

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd, the writer *Diana Evans* examines the vital importance of honesty, both in our ability to speak truth to power and our willingness to be candid with ourselves; to tell the stories of every member of our society; to call on those with privilege to take responsibility for dismantling the iniquitous structures of the world; and to embrace openness and fairness for all

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e saw it. We saw a white knee crush a black neck.

We've been seeing it, centuries have seen it.

We've seen black strangled – lashed – lynched – boiled – drowned – starved – shot – stabbed – raped – locked up – and we've carried on with our lives, as if it were nothing to do with us, as if we had no part in it, as if we were a different story. One of the reasons this was possible is that the stories we were told and the stories that were most often placed before us, and therefore the stories that we often chose, did not contain the true whole story, the one about the knee on the neck. It was there, though, hidden in the sentences, in the absences, in the white space, in the wider background. And sometimes it was a little clearer and we might see it enough to acknowledge it was there but not enough to understand it. Understanding it takes living in another way, turning ourselves inside out, turning the world upside down, letting the golden towers of these old empires crumble.

George Floyd was a man and not an idea. The supremacy of one thing rests on the dehumanisation of another and the indifference of everything else. The man who killed George Floyd with his knee over eight minutes and forty-six seconds did not believe this was the neck of an ordinary man like him, a man who might enjoy football or a banana and mayonnaise sandwich or a particular kind of beverage or who had a childhood stretching back into shadows. He did not see a man under his knee, only black, only the idea of black, attached to a man, and against which he believed himself superior, possessing a worthier right to life and liberty. He was raised like that. We must blame him entirely for allowing himself to be captured and twisted and drained of compassion by the idea of white supremacy, and we must blame his accomplices for agreeing with him enough not to save George's life, perhaps even wishing their own knee could have a ride on that breathing, calling sacrifice; but we must also look at ourselves, our failure to contest enough the foundations of our own freedom, and to acknowledge the fact that because of it others are still not free. We went on living comfortably inside the idea. We were part of the indifference.

Stories are about people. Ideas themselves do not make stories. There must be breath, feeling, the witnessing of dusks, the fullness



of days, people riding buses, people making love, the yearnings of restless souls and the preoccupations of the mind. Stories show us back to ourselves and open windows onto other pictures, other lives. Our gatekeepers have been selfish. For a long time they have habitually made a dangerous and myopic assumption that we would not be interested in seeing the other pictures, in seeing the inside of what

was invisible. They have been looking out of the oldest window right at the top of the golden tower and registering what they already knew, not what they did not know. And we, too, have been lazy. Why did we imagine that in any of those pictures of the invisible we would not see ourselves and recognise our own human feelings? Why do we restrict our vision, and succumb to the same myopia, and allow ourselves to be complicit in the unequal dividing of access and illumination? And why did we so continually fail to unlearn our privilege by considering what it must be like to repeatedly consume stories in which one is not included, yet then make do with that reflection at least for the duration of

reading, thereby facing the insinuation that one does not matter, one's life does not matter, black lives do not matter? All of this is part of the violence.

To unlearn privilege and give away power, that is what must be done. Do not assume you are the centre. Do not subscribe to the idea of the other. Open all the windows and look outwards. Share liberty, share space. Make diversity your default in the highest echelon of your workforce. Turn yourself inside out and upside down. Begin again. Do not ask one of the black people you know what you should do about racism because they are only experts in its suffering, not in its solution. They can only tell you how it feels and they have been telling that for a long time and now they are very tired. They cannot tell you how to live right after the accumulative deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Mark Duggan, Ahmaud Arbery, Stephen Lawrence, Tamir Rice and so many other sons, daughters, brothers, nieces and loved ones, but only hope that you live differently and share this load. It belongs to everyone. □