

PILLOW TALK

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BLACK VODKA (2013)

'Why are people so thirsty at night?'

Ella, who is lying in Pavel's arms, sips her glass of iced water and listens to people putting money into the soft-drinks machine on the landing outside their hotel room. She can hear the tops of the cans being ripped off and then the strange intense silence of people drinking their first three gulps.

'Sometimes you get a choking feeling at night,' she replies. 'It makes you want a drink nearby, just in case.'

'You don't feel like you're choking, do you?'

'No. I don't feel like I'm choking.' She kisses his fingers.

'Do you know, when I was a little girl, I was so light I could stand on my father's hand and he would lift me up to the ceiling?'

Pavel passes her his cigarette. Ducados. *Autentico Tabaco Negro*. A cheap Spanish cigarette they both

like, especially after sex in a hotel bed made with clean cotton sheets and never enough blankets in spring.

Earlier, they had spent their last evening in Barcelona walking up and down the Ramblas, stopping to look at four grey rabbits for sale in a kiosk under the plane trees.

'Would you eat this rabbit?' Ella stroked the baby of the batch, rubbing her fingers against the soft strip of fur between its ears.

'Sure. I'm Czech. We're like the Chinese, we eat anything that moves.'

A tall North African man selling jewellery from an orange blanket on the pavement made shhp-shhp noises to get their attention, and then offered (in a low whisper) to sell them hashish. Ella bought a watch studded with rubies instead and told Pavel the time.

'It's nine o'clock. Let's eat.'

All around them people had finished work and were now sitting in cafes tucking into plates of meatballs, *calamares* and *tortilla*, wiping their hands on thin

tissue napkins with *Gracias Por la Visita* printed in blue ink on every one.

'Why do people always say "I love you" in a sad voice?' Pavel smiles in the special way that shows his gold tooth.

'I've never understood why,' Ella replies.

Surname. Given names. Nationality. Date of birth. Sex. Place of birth. Date of issue. Date of expiry.

Pavel, who was born in what used to be called Czechoslovakia, has two passports. Ella, who was born in Jamaica but has lived in the UK since she was three years old, has a British passport. When the airport official, a man who is barely five foot tall and whose side parting is so straight it looks like it's been drawn on with a felt-tip, frowns at their documents, their hearts beat a little faster on the other side of the perspex barrier. What if he asks them to explain where they are from? What would they say? 'A bit from here, a bit from there.' Would this be enough information for the small guy whose bright eyes spin such a hostile glare over their faces? When the official finally

nods and at last hands them back their passports, they walk straight into the Duty Free shop. Pavel wants to buy Ella the perfume he likes best. The one in the ribbed glass bottle that reminds him of old-fashioned European hotels with marble floors and red velvet sofas. Hotels that are dark rather than light, all the better for flirting with a stranger under crystal chandeliers, for sharing a bed that is home for a few nights only, a bed for sex rather than sleeping in. He hands over his credit card and tells the woman not to bother wrapping the perfume because he has twelve minutes to find his way to Gate 24. When Ella kisses him thank you, he knows it's a bitter, sweet kiss. Tomorrow he has an interview in Dublin with a firm of architects, and if he gets the job it means he will have to live far away from her.

Another airport. Another country. Another hotel.

Pavel turns left into a pub he knows well, just opposite Trinity College Dublin, and orders a pint of Guinness. The interview, he suspects, was a disaster. Every time he replied to a question asked by the

Japanese director of the firm, a man with gleaming black shoes on his tiny feet, Mr Kymoto lowered his eyes.

He searches for his cigarettes and finds the battered pack of Ducados. When he discovers there is only one broken cigarette inside it, a woman sitting alone at a nearby table offers him one of hers.

'Thank you.' Preoccupied with his failure to charm Mr Kymoto, he takes the cigarette without looking at her.

'Where are you from?'

'Český Krumlov.'

'Where?'

He glances first at the magazine she's reading and then at her face. Beauty is a shock to the nervous system, he thinks while she passes him her lighter, especially when he's not expecting it. Not expecting glass-green eyes and long chestnut hair piled on top of her head in the casual way he likes. She tells him she grew up in County Cork but now works in the box office of a theatre. It's great, she says, not too bad really, better to be on the phone all day in a theatre than an office; she gets to meet actors and to see all the shows for free. But she misses her friends. He must miss, um, what was it called, Český Krumlov, mustn't he? Pavel shrugs.

He knows that he offended the Japanese boss but he doesn't know why. Was it a major or minor offence? When he left the Czech Republic, the last exhibition he saw, before it was closed for reconstruction, was at the Police Museum. It was called Road and Traffic Offences. Some were minor and others major but he couldn't remember why.

In the morning, Pavel strokes his new lover's hair, his thin white legs wrapped around her freckled, fleshier legs. He glances at a photograph of a man pinned to her bedroom wall, a man who resembles himself, but is definitely someone else. There is something about the love beaming through the man's eyes that makes Pavel feel ashamed.

'Shall we go for a coffee in Grafton Street?'

'Don't you want breakfast?' She is tired and slow, taking her time to start the day.

He shakes his head. Sharing breakfast feels more intimate to him than making love to a stranger. Pavel wants to go straight to the airport but he doesn't know how to tell that to the woman with long curls and glass-green eyes.

'I'm going to miss my plane,' he says.

'Do you want to meet again?'

'Yes.' Pavel looks down at his bare feet. 'But, um, I've got a girlfriend in London.'

She smiles when he asks her for the number of a taxi company and suggests he call a helicopter instead. And then he realises he has spent all his euros and will not be able to pay the driver. He's only got an English twenty-pound note. The woman has turned her back on him and disappears into the kitchen to make coffee for herself. At the same time a message on his answerphone tells him that last night, Ella lost her front door keys. Her voice sounds stressed. 'I can't get into my house.'

'So you found your keys?' Pavel's voice is different. He sounds to Ella as if he is drowning.

'Someone else found them.'

'Where were they?'

'I dropped them in the bookshop.'

'Who gave them back to you?'

'That French man who works there. We discovered we were wearing identical shoes.'

'What kind of shoes?'

'Scottish dancing shoes.'

'I'm jealous.'

'But you had an affair in Dublin.'

Pavel says, 'I didn't mean to. I didn't set out to have an affair.'

Ella walks away. Probably, Pavel thinks, to the bookshop where the French man who wears the same shoes is waiting for her. He will suggest they take the Eurostar to Paris, straight to the Gare du Nord, and of course he will tell her that the best way to discover Paris is by walking the city in their identical Scottish shoes. He will show her the Parisian parks with their terraces and octagonal fountains and they will kiss under every tree and then he'll take her to a hotel in the Marais where she will punish Pavel by having the most exciting sex she's ever had in her life. In fact Ella rings him from work to tell him to pack his shirts and move out. And then his phone rings again. It is Mr Kymoto, calling from Dublin. He tells Pavel they liked his ideas, his qualifications were impeccable, but unfortunately they did not feel he had long-term loyalty to the firm.

'I'm not going to move out.'

'I know you're not.'

Pavel is lying on his side of the bed and his girlfriend won't let him touch her. After a while Ella turns towards Pavel and pulls his ponytail, hard.

'You look fucking ridiculous.'

'I know.'

'Cut it off.'

'I can't.'

'I want you to be someone else.'

'Who do you want me to be?'

'I want you to be kind and wise. I want you to be a father who loves his children. I want you to be attentive to me and faithful for ever. I want you to always fancy me and respect and admire me and I want you to be older and more confident.'

'But I'm not,' Pavel says. 'I'm not a father. I'm not very wise.'

'I know.' Ella turns away from him.

Pavel's hands are not just white. They are the alabaster white of Catholic saints. Ella's father had wide, dark brown hands. But he was not wise. He left the house one night and never came back to tell her mother why. He left home to make another home and other children and then he left that home as well. Her father had many homes but no home.

He was not wise. Only in his hands. His hands were strong and in a way, they were wise. When he held her in his arms, she could feel his love for her. And when she was three years old she stood on his hands and he'd lift her up into the air until she touched the ceiling.

'Let's go for a walk.' Pavel risks kissing the back of her neck.

'We can walk by the Thames to that Portuguese place and have coffee.'

When Ella kneels down and ties the laces of her shoes, Pavel glares at them. It's quite unusual for a woman to own the same shoes as a man. Especially Scottish dancing shoes, men's dancing shoes with long laces that criss-cross up the shins. They walk on the paved bank of the Thames, cold and silent, listening to a busker play the bagpipes while two huge industrial barges sway on the oily churning water.

'Look, he's also got the same shoes as you!' Pavel points at the busker. He laughs now, squeezing Ella's hand. 'They must be very common, this kind of shoe.'

'Not really,' Ella replies, trying not to smile. 'It's not common for women to wear men's dancing

shoes and to find a bookseller who wears them too. Specially as he's not Scottish and neither am I.'

They walk into the Portuguese cafe and kiss the owner's new baby, who was born last week and is now the star of the establishment.

'Good evening, your royal highness,' Pavel says when she is passed into his arms.

Later, when Pavel and Ella, now too tired to walk home, wait by the bus stop, he tells her he did not get the job in Dublin. The word 'Dublin' makes his girlfriend stiffen and move away from him. Pavel touches his throat. More than anything he wants a glass of water.

'Have you ever had that weird feeling in an airport when you panic and don't know what to do? One screen says Departures and another screen says Arrivals and for a moment you don't know which one you are. You think, am I an arrival or am I a departure?'

Ella is frowning, looking out for the bus.

'I don't know what you're saying.' Ella's voice is suddenly angry. 'Do you mean you don't know whether you're staying or leaving . . . is that what you're trying to say to me?'

'I'm sorry about Dublin,' Pavel murmurs into her hostile brown ear.

The bus arrives and they step inside, fumbling for change. Not knowing if everything is all right between them, they glance at the passengers in their scarves and hats and overcoats. Some of them are drinking fizzy cold drinks from cans. They hold the drink to their lips, eyes half shut, tense and concentrated as they gulp down the liquid, briefly stopping to catch their breath before lifting the can once more to their lips.