And when the woman did not respond immediately: "Now damn it!"

“Yes, yes!” The woman quickly exited the refrigerator.

“How bad is it?” Polyana rasped, coughing lightly as the words exited her mouth.

“You’re gonna be all right. Don’t talk, Polly.”

“I think I’m going to die.”

“No, you’re not!” Big Don turned the girl on her side and firmly applied pressure with his hands to both wounds. Crimson streamed between his fingers.

The woman returned with an armful of clean rags and a knife. She set them down next to Big Don. He grabbed the knife and sliced through Polyana’s bodysuit, revealing the flesh around the wounds. Then he took a rag in each hand and pressed on the entry and exit holes again.

“Do you have a phone?” he yelled to the woman.

“Yes, I do!”

“I need you to call for paramedics.”

She pulled out her phone. “There is no service in here. I have to go outside.”

“OK. Fast as you can, please!”

The woman departed again. Polyana was silent now, her eyelids half-closed, her skin drained of all pigment.

“Stay with me, Polly.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she mumbled incoherently.

This was the second time in his life that Big Don found himself tending to a grievously injured person. After high school, in 1981, he enlisted in the Army and was assigned to Fort Sill for Field Artillery School. A year in, he was in a freak helicopter crash. He and three other artillerymen were to be transported across the base for a live-fire drill. However, just as the helicopter lifted from the pad, its tail rotor malfunctioned. It spun wildly, then lurched onto its

side. The main motor blades shattered upon impact with the ground, sending shrapnel flying across the area, and the helicopter burst into flames. Big Don and one other soldier escaped the wreckage with mild injuries, but a few of the soldiers on the ground nearby were hurt badly. One, a Private Meade, was struck by a projectile just below the knee. Big Don stumbled upon the downed man amidst the chaos and heavy smoke. Meade was writhing and groaning, in extreme pain. His mangled calf and ankle were hanging from his exposed knee joint like a butchered steak. Big Don hurriedly repurposed his uniform coat as a tourniquet and knotted it tightly above the wound and held it in place until a medic arrived. He likely saved Meade's life but the lower limb was a lost cause.

The incident dramatically changed the course of Big Don's life. Until that point, he had anticipated a lengthy career in the Army and harbored ambitions to achieve the rank of Master Sergeant or higher. However, he suffered from a lingering case of PTSD after the crash and never regained his fervor for military service. He was honorably discharged after his four-year contract expired.

In a few minutes, the woman returned with bad news, having spoken with emergency services. The attack was ongoing and paramedics were unable to safely enter the arena. They had advised her to shelter in place and await further instructions from the police.

"That's not going to work," Big Don said. "She's going to die right here on the floor."

Polyana, who had been quiet, sputtered weakly, "I thought you said that I'm not dying."

"You're not, baby girl. You're not. We just have to move you ASAP."

"I can't move."

Big Don thought for a moment, then removed the black polo shirt he was wearing, underneath which he donned a white tee. He wrapped the shirt around the girl's narrow waist and

tied it tight against the wound. Then he scooped her into his arms, causing her to exhale a high-pitched bleat.

“Take the gun,” he said to the woman.

She hesitated only momentarily, before picking it up and following Big Don out of the refrigerator.

From the kitchen, they could hear an audible commotion in some distant part of the arena and, still, the occasional gunshot.

They made their way to the door. The woman pushed it open slowly and peered out into the hall. Concertgoers ran past, away from the madness, some apparently injured. “I think we can try now,” she said after a moment.

Big Don, carrying Polyana, followed the woman into the hall. They ran to the right. “There’s an exit this way!” she shouted over her shoulder.

A hundred feet up, they came upon a man, face-down on the concrete floor. He appeared to have a gunshot wound in his mid-back. The woman kneeled and checked on him, but he appeared unresponsive. Big Don continued past, Polyana a dead weight in his arms.

Shortly, they arrived at a loading dock that opened onto the rear of the property. There were two box trucks parked there, one at each bay. Big Don, struggling to catch his breath, sweat coursing off his bald head, hesitated and looked into the distance. A cacophony of sirens filled the night air. A quarter-mile away he could see a lineup of police vehicles, their roof lights flashing blue and red against the darkness of the surroundings. The woman appeared again.

“You’ve got to cover us as we run,” Big Don said to her. “Can you use that gun?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I served. We all serve here.”

Big Don looked into Polyana's face. Her eyes were closed. He shook her. "Open your eyes, Polly. Keep 'em open."

But the girl did not respond. Her face was slack, her mouth hanging open. She was either unconscious or dead.

Big Don clenched his jaw, then hurried down the loading dock stairs to the ground and out into the open. The woman ran at his side, holding the rifle competently. The scale of the police response was massive. It seemed as if they had the entire arena surrounded with squad cars and military vehicles. Throngs of people continued to pour out of the arena and run for cover.

Suddenly there was a massive explosion near one of the entrances, two hundred feet from their location. The flash lit up the entire sky and the accompanying boom was deafening. Orange-hot projectiles streaked through the air and skipped along the asphalt. Something stung Big Don in the thigh, but he kept rushing forward toward a cluster of emergency vehicles that included several ambulances. His arms and lower back were throbbing and he was out of breath, but he persisted. The girl's life most certainly depended on it.

When they reached the perimeter, two policemen came to their aid.

"Help us!" Big Don bellowed.

"This way! This way!" one replied, and guided them toward an ambulance.

A paramedic appeared and instructed Big Don to place Polyana on a gurney that was set up behind the ambulance. As soon as he let her go, another paramedic shoved him out of the way and began taking her vitals. The girl looked like a discarded mannequin, like a limp marionette.

"She's shot in the abdomen!" Big Don shouted over the din of sirens.

"All right! Step back please!"

He moved away and suddenly realized how wiped out by the exertion and adrenalin surge he was. He bent over and put his hands on his knees and wheezed. He felt incredibly weak and dizzy. Someone placed a hand on his back and rubbed in circles.

“She’ll be OK. They’ve got her now.” It was the kitchen woman, her voice steady and reassuring.

Suddenly the world seemed to be spinning like a tornado around Big Don. He wobbled on his feet then dropped to one knee, nauseous, his heart pounding as if it were on the verge of breaking through his ribs. His jaw and shoulder locked up painfully. Then he tipped to his side like a felled tree and blacked out.

One year later Big Don returned to Jerusalem for the national memorial service. Gila picked him up at the airport in a compact Skoda. He barely fit into the passenger seat. Polyana’s mother, relatives, and friends had flown in a few days earlier. Big Don felt the need to travel alone.

Gila had insisted that he stay at her home during his visit. He resisted the invitation half-heartedly but, in truth, was looking forward to spending some time with her. Although they had connected over the phone a few times since the tragedy, he had not been with her in person since he checked out of Hadassah University Hospital. He had suffered a massive heart attack outside of the arena. Gila accompanied him to the hospital and held vigil while he underwent triple bypass surgery and spent another week in the hospital recovering.

Polyana was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital on that dreadful day. A doctor later explained to Big Don and Gila that there was nothing they could have done to save the girl.

It was a kill shot through and through. That did not prevent Big Don from blaming himself, however, and he was tortured by remorse and a sense of failure for the rest of his life.

The Jerusalem concert, of course, was the last time he worked security. With his heart condition, he was not fit for duty. But, beyond that, he had lost all faith in himself. Even if he could recuperate his body, he felt that he had lost his instinct, his edge. Fortunately, he had enough resources to retire. Polyana's mother, of course, sued the owner of the arena and the concert promoter, ultimately settling for a substantial fortune. She insisted that Big Don accept a portion of that. He considered it a macabre memento, a form of blood money, but she convinced him that Polyana would have wanted him to have it.

Gila lived in a suburb of the city. During the drive out, she talked about how she left the hospitality business after the attack and became a caretaker for homebound senior citizens. "The work is more impactful. It's more aligned with how I view the world now," she explained. Big Don said that he, on the contrary, was done taking care of people. Gila said she understood.

That night, Gila and her sister cooked a substantial dinner consisting of nine traditional dishes that they served family style. Her sister's husband and two children and another couple from the neighborhood joined them. They talked extensively about local and national politics, which Big Don knew nothing about. He engaged in the conversation only when he was addressed directly, which, fortunately, was on few occasions. He realized during the meal that his acquaintance with Gila would not last much longer. It was simply too contrived, too laden with tragedy and, frankly, they had little to nothing in common. He spent a good part of the evening wishing he had never come.

The memorial was at noon the next day at the Great Synagogue, which accommodated fourteen hundred people. The service was led by Rabbi Nachman and broadcast on Israeli

television. The Prime Minister gave an emotional speech in which he invoked the Holocaust and, once again, vowed to bring all of the terrorists to justice. The cantor sang a prayer for the dead and read the names of all ninety-three of the victims, including Polyana. Big Don wept into his hands.

Afterwards the Prime Minister led a long procession of cars on a slow drive past the arena. Big Don rode with Gila, who cried the whole way. He put his hand on her shoulder but sensed he was incapable of providing any comfort.

He decided to return to Los Angeles a day earlier than planned. Being in Israel was in no way cathartic. He ordered a taxi and left before Gila woke, leaving behind a brief note of thank you.

Big Don spent the following weeks fishing and drinking heavily. He thought on occasion of killing himself, but, each time, rejected the idea as cowardly. Yet, at some point, he realized that he could not spend his remaining years alone. So he began driving for a medical transportation service a few nights a week and volunteering at an animal shelter in North Hollywood on the weekends. The work was suitably mindless, impersonal, and stress-free. A few months later, just before Christmas, someone dropped off a box of dachshund puppies at the shelter. The manager, a rosy-cheeked, chipper woman, insisted on taking photos of Big Don holding one of the miniscule creatures. The puppy fell asleep in the palm of his giant hand and, rather than return it to its crate, he chose to adopt it. He tucked it into his jacket pocket when he went fishing the next morning and, as the sun rose over Lake Gregory, he looked into the animal's tiny, soulful eyes and named it Polly.