

# Traffic

by Malachi King

*In the year 2000, the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. In 2011, several countries within Africa are still primary dissenters of the Protocol, and the United States continues to remain the primary destination of thousands of human cargo every year.*

Stuffy room with metal walls. Slight swaying motion. The air carried sounds of captivity and discomfort. A woman lay on her side, wedged in a corner. Her hands were bound in front. Steady breathing. Pan left: more women, some sitting, some sleeping. A muffled groan from the corner.

Alayla lifted her head. The binding tape across her mouth pulled at her face and was wrapped several times around. She could smell its strong pungent adhesive, specially applied for long distances. The cold steel floor under her heaved with the undulating motion of ocean waves. Someone had gotten sick through their nose and it ran along the floor, soaking her at the knees. Her hands were bound behind her. The darkness enveloped her the moment the doors had slammed home.

She could sense the others. Their sounds of discomfort would fill her ears for many years to come. She would never forget the soft moans and pitiful whines in that darkness. Nearly everyone cried. But not Alayla. She had no room for tears. Most of her life had been abuse and this horrible journey might just lead to something better. She told herself that. She told herself all people suffered and this was her lot, abandoned by God. Her name means “the lost one” and she took it to heart.

She believed a sin she had committed years earlier was the cause of her present torment. Alayla was twelve years old now and had begun her period, her *bedbi*, last year. That was when her uncle had sold her. She told herself it was out of necessity.

When Alayla was five, her father was killed in the Ituri Conflict of the civil war raging in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She wasn't aware

of which side exactly her father died for, but she knew it had destroyed her mother. Since her husband's death, Subira took little notice of her housework, her children, or herself. She committed suicide within the year by jumping down a water well with a piece of wire wrapped around her neck, tied to an iron pump. That afternoon, the village children had stood around the well staring down. That was how Alayla had found her. She stood with her shoulders stooped forward, chin down, and gazed at the top of her mother's head.

The other children stared blank-eyed and motionless. They had seen death before. They had not seen it down a well. They stared with an impartial curiosity and a wonder peculiar to children. One of them kicked a stone in, turned around and ran into the bush. The others followed him. Alayla heard one mutter *makosa* as he ran past, meaning “mistake.” He did not mean her mother had fallen down the well by mistake, he meant it was a mistake to wait there any more as there was no longer anything interesting to watch. Alayla just stood there and dried up inside.

She had cried endlessly for her father; he who would hug her tight under the covers when gunfire was rattling in the distance and a slug had pierced the side of their hut, he who would wipe her tears and say *bora kesho* when she had tired of wiping them herself, he who always promised a “better tomorrow” and was incapable of providing it. She loved him with a daughter's devotion and wore the flowered dress he had bought her the day he left for the front. The elders had called for volunteers to fight and his honor brought him to the depot the next day. Alayla stood in her flowered dress, holding her mother's hand, and kissed her father's lips letting the tears flow.

When news came of his death she cried by herself under the covers. Her mother did not console her for she could not console herself. Alayla cried and clutched the blanket and tried to shut out the gaping hole caused by the absence of her *baba*. There was nothing to fill it. And soon it began to gnaw at her insides, pulling pieces of her into its yawning mouth, and she feared she would be torn to little disappearing specs, falling in the hole that was eating her up from within. Her whole being was in peril of becoming engulfed, and just before the last piece went in, the morning sun crested the horizon and peeked in

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the window of her hut. It brought a ray of brightness into the room and the darkness lifted for Alayla. What her father had said was true; there would be a *bora kesho*, a better tomorrow. It was only for Alayla to allow it to arrive.

Austin Frakes had been transferred to the harbor in Richard's Bay, South Africa three weeks after his arrival in Johannesburg. His family in London had supplied him with enough cash to last him a month and he had grown restless searching for a job. He had been sent to an uncle's shipping business in the region to learn the trade and had refused a foreman's position, partly because he wanted to work his way up, but mostly because he knew he wasn't qualified and nursed a fear of failure.

Dock work had never appealed to Austin, but he threw himself into it nonetheless, loading small freight, checking orders, running hi-lows, all the while knowing he was learning the groundwork of the port business. He wrote letters home to a London girl, Aisha Richards, and told her he was working hard for their future. She was finishing her schooling to be a teacher and Austin envisioned a broad future for them both. He felt he hadn't yet made his mark in the world and wanted to capture a sense of accomplishment before proposing to her.

When Austin walked into the port office one morning, his supervisor told him there was an open crane operator position if he was interested in the training. He asked knowing full well Austin would be interested. Operating one of the port cranes was a respected position. The operator was enthroned high above the ground action, pushing levers that moved thousands of pounds of weight and millions of dollars of cargo. The operator was a respected individual in the business and took on an incredible responsibility for the welfare of the company, not to mention the lives of the men he swung his loads over. However, when accidents occurred, the crane operator was automatically suspect. Few envied him on those days. Despite the responsibility the position offered, Austin jumped at the chance. It was an opportunity for a significant promotion, a better future.

A crane operator in training did little lever pushing. Austin began like most trainees, oiling cables, securing loads, and helping with the maintenance of the rig. Each morning there was an extensive checklist handed to him and the journeyman operator followed Austin around double checking his work. In two weeks Austin had the list memorized. In four he had learned to rig the loads and land them. He even was able to interpret and

form the complex system of hand signals necessary for ground crews to visually communicate with the crane operator. It came time for him to try his hand in the cab of the crane.

Austin settled into the operator's seat, it was frayed and depressed from years of service, and placed his hands on the black knobs protruding from the various consoles. Jacob Billings, "Jake the Brake," explained the functions of each lever once more to Austin. Austin already had them memorized from his time watching the Brake operate, but he listened patiently. It was no small matter to take control of a 250 ton, multimillion dollar port crane. One lever, when pushed or pulled, raised or lowered the giant overhead boom, the massive arm of the crane. Another black-headed lever swung the entire chassis of the crane around a horizontal gear, causing the entire rig to rotate left or right. A third lever raised and lowered the block hook suspended by steel cables. These three would do for a first lesson.

On his first pick taking a container off the bed of a semi-truck, Austin's arm slipped a fraction of an inch and the load lurched up several feet unexpectedly. The riggers started in unison and instinctively backed away. But, the container was judged to be secure and the semi moved forward. Using rope a rigger spun the load ninety degrees, Austin reversed directions on the hoist lever and the container sat snugly down on the surface of the loading dock. Jake the Brake breathed a sigh of relief. Austin's eyes dared not move from his load until the cables were disconnected from the block and it was raised up to a safe height.

"Next time ease into the lift more. Not so sudden." The Brake said.

Austin nodded assent. He didn't need to be told. Jerky movements with the crane were sure signs of an amateur. His face flushed and the tips of his ears burned.

"Remember this feeling," the Brake went on. "A tiny movement in here can mean instant death down there. Never forget that."

"I won't." Austin meant it. He turned to exit the chair. He wanted nothing more than to be relieved of the responsibility. At least for awhile.

"Let's take lunch," the Brake said.

At the office recreation room Austin sat across from the riggers and loaders. There was an argument about the best way to rig the new forty five foot boxes, with an extension-shackle combination or the tradition method using cable clamps and support grips. The cause of the disagreement was lost on Austin.

He stared out the window at the ship coming in, loaded to the brim with thousands of containers. This ship, the *Omega*, was owned by FFS Bun-

kers Ltd., a common sight in Richard's Bay, its company letters were stenciled in twelve foot letters across the bow. Austin recognized it as outbound, stopping here for a last loading before heading over the Atlantic, sometimes for Boston, New York, or Jacksonville.

There was a curious gathering of suited individuals at the customs office. Two stood next to a dark blue sedan watching the ship come in. Two others walked over to the dock's edge and gestured towards the towering bridge of the ship. Still others emerged from the office. Austin saw the head custom's official with them. He was frowning heavily. The group made their way to the service area where the ship would dock, directly in front of the port crane.

Jake the Brake took a manly bite of his sandwich and headed for the door. Austin followed. It looked like this wasn't going to be the usual load-and-go shipment.

As they passed the dark sedan with the two men standing guard, it became clear there was an individual in the back seat. His face was bronzed and intense, framed by bushy black eyebrows and a matching Van Dyke. He stared at the *Omega*, touched an ear piece and began speaking.

Swaying with the motion of the container, Alayla closed her eyes against the oppression of the darkness. The putrid odors of her surroundings were blocked out one by one with mental effort. She sank deeper into the hole ever-present inside her chest. There were constant hummings and groanings in the container now, some women sitting next to each other for comfort, swaying back and forth together. A few had been locked in here for several days, the others less.

The first ones in discovered the half barrel in the corner and used it appropriately when the need arose. The newcomers followed their example. Bread was tossed in after the second day, but their mouths were covered with layers of tape, indeed it was wrapped around their heads. It had been explained by their captors that this was temporary; as soon as they made sea the tape would be removed. Alayla figured there must be crew members in on the scheme to perform this action. At least, she hoped there were.

Alayla had heard of human trafficking before, but like everyone else she never dreamed it would happen to her. It was a horrible unthinkable occurrence in the women's lives around her and her heart went out to them. But for her, she believed it was her fate to be taken in such a manner because

of the sin she had committed.

It wasn't long after her mother's suicide she had been picked up by an uncle and taken to his apartment in the suburbs of Johannesburg. She was six years old when she came to live with her uncle and his family.

In the beginning, Alayla had helped with the housework, cooking, cleaning, and washing the clothes. There were several cousins coming and going, no one as young as Alayla. Her uncle worked at a packaging factory next to a major stream feeding the Orange River. He was gone much of the time and the young girl only made a friend in Aunt Rossy. She would greet Alayla each morning with a standard Afrikaans greeting, "Hallo! Hoe gaan dit?" Alayla learned the correct response was "Baie goed, dankie!" and she would elicit a smile on her aunt's wrinkled face which brought her pleasure.

The other family members ignored Alayla and treated her as a servant. She was there to work for them to earn her food and bed and they saw no reason to show her respect of any kind. She didn't try especially hard to please them and that gave them reason to scorn her even more. One cousin, Abraham, took her by the hair once and threw her against the wall because she didn't show obeisance to him during meal time, as was their custom. He felt it was the culmination of a long list of disrespects she had shown towards him, he had later explained to his mother. She had asked him to show Alayla kindness because she was alone in this world. When he went to speak to Alayla she was sitting on her bed, head bowed in quiet respect. He sat next to her and spoke in soft tones. She responded in affirmatives, hoping to appease his disdain towards her. When he began stroking her hair she didn't resist.

It was only afterward that Abraham's attitude turned against her again. Alayla had confided in her aunt about the sin she had committed with Abraham, hoping her desire to bring peace to the family would absolve her of it. Her aunt was shocked and confronted Abraham about the deed. He claimed Alayla had seduced him and that she wasn't fit to live in their household any longer. He flew into a rage when Alayla tried to defend herself. Finally, in tears, her aunt declared no more would be spoken of it. There was hardship enough without this stain upon their family. Alayla went on with the business of living, performing the duties of a house servant for the members of the family, but always as an outcast. The black shroud of incest now hung over her, and she felt the debilitating weight of sin and condemnation cast around her neck whenever she was in the presence of another who knew of it.

Her uncle did not know of it and he still cared little for her and

paid her no attention. That is, until he lost his job at the factory. He sought other employment, but was unsuccessful. His drinking increased and he spent more and more time at the gambling halls hidden in the rear sections of small shops crowding the streets of Johannesburg. He was not particularly good at gambling and racked up substantial debts in the matter of a month. A few high interest loans covered his bets in the beginning, but it was a vain attempt to recoup his losses. He fell further and further behind. His debtors pressured him to sell his car, which he did, but it wasn't enough. They told him to pay his balance in three months or his life would be forfeit. He tore out his hair in nights of frustration and anger. Several times Alayla's aunt emerged in the morning with fresh bruises scattered over her face and arms and Alayla would run to her and embrace her. Her aunt's ebony fingers traced patterns in her niece's hair while she muttered, "uvumilivu." She spoke the Swahili word for 'patience' for Alayla's benefit, not her own.

When the deadline came for her uncle's debts to be paid, there was no money. Men showed up at the family door, powerful and menacing, shouting at her uncle. He shook his head, promising the money if only they would give him more time. They refused and brandished weapons. They pointed around the apartment at the various articles that could be sold to raise the money. They pointed towards his wife and laughed, pulling her by the arm as she shrieked. Alayla's uncle pleaded on his knees for them to not take his wife, to take anything else, but leave his wife and children alone. Suddenly, he grabbed Alayla by the hair and threw her at their feet. No one resisted as they took her away. She didn't even cry as they forced her into their van. It was the punishment she deserved for her sin. It even alleviated the guilt she felt over losing her mother down the well. In her childlike innocence she felt somehow responsible even for her father's death. If she had been a better daughter, worked harder or loved purer, he might have stayed home. He might be alive. Her captivity was her penance for such things.

Alayla rested her head against the side of the steel box. The up and down motion had ceased and her stomach was thankful. Some in the enclosure took the opportunity to stand and walk about. Some made attempts to communicate, but the tape was strong and stuck to their skin, and it was dark inside their confinement. They were left with touching shoulders and other small comforts they could gain from each other's presence.

Austin Frakes slid into the operator's seat of the towering port

crane. He eyed the boom stretching out over his head, pointing into the heavens. This was the path to a better life, he mused. Austin was still in awe over how the little knobs and levers at his fingertips could move such great heights of steel. It filled a niche in his mind that lusted for power over his environment, that natural urge from which all men suffer. Jake the Brake leaned in the doorway and gave preliminary instructions. This was just some routine pick and drops. They had been told by their supervisor that government officials were here to inspect the cargo containers aboard the *Omega* barge. Austin could see them far below, miniature men scurrying here and there on the docks. No particular features separated them, but for color. He could distinguish black faces and white faces and he could see the car which held the diplomat. The supervisor had told them it was their privilege to host the Honorable Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, South Africa's Foreign Minister. It was he who Jake and Austin had seen in the black sedan speaking into his Bluetooth.

Presently Nkosazana exited the car and walked with the lead customs official to the first container Austin had set on the docks. The black-suited men crowded around it and someone who specialized in high security seals was called over. Certain containers remained locked throughout their transport and only special tools could unlock them. Someone had a clipboard and was checking the freight number against it. Everyone stood and waited. The enormous pile of thousands of such containers on the ship waited too.

The door was finally opened and the container thoroughly checked. A cargo lifter was brought and took the box to one side while Austin maneuvered the crane for another pick from the ship. Another clipboard appeared on board the vessel and a man indicated which container was next. They could not be safely inspected while on board the *Omega*, the stacks were simply too high. Riggers swarmed over them and successfully prepared another box for the crane. Austin moved the levers and brought the hook into position and eased the container into the air. He set it down where the other had been and the men on the ground went to work. Another clipboard, another sealed door, and another search of the contents.

"What do you suppose they're looking for?" Austin asked.

"Could be narcotics. Maybe contraband." The Brake spoke from experience. Delays of this nature were not unheard of, though, he couldn't remember ever having such a diplomat on site before. "Watch the rigger on the left there. He isn't watching for the hook. Boom down a touch more, as well."

Austin responded with the proper correction. The absent minded rigger found the hook and guided it into his connection. The lift was smooth and controlled. Austin felt the caressing touch of pride in his new skill and allowed himself a moment of self-congratulation. After setting the next container down, his phone beeped. It was the port supervisor. "This is too slow. We're forming another rigging crew to help speed this up. The captain of the *Omega* is probably chewing his fingernails off. Come down, Austin, and lead another rigging crew. Meet on the ship, customs will tell you what boxes to rig."

Jake the Brake took the crane controls and Austin began the descent down the metal rungs on the side of the crane. He was quite comfortable rigging boxes and was intrigued with what the government officials might find, but concern clouded his intrigue. He was supposed to be learning crane operation. Austin hoped his time on the ground would be short lived.

He made his way across the dock and crossed the scaffold to the ship. The other riggers were there with the shackles and cable clamps. A man with a clipboard was standing with his head thrown back eyeing the faded numbers printed on the ends of each container. The many colors created a checker board pattern along the entire length of the barge. Austin approached the customs man. "What number do you need next?"

The man studied his clipboard. "S2-130834"

"What do you suppose is in it?"

The man glared at him. "Just find the next damn container."

A little light seeped in from air holes on the ceiling. They had brightened considerably in the last half hour. The women inside had heard faint noises from above, but it excited no great amount of hope. Similar noises had been heard before, in fact several times, and it was discerned that their barge was simply being filled at various locations. Most of the occupants did not know their destination, a few suspected it. Some had been told beforehand, but they were in the minority. Nearly all had been lied to. Verbal communication still was impossible, so one could not ask another from whence she came or where she thought their destination was. It was very much a solo journey in the company of others.

Alayla sensed difficulty from a fellow captive. The woman's outline was barely visible and she was shaking on the floor and wheezing through her nose. She shuffled towards her and positioned herself next to the

woman. There was little she could do; her hands were still tightly bound behind her back. The woman let out a moan and hummed something in response to Alayla's presence. It was a soft conciliatory sound, emitted from one whose burden has been eased by the simple touch of another. Alayla felt the cursory movements of sympathy warm her chest. She had rarely known warm feelings for another person for many years. With sudden insight, she turned and brought her fingers into contact with the prone woman's head. Her hands groped blindly but it was only a few minutes before she located the end of the binding tape by scraping her fingernails along its length feeling for an edge. When it was found she started picking at it, hoping to pry a section up that she could pinch between her nails. The woman's self-pity was lightened by the effort and she assisted as best she could. Alayla found this simple cooperation was forming a brighter future for both of them and she worked all the more diligently.

When Alayla had been taken from her uncle's family she had not felt any specific loss. Her aunt had held a special place in her heart at first, but her failure to come to Alayla's defense during the abduction stirred the coals of anger deep down inside. The men had grabbed her and forced her into the hallway and not one voice uttered protest. Isolation cemented itself around her heart and she tucked any remaining feelings deep inside the hole in her spirit, keeping only the bare remnants of self-awareness alive.

She was shuttled into a waiting van and it sped off through the streets of Johannesburg, filled with vile oaths from swarthy men. They brought her to a warehouse and kept her in the van while two of them stepped out and went inside. One of the men remaining with her took out a knife. He brandished it before her eyes, letting the lights from the street lamps dance along its stainless surface. He grinned an evil and licentious grin, causing a long thin scar on his cheekbone to curve and bend as if made of rubber. Alayla rolled her head until her eyes found a window. She receded into the dark shadows of her mind and purposefully blurred her vision. Her father's voice echoed from a dark recess *bora kesho, bora kesho*. She waited for the morning light to warm her face but found none.

The men inside the warehouse agreed to an exchange. The girl for a crate of small arms. The man who had driven the van, the one to whom Alayla's uncle owed money, was a dealer in weapons and had found great profit in it. The man he now dealt with was a dealer of a different and more lucrative kind. One of humans. He had connections in the United States and a full shipment of captives meant his income for three quarters of the year. He indicated his desire to have the girl brought before him.

Alayla was pulled from the van and brought inside. Her new captor approved and the men loaded the crate in her place and drove away. She was grabbed by the shoulder and herded into a back room. The man smelled of cigars and sweat and wore snakeskin boots. They clicked the concrete in a particular and regular nick-knock pattern. Alayla did not feel fear towards this man, only the same indifference she felt for any man. She was led to a locked door and stood there unmoving as the man fumbled with keys. When it opened, the man pushed her in and locked the door behind her.

She was in a spare room with a few crumpled blankets on the floor and a wicker chair in the corner. There was a pile of women's clothes against the far wall. She sank down on the blankets and covered her head with a corner. In a few minutes she was asleep and breathing with a deep and slow heaving of her chest. She dreamed of green grass and blooming ericas surrounding a giant baobab tree. Its tangled branches reached far into heaven. Her father sat underneath it playing the harmonica. He had on a straw hat and a white shirt tucked into tan, khaki pants. The brim of his hat dipped rhythmically with the notes of his music. She could see the harmonies radiating from the instrument. They flowed in a rainbow mix, streaming out in all directions, a great panorama of the color spectrum. The colorful waves flowed into her and filled her being, reaching into the farthest recesses and replacing the darkness with vibrant hues. She sensed a completeness wash over her as each melodious ray pierced the wall she had built around her heart. She felt feminine and innocent. All guilt was gone. All traces of self-accusation vanished and she simply basked in the glory of the sights and sounds flowing in and around her.

In the next room the man with the snakeskin boots made a phone call. He arranged for the pick up of his latest cargo bound for the states. He would deliver his cargo in the morning already packaged and ready to transport overseas. He asked about the status of his latest advertisements on the internet. These needed to be ready to provide income from his recent investments when they arrived at the destination. He was informed the ads had already generated more demand than could ever possibly be filled. A smile spread across his stubbled chin and a gold tooth glinted in the fluorescent light.

Austin Frakes helped remove twenty three containers from the *Omega* in four and a half hours. It was already long past normal working

hours, but everyone was still waiting. The customs officials were nearing the end of their lists on the clipboards. Minister Nkosazana was back sitting in the black sedan parked in front of the customs building. He made repeated calls for any more specifics on which containers the human cargo should be found. The *Omega* was known to currently carry over four thousand containers. It was an impossibility to search them all. Nkosazana believed his information was reliable, but the sheer size of the task had become a looming reality. He stared stoically out the window willing to expend his collected resources as far as he was able. Unfortunately, he was only permitted to search the containers on his prepared list and that was running out. His Bluetooth blinked.

The voice on the other end told him he was wasting his time and money at Richard's Bay. It told him to call off the search and no one would question him. It told him if he didn't call off the search, his stake in Caltex Corporation would diminish considerably. Whereas, if he did withdraw from his efforts, a man would deliver a briefcase to him containing adequate compensation. So, Minister Nkosazana sat there thinking. His daughter would be graduating secondary school soon and he planned to send her abroad for her education, and his wife had just privately filed for divorce and was demanding heavy alimony payments. There were too many strings attached and he felt the decision wasn't his own. This feeling had pervaded his entire political career and he had hoped to become accustomed to it. He never did. This decision was like the rest. It had already been made before he ever became involved.

Nkosazana directed his driver to take him to the head customs official in the dockyard. He told the official his search list had been exhausted and his men would be withdrawing. He thanked the official for his cooperation. The black sedan pulled out of the port complex and sped towards the airport.

Austin Frakes was bending down securing a shackle on the top of a red tinted container. He was in a corner, surrounded on three sides by steel ribbed boxes. A customs man shouted up to him to forget it, they were through. Austin went to the edge and looked down. The man's list on his clipboard was only partially crossed off and he was walking away. Austin shrugged and went back to get his rigging equipment. A whining overhead told him the Brake was repositioning the boom of crane. He bent down and twisted the center pin of his shackle. A voice from the phone at his side told him to call it for the day, the lost time could be made up better tomorrow. A muffled shout from inside the container in front of him was entirely drowned out by the sounds of the port coming back to life.