

Excerpted from the book [JUST LAST NIGHT](#) by Mhairi McFarlane. Copyright © 2021 by Mhairi McFarlane. From William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. Reprinted by permission.

Before

“We’re going to win tonight,” Ed says. “I can feel it. I can smell it. I could slice it like a frittata. The air is thick with the odor of our imminent victory. Breathe it in, my bitches.”

He pretends to scent the air.

“Are you sure that’s not Leonard?” Justin says. “He had chili con carne for tea. Got up on the counter and had his face in the saucepan before I could stop him, the fool. He’s been farting in spicy beef flavor ever since.”

“Maybe victory smells exactly like mince and kidney beans working its way through a very small dog’s digestive system,” I say, as Susie says: “BLURGH.”

“How would we know how it smells, after all? None of us have ever been successful,” I say, directing this at Ed.

“Speak for yourself. My GP said my hemorrhoids were the most prominent he’d seen in thirty years practicing medicine.”

I guffaw. (This is a standard joke format with Ed; I assume his bum is fine.)

I reflexively reach out to pet Leonard, who has his own chair, sitting atop Justin’s coat, protecting the upholstery.

Leonard is a “Chorkie”—a Chihuahua crossed with a Yorkshire Terrier. He has beady eyes peering out from under a comical fringe of gray-white hair, spiky in the middle like he’s had Paul Weller’s Mod cut, bat ears, and a lopsided little grin, full of toothpick teeth.

He looks, as Ed says: “Like an enterprising cartoon rat doing some kind of stealthy cosplay as a canine. We’ve been infiltrated by a rodent master criminal.”

Leonard, an omnivorous eater and troublesomely impromptu urinator, is one of the loves of my life. (The rest of them are around, and also sometimes under, this table.)

“You say we’re going to win this quiz every week, Ed,” Susie says, worrying at a coaster, shredding it into a pile of soft cardboard shards. “And we are always fucked by the same five determined men in Lands’ End packable anoraks.”

“Describing my best holiday in Wales, there,” Justin says. Justin is a self-proclaimed “tiresome show-off and performative middle child” and one of the funniest men you’ll ever meet, but you absolutely do not go to him for good taste.

The quizmaster’s voice booms out, cutting through conversation, like the Voice of God:

“Question TEN. Who is Michael Owuo? *Who is, Michael Owuo?*”

The usual seconds of post-question hush fall.

"Is he . . . the Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull East?" Ed whispers, faux-earnestly.

"Seriously?" Susie says.

"No," I say, rolling my eyes, and Ed taps the pen on his lips and winks at me.

"You three *do* know who he is, right?" Justin says, doing a double take. "UGH. So we *are* the millennial cast of *Last of the Summer Wine*."

"Did he play the villain in the last Bond?" I ask, and Ed says: "YES! 'Doctor Pardon.' What was his gimmick again?"

"He had bejeweled ear gauges," I say. "And a walker, with tinsel wound 'round it."

Ed laughs. I love the way he laughs: it starts in his shoulders.

"OK, who is joking, and who isn't?" Susie says. "I mean obviously, they are," she grimaces at myself and Ed. "Do you genuinely know who he is, Justin?"

"He's *Stormzy*," Justin hisses. "God, you can tell you lot are thirty-four."

"You're thirty-four, Justin," Susie says.

"There's thirty-four and then there's, like, 'Who are the Stormzys?' thirty-four," Justin says, pulling an "old geezer" rubbery face.

"A '*stormzy*,' you say," Ed says, in a creaky High Court judge voice. "Whatever a *Stormzy* is," and writes "Mr. Storm Zee" on the paper.

Ed has really nice hands; I'm a sucker for nice hands. He cycles a lot and can mend things, and I am now mature enough to appreciate practical skills like that.

Susie takes the pen from Ed, scribbles his words out, and writes Stormzy correctly.

"Don't your pupils keep you up to date with this stuff?" I ask Ed. "Hip to the jive, daddio?"

"It's my job to teach them Dickens, not theirs to teach me grime."

Ed is head of English at a nice county school. You know how they say some people look like police? Ed looks like a teacher—a film or television, glossy young teacher—with his unthreatening, handsome solidity, strawberry-blond, close-cropped hair. In a crisis in a situation full of strangers, Ed's would be the kind, reliable face you'd hope to see. He'd be the guy offering his necktie as a makeshift tourniquet.

Part of the pleasure of this weekly pub appointment to lose the pub quiz, I think, is it brings out and defines all the roles in our foursome. Ed and I clowning around together, Justin refereeing, with his caustic wit, Susie playing exasperated mother.

Sometimes I stop participating in the conversation and just hum happily inside myself, enjoying our togetherness, reveling in the way we all broadcast on the same frequency. I watch us from the outside.

. . . *didn't she marry the singer from the Mumfords? I'd rather be a Sister Wife. (Susie)*

. . . *this cherry Stolichnaya that Hester brought back from duty-free, it's amazing, tastes like baby medicine. Or so babies tell me. (Ed)*

. . . *he was a right grumpy carrot top. I said to him, do you know why gingerism is the last acceptable prejudice? Because it's acceptable. (Justin, of course)*

"Shhhhh," I say, as I can see the quizmaster adjusting his readers, as he squints at a piece of paper.

"Question *ELEVEN*. The word 'CHRONOPHAGE' is an Ancient Greek word for what is now an idiomatic expression in English. But what does it mean? Clue: your mobile phone may do this. That does not mean you can check your phones, hahaha!"

The quizmaster blows air out of his nostrils in a windy gust, directly into the bulb, and you can hear his spit.

The looks on the faces of our hiking anorak nemeses suggest they're considerably more confident about this than they were about Mr. Stormzy.

"Chrono means time . . .," Ed whispers. "Chronograph watches."

"Chronological." Susie nods. "In order of timing."

"Phage," I say. "Hmmm. Coprophagic is eating poo. Fairly sure the copro's poo, so the phagic must be eating."

"Eve!" Susie barks, with a potato chip halfway into her mouth. "How do you even know that?"

"I've lived a full life."

"I've been around for most of it so I *know* that isn't true. A quarter full, at best."

". . . *Eating time?*" Justin hisses. "It must mean eating time. Your phone does that. Boom. Write it down."

Ed obliges.

We come to The Gladstone every Thursday. I would say without fail, but we are thirty-somethings with lives and jobs and other friends and—some of us—partners, so there are some fails. But we're here more often than not.

"Question *TWELVE*, before we take a short break. What do Marcus Garvey, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway, and Alice Cooper have in common? I'll give you a clue. It involves a mistake."

We stare blankly at each other. Packable Anoraks are frantic-whispering instead of writing or looking sneaky-smug, which means they're not sure either.

"Is it choice of first wife? As in they've all had more than one?" Ed says.

"We don't call people we divorce mistakes now," Susie says.

“My mum does,” I say.

“Remember when our religion teacher said, ‘People are too quick to divorce nowadays,’ and you said, ‘I think they’re too slow,’ and you got a detention for it?” Susie says and I guffaw.

“Ah, there she is,” Ed says, as the door slaps open and his girlfriend, Hester, appears, her nose wrinkling in distaste at the slight stench of “armpit.”

My heart sinks a notch, but I ignore that it has done this and paste on a strong, welcoming smile.

To be fair, The Gladdy does have a bit of an *aroma* sometimes, what with the sticky floor, but that’s part of its charm. It’s a dartboard-and-devoted-regulars pub.

I love it, year-round, with its scrappy concrete beer garden with flower planters on the fire escape. I think they are supposed to simulate “verdant urban oasis” in a yard full of lager and smokers. But it’s at its best in autumn and winter. Frosted-leaf mulch and dark skies with bright stars on the other side of the steamed-up panes. Serious *hygge* to be had, on this side of the window.

Well, mostly.

Hester moved to Nottingham for Ed, a fact she likes to relitigate about once a month.

She looks like a colorized picture has walked into a black and white, kitchen sink realism film: skin the color of ripe peaches and shimmering champagne-blond hair. She’s like a human Bellini.

Her balled fists are thrust in her coat pockets, a Barbour with a fawn cord collar, as if she’s smashed into a saloon in a Western and going to draw two guns.

It’s not that I don’t *like* Hester . . .

“Are you all drunk by now, then?” she says, bullishly. She glances at me. “Eve looks drunk.”

Oh, why do I bother. It’s absolutely that I don’t like Hester.

“And once again for the cheap seats! What do Marcus Garvey, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway, and Alice Cooper have in common? It involves a mistake. A *mistake*. An error. OK, back soon.”

“Hemingway was in a plane crash, were any of the others?” I whisper.

“Bit of a stretch to call a plane crash ‘a mistake’ though?” Ed whispers back and I shrug, nodding in concession.

“And Rudyard Kipling’s a bit too yesteryear for planes, isn’t he?” Justin says. “Not exactly doing his Instagram Story with a Prosecco claw holding a flute aloft in the airport bar.”

He mimes trying to photograph his pint glass, and Susie snorts.

“They were wrongly given awards that had to be taken back,” Hester says, dragging her coat off her shoulders. “Where’s the pen?”

Justin makes a skeptical face and Ed tries to look persuadably neutral as he hands it over. His sense of humor doesn't evaporate, exactly, around Hester, but he goes more *no absolutely of course I didn't mean that* formal.

Hester's late joining tonight as she's been out with friends at a tapas restaurant, and understandably, given the number of babies that the rest of the circle have between them, they wind things up by nine p.m. Hester only joins us at The Gladdy quiz intermittently, anyway. "Sometimes it gets wearying, with all your in-jokes," she says. Even though she's known us all for so long as Ed's girlfriend, I am not sure how there's an "in" she's outside of.

"Are you sure?" Susie says.

"Yes, I'm sure," Hester says. Qualifying: ". . . Well, have you got anything better?"

"Sure, sure—or four-Proseccos-deep-and-we-haven't-got-anything-better-yet, sure?" Susie persists, smiling in a "Wicked Queen with a red apple" sort of way.

She dares with Hester in ways I absolutely do not dare. Susie dares with most people. Most people don't dare back.

Susie has long, thick blond-brown hair she wears in a horse-mane-length ponytail, or loose and bunched up into a scarf like she's Streisand in a seventies film. She has a full mouth with an emphatic pout to her top lip, which looks as if it's being pulled upward by her tilted nose, which I think is a thing called "retroussé."

"What award did Marcus Garvey get?" Justin says.

"Rear of the Year?" I say, and Ed hoots. Hester's fuming, I know.

"OK, ignore me then!" Hester says. "Pardon me for trying to participate, guys."

"No, no! It's good! I think you're right," Ed says, hastily. "None of us have anything better. Write it down."

I always respect Ed for leaping chivalrously to Hester's defense, while wishing it was for someone who better deserved it. Hester scribbles while Justin, Susie, and I try not to meet each other's eyes.

"More drinks I think, what's everyone having?" Justin says and gets up to go to the bar.

I go to the loo and, after I flush, I see I have a text from Susie. (Not a WhatsApp, because it would risk appearing in full on a lock screen. Canny.)

When I open it, I see it's been sent to myself and Justin. I know how they're triangulating the signal, next door—Justin nonchalantly studying his handset while waiting to be served, Susie slightly angled away from the couple, feigning picking up her messages.

Susie: *WHY IS SHE SUCH A BOSSY ARSEHOLE THOUGH*

Justin: *She can get away with anything due to the fabulous breasts, darling*

Susie: *I have great tits and you don't see it affecting my personality. That answer is SO OBVIOUSLY WRONG. And why is Ed such a wimp about it. Oh yes write that bollocks down, my precious little poison dumpling. ARGH*

Justin: *Again, boobs*

Eve: *The poisoned dumplings*

Susie: *I swear she knows it's the wrong answer and is doing it to fuck with us*

I lean against the pleasantly chilly wall in the loo and type, grinning.

Having been in stone-cold love with Hester's other half for the best part of two decades means I never know how much of my dislike is plain old envy. Susie and Justin continually—and inadvertently, because they absolutely don't know—reassure me I'd have disliked her anyway. I often play Nice Cop in regards to Hester, to further throw everyone off the scent.

Eve: *You wait, she'll be right and that'll show us*

Susie: *She's not right, she doesn't even know who Marcus Garvey was, you could see that when Justin challenged her*

Justin: *She probably thinks he won Best Video 2007 at the Grammys*

Susie: *Lol. And I'd just point out that Eve's suggestion got shot down and she didn't get the hump*

Eve: *Does this say anything bad about my breasts*

Susie: *Only that they're not a carbon offsetting scheme for being a horror*

Justin: *Sigh. Let us get drunk.*