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Unfeeling

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On a morning like this I could kiss everybody,
I'm so full of love and goodwill.

'A Wonderful Day Like Today'

LESLIE BRICUSSE AND ANTHONY NEWLEY

1

The boy with emerald eyes everyone calls Davey sits on the veranda of Aunt Marsha's farmhouse, hugging his knees in the searing morning sun. He is shaking, his mind restless, thinking of Edenfields: the Cape Dutch house clutching the hill, just above the cathedral-like tobacco barns and the cluttered chemical-smelling sheds, then down to the brown Broadlands Dam lying beneath the hill, and the fields rutted and rugged, spreading beyond. From the hill's summit at Eden's View he could stand squinting, and know that everything he could see belonged to Edenfields Farm.

Aunt Marsha's veranda is a smooth stretch of glazed red granite. The rich stench of floor polish makes him queasy as he stares at his reflection, still on the stone floor. Looking up to steady the spinning in his head he is lost in a blurred haze of khaki: branches, twigs, leaves, moss. The landscape won't settle, something in the air seems to scorn him, and then the sudden wild squall of a bird perched high in a dry tree.

Up, out and beyond, a quietness looms, a pregnant stagnation that is the flustered settling of the wild.

But in his head strange noises trouble him, grating and scratching about like the snorting of a pig. His hands, stiff and skeletal, shake continually. He claws at his skin with filthy nails, scraping away days of dirt and grime. His body is battered and bruised. His guts shift and stir and it's now that a distinctive bubbly sensation churns through the depths of his stomach.

He leans forward, grips his stomach, throws up on the steps below.

From the deep shadows of the veranda, Aunt Marsha rises from her wicker chair and moves forward to put a cool hand to his shoulder.

'There, there,' she whispers.

Still his head won't settle. He cannot focus on a thought, hold an image still long enough to recognize what it is or means. Sudden snatches of memory swim across his vision, cancelling out the blotted garden. Sitting back against the cream pillar, his teeth chattering, his hands shaking, he is aware that Aunt Marsha stands, mutters something, withdraws like the removal of a gag. Alone, his body exhales. A convulsion follows, the breaking of a fresh sweat and a coldness creeping on him, a bone chill.

Only when he finds himself clutching a cold glass and glimpses again the fuzz of Aunt Marsha above him does he surface to realize the dull throb of pain at his temple, the roller coaster wobble of nausea. He lifts the rim of the glass to his soured mouth. He tastes the sweetness of the Coke, then the rush of rum and throws up again. He sits back, clutching his tender stomach, hearing the bird complain at him invisible in its tree, and then, a moment later, the sun's heat escalates.

He had taken a bottle of Captain Morgan's as he left Edenfields, the shotgun tucked under his arm. He'd planned to retrieve the gun from its hiding place and kick down the living-room door, blow away everyone who moved. Instead, he'd inched down the passage, utterly exhausted, battling to hold the heavy gun, the barrel constantly bearing towards the floor.

Being back in the house had done nothing to appease him. Its life-force had gone: no slow pulse rose from its foundations, no current

moved through the sunken pipes and trusses. There was nothing to suggest what it had been. He'd thought the house would have spurred him on, that being there inside its walls, under its roof, would have filled him with family memories and helped him reclaim at least the essence of all he'd lost. Instead, it seemed sterile, or, worse, indifferent to him. She had spread her terminal gloom to it. The evening was still, the air warm and stale and hard on his lungs. He moved deeper inside, to his left a crescent-shaped table bearing the brass bulldogs he'd once given Ma for a birthday present, on his right a series of teak-framed lion photographs he remembered her hanging there. Ahead: the bedroom, drawing him in like a vortex, for the next act. But in the end he took no delight in pulling the trigger.

Thinking about it now, he realizes he should have expected this anticlimax. He had long ago learnt that death is a strangely quiet thing, even for people. On that night a couple of months before, as he reeled against the cupboard in his parents' bedroom, the bed red and soaked, a pool of blood edging towards him along the beige carpet like a snake across stone, it had been pure silence pounding in his ears.

Being there disturbed him in other ways he didn't anticipate: the memories that he had cherished since that night now plagued him, refusing to welcome him back, and after a while he withdrew as quietly as he'd come, taking only the bottle of rum from the bar counter in the lounge. He wandered listlessly down the hill, through the cream-pillared gate, and didn't look back at the tight grip of the house, fort-like on the kopje, betraying him with its stubborn lifelessness. Even though the woman was now dead, Edenfields didn't seem cleansed or purified. The exorcism had brought no righteous sense of restoration, replaced nothing of what he'd lost. He wanted to get far from it.

A quiet melancholy filled him as he walked over the red soil, along the dusty road that cut through the scorched fields. The sky darkened. Shrill insects berated him. The wind shifted every now and then, dousing him in an evening coolness. There was not another soul about. And in any case, the last couple of days had left him far beyond caring. He walked through the quick fall of night, climbed to the peak of the high kopje, a sacred place his great-grandfather had named Eden's View – a place he knew she would never have invaded – and there he leant against a rock face, exhausted, delirious, stricken of will or reason.

With darkness blurring the edges of a tobacco barn, swallowing up blue hills, there was nothing between him and the murderers. The militia had appeared from nowhere, caught them unawares, permeated the farmhouse like vapours. And now they were beginning to come again, this time through his ears, his eyes, the soles of his feet, the hardness of the rocks, from out of Edenfields itself, a shroud of killers, a shimmer of raised pangas, just when he defeated them.

Then the haunting sound of a boar rose, sticking hard in his skull like a thin razor-edged arrow splintering the bone, slicing cleanly into his brain. In pain, he drove his body hard against the unrelenting boulder, bruising his spine, cutting his shoulder blades on stone shards sharp as glass. The moist blood welled through his skin, dampening the grime on his shirt.

But actually he was alone. Insects buzzed in his ears, nestled in the dampness of his sweaty arms. Beneath him the gulf of night spread across the burnt landmass and he regarded the bleak vision of land stretching black and boundless below him, fold upon fold, dale upon dale, burnt and barren. When the wind blew, he pictured ash rising in a great grey gust across the vast wastelands of the farm, his Edenfields.

So in fact he hadn't taken the farm back, hadn't achieved what he wanted to. You can't raise the dead after all.

The quick turn of his hand over the gold bottle-top seal broke it and he lifted the liquor to his lips. He left the gun by his side, waiting.

Then the night condensed into a black shadow, surrounded by sunlight, and the shadow took his head on to its shoulder. It was Aunt Marsha: a featureless angel etched in gold, her words distant, incomprehensible, calm, caring. She moved forward, peered into him. He saw there – he can't remember – something soft, motherly in the spark of her eyes, a connection.

Then she jittered, spun away. A shatter of glass as the emptied rum bottle smashed against rock, a shudder within him, a fall again into darkness.

At Summerville Farm, Marsha is troubled. She is sitting at her desk in the office, clutching a pencil, poised over a notepad. Someone had once told her that she should plan what to say when confronting people, write down what angle to take. She's never had to try it before – she never has cause to disagree with Mike, never did with Leigh either – but she knows she will need the support when Davey finally shows up. She jots down a few points, but finds she has to tear the lines out of herself.

1) You know we're always here for you Davey.
2) Blaming yourself or anyone else isn't going to help matters.
3) We understand your hurt, the pain you're going through.

Then she stops. She may as well be fighting a fire with a cake of soap. Who wrote these words? she wonders. Looking down at the paper with its silly little point-form platitudes, she finds herself overcome with a new apprehension. She screws the paper up, discards it.

She's been anxious for two days, ever since the headmaster called to announce that Davey was missing. It's brought it all out into the open again, forcing her into a confrontation with these dreadful past few months. Months when innocence was lost, lives were taken, snatched away in the night. Months in which they've all, each and every one of them, become afflicted. Somehow, with the boy neatly tucked away and out of sight, they've been able to cover it up on the surface, pretend as if all was okay.

But, to be honest, she's been expecting it. She's had an inkling something like this was going to happen. It is their fault: it is her fault. The simple truth is that poor Davey Baker was forced back into the living, working, breathing world far too quickly after the whole awful ordeal. At the time the community all gathered round him, told him that putting his best foot forward was the one way to overcome his grief. They said, 'Be strong and tough young man, be brave, they'd have wanted you to.'

And however sincere this advice had been, Marsha wonders how many of those giving it knew the truth, that it was said merely to shield their own emotions, stripped raw by the shock of it all. Seeing him off back to boarding school with their tearful faces, their gifts of fudge and koeksusters, had been an act of cowardice.

My God, she thinks, angered at this sudden bitter truth, the poor kid was shipped off at the beginning of the new term, just three weeks after his parents were hacked and bludgeoned to death, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief, banishing their terror to some distant sphere of the mind. She could hear the community exhale for the first time in weeks. But what gave them the right? And what cruelty: they'd gained a bit of cheap solace at the expense of the person who was meant to matter most – the victim, the orphan. Despite the unruly farm boy antics, underneath that tough tanned veneer he's really always been a sensitive child. Surely she should have realized he would have been this vulnerable, this fragile? She had done everything for herself: they all had. They'd let him down.

Yes.

The guilt hits her and with it her opportunity to atone. What to do when he makes his appearance? As he certainly will. She has felt the signs all along: her prickling fingertips, her sudden portentous shudders in the night, and now that she thinks about it she realizes

that he'd even tried to tell them his exact intentions. There can be no denying what crisis, what dark storm has been brewing.

When Davey first went back to school, Marsha moved in with old friends in town and went to see him every day. She stayed a week, arriving at the school at lunchtimes and in the early evening after he'd finished cricket practice, and he'd come to the car or they'd sit silently on a bench on a brick-lined path along the plush lawns. She tried to cheer him up, comfort him, but knew that her despair was doing nothing to help his. Instead, she addressed herself to his stomach, plying him with chocolates, pizzas, chips. He ate slowly and silently and neither of them cried.

One afternoon she took him shopping. He needed a whole new wardrobe, new school uniforms, a new cricket bat and kit. Here was a boy who'd lost everything, literally, and while she was writing out the cheque in Sportsman's Paradise, it struck Marsha that 5000 hectares of prime farming land and all the carefree promise in the world were now reduced to this chunk of willow and the torment of desolation. For a minute her hand trembled, her breath quickened, she couldn't remember whether the word 'million' had one 'l' or two. A couple of days later she decided she had done what she could.

Back at Summerville she took to calling Davey up regularly. At first these conversations were no easier than sitting on the path bench. Marsha was astonished at how difficult she found it to say anything more than bland, pointless pleasantries. She wanted to find the phrase that would lance his grief, that would allow him to tell her what was going on inside and therefore be free of it. But each time she thought she might try, she felt herself pushing him away, and stopped.

'How are you Davey?'

'Fine.'

'How's school coming along?'

'Okay.'

'Is there anything you need?'

'No thanks.'

She turned his monosyllables over like crossword clues. At first he spoke with a toneless gravity that implied he was treading lightly in his new being, behaving well, but falsely. But after a few weeks he began to assert the rights of his pain, and Marsha was relieved, though torn, when a call would come suddenly in the middle of the week and he'd say, 'Aunt Marsha, I'm not well – it's a bug going round.' She was delighted he wanted to come to her, but then she'd have to fob him off: they couldn't leave the farm, or petrol was a problem. It was heartbreaking. But that's what had been decided from the start.

'It is perhaps sensible for him not to have to see the unfortunate situation developing out there,' his headmaster had advised. 'Instead, I've taken the liberty of telephoning one of his good friend's parents who reside here in the city and they're more than happy to have him for the weekends, look after him and all. I assure you, Mrs De Wet, it's for the best.'

Mike agreed. 'It's better he learns to stick it out at school. There're far too many disturbing things around here for him now.'

Initially Marsha resented the idea. It was such a typically male thing to suggest; this tough farmer stoicism wasn't going to help the boy one bit. He needed motherly care, a sympathizer, someone to grieve with. And, of course, Leigh would never have left him in need; she'd have been there in an instant, she'd have travelled through the night if she thought her son was ill and needed care.

But in the end Marsha resigned herself to harden her heart, because she saw their point. She'd been forced to acknowledge what she couldn't have conceived of when she first came to Summerville – that farms were no longer places for children; that the horrors he'd witnessed weren't one-off, random acts; that an organized system of violence had been instigated, and they had to find a way of living with it. Perhaps her days of being what Mike called, affectionately, an eternal idealist were not eternal after all. Although she ached for the sight of Davey, the comfort she'd bring him and the comfort he'd give her as his mother's son, she had to be realistic.

A few weeks later, the headmaster made the first of what became regular phone calls. He'd start off, 'I don't want to alarm you Mrs De Wet', and she would know at once that David had been up to something: smoking, fighting, swearing. 'Of course,' he would say, 'we do appreciate he's going through a bad time and we all sympathize with him deeply, but I must warn you that although these incidents may be relatively trivial within themselves, we don't want him becoming something that he really isn't – a thoroughly nasty young man.'

'Yes, I see,' she'd replied curtly, wounded. The words 'thoroughly nasty' seemed brutal, cruel – as though they were directed at her. She understood what the head meant to suggest, of course she did, but a part of her was angered by this crude branding, casting Davey into a herd with other normal, naughty schoolboys.

'Perhaps he needs special care?'

'Quite honestly, the worst thing for him, Mrs De Wet, is to be treated differently.'

'But he is different. He needs some guidance and understanding surely?'

For a while they found themselves in polite deadlock, until even-

tually they agreed in principle on a revised strategy: he was to go for counselling with the school chaplain. But as soon as she'd put the phone down, she knew he would hate it – all that obfuscation and well-meaning. She knows he's far too much a farm boy to go in for that nonsense, for talking like a woman, getting in touch with his inner self; he's far too proud to show emotion, sentiment. Still, what could be done?

The half term break was nearing, Davey would have to come back. Marsha dreaded it more and more, longed for it more and more. She didn't know what to expect from him, how he'd cope returning to the district, how he'd assuage this wild, erratic rage of his, yet at the same time she needed him to come, she needed to bask in his survival. She made up a room for him, removed all the flowered vases, embroidered pillows, and put in a study lamp, an ethnic print duvet, newly made curtains, and a few posters of flashy sports cars and blinking girls in swimsuits on the cupboard doors.

He seemed excited to be coming, almost manic. He talked nonstop the whole way back in the car about everything, nothing. At the farm he tore around, ate ferociously, ran amok with the dogs, kicked about in the pool.

'The kid's looking much better,' said Mike. 'Let him do what he wants, whatever makes him happy. He's only a boy after all.'

She wasn't so sure, but tried to ignore this nagging, useless doubt. They indulged him. Mike took him fishing. She baked his favourite carrot cake and milk tart. They went to the sports club to play tennis and socialize, although the club gatherings lacked their old zest. They'd all been so depressed, so down. Now, though, it was halfterm, all the kids were back, and they tried to make it like old times even if they all knew that the old times were fast becoming incomprehensible, like a time before their birth.

Davey seemed at ease around the community, even if the community wasn't entirely at ease around him. Marsha detected a frost in the pleasantries, a smiling discomfort, an accepting hostility. How dare they, she thought, how dare they be so damn cruel? Don't they know it must be obvious to him, must scream out at him even as they chat blandly away? Men asked him about sport, women about school – only the other kids seemed to retain a bit of honesty, not really knowing, awkward in their affection. She tried to ignore what she felt beneath the surface and in the teeth of everyone's anxiety to remain calm – to the point of paralysis – she took charge of arranging the mixed doubles and drinks orders herself. The tennis was ordinary, the drinks muzzled the panic.

But it was to no avail. By the time they came back from the club Davey's mood had changed entirely. He dropped the fake normality (Marsha was partly relieved – the front had been as much a drain on her energy as him) and replaced it with a hard, moody exterior. Marsha soldiered on through carelessly made comments, pregnant silences, the terrible wrench at realizing how Davey might have taken something, and the desperate, repeated prayer to avoid anything risky or sensitive.

In such a state Davey generated a power of his own. Perhaps this was what he was like at school. Marsha never thought a boy would throw her composure, skittle her nerve so easily, especially sweet Davey. There were moments when she positively shook from the inside, sitting across from him in the lounge, not knowing what to say other than offering him yet another ginger biscuit. It was almost like first love; young, unknowing love. And when she made herself dig down beneath his tanned crust, when she pressed into his supple skin, or when she entered through his emerald eyes, it was him: it was Davey and his being there meant that for a day or two

she could be the person she longed for and missed; she could be Aunt Marsha again.

But the next day at church matters came to a head. The three of them were sitting near the back and Pastor Fellows was giving his usual pithy sermon. Over the years he'd learnt to make it short if he wanted any kind of attendance. The day's theme: forgiveness. Marsha stopped breathing when he announced it.

'We must never underestimate the blessing of forgiveness, the one true gift of the Lord to mankind.'

She sat as still as the pew, sensing the tension rising in David, feeling it steal over her. She looked across to see him clenching his hands, flexing his jaw, sweat flushing his cheeks. Jesus, she thought, couldn't the blinking twit have chosen something less bloody touchy? But no: Pastor Fellows ploughed on, driving home his point. 'Forgiveness is indeed a powerful tool in the hands of mankind.' At each intoned phrase Davey inhaled more audibly, drawing his face into a pained, angular tightness to the point where Marsha saw a vein surface and bulge down his temple. As she reached out to put a hand to his knee in the hope she would comfort him, he snapped. He let out a string of loud, berating vulgarities, rose to his feet. She tried to pacify him – to hold his knee more tightly – but to no avail. The congregation gasped, spun round on the benches. 'David,' she whispered sternly, trying to pull him down, but he struggled free. He stumbled his way through a sea of knees and then stormed out, half muttering angrily, half crying incoherent threats.

Shock froze. A few elderly ladies had raised their hands to their mouths to stifle their disbelief, mark their own disapproval. Pastor Fellows quickly announced the next hymn and the thumped opening chords of 'Praise My Soul' sounded.

'I'm sorry,' she said afterwards, bursting into tears. 'I'm sorry, he's just not himself. He doesn't mean it. He's just not over it yet.'

Everyone consoled her, said how they sympathized. 'It's tough, we know it's tough.' But, of course, it remained shocking: it left impressions in people's minds, stirred their own nervousness. Poor Davey, she thought, was a walking, talking, breathing nightmare to them all; an icy plunge into that deep level where trauma and dread and violence exist. He stripped back layers of their own blindness to show what the future might hold, the plight of the survivor. Floating between the tea tables outside the church, snagged by people she'd thought she knew, Marsha realized a dark truth: the unspoken acknowledgement that it would've been more convenient if Davey had perished with his mother and father so that Edenfields and the Bakers just didn't exist any more. Total obliteration was tidier, less of a hassle to deal with. That was really what they were saying to one another when they carefully talked about some subject other than Davey.

On the way home he sat sulking on the back seat. She didn't know what to say to him. The pressure sitting like stone on her shoulders was almost unbearable. In the last couple of months, she felt she'd become the community flagship; the one they all checked to see was still sailing, still ignoring what the dismal future held in store, and therefore somehow holding together the pieces of a quickly disintegrating flotilla. Or maybe it was Davey they were looking to, and she was just the link: people measured their own sense of wellbeing, their own ability to cope on how he held up. If he cracked: they cracked. And she was responsible for him, wedged in the middle, managing a precarious balancing act.

And perhaps Davey just needed the opposite. Perhaps he had done what he needed – shock them – and now that he had

reminded them of his pain, he could concentrate on dealing with it properly. Outwardly they all hoped it was so. At church the next week, when Davey was back at school, she made up an announcement on his behalf. 'He wishes to apologize to everyone for his outburst. He knows it wasn't the time or, certainly, the place. But he's truly sorry and wants me to tell you all that he's now much better and more at peace. He's much more his old self.'

The community, in his absence, patted him on the back, pleased to see him doing his bit, quelling their own fears and anxieties. But it was cosmetic, for all of them. She knew. He wasn't calm. Wasn't at ease. He hadn't got over anything at all.

And then three nights ago Davey called them up late. He sounded agitated, excited, spoke at a rate of knots, saying the same thing over and over.

'I know what I'm going to do, I know how to deal with these people. I've got the solution. It's all okay now, it'll be all okay.'

She didn't know what he was talking about, but tried to calm him. 'Now just try to get a good night's sleep.' Eventually she got him to agree to go to bed and think things through in the morning, but she knew it was a reprieve, not a victory. She told Mike.

'Just ignore it, the kid's having a bad time that's all. He's probably homesick, been in a punch-up or something.'

Marsha knew that wasn't it. There was something horribly determined in his voice, something steadfast, resolved. She felt another layer of denial slip away, and spent the whole night restless and unsettled, thinking over and over what he'd said, how hard she'd needed to work to get him to breathe, to talk slowly, to realize that she was there on the other end of the line. She knew what he meant to do, and wondered how she could stop him. It wasn't going to be easy, especially when, with all the mounting anger in

her heart, she'd like nothing better than to act herself, to exert some influence over the fate of Leigh and Joe's killers. But she knew it was her duty to try to pacify him, help him accept what had happened.

And now he's run away. She tries to pull herself together. Sitting in the office, tapping a pencil against a screwed-up ball of paper isn't going to make him appear with an innocent explanation. She's been stupefied by inaction: all these mounting worries – this anger she has inside her against something she's powerless to overcome – have weakened her, made her inept. She tosses the pencil aside, throws the paper into the wastepaper basket, taps her twitchy fingers on the desk calendar, stops. She closes her eyes for a moment, to marshal her thoughts, to try to see what to do now. She knows he must be coming back, somehow, travelling back towards her, towards Leigh, towards Edenfields. On the back of her eyelids, in the blackness, she sees him, a shape in the distance, a figure struggling and labouring along the hot surface of a weltering track, a shape broken up by the haze of the heat, into a head, a body, for a moment a limb. Marsha feels the heat as hot as blasts from a furnace. Her breath quickens, her cheeks burn, and then the figure is gone, in the yellow sun. She opens her eyes, and sits for a while. She goes through to put the kettle on for tea, allowing her mind to settle. She wanders round the kitchen, hacks a chicken from the depths of the deepfreeze and leaves it on a plate to thaw for supper. Waiting for the water to boil, she knows that he needs her – not just in a protective, motherly way, but physically needs her. She doesn't know why or how, but nevertheless he does. She flicks the kettle off. The bubbling water comes to quick rest. She walks through to the passage, picks the keys to the truck off the key rack.

A few minutes later she's on her way to Edenfields, to Eden's View, ignoring the possible dangers, the armed militia who have fortified the farm. She drives, pulled towards the base of the hill. No one stops her. She parks the truck slightly in the bushes to conceal it from the homestead and begins picking her way through the tall unruly vlei so that she can climb the hill (thankful she's at least wearing track shoes) to find the boy who's spent the whole night there, waiting for her. The boy who ran away three days ago to come and do what needed to be done.