

Because it's a Wednesday

By A L Kennedy

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Because it's a Wednesday, he's shagging Carmen.

Grotesquely unlikely name for a cleaning woman, Carmen. It doesn't even suit her as a person – entirely inappropriate, in fact. As is the shagging, of course. I am her employer – professional relationship, position of trust and so forth – I should be more restrained.

Not that a shag might not indicate trust.

I could argue that, to a degree, I am really confirming some level of interpersonal confidence.

It had started, the shagging, when Philip's office hours were cut. Inadequate warning and then he's semi-permanently homeworking in the flat – emailing, drafting and whatnot – bit of a shock – while Carmen's there setting his rooms to right – polishing, ironing, folding, making his good order better and getting the place to smell of nowhere, or else like a well-maintained hotel.

*Which is what I request - no trace of my having been here, no spillages, no confusions, no scent beyond fresh linen, dry heat. **Impersonal.** People say that as if it's a bad word when it's fundamentally light and pleasant and unstressful.*

Fifth new apartment in six years – third city, third country – sustaining that level of movement, you want to feel unrestricted, stay painless, be able to slip in and out.

No pun intended.

Christ.

Old bloke shagging the help and cracking interior single entendres.

That's a bit desperate.

He stares at his hands where they're gripping her waist.

Old man's hands he has now.

How did they happen? When? Where was I?

They give the impression he's wearing ill-fitting gloves, gloves with baggy knuckles. And big, ribbed, spadey fingernails – a vulnerability about them.

And pale, pale, pale.

Carmen is wearing the pink-and-white-striped blouse today, which is his second favourite. His favourite is the green, the one she was wearing when they first shagged, when she stood up and made her move once they'd finished their cup of tea with the chocolate biscuits. This habit they'd fallen into – English habit – English being his home and this, for once, being England, or close enough – and, in consequence, there they would sit, eating these biscuits with bad, cheap chocolate on top and sharing a silent cup of tea at roughly, regularly,

twelve o'clock. With no provocation, she'd leaned against the kitchen counter, given him a slightly complicated look and then raised her skirt.

Not enticing, not particularly sexual, but unmistakably a request.

She doesn't have very good English – probably thought a gesture would be more effective.

Which it was.

No idea what she actually speaks inside her head, what her language is.

Should ask to see her passport, find out.

International, me - fluent in several places, but it's English that's the big one, is dominant.

Which is a happy happenstance.

She was wearing white knickers – always does – dull from too much washing, unadorned, but somehow girlish. Surprising.

Odd when you suddenly realise that somewhere in your mind you have made an assumption about someone's underwear, even though you have at no point imagined – not even considered – that you will see it, or touch it, or pull it down and have a shag.

Shag.

She is very definitely a shag.

This isn't *fucking* , Phil's not of an age any more to *fuck* . He lacks the energy and what he thinks of as the necessary edge. And Carmen, being plain, is not *fucking* material – he has to be truthful and she truly is not.

*And we are absolutely not **making love**.*

Phil has no patience for the expression. He feels it suggests that love can be fabricated like scaffolding or a hull, or that it might be forced inside a collaborator, injected, sweated into life. He does not believe this to be the case.

Philip and Carmen *shag*.

A dogword, dogged – something comfy and tousled, sturdy, reliable, warm-muzzled, panting. You can meet its eyes and know just what you'll get. Uncomplicated.

She's bent over one of his kitchen chairs – pants and tights rumpled down to her shins, skirt lifted – lately she has let him do this, has allowed him to partly roll and partly fold it out of their way, to prevent creasing. There's a mild blush spreading on her buttocks.

Mustn't think of that, though, or I'll come too fast.

Philip is picturing railway lines and sidings, cuttings, the approach to his current city's largest railway station: overhead wires and power ducts, channels, signals, warning signs, tracks shining down to disappearing points – the naked workings of transportation, their honesty – it calms him.

He crouches against and beneath her, up her, paces himself to a steady *digdigdig*.

Dogdogdog.

Shagshagshag.

Although he needn't, he is being courteous. There absolutely is no point in holding back – she never seems to come herself, never attempts an explanation of why they do this, or what she might want. Even so, he does very often try to please her, to break a noise from her

beyond the loudish rhythm of her breath. He has called her by name on a few occasions – *Carmen* – but she hasn't answered, hasn't turned her head.

Although he guesses this is not what she prefers, he tends to shag her from behind, purely because when he faces her he can't avoid being aware that she doesn't smile, avoids kissing, looks beyond his shoulder throughout as if she were puzzled by some detail, or attempting to recall an itinerant fact.

And always in the kitchen.

Domestic servant, knows her place.

Oh.

Shouldn't think of that, either. Anything hierarchical gets too horny.

He'd felt quite peculiar afterwards, on that initial afternoon – chilled and thirsty and curious, possibly affronted, but also sinking a touch into a kind of softness, a gratitude – it had been a while, after all. He'd briefly considered taking her to bed and starting again, pretending they had some meaning for each other. Carmen had only released him, dressed herself, cleared the tea things, left.

He did wonder if she'd be back, but the following Wednesday, she appeared at nine, the same as usual – only now the extra half hour added for the shag.

It had been difficult to know if he should pay her more – he was, clearly, increasing her workload, in sense, but he'd guessed any offers of extra cash would be distasteful. For a while, he'd left small gifts beside her tea mug. She ignored them. He'd begun conversations she either wouldn't, or couldn't, finish, had reached out to pat her arm when she was passing, had aimed to create an atmosphere of, if not tenderness, then positive regard, but she seemed

to dislike this and as a result he had taken to rushing a roll of notes at her when the month ended and being vague about how much he genuinely owed, overestimating as if by accident.

I can afford it. Afford her.

Oh.

Not yet, though.

Oh.

One day she'll make me think of additional vowels.

Meanwhile, divert myself.

Affording.

Comforts.

Luxuries.

Pleasant situations.

Yes. Right up to the walls I am most pleasantly situated and living well within my means, living well completely.

When he'd viewed it, the flat was already exhaustively furnished and equipped – carpets, bed sheets, towels, ornaments, pictures, cutlery, pans, reading glasses, candles, lampshades, soap – as if the owners had left on holiday and had asked him to stay and take care of their belongings. Generously vacant for him – sign the inventory and he was home.

Mine.

My floor, my wall, my window, my view.

Outside it's easing into spring. Blossom shivers in the tall, haphazard trees and young light is being kind to the buildings opposite, the thin lane that runs beside them.

Foxes in that lane at night. I can hear them. Foxes in the city, and rabbits and hawks – the countryside's cleaned, it's shriven – but here there's hunting day and night. There are screams – exactly like women. In the morning I see traces.

He can feel heat running at the backs of his legs, the strain of the end on its way and he studies the shop fronts, clings to them for a beat and a beat and beat.

Flower shop – no one goes in it, not properly an area for flowers, not yet. Refurbished café – one of those chains. 24 hour grocers and off-licence. Tobacconist's. Chemist. Somewhere that's still empty – whitewashed windows, dust.

He can see from the broad, slanted outlines left on the sandstone that the business was called *Zumzum* – silly name – typical.

No way of knowing what they sold, probably fancy cloth, or gold jewellery, maybe weird, small, cubic sweets, the kinds of stuff those people liked. Butcher – sausages, pork pies, nice bit of steak for the weekend – have to support your local butcher. Funny lettering over the door from when it was different, stocked different meat. Cheap paint, it'll fade.

Transitional areas. Reclamations. They start off unsteady, blanks where you wouldn't expect them, oddities, reminders, and then in the end, everything fades. You get a new community. Peace.

And, before the disruptions settle and the fresh life grows, you can roll in and get a cheap flat with all the trimmings.

My street, this is – in my neighbourhood – my house in my street in my neighbourhood.

And my view, my window, my wall, my floor, my chair, my shag.

My shag.

Oh.

My shag.

Oh.

Possession.

Oh.

Does the trick.

Oh.

Quite.

Phil draws himself away from her, removes the condom.

Can't be too careful.

He's pressed her forward and her blouse has ridden up. For a moment he has to stare at the scarring on her back – purplish-red and swollen. Then she straightens, hides it. He's never been able to see the whole of it.

Burning.

Beating.

Some wrongness.

Some wrong act.

He bins his little parcel of semen, the tepid crush of what he's left, and adjusts himself, clears his throat. He's sticky, needs a shower and maybe an aspirin, but he can't enjoy either until Carmen's gone, in case he gives offence. This means he can only loiter and wait for his pulse to dim, keep his hands from rising to his face, because they will smell of activities and people, needs, heats.

By the far table leg, he notices there are crumbs – he must have dropped a sizeable piece of biscuit and then trampled it into a mess while he was busied.

Dirty old man.

He inspects the bottom of his shoe – more biscuit.

Tsk.

That being the noise of crushed biscuit.

When she turns, respectable again, he points to the mess and notices what could be a mild warmth in her expression, a certain friendliness towards the idea of sweeping. Before she goes for the pan and brush, she upends both the shagging chair and Philip's ordinary chair and rests them on the table.

He's seen it before, of course – Carmen, too. Someone with a clear, dark hand has inked a surname and a date on the underside of each seat. There is a liquid, foreign taste about the script, not unattractive. Philip knows – having, late one night, eventually checked his furniture – that the same date and name has been written on the back of his dresser, the head board of his bed, under his sofa, somewhere on every chair, beneath lamp stands, inside

cupboards where the doorframes make a shadow. He is almost, almost, almost surrounded by a multiplicity of records, marks.

In the spring of last year.

Before they left.

Some morning, probably morning – early hours most suitable for clearing out.

Blossoms through the window and closed shops.

Making a good order better for everyone.

Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye.

Didn't even take their nail clippers, or the thermos flask.

How strange it must have been to be so unimpeded. Like falling.

Carmen tidies round him, then quietly empties the tea leaves out of the pot and – as it happens – probably onto the condom.

She rights the chairs and he sits, a little light-headed. She washes the crockery which was here when he arrived and dries it with the tea towel which was rolled neatly with some others in a drawer – scenes of village life, British sea birds, common knots, blue and white checks, red and white checks, plain blue.

Once she's done, Carmen walks to stand close at his side, eases her scrubbed and tidy fingers inside his jacket, finds his pocket and takes out his comb, his own personal comb.

He exhales, with the intention that she will feel it.

And then he lets her.

He lets her comb his hair - run the little teeth back from his forehead, over his temples, smooth him from his hairline to his nape, and he drops his face forward and nods, indicating that she should continue, and sometimes they do this for twenty minutes, for half an hour, or until he forgets, until he fades, until he's simple.

It helps.

It definitely helps.

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