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## 13. Always in Motion

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## Always in Motion

*Alistair Mackay*

He tells her she can call him Trevor. “Like the comedian,” he says, which she seems to find very funny. It’s partially a joke – he knows he comes across as serious and withdrawn – but it’s also just easier. Easy to remember. Easier than telling her anything real about himself.

“You have resting-wise-face,” she declares. She’s drunk, and apparently very proud of her coinage. She sighs theatrically and collapses against the back seat in a heap of blonde curls. He lets himself feel warm for a second, and relaxed. Maybe that will be the end of the talking. But then she leans forward and says, “Since you’re so wise, what do you think I should do about ...” and proceeds to tell him all about her ex, whom she ran into tonight, and was there still chemistry there, because there shouldn’t be, they fought so much when they were together, that’s why they had an on-again, off-again relationship, and Trevor feels the pressure build behind his eyes, and it makes him angry – the pressure to not only listen to this story he isn’t interested in, but to actually *be* wise, and say something thoughtful and uplifting because she feels entitled to it, and it suits her conception of him. And why? She’ll have forgotten about this whole conversation, and his existence, by the time she sobers up, and she isn’t nearly as distraught as she thinks she is, either. It’s all empty words. This is what Trevor’s nephew would call ‘content’ – the stuff that fills up conversations and social media.

He can tell, even with all of her complaining and drama, that she believes things will be fine in the end. And she's right. Things are always fine for people like her. She doesn't need reassurance, but she wants it. (*This*, Trevor's nephew would call 'emotional labour'.) She has that quality that people who have known security in their childhoods exude. An expectation of support. He'd seen her slurshout her goodbyes at her friends when he picked her up outside the bar in Illovo, and watched her fall into his car like she knew it would catch her. Even if her romance fails, she has her people.

"Where are you from, Trevor?" she asks, when he hasn't said anything in a while.

"No, I live here," he replies, and she seems satisfied with that.

After he's dropped her off at an apartment block in Killarney, things are quiet for a while. There are no ride requests. He pulls over on a side street near the bridge over the freeway. He loves these city arteries at night. Especially at sunset, in winter, this freeway works better than almost anything else to keep the dread at bay. The city is a living, breathing thing. Alive with heavy metals in the blood. Ten thousand golden headlights flood northwards in the arteries. The spent, glittering embers of red taillights pull southwards in parallel veins towards the heart. He can hear the heart, the whole vascular system. A deep, steady hum of traffic, of living, thumping up against the sky, reverberating in his chest. He is near the heart of the city now. The old diseased, ramshackle, resilient one. The other heart is further north. Marbled, gilded and soulless. What kind of monster has two hearts?

All the better to keep the darkness at bay.

Except, it's too late now. A few long-haul trucks and ride-share drivers. Blood flow has slowed right down. The monster is asleep.

If Trevor can move, the darkness isn't so frightening. If he's moving, it means he isn't trapped at home, stuck waiting, listening for when they come for him. In his car, he is invisible. He is free. A tiny speck in the bloodstream. No one knows where he is. No one knows who he is. Even if hijackers come, he has his accelerator. Their attacks aren't personal. They won't hunt him down. They will simply turn their violence onto someone else.

The downside of working the late night trips is that many of his passengers are drunk. Sometimes it's not so bad. They joke and laugh and sing, they tease one another, and he feels buoyed by their spirits, but sometimes they shout at him or demand he find good music, and turn it up. They argue with him over routes. Twice, he's had someone vomit. Once in his car, and it took weeks to get the smell out. Bitter and acidic. He's still not sure he ever got the stain out completely.

Still, he reminds himself: it's better than what he left behind.

His second trip of the night is a couple in their fifties. It's a restaurant pick-up and the couple was the last to leave. Trevor knows this because he watches the waiters stack the chairs on the tables through the restaurant windows as the couple gets into his car. He feels annoyed that the two of them were chased out because they are so obviously still in love, and it's a miracle to see love like this, a bright glittering light in the darkness, and for the restaurant staff to be so unmoved, so impatient, debases the whole thing. The couple's love is not new. Trevor can see this immediately. They are very familiar with one another, very comfortable. There is none of the tension of the unexpected between them; but there is no boredom, either. No disdain.

It's too dark in the car for Trevor to see if there are wedding bands on their fingers; but, in his rearview mirror, he glimpses the husband – for he wants to imagine he is her husband – taking the woman's hand in his own. She smiles, softly, and the two of them watch the city rush past on either side of their respective windows like dark fluid. Trevor imagines their children at home – two boys, maybe teenagers by now, fighting and teasing each other like his brother used to do with him – and he almost asks them if they have children, but he does not want to find out that they are childless, or that this is a side-relationship or anything that would ruin this moment. He also does not like to talk too much because it's never long before his passengers' questions turn to his own life, and what is there to say about that which wouldn't leave the taste of metal in his mouth?

He drops the couple off at a home in Parkwood and proceeds to Melville, where he accepts a good, long ride with decent fare.

At first, he does not see the blood on them. The darkness plays tricks on him. Shadows everywhere, cast from the glowing signs of the bars in Melville. The men position themselves so that the light fails to catch their injuries until it's too late. By the time Trevor realises that the darkness on the one man's forehead is not a shadow but blood seeping from a gash, the man is already inside his car and the door is closed. His friend comes around the vehicle to the other side and Trevor thinks, for a second, that the man is going to drag him out of his seat. That's what happened to that Uber driver in Katlehong, isn't it? They dragged him out his vehicle, whipped him, destroyed his car, and kidnapped him in their taxi. Was he ever found?

"You must get out," Trevor says. "I can't take you."

"Relax," the first passenger says, catching Trevor's eye in the rear-view mirror. "I won't get blood on anything." He does not move to get out.

The second passenger falls into the back seat and he, too, is bleeding. Gashes on his forearms and below his cheekbone. Trevor's chest has tightened and his own blood is cold. His senses have misfired, again, and reality drains from him. What's left where reality should be is too bright and too loud and yet also very, very far away.

"What happened to you?"

"This was just an accident. We fell." Trevor watches them in the mirror for as long as he can. He is sweating. He needs to know if they were the victims or the aggressors. These are not the wounds of a fall. Why would they lie to him? Are they ashamed of what happened? Humiliated? Or are they the most frightening of all violent men – the kind who smile at you and tell you to relax, who say thank you. The ones with a softness around the eyes.

Trevor summons all the strength he has left in his body to push back up into this world from where he's fallen, that cold, far away place. He tries to say *no*, again, to say *I can't take you*, but the only word that comes out is: "Hospital?"

"We don't need a hospital," says the less drunk of the two. And then, to placate the driver, he winks and says "Thanks. Just the address I entered on the app."

"Trev," the other one says, "let's go, let's go."

Trevor puts the car into gear and pulls away. He tries to imagine all that blood as a kind of tree sap. His grandfather used to bleed trees when he was a young man, back in the rural village Trevor visited sometimes with his parents. They still do it in those parts of the continent – which have never felt further away than they do right now – for palm wine and rubber. They slice into living tree flesh and the blood runs out and the villagers catch the life within them, and yet everything is okay. The trees do not die. They withstand the violence. They offer their insides and those insides don't smell like death or fear. Trevor tries to imagine a clean, sweet smell. A bite of succulent mango, its juice running down the chin.

It does not work. "Do you mind if I open the window a little?"

One of them makes a dismissive hand gesture that Trevor takes to mean, *do whatever you like*. They are heading west and picking up speed and an open window makes the swirling, thundering air hurt his ears, but it also gets rid of the smell. And it makes their conversation impossible to hear, which is a relief. He had been straining to hear their subdued, conspiratorial murmuring – did he understand the language? Did he recognise it? *Now he is set free*.

But his body remembers, even if his mind retreats.

The adrenaline tingles in his blood. He can still feel it, the memory trapped within each and every cell, the paralysis of being surrounded. The defeat of having run and run and run, and not escaped. The words they used to justify their hatred – foreigner, *makwerekwere* – were so different from the words they used back home, but the hatred was the same. Thousands of kilometres away and yet here too, the mob. When the rock struck his brother, it was as if Trevor felt it in his own body, his whole body. And then the blood. Pouring from his brother's broken nose, and then, with the second strike, from his eye. Trevor's knees went weak. Was *he* losing blood? Had he also been struck? For a second, he wanted to be, he wanted to share this with his brother so that his brother didn't have to bear it alone, so that neither of them were alone in this terror.

And then he was hit, too, already on his way down into the sandy dirt. He thought, why is there so much blood? He thought, all we are is blood. There is so little to hold us in, to keep us from pouring out into

the earth. Leaking out through our perforated casing. We behave like blood, too. Clotting to protect. Sealing shut to heal a wound. Mobs and family, both. We congeal. An unspoken chain reaction of white blood cells to drive out invaders, proteins and platelets to knit an impenetrable blockade. But why do these people perceive a wound? What did he or his brother ever do to injure anybody?

Trevor will do anything, anything, to not think of his family right now.

They are entering a part of the city that's unfamiliar to Trevor. The small, broken veins of roads far from the organs and arteries. Blood flow is slow here in the periphery of the great sprawling monster. Clots are easy to form. He pulls the car over, opens his door, leans out and heaves his insides into the dirt.

"Are you drunk?" one of the passengers says from behind him, and Trevor has to laugh. All of these drunk passengers every night and they think he is the drunk? He laughs despite the acid all over his lips. Trevor, the comedian.

He wipes his mouth. He gets out of the car, and opens the back door. "Get out," he says.

The two men look at him. "We're not there yet," says the one with cuts on his arms. He is outraged, but his friend is not. Trevor knows that expression all too well. His friend, the one with the gash on his forehead, is terrified. "Please," the friend says. His voice is small. "Please."

Trevor closes the door and gets back into the driver's seat. They might be brothers, but Trevor can't bear to ask them. No one speaks for a long time. He starts the engine. He turns on the sound system. He never listens to music when he has passengers, in case they ask him where it's from. But these passengers don't say anything about the music. They don't say anything at all. No conspiratorial whispering. Nothing to upset Trevor. Trevor wants to laugh again, and shake himself like a dog after a fight, but he knows how frightening laughter can be. And the fight is only in his cells.

No one is getting expelled or attacked tonight, at least. The two-hearted monster sleeps. Trevor drives the two bloodied men home.