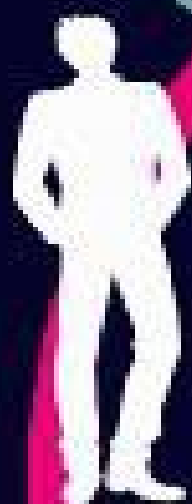


What happens when the ONE that
got away comes back?

YOU
HAD ME



at
Hello



MIHAIRI MCFARLANE

YOU
HAD ME
at
Hello
MHAIRI MCFARLANE

A stylized graphic design for a perfume advertisement. The text 'YOU HAD ME at Hello' is arranged in a circular pattern. 'YOU' is at the top, 'HAD ME' is to the right, 'at' is in the center, and 'Hello' is at the bottom. The letters are in various shades of gray and fonts. A silhouette of a man stands on the left side of the 'H' in 'Hello', and a silhouette of a woman stands on the right side. Small hearts and dots are scattered around the text. A crescent moon shape is formed by the bottom of the 'H' and the 'Hello' text.

AVON

For Jenny
Who I Found At University

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PROLOGUE

‘Oh bloody hell, of all the luck ...’

‘What?’ I asked.

I batted a particularly plucky and irrepressible wasp away from my Coke can. Ben was shielding his face with his hand in that way which only renders you more conspicuous.

‘Professor McDonald. You know, Egg McMuffin Head. I owed him an essay on Keats a week ago. Has he seen me?’

I looked over. Across the afternoon-sun-dappled lawn, the professor had stopped in his tracks and was doing the full pointing-finger Lord Kitchener impression, even down to mouthing the word ‘YOU’.

‘Er. Yes.’

Ben peered through a gap in his fingers at me.

‘Maybe yes or hell yes?’

‘Like a tweedy, portly, bald Scottish Scud missile has your exact coordinates and is ripping across the grass to take you out, yes.’

‘Right, OK, think, think ...’ Ben muttered, looking up into the leaves of the tree we were sitting beneath.

‘Are you going to try to climb it? Because Professor McDonald looks the type to wait for the fire crews at dusk.’

Ben’s eyes cast around at the detritus of lunch, and our bags on the ground, as if they contained an answer. I didn’t think an esteemed academic getting a face full of Karrimor rucksack was likely to help. His gaze came to rest on my right hand.

‘Can I borrow your ring?’

‘Sure. It’s not magical though.’ I twisted it off and handed it over.

‘Stand up?’

‘Eh?’

‘Stand. *Up.*’

I got to my feet, brushing the grass off my jeans. Ben balanced himself on one knee and held aloft a piece of gothicky silver jewellery I’d got for four quid at the student market. I started laughing.

‘Oh ... *you idiot ...*’

Professor McDonald reached us.

‘Ben Morgan ...!’

‘Sorry, sir, I’m just in the middle of something rather important here.’

He turned back to me.

‘I know we’re twenty years old and the timing of this proposal might have been forced due to ... external pressures. But, irrespective of this, you are amazing. I know I will never meet another woman I care about as much as you. This feeling just builds and builds ...’

Professor McDonald folded his arms, but incredibly, he was smiling. Unbelievable. The Ben chutzpah triumphed again.

‘Are you sure that feeling isn’t the revenge of the sweetcorn and tinned hotdog tortilla you and Kev made last night?’ I asked.

‘No! My God – you’ve taken me over. It’s my head, my heart, my gut ...’

‘Careful now, lad, I wouldn’t go much further in the inventory,’ Professor McDonald said. ‘The weight of history is upon you. Think of the legacy. It’s got to inspire.’

‘Thanks, sir.’

‘You don’t need a wife, you need Imodium,’ I said.

‘I need *you*. What do you say? Marry me. A simple ceremony. Then you can move into my room. I’ve got an inflatable mattress and a stained towel you can fold up and use as a pillow. And Kev’s perfecting a patatas bravas recipe where you boil the potatoes in Heinz tomato soup.’

‘Lovely offer as it is, Ben. Sorry. No.’

Ben turned towards Professor McDonald.

‘I’m going to need some compassionate leave.’

1

I get home slightly late, blown in the door by that special Manchester rain that manages to be both vertical and horizontal at the same time. I bring so much water into the house it feels as if the tide goes out and leaves me draped across the bottom of the stairs like a piece of seaweed.

It's a friendly, unassuming-looking place, I think. You could peg us as early thirty-something childless 'professionals' in a two-minute tour. Framed prints of Rhys's musical heroes. Shabby chic with a bit more of the former than the latter. And dark blue gloss paint on the skirting boards that makes my mum sniff: 'Looks a bit community centre project.'

The house smells of dinner, spicy and warm, and yet there's a definite chill in the air. I can sense Rhys is in a mood even before I set eyes on him. As I walk into the kitchen, something about the tension in his shoulders as he hovers over the stove makes it a certainty.

'Evening, love,' I say, pulling sodden hair out of my collar and unwinding my scarf. I'm shivering, but I have that weekend spring in my step. Everything's a little easier to bear on a Friday. He grunts indistinctly, which could be a hello, but I don't query it lest I be blamed for opening hostilities.

'Did you get the tax disc?' he asks.

'Oh shit, I forgot.'

Rhys whips round, knife dangling in his hand. It was a crime of passion, your honour. He hated tardiness when it came to DVLA paperwork.

'I reminded you yesterday! It's a day out now.'

'Sorry, I'll do it tomorrow.'

'You're not the one who has to drive the car illegally.'

I'm also not the one who forgot to go last weekend, according to the reminder in his handwriting on the calendar. I don't mention this. Objection: argumentative.

‘They tow them to the scrap yard, you know, even if they’re parked on the pavement. Zero tolerance. Don’t blame me when they crush it down to Noddy size and you’ve got to get buses.’ I have an image of myself in a blue nightcap with a bell on the end of it.

‘Tomorrow morning. Don’t worry.’

He turns back and continues hacking at a pepper that may or may not have my face on it. I remember that I have a sweetener and duck out to retrieve the bottle of red from the dripping Threshers bag.

I pour two thumping glasses and say: ‘Cheers, Big Ears.’

‘Big Ears?’

‘Noddy. Never mind. How was your day?’

‘Same old.’

Rhys works in graphic design for a marketing company. He hates it. He hates talking about it even more. He quite likes lurid tales from the front line of reporting on Manchester Crown Court trials, however.

‘Well today a man responded to the verdict of life sentence without parole with the immortal words: “This wrong-ass shit be whack.”’

‘Haha. And was it?’

‘Wrong-ass? No. He did kill a bunch of people.’

‘Can you put “wrong-ass shit” in the *Manchester Evening News*?’

‘Only with asterisks. I definitely had to euphemise the things his family were saying as “emotional shouts and cries from the public gallery”. The only word about the judge that wasn’t swearing was “old”.’

Chuckling, Rhys carries his glass to the front room. I follow him.

‘I did some reception research about the music today,’ I say, sitting down. ‘Mum’s been on to me fretting that *Margaret Drummond at cake club’s nephew had a DJ in a baseball cap who played “lewd and cacophonous things about humps and cracks” before the flower girls’ and page boys’ bedtimes.*’

‘Sounds *great*. Can she get his number? Maybe lose the cap though.’

‘I thought we could have a live singer. There’s someone at work who hired this Elvis impersonator, Macclesfield Elvis. He sounds brilliant.’

Rhys’s face darkens. ‘I don’t want some cheesy old fat fucker in Brylcreem singing “Love Me Tender”. We’re getting married at Manchester Town Hall, not the Little McWedding Chapel in Vegas.’

I swallow this, even though it doesn’t go down easy. *Forgive me for trying*