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Black Vodka

Written by Deborah Levy

Published by And Other Stories

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BLACK VODKA

TEN STORIES

Deborah Levy

Introduced by Michèle Roberts



First published in 2013 by
And Other Stories
91 Tadros Court, High Wycombe, Bucks, HP13 7GF

www.andotherstories.org

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'Vienna' and 'Stardust Nation' were first published in *Ambit*; 'Cave Girl' in *Here Lies* (Trip Street Press, 2001); 'Roma' in *Vertigo* magazine; 'Black Vodka' in *Road Stories* (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2012). 'Shining a Light' was commissioned for an installation by the Wapping Project. 'Placing A Call' was commissioned by Margarita Production for the narrative project *Loose Promise*, a collaboration with performer Kate McIntosh. 'Vienna', 'Pillow Talk', 'Simon Tegala's Heart in 13 Parts', 'A Better Way to Live' and 'Cave Girl' were published together in *Pillow Talk in Europe and Other Places* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2003).

ISBN 978-1-908276-16-2
eBook ISBN 978-1-908276-17-9

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

LOTTERY FUNDED

INTRODUCTION

The short story form, in its brevity and condensation, fits our age, the short attention span of modern readers, the gaps and fragmentedness of modern consciousness. Deborah Levy's work exploits this beautifully, packs a real depth charge, diving into those gaps, that brokenness, and blowing them up inside our minds. Her elegant and witty stories explore the pain and dislocation of modern life, the silences and evasions between people scared of not seeming cool, not being in control.

These stories are European in setting, by design, by subject. They invoke other art forms: cinema and poetry. At the same time they are unsettling and experimental, forcing us to question what it means and how it feels to be citizens of the world,

yet unsure of where we belong or whether we can belong somewhere any more. The stories do not so much unpick illusions as flash them in front of us like ads on a screen. We are not invited to recognise ourselves or some mythic human condition in these stories. Instead, we may catch glimpses of other, potential, different selves in the sparkling mirror of Levy's prose.

Reading these stories, we have to stretch further open our sense of what it might mean to identify with others in all their glorious apartness and unknowability. What can seem like the loneliness of the modern human condition opens up, paradoxically, the chance of transformation, of new possibilities for contact.

Michèle Roberts
London, October 2012

BLACK VODKA

The first time I met Lisa I knew she was going to help me become a very different sort of man. Knowing this felt like a summer holiday. It made me relax – and I am quite a tense person. There is something you should know about me. I have a little hump on my back, a mound between my shoulder blades. You will notice when I wear a shirt without a jacket that there is more to me than first meets the eye. It's strange how fascinating human beings find both celebrity and deformity in their own species. People sink their eyes into my hump for six seconds longer than protocol should allow, and try to work out the difference between themselves and me. The boys called me 'Ali' at school because that's what they thought camels were called. Ali Ali Ali. Ali's got the hump. The word 'playground' does not really provide an accurate sense of the sort of ethnic cleansing that went on behind the gates that were supposed to keep us safe.

I was instructed in the art of Not Belonging from a very tender age. Deformed. Different. Strange. Go Ho-me Ali, Go Ho-me. In fact I was born in Southend-on-Sea, and so were those boys, but I was exiled to the Arabian Desert and not allowed to smoke with them behind the cockle sheds.

There is something else you ought to know about me. I write copy for a leading advertising agency. I earn a lot of money and my colleagues reluctantly respect me because they suspect I'm less content than they are. I have made it my professional business to understand that no one respects ruddy-faced happiness.

I first glimpsed Lisa at the presentation launch for the naming and branding of a new vodka. My agency had won the account for the advertising campaign and I was standing on a small raised stage pointing to a slide of a starry night sky. I adjusted my mic clip and began.

'*Black Vodka . . .* ' I said, slightly sinisterly, 'vodka *Noir*, will appeal to those in need of stylish angst. As Victor Hugo might have put it, we are alone, bereft,

and the night falls upon us; to drink Black Vodka is to be in mourning for our lives.'

I explained that vodka was mostly associated with the communist countries of the former Eastern bloc, where it was well known that the exploration of abstract, subjective and conceptual ideas in these regimes was the ultimate defiance of the individual against the state. Black Vodka would hitch a nostalgic ride on all of this and be sold as the edgy choice for the cultured and discerning.

My colleagues sipped their lattes (the intern had done a Starbucks run) and listened carefully to my angle. When I insisted that Vodka Noir had high cheekbones, a few of the guys laughed uneasily. I am known in the office as the Crippled Poet. Then I noticed someone sitting in the audience, a woman with long brown hair (very blond at the ends) who was not from the agency. She had her arms folded across her grey cashmere sweater; an open notebook lay on her lap. Now and again she'd pick it up and doodle with her pencil. My sharp eyes (long sight) confirmed that this stranger in our small community was observing me rather clinically.

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After the presentation, my colleague Richard introduced me to the woman with the notebook. Although he did not say so, I assumed she was his new girlfriend. Richard is known for splashing his footballer's body with a heady cologne every morning. 'West Indian Limes'. Its effect on me is both arousing and desperately melancholy. I could buy five bottles of that seductive cologne tomorrow, yet to draw attention to my damaged body in this way would be to underline its difference from Richard's. Anyway, it was quite a shock to see him with the woman whose clinical gaze had for some mysterious reason awoken in me the kind of nihilistic lust I was attempting to whip up in my Vodka Noir campaign.

Richard smiled affectionately at me, apparently amused at something he couldn't be bothered to explain.

'Lisa is an archaeologist. I thought she'd be interested in your presentation.'

Her eyes were pale blue.

'Would you buy Black Vodka, Lisa?'

She told me she would, yes, she would give it a go, and then she screamed because Richard had crept up behind her and his hands were clasping her narrow waist like a handcuff.

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