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opening extract from

Singing It

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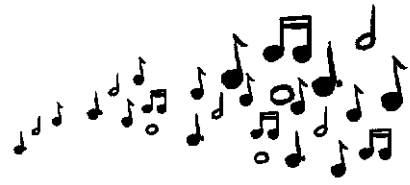
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One

Another new school. As we walked down a long empty corridor, my shoes squeaked on the slippery, shiny floor. The deputy head's heels tapped out quick, staccato clicks as she hurried along in front of me. Occasionally she turned to me with a big smile plastered across her face.

'I'm sure you'll like it here, Flower,' she said hoping that would somehow make me walk faster. She was in a hurry and I was just one more thing she had to sort out.

I tried to make my arms longer inside the sleeves of my new school blazer. My mum had bought it big so 'I could grow into it' and only my fingertips showed below the sleeves. I think she was trying to fool me into believing that we would be in this place long enough for me to grow into anything. She knew that I really wished we could stay in one place for a while.

We usually stayed somewhere for about six months. Then we moved. Ever since something went wrong with the flower shop my parents used to have, we've moved around a lot. My mum and dad sort of collect stuff and sell it in car-boot sales or they get a market stall for a while. We have a van and they haul all their junk around in the back, and when they decide it's time to move on, we stuff everything we own into the back and drive to the next place.

I hate moving all the time. I just make a friend and off we go again. Or sometimes I don't even get a chance to

make a friend before I have to pack my stuff into the back of the van and go.

'Almost there.' The deputy head smiled even harder.

I concentrated on trying to keep my cheeks pale. It never worked though. As soon as the deputy head said, 'Class, I'd like you to welcome our new student. This is Flower Power,' heat would swarm up from beneath my shirt and drench my face with sweat.

Flower Power. What do those two words make you think of? Hippies? The Sixties? Well for me, in the twenty-first century those two words are the bane of my life. Fourteen years ago, as my parents cooed and smiled over their brand new baby girl, my father happened to say, 'She's our beautiful little flower.' To which my mother replied (she must have been ga-ga the way women are just after birth), 'Let's call her Flower.'

I'd like to give them the benefit of the doubt and think that they were both so loopy at the moment that they forgot their surname was Power. But I have a terrible suspicion that they thought it was cute to have a daughter called Flower Power.

It's not even like they were hippies (too young) or New Agers (too conservative). I think I was an advertising gimmick. When I was born, they had just opened their florist and were looking for a name for the shop. They named me Flower and they called the shop Flower Power. I'm still confused whether they named me after the shop or the other way around.

Anyway, I want to change my name. Officially. I've tried to do it unofficially. Whenever I go to a new school, I tell them my name is Natalie. Natalie Power. That

sounds good. But the records always always let me down. They say 'Flower' and that gets read out no matter how many times I say my name is Natalie. For instance, I told this deputy head that I'm actually called Natalie. She looked a bit distracted when I said it, so I'm not holding out too much hope.

The deputy head turned to me as we reached a door with a small window about shoulder height.

'Ready?'

This time she seemed almost human. As if she might have gone through this herself at one time. I nodded. I didn't trust myself to try and say any words. They would come out all scuffed and scraped. You would think this would get easier, but for some reason it never did.

She pushed open the door and there they were, the thirty faces, just like the last time I did this, six months ago.

I was introduced to the teacher, Miss O'Neill. She smiled. She looked OK. Young, with a short spiky haircut and a little jewelled stud in the side of her nose. For a moment I was mesmerised by her pierced nose and forgot about all those faces, but then I heard those fateful words: 'Class, I'd like you to welcome our new student. This is—'

She checked the piece of paper with my name on it.

'—Flower Power.'

'Peace!' shouted a boy with a huge zit on his chin. He put his fingers up in a peace sign. The class giggled. Why can't anybody come up with anything original? I still couldn't manage to speak so I forced the corners of my mouth up in my facsimile smile.

'Flower, you can have that empty desk at the back there,' said Miss O'Neill.

As I made my way to the back of the class a girl sniggered, 'More like "Weed Power" if you ask me.'
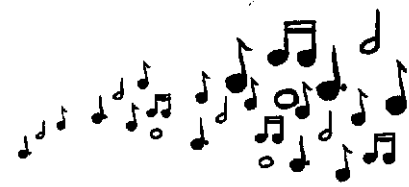
Funnily enough, I'd heard that one before. I think it's on account of my being skinny, with stringy brown hair and – under most circumstances – pale skin. Kind of weedy-looking, really.

'Now Cat,' said Miss O'Neill to the girl sitting beside me. 'I'd like you to be Flower's buddy until she gets used to the school. Show her where everything is and what the school protocol is.'

'Cat's a "Flower Buddy"!' shouted a boy. He had a thick smattering of freckles.

'Shut up, Liam!' snarled Cat.

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled at her. She frowned and turned towards the front of the class. Out of the corner of my eye, I took in the shiny, black hair pulled into a dishevelled pile on top of her head. Her eyes were as black as her hair. She wasn't pretty, but there was something about her. Usually the girls who were assigned to 'look after' me were the ones who didn't have any friends and teachers saw me as a opportunity for them to finally have a friend. I often ended up not having a friend though, because a lot of them were real losers, so I spent a lot of time on my own. Cat didn't look like a loser, but she looked like she sure didn't want me for a friend, so I prepared myself for the life of a loner again.



Two

Cat more or less had her claws out all day. 'Follow me' was pretty well all she said as she stomped from class to class along crowded corridors lined with pastel-coloured lockers. Occasionally the boy who had called her a 'Flower Buddy' would sidle up beside her and flick her bare arm with his fingers or pull a strand of her hair out of the pile on top of her head. His name was Liam. As well as a lot of freckles, he had shaggy red hair. He was not very cool looking.

I kept quiet and vaguely followed Cat.

I was pretty relieved to get home, until I discovered that my parents were already there. I walked into the kitchen and there they were, talking intently to one another across the table. They broke off for a moment to say, 'Oh, hi, Flower. Home already?'

'Yeah.'

And that was it. End of conversation. *Our* conversation. *Their* conversation continued.

Ever since I can remember, my parents have really been totally wrapped up in each other. And as I'm the only other person in this family, I've always felt a bit like an outsider. I've asked for dog or a cat, but my dad is 'allergic' to animals. (I think this is a convenient exaggeration. He just doesn't like them.) What this all means is that I really notice that my parents don't seem to notice me very much, but they don't notice that they don't notice me.

Sometimes I try a mild form of sarcastic humour to point this out them: 'Hi, Mum! Hi, Dad! It's me! Your daughter, "Flower". Remember me? You gave me this really, really dumb name.'

'Flower is a lovely name,' and my mother smiles her benign smile at me, then turns to my father.

'Isn't it, Geoff?'

'Lovely,' he says. 'And we knew that from the moment we saw you.'

And my dad puts his arm around my mum and gives her a squeeze.

Yuk!!

However, I'm not one to wallow in my misfortune. I have other ambitions than to be noticed by my parents. And I had new room to sort out.

Not that I had much sorting out to do. Once I'd rolled out of my bed and put my sheet and duvet on it, there was only my clothes to put away and my pictures to put up (various tigers and my favourite singers). Then I set out my CD Walkman and my CDs which I get second-hand at the car-boot sales. I'm saving up for an MP3 player.

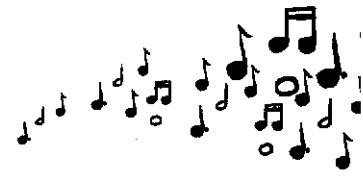
There was also 'my collection'. I hope this flat never gets raided because my collection could put me in jail. You see, I have a collection of library books from every library in every town we've ever lived in. At first I never meant to keep them. I would be in the middle of a really good book when my parents would announce that we were moving again. I couldn't bear to not know what happened in the end so I used to 'forget' to return the book. Once we were a hundred miles away in the next town, the possibility of

returning it was pretty remote. Then I started to like the idea of remembering each place we lived in through library books. Now I have a pretty big collection.

My voice sounds really good in this room. It's my new bedroom and it's empty and echoey so my voice comes back to me all big and powerful. The walls are yellow, which I like a lot. My last bedroom had these sort of turdy brown walls which were horrible, but we only stayed in that flat for about six months so I didn't have to put up with it for too long.

You see, my biggest ambition is to be a great singer. I love singing – and it's something that you can do all by yourself. You don't need anyone or anything else. If you play the piano or the guitar, you have to lug it around with you. But your voice is part of you. It's like your mind and your body all mixed into this sound that goes out into the world. Not that my voice goes very far out into the world. Usually it doesn't go beyond the walls of my bedroom and even then my mum and dad ask me to 'keep it down a bit'.

My other great desire is to save tigers from extinction and to that end I have a 'Save the Tiger' website which I run from libraries and various cybercaffs as I don't have my own computer. I have run in four 10K marathons to raise money. In the last one I came 886th out of 892 entrants. I *did* raise £65.74, which is a lot of money.



Three

The next day at school was pretty much like the first day.

Cat would say, 'Buzz off, Juvenile!' to Liam, the tiresome freckled boy, but of course he wouldn't buzz off. He would ask her whether she had heard of this song or that group's new album.

'Maybe...' or 'What's it to you?' she would say. They kept this up between classes pretty well all day. Sometimes he would slide his eyes my way to see if I was impressed at his having heard a particular band's latest CD, but they were such crap bands I totally ignored him. When we were going to science, last class of the day, he threw a ball of scrunched-up paper at Cat. It missed and hit me.

'What about you, Weed? You like Bella Armstrong?'

Well as it turns out, Bella Armstrong is absolutely my favourite, favourite singer. She has this voice that can pick you up and carry you like a big wave at the seaside, or it can spill like cream down the back of your throat. And that's just for starters. I have every CD she has ever made – and her voice gets better and better. However, I wasn't going to let this pipsqueak, Liam, know that.

'Maybe,' I said.

'She's crap,' said Cat.
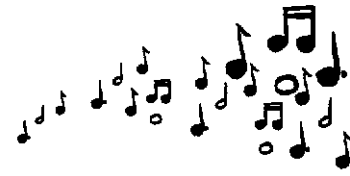
'You haven't even heard her,' said Liam.

''Course I have,' said Cat.

Cat couldn't have heard her or she couldn't say she was

crap, but at that point, I couldn't care less whether Cat liked her or not. All I wanted to do was get to the end of the day without another teacher arching their eyebrows at me when they found out my name. Sometimes the other girls looked at me like they might come over and say something to me, even try to be friendly maybe, but Cat's snarly face kept them pretty much at bay. Maybe Miss O'Neill thought I might be the one to tame her. Well, she was wrong.

However, at the end of the second day, when I said, "Bye,' Cat said. 'See ya tomorrow.' I nearly fell over. For her it was positively friendly.



Four

After school, I went to the library which turned out to be quite close to our flat. It was one of those new-fangled ones with lots of glass that pretend they aren't really libraries because they think nobody wants to go to a library these days. It wasn't even called a library. It's called 'The Knowledge Store'.

Anyway, I like these new ones. They've got tons of DVDs, CDs and loads and loads of computers. Unfortunately they tend to have the same old crabby women working in them – like the one today who told me to be quiet when I was at the computer. I wasn't talking, but ever since that boy Liam had mentioned Bella Armstrong, her song 'Soul Searcher' was running through my head. You know the way you can't get a song out your head?

Bella Armstrong has this way of seeming to start way up somewhere in the blue, blue sky and then swooping down. Then her voice sort of digs through the earth into this dark, warm place. She doesn't have one of those horrible breathy female voices that go all quavery and make them sound helpless. Hers is strong even when she's singing about something sad like losing your boyfriend. I don't know what it's like to lose your boyfriend (I've never had one), but I'm sure it feels like you feel when you listen to this song.

Anyway, I love this song and I couldn't help humming it to myself while I was cruising various websites. The

librarian (or maybe I should call her the 'storekeeper') didn't seem to appreciate this musical accompaniment and told me I could sing for my supper elsewhere. I thought this was a bit rich given all the pinging and zinging coming from computer games that kids were playing almost next to me. I stopped for a while but the song kept bursting through when I wasn't thinking and every time she gave me the big glare.

My Save the Tiger website has had thirty-eight hits since I last checked a few days ago. I started it three years ago and sometimes I think that maybe I've outgrown it. It's sort of a kid thing, but I just love tigers and through the website I exchange pictures with people all over the world. My favourite tiger is the *panthera tigris altaica.* Otherwise known as the Siberian tiger. There are only 150–450 of them left. They are so huge and powerful. It practically makes me cry when I think of them, all alone, padding through the forests of Russia. And when there is news of one of them being killed, well, I feel s-o-o-o depressed for days. But today I found a great photo in my mailbox of a Siberian from this girl, Erin, who lives in Minnesota in America. It took my mind off the horrors of these first days at school.

I wasn't in any hurry to get back to the flat so I sort of wandered down the High Street. I was humming again, but my mind had somehow switched into another Bella Armstrong song – a real upbeat one about getting ready to go out on a Saturday night. Then without realising it, I must have started singing it, because suddenly an arm was thrust in front of me holding a bunch of flowers.

'Singing like that deserves a bouquet!' said a voice. An

old crackly voice. A bit like old leather. It belonged to a slightly hunched old guy with a big grin and a missing tooth. He had one of those Sherlock Holmes hats that was sitting sideways on his head so the two peaks stuck out on either side of his head rather than front to back.

'Go on! These are for you!' he said. 'I love to hear a voice singing a happy song like that.'

I think I must have just stood there, looking gormless and surprised, because he said, 'What's the matter? Would you rather have some lilies? I don't think they suit the song, but you can have lilies if you'd rather.'

He pointed to a big bucketful of lilies that was part of the display on his flower stall.

'No,' I said. 'These are lovely. But, I'm sorry, I don't have any money.'

'Forget your money,' he said. 'These are a present.'

'Thank you,' I managed to squawk. I breathed in this really heady smell. These were potent.

'What are they?'

'Freesias,' he smiled.

'My parents used to have a flower shop,' I said.

'Then you should know what they are.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'Well, enjoy them. And thanks for the song!'

I felt a bit silly walking down the street carrying a big bunch of flowers. But not nearly half as silly as I did a few minutes later. I was thinking about the old man and not paying much attention to anyone around me when I came upon two people in front of me walking along with their arms around each other, talking together and occasionally kissing. That was yucky enough, but a moment later I

realised they were my parents! Sometimes my parents are so over the top. They act like newlyweds, but they aren't. My aunt says they're stuck in their teenage years. She disapproves of them, like I do.

They were walking really slowly. I felt really dumb having to walk along slowly behind them so I decided to pass them. They probably wouldn't notice me anyway. Just as I had pulled in front of them, and surprise, surprise, they hadn't noticed me (I put it down to the unfamiliar uniform), I could feel someone coming along beside me who must have also just passed them. When I glanced towards the person – it was Cat.

'Get a load of those two! Aren't they a bit old for that?' she said in an ultra loud voice so they could hear. And of course they did, and of course they looked in our direction.

'Flower!' cried my mum.

'You know her?' said Cat.

'How was school, darling?'