

She *kissed* the groom. She's *not* the bride.

Who's that Girl?

'Hilarious'
Hello



MHAIRI
McFARLANE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF YOU HAD ME AT HELLO



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Dedication

For Natalie, Paula & Serena
My favourite mix tape

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Life through a phone is a lie. Edie imagined the process like a diagram from physics lessons, the one on that Pink Floyd album cover – a beam of white light refracted in a prism, splintering and fanning out as a rainbow.

I mean, how much artifice, she wondered, was crammed into this one appealing photograph? She gazed at its seductive fictions in the slightly greasy, warm slab of screen in her palm as she queued at the hotel bar.

Activity in the room whirled around her, messy unkempt sweaty reality, soundtracked by The Supremes ‘Where Did Our Love Go?’ In this still life, everything was forever image managed and perfect.

Untruth number one: she and Louis looked like they adored each other’s company. In order to squeeze into the frame, Edie had rested her head against his shoulder. She was coquettish, wearing a mysterious smile. He was doing the self-satisfied, slightly 007 quirk of the lip that conveyed *hey life is great, no big deal*. It really wasn’t a big deal.

They’d spent five hours as platonic plus ones – the wedding planner had demanded pairs, like Noah’s Ark – and now they were grating on each other, in heat and booze and wedding clothes with waistbands that had got tighter and tighter, as if inflating a blood pressure cuff.

Edie’s heels had, like those high enough for special occasions, moved from ‘wobbly and pinchy, but borderline tolerable’ to stabbing at her viciously like some mythic pain where she’d given up her mermaid tail for size 4s and the love of a prince.

Falsehood number two, the composition. Twinkling-happy party girl Edie, looking up through roadsweeper-brush-sized false lashes. You could glimpse the top half of her red dress, with nicely hoisted pale bosom, stomach carefully held in. Louis’s cheekbones were even more ‘killer in a Bret Easton Ellis’ sharp than usual, chin angled downwards.

This was because they’d held the lens at arm’s length above their heads and discarded five less flattering images, bartering over who liked which one. Edie had eye bags, Louis objected he looked gaunt, the expressions were slightly too studied, the shadows had not fallen in their favour. *OK, another, another! Pose, click, flash*. Half a dozen was the charm: they both looked good, but not too much like they’d *tried* to look good.

(‘Why does everyone do that expression now, like you’re sucking on a sour plum?’ Edie’s dad asked, last time she was home. ‘To make yourself look thin and pouty, I suppose. But you don’t look like that face you pull, in

real life. How strange.’)

Louis, an Instagram professional and very sour plum, fiddled with the brightness and contrast settings. ‘Now to filter ourselves to fuck.’

He selected ‘Amaro’, bathing them in a fairytale cloud of lemonade fog. Complexions were perfected. The mood was filmic and dreamy, you’d think it captured a perfect moment. *You had to (not) be there.*

And then there was the caption. The biggest deception of all. Louis tapped it out and hit ‘post.’ *‘Congratulations Jack & Charlotte! Amazing day! So happy for you guys <3 #perfectcouple living their #bestlife.’*

This was mostly for the benefit of the rest of the Ad Hoc agency, who’d all found elegant excuses not to travel from London to Harrogate. Nothing tested popularity like several hundred miles of motorway.

Like after admiring Like rolled in. ‘Sigh. You two are another #perfectcouple!’ ‘Shame I’m a bender!’ Louis replied. *That’d be the least of our problems*, Edie thought. They’d all done the arithmetic with Louis, that if he slagged off everyone else to you, he slagged you off, too.

And of course, Louis had not stopped grousing under his breath about the ‘amazing’ wedding. Edie thought criticising someone’s big day was like making fun of the way they ate, or the size of their ankles. Good people instinctively understood it was not fair game.

I really thought Charlotte would go for something more clean, minimal. Like Carolyn Bessette marrying JFK Jnr. The crystal beading on that gown’s a bit Pronuptia, isn’t it? Even women with taste seems to lose the plot and go Disney disaster in a bridal salon. I am so over those rose bouquets with pearl studs and white ribbon round the stems, like a bandaged stump! Once a WAG has done something, it is DONE. And sorry, but I find a tanned bride vulgar. Ugh, two sips of that Buck’s Fizz and it was into a plant pot. I can’t bear orange juice used to hide cheap champagne. Look at the DJ, he’s about fifty in a blouson leather jacket, where did he get that from, 1983? He looks like he should be on Top Gear. It’ll be rocking out to Kings Of Leon’s ‘Sex On Fire’ and Toni Braxton for the erection section. Why can’t weddings be more MODERN?

The Old Swan in Harrogate was not, as the name suggested, modern. It had the exciting association of being the place Agatha Christie disappeared to during her ‘missing days’ in the 1920s, even though there was probably nothing exciting about being in a confused fugue state.

Edie loved it here. She wouldn’t mind absconding from her life into one

of its rooms with four-poster canopied beds. Everything about The Swan was comforting. The ivy-clad frontage, the solid square portico entrance, the way it smelled like cooked breakfasts and plushy comfort.

It had been a blistering high summer day – *Haven't they been lucky with the weather* becoming the go-to banal conversation opener – and the French doors in the bar opened on to the honey-lit rolling gardens. Children in shiny waistcoats were zooming around playing aeroplanes, high on Coca Cola and the novelty of being up this late.

Nevertheless, this was, for none of the reasons Louis described, the worst wedding Edie had ever been to.

Giving her order at the bar, she found herself next to a group of women in their seventies and possibly eighties, dressed as flappers. Edie guessed they were here for a Murder Mystery weekend; she'd seen a coach from Scarborough pull up earlier.

There was a 'suspect' with no legs, sitting in a wheelchair. She was wearing a feather headband, long knotted beads and draped in a white feather boa. She was sipping a mini bottle of Prosecco through a straw. Edie wanted to give her a cuddle, and/or cheer.

'Don't you look lovely,' one of the group said to Edie, and Edie smiled and said, 'Thank you! You do too.'

'You remind me of someone. Norma! Who does this lovely young lady look like?'

Edie did the fixed embarrassed smile of someone who was being closely inspected by a gaggle of tipsy senior citizens.

'Clara Bow!' one exclaimed.

'That's it!' they chorused. 'Ahh. Clara Bow.'

It wasn't the first time Edie had been given a compliment like this. Her dad said she had 'an old-fashioned face.' 'You look like you should be in a cloche hat and gloves at a train station, in a talkie film,' he always said. 'Which is appropriate.'

(Edie didn't think she talked *that* much, it was more that her father and sister were quieter.)

She had shoulder-length, inky hair and thick dark brows. Their geometry had to be aggressively maintained with threading, so they stayed something more starlet than beetling. They sat above large soulful eyes, in a heart-shaped face with small mouth.

A cruel yet articulate boy at a house party told her she looked like 'A