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BLACK VODKA (2013)

**SIMON TEGALA'S
HEART IN 12 PARTS**

1

Simon Tegala leaned his back against the wall of the American Embassy and held her against him. It was an electrical event. Small voltages spread through their limbs. She said, Honey, that was a test burn. She heard his heart sounds: lub dup lub dup lub dup. She noted they were fifth in the queue for visas. Naomi was the Newton of atomic kissing; erotic radioactivity buzzed through her blackberry lips. They had been told to produce proof of identity in triplicate. Driving license, passport and a household bill. Naomi would not let Simon Tegala see the photograph in her passport. She said, Stop looking for me. I am here standing next to you listening to your heart sounds. He knew that her lips were the only country he wanted to be in.

2

Simon Tegala decided to throw the I Ching to discover if Naomi loved him. At that moment the phone rang. While his father's voice disappeared into his answering machine Naomi walked into his apartment carrying something for supper wrapped in wax paper. When she asked him why he was so quiet and what he was thinking about, he said SHAKING. My father has Parkinson's disease. They salted the chicken and cooked it in its own sweet juices while the phone rang again. His father's voice said AMERICA and then it said DID YOU GET YOUR VISA and then he said other words which upset Simon Tegala. DON'T LIVE FAR AWAY. Naomi pointed to a red felt hat that hung on the coat hook in Simon Tegala's kitchen. He told her it was a fez and she told him it was a chechia. What is a chechia, her boyfriend wanted to know. It's a fez, she replied. And then she said, shall we go and visit your father and take him a cake?

3

Later, Naomi said to Simon Tegala, I want you to touch my body in the following order:

3. My ear

5. My belly

Simon Tegala's heart is a biomachine beating hard and fast as he searches for the missing numbers.

4

Mr Tegala is sitting in a cafe drinking a mug of tea thinking about how his father shakes and jerks his head and arms. Images of projected futures whirl like a science fiction behind his eyes. He decides he wants to spend Christmas Day with her but fears she might think he's getting ahead of himself because it's only July. And anyway, he hardly knows her.

5

Naomi said, What do you mean you hardly know me? Simon Tegala stretched out his arm and tickled the nape of her neck where a curl had escaped from her hair clip. Tell me about your mother your father your brothers and sisters, Naomi. Look, Simon Tegala, his girlfriend replied, the past is a place I have left behind. I want to arrive somewhere else. How am

I going to get there if I hang out with a cyclist who has no car to run his girlfriend or his ageing father around town?

6

While he negotiated with the car salesman, it occurred to Simon that this man had a substantial volume of blood pumping through a purple vein on his forehead. The salesman (who wore a thick gold wedding ring on his finger) was pointing at the vintage Cadillac of Simon Tegala's dreams. Mr Tegala the customer had suddenly become butcher. He saw the salesman merely as a sum of parts with blood flowing between, through and around them. A biological highway of organs, venules and veins. The salesman, unaware that he was perceived merely in terms of circulation of the blood and lymph, smiled and said he'd make a friendly price for Mr Tegala. As they walked over to his office to complete the deal, the salesman twisted the band of gold round and round his knuckle.

7

When Simon Tegala said to Naomi, Perhaps we can talk about Christmas Day, she gazed out of the window of his new old Cadillac and pointed to a white cat sitting on a wall.

8

Mr Tegala plays back three messages from his father on his answering machine and decides to drive to a late-night movie on his own.

9

The usherette shone her torch on a red velvet seat and sat Simon Tegala next to a woman eating an ice cream in a cone. Halfway through the movie, the woman told Simon Tegala that her name was Caroline Joseph. At that same moment the plot took a twist. Simon Tegala had missed a crucial clue and the film made no sense from then on. On the screen a man swam in a pool of salt water. A woman in a bikini waved to him from a rock. Simon Tegala sneaked a

look at Caroline Joseph. Her eyes were like spark plugs shining in the dark. She was all sharp edges, lathed and polished. So very different from Naomi. The film had a happy ending. When Caroline Joseph put on a jacket with a fake ermine-trimmed hood, Simon Tegala found himself saying, 'I've just bought a new Cadillac. Do you want a ride home?' Caroline Joseph was so perfect she looked like she'd just stepped off the production line of a factory in Germany. He unlocked the door of his new old Cadillac and she eased herself in, admiring the white leather seats and the way he gripped the steering wheel. She told him she lived in Hammersmith with her dog, a terrier called Bobby. Would he like to meet Bobby? Simon Tegala nodded enthusiastically. When he woke up next to Caroline Joseph the following morning she told him all about her family and he told her he was in love with Naomi.

10

Naomi said to Simon Tegala: It's over between us. I can't believe you wanted more sex magic because you think your father is dying. Simon Tegala's heart has two chambers: the upper chamber and the lower

chamber. Blood flows between these chambers. Simon Tegala's heart is the size of his fist. What were you thinking, his ex-girlfriend shouts as she slams the door. Simon Tegala says, SHAKING. I was thinking about SHAKING.

11

This is his sixth day without Naomi. As Mr Tegala rides his bicycle to the pub, he hums his favourite Leonard Cohen song. A passing truck knocks him into the gutter. Simon Tegala is bleeding and bruised and he can't stand up. Apparently someone has called an ambulance. He wonders if Naomi would leave him if she knew Leonard Cohen was his hero. And then he remembers Naomi has left him anyway.

12

The nurse in Casualty asks Mr Tegala if he knows anyone who can drive him home. Simon Tegala winces because she is taking out the glass shards in his thigh with long silver tweezers. The nurse says, 'Now look up, because I'm going to put some

antiseptic on your chin.' When he looks up he sees Naomi leaning against the wall, holding a brown paper bag full of apples. Look over there, Naomi says, and she points to the door. Simon Tegala sees his father waving at him with his right hand because his left hand is holding a steel crutch. His father is wearing a hat and an overcoat and he is speaking. The only person in the room who can understand him is Simon Tegala because his father can only whisper. We've come to get you son, the taxi is waiting outside. Next time keep your eyes open when you ride a bicycle. Naomi's red heels click across the floor towards Simon Tegala and then she is just one centimetre away from his lips.