

David Levinrad's story

The call

THERE IS NO SPIRIT THAT DOES NOT COME HOME.

David Levinrad bit his lip, pointed a finger into his chest, felt its white nail scratch in his flesh. He was sitting alone, in his living room, thinking without wanting to think about that old Zulu saying he had heard once. About those times. About that saying he had heard late one night, drunk as a skunk, in the townships. The saying that bit in his bones and yet thought would never apply. Not to him. Not to the great, untouchable David Levinrad whose parents believed, *so help me God*, South Africa was God's chosen country. 'Not a better, cleaner, more affordable country in the world,' they said. Often. 'Forget Jerusalem. Forget the USA. Forget the UK.' To live, there was only one country in the world: South Africa. That was the way they spoke. Exactly how they spoke. And David was determined to show them only one thing: the other South Africa. The flip-side South Africa. The real South Africa. The South Africa where the majority of South Africans lived, laboured, loved, died. In the townships, in the poverty-driven ghettos set up by white South Africa.

That South Africa that was stuck in a quagmire of poverty, hardship, hunger, where people did not have to be murdered, because they starved to death from a lack of food. (They were murdered anyway - in one way or another.) That South Africa where a people laboured under job reservations - a government ordained restriction that saved the best jobs, wages, positions for whites. That South Africa that enforced people to carry 'Passes' - that restricted an entire people's movements to certain regions, towns, times, places. That kept the country's white streets clean and safe. And worse than anything, that South Africa that enforced ignorance. That kept the vast

majority of South Africa, which was black South Africa, for the most part out of universities, and buried in an erratic, chaotic, second-class education system. Yes, ensuring the black masses would remain as hewers of wood and carriers of water, as the great and revered architect of apartheid, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, cast it in the nineteen forties. Yes, that South Africa that could be overturned. That would be overturned! That South Africa that could yet be filled with rising suns and pristine, gilt-edged moons. That South Africa that could abound with golden bush and cities and towns shared by all. Black and white. Equals. The South Africa where he – David Levinrad – and his children could live forever. Without conscience. The South Africa that his parents would get up and run from.

David swallowed, felt the spittle like pins clustered in his neck. And yet, in the end, it was he who left. He who was unable to see it out. He who grew impatient. He who gave up – and his parents who died happy, peaceful deaths in the tranquillity of apartheid South Africa. Yes, yes, he swallowed again, feeling the sharpness of it in his neck, he who fled to prevent his children from going to privileged, all-white schools. He, who used his wife, his adventurer wife, Penny Hunter, an Australian with a silken paper-white face, who travelled to South Africa to see for herself, as a way out. Yes, he who urged her to take him into the great new world, the Land of Oz – and saw his children end up in all-white schools anyway.

And in the end he had to convince himself it was the army he was running from, army camps, the compulsory South African army that called into its ice-cold, unbowing bowels every white South African teenager. The army that, with nowhere to hide, he had served in for nine months as a boy, fresh from school, and thought he was going to die with disgust and guilt. The army that called its white people up for compulsory three-week and sometimes three-month training camps every year, camps that he had found every excuse under the sun to keep away from, even undergone a fictitious hernia operation once, and once left the country and gone into hiding when that proud white army called him up to serve in the great battle for Angola in the mid seventies. Yes, the army that upheld apartheid. That kept

order. That kept the townships and ghettos shaped square and always in need. That stood there, always, R1 rifles in hand and screaming metal beasts, the great hunking steel tanks known as 'hippos', on the ready to put down uprisings. Yes, yes, it was good reason. Very good reason. To end the questions that kept running back into you: Why should I remain? Why should my children have to grow up in this nefarious place and endure apartheid, albeit the white privileged end of it? Why should my Australian wife have to go through all this heart-damaging lifestyle of fighting an oppressive system and not really seeming to get anywhere? Why should I have to serve in an army I was dead-set against? Nearly eight years in from the great Soweto school children's uprising of June Sixteen, Nineteen Seventy-six that saw hundreds of kids killed in a vicious and mephitic spew of police bullets, was anything changing? Was I, were we all, hitting our heads against a brick wall?

And then he left, head staring in front with a grin, eyes looking back, oblique, and only months later it all exploded. Without warning. The latter half of Nineteen Eighty-four. George Orwell could not have predicted it more precisely. The people rising up against Big Brother. The country on fire. And somehow, somehow, it seemed too soon. To go back. Penny happy. Children happy. Life happy.

'Give it a while,' she said. 'We've only just arrived. The fires have only just ignited.'

And David agreed, it was her turn. Her turn to experience home.

He looked on from outside. Swallowed. Felt the spittle dry.

The years passed, the holes grew bigger, the battle against apartheid continued with great leaping flames; the immigrants arrived. The immigrants from his country, arriving and arriving and arriving. The suitcases getting fuller and fuller and fuller. And slowly they were all becoming his friends. All of them, he swallowed, feeling the spittle like shale splinter in his throat, finding reason to believe. In their journey. In their flight over from the bottom of Africa to the very tip of Antipodes. All of them telling him it was over. That country, their old country, was over. Eventually the tribes would rule and fight forever.

And he heard in their conversations talk of old times – how everything, the fruit, the sweets, the prawns – tasted better there. And in the same breath he heard them at *braais* – only they called them ‘barbies’ now – deny missing anything about that old place. Home. Yes, he remembered it, remembered swallowing tightly for them; how those people were once so proud of their homes. Of their suburbs. The big, solid brick of them. The lush gardens. The perfect sprays of colour. Hearing them, it irked. It irked. It brought tears.

David sat back, wiping his forehead, almost forgetting the sweat on it from an unbearable humidity, a thick dampness that sat in the groin and under the arms that was Brisbane. He flicked the droplets of salty water in the air, into the here and now: Australia. Seeing his life writing on newspapers – on poverty, domestic violence, incest rape, family dysfunction, stories about Australia for Australians. This place where so, so many migrants, so, so many Australians thought those problems mere fabrications. Myths built up to engender and maintain a welfare system. Knowing, despite the lifting of the carpet, something in him was not quite connecting, not quite seeping in through the hot, telling pores. That his head was merely a device, a form of printers’ ink going through the motions.

And he saw across the waving ocean that place, that little place at the tip of Africa where those same problems he was concocting here were so very big and huge on the landscape. Where those same problems existed not just in the here and now, in stories that you wrote for a crust and to put furniture in the living room, but on a profound, almost inexplicable blood level. Yes, he recalled, it was like those stories were a touching of souls, a touching of souls between victor and defeated, between perpetrator and victim. Everything urgent, everything quintessential. Like words could shake a country, could bring down a government, could shift the axis on which all life revolved. Yes, yes, stories that dug deep into the chest and bit into the soul.

And then the great change came – April Nineteen Ninety-four happened – the end of apartheid. And David watched from

his Red Hill home in Brisbane even more fellow countrymen arriving. Many, many more. Saying they could not live there. It was not the black government. It was not the new freedom. It was not the new, wonderful rainbow nation. It was the violence, the AIDS, the poverty, the lack of health care. And they too said it was over. That country was over. Everybody was getting out.

The Gersons' story

At home

HANNAH ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?... What I am saying is you get used to it, my girl, you get used to people and their differences. At least Australians don't go around bladdy murdering and raping one another and behaving like AIDS is nothing more than a common cold. That eating carrots and cabbage and beetroot can get rid of HIV. Just remember that, my girl. Just remember that whenever you think of South Africa.

That was how Clive Gerson remembered it, that conversation with his daughter, saying to her: 'At least here they look after their own - and that includes everybody, irrespective of race or colour or creed! I mean, just think of your circle of friends: Danika - now in Toronto; Robert - now in Boston; Lauren - in Vancouver; Lolly - in Perth; Sandy - now in Sydney; Melita - in London.'

And above all he remembered how his daughter, Hannah, *nearly a twenty-year-old adult now*, lifted her top lip and snapped back like a crocodile. 'Jesus, Da, you really couldn't give a crap, could you? I know why you left - because you got overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by other people. By black people. Ashamed and resentful that they would never make you head of that stupid bladdy social work department. Too shit-scared to fight back!'

Clive Gerson hit his head with his hand like it was wood, and thought: *How do you argue with that? It was impossible. She was impossible. Maybe she couldn't see it, the country had been through a revolution, and now the issue wasn't black exploitation, wasn't apartheid, it was plain and simple danger: This time the enemy was on the streets, on everyone's streets, in the suburbs, knocking at your front doors, knocking at your office door, climbing over your*

electric security walls, stalking everyone like wild game.

Not knowing what had gone on between them, Raynor Gerson entered her daughter's bedroom later, thinking of her new reality, thinking back on the day, of saying 'G'day' with a narrow smile to her new teacher colleagues *who weren't the hell interested in who you were except to openly mock you when you said 'pehn' instead of pin and 'cheps' instead of chips – or rather 'cheeps', like they said here, like chips were some kind of noise young chickens made.* And as she stepped into the room she saw the mess and stepped back in horror.

'Clean up your blimmin room, Hannah – now!' Sometimes it seemed she could find no other way but to shout at her.

'It's not my blimmin room. It's your room. You're the one – and Da – so like flippin brought me to this place.'

It always came back to that. Raynor Gerson turned away from her daughter's room. *The resentment against them. Against her and Clive. Always their fault.* Behind it Raynor saw, without being able to articulate it, to even mouth it, possibly because she did not want to, not even to Clive, her husband, not even in her head, that there was in her daughter just a basic unhappiness. It was just there, like oil stains that you could not see under a car but stuck there anyway, stains that became hard like tar. That were carried everywhere the car travelled. And Raynor Gerson thought to herself: *All I know is we had to move forward. Accept what was, as much as it hurt. Accept now that we are nuwe mense in a nuwe land, new people in a new land.*

And yet, inside, she felt it like she was fighting, like she was part of a tug-of-war. Only the winning side wasn't always the better side. Seeing, when she really thought about it, when she really faced herself in the mirror, that home was like a mole on the face. Scratch it and it bled. Let it bleed for too long and you died. And she saw how they had scratched that mole; it was bleeding, but it was too late. There was no way they were going back. Not to a past already gone. *Who would've expected?* Raynor Gerson felt her head shake.

She went back to her daughter's room. 'We must make ourselves happy here.' She tried to be calm. 'We must move forward, Hannah, *my skat.* Like we are on that Great Trek of my

forebears. To a better land.'

Hannah Gerson put her stiff head in her hands and cried.

Later on, knowing how soft he could be, Hannah came up to her father in his study and looked for his eyes.

'Shit, Da, hey, let's face it. The people may look the same here, but they're different. Like they just are. Admit it. I mean I've even heard you say it yourself - *They may speak English here, but it's not the same flipping English I know.*'

Clive's eyes curled. He strained his thick, bull-like neck. 'Hannah, my baby, believe me, they're all getting out of there. They're all branching and forking out. The only ones left, basically, are the ones who can't afford to move. And they are looking too, believe me, my honey. Everyone, rich and poor alike, everyone is looking for a way out.'

She raised her lip and Clive prepared himself for the snap.

'Whatever. Have it your way then. But I'll be perfectly honest, Da... Yeah, I was excited to begin with, I admit it. But just don't expect me to be instantly happy now. Some of my friends may have left, it's true, but there are still plenty of them left behind.'

Clive Gerson, stocky frame, eyes searching like a frog, looked up at her, her milky features like her Ma, and said what he had said to her before, what was beginning to sound like a speech. 'I'm sorry, my baby. Really. I'm sorry. I know it's not easy, but you just have to start again. All we ever wanted was what's good for you: a safe and happy future. You, and please God one day your children. I mean let's be fair and reasonable here, Hannah. At least this place is clean, well ordered. You don't even hear about AIDS. Let alone a thousand bloody murders a day! And if you're really being real, my honey, there's bucket loads of opportunity out there. Really. If you just look around. For young people like you, ja, my baby, there's no end to what you can achieve here. Really. But I'm telling you this, you have to get off your blimmin bum and actually do something about it. Look Hannah, my girl, we don't expect you to immediately be happy and find your feet here. But remember we're in the same boat as you. And we're here to

support you. Everything takes time. Believe me, my baby, I know. Your ma and I know. But you'll see, in the end you'll be very glad we made the move.'

Clive steered inward-searching eyes up into that face that was like a bottle of milk and he remembered how they all told Hannah, at her farewell, how lucky she was. How lucky she was to be getting out and going to live overseas. He remembered her little protruding belly and how it wobbled and shook as she cried in a way that was quite frightening, even for him. But he also remembered, in his way, crying. *It was a long time to spend in a place, forty-five years, Christ! And then to watch it held to ransom by bloody criminals for whom life wasn't worth a bloody sixpence. To be held to ransom through discrimination, yes, on the other foot now. Discrimination without regard for skills and experience. Black and female – top of the bloody coop now. Being white and male, more than enough reason to lose your job, to stop that bloody promotion, to stop experience from getting ahead. And then, and then, Jesus, like it was dirt to be shoved under a carpet – the unacknowledged bloody diseases that killed, the political corruption, the unstoppable tide of black bladdy entitlement. Yes, there was no choice – no goddamned choice. Clive turned tired eyes down to their newly varnished floorboards. Damn it, we just had to make up our minds – and go.*

And then he remembered how they smiled as they left and how envious their friends were, how dead-set red in the face and jealous they were, seeing them off at parties like they were going to Nirvana.