

Opening extract from
Black Shoes

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Four walls, strips of limited light adorning one of them and the God-awful smell. I mean it when I tell you that this was no place for me. I had always been a hard working professional. An honest – okay not honest, well actually yes, honest – apart from when it came to women, but this was beside the point. Dishonesty wasn't the reason I was there. In that dark, tiny space, with concrete walls that blended into the concrete ground. With my belt removed, and my shoelaces confiscated. Sitting on a faded blue, worn out excuse for a bed. So how in the hell did I, Daniel Martins, a twenty-six year old, successful London property developer, come to be incarcerated? How in the hell did I fall into the trap and become a stereotype, the very thing that I had been running from my entire life? At that point I wasn't sure, but one thing I was certain of was the fact that I didn't deserve it.

PIGS

'Is that your car, Sir?'

I looked on as the slightly overweight police officer made his way across the petrol station

forecourt towards me. As I sat behind the wheel, I observed the officer's nervous steps; the steps were matched with a tense but determined facial expression. I had always been very observant. Especially when I was irritated, and I was very irritable, and the sight of this, late thirty-something year old, round-faced, red-cheeked, white police officer, made me feel extremely irritated.

'Excuse me?' I replied, pretending to be confused. Pretending that I had never been in this situation before.

'Is this your vehicle, sir?' The police officer was now close enough to me and my car that he didn't have to walk anymore but still slightly out of a sitting-punch distance. I imagined opening my car door with force, slamming it into the policeman's mid section as I did so. The next sequence in my brief fantasy saw me hop out and kick the officer in the groin, before grabbing his head and slamming it against one of the petrol pumps.

'Sorry, what?' I responded, twisting my face to illustrate my disgust. I wanted the officer to see that I was insulted. That he made me feel sick. That I thought he was a fucking, ugly, low down dirty pig. I was very good at this. I was used to controlling my emotions. I was equally adept at writing my exact feelings on my face. At that precise moment, as well as feeling disgusted and insulted, I was feeling a cocktail of anger and familiarity. Oh yes, familiarity. I had been in this wearisome situation

many times before; it was a case of same song, different stereo or to be more precise, same question, different officer.

One second seemed like a lot longer, probably more for the nervous police officer as I looked around the brightly lit forecourt. I observed the young white male who was standing in front of me in the petrol shop a few minutes ago. This man had paid only '*twenty-quid mate, number four*' in contrast to my '*seventy-pounds please, number two*' (after all, I drove a BMW 645ci convertible, in contrast to the white male's Golf. *Hideous, burgundy Golf*). I watched the white male enter his car and sarcastically wondered to myself why the police officer hadn't stopped this white man who left the shop just before me. I privately asked myself why the police officer hadn't asked this white man whether he owned the ugly Golf. The answer was so obvious that I chuckled to myself slightly.

'Sir?' This time the police officer spoke in a more serious tone.

As I was about to speak, another officer appeared. 'Is there a problem?' he asked as he stepped out of the patrol car parked at a pump. He was white.

Great, another pig.

'This man is refusing to step out of the vehicle,' the round-faced officer said to his approaching colleague.

If it wasn't for the self-control I had always been

proud to possess, I would have acted out my fantasy and beaten this liar around the forecourt. It took a lot of self-restraint for me not to grab the overweight bastard by the throat and throw him out of the forecourt into the night.

‘I’m not *refusing* to do anything. I just don’t know what this man is talking about.’ I jabbed my finger towards the heavy policeman.

‘Please be calm, Sir, there is no need to make a scene.’ This second, more confident officer removed his hat and revealed his receding hairline. He was around the same age as his counterpart and he spoke in a relaxed and patronising tone. The way I used to speak to some of my employees. I hated being spoken to like this. I hated this probably more than anything. *How dare anybody speak to me like this?* I thought. *I am sitting in sixty thousand pounds’ worth of machine. My suit is worth...* I looked down at my attire; I was wearing a tracksuit. *Shit, I’ve just come from the gym,* I remembered. I suddenly didn’t feel as professional but didn’t let it stop me. I jumped out of my car.

‘Whoa, whoa,’ the fat – yes, I had now decided that he was fat – officer stepped back as he gripped his baton.

‘“Whoa” what?!’ I exclaimed.

There was a middle-aged white lady filling up her car at a pump nearby. She quickly averted her eyes when I looked at her. Despite it being night time and fairly quiet, I felt like I was being watched. It began

to feel like the petrol station forecourt was a well-lit stage and that the surrounding night street was filled with an audience. I imagined it was press night at a West End play, and that I was the lead character whose performance was being judged by critics who looked nothing like me.

I weighed up my options. I could *turn* my 'shock' up a level and hope to *appear even more of a victim and evoke sympathy from the middle-aged lady and the rest of the unseen crowd*. I could *kiss my teeth, slouch over and fire obscenities toward the officers*, knowing that my *light blue tracksuit would help* if I chose to go *with this character*. I could... my thoughts were interrupted by the crackle of the fat officer's radio. What appeared to be relief spread over the fat man's face as he stepped away to answer the call.

The calmer, patronising officer smiled at me. 'Sorry, it's just that there has been a lot of theft lately.'

'Jesus Christ,' I thought and said. *Is this his attempt to appease the situation? Is this his attempt to make me feel better?*

'Do you have any identification Sir?'

If my face were a sheet of paper, after this question the first sentence written on it would have been: *I am so fucking fucked off you piece of shit.*

'I'm sorry Sir, it's just part of—'

'Shush,' I interrupted, reaching into my car for my wallet. I fished out my driver's licence and

handed it over. 'Please, just don't talk to me anymore.' This "please" was in no way meant to be polite. I made sure I maintained eye contact as I watched the officer step away and speak into his radio. This was another thing I was good at; eye contact. Whenever I was dealing with a client, or talking to women. *Hmmm, women*. My lapse of concentration suddenly made me feel twenty percent better. The thought of women always cheered me up. The sight of the fat and patronising officers returning to me quickly erased the twenty percent.

'Thank you Sir, have a good evening.'

It took a lot of strength and maturity for me to not slap the patronising officer as I took back my licence. The fat officer smiled at me. In my head I smashed his face in. I watched them enter their patrol car and I'm sure they broke the speed limit as they disappeared out of the forecourt into the dark street.

As I stood there, trying to convince myself that I didn't feel at least slightly humiliated, the middle-aged white lady exited the petrol shop. She entered her annoying looking green Nissan Micra as she gave me the filthiest of looks. I replied by giving her my *'have you got a problem?'* look, which was basically an animated frown. It was successful and she sped off, surely also breaking the speed limit.

I took a deep breath and briefly looked up to the

sky. Looking back down, I could make out my distorted reflection in the door of my shiny, black baby. My wonderful BMW convertible, with cream leather interior. I planned to jump in and vroom off into the warm night. A night so warm, that I had the roof down. I suddenly didn't feel so bad, in fact, the twenty percent returned. On taking one last look around the empty forecourt, I caught the eye of the Asian guy who worked in the shop. He peered out through the window as he stood behind the counter. I had known this man's face without knowing his name for a couple of years. Over this period I had observed that the Asian man's accent (*was it Indian?*) had faded. I also noticed how despite this, customers would over pronounce their sentences, and how they would speak very slowly to him, as if the Asian man didn't understand what they were saying. As if he were stupid. I always sort of cringed and felt a little sorry for him when this happened.

The Asian man looked straight at me, he had a look of ... *surely not*, I thought. The Asian man appeared to feel sorry for *me*. *How dare he?* In annoyance, I jumped into my BMW. As I disappeared out of the forecourt, so did my twenty percent.

As I travelled through the night, I thought about how my time had just been wasted. I recalled the officers attempting to strip me of my dignity. I

thought about how their behaviour was racially motivated. There was no way that I could be convinced that the bullshit questions they asked me, stored in their bullshit computers were not activated by the colour of my skin. All I had done was have the audacity to be black and buy a nice car and fill it up with petrol. How dare I?

I put my foot down and thought about how much I loved driving. I loved feeling the cool breeze softly gliding across my chocolate skin. As a child I had always dreamed about cruising through London in a sexy convertible sports car. I would picture myself speeding through the night while the city was asleep. I collected toy cars as a youngster and had many fantasies about weaving in and out of traffic like I was on a mission. Like I was James Bond. I always thought that James Bond should be black. Despite this, I didn't have too much to complain about. Here I was, flying through the dual carriageway in my convertible. Oh how the breeze felt good after a long day at work. The air and the sound of other cars whizzing past kept me awake.

I reflected on how I had completed the sales of two of my developments today. *It was a great day at the office*, I thought. Come to think of it, *it had been a good year so far*. So *why*, I wondered, did I feel anxious lately? What was bothering me? Why, no matter how fast I drove, did that irritating cloud seem to follow me everywhere?