

Deborah Levy, 'Black Vodka',
BLACK VODKA (2013)

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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As I put away my laptop, I felt an unwelcome blast of anger. I think I suddenly wanted more than anything else to be a man without a burden on his back. After a presentation we tend to open champagne and instruct the interns to order in snacks. But when I saw a tray of sun-dried tomatoes arranged on tiny, pesto-filled pastry cases, I wanted to punch them onto the floor.

I left the office early. I even left without asking my boss what he thought of my presentation. Tom Mines is the Cruel Man of the agency (though he would call his cruelty 'insight') and he suffers from livid eczema on his wrists and hands. For as long as I've known him, he's always bought jackets with extra-long sleeves. For obvious reasons, I am fascinated by how other people conceal their physical suffering.

I muttered something about being summoned to an emergency and left quickly before Tom could point out that the emergency was me. But I did not leave before walking straight over to Lisa, aware that Tom Mines had his eye on me, his thin grey fingers twisted around the cuffs of his jacket. What I did next might sound strange: I gave Richard's girlfriend my card. The surprise she attempted to express with her facial muscles, her raised eyebrows,

her mocking lips slightly parted, was really not that convincing because of what I knew. When Lisa was doodling in her notebook, she had let it rest open on her lap. From my position on the raised stage, I could see quite clearly that she had drawn a sketch of me on the left-hand page. A picture of a naked, hunchbacked man, with every single organ of his body labelled. Underneath her rather too accurate portrait (should I be flattered that she imagined me naked?) she'd scribbled two words: *Homo sapiens*.

She called me. Lisa actually pressed the digits that connected her to my voice. I asked her straight away if she'd like to join me for supper on Friday? No, she can't make Friday. It is usual for people attracted to each other to pretend they have full and busy lives but I have an incredible facility to wade through human shame with no shoes on. I told her if she couldn't make Friday, I was free on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and that the weekend looked hopeful too.

We agreed to meet on Wednesday in South Kensington. She said she liked the big sky in that part of town and I suggested we drink our way through the vast menu of flavoured vodkas at the Polish Club, not

far from the Royal Albert Hall. This way we could conduct a bit of field research for my Vodka Noir concept. She said she was more than happy to be my assistant.

That night I dreamt (again) of Poland. In this recurring dream I am in Warsaw on a train to Southend-on-Sea. There is a soldier in my carriage. He kisses his mother's hand and then he kisses his girlfriend's lips. I am watching him in the old mirror attached to the wall of our carriage and I can see he has a humped back under his khaki uniform. When I wake up there are always tears on my cheeks, transparent as vodka but warm as rain.

There's something about rain that makes me slam the doors of cabs extra hard. I love the rain. It heightens every gesture, injects it with 5ml of unspecific yearning. On Wednesday night it was raining when the cab dropped me off on the Exhibition Road in London's Zone 1. In the distance I could see autumn leaves on the tall trees in Hyde Park. The air was soft and cool. As I began to walk up Exhibition Road, I knew that under the twenty-first-century paving stones there had once been fields and market

gardens. I wanted to laze in those fields with Lisa stretched across my lap, the clouds unfolding above us, and I wanted the schoolboys who told me I was a freak to want to be me.

I walked deliberately slowly up to the white Georgian town house that is the Polish Club. The building was donated to the Polish resistance during the Second World War, later becoming a cultural meeting place, a kind of home to those who could not return to a Poland ruled by Stalin. While researching the Black Vodka concept, I had discovered that, like myself, Stalin was physically misshapen. His face was pitted from the smallpox, one of his arms was longer than the other, he was called 'tiger' because his eyes were yellow and he was short enough to have to wear platform shoes. I have never worn shoes with heels to make me feel bolder, but I have always thought of myself as lost property, someone waiting to be claimed. To be offered an elegant home for a few hours at the hospitable Polish Club always does good things for my dignity.

I hung my coat on a wooden hanger, placed it on the clothes rail in the foyer and made my way into

the bar, where a polite and serene waitress from Lublin confirmed my booking in the dining room. She discreetly invited me to 'enjoy a drink until my companion arrives'. Keen to obey her, I ordered a double shot of pepper vodka. Thirty minutes later, I had researched the raspberry, honey, caraway, plum and apple vodkas, and my companion had still not arrived. The sky was darkening outside the window. An elderly woman in a green felt hat sat on the velvet chair next to me, scribbling some sort of mathematical equation on a scrap of paper. She was so lost in thought, I began to worry that somewhere else in the world, another mathematician would pick up on those thoughts and at this very moment, 8.25pm, find a strategy to solve the equation before she did. It was possible that while she sat in her chair struggling with the endless zeros that seemed to perplex her deeply, someone else would be standing on a stage in São Paulo or Ljubljana, collecting a fat cheque for their contribution to human knowledge. Would I, too, be waiting in endless humiliation for Lisa, who was probably at this moment lying in Richard's arms while he kissed the zero of her mouth?

No I would not. She arrived, late and breathless, and I could see she was genuinely sorry to have kept

me waiting. I ordered her the cherry vodka while she told me the reason she was late was that she had been planning a dig that was soon to take place in Cornwall, but the computer had crashed and she'd lost most of her data.

There is nothing that feels as good as breathing near someone you desire. The past of my youth was not a good place to be. Is it strange then, that I am attracted to a woman who is obsessed with digging up the past? Lisa and I are sitting in the dining room of the Polish Club on our first date. We arrange the starched linen napkins over our laps, admire the chandelier above our heads and discuss the oily black eggs, the caviar that comes from the beluga, osietra and sevruga varieties of sturgeon. The waitress from Lublin takes our order and Lisa, naturally, wants to know less about fish and more about me.

'So where do you live?' She asks me this as if I am an exotic find that she is required to label in black Indian ink.

I tell her I own a three-bedroom flat with a west-facing balcony in a Victorian double-fronted villa in Notting Hill Gate. I want to bore her.

I tell her I never dream or cry or swear or shake or snack on cereal instead of apples. Better slowly to prove more interesting than I first appear.

Lisa looks bored.

I tell her that my mother wanted me to be a priest because she thought I'd look best in loose-fitting clothes.

She laughs and plays with the ends of her hair. She shuts her eyes and then opens them. She fiddles with her mobile, which she has placed on the table. Lisa shuffles her shoes, which are red and suede. She eats a hearty portion of duck with apple sauce and discovers I like delicate dumplings stuffed with mushroom because I am a vegetarian. When she stabs her fork into the meat it oozes pale red blood which she mops up with a piece of white bread; little, delicate dabs of the wrist as she brings the blood and bread up to her mouth. She eats with appetite and enjoyment. That she is a carnivore pleases me.

After a while she orders a slice of cheesecake and asks me if I was born a hunchback.

'Yes.'

'Sometimes it's difficult to tell.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, some people have bad posture.'

'Oh.'

Lisa licks her fingers. Apparently it's an excellent cheesecake. I am pleased she is pleased. The waitress offers us a glass of liqueur from a bottle that has 'a whole Italian pear' lurking inside it. The pear is peeled. It is a naked pear. We accept and I say to Lisa, 'We should get that pear out of the bottle and make a sorbet with it' – as if that is something I do all the time. In fact I have never made sorbet. She likes that. It is as if the invitation to wedge the pear out of the bottle is like freeing a genie. She becomes more animated and talks about her job. Apparently when she finds human remains on a dig, bones for example, they have to be stored in a methodical way. Heavy bones, the long bones, are packed at the bottom of a box; lighter bones such as vertebrae are packed at the top.

'Archaeology is an approach to uncovering the past,' she tells me, sipping her liqueur – which, strangely, does not taste of pear.

'So when you go on a dig, you record and interpret the physical remains of the past, is that right?'

'Sort of. I like to know how people used to live and what their habits were.'

'You dig up their beliefs and culture.'

'Well you can't dig up a belief,' she says. 'But the material culture, the objects and artefacts that people leave behind, will give me clues to their beliefs.'

'I see. You know why I like you, Lisa?'

'Why do you like me?'

'Because I think you see me as an archaeological site.'

'I am a bit of an explorer,' she says. 'I'd like to see the bone that protrudes in your thoracic spine.'

At that moment I drop the silver fork in my right hand. It falls noiselessly to the carpet and bounces before it falls again. I bend down to pick it up and because I am nervous and have downed too much vodka, I start to go on an archaeological dig of my own. In my mind I lift up the faded rose-pink carpet of the Polish Club in South Kensington and find underneath it a forest full of wild mushrooms and swooping bats that live upside down. This is a Polish forest covered in new snow in the murderous twentieth century. At the same time, in the first decade of the twenty-first, I can see the feet of customers eating herrings with sour cream two metres away from my own table. Their shoes are made from suede and leather. A grey wolf prowls this dark forest, its ears alert to the sound of spoons stirring chocolate-dusted cappuccinos in West London. When it starts to dig up an unnamed grave that has just

been filled with soil, I do not wish to continue with this mental excavation, so I pick up the fork and nod at Lisa, who has been gazing at the lump on my back as if staring through the lens of a microscope.

The rain tonight is horizontal. It makes me feel reckless. I want to give in to its force. As we step onto Exhibition Road I slip my arm around Lisa's shoulders and she does not grimace. Her hair is soaking wet and so are her red suede shoes.

'I am going home,' she tells me. She beckons to a vacant taxi on the other side of the road and all the time the warm rain falls upon us like the tears in my dream. Her voice is gentle. Rain does that to voices. It makes them intimate and suggestive. While the taxi does a U-turn she stands behind me and presses her hands into my hump as if she is listening to it breathe. And then she takes her forefinger and traces around it, getting an exact sense of its shape. It's the kind of thing cops do to a corpse with a piece of chalk. Now Lisa bends down and opens the door of the taxi. As she slides her long legs into the back seat, she shouts her destination to the driver.

'Tower Bridge.'

He nods and adjusts the meter.

When she smiles I can see her sharp white teeth.

'Look, you know that Richard is my boyfriend – but why don't you come home with me and compare notes on those vodkas?'

I don't need any persuading. I jump in beside her and slam the door extra hard. As the cab pulls out, Lisa leans forwards and starts to kiss me. Does she want to know more about my habits and beliefs and how I live? Or is she curious to find out if her sketch of *Homo sapiens* was an accurate representation of my body?

The meter is going berserk like my heartbeat while the moon drifts over the wildlife gardens of the Natural History Museum. Somewhere inside it, pressed under glass, are twelve ghost moths (*Hepialus humuli*), of earliest evolutionary lineage. These ghosts once flew in pastures, dropped their eggs to the ground and slept through the day. There is so much of the world to record and classify, it's hard to know how to find a language for it. So I am going to start exactly where I am now. Life is beautiful! Vodka is black! Pears are naked! Rain is horizontal! Moths are ghosts. Only some of this is true, but you should know that this does not scare me as much as the promise of love.