

  
Girlfriend *fiction*

not quite  
**the perfect  
boyfriend**



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ALLEN & UNWIN

# 1 **com·mence·ment**

/kə'mɛnsmənt/

–noun; an act or instance of commencing; beginning.

– A Wordsmith's Dictionary of Hard-to-spell Words

Sometimes I wish I could just grow down and go back to primary school. Everything was easy then. School was fun, I was the Grade 6 Spelling Champion, and my best friend and I thought boys were disgusting.

When I wake up on the first day of Year 10, I realise how much has changed. School is hard. My best friend is boy-crazy. I have never kissed a boy. And no one gives a rat's fundament about spelling.

I drag myself into the kitchen for breakfast. Mum and Dad are talking, but stop when I come in. Mum looks down into her cup of tea, and Dad leaves the room.

'Is everything okay?' I ask as I eat last night's ravioli straight from the Tupperware container.

'Fine,' says Mum, then makes a face. 'Imogen, that's disgusting.'

Mum named me Imogen because it sounded like

*imagine*, but everyone calls me Midge. Even Mum only calls me Imogen when I'm doing something wrong.

I pop another piece of ravioli into my mouth. 'What?'  
'You could at least heat it up.'

'I like it cold.'

Mum empties the dregs of her tea into the sink and then smooths her shirt. She was a total hippie before I was born, but now she works for a classy law firm in the city. She still burns incense and talks about karma, and she gets all hot under her Country Road collar when I call her a sell-out.

I finish the ravioli, and rummage through the fridge to find something worthy of a sandwich for school.

'Don't bother making your lunch,' says Mum, gathering up the official-looking papers that decorate the kitchen table. 'I'll give you money to buy something.'

I freeze. 'What have you done with my mother?' I ask suspiciously.

'It's your first day back at school,' says Mum. 'You should have a treat.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'This from the woman who started a letter-writing campaign to our local council insisting they serve tofu in the school canteen.'

She just smiles and snaps her briefcase closed.

Tahni bounces up to me at my locker in the Year 10 corridor. She's been in Queensland with her family since after Christmas, so I haven't seen her in forever.

We squeal and hug and do the girl thing, then she

launches into a lurid and, I suspect, highly exaggerated description of the boys she met on the beach, and the bikini she wore, and the expressions on the faces of the boys when they saw her in the bikini, and the photo she gave them of her in the bikini (airbrushed, of course – Tahni became a Photoshop expert last year with the sole purpose of being able to airbrush her own photos). I zone out after a couple of seconds. I notice a sign on the wall:

**“Welcome” Year Ten’s**

I can forgive Tahni her tendency to turn even the most mundane events into a drama worthy of Ramsay Street, but there are only two things worse than poor spelling. One is misplaced quotation marks. The other is unnecessary apostrophes.

‘So?’ asks Tahni. ‘Did you meet any hot boys over the summer?’

She says it in this annoying sing-song voice which makes me blush. Because she knows the truth. She knows I’ve never kissed a boy. She’s the one who tells me at every available opportunity that I’m going to be a lonely old lady with eleven cats in a caravan.

I feel like the whole school is judging me. Me in all my pathetic loser-y glory.

This is an extra-special bonus level of Not Fair. It’s not like I’m ugly. I’ve spent hours in front of the mirror, trying to figure out what is wrong. I have good skin. My eyebrows

are nicely shaped. I don't have crooked teeth or a hideous squint. So. What. Is. The. Problem??

Tahni laughs and makes miaowing noises. I envisage a whole year of this. A whole year of every girl in the school who isn't me pashing anything with a Y chromosome. And I can't handle it. I would rather die.

So I say it. I don't think about it. I just say it.

'I did meet a boy.'

Tahni giggles. 'Cousins don't count, Midge,' she says. 'Or pizza delivery boys. Or the boys who work at the video shop.'

I glare at her. 'I met him at the library,' I say. 'He has wavy brown hair, and he's English.'

I pause. What am I talking about? I didn't meet any boys.

'So he's a nerd,' says Tahni, cautiously.

Does that mean she bought it?

I grin. 'A hotty Mc-Hot nerd.'

Tahni nods appreciatively.

Who doesn't love a hot nerd?

'Wow,' she says. 'You really met a boy. When can I meet him?'

'He's gone back to England,' I say. 'Where is this all coming from?'

'So you'll never see him again,' Tahni says dismissively, like it doesn't count.

'He might be moving here.'

What am I doing? I'm crazy. There's no way Tahni will buy this.

But she is. She's leaning forward, her eyes intent.

'Did you pash him?'

'Of course.'

Tahni lets out a little squeak of excitement. 'Are you off your V-plates?'

I give her a Look. 'Don't be gross,' I say. 'We only met a month ago.'

'So what did you do?' asks Tahni. She looks slightly defensive. Maybe she's worried that I have a better story than her never-ending Bikini on the Beach masterpiece. I'm enjoying this way more than I should.

'We went on a picnic by the river,' I say. 'We had a picnic rug and lemonade and dip and squishy cheese. He made me a garland out of daisies and willow branches and called me a princess.'

Tahni frowns, and I know I've gone too far. 'Sounds kind of wet,' she says.

'It wasn't,' I say. 'It was romantic.'

The bell rings. 'More on this later,' says Tahni over her shoulder as she hurries off to form assembly.

I am officially insane.

## 2 **thes·pi·an**

/'θɛspiən/

-adjective; pertaining to tragedy or to the dramatic arts in general.

- A Wordsmith's Dictionary of Hard-to-spell Words

When I found out Tahni and I were in different home groups, I was furious. How could they split us up? Tahni and I have been best friends since Grade 2, when we bonded over a shared love of pineapple jelly-snakes, and a shared hatred of Nina Kennan, the school's resident Little Miss Perfect.

Now, as I slip into form assembly alone, I'm just relieved to be away from the boy-interrogation.

What on earth was I thinking?

When I was a kid I had an imaginary friend called Susan, who had curly red hair and could tap-dance. Dad thought it was cute. Mum thought it was an expression of my inner creativity, or possibly a shadow of a past life. I think she was secretly hoping that my imaginary friend would be Aboriginal, or Cambodian, or someone Spiritual and Ethnic with feathers in their hair who could talk to animals and

was called *Runs With Bears*. But no. The closest Susan ever got to being Spiritual or Ethnic was the all-singing, all-dancing concerts that she and I staged together. I blame my grandmother, who took me to see *Annie* when I was five.

Dad was right. Imaginary friends *are* cute. Redheaded, tap-dancing ones especially so. When you're *five*. When you're sixteen, it's not so cute. When you're sixteen, it's deranged. I should see a doctor.

At the front of the room, Ms Church clears her throat, and slowly, everyone sits at a desk and stops discussing the relative merits of spray-on-tan versus solarium tanning (is it better to be messy and orange, or to risk getting cancer and looking like a handbag by the time you're thirty-five?). I hadn't even noticed Ms Church entering the room. She's so tiny I seriously think she could apply for a disability pension. I had her for French last year, which would have been fine if the poor woman could actually speak French. All I had to do was make lots of French-sounding, throat-clearing noises, and I got As.

'Imogen Arkles?'

I jump. Ms Church may be the size of a malnourished hobbit, but she sure can project. She's got a voice like a seagull. A seagull with a megaphone.

'Here.'

I'm almost always first on the roll. It sucks because I can't slip into form assembly that precious extra twenty seconds late, like Joe Wilson or Shuchun Zhao.

It does have its benefits though, because once I've done my 'here' duty, I can zone out and think about more important matters (like what to get for lunch with the ten dollars Mum gave me), while all those familiar names go washing past (or, in Ms Church's case, screeching past).

I'm wondering whether a meat pie or a sausage roll has more calories, when I notice Ms Church's constant nails-on-blackboard squeal has stopped. I pop back into reality, just in time to be blasted again.

'George Papadopoulos?'

Everyone is looking around. A new name. We're getting a new kid? A *boy*?

The girls all sit up a little straighter, apply lip gloss and smooth or mess up their hair, depending on whether they are the smooth kind or the messy kind. I find myself sitting up a little straighter too.

A new boy.

I imagine him walking through the classroom door.

*He's tall and gorgeous. His soft brown eyes zoom straight to me, and we have a Moment. Ms Church has to clear her throat, and the New Boy blushes and looks away. But that Moment is all we need to know that we are Meant To Be Together.*

I'd have to break up with my English boyfriend first, of course. But he's gone home anyway, and everybody knows that the long-distance thing doesn't work.

Okay. I am seriously insane. I am feeling guilty about breaking up with my PRETEND boyfriend in order to get it on with a new PRETEND boyfriend. Le sigh.

Ms Church shrugs and moves on down the roll to Cherry Pham.

But then we hear footsteps in the hallway, and the door opens, and he's there. The New Boy.

He isn't tall. He also isn't gorgeous. About the only thing I got right is the brown eyes.

He's sort of . . . lumpy. Not fat, but he could lose a few kilos. He has dark brown hair that is too long to be normal, and too short to be skater/surfie cool. It's curly in a kind of girly way, and is in desperate need of some Product.

And he's wearing the Official School Shorts, which no one wears. Seriously, no one. Not even the boys who spend their lunchtimes in the library playing chess. (Not that there's anything wrong with that. As the Grade 6 Spelling Champion, I understand the vilification that comes with being committed to a Cerebral Extra-Curricular Activity. I'm sure those chess-boys in the library are lovely, well-adjusted young men. But, you know, if anyone was going to be wearing the Official School Shorts, it would be them. And they don't.)

It actually looks like his mother may have dressed him. All the other boys wear their uniforms in a slouchy, grubby, who-gives-a-rats kind of way. Their shirts are ruffled, their ties half undone and all skewed. Their oversized grey pants hang so low that their boxer shorts show. (What is *with* that? And how do they do it without, you know, *hips*? Do they have some kind of complicated pulley-suspension thing to stop their pants from falling down? Maybe this is

why I don't have a boyfriend. Because I can't appreciate the scientific and aesthetic skill that goes into wearing your pants around your knees.)

The New Guy's uniform fits. It's clean and freshly ironed. His top shirt button is done up, with the tie knotted neatly over it (a half-Windsor, by the look of it). He actually has his shirt *tucked in*. He's lucky we aren't in Year 7 anymore, or he would probably be beaten up for coming to school dressed like that. Now we're All Grown Up and in Year 10, the other boys will just ignore him, make crude jokes about his mother and possibly pay him to do their homework.

'George Papadopoulos?' screeches Ms Church.

The New Boy nods. Ms Church makes a note on the roll.

'Take a seat,' she says. 'And please try to be on time in the future.'

I have English, Twentieth-Century History and Maths before recess. In each class, the teacher hands out the course outline, tells us that they won't go over it in detail because we can hopefully all read by now, and then stands up the front of the class and reads the entire thing out, word for word. The only variation is in History, where Mr Loriot speaks to a PowerPoint presentation.

I count three spelling mistakes in the English outline (*consistant*, *recieve* and *recommmend*), and a typo (*assingment*) and a misplaced apostrophe (*integer's*) in Maths. History has no mistakes that I notice, but Mr Loriot loses points anyway

for having one of those PowerPoint presentations where every single font/colour/transition/background/noise is used to create optimum irritation and confusion.

I'm so completely brain dead after two and a half hours of 'assessment criteria' and 'submission requirements' that when the bell goes, I zombie-walk out of class to my locker without even thinking about what is awaiting me.

Ambush.

Tahni is practically drooling with anticipation. I don't even have time to open my locker and put away my new grammatically inaccurate course outlines before she launches the first strike.

'When is he moving here? What colour are his eyes? Did you pash on the first date? If there was a movie about you guys, who would play him?'

I can't tell if she's genuinely interested, or if she's trying to catch me out.

I try to kick-start my brain back into action. 'Um. I don't know. Blue. No, but we held hands. Um, an English Zac Efron?'

Tahni drags me to the canteen. I am so flustered that I order a vanilla slice instead of hedgehog. I am frogmarched off to a shady corner, where I am further interrogated.

During recess, I tell her that my boyfriend lives in Surrey (I don't even know where that is, but it sounds sufficiently hedges-and-high-tea), is an only child like me and loves watching re-runs of M\*A\*S\*H. He listens to This Broken Tree, but he isn't emo and he's also into The Beatles. He is

right-handed. He is a Libran. He reads the classics (Dickens, not the Brontës), biographies (the Dalai Lama and Barack Obama), literary fiction (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) and graphic novels, but not comic books. He plays lacrosse.

When the bell rings for the end of recess, I gratefully drag my exhausted brain back to class, where I sit through another two mind-numbing periods of course outlines (Psychology: *cognitive*. Politics: *election's, government, standerd, the five living prime minister's* and *upholding 'democracy' in Australia*). I have no classes with Tahni – she's doing vegie-maths and as many IT subjects as she can. It turns out that she's good at computery things other than airbrushing. She says she wants to do Digital Design and Communication at uni when we finish. I reckon that first she needs to learn that there are two 'm's in *Communication*, but that might just be because I'm jealous. I have no idea what I want to do after school. Can you do a Bachelor of Spelling? Or a Diploma of How to Look After Your Eleven Cats in a Caravan?

The new guy – George Papadopoulos – is in my Politics class. He is also in my English class. I sit behind him in Politics (he obviously didn't get the memo about avoiding the first three rows in Ms Green's classes, not without an umbrella, anyway), where he clearly doesn't engage with the wonders of the course outline any more than I do.

Ms Green is wearing what seems to be a peach-coloured dressing-gown. I can see dark leg-hairs squished between her skin and her beige pantyhose. She's surrounded by a cloud of hairspray that makes me wonder if she is a primary

contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Her blue eye shadow goes right up to her eyebrows, and then keeps going. As she lispers her way through the course outline, I consider the possibility that she might actually be a man.

New Guy stares dreamily off into space and doodles in the margins of the course outline. I snoop over his shoulder and see biro sketches of dragons, and knights with swords. What is this guy, *nine*? He is so going to get broken at this school. There's a strange, biscuity smell coming from him, which is not at all what I imagine boys should smell like.

As I'm watching, a little glistening glob of Ms Green's spit lands on his page, near the dragon. The New Guy pauses for a moment, and then draws around it, turning it into a crystal ball thingy being held by a wizard wearing a pointy hat. Oh. Dear.

I think he can feel me watching, because he turns and stares at me. His face isn't too bad – a little pudgy perhaps, with a blemish or two, but nothing that couldn't be fixed with a skin peel and a few weeks of no carbs after lunch. He has nice eyes.

He raises his eyebrows at me, and I blush and look away. Nice eyes notwithstanding, he's still obviously a Complete and Total Social Incompetent. I feel sorry for him, but not enough to actually, you know, *talk* to him or anything.

Not that my social status is so high or secure that me talking to the New Guy would automatically confer upon him some degree of coolness. I have, after many years of diligent eyebrow-waxing and lip-glossing, clawed my

way out of the rotting mire of uncoolness, and am now desperately clinging to my own little rung of the social ladder. It's not a cool rung, but it's a normal rung, and that's good enough for me.

Tahni's way further up the ladder than me. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but at some point between Grade 6 and Year 9, she became cool. Her body shape-shifted to create pleasing curves, and her uniform suddenly clung and flared in all the right places as though it was personally tailored to make her look beautiful.

My uniform hangs off me like a shroud. I blame my mother. When we went to the uniform shop in Year 7, Mum decided that in order to save money and natural resources and to lessen the burden on the starving kids in China working in sweatshops, she would buy me the largest size there was, so I could 'grow into it'. I pointed out that the chances of me *tripling my body size* in six years was unlikely, and that when I did need a bigger uniform, it would be supplying more work to the starving sweatshop kids, but she just called me a capitalist and bought it anyway.

Four years on, the dress is (unsurprisingly) still enormous. Except now it has the added bonus of being rather threadbare from constant wearing and washing, and has a blue biro stain on the side from when my pen leaked in a Year 9 Geography test.

Lunch is much like recess, only worse. I waste time in the queue at the canteen (the boy in front of me orders a

'headjob' instead of a hedgehog and hilarity ensues), but before long I am once again subject to a long and painful interrogation by my best friend. I mumble and stutter through some outrageous lies about dates and kisses and gifts (he bought me a hardcover early edition of *The Secret Garden* – my favourite book). Tahni is like a vulture. It's quite scary.

'It's such a relief you finally have a boyfriend,' says Tahni. 'I worried about you.'

'Thanks,' I say. 'It's so nice to know you care.'

'Of course I care!' says Tahni, completely oblivious to my sarcasm. 'I was starting to think you might be—' she looks away and muffles a weird giggle.

'I might be what?' I say. 'Destined to end up a lonely old lady with eleven cats?'

'Never mind,' says Tahni.

I frown. 'No, what?' I don't like the idea that she thinks things about me without telling. *Oh poor Midge*, she probably thinks, *she's so boring and ugly that she'll never get a boyfriend. Not like me* (hair toss, re-apply lip gloss, hair toss).

'I thought—' says Tahni, then laughs again and examines her bare knees.

'You thought . . .'

'I thought you were a . . .' Tahni lowers her voice. 'A *thespian*.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'You thought I was an *actor*? After my shameful performance in the school production of *Ain't Misbehavin'* last year?'

‘Not an actor,’ says Tahni. ‘I thought you might, you know. *Like girls.*’

I can’t help laughing. ‘You mean a *lesbian*, not a *thespian*.’

‘Isn’t it the same thing?’ says Tahni.

I think I just figured out where all those curves came from. They migrated from her brain. And hang on a minute; she thought I was a *lesbian*? Just because I don’t have a boyfriend? Not that there’s anything *wrong* with being a lesbian. I’m just not one. Oh God, what if I am? What if that’s why I’ve never had a boyfriend? I think about it for a minute. No. I don’t think I am. I’ve listened to Dad’s k.d. lang albums, and I feel nothing. And I like boys. The ones on television. I just haven’t met any actual real boys that I like. Except for my imaginary boyfriend, of course.

‘No,’ I say. ‘Not a lesbian. Or a thespian, for that matter. I just have very high standards.’

Tahni nods, understanding, even though she has lower standards than a burger joint’s recruitment process. ‘So when did you last hear from him?’ she asks.

‘He emailed me last night,’ I say.

‘Really?’ says Tahni. ‘And?’

‘It’s – ah . . . It’s private,’ I say. Brilliant answer. Brilliant. I am a genius. Of course it’s private.

‘Fail,’ says Tahni. ‘There’s no such thing as privacy between friends. Remember when I first got my period and I made you check in case it was something else?’

I screw up my nose. ‘How could I forget?’

‘You need to tell me,’ Tahni says. ‘I can decipher the boy code.’

There’s a *boy code*? Does all that monosyllabic grunting actually *mean* something? Is there a decoder ring for the ‘your mum’ jokes?

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘I couldn’t possibly do it justice. He has such a lovely turn of phrase, and I’m sure I would spoil it if I tried to remember.’

She nods.

Success!

‘Well,’ says Tahni. ‘Print it. Bring it to school tomorrow.’

‘Right,’ I say. My voice sounds a bit squeaky.

‘And Midge?’

I think I am going to be sick, but I smile at her.

‘What’s his name?’

Oh, crap.