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## 'I could have saved the mother'

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**rediff.com's Vaihayasi P Daniel traveled to the small Israeli town of Afula and discovered that Sandra Samuel, the heroine of 26/11, is still a mother to baby Moshe.**

Sandra Samuel opens the door cautiously, just a few inches. Her smile is tentative, guarded.

When you tell her you have come all the way from Mumbai to talk to her, she says quietly, "One minute. I will ask madam."

She disappears into the large two-storey house, and is gone for a good ten minutes.

It is a grey, cloudy day. A chilly wind blows through the bleak, charmless north Israeli town of Afula. You are left surveying the garden, which is strewn with little Moshe Holtzberg's toys bright colored plastic animals, balls, pool sets and more.

An angry exchange of words can be heard through the door. Yehudit Rosenberg, Moshe's grandmother and Rivka Holtzberg's mother, appears at the doorway.

"I am very, very busy, I cannot speak to you," she says in a strong Israeli accent, and asks you to leave. She is dressed in a floor-length brown skirt and lavender top a tall woman, stern in an odd distracted, faraway but not unkind, manner. Her anger subsides when she realizes how far you have travelled to reach her door.

"I will ask Sandra if she will speak to you," she says softly.

Moments later, Sandra returns with Yehudit, who suggests we use the sitting area in the garden for the interview. Yehudit says she cannot come to India for the commemoration ceremony at Nariman House on the first anniversary of 26/11, because she has to be with Moshe.

She smiles wistfully, "The other day he said, 'Savta (*grandmother*), what colour is my hair? I wish it was a nicer colour.'"

The Rosenberg home is situated on a corner, just five minutes from the centre of Afula and half a kilometre from the bus station that was the target of a suicide bomber attack some years ago.

Afula is uncomfortably close to the West Bank. It is where Rivka grew up with her eight siblings. A high wooden white fence surrounds the house, and the happy faces of Rivka and Gavriel Holtzberg smile out from handbills pasted outside. A poster of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Rebbe/spiritual head of the Chabad Lubavitch movement, hangs at the entrance.

It is a quiet, mildly gloomy town; population: 37,000. Sandra – Moshe Holtzberg's nanny, and one of the bravest heroes of Mumbai's 26/11 terror attack – who has been in Israel for 11 months now, points immediately to how different it is from living in bustling, upbeat Mumbai.

"It is nice here, clean and neat. I have been all over the place – Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Mount of Olives. But it is very quiet. Everyone goes from place to place in their cars. You don't see any public! *Hamara (my)* Hindustan is after all our Hindustan."

She sorely misses the cheerful daily confusion of Mumbai, and will go home for a vacation for ten days in December to see her sons Martin, 20 and Jackson, 26.

For Sandra, 45, whose family hails from Goa but who is a thorough Mumbaikar, 2008 was a ghastly year. In June her mechanic husband John, a Keralite, died suddenly in his sleep of an undiagnosed illness. And in November, her employers of five years, the Holtzbergs, were brutally killed in the terrorist attack at Nariman House, Mumbai.

When she managed, with scarcely comprehensible presence of mind, to scoop up the curly-haired, dazed and frightened Moshe and escaped from the beleaguered building, she became an instant icon, and poster girl for the many named, and unnamed, heroes of those 60 hours of terror.

2009 has been better. "More calm. My mind is relaxed. *Man bahut soch mein rahta hai (Many thoughts wander through my mind all the time).*"

She has managed to get over the recurrent nightmares that plagued her in the aftermath of the attacks. "I would dream that the terrorist attack is still happening and I am there. I think at least I could have saved his mother or done something," she says, her voice a whisper. "I had never met Jews before. But it was so nice to work for them, because they were Israelis. I like Jewish people and I just loved them. They were such good people. Very special."

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Image: Sandra Samuel in the Rosenberg home in Afula, north Israel.  
Photographs: Vaihayasi Pande Daniel

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