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Who's That Girl

Written by Mhairi McFarlane

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WHO'S
THAT
GIRL?

Mhairi McFarlane



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1

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.

Eddie'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 Eddie, 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. Eddie 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?' Eddie'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 Victorian doll reanimated by the occult.’ She told herself it was because she was going through her teenage Goth phase but she knew it was still applicable now, if she hadn’t had enough sleep and caught herself glowering.

Louis once said, as if he wasn’t talking about her when

they both knew he was: 'Baby faces don't age well, which is why it's a tragedy it was Lennon shot instead of McCartney.'

'Are you here with your husband?' another woman asked, as Edie picked up her white wine and V&T.

'No, no husband. Single,' Edie said, to lots more staring and curious delighted *ooohs*.

'Plenty of time for that. Having your fun first, eh?' said another of the flappers, and Edie smiled and nearly said, 'I'm thirty-five and having very little fun,' and thought better of it and said 'Yes, haha!' instead.

'Are you from Yorkshire?' another asked.

'No. I live in London. The bride's family are from—'

Louis emerged from the restaurant, gesturing for her to join him with an urgent circling motion of the hand, hissing:

'*Edie!*'

'Edie! What a beautiful name!' the women chorused, looking upon her with renewed adoration. Edie was touched and slightly baffled by her sudden celebrity status. That was Prosecco drunk through a straw for you.

'Are you this young lady's gentleman?' they asked Louis, as he joined them.

'No, darlings, I like cock,' he said, taking his drink from Edie while she cringed.

'He likes who?' said one of the women. 'Who's "Cock"?'

'No. Cock.' Louis made a flexing bicep gesture that Edie didn't think made it much clearer.

'Oh, he likes *men*, Norma. He's a Jolly Roger,' said one, casually.

Attention shifted to Louis, the not-that-jolly Roger.

‘I prefer a game of Bananagrams and a hot bath, these days,’ another offered. ‘Barbara still likes a bit of cock, well enough.’

‘Which one of you did it, then?’ Louis said, eyeing their costumes. ‘Who’s the prime suspect?’

‘There’s not been a crime yet,’ one said. ‘Rumour has it there’s going to be a body found on the third floor.’

‘Well you can probably rule her out then,’ Louis said, tapping his nose, gesturing at the woman in the wheelchair.

‘*Louis!*’ Edie gasped.

Fortunately, it caused a cackle eruption.

‘Sheila used to dig her corns out with safety pins. You don’t mess with Sheila.’

‘Looks like she overdid it.’

Edie gasped again and the old ladies fell about, howling. She couldn’t believe it: Louis had found his audience.

‘Great meeting you, girls,’ Louis said, and they almost applauded him. Edie was forgotten; chopped liver.

‘Come back to the table. It’s all kicking off big style in the main tent,’ Louis said to her. ‘The speeches are starting.’

With a heavy heart, Edie excused herself. The moment she dreaded.

An Audience With The Hashtag Perfect Couple, Living Their Hashtag Best Life.

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‘Was that free?’ barked the sixty-something man with the hearing aid, dressed as a posh country squire, eyes fixed on the glass in Edie’s hand. Edie and Louis had been put on the odds and sods, ‘hard work, nothing in common’ table. The others had immediately abandoned the hard work and scattered, in the *longueur* between meal and disco. This sod remained, with his timid-looking, equally tweedy wife.

‘Er, no? I can get you something if you like?’

‘No, don’t bother. You come to these bloody interminable things and they fleece you like sheep. As if the gift list wasn’t brass neck enough. Four hundred pounds for some bloody ugly blue cake whisk, the silly clots. Oh hush, Deirdre, you know I’m right.’

Edie plopped down in her banquetting chair and tried not to laugh, because she thought the KitchenAid was a rinse, too.

She swigged the acidic white wine and thanked the Lord for the gift of alcohol to get through this. The top table passed the microphone down the line to the groom, Jack. He tapped

his glass with a fork and coughed into a curled fist. His sleeve was tugged by his new mother-in-law. He put a palm up to indicate, ‘Sorry, in a second, folks.’

‘What’s this crackpot notion of wearing brown shoes with a blue suit and a pink tie, nowadays?’ said hearing aid man, of the groom’s attire. ‘Anyone would think this was a lavender liaison.’

Eddie thought Jack’s tall, narrow frame in head-to-toe spring-summer Paul Smith looked pretty great but she wasn’t about to defend him.

‘What’s a lavender liaison?’ Louis said.

‘A marriage of convenience, to conceal one’s true nature. When one’s interests *lie elsewhere*.’

‘Oh, I see. We’re having one of those,’ he grinned, clapping Eddie to him.

‘Forgive me if I don’t scuffle for my inhaler in shock,’ he said, looking at Louis’s quiffed hair. ‘I had you down as someone who likes to *smell the flowers*.’

Eddie had heard more inventive euphemisms for ‘homosexual’ than she expected today.

‘Think you’ll ever bother with marriage?’ Louis said, under his breath.

‘I think it’s more whether marriage will ever bother with me,’ Eddie said.

‘Babe. *Loads* of people would marry you. You’re so “wife”. I look at you and think “WIFE ME”?’

Eddie laughed, hollowly. ‘Surprised they’re not making this known to me then.’

‘You’re an enigma, you know . . .’ Louis said, prodding the bottom of his glass with the plastic stirrer. Eddie’s stomach tensed,

because meandering, whimsical trains of thought with Louis were always headed to the station of *I Can't Believe You Said That*.

'Hah. Not really.'

'I mean, you're never short of fans. You're the life and soul. But you're always on your own.'

'I think that's because *being a fan* doesn't necessarily equal *wanting a relationship*,' Edie said neutrally, casting her eyes over the hubbub in the room and hoping they'd snag on something else they could talk about.

'Do you think you're the commitmentphobe? Or are they?' Louis said, moving the stirrer to one side as he drank.

'Oh, I repel them with a kind of centrifugal force, I think,' Edie said. 'Or is it centripetal?'

'*Seriously?*' Louis said. 'I'm being serious here.'

Edie sighed. 'I've liked people and people have liked me. I've never liked someone who's liked me as much as I like them, at the same time. It's that simple.'

'Maybe they don't know you're interested? You're quite hard to read.'

'Maybe,' Edie said, thinking agreeing would end this subject sooner.

'So no one's ever promised you a lifetime of happiness? You haven't broken hearts?'

'Hah. Nope.'

'Then you're a paradox, gorgeous Edie Thompson. *The girl who everyone wanted . . . and nobody chose.*'

Edie spluttered, and Louis had the reaction he'd been angling for.

“Nobody chose”! Bloody hell, Louis! Thanks.’

‘Babe, no! I’m no different, no wedding for loveless Louis any time soon. I’m thirty-four, that’s dead in gay years.’

This was nonsense, of course. Louis no more wanted a wedding than an invasive cancer. He spent all his time hunting for meaningless hook-ups on Grindr, the latest with a wealthy, hirsute man he called Chewbacca to his ‘Princess Louis’. It was just a way of claiming the latitude to take the mickey out of Edie.

‘I did say gorgeous, you diva,’ Louis pouted, as if Edie had been the aggressor. You had to admire the choreography of Louis’s cruelty – a series of carefully worked out, highly nimble steps, executed flawlessly.

‘Ladies and gentleman, sorry about the delay. . .’ said the groom into the microphone at last.

Jack’s slightly anaemic speech ticked off the things it was supposed to do, according to the internet cheat sheets. He said how beautiful the bridesmaids looked and thanked everyone for being there. He read out cards from absent relatives. He thanked the hotel for the hospitality and both sets of parents for their support.

When he finished with the pledge: ‘I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Charlotte. I will spend the rest of my life trying to make sure you don’t regret your decision today,’ Edie almost knocked back the flute of toasting champagne in one go.

The best man Craig’s speech was amusing in as much as it was horribly misjudged, with gag after gag about the varying successes of Jack’s sexploits at university. He seemed to think these tales were suitable because ‘We were all at it!’

and they were, 'A bloody good bunch of chaps.' (Jack went to Durham.) At the mention of a rugby game called 'Pig Gamble,' Jack snapped, 'Perhaps leave that one out, eh?' and Craig cut straight to, 'Jack and Charlotte, everyone!'

The bride had a nervous fixed grin and her mum had a face like an arse operation.

Charlotte's chief bridesmaid, Lucie, was passed the microphone.

Eddie had heard much of the legend of Lucie Maguire, from Charlotte's awed anecdotes in the office. She was a ruthlessly successful estate agent ('She could sell you an outdoor toilet!'), mother of challenging twins who were expelled from pre-school ('they're extremely spirited') and a Quidditch champion. ('A game from a kid's book,' Jack had said to Eddie. 'What next, pro Pooh Sticks?')

She 'spoke as she found' (trans: rude); 'didn't suffer fools gladly' (rude to peoples' faces) and 'didn't stand for nonsense' (very rude to people's faces).

Eddie thought Lucie was someone you wouldn't choose as your best friend unless there'd been a global pandemic extinction event, and probably not even then.

'Hello, everyone,' she said, in her confident, cut-glass tones, one hand on her salmon silk draped hip: 'I'm Lucie. I'm the chief bridesmaid and Charlotte's best friend since our St Andrews days.'

Eddie half expected her to finish this sentence: 'BSc Hons, accredited by the NAEA.'

'I've got a bit of a cheeky little surprise for the happy couple now.'

Eddie sat up straighter and thought *really? A wedding day surprise with no power of veto? Oof . . .*

‘I wanted to do something really special for my best friend today and decided on this. Congratulations, Jack and Charlotte. This is for you. Oh, and to make the song scan, I’ve had to Brangelina you as “Charlack”, hope that’s OK, guys.’

Song? Every pair of buttocks in the room clenched.

‘So, on one, two, THREE . . .’

The other two – blushing, literally – bridesmaids simultaneously produced handbells and started shaking them in sync. They wore the expressions of people who had come to terms with their fate a while ago, yet the moment was no less powerfully awful for it.

Lucie began singing. She had a good enough voice for a cappella, but it was still the shock of a cappella that was sending the whole room into a straight-backed, pop-eyed rictus of English embarrassment. To the tune of Julie Andrews’ ‘My Favourite Things’, she belted out:

*Basset hounds and daffodils and red Hunter wellies
Clarins and Clooney films on big HD tellies
Land Rover Explorers all covered in mud
These are a few of Charlack’s totes fave things!*

Eddie found it hard to comprehend that someone thought this fell into the category of a good idea. That there’d been no shred of doubt during the conceptual process. Also, ‘Charlack’ sounded like a *Doctor Who* baddie. A squirty one.

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*Cotswolds and cream teas and scrummy brunches
Meribel and Formula One and long liquid lunches
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave things!*

*Fresh paint and dim sum and brow dyes and lashes
Rugger and Wimbledon and also The Ashes
These are a few of Charlack's totes fave things!*

Eddie couldn't risk her composure by glancing at Louis, who she knew would be almost combusting with delight. The top table simply stared.

*. . . When the work bites!
When the phone rings!
When they're feeling totes emosh
They can simply remember these totes fave things
and then they won't feel so grooosssssss*

Eddie held her expression steady as Lucie fog-horned the last word, arm extended, and hoped very hard this horror was over. But, no – Lucie was counting herself into the next verse.

In the brief lull, the hearing-aid man could be heard speaking to his wife.

'What *IS* this dreadful folly? Who told this woman she could sing? My God, what an abysmal din.'

Lucie carried on with the next verse but now the room was transfixed by the entirely audible commentary offered by hearing-aid man. He apparently didn't realise that he was

shouting. Desperate shushing from the wife could also be heard, to no avail.

‘Good grief, whatever next. I came to a wedding, not an amateur night revue show. I feel like Prince Philip when he’s forced to look at a native display of bare behinds. Oh nonsense, Deirdre, it’s bad taste, is what it is.’

The spittle-flecked *shhhhhhhh!* of the spousal shushing reached a constrained hysteria, while laughter rippled nervously around the room.

Eddie could feel that Louis had corpsed, his whole body convulsing and shaking next to her.

*Ad land and glad hand and smashing your goals
Jet planes and chow mein with crispy spring rolls
Tiffany boxes all tied up with ribbon
These are a few of Charlack’s totes fave thiiiiingssssss*

‘. . . Will this ordeal ever end? No wonder this country’s in such a mess if this sort of vulgar display of your shortcomings is considered suitable entertainment. What? Well I doubt anyone can hear me over the iron lung yodellings of Kiri Te Canary. This is the sort of story which ends with the words, “Before Turning The Gun On Himself.”’

Eddie didn’t know where to look. Having the heckler on her table made her feel implicated, as if she might be throwing her voice or feeding him lines.

Eddie’s eyes were inexorably drawn to Jack, who was staring right back at her, palm clamped over mouth. His eyes were dancing with: *what’s happening, this is insane?!*

WHO'S THAT GIRL?

She might've known – he not only found this funny, he singled Edie out to be his co-conspirator. Edie almost smiled in reflex, then caught herself and quickly looked away. Oh no you don't. Not today, of all days.

Just nipping to the loo, Edie muttered, and fled the scene.