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Opening extract from

An Urgent Message of Wowness

Written by

Karen McCombie

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Please print off and read at your

20% random imperfectness





Let's skip way back. I mean *way* back.

Back to a school, ooh, about forever ago, where a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl meets a gorgeous seventeen-year-old boy. They're perfect together. After a few hard-studying, fun-travelling years, they get married and have two perfect children . . . and me.

OK, I've gone too far forward: let's rewind and stop at the point when my big brother joined the family.

Jo-Jo was born exactly one minute into the New Year. After a dramatic and exciting journey (he nearly made his first appearance in the back of a Ford Mondeo taxi), he finally burst into the world as fireworks spilled into the sky outside the labour ward. All the midwives and doctors and expectant mums and dads gave him and my proud parents three cheers and a round of applause.

Tallie's birth was wow in quite a different way: she was born at home, surrounded by candles, soft music and minimal yelling (Mum says). Me and Jo-Jo were conveniently asleep, dreaming of skateboards (Jo-Jo) and lost toys (me), unaware that our kid sister was slipping into the world via the spare room, to the scent of vanilla and rose and the sound of Dido's "No Angel".

In between Jo-Jo and Tallie there was me (I was saving the worst for last). Dad was in bed with a basin by his side and a bad case of gastric flu when Mum announced

that her contractions had started. He thought she was just joking – it *was* 1st April after all. I think even as an unborn baby, I realized that having April Fool's Day as a birthday was going to be less than fun. In an effort to avoid a lifetime's worth of teasing, I dug my tiny heels in and tried hard to hang on till the 2nd, but the midwife was having none of it. I was dragged out by ventouse (a fancy name for the suction cup attached to my head) at 11.45 p.m.

Dad arrived, grey-faced, from his twentieth visit to the hospital bathroom to find an exhausted wife and a pointy-headed alien instead of the rosy-cheeked daughter he was expecting.

I'm Heather, by the way. Heather P. Smith. I like people to guess what the "P" stands for, then infuriate them by not telling. Adding a little mystery is the only way to make my dull name interesting.

I'm the middle child of the perfect Smith family. Well, statistically speaking, the eighty per cent perfect Smith family, with me mucking things up with my twenty per cent random imperfectness. It's not that I look like an alien any more (the pointy-headed swelling went down a week or two after my parents brought me home), but compared to Mum and Dad and Jo-Jo and Tallie, I'm a bit un-wow. Imagine a drift of elegant swans gliding along a river, with a yellow plastic duck in their midst; or a pride of majestic, athletic lions prowling the African plains, with a wombat waddling along behind them. I *am* that rubber duck; I *am* that wombat.

Wombat's my email name, by the way. Well, calling myself heathersmith@hotmail.co.uk would be pretty

dull, plus there're probably a zillion Heather Smiths out there. (Thanks, Mum and Dad, for giving me a name that can't be shortened to anything funky.)

Wombat's a lousy nickname, I know. I thought it could be a cool email name, in a quirky kind of way, but I'm just really bad at getting excited about stuff and then realizing down the line that I had less of a moment of genius and more of a judder of dumbness.

I nearly went with "Scooter" for my email address, the nickname that Jo-Jo gave me when I was born. Mum and Dad had bought my four-year-old brother a shiny silver scooter as a consolation prize, to make up for ruining his childhood by bringing a squalling baby into his life. He couldn't pronounce "Heather", so he stuck to calling me after his much-preferred present.

Jo-Jo. . . Luckily, he liked me a lot more once I grew up and out of the random crying and pooey nappies stage. He never seems to mind that I walk a wobbly line between cool and nerdy.

Tallie loves me too, even though I regularly ruin her "let's pretend!!" games by being a useless shopkeeper/ballet teacher/fairy princess/pet puppy or whatever. It's not that I'm not imaginative – Mum once said that if imagination worked on a scale of one-to-ten, I'd be forty-two – it's just that my mind goes blank when I'm faced with a basket of plastic fruit/an overload of pink frills/fairy wands/I'm being ordered to bark. My cluttered brain isn't wired for all that stuff.

Speaking of Mum – and Dad, of course – I know they both love me, even if I confuse them. I mean, they're pretty straightforward: Dad is a dentist who likes golfing,

reading current affairs magazines and buying box sets of DVDs off the internet. Mum helps out in her friend's posh clothes shop, and spends most of what she earns buying posh clothes from the shop. They know where they are with Jo-Jo: he does karate, plays squash for the school team and listens to indie music, when he isn't busy being hyper-intelligent and handsome and lusted over by every girl in the known universe (especially my pretty perfect best friend, Becca).

And Tallie. . . She's just the whole ultra-cute package: sweet, polite, with a bedroom packed full of fairy bits, fluffy bobs and bunting, and with a tendency to hold dolls' tea parties at every opportunity.

"Stop making yourself sound like a freak!" Becca would say, if she saw this stuff. And no, I guess I'm not a freak. I guess it's just the fact that my whole family – and Becca, for that matter – seems to know exactly *who* they are, and exactly *what* they like.

But not me.

I've always had interests and hobbies as often as colds (and I get colds a *lot*). And then I'll get over them, and haven't a clue why I felt so completely passionate about them at the time. I mean, *why* was I so obsessed with always spotting yellow cars when I was two? (OK, it was something to do with a rhyme with a fish in a Dr Seuss book that I loved.)

Still, that was only the *start* of it.

I got into collecting keyrings (a small collection: I stopped at three), collecting lost soft toys left on pavements (got fifty-one, and still collecting), wearing only boys' shoes (between the ages of six and eight),

cutting out Gary Larson *Far Side* cartoons from newspapers (drove my dad mad if he was still physically reading the paper at the time), star-gazing (the telescope I got for my eleventh birthday is good for hanging jewellery off now), turning vegan (I missed smoky bacon crisps too much), spending two years begging my mum for an auricle* piercing (when she finally stopped saying no and told me I could when I was fourteen, I realized I'd already lost interest), taking books and stuff to school in carrier bags from hip shops (i.e. record shops and clothes shops, not Tesco's), becoming besotted with the idea of travelling round South America (lasted till I read that quite a few South American countries have a problem with gangs kidnapping foreigners for ransom money).

And it didn't just start with spotting yellow cars and end with me wanting to back-pack round countries I might get abducted in. My stupid habit of collecting hobbies and interests (and often dumping them again) goes on and endlessly on. My latest is scouring *The British Book of Hit Singles and Albums*. Or more precisely, scouring *The British Book of Hit Singles and Albums* for songs with really bizarre titles. (Get this: under "A" alone there are three excellently weird-sounding songs: "And A Bang On The Ear"; "Ain't Gonna Bump No More (With No Big Fat Woman)"; and "All Around My Hat". I'm going to download them later and see what on earth they sound like.)

* Look it up on the internet. Warning: it might make you go "bleurghhh".

Ah, now . . . d'you see what I mean about me having a cluttered brain? Can you imagine how often my patient, perfect family smile and nod, listening to me happily rant on about things they know I'll be bored of by a week on Tuesday?

Ah . . . my patient, perfect family.

Let's get back to them.

'Cause lots of what I've just told you about my family isn't exactly true. I mean, it *was* true, in the past (i.e., rewind to a few months ago), but it's definitely not so true now. That's because the general perfectness of my branch of the Smiths came to an end on Monday 26 March.

It ended with a bombshell.

When I say bombshell, I mean the "NOOOOO – IT CAN'T BE TRUE!!" type, not the ka-***boom*** type.

But it was still big enough to make my whole family implode, explode, go right round the bend and back again.

And by the time I got my cluttered brain around it all, I realized that being twenty per cent imperfect was perfectly fine – compared to the rest of the screwballs I was related to. . .

From: **wombat**
Subject: **Tracklisting**
Date: **Tuesday 27 March**
To: **rsmith@smiledentalgroup**

Dad –

Can you print this out? It goes with the CD I stuck in your bag when you weren't looking. I did the same CD for everyone; I spent ages sussing out the tracks and downloading them off i-Tunes. I thought it would be a nice surprise, but I guess YOUR surprise sort of blew mine out of the water. By about a zillion miles. . .

Hope you like it.
Love,
Heather x

Number Ones From The British Charts On The Days We Were All Born!
Compiled by Heather P. Smith

- "Something In The Air" Thunderclap Newman (Rory Smith, born 14 July 1969)
- "Woodstock" Matthew's Southern Comfort (Joanna May Smith, born 12 November 1970)
- "Do They Know It's Christmas?" Band Aid II (Jonathan Joseph Smith, born 1 January 1990)
- "Doop Doop" (Heather P. Smith, born 1 April 1994)

- "Evergreen" Will Young
  (Tallulah Belle Smith, born 9 March 2002)
- "Things Can Only Get Better" D:Ream
  (Rebecca Clare Fitzgerald, born 7 February 1994)