

Dislocations, a play

By Cornelius Fortune

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Synopsis:

In a split second, your life can change. Just ask Levar Penningsworth, an African-American man who gets caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Levar is having a really bad day, and the day gets even worse during a fit of road rage that leads him to a world he could hardly have imagined – all he wants to do is get home. But out of gas and hopelessly lost in a small suburb where he is an outsider, he wonders just how possible it's going to be for him to return home unscathed. He meets two characters, one of whom can get him the gas he needs to get out of town, but will he give it to him?

Everyone's been lost before in a city they've never been in, or a road they shouldn't have turned on.

“Dislocations” is a horror story without supernatural monsters, vampires or werewolves. It explores the stereotype of the “angry black man,” and the consequences of living up to that stereotype. It's a story about America through the lens of an African-American searching for his way home.

THE CHARACTERS

LEVAR PENNINGSWORTH, *an African American man in his mid-to-late thirties. He's a world-weary sort, and views himself through the world's prism. He's highly observant, intelligent, though sometimes volatile.*

MYSTERIOUS DRIVER, *a featureless man, shadowy. He's LEVAR's antagonist.*

BALLCAP GUY, *owner of a gas station in an out-of-way town: GAS-UP. He's got a dirty, greasy old ballcap, and wears it like Mark on Highway to Heaven, kinda low, kinda hokey really.*

JOE, *early fifties. Typical redneck. Not much on the outside but something creepy and almost sagacious lurking on the inside; he's got a twisted worldview.*

LILLA PENNINGSWORTH, *Levar's wife. She can be African American, or a darker skinned Latino, or of Middle Eastern descent. LILLA is deeply in love with LEVAR and knows him better than he probably knows himself.*

EXTRAS

POLICEMAN, *early forties, stocky.*

PRETTY GIRL #1, *Twentysomething blond in great shape.*

PRETTY GIRL #2, *Twentysomething brunette in great shape.*

PRETTY GIRL #3, *Early thirties, sandy hair, plainfaced.*

OLD BLUE-HAIRED LADY, *73 cranky, wears typical old lady stuff.*

SKATE BOARDER, *16 to 19 years of age, shorts, no shirt, sunglasses.*

HIGHWAY DRIVER #1 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

HIGHWAY DRIVER #2 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

HIGHWAY DRIVER #3 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

HIGHWAY DRIVER #4 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

HIGHWAY DRIVER #5 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

HIGHWAY DRIVER #6 {can be either male or female, working age preferred}

Playwright's notes to director and cast:

The MYSTERIOUS DRIVER plays an important role in this story, but no spoken lines. Because he's driving a car, it might be necessary to use lighting to have him enter and exit a scene. I've made the notations accordingly. Speeches in italics represent a "high" or "theatrical way" of speaking – what I tend to think of as hyper-reality speech; people only speak like this in books and plays anyway. I've listed six highway drivers, but there doesn't have to be six, just enough to give a little scope.

Scene 1: Highway.

Hot summer's day, late afternoon. Everyone's got that impatient look, like they're pissed to be alive; like they want to be anywhere but here, and the heat only makes it worse. LEVAR's in the front lane. He glances at his side, where HIGHWAY DRIVER #1 is trying to get LEVAR's attention to let him over. HIGHWAY DRIVERS #2-6 are waiting impatiently. LEVAR's not paying attention to any of them.

LEVAR: They think they're always right. No mistakes whatsoever. Perfect drivers, all of 'em. And of course where they're going is a lot more important than my destination, right? With four kids, a wife, a cat; weeds, the size of Arkansas doing a shingle dance up my fence, and a hell of a need to piss on top of the twelve hours spent changing oil filters – what it is, they wanna'ack like I have no place to go. Nothing better to do with my time than let these jerks in on my lane – the lane it took me fifty minutes to get in? Yeah Right Dream on

Traffic's jammed all the way up to Second, and the nearest exit is half a mile down. So I'm

figuring my day's been jacked from start to finish and I'm not letting any of these A-holes in no matter what. No way. No how. Simple enough, right?

Wrong.

Twenty minutes later everyone's got the message except this one guy.

(Enter MYSTERIOUS DRIVER)

And then there's this moment where I start thinking maybe I should let him in after all. You know: why complicate my life further by dealing with a person that was more an ass than I could ever be, even on my worst day?

And I saw him give the signal so that the guy next to me had to speed up in order to avoid an accident 'cause this fella was coming over whether he was invited to or not, and that's when the bastard started trying to force his way in...

Then I see him in my rearview mirror again – this time, a hellava-lot closer: Directly behind me, dark and featureless; the outline of something on his head, and the sun behind the both of us, so I couldn't make anything out, and he kept bumping into me, honking on his horn and I'm thinking to myself in slow consideration *the bastard's really in a hurry and I blocked him off*
Now he wants to tap my ass bumper-to-bumper-style

Enter POLICEMAN and EXTRAS.

PRETTY GIRL #1 with PRETTY GIRL #2 crosses LEVAR's path. They immediately look away, and are suddenly ashamed because they know he's looking at them in their spandex; they fold their arms so that LEVAR can't get another look at their breasts.

The OLD BLUE-HAIRED LADY just stops there in the middle of the street, mouth agape at LEVAR, eventually she shakes her head, and trudges across in her walker. LEVAR waits impatiently.

A young SKATEBOARDER whizzes by, doesn't even look at LEVAR.

PRETTY GIRL #3 walks a dog, probably a prissy dog, she's in her own world.

None of the other extras stare at HIGHWAY DRIVERS #1's-6. Obviously they're all white.

Despite all his honking and carrying-on, I'm driving real slow like the cop ahead is directing me to, and merge into traffic, and then I noticed it: how everyone was looking at me and all the white faces acting as if they hadn't seen any black faces up close and I guess if they were to have seen one, mine would have been the blackest of the black, so I smile at them so I can see their smooth fake mannequin-like legs pumping faster to get away from the black man in the dirty Lube & Jube uniform, with his bright and shiny teeth that followed after them when they passed down the street, and it's pretty-damn-weird in this little out-of-the-way-town with all these dislocated folks closed off in their white-material-worlds, and the absence of white trash, both human and inanimate.

(exit MYSTERIOUS DRIVER and EXTRAS)

It doesn't take me long to figure out I was in the wrong place at the wrong time: This wasn't the type of town a BLACK man (black in big capital letters) should be in after dark. And I never paid it any mind 'cause it was just a name to me: CLAIREMONT EXIT that I just drove past never thinking of the REDNECKS that might have populated the whole thing and made it run and still exist.

Pieces began fitting together and I realized why that man was so persistent in getting in front of me: This was his town, and I should have yielded to let him in first. Afterall, *I was* the minority in this unlikely situation, wasn't I?

I looked in my rearview mirror to see if he were still there, but he wasn't, and after the light changed, I started looking for a way out of this shit.

In a place like this, you find it hard – nearly impossible, to retrace your steps. Gone are all the familiar markers of city life – the repeat pattern popularized in the suburbs, and now ever-present in the urban communities. The stripmall-McDonalds-CVS-at-every-damn-corner-you-turn-on, is replaced here by a pattern of diminishing maybes. *Maybe you'll find your way out of here. Maybe you won't. Maybe they'll string your ass up before morning. Maybe they won't.*

Maybe Maybe Maybe

It's gotten so that every road I turn onto is indistinguishable from the one I just passed off of, and I know I'm gonna have to stop the car 'cause my gas light is flashing me like it wants a date, and it suddenly seems dark and cool, so I roll my windows up and concentrate on finding a well-lit sign with the prices right underneath each other, and a little snack shop inside the gas station, and I'm saying, "This is bullshit! Out of all the motherfuckin days this shit coulda happened..."

I should have saw the light first, but I didn't.

(Enter MYSTERIOUS DRIVER)

I felt the impact almost before it came; my rearview mirror, blazing white light; the empty roads, swelling in a severe and casual way, as I sent the brown Camero leaping ahead and kicking up a mist of dust with the trees and the country-backed roads enveloping me: All in a *simplekind-of-reflex-motion*, with seconds flashing by, and no minutes for rational thinking or rational reacting, just the accelerator becoming one-in-the-same with my foot and the groaning of the engine, 'cause when the guy pulls beside me (I still couldn't see his face), there's a narrow, dark object being pointed my way.

Then: the white hood and the shattering of my passenger side window; me, ducking low, and banking the car a hard right, cutting my steering wheel even harder in hopes of running him off the road.

And him: Leveling the gun again, for another shot with me wrestling the steering wheel, gritting my teeth and saying to myself, or maybe thinking, I coulda been thinking but I wasn't aware of it "This mutherfucka's crazy... This mutherfucka's really crazy..."

And I think my angel must have distracted his devil for a second, 'cause I guess he was paying too much attention to his aim and not his steering wheel (or maybe he just couldn't see out of them holes too good), 'cause his car started spinning in an arc; tires screaming and burning, and the whole thing going smack-dab into a nearby tree.

(He raised his fist at me, with his invisible lips working under the hood like he was chewing something real fast, but really he must have been cussing up a storm) – and I just kept driving like I knew where the hell I was going and would have laughed if I were watching this on the big screen with a tub of buttered popcorn at my side, but the shit ain't so funny when you're the one being chased...

(Stage lights flashes off the MYSTERIOUS DRIVER and on LEVAR, as the adrenaline slows...)

And the road snaked and swerved and echoed itself for miles, till it rose and abruptly down-trodded, with the woods on each side of me, and the phrase LYNCH MOB hanging somewhere in the back of my mind...

(The quiet stinging of my face and the checking of the rearview mirror for the car but the mirror's blank except for the road and the darkness encompassing it and I don't know how many miles later or minutes it took before I saw the sign rising up out of the ground with them prices on it Wavering plainly like a mirage and the oasis being the hard sun baked road Black and evil

and mindful of the westward-wheeling stars Smudged by the impact Insect funerals plastered to the windshield like raindrops and the sudden smooth caress of asphalt bringing the shit brown Camero to a slow and agonizing halt)

SCENE 2: GAS-UP gas station.

LEVAR: I parked my car at the gas pump, not looking around for anything except the door to the gas station. I almost jumped out without thinking.

Here I am in a hick town with my passenger side window broke out; a few pieces of glass lodged under my skin, and Lord knows what else... So I get to thinking real fast They'll expect me to act a certain way... If you run in there, they might call the troopers (this far out they don't have no cops THEY have troopers with red neck accents and a whole freakin lot of woods and empty fields to put to use...).

“This is a *post racial society*,” I say to myself, closing the car door, as I'm walking real cool, but not so cool that they would get suspicious. “The Civil Rights Movement's over and the Black Codes have been abolished along with slavery. We're a dislocated nation now. There's no such thing as black and white. Race doesn't divide us any more: only ourselves.” (chuckles) Like I'm giving a speech to the NAACP.

LEVAR walks into the gas station.

This is where we meet BALLCAP GUY, who's standing behind the counter, rifling around, maybe running figures on a calculator, and talking to the JOE. He's sitting in a chair by a rack of potato chips fanning himself (pork rinds might be a bit much, but fit it in if you can). He's got sweat pockets under his arms. BALLCAP GUY isn't sharing the miniature fan he's got running in the corner, and JOE doesn't seem to mind much; he's used to it.

JOE (looks up): What can we do for you?

The BALLCAP GUY is looking at LEVAR's car out the window.

LEVAR: I need to fill my tank up. (He fumbles in his pockets for the change). Could you give me fifteen on pump number two please? *(He slides the sweaty money through the silver tray, a little embarrassed by the wetness.)* Um. Sorry about that. Air conditioner's busted.

BALLCAP GUY: Looks like your air conditioner ain't the only thing that's busted. (He keeps staring at the car) You been in some trouble, boy? (He makes eye contact with LEVAR)

LEVAR takes this in, obviously not too happy about the word "boy," and BALLCAP GUY knows this, perhaps he smiles.

JOE: Why don't you answer his question?

LEVAR: I don't mean no disrespect, but I'm in a bit of a rush...

JOE: I just bet you are. What you do, boy, rob a liquor store? They shoot your windows out too? You probably wasn't expectin them to be carryin. But we all carryin in these perilous times, just in case we run across potential hoodlums like yourself. And I bet you been runnin till your gas run out on you, and you can't find your way outta town. Is that what happened? Now you coming in here to cause *us* some trouble too. Is that it, boy? You want more trouble?

BALLCAP GUY: You better answer his question. I ain't taking no money from you till you answer it.

LEVAR *(choosing his words carefully)*: All I've been trying to do the past couple hours is get home. The last thing I want to do is cause y'all any problems.

BALLCAP GUY: But you found a wee-bit of it, didn't ya? Go on, tell us 'bout 'tit.

LEVAR: No, no. That's okay, I'd really like to fill up my gas tank please, and I'll be on my

way.

JOE: Not if he ain't selling you no gas, you ain't.

BALLCAP GUY: This here station's officially closed. (*He points to the closed sign*). Been closed for over ten minutes now. You come five minutes too late. We'll extend a courtesy to you, if you'd extend one to us. Now go on with your story. For all we know you could be some escaped convict posing as a COLORED mechanic. Wouldn't that be somethin' Joe?

JOE (uninterested): Yeah. A riot.

LEVAR: Wait a second – I ain't colored.

BALLCAP GUY (*smiles wryly*): Oh, I forget. You people prefer to be called A-free-can-Americans, don't ya? (again, the laugh) I guess *Afro-American* went the way of Disco and dino-SARS. Anyway, let's hear it. A certain point of view might even suggest you're amongst friends. Spin a yarn's worth. Won't cost you a cent.