

Dicing with Death on SA Trains

by Franz Kruger,
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Thabo Thedise knows his hobby is dangerous. "Yes, I can fall, but I can phone my mom, she can take me to the doctor," he says. The tall 19-year-old is one of Johannesburg's "train surfers": mostly young men who perform daring stunts on the city's commuter trains.

The most dangerous is train surfing proper, standing on top and dodging bridges and high-power cables. Then there's a trick that involves swinging out of a door as the train travels through a tunnel and running along the sides. The mildest, and most common, move involves jumping off the train as it begins moving, and jumping back on board again.

If he dies, so be it, Thabo says, to the laughter from the crowd that surrounds him at central Johannesburg's Park Station. "They will cry and they will bury me. I will be a born again. You know anytime you are going to be born again. I might be a white boy. I have to go and attend to some chicks," Thabo says.

Johannesburg's commuter trains have seen a rise in train surfing, partly because of a long-running security guard strike.

Lebohang Motsamai, a strong young man with hair braided tightly, describes another move, known as "gravul" from the gravel on the tracks: "I get under the train, when it is in motion, and kick the stones, kin, kin, I play with my legs." Surrounded by a group of admirers, he says he plays these games to impress girls. "Because when I do this, they are going to love me. They are going to say, eish, this boy is clever."

Some miles away, Desmond Motsemme, 15, is lying in hospital. His arms are tied to the rails of his bed because he's become aggressive in his disorientation. It's visiting time, and his grandmother and mother are there every day, talking softly and feeding him yoghurt.

After weeks in hospital, he can still hardly speak. He fell while swinging out of a train, trying to catch his cap that had flown off. The result: severe concussion, and most of his scalp ripped off. His grandmother, Ruth Motsemme, says the injuries were terrible to see.

"I couldn't look at him, really, like that. The skin of the head was just off, from here to here, he was terribly swelling, and bleeding badly. It was upsetting me to look at him like that. I couldn't believe that boy would survive, it's a miracle that boy is alive."

dicing with death • spēla

við deyðan

SA = South African

disorientation • vera í ærviti



Mrs Motsemme says she spoke to him about the dangers of playing these games just days before the accident, but nothing seems to help: "I said to him, please my boy, that is the train, it is steel, it is going to kill you."

Social worker Nonhlanhla Gasa says, "Most of the kids see dying as a way of resting from all these problems, from all these issues that life is throwing at them". And Metrorail, the company that runs the commuter trains, says it is deeply concerned about the phenomenon. Their manager of educational projects, Dolly Gaelesiwe, is visiting schools to talk to the kids about how dangerous the trains are. But she finds it very difficult to get through to them: "You know, whenever I go to schools I say guys, I'm an aunt, granny, mother – to me every child is my child. I don't like what you are doing. Why are you doing it? It worries me a lot because you see these kids getting hurt every day. This is a national crisis, it is a real national crisis."

