

16.

The Art of Speechlessness

14 September 2010

So here we are, late morning, mid week, reading quietly, peaceably, harmoniously at the kitchen table about an hour before our perambulatory expedition down to Dalston for some lunch, when I hear the key turn in the lock and guess who swans in through the front door with Donna in tow, dragging the kind of man-sized suitcase favoured by immigrants?

Lord-a mighty, what happen to wifey? I barely recognize her.

As she moves closer down the infamous hallway that has been witness to many a Walker drama over the decades, I notice she not only walking a bit straighter, but limping a lot less.

What is more someone has taken a hammer and chisel to her former self and starting chipping away, because the woman who must-a been hiding underneath is starting to show.

Her eyes appear bigger, glossier, glowing.

Her face is smoothly tanned, quite radiant. Are those actual *cheekbones* peeping through?

As for her hair. *What-a thing*. When I first met Carmel, her hair was the product of a hot-iron comb; as she got older she dyed it; and when it started to thin prematurely from all she put it through, she bewigged herself.

Now look at her: *au naturel*, and, I have to say, it looks bloody lovely: pretty little grey curls shaping her head.

Yes, it really suits her. Wifey looks classy, makes her look younger too.

I stand up as she enters the kitchen, wearing a floaty white kaftan with blue diamond embroidery and white linen trousers that flap over a pair of canvas sandals with platform heels. *Heels?*

She's wearing a turquoise bangle and raindrop *earrings?*
Lipstick . . . nail polish?

What happened to her offensive nylon trousers with tights worn underneath? You could hear her a mile off with all that rub and bristle.

Way she looks now, I could pass her on the street and not recognize her.

And since when does she carry shoulder bags? Carmel's bags have always been modelled on the Queen's.

I don't stop Morris as he takes his leave, silently, diplomatically, scooping up the two novels (wisely) in the process.

Me and her face each other.

Me standing by the window, hearing rain splatter against it, wondering if she goin' send me through it.

She watching me watching her, enjoying my astonishment as I absorb her newly renovated self.

She don't appear angry, don't appear hurt. She appears . . .
confident . . . magnificent.

I been rehearsing my speech so long but the thought of delivering it . . .

This is not the person I thought I'd be divorcing. Who is this person?

Donna, dressed in a smart black work trouser suit, has

taken up position as sentinel and is blocking the kitchen doorway.

She should get lost, because I really need to have an *entre nous* with her mother.

As if Carmel can read my mind, she says, 'Thank you for your help, but you can leave us alone now, Donna. I can handle this one.'

What? I goin' be *handled*?

'Okay,' her guard dog mutters reluctantly, like she don't want to miss the histrionics. 'I'll see you later.' She goes over to her mother, gives her a peck on the cheek.

As she leaves, she flashes me a smirk that insinuates she'll be returning to help her mother pack my body parts into black rubbish bags and bury me in the garden under cover of darkness.

At this point I realize I am trapped, because if Carmel decides to pull a knife on me there's a massive kitchen table blocking my exit.

Except this too is strange. Carmel don't look like she ready to serve up my intestines.

'Sit down, Barry.'

I do as she says, and she takes her position at the opposite end of the table, not slouching.

'Yuh looking good, Carmel.'

'*That's* an understatement, yuh no think?'

'Uh, yes . . . You looking absolutely splen—'

'I *know* what I look like, Barry. I don't need you to tell me anything. Now, *this* is what I goin' tell *you* . . .'

She eyeballs me, but I used to that, except it ain't resentment coming off her but something else. Pity? Is *pity* she feeling?

'Carmel,' I say, realizing I'd better get my speech in before

hers, 'I'm aware you not been happy for sometime now. We've both been lonely in this –'

'Barry,' she says, cutting me off, '*shut up.*'

She waits for me to appear suitably chastised.

'Now, contrary to your assumptions, I am quite contented, as per the *unusually.*'

She takes her time, fiddles with the bangles on her wrists. Her *turquoise* nails are long, shapely, manicured.

What *has* she been up to?

The rain is now thrashing against the window, signalling summer's left us and winter ain't far behind.

'After the funeral, I stayed on to sort out Papi's business. He left everything to me, his *only* child. Don't worry, my lawyer is seeing off those scavengers.'

She tchupses and skins up her nose, ruining her new image.

'Talking of lawyers, I've returned to wrap up my life here and start a new one over there. Yes, you wasn't expecting that, was you? First thing I got to do is "lawyer-up", as Donna puts it, because I starting divorce proceedings and you not getting off lightly.'

She takes off her wedding ring, which, seeing as she's thinner, comes off easily. She flicks it so it rolls like a wheel across the table, dying a death right in front of me, where I leave it.

'I caught up with Odette over there and, like you always saying, when women get together they natter.

'She told me I got to forgive, same way she did. *Unforgiveness is the poison you drink every day, hoping the other person will die*, she kept reminding me. Well, I working on it. Yes, I working on it, because you got the sickness in you and therefore can't help yourself. But it hard, Barry. It so hard,

because, way I see it, I spent fifty years of my life betrayed by your lie. Missing all of the clues that was staring me in the face. I been through some bad times over there, Barry, realizing my whole adult life been wasted. Odette says you gave me two daughters, so it's not wasted, but she wrong.

'Here's another thing I found out: you was being talked about even from when you was at school. It just as well you married me when you did, but that was the whole point, wasn't it? Fifty years with a man who used me as his cover story to protect his disgusting business, making a mockery of me. How yuh think that make me feel?'

She arises without her customary huffing and puffing, fetches a glass of water to drink. Carmel? Water?

'Yuh see, Barry, I'm not lonely no more. So don't you start telling me I am. Remember Hubert from school? Of course you do, because you *stole* me from him. Well, he back in my life and we getting on just fine. More than fine. You shock again, eh? He got a Ph.D. at Howard University in *Washington*, where he became a maths *professor*. He's not a skinny sixteen-year-old neither. He taller than you, slimmer than you, more hunky and not bald neither.'

She registers everything that flickers over the face that I am now convinced shows everything.

'I goin' back to him. My life here is done. Don't worry, I ain't in the business to dish the dirt. What good that do me, eh? Let everybody know what a fool I been?'

'Donna's taking a fortnight off work to help me with everything. I'll be here every day from 10 a.m. to start sorting through stuff, and you better not be here, neither sight nor sound. I sending in the packers next week, and I don't want you here then either. Don't worry, I'm not stripping a house that represents half a century of misery.'

‘As for that Jim Reeves record you scorn so much? Ditto. I can’t wait to take a hammer to it. You lucky I ain’t taking a hammer to you, but you’re not worth a life sentence. I done my time already.

‘I don’t want to see or speak to you again, unless you contest the divorce, which you won’t.’

‘Carmel, Carmel, dear, I –’

‘Shut up. You a sick man, Barry, and the only person who can help you now is God.’