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Clarity in that moment of panic

SIR — The sound of breaking glass at 4am wakes us to the realisation that we are about to become the latest victims of gratuitous violence in SA. Panic buttons are pressed to summon security companies and police alike, and hopefully to scare the thieves into flight.

Within minutes the security company arrives. Five hours later, the Brooklyn police show up. I am beyond angry.

"I could have been dead by now," I tell the two nonplussed policemen. To which one replies: "I know what you mean ... but we could not find the keys to the van."

In those moments, when your life hangs in the balance, you begin to gain insights that do not come easily in daily life. I understood clearly that security companies are 100 times more efficient than government police bureaucracy — and that the mid-

dle classes are paying, yet again, for something that every South African should enjoy: the right to security.

South African citizens are being picked off daily by fearless criminals with unprecedented ease. These criminals know that they will probably not be caught; and if caught, they are likely to be released because of the incapacity and incompetence of the police.

One of the joys of my life is to work with high school youth on the subjects of our country, their future and the importance of hope. At my annual workshop with girls from a prominent Afrikaans high school in Pretoria, I took them through the importance of learning to cross borders in a racially divided society and in a very dangerous world.

Then I got one of those questions that usually compels me to call for a short break while I recover and take

time to think about my response.

"Professor," said a Grade 10 student, "I agree with what you say ... but tell me how I am supposed to cross borders to someone who represents to me the people who almost killed me in a violent hijacking?"

Her question went to the heart of a problem we seldom recognise: the impact of crime and violence on the prospects for reconciliation.

It is difficult enough to bring South Africans together after our violent and divisive past; it is infinitely more difficult when prejudices and stereotypes are inflamed through violent experiences with the other.

The quality and durability of our democracy are directly threatened by the inability of government to stem this rising tide of violence.

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