

Operation: Hellfire

by MacKenzie Guthrie

Trigger warning: abortion, rape, sexual assault, abuse, arson

“Baby killer!”

Lilith heard the tomato fly through the air before it splattered across her back like a gaping wound. *Seriously? Who pelts people with rotten tomatoes anymore? What is this, a Shakespearian theater?* she thought. But no, this wasn't a Shakespearian theater, and she was not an actor being heckled. This was the entrance to a Planned Parenthood, and all Lilith wanted was an abortion. *It's not even a crime, she thought, Yet.*

Lilith snapped out of her reverie just in time to avoid the second tomato that streaked past her shoulder and landed on the pavement with a half-hearted *splat*. As she walked through the glass doors into the air-conditioned building, the din of the protesters softened to a dull roar. In the new silence, Lilith became aware of how loudly her heart was beating. Reflexively, she began to whisper:

Bar'chi nafshi et Adonai,

Adonai Elohai, gadalta m'od, hod v'hadar lavashta.

Oteh or kasalmah, noteh shamayim kay'riah

Bless, Adonai, O my soul!

Adonai my God, how great You are.

You are robed in glory and majesty,

wrapping Yourself in light as in a garment,

spreading forth the heavens like a curtain.

She hadn't uttered the Jewish *tallit* blessing since her childhood, and while the words in Hebrew didn't come easily, their familiarity calmed her. The prayer reminded her of her mother, the way the words she said over the prayer shawl smoothed over the perpetual worry carved into her face with the calm of routine. Her heart rate slowed, and she worked up the nerve to approach the receptionist. The woman sitting at the computer also looked worn with worry. *Maybe that's just how women look,* Lilith mused, only half-kidding. The receptionist—“Hawa,” according to the name plate on the counter—looked up, and her previously deep tan face grew pale at the drying red liquid around Lilith's neck and ears, made even more vivid by Lilith's pale skin. Before she could voice her alarm, Lilith explained, “Protestors. With tomatoes.”

At this, the woman looked less stricken and even managed to crack a joke. “What, give a bad performance?” she quipped.

Lilith grinned, glad someone else had made the connection. After this brief moment of comic relief, Lilith remembered why she was there. Her stomach felt knotted, and she wasn’t sure if it was because of the unwanted life growing inside of her or her own fear.

Twenty minutes later, the ultrasound technician looked up at her, sympathy written across her face. Lilith knew what this look meant. It was too late. “How far along?” she croaked.

“About four weeks, as best as I can tell,” she responded, trying to sound professional and failing. They were both thinking the same thing: Ohio’s latest in a series of ever more regressive abortion laws had just taken effect a few months ago. She was two weeks too late. Two weeks. The technician spoke up, “I’m going to bring the doctor in so you two can discuss your options.” She exited the room softly. After she left, Lilith, alone, vulnerable, with her shirt pushed up over stomach, thought about how she got here...

She had become a human rights lawyer to protect children, and now she was trying to kill the child inside of her. *The irony...* Her team was staying late at the office to celebrate a big win. After two years of scrutiny, the firm had managed to bust a huge tech company in India that was very clever about skirting child labor laws. They brought kids in from poor, rural regions of India, forging papers that claimed they were much older than they really were. They lured them in and worked them to the bone. Most died within two or three years, either from exhaustion or exposure to dangerous materials. Because they were poor, their families had no way to seek justice. Thankfully, they had managed to sneak in an informant wearing a recording device, and she caught everything—the long hours, the lack of food or clean water, the beatings—and now the CEO was going to jail for a long, long time, as were many of the other executives and managers who enriched themselves with the blood and sweat of children.

As they were celebrating, Lilith stepped into the office to take a call. She can’t even remember what the call was about. She had left the door cracked, and so she didn’t hear her coworker Clay Malmont slip in and draw the blinds. The click of the door lock alerted her. She turned around, more frustrated at being interrupted than worried about the door being locked. “What do you need, Clayton?” she grumbled. He hated being called Clayton.

“Where’s the Desmond briefing?” he slurred.

She sighed, “Clayton, you’re drunk, and you need to get out of my office. Besides, that’s your briefing. It was due a week ago.”

“Well, I’m telling you to write it now. Get to it, bitch,” he growled.

She sighed again—he had always been a bit of a misogynist, even sober—and patiently explained, “You and I are coworkers, equals. You are not my superior. You don’t get to tell me to do your work for you.”

“Get over here, bitch. I’ll show you which of us is in charge,” he said as he began to stumble towards Lilith angrily. She tried to dodge him, but the office was tiny and he had her on the floor before she could even get around her desk.

Lilith doesn't remember the assault itself. She remembers the smell of whiskey and Coke on his breath; the rough texture of the carpet; the slanted light coming in through the blinds; his stubble grating against her cheek, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth; the sound of him zipping his fly when he was finished. She doesn't know if she screamed or fought. She doesn't think she did. She laid there for what felt like hours. The next thing she remembers is bolting to the bathroom and throwing up. She took a moment to readjust her clothes and slipped out of the office unnoticed and went home. She took a lava-hot shower and scrubbed and scrubbed at her skin until it was raw.

She took the next two weeks off from work and spent those weeks trying to make sense of everything. She didn't feel safe in her apartment anymore, so she stayed with her parents. Every little sound made her jump. Her own father's voice, deep like Clay's, made her cringe in fear. After those two weeks, she tried to make everything go back to normal. Going to work every day was borderline torture, seeing Clayton there, watching him act as if he had never held her down on the floor of her own office and used her like some kind of sex object. But, despite the daily torture, Lilith was beginning to recover.

She knew that reporting Clayton was a useless endeavor—no one would take her seriously. Her boss and all of her coworkers were men. She heard the kind of jokes they made about women when they thought she couldn't hear them. She heard the way some of them talked about the new abortion law, saying to one another to “be more careful” with a wink. Not everyone in the office was like that, of course, but the ones who didn't make those jokes certainly did nothing to stop or discourage them. Reporting him was more likely to cost Lilith her job than cost him his. She had seen it happen to her only female coworker a few years ago. When she confessed to Lilith that one of their male coworkers was harassing her in the break room—grabbing her, pushing her against the wall, telling her what he'd like to do to her if no one were around—Lilith told her to report him, so she did. Later that day, Lilith saw her packing up her office, tear tracks dried on her cheeks. Their message was clear: this was a man's world, and they protected their own. So she tried to move on, and she had almost managed to block the memory of it out, until her period was late. She had noticed all the familiar signs of what she thought was menstruation: the cramps, the bloating, the moodiness, the chocolate cravings. She hadn't thought it was possible, had tried to will it to not be so, but here she was, two weeks and twelve home pregnancy tests later.

The door opening brought her back to reality. It took a moment for her to realize that the young woman wearing an emerald green hijab and a white lab coat was the same woman working at reception when she walked in. It was Lilith's turn to look surprised. Hawa—no, Dr. Assamad—smiled. As if reading her mind, Dr. Assamad said, “We're a little short-staffed here, so sometimes I work at reception to give the girls a break.”

“So, I understand that you have a little bit of a problem on your hands,” Dr. Assamad said gently, but Lilith didn't want her gentleness or her platitudes or her advice. What she wanted was to be rid of the parasite growing inside of her, the living memory of that night.

“That's a huge understatement,” Lilith snapped.

Dr. Assamad smiled sadly, “I know this isn't what you want. I wish I could help you more, but you know the law.”

Her calmness infuriated Lilith. Her voice went up an octave as she yelled, “That’s easy for you to say when you aren’t currently playing host to your rapist’s baby.” Lilith started to get up to leave.

Dr. Assamad’s face got even paler than it had when she thought Lilith had been attacked outside of the Planned Parenthood. She stuttered, “I-I-I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Obviously not,” she snarled. By now, Lilith had wiped the ultrasound gel off her stomach and pulled her shirt back down. She collected her bag and stormed out. She scurried through the parking lot past the screaming protestors still screaming “babykiller!” at her and began unlocking her car. Hawa scurried out after her, white lab coat now gone. “Ms. Lieb, wait!” Hawa shouted.

“Dr. Assamad, I’m in no mood for your platitudes,” Lilith said sharply.

“Please, just let me help you. It may be too late for you to abort the embryo, but I can try to help you make this pregnancy go as smoothly as possible. Please, come back into the clinic and we can begin setting up a plan for your care,” by the time Hawa finished her speech, she was out of breath and panting slightly.

Lilith raised an eyebrow. “Why should I trust you? And why exactly do you even care?” she asked.

“Because what other options do you have at the moment? Ms. Lieb—”

Lilith interrupted, “Call me Lilith.”

“Lilith, your options, frankly, are limited, and I want to make sure that you get the care that you need, that you deserve. I’m concerned about you because I’ve already seen one too many desperate pregnant women attempt dangerous things to get rid of their pregnancies after the ban. Maybe it’s selfish of me, but I don’t want to let another one of my patients die from this law.”

“Fine, but no more pity looks. I don’t need your pity, Dr. Assamad,” Lilith spoke primly, still unsure of the doctor’s motives.

“Please, call me Hawa,” she said with a smile. She had the barest hint of an accent that Lilith hadn’t noticed before—Palestinian, if she wasn’t mistaken. She recognized it from all her summer visits to her grandparents’ in ‘Israel.’ The trips were intended to strengthen her Jewish faith, but all they succeeded in was fueling her fury at the human rights abuses she saw happening around her. Even at ten years old, she could vividly remember feeling furious at seeing little Palestinian children her age getting bullied by IDF soldiers, prodded with guns, shouted at.

“Hawa, then,” said Lilith, warming up to Hawa slightly despite her suspicions.

The pair walked back into the clinic, tuning out the shouts of the protestors.

As weeks turned into months, Lilith’s stomach grew rounder and her bond with Hawa grew stronger. The kindly doctor checked on her far more often than a physician normally

checks on a patient, and sitting together to watch movies or discuss books was probably not something she learned in medical school. One day, Lilith finally mustered the courage to bring it up. “Hawa, why do you care so much?” she asked, “isn’t visiting everyday going a little above and beyond?”

Hawa blushed. “W-w-well, I suppose I’ve just become rather fond of you,” she stuttered. Hawa always resorted back to her British schoolgirl manners when she was nervous.

Lilith grinned and imitated her accent, “‘Fond’ of me, huh? Why’s that?”

Hawa gave her a dirty look that barely concealed her own grin. “Shut up, Lil,” she said.

“C’mon, I really want to know! What do you mean by ‘fond’ of me?” Lilith batted her eyelashes at Hawa, getting more mischievous by the second.

In response, Hawa leaned over and put her hand on Lilith’s pale cheek and kissed her softly. “*That* is what I mean,” she told her. Hawa smirked—now it was Lilith’s turn to blush.

Lilith, eyes wide, ran a hand through her short, dark hair. Her cheeks, normally pale, were bright red. Oddly enough, she looked a little bit like Snow White at the moment. She played with her hands, tracing the owl tattoo on her forearm. When Lilith still hadn’t responded, Hawa began to panic, *shit, shit, I should NOT have done that*, she thought to herself furiously. But before she could open her mouth to apologize, Lilith closed the gap between them and hugged Hawa, nestling her face into her neck. After a moment of shock, Hawa hugged her back and kissed the top of her head.

Several months after Ruth was born, Lilith came home from work fuming. She shouted to Hawa, who was in the nursery with the baby, “You don’t believe what those bastards at work did. They went and gave that rapist sonofabitch a promotion.” She recounted the entire story to Hawa, who listened with her usual patience, this time tinged with silent fury.

After the meeting in which their boss announced Clay’s promotion, Clay came up behind Lilith, still in shock, and whispered in her ear, “Get ready for more nights like the Acharya case. Remember that? Oooh, were you good that night. I can’t wait to get you back down on that floor. Don’t forget: I’m in charge.”

Lilith’s blood ran cold. *So he did remember*, she realized with horror. After making some excuse to her boss about not feeling well (she truly did feel sick, but not for the reason he thought), she hurried home...

By the time Lilith finished the story, she was practically falling apart. “I can’t go through that again. I can’t. I still have nightmares about it. I can’t relive that. I can’t,” Lilith began to panic, rocking back and forth as she spoke. Hawa set Ruth down in the crib and held Lilith instead, running her hand over her back.

“Shhh, it’s okay. I won’t let that happen to you again,” Hawa whispered.

“What are you going to do about it?” Lilith sniffled.

Hawa shrugged. “Burn his house down,” she suggested almost casually, “with him in it,” she added.

Lilith laughed in disbelief, “You’re joking, right?”

“No.” Hawa responded with such finality that Lilith was speechless for a moment as she shifted in discomfort.

When Lilith didn’t respond, Hawa continued, “You said he smokes, right? Let’s make it look like an accident. He had a few too many to drink, lit up, and passed out in bed before he finished the cigarette.”

Lilith shook her head. “How long have you been planning this?” she asked, still shocked that her usually mild girlfriend was oh-so-casually suggesting murder and arson.

“A while,” was Hawa’s only response.

Lilith studied her girlfriend, reminded of the shock she had felt the first time Hawa took off her hijab in front of her, back before Hawa was her girlfriend. Lilith remembered how she had expected long, dark hair to accompany Hawa’s naturally deep, tan skin, and how instead she was greeted by an assortment of multicolored tresses in reds, pinks, and white, shifting and melding together. Lilith recognized the colors immediately. “Are you...?” Lilith started to ask, but trailed off.

“A lesbian?” Hawa filled in the blank. “Yep,” she said it so casually, with so much confidence. Lilith looked at her, open-mouthed. Without speaking, she lifted up the leg of her pants to reveal a tattoo of the lesbian pride flag: reds, pinks, and white, just like Hawa’s hair.

This was like that moment, only magnified times one thousand. It was the unexpected surprise of finding out that Hawa was far more than meets the eye, that her docility was for show; it was not her personality.

Lilith began to play out the scenario in her head. She said, “You do understand what this means, right? I, you, we, could go to jail, and then what would happen to Ruth?”

Hawa shrugged again. “Only if we get caught,” she said.

“Okay, okay, tell me more about this, you evil mastermind,” Lilith told her with a chuckle.

One month later, in the dead of night under a new moon, Lilith and Hawa arrived at their destination: 127 Paraíso Drive. They parked about a hundred yards away in a field across the street. No one owned it—they checked. Their rented car was pitch black and blended in with the night itself. Hawa had even had the foresight to tell Lilith to stop about a mile away, and she got out and put dark paper over the headlights and taillights, letting just enough light peek through to make driving a (difficult) possibility. They both sat in the dark car for a moment, holding hands. Ruth babbled happily in the backseat, completely unaware that her mother was about to murder her father with the help of her adoptive mother.

The pair had decided that Lilith should be the one to start the fire while Hawa stayed in the car with Ruth, keeping lookout and whispering instructions to Lilith through an earpiece. Lilith, dressed head to toe in black, practically melted into the shadows as she snuck up to the one-story home. She entered through the back door, which was left unlocked. She rolled her eyes. *Men*. She decided to first explore the house, making sure that no one else would be victim to her fiery wrath except Clayton. He wasn't married, but he certainly made a big show about how often he brought women back to his place. Plus, who knows? Maybe he has a dog. However, after checking every room twice, Lilith was certain the only two living things in the house were her and Clayton. She whispered to Hawa through the earpiece, "All clear."

"Light 'er up. Operation: Hellfire is a go," Hawa responded immediately. Lilith heard Ruth giggle in the background.

Lilith found Clayton's room. His snoring gave it away. She slipped into the room and closed the blinds. *My, my, how the tables have turned*, she said to herself. Next to his bed was a very full ashtray and a half-full pack of cigarettes. When she got close, he reeked of booze. *This is almost too easy. Hawa, you're a genius*. Lilith fished a lighter out of her pocket and broke it open, pouring the fluid out on his bed. She repeated the process with another lighter. She noticed a bottle of whiskey next to the bed as well, so she added that too. Then she picked up the pack of cigarettes. *Menthols? Seriously?* and took all but one out. She retrieved a third lighter from her pocket, kneeled down, and lit the cigarettes all at once. She dropped most of them on the carpet, which she had also dosed liberally with whiskey, and then placed the last two lit cigarettes on his bed, one next to his hand and the other next to his head, directly onto the lighter fluid and alcohol soaked sheets. They caught almost immediately. Just before she left, Lilith placed a single owl feather on his night stand. She quickly made her exit, making sure to tip over furniture and lock doors as she went. She got out of the house, looked around for other cars, and, seeing none, sprinted back across the street to the field where Hawa was waiting for her. She knocked on the tinted window in the agreed-upon fashion—knock, pause, knock, knock, long pause, knock—and the door unlocked. Lilith got in the driver's seat and flashed an exhilarated grin at the woman sitting next to her. "I did it!" she whispered, though she felt like screaming it.

In response, Hawa leaned over, kissed her, and whispered, "I'm so proud of you, my angel."

"Let's get out of here," Lilith said as she started the car, grateful that they had thought to research which cars had the quietest engines. That, too, had been Hawa's idea.

As Lilith and Hawa sped away from Clayton's house, now engulfed in flame, Lilith glanced into the mirror at the back seat. Ruth was there, babbling happily and playing with the stuffed camel that Hawa had bought her. Lilith smiled, and as Ruth looked up, Lilith saw the glint of the flames reflected in her daughter's eyes.