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Picture Perfect

Written by

Holly Smale

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For my dad.
My rock. My hero. My Richard.



PICTURE PERFECT

HOLLY SMALE

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model [mod-l] noun, adjective, verb

1 A standard or example for imitation or comparison

2 A representation, generally in miniature

3 An image to be reproduced

4 A person whose profession is posing for artists or photographers

5 To fashion something to be like something else.

ORIGIN from the Latin *modulus*: 'absolute value'

1

My name is Harriet Manners, and I am a girlfriend.

I know I'm a girlfriend because I can't stop beaming. Apparently the average girl smiles sixty-two times a day, so I must be statistically stealing somebody else's happiness. I'm grinning every thirty or forty seconds, *minimum.*

I know I'm a girlfriend because I'm giggling at my own jokes, singing songs I don't know the words to, hugging any animal within a hundred-metre radius and twirling round in circles with my hands stretched out every time I see a small patch of sunshine. Thanks to my brain drowning in the love chemicals *phenylethylamine*, *dopamine* and *oxytocin*, I've basically morphed into a cartoon princess.

Except one with an astronomically high phone bill and a tendency to look up 'symptoms of being in love' online when her boyfriend isn't looking.

Anyway, the final reason I know I'm a girlfriend is this, written on the inside back page of my new bright



purple diary:

GIRLFRIEND

I did it, obviously. It would be a really weird thing to doodle on someone else's private stationery. There's a sketch of me and it's timed and dated to commemorate the precise moment – four weeks and two days ago – that Lion Boy and I became an official item.

That's right: Nick and I are finally a proper duo.

A couplet. A twosome never to be divided, like salt and pepper or cheese and tomato. We are the human versions of seahorses, who swim snout to snout and change colour to demonstrate how much they like each other, or Great Hornbills, who sing in duets together to show the world how utterly in tune they are.

And it's changed everything.

After the Most Romantic Summer Ever together (MRSE™), all that's left are rainbows and sunsets and good-morning texts and good-night phone calls and somebody to tell me when I've got chewing gum stuck to the back of my hair and I'm gummed to the bus seat behind me.

For the first time in my entire life, I wouldn't change a single thing. There are 170 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and I wouldn't alter a jot of any of them. My life is exactly as I want it to be.

Everything is perfect.

2

Anyway, the truly great thing about being so *chipper* all the time is that nothing can really upset you. Not an early-morning start when you're used to a summer of lie-ins. Not your dog, Hugo, moulting all over your brand-new Special Outfit. Not the prospect of seeing your nemesis again after ten blissful weeks without her.

Not even the fact that it's the single most important day of your life and *nobody has remembered*.

Nope. I am a paradigm of calmness and maturity.

Like Gandalf. Or Father Christmas.

"Good *morning*," I say as I float into the kitchen. That's how I travel these days, by the way: in a magical, joy-filled bubble. "What an *auspiciously* lovely day, don't you think? Almost *propitiously* sunny, you could say. A day for *great things* to happen."

Then I stare optimistically at my snoring parents.

It looks like somebody tried to destroy the house overnight and then gave up and filled it with sleeping gas instead. The room is dark except for the glow from the open fridge door, and cups and plates are everywhere. Dad's leaning back in a chair with a tea-towel over his head, and my stepmother Annabel is slumped over the breakfast table with her cheek resting gently on a piece of buttered toast.

Tabitha is lying in her cot, making cute snuffling sounds as if she's not the bomb that keeps going off.

I clear my throat.

"Did you know that it's actually called *August* after the first Emperor of Rome, Augustus? It was his most successful month. How significant is *that*?"

Silence.

It's a good thing I am newly shiny and happy on a permanent basis, or I'd be throwing a hissy-fit round about now. Instead, I abruptly pull the curtains open so my parents can see the epic day in its full glory.

"*FIRE!*" Dad yells, whipping the tea towel off his head and peering at me through his fingers. "Ugh, worse. What have we told you about daylight, sweetheart?"

"It's 9.21am," I point out. "You're not vampires."

I don't say that with a *lot* of conviction. My parents have grey skin and red eyes, they're up all night, rarely

eat and seem to communicate without actually talking. The signs aren't looking good.

"Mnneurgh," Annabel mumbles, propping herself up slightly. The toast is still stuck to her face. "How long were we asleep?"

Dad sticks a finger in the cup in front of him. "Not long enough –" he sighs and waves a hand in front of his face –" nope, Elizabeth Hurley is gone."

"Oh, God," Annabel sighs and squints slightly. Her normally perfect fringe is sticking up like the crest of a blonde cockatoo, and there are crumbs stuck in her eyebrow. "I need to get the laundry on, the bathroom cleaned…" She slumps down again. "This toast is surprisingly comfortable."

Yup.

It's been exactly seven weeks since you last saw us, and anything resembling domestic order has totally disappeared.

At an average of 125 decibels, it turns out my new sibling is slightly louder than a rock concert (120dB) and only very slightly less loud – and painful – than being shot repeatedly by a machine gun at point-blank range (130dB). Apparently the word 'infant' comes from the Latin word *infans*, which means 'unable to speak', but all I can say is: the Ancient Romans

obviously never met Tabitha Manners.

Much like somebody with a fully automated firearm, my tiny sister is capable of expressing *exactly* how she feels.

I pick Tabby out of her cot and she opens her eyes and beams back at me. That's just one of the plethora of things I love about my sister: we're like peas in a pod. Except luckily her pod is in my parents' room, on the other side of the house.

Plus I have very high quality ear-plugs.

"Does anyone happen to remember what day it is?" I prompt. Maybe I should show them today's pie chart. I can't stop the anxious butterflies, but I can at least put them in the right ten-minute time slot.

"Tuesday?" Dad attempts. "Friday? 1967? Could you give us a ball-park figure?"

"Lift the green towel on your right, Harriet," Annabel murmurs, eyes still shut. "And the dishcloth next to it. We'll be awake in a second."

I step over a couple of large boxes and suitcases lying open on the kitchen floor.

Then I tentatively move the towel with my fingers. Underneath is a brand-new red leather satchel with a sale sticker still attached and the letters HM engraved on the flap. When I open it, it's packed to the brim