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Phindile Joseph Ntshongwana's reign of terror spanned just three days starting from March 20, 2011, when four men were attacked and brutally killed with an axe by what some eye-witnesses would describe as a huge man. Picture: PHUMLANI THABETHE

True Crime: Four murders in three days. What made Durban's 'Axeman' snap?

By [Lee Rondganger](#) Sep 6, 2021



Durban: In March 2011, under the cover of darkness, an axe-wielding serial killer stalked the streets of

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the night. And when he caught up to them they would be hacked to pieces. Two were completely

beheaded.

The reign of terror spanned just three days starting from March 20, 2011, when four men were attacked and brutally killed with an axe by what some eye-witnesses would describe as a “huge man” who would slip into the darkness.

Other witnesses who did not realise how close they came to falling victim to the serial killer told detectives that the burly, scary man was seen driving in a silver car.

It would be this silver car, the number plates of which were given to detectives, that would eventually lead them to the killer’s home in a quiet suburban street in Yellowwood Park, south of Durban.

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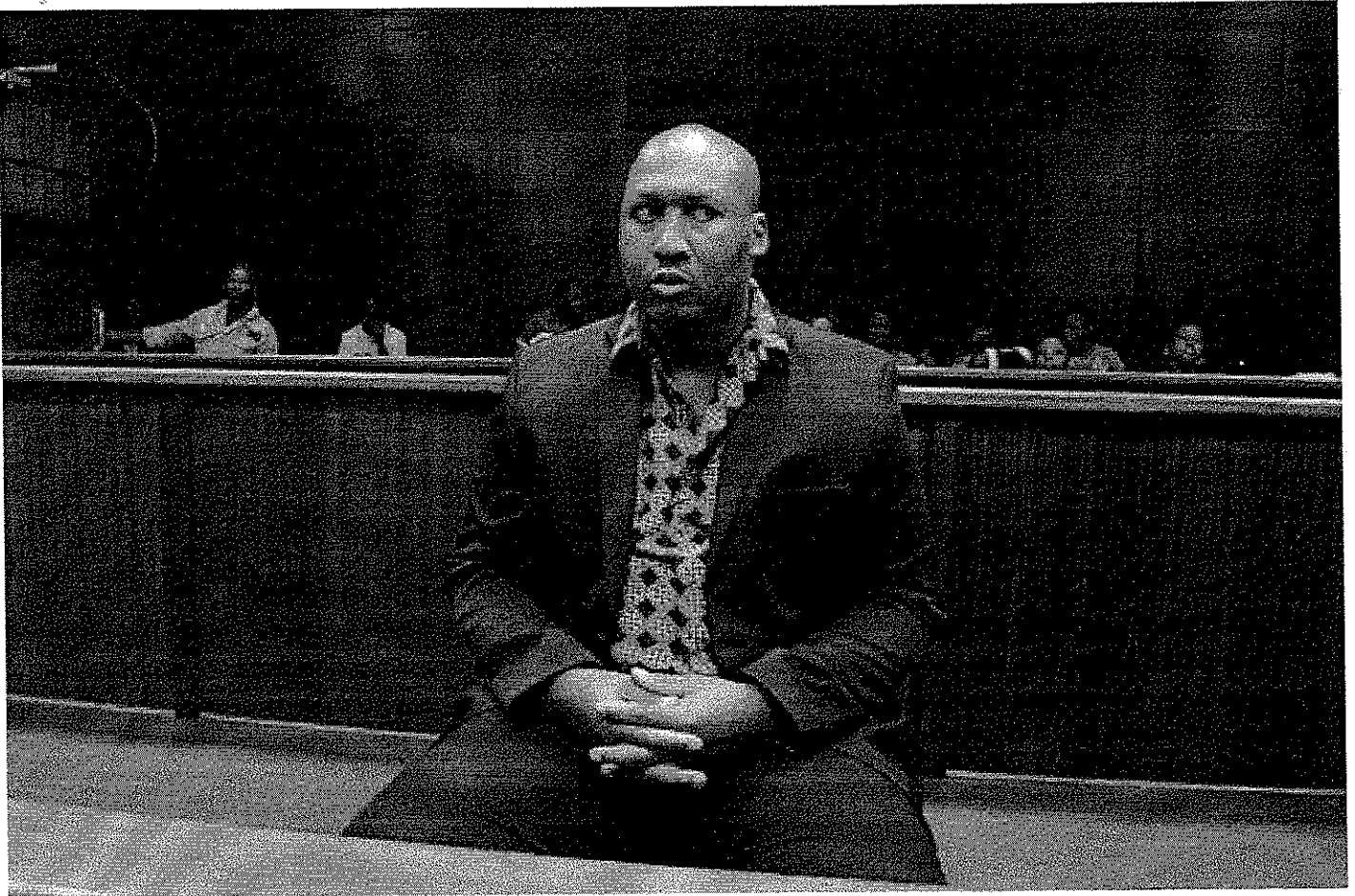
Eight days after the killing spree started, police raided the home of the man where a bloodied axe was found in a dog kennel outside. Inside the house, the blood-stained bathroom floor was analysed by crime scene detectives, while other officers traced the silver car to a car rental company where they found traces of blood still in it.

The axeman’s identity would further shock detectives, when they discovered that he was in fact a former professional rugby player.

Phindile Joseph Ntshongwana was the unlikeliest suspect for a serial killer.

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*All of Joseph Phindile Ntshongwana's victims were male, all had been randomly selected and all had been chased down in the dead of the night.
File Picture.*

He had represented the South African under-23 team and, in addition to the Blue Bulls, had played for the South-Western Districts Eagles.

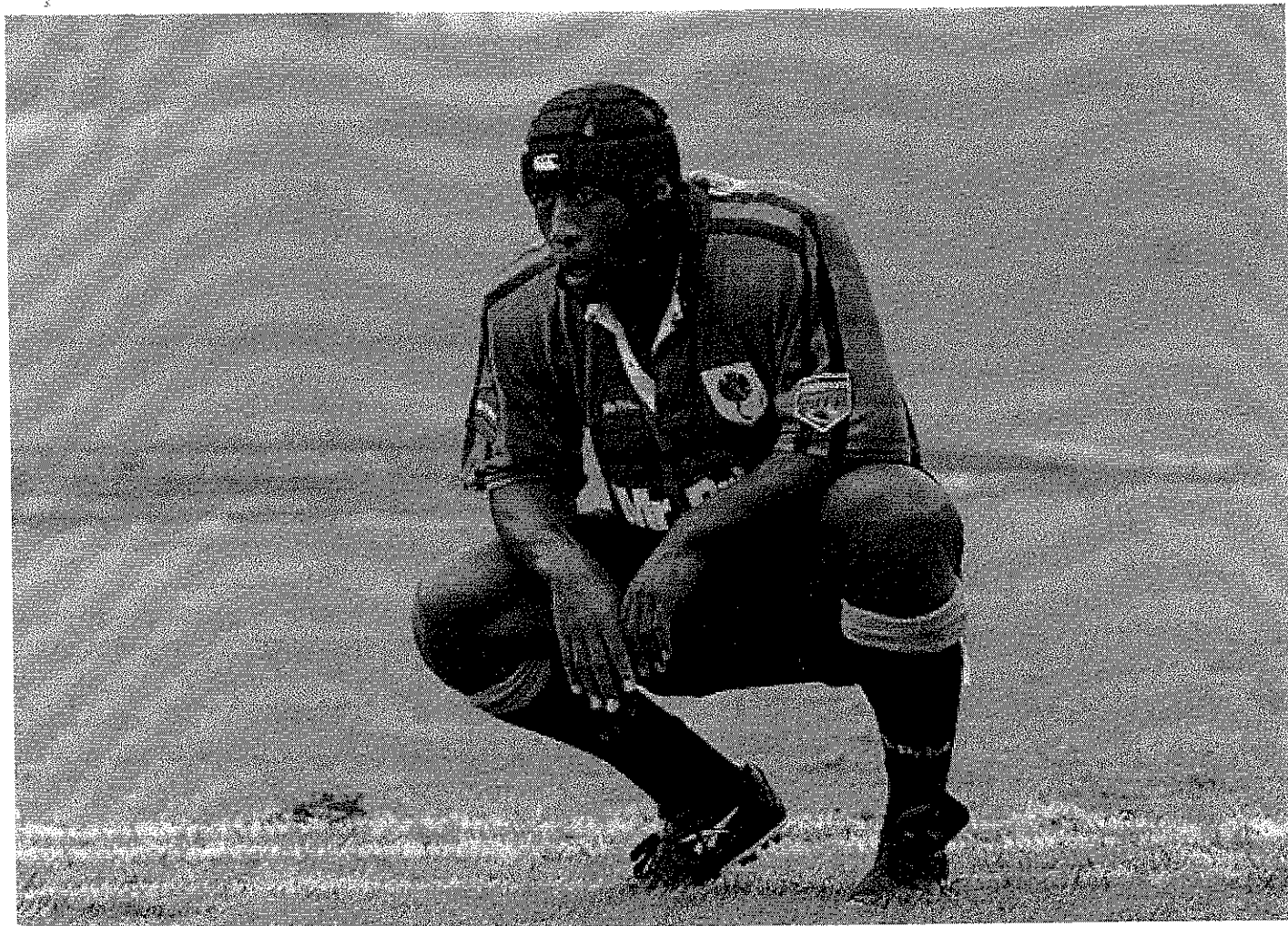
He quit provincial rugby in 2002 after two tries in his career while playing as a flank.

Until his arrest on the stroke of midnight on March 28, nothing about his life or his upbringing pointed to a serial killer in the making.

Those who knew him and played rugby with him described Ntshongwana as a gentle giant and a joker in the dressing room.

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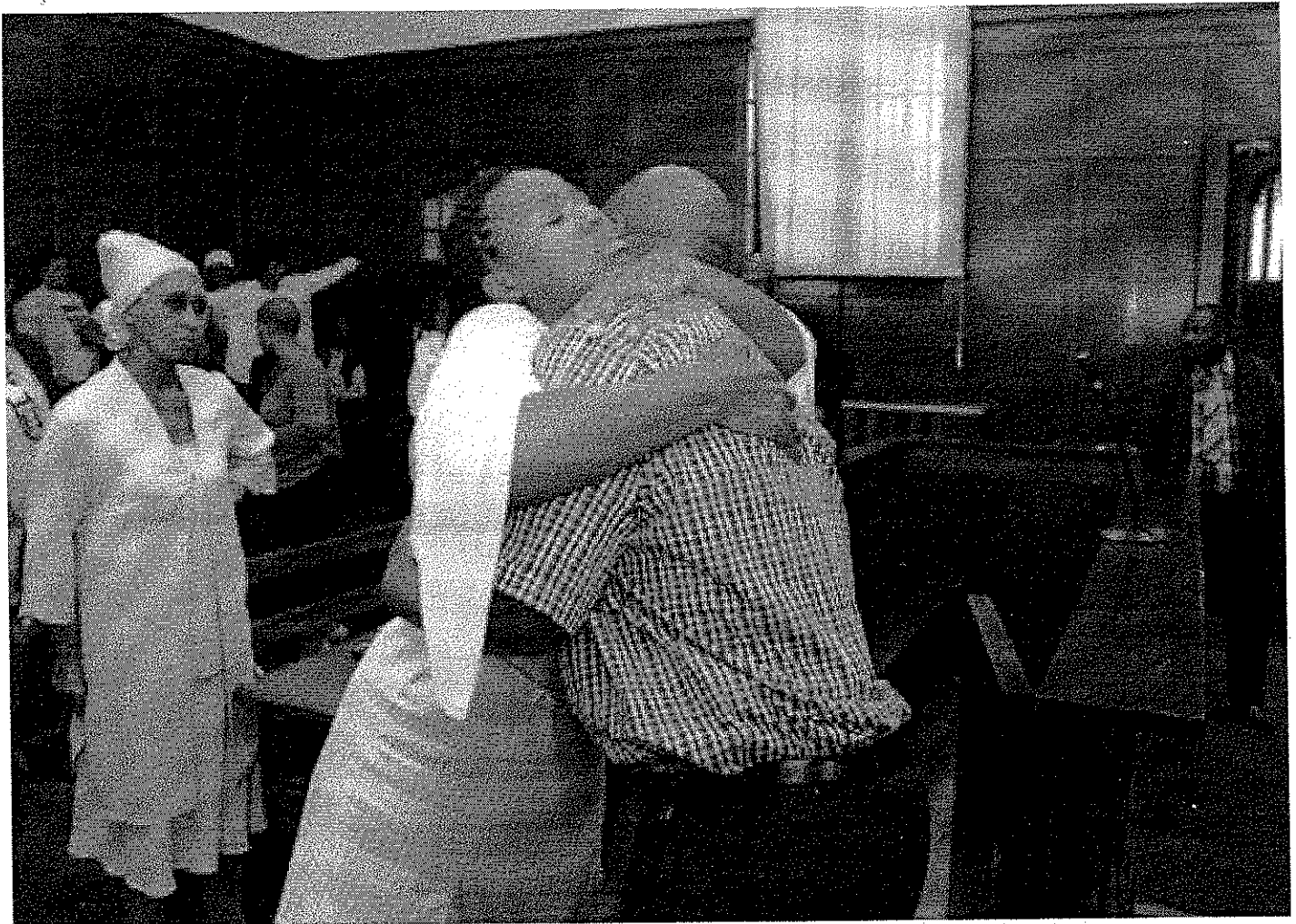
He came from an upper middle-class background, with rugby running through his veins.

In fact, the court heard that he came from a loving home and had a good relationship with his parents.



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Phindile Joseph Ntshongwana hugs a relative in court. His family said that he was off his medication when he committed his crimes. File Picture.

His father was none other Liston Ntshongwana, a former black Springbok rugby player, government adviser and diplomat in the former Transkei who would later go into business.

Liston Ntshongwana was tipped to be the first black Springbok coach owing to his distinguished sporting past, having played for the African Springboks from 1972 and toured Italy with the team in 1974.

So when his son was brought in for questioning at the Brighton Beach police station in connection with the axe murders, it sent shockwaves through the rugby fraternity.

The question on everyone's lips at the time was, what made the Mthatha-raised, private schooled, former athlete, snap?

Was it mental illness, as Ntshongwana's legal team would argue at his trial, or was it something darker?

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Warrant Officer Marius van der Looy, above, holds up the axe which, the State said, Joseph Ntshongwana used to kill his victims and then hack off their heads with.

What is known, however, is that on March 20, 2011, Ntshongwana sought out his first victim, Thembelenkosini Cebekhulu, in Montclair, who he followed and hacked to death in the south Durban suburb.

The next day he attacked a man in Umlazi with an axe, but his victim was able to escape.

On March 22, 2011, Paulos Hlongwa was hacked to death in Lamontville.

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People demonstrated at the Durban Magistrate's Court when Phindile Joseph Ntshongwana appeared on charges of murder on Thursday, 7 April, 2011. Picture: Rogan Ward/SAPA

His head was found in a bin a few hundred metres away from his body. Two days later, Simon Ngidi was hacked to death in Umbilo at around 3am.

But, as Ntshongwana ploughed his axe through Ngidi, he was startled by a student who had been studying at the time, and who screamed at him to stop.

Another man, who has never been identified, was also hacked and killed by Ntshongwana that week. According to court testimony, Ntshongwana would hunt victims who were alone at the time, late at night or in the early hours of the morning. After hacking them he would put the axe in a plastic bag in his car and drive off.

His victims had no connections to him, posed no danger to him, were randomly selected and then butchered for no reason at all, the Durban High Court was told.

Moreover, police investigations would lead them to other crimes committed in the months prior to the

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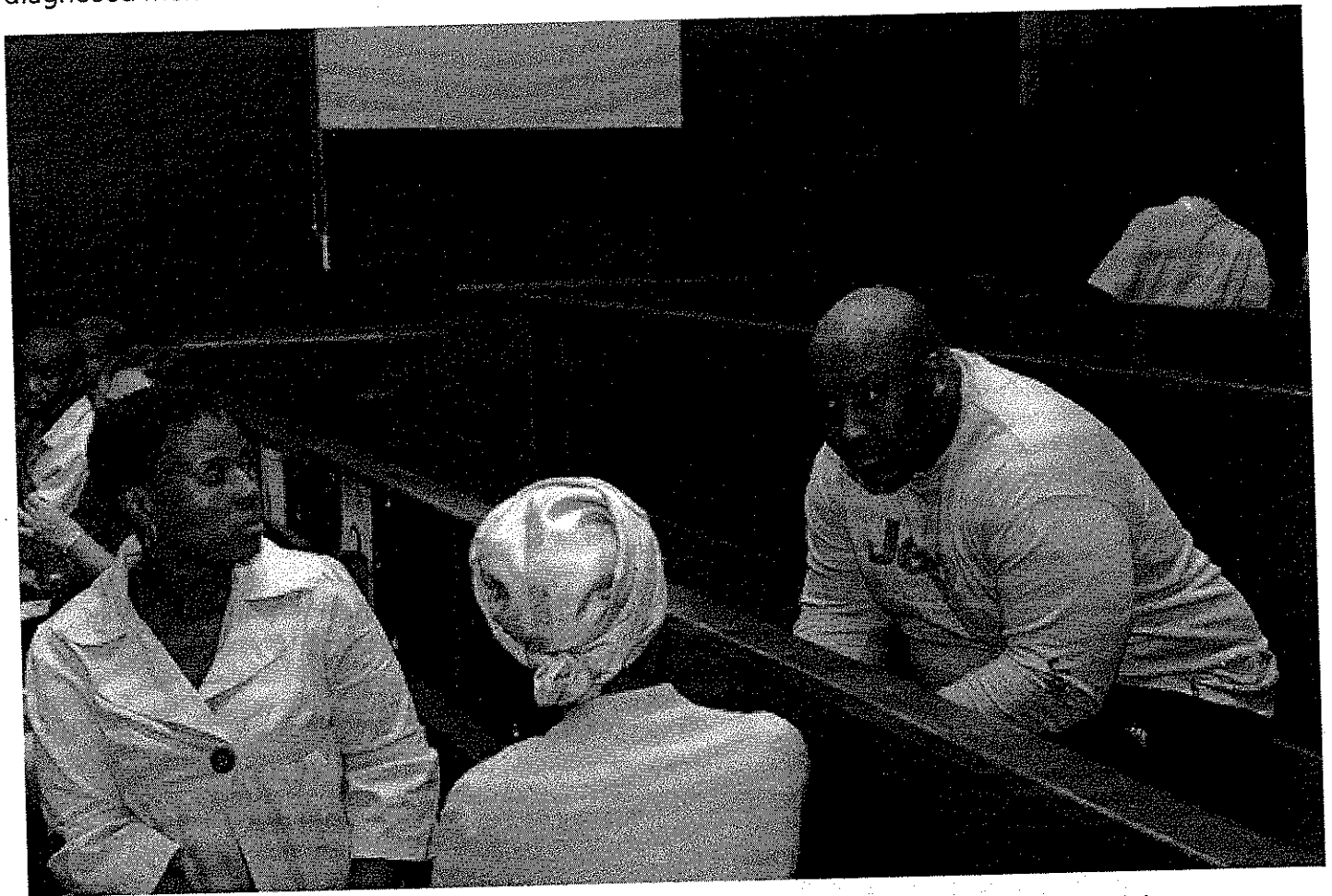
her hostage at his Yellowwood Park home for three days, during which time she was raped.

In her testimony, the court heard how, during her ordeal, Ntshongwana had accused her of being unfaithful, even though she was not his girlfriend.

The court heard that he also asked her what it was like to have sex with "a Xhosa boy", made her lick yoghurt off him and then accused her of infecting his daughter with Aids, even though he does not have a daughter.

Ntshongwana's bizarre behaviour was the central plank on which his lawyers laid down their defence strategy against the nine charges against him - pathological criminal incapacity, the belief that he was mentally ill and could not be held responsible for his actions.

His family said that during the murders, Ntshongwana was off his medication for a previously diagnosed mental illness.



Joseph Ntshongwana speaks to his sister Luleka Ntshongwana (L) and his mother Phylina Letlaka at the Durban High Court during an adjournment in his trial in September 2014. Picture: Giordano Stolley/SAPA

Ntshongwana did not testify at his trial and his legal team claimed he had no memory of committing the crimes.

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Ntshongwana was found guilty of four counts of murder, two counts of assault, kidnapping, rape and attempted murder, and sentenced to five life terms.

In handing down sentence, Khalil said he did not accept that Ntshongwana was genuinely remorseful, but was in fact regretful at being caught for his crimes.



A pair of takkies and the murder weapon was key to get a conviction. PICTURE:GCINA NDWALANE

“There was nothing in his background that could have predisposed him to crime. He had a close and loving relationship with his family,” he said.

The judge said Ntshongwana had targeted vulnerable victims and had no particular reason to kill them. He described the crimes as premeditated, brutal and barbaric.

“He purposefully targeted people walking alone. He chased them down and then, when they fell, he chopped them. He intended decapitating his victims, and was largely successful”.

Khalil said Ntshongwana’s defence had failed to prove he was not criminally responsible.

“Mental illness is not a defence that excludes criminal culpability,” he said.

Judge Khalil praised the efforts of the police task team, saying that “one could only shudder to think how many more murders would have been committed”.

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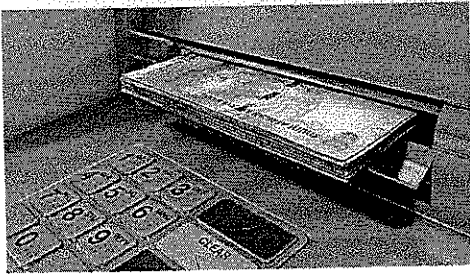
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