

DEBORAH LEVY BLACK VODKA 2013

Kissing you is like new paint and old pain. It is like coffee and car alarms and a dim stairway and a stain and it's like smoke.' ('Placing a Call')

How does love change us?

And how do we change ourselves for love - or for lack of it?

Ten stories by acclaimed author Deborah Levy explore these delicate, impossible questions.

In Vienna, an icy woman seduces a broken man;
in London gardens, birds sing in computer start-up sounds;
in ad-land, a sleek copywriter becomes a kind of shaman.

These are twenty-first century lives dissected with razor-sharp humour and curiosity, stories about what it means to live and love, together and alone.

The stories in *Black Vodka*, by acclaimed author Deborah Levy, are perfectly formed worlds unto themselves, written in elegant yet economical prose.

She is a master of the short story,
exploring loneliness and belonging;
violence and tenderness;
the ephemeral and the solid;
the grotesque and the beautiful;
love and infidelity;
and fluid identities national, cultural, and personal.

In "Shining a Light," a woman's lost luggage is juxtaposed with far more serious losses.

An icy woman seduces a broken man in "Vienna,"
and a man's empathy threatens to destroy him in "Stardust Nation."
"Cave Girl" features a girl who wants to be a different kind of woman--she succeeds in a shocking way.

A deformed man seeks beauty amid his angst in the title story.

These are twenty-first century lives dissected with razor-sharp humor and curiosity.

Levy's stories will send you tumbling into a rabbit hole, and you won't be able to scramble out until long after you've turned the last page.

These ten pieces are less stories than they are musings.
And I don't mean meditations.

I mean musings in the sense that each exists as an unraveled thought.

The idea of an exchange, a collaboration, an interaction.

Equally, they are just unsettling enough that I would advise you to avoid reading them at bedtime. It's the sort of content that tends to seed unpleasant dreams.

"Black Vodka" provides this collection of 10 stories with its title piece, and with a fabulously jolting opening.

Its first sentences, in which the copywriter narrator introduces himself, bombard us with clichés of revelation and metamorphosis

"There is something you should know about me," he confides, and "there is more to me than first meets the eye"; the woman – an archaeologist – will, he says, "help me become a very different sort of man".

What he is, at the moment, is an outsider, one with "an incredible facility to wade through human shame with no shoes on", a man who has always thought of himself as lost property, "someone waiting to be claimed".

No wonder, then, he is launching Black Vodka – vodka noir, a drink for those "in need of stylish angst". When he drops to the floor of the club dining room to retrieve a fork, he suddenly sees beneath the pink carpet to a forest, with wolves and wild mushrooms and bats, a glimpse into Polish history, and we wonder whether what he is doing is remaking himself into an archaeological site, ripe for excavation.

Throughout the book, we meet characters caught between openness and concealment, unsure of what either will bring, their identities problematically fluid and tantalisingly elusive. "What is your first language?" a man asks his new lover. "There are so many

languages," is all she offers in reply. Another, happier couple get married and exchange their vows in "all the European languages".

Frequently, national and cultural identity is used as a prism through which to explore shifts of attachment and belonging

But sometimes what constitutes a person is even more difficult to establish.

Elsewhere, Levy exuberantly mixes up the mechanistic imagery with the language of butchery.

One of *Black Vodka*'s most accomplished and uncanny stories takes the idea of human mutability a step further.

Like their protagonists, these stories do not give up their secrets easily, although they are by no means difficult to understand.

But they are powerful because they are fragmentary, elliptical; because they interrupt and disrupt themselves, and refuse to settle down into something immediately recognisable.

One of the treats of last year's revived Booker was not only the inclusion of *Swimming Home* but the subsequent recognition for much of Levy's earlier work. If you have not read her, go backwards – to *Billy and Girl* and *Beautiful Mutants* – and forwards, with these stories. The strange, unpredictable journey is worth it.

Black vodka

The protagonist works for an advertising agency.....his latest work is a project to advertise 'black vodka'...he is introduced to Lisa at the presentation and makes a play for her....one problem is that he has a "hunch" back....which makes him treated as an oddity....and he expects the same from her....she draws him naked while he

is presenting his ad campaign to the press....which he sees in her note book...but this makes him more determined and she does consent and go out with him to a restaurant in kensington...and they go to her home together in a taxi.." the meter is going berserk like my heartbeat while the moon drifts over...." and he concludes "...nothing can scare me as much as the promise of love".

Shining a light

Alice travels to prague and the airways lose her bag....she has only one blue dress namely the one she is wearing....she goes dancing in a park in prague and is befriended by 2 serbian women....they and their boyfriends invite her to go swimming on the next day...."no clothes has made her more reckless , but more introspective too...p23. The serbians pick her up and she is introduced to Alex, a composer...they go for a walk in the woods and it seems a love affair is beginning....

Vienna

A travelling businessman has sex with a cold manipulating woman. They are both unfaithful to their respective partners . But he "nameless" is besotted with her and she cannot care less for him or her italian husband. But she still succeeds in destroying his marriage and alienating him from his beloved children." he knows she is dead inside and he is aroused that this is so..."

" she is middle europe

She is vienna

...silver teaspoon

...cream

Schnapps

Strudel dusted with white icing sugar

Sound of polite applause

Chandelier

Velvet curtain

Horn of deer

Money

Burnt sugar

Snow

Fur

Leather

Gold

Someone else's property

He wants her to share all this wealth with him....

He also knows that he feels used,

Teased

Abused

Mocked

And the fact that all this has ended his marriage.

Stardust nation

For high-flying, heavy-drinking advertising boss Tom Banbury -Mines, the art of persuasion relies on an infiltration of the consumer's mind.

In the case of his colleague and confidant Nikos Gazidis, the overdeveloped sense of empathy that suits him to the business has given rise to a strange psychiatric condition

Nick has unwittingly crashed into the consciousness of his boss.

While Tom drinks to forget the troubles of his early life,

Nick is forced to confront a past that is not his own: a childhood scarred by the small wars waged by an abusive father – and by the events that brought them to a close. Tom stabbed his father to death.

When Nick enters the panicked silence of the Abbey, a fortress for the rich and unstable, his sister guards him from the visiting Tom Banbury. She states that her brother is “suffering for you” But can this peculiar bond be broken or has Nikos Gazidis taken an empathetic leap too far?

“we are all of us breathing in atoms that were once forged in the furnace of a star” There are tiny shards of your life inside them and their life is inside you too “...

There is a horrifying, dreamlike logic to the relationship between text and imagery. Nick ends up in an asylum, confused about who he is, guarded by his sister, who Tom starts imagining as a guard dog, and dreaming about her as a three-headed Cerberus figure. By the end it seems that Tom's plan may have been to empty his bad memories into the vessel of Nick, that his reticence in showing an emotional response to Nick taking on his past is because it's all part of his plan.

Which makes the moment when Tom tells Nick what eventually happened to his father even darker – Tom washing his hands of the guilt, passing it on to Nick.

"Stardust Nation" sees Tom Mines – briefly referred to in the title story as the "Cruel Man" of the advertising agency – taking a small-hours telephone call, in which a colleague weeps "broken words and images into my ear" and claims to be ringing from the moon. Despite his subsequent return to work – "he wore a Paul Smith suit like the rest of us" – his tortured confessions continue, centring on a childhood marked by

violence. Except that they are not his experiences, his history, but Tom's. Is this appropriation or projection? The clue comes, perhaps, with Tom's visit to the broken-down man in a clinic staffed by attractive doctors who carry hypodermics as if they were cocktail cigarettes: "it was a tremendous relief to see how distressed he was," he tells us.

Stardust Nation leaves a mark, an echo of something unsettling made more unsettling by pinpricks of realism. There is a kind of joy in this slippage, in giving up on realism and delineation.

It's a kind of metaphor for empathy, for connection, vs. the rhetorical principle of persuasion, which is to win, to conquer. The two become inextricably connected.

Pillow talk

Czech man, Pavel, has a Jamaican girlfriend, Ella, staying in Barcelona. He has an interview in Dublin with a Japanese client. He also has a one night stand with an Irish woman. Ella meanwhile contemplates an affair with a man who may take her to Paris.

"Am I an arrival or a departure?" Ella interprets this as "are you staying or leaving?"

the whole story revolves around internationalism

but the world has so many places that somehow relationships

cannot survive the whirlwind movement of ambition and travel...

"Pillow Talk", in which a Czech man living in London is interviewed in Dublin by a Japanese man, before having casual sex with a woman from Cork and then flying home to his Jamaican-born girlfriend. Unsurprisingly, passports – documents that are simultaneously intensely personal and irrefutably official – are a recurring motif.

Cave girl

In "Cave Girl", with its echoes of *Billy and Girl*, Levy's terrific 1996 novel about an ambiguously bonded brother and sister, Cass's brother is shocked by her determination to undergo a sex change – not from female to male, but from female to female. "I want to be a pretend woman," she says, and she succeeds; soon her brother is entranced by her blue eyes and "this woman's" new voice, which sounds "cool and easy going like a best friend in a great mood". Cass is delighted. "The surgeon did well," she proclaims. "He really fiddled with my controls." Her brother cannot accept the change and his final comment is frightening "her blue eyes take me in, and freeze me out".

Placing a call

Here the woman is talking to her husband in the garden and the phone rings. She goes inside to answer the phone and realises that it is the call of a particular bird. The phone was not ringing. And her husband is not there with her as she wanted." silence is cruel in cities where missing people need to hide in noise " Her husband is dead and she cannot come to terms with his death " i am looking into your eyes and i can't get in " i know you are dead and i miss you and all the ways of living that her husband controlled like pin numbers and gym locker keys and where the honey is...

Simon tegala's heart in 12 parts

In "Simon Tegala's Heart in 12 Parts", human beings are "a biological highway of organs, venules and veins",

but they also boast eyes like spark plugs and hearts that are biomachines,
scanning the body for activity and information.

1.....simon and naomi against the wall of the american embassy. Naomi was the newton of atomic kissing

2.....simon's father has parkinson's disease

3.....naomi says to simon "i want you to touch my body in the following order".....simon's heart is a biomachine.

4.....simon wants to spend christmas with her "images of projected futures whirl like a science fiction behind his eyes"

5.....Naomi says to Simon "the past is a place i have left behind. I want to arrive somewhere else."

6.....simon buys a car

7.....naomi points to " a white cat sitting on a wall"

8.....simon goes to a movie on his own

9.....simon meets caroline joseph in the moviehouse and sleeps with her but tells her he loves naomi.

10.....naomi is outraged, simon has a heart shaking

11.....simon is knocked over and off his bicycle by a passing truck

12.....naomi and simon's father come and collect him from the hospital

Roma

In "Roma" Levy writes about infidelity with wit and pain. A wife dreams of her husband's affair with another: "When she wakes from this dream, the traitor is lying by her side." The story focuses on the power of the subconscious to tell us the truth.

A better way to live

A couple get married in a modern way, almost glam rock, "although our interior worlds are volcanic, exotic, troubled, the everyday is beautifully predictable" both partners have had horrible abusive childhoods which linger in terrible ways of angst and worry and anger....can we call them the quintessential 21 century couple...nothing hidden and everything to be contained and passed along to future generations in the word "survival".