Lovereading.co.uk

Teacher's Dead

Benjamin Zephaniah

Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

The Ending

The knife was pushed so far into Mr Joseph's stomach that it almost came out of his back. Lionel Ferrier closed his eyes, held the handle tight, and turned it vigorously. Mr Joseph grunted towards the sky as the knife was twisted deep into his intestines, and as the sharp stainless steel sliced through his organs blood pumped out of his body with so much force that it splattered Lionel's chest. Lionel pulled the knife out and jogged away slowly with his friend Ramzi Sanchin following behind him.

They weren't hiding their faces as they ran, and they weren't running to avoid being caught, they were just going somewhere else. The attack took place in front of dozens of other pupils, who looked on horrified, many of them screaming, and all of them too scared to go to their teacher's rescue.

'Don't just stand there!' screamed head boy Otis. 'Get some help, go and get some help!'

His hands trembled so much that it took him several attempts to turn on his mobile phone; as soon

as it was on he called the police, who arrived ten minutes later. But it was too late; Mr Edgar Arnold Joseph had already drawn his last breath in the arms of Otis Westwood the head boy and Mrs Cartwright the history teacher.

CHAPTER 2

The Crime Scene

My name is Jackson Jones. I stood and watched a teacher die. For the first time in my life I felt real shock. I didn't panic, I just froze. I wanted to walk away but I couldn't. I tried to walk towards the place of death but I couldn't. I was the quickest at the one hundred metres in my year, I had only been beaten once in the long jump, and my reflexes were sharp, but all that stuff was useless. My whole body actually went numb. They say the brain is like a computer – well, my computer crashed.

Lionel and Ramzi were the same age as me. I knew Lionel, we were friends once, for a short while. Actually we were only friends for two days until we fell out over my MP3 player. I lent it to him and when I got it back it was broken, the screen was damaged. I'd say hello to him sometimes but we were never close friends. I didn't hate him for it, I just didn't trust him. I didn't know Ramzi much, I hardly ever spoke to him, but there was something about him. I didn't

trust him either.

I will never forget the way Lionel put that knife into Mr Joseph. He was so calm, and he did it with such ease. As I watched them both jogging away I thought they must have done this before. They were like hardened gangsters in a movie. It was like just another day at the office, and nobody dared try to go after them.

Films brainwash you. When people die in films the way the blood trickles down the shirt can look quite cool, the death is usually accompanied by music, and they always have just enough time to deliver their last lines, usually a message for the woman or man they love, or their mother, or a message for the whole of mankind. The way Mr Joseph went down was nothing like that. First there was the force of the blood, then urination, and then the very violent convulsions, and the desperate gasping for breath as his body tried to hold on to life. I knew exactly when his body gave up the fight: there was a moment of silence, his back arched, his body stiffened, and then he took his last breath. Trust me, it was nothing like in the movies.

The school was surrounded by police, all entrances were sealed off with that flimsy tape that they always use, and an ambulance came and put a curtain around the body before taking it away. Those of us who saw what happened were told to line up in the dining hall and wait for our parents to come so that we could be

questioned by the police. Although I was hungry I didn't mind waiting, but I felt guilty for feeling hungry, after all this was much more important than my food. I should have been feeling sick after what I just saw, but I was thinking of food.

I looked out of the dining-hall window and saw my mother talking to a newspaper reporter. The reporter gave her a business card and she pushed her way to the front of the crowd and identified herself to the police who were guarding the school gate. As soon as my mother saw me she raced towards me. She's small, but she's strong, and when she put her arm around me and squeezed me she almost took my voice away. I could feel the relief in her voice.

'Jackson, are you all right?'

'Yes, Mum, I'm all right.' I groaned into the collar of her coat.

She stepped back to look at me. 'Are you hurt?'

'No, Mum, but Mr Joseph's been killed. Lionel Ferrier stabbed him, I saw it. None of us kids were attacked, but that Lionel, he just stabbed Mr Joseph and went off. I saw it with my own eyes, I was right near.'

CHAPTER 3

Boy A and Boy B

I was expecting something like an interrogation. Maybe television is to blame again, but I really thought that after witnessing a murder I would be subjected to hours of heavy questioning in a dark room, but all they did that day in the hall was ask me what I saw, and all I did was tell them what I saw. After speaking to other pupils I learnt that it was the same for all the witnesses. Then that thing happened, that thing when a group of people watch the same incident but see different things. Apparently it's because of the shock and the stress, and the excitement, if you can call it that. We were also offered counselling but no one accepted the offer, or no one admitted to it, even though we were warned that the effects of what we all witnessed may not be felt until much later. There was lots of crying, especially from the girls. Some boys too, but mainly girls. To be really honest, I felt like crying but I didn't. To be really, really honest, I shed a tear or two, but I was silent, and because I was silent I don't think it can really be

called crying. Whatever.

Watching someone die is not easy, I don't care what kind of front people put up. I put up a front, I had to, I'm a boy, but deep down I was feeling it. It wasn't too bad when I was busy doing things, but it would get to me when I stopped, or when I was just about to sleep, or just after I woke up. But I never cried, not really. Sometimes I would see the whole thing happening again in my mind. When that happened I just told myself that this was the real world, and if this was the real world I should be prepared to see more acts of violence, more death, and more destruction.

After Lionel stabbed Mr Joseph he jogged to the park with Ramzi, put his shirt in a rubbish bin, cleaned the blood off the knife, and then he and Ramzi both lit cigarettes. When the police arrived they were sitting on the park bench puffing away and saying nothing. The police were surprised to see how relaxed the boys were. Lionel still had the knife in his hand, an officer took it, and without the slightest hint of resistance they both walked to the police car surrounded by officers. The newspapers picked up on this. Boy A and Boy B, as they were called, were being described as 'Teen Killers', 'Blood Brothers', and 'The Unteachables'. They were being compared to other young killers, and many so-called experts were coming up with hundreds of so-called character profiles.

Radio phone-in programmes were swamped with people calling in with their opinions. Most of the callers were falling into two camps. Some were complaining that it was the fault of television and that if we kept allowing our children to get out of control we would end up like America. Others were saying the only way to stop them is to execute them like they do in America.

The school was closed down for a week, and every day more and more flowers were being placed on the railings. The Queen sent a message and spelt the school name wrong, the Prime Minister sent us a message saying how proud he was of the way we all handled a time of great difficulty, but a month before he had been on television calling us a failed school, threatening to close us down or send in a 'super head teacher'. Suddenly kids who hated writing started to write short poems and place them with the flowers. A policewoman was given the job of making sure that all those who came to pay their respects were able to, and that all the flowers were properly placed and could be seen.

Lionel and Ramzi were taken to court the day after the killing and remanded in youth custody. The court ordered that reports were made ready for the hearing. The media made a big deal out of the fact that both boys were accompanied only by their mothers. 'Fatherless Killers' one newspaper called them. I

wasn't going to judge them for that. I had never seen my father, I didn't even know who he was, but that didn't make me evil. I'd been alive for fifteen years and I'd never felt the need to kill someone because I didn't have a dad.

Back then I used to listen to a lot of music, mainly dance bands like The Chemical Brothers, and hip-hop bands like Positive Negatives, I used to go for all types of British bands. Then all this happened. I kept listening to music, but I became more interested in the lyrics. I suppose I was looking for the meaning of life but I soon realised I weren't going to find that out from a singer who was a spotty teenager like me. I also started looking a lot – I mean really looking. I would stare at people and wonder if they were capable of killing someone. I even started looking at myself in the mirror and asking the same question. Could I?

CHAPTER 4

A Mourning of Celebration

The first time I saw Mrs Joseph I couldn't take my eyes off her. She came to school to speak in the morning assembly. It was two weeks after the death of her husband and the school was still in mourning. As we sat through the head teacher's speech I watched Mrs Joseph. I could not stop my eyes coming back to her, and when I was looking at her the head teacher's speech just became background noise. I could only see Mrs Joseph; everything else in my field of vision became a blur. As I stared at her I realised that there were so many questions in my mind that needed to be answered. I knew how I felt having seen her husband die, but I began wondering what it was like for her to suddenly find that her husband wasn't there.

When Mrs Martel, the head teacher, invited her on to the stage you could feel the anticipation in the hall. This was going to be heavy. Some kids held their heads down, about five pupils began to clap their hands, but when they realised that they were in the minority they stopped. Mrs Joseph surprised us all.

She smiled as she took to the stage and started her speech by telling us not to feel sorry for her. She walked to and fro across the stage, unlike Mrs Martel, who always stood still when speaking.

'I think it would be hard for anyone to imagine the pain that I've been through,' she said on the move. 'My husband kissed me goodbye one morning, and came to this wonderful school, to do what he loved doing best, teaching you wonderful kids. He even called me at lunchtime and told me that he was having a really good day. He told me that one pupil had come up to him and said, "Sir, you rock," which apparently meant that he was good. The moment I was told of his death I didn't believe it. After all I had just spoken to him and he had said he was having a good day. And anyway he was at school – teachers get killed in American schools, I thought, not in our great British schools. But I soon couldn't hide from the reality. For many days I locked myself away, I kept my house in darkness and I communicated with the world outside as little as I possibly could. There was a numbness of all my senses. When I touched things they didn't feel the same. I could no longer hear the simple sounds that I normally found pleasure in, like birds singing in my garden, or snatches of conversation from people walking past my house. The only comfort I really found was in the darkness. Then I began to feel angry, I mean really angry. I turned into

this person that I didn't like. I never lose my temper, but now I found myself smashing things, some things that I really valued. I became aggressive and bitter, and then I started feeling sorry for myself.

'But soon I realised how much that was holding me back. I had lost my husband, the man I loved, but the more I kept feeling sorry for myself the more depressed I got. I remember just after we got married, Edgar, or Mr Joseph as you know him, lost his mother in a car crash. I hardly knew his mother, but I was so saddened by this sudden death that I found it difficult to eat and do everyday things, but he told me that his mother wouldn't want us to wallow in sadness. He said that his mother would want us to take stock of what had happened and move on. He gave me a lecture on the difference between mourning a death and celebrating a life. Edgar's mother turned him into a celebrator of life, Edgar turned me into a celebrator of life, and I want you to celebrate his life.

'There are still many questions to be answered, but I have stopped asking, why me? I am moving on. I have to. I don't know how much you realise this, but Edgar loved teaching, and he loved teaching you. Some of the knowledge you have is a little bit of Edgar that lives on in you. I want you to celebrate his life; I want each one of you to live on. Thank you.'

Not once did I take my eyes off her. I had heard that celebration of life thing before but it usually

came from a priest, or a teacher. It seemed like an easy thing to say, but I found it astonishing this time because it was Mr Joseph's wife who was speaking. She had less anger, and less sorrow, than any one of us in that hall on that morning.

When the assembly was over I managed to get close to Mrs Joseph. I was nervous but I had to ask her a question.

'Excuse me, Mrs Joseph. I'm sorry if you think I'm being rude, but I just wanted to know. Don't you feel like you want revenge or something? OK, maybe not revenge, but justice, don't you want justice?'

She smiled. 'Justice? What is real justice? That's not my main concern. I want to use this time to think, to think about life, death, and everything else that we have to do with our time. I want to think about moving forward, I have thoughts about life without my husband, but I also spare some thoughts for the parents of whoever killed my husband.'

'What do you think about them?' I asked.

She wasn't sure who I meant. 'The killers or the parents?'

'The parents,' I said.

'Well, I think that they never killed him, and I just wonder what they are going through.'

'Do you know them?'

'No,' she replied. 'But I know that they are humans, whoever they are.'

A voice came from behind me. 'Move on now, Jones.' It was Mrs Martel. 'I don't want to rush you, but you do have a lesson to go to.'

That's when I started thinking, that's when I started asking questions. Why was it that the people causing trouble in the media were the people who were most removed from the situation? Could Mrs Joseph, the person closest to the victim, really be so forgiving? I wanted to know what kind of fifteen-year-old goes to school with a knife and kills his teacher. I knew that Lionel had had arguments with Mr Joseph, but so had I. I knew some people thought Lionel was a bit weird, but lots of people thought I was weird too. I knew that some people said he was dangerous, but what did that mean? They also said Neil Franks was dangerous because he was a wicked MC, and swallowing chewing gum was dangerous because it would stick to your heart, and kissing was dangerous because you could get cold sores. So dangerous meant many things. Were people scared of danger, or were people scared of the truth?

CHAPTER 5

A Small Tree Planted

When I first heard about the way Mr Joseph was buried I thought it was really weird. The only people there were his wife and a small group of relatives. The press were asked to stay away and all Mrs Joseph asked of the school was that we send our thoughts. She didn't mean write them down and send them by post, she meant that we should just think them, the idea being that they would arrive under their own steam. What I thought was even weirder was where he was buried. He was buried in some woodland, in a biodegradable cardboard coffin, with no flowers and no gravestone, just a small tree planted where a gravestone would have been. At first I thought it was all a bit nutty but then I began to understand. He wasn't religious, so there was no priest, just a friend talking about him and reading some of his favourite poems. Compare that to what we did at school.

Our head teacher organised a big memorial service. Other local schools were invited, as were the families

of all the pupils, the local bishop, imam and rabbi, and a pagan, and a Hindu priest, and the world's media were there to record it all. My mother didn't make it, she said she wanted to, but she just couldn't afford to take a day off work. Still, there were so many people there that they even put speakers out in the playground for everyone who had to stand outside. The great and the good all stood up and did their speeches but they all sounded as if they weren't speaking to us in the hall, they sounded like they were speaking to the TV cameras, all doing mini performances, all except Mrs Joseph. What she said was pretty much what she'd said in the assembly some weeks before but she still sounded like she was speaking to us, she was still very personal, and because it was so real she was the only one who didn't get applause after her speech. Everyone was stunned into silence.

After the service everyone flocked around Mrs Joseph, and outside the school she was stopped by people with microphones desperately seeking something for the six o'clock news. I really wanted to speak to her again but I knew I stood no chance whilst the television people surrounded her. Fortunately as soon as they got what they wanted they were off. All I had to do now was get past Mrs Martel, who had become her private bodyguard. That was tough. I had to wait until almost everyone had gone before I could make my move, and then they were heading for the