

My
Not So
Functional
Family

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ZAFFRE

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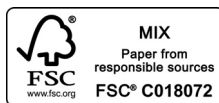
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CHAPTER 1

Winston was like every other home town in our collective history in that it was incredibly dull but had the power to both enchant and provoke regression in its former inhabitants. It was the beginning of spring so it was a particularly dangerous time to return – the bitumen was warm enough to give off the smell of your childhood when the rain hit and every flower seemed to be in technicolour.

If that was not enough to give a 28-year-old woman whiplash from the nostalgia, Claudia Carter had returned that September to get married. Despite being the perfectly average age to do such a perfectly average thing, Claudia was feeling radical. The idea of marriage still seemed so foreign to her that it was almost subversive.

This was just one of the many ridiculous things that crossed her mind as she sat on a kitchen island in her mother's house, listening to her mother cataloguing her younger sister's flaws.

‘And you know, out of all of you, Poppy was the one I breastfed the longest,’ Rachel told Claudia, ‘so it’s bullshit that it fosters a bond.’ Rachel stabbed viciously at the sausages browning in the pan in front of her as she spoke. Rachel subscribed to the idea that cooking dinner was some form of martyrdom.

Rachel’s list of grievances was familiar. Her youngest daughter Poppy did not phone her ‘Mother’. Poppy never said sorry. Poppy expected everyone to do the things she wanted to do, go to the places she wanted to go for dinner. Poppy always said exactly what she thought. (‘That skirt is ugly. Why don’t you cut your hair? Your best friend is a monster.’)

The truth being that Poppy was – in fact – just like her mother.

At the core of Rachel’s gripes, although she would be insulted if it was ever actually suggested to her, was that Poppy did not ask permission to do anything, and even though they were all adults, her children were all expected to ask permission. Claudia did a good job of pretending to ask permission. Poppy, on the other hand, never bothered pretending anything.

‘How long did you breastfeed her for?’ Claudia asked abruptly.

Her mother looked at her blankly. ‘What? Oh, eighteen months.’

Claudia snorted. ‘So she could say words and you were still putting your tit in her mouth?’ She knew it was somehow wrong to be grossed out, probably something to do with the patriarchy, but it was too juicy. So she filed it away for further mocking at a later date with a more receptive audience.

Poppy was due to arrive tomorrow; their brother was already here, upstairs, avoiding all women, and Claudia’s best friend

Nora would arrive in just a few days. Claudia worried that this would be the spark to quickly engulf the bone-dry kindling of the family dynamics. Everything a woman feels for her sister – protectiveness, envy, passion, competition – is magnified twenty-fold when her best friend is around.

And the longer they all hung around Winston the more they would all regress. There would be screaming at each other. Last time they'd met up, Claudia had screamed at Poppy, telling her that (at twenty-five) she had fucked her life up and destroyed Mum and Dad. So Poppy had thrown a wine glass that had shattered all over Claudia's chest. The next morning Poppy had got up and left and they had not spoken since.

And now Claudia was getting married in a week.

Last to arrive would be lovely Dylan, a crucial element for the marriage. His presence would help diffuse any tension between the siblings. That was the kind of man he was: soothing, reassuringly sane.

Claudia was perched at a solid oak island, so close to the gas stove she could reach out and grab her mother if she wanted. The island was too big for the space, of course – it always had been – but Rachel had fallen in love with it, and when she fell in love with something, her steely determination to make it work could only be worn down over painful decades. The kitchen was old but all the utensils were brand new, bought on a glossy-magazine-abetted rampage. She had not bothered to replace the stove, although it was entirely possible it was older than her. But her knives, toaster and kettle all matched and all gleamed.

Claudia had spent her late teenage years living in the house, an inheritance from Rachel's mother, but today she was not

comfortable here. Why wasn't she comfortable here? When had this town stopped being her home?

'I thought you would be more excited.' Rachel glanced across the kitchen island and eyed Claudia, who kept her head down. She was fiddling with her ring.

'I am!' Claudia responded brightly.

'Your dress is beautiful. You're going to look beautiful, don't worry about that,' her mother said. 'And you look very slim, you've always been so slim,' Rachel continued, admiringly.

'Yes, well,' Claudia said, picking at her ring again, before looking up and smiling sweetly back at her mum. 'I've always had such motivation.'

Her mother let the comment blow past her: a piece of interloping dust, never to be thought of again. Rachel had endured a lifetime of commentary from her own mother about her weight, who had endured a lifetime of commentary from *her* mother. You might as well feel guilty about the sky being blue if you were going to feel guilty about teaching a girl her size mattered.

Despite being in her sixties, Rachel remained a very attractive woman. She was the only mother at the high school gates who had not conceded her femininity by cutting her hair short; she wore her silver-streaked hair carefully styled with three blow-dries a week. Sometimes, just looking at her mother's figure made Claudia want to sit down, contemplating the sheer amount of effort that went into maintaining it. The daily cycling, the aqua-aerobics classes, the pacing around the house with weights strapped to her ankles, the measuring out of portions. Rachel was the kind of thin that required an immense amount of time and effort; daily self-denials that ensured she remained under

sixty kilograms when over sixty years of age. On top of all of that Rachel was just pretty – radiant, even. This hadn't quite been passed on to any of her daughters, who had been polluted by their father's genes, their eyes slightly too far apart and mouths too narrow. Even with youth on their side they did not feel they had a patch on their mother, something they had each made an uneasy peace with towards the end of their teenage years.

Rachel shifted from one bare and pedicured foot to the other. 'I'm still not sure about the bridesmaid dresses you know,' she said.

Claudia exhaled; she had not wanted a bridal party but her mother had called her sobbing about the prospect of her sisters being left out of the wedding. 'It will look so odd if you are standing at the front of the church with nobody around you,' she had wailed down the phone, so Claudia had acquiesced, just as she had by agreeing to a church venue – she had wanted a garden wedding – and to holding it in Winston. She and Dylan had originally wanted to marry in a coastal village halfway between the towns in which they'd grown up.

'If I'm going to have bridesmaids, I definitely do not want to go the full matchy-matchy,' Claudia told her mother firmly.

'Well, just in case you change your mind, I popped down to the dress shop and put a dress like Poppy's on hold in Zoe's size as well. I think when you see them standing next to each other at the dress shop you will see how funny it looks if they are in different dresses to each other.'

'You really shouldn't have done that.' Claudia emphasised the 'shouldn't'. 'I'm not worried about how their dresses are going to look.'

‘Well, what are you worried about then?’ her mother asked her.

‘What do you mean?’

‘If you’re not worried about how the dresses are going to look, why are you so agitated?’

‘I’m not agitated. I’m just sitting here.’

‘Well, since you’re not agitated and you’re not doing anything useful, can you finish these sausages?’

Claudia took the tongs from her mother and watched her walk to the bathroom for what she knew would be the precise length of time it took for dinner to be finished. Rachel might have seen the martyrdom potential in cooking dinner, but that did not mitigate the tediousness of the task.

Claudia started turning the sausages with her left hand so she could see her glinting engagement ring, picked out and paid for by her at an antique fair, almost on a whim, when she was feeling particularly dreary about her job and prospects. It had been so long since she had felt excitement in her life, but the most drastic thing she could think of was getting engaged. She didn’t even bother to hint to Dylan about what she wanted, she just gave the box to him and told him to produce it at a nice time in the next month. Dylan, who was always happy as long as Claudia was happy, obliged a few weeks later.

She did not know why she wore an engagement ring.

She tried to turn over how she felt about the marriage in her mind, as she had done so many times before in her own kitchen, her friends’ kitchens (even on one occasion her boss’s kitchen), in the shower almost every morning and anytime she was in a supermarket, a task so mundane it regularly sent her into a meditative state. When she had bought the engagement ring

she had not really thought much past what time of the day she would announce it on Instagram for maximum likes. Claudia might have thought she and Dylan would just be engaged forever, or even that it was a bit of a joke, or that she would just feel more excited. But it had turned out that she didn't really think she would get married, and she had felt like a spectator through the past year. She loved Dylan, but when she wore the ring she felt like a traitor. Then she felt indulgent for feeling like a traitor. She had never actively wanted to get married. When she was a teenager she'd revelled in brazenly describing it as an 'empty constitution' after once mishearing a teacher who had been asked about its place as a traditional institution.

Claudia had always been the one for whom events just happened: always in the right place at the right time – a geospatial and temporal nook that never required more than a minimum expenditure of effort. She had fallen into a well-paid job for a boutique bank when she was nineteen, she had earned her degree in Economics while hardly showing up for class, and had been promoted almost as soon as the Dean-signed document was in her hands. She had met Dylan and had a blissed-out few years and now she was getting married, having barely made a decision along the way.

And now here she was in her mother's simultaneously posh and decrepit kitchen, dreading the arrival of her sisters and wondering if the next decade of her life was going to look exactly like it did now.

'Hi sweetie, hi doll-face, hi SNOOKUMS.'

Her brother Phinn was doing a pitch-perfect impersonation of their aunt Mary. The aunt who always hugged the girls a little

too long and liked to look them up and down while telling them they were looking healthy. Phinn leaned over and bear-hugged Claudia, lifting her off her feet, as if to underline the point.

Once back on earth, she handed the tongs to him. 'Finish these.'

He took them good-naturedly.

'Settling in well? Ready for all your dumb girl craic?' he said cheerfully.

'What exactly do you think is so painfully girlish about this week? Both of us are getting married you know.'

'Yeah yeah, I'm sure the focus on Dylan in all of this has been entirely equal; nobody has made more of a big deal about it for you, I'm sure,' he said, mildly sarcastic.

'If you mock me I will cut myself,' said Claudia, reverting to a joke born years before in the disinfected halls of the local hospital, when she'd been having a particularly tough time. Their oldest sister Zoe had swept into town whispering to Phinn that she'd had great difficulty choosing a wardrobe that said 'concerned but effortlessly elegant sister'. That night she had refused to give Claudia the remote control and, without missing a beat, Claudia delivered the po-faced threat about cutting herself. After a moment of leaden silence, the trio collapsed into laughter. Since then it had become a running joke.

Phinn chose not to react this time and looked over the top of Claudia's head. 'Have you heard the latest?' he said, all the while looking at the doorway for interlopers.

'You finally got laid this year?'

'No. Well, not that, none of your business.'

'You know what you want to do with your life?'

‘Unfortunately for you, no.’

‘God has called you. You weren’t in.’

‘No . . . Seriously . . . Old mate is back at it again.’

Phinn did not need to explain any further. The recent reconciliation between their father and his girlfriend, Lisa, had always been fragile to say the least.

‘This is none of our business,’ Claudia finally said.

Phinn gave a grunt of assent. ‘But you know who is making it their business.’

Claudia groaned. ‘Rachel.’

‘Yep, none other than our esteemed mother, and who else?’

Claudia stared at the ceiling, stretching out her arms so she could do a full body groan. ‘Poppy.’ She hadn’t needed to guess; she’d known straight away which of her sisters it would be.

‘Award yourself a PhD in Juvenile Behaviour and Failure to Thrive as an Adult and call yourself Doctor Carter because you just scored 100 per cent in the “could our family behave more idiotically?” exam!’

Phinn turned the stove off and moved the pan of slightly too-crisp sausages to the side.

‘What are the briefing notes?’ Claudia asked.

‘Apparently shit-for-brain’s car has been seen outside some local footy player’s house – and may I put in an aside here, does this woman have any imagination? And Mum thought it wise to let Poppy know, so now Poppy’s apparently preparing for the warpath upon arrival.’

‘Hmmm, that’s odd. They’re meant to be on the same team. Mum was gleefully going through Poppy’s shortcomings earlier. She was even referring to me as the “good one”.’

Phinn scowled. 'There's more.'

Claudia braced herself with a tight smile.

'Poppy is already here,' Phinn told her.

Claudia propped herself up on her elbows. 'What do you mean? Where?'

'She arrived this afternoon and has set up camp at Dad's house so they can have their crucial favourite parent-favourite child time while we pay our dues here.'

'I knew this was going to be a disaster. Why did I agree to this whole shitfight?'

'Hardly a shitfight, dear,' he responded, grinning. 'I would say this whole situation is utterly fucking predictable.'



Phinn leaned against the doorframe, allowing his shoulders to fill the space in the way of someone who is sizeable enough to have thrown down a few people in his time but not so big that he invariably becomes the target of every dickhead with eight schooners under their belt at any given time. You never want to be the first, the best or the biggest. It's too much pressure.

He was comfortable in his skin. This was partly because of his medium size, which precluded him from having to prove too much in the schoolyard, and partly because of his three sisters. When your youth is spent playing the fourth Spice Girl, you shed anything resembling self-consciousness fairly quickly.

He thought about the week stretching in front of him and immediately felt weary. Not that it would ever show. He kept the same measured disposition whatever the turn of events. He could be relied upon never to lose his temper, but what swam

beneath the surface, what was really going on under his dark eyes was never quite understood by the women around him. And there were a lot of women around him.

He gave his mother a kiss as she squeezed past him, and he lazily picked up the knives and forks before he was told. He was already exhausted but at least tonight was just his sister and his mother. Claudia would not fight with Rachel and Rachel knew better than to pick on her. Her excitement at having two children at home at the same time would be enough to make a pleasant evening. It would be another day or even two before Rachel would be driven mad by towels left in the wrong place and yoghurt tubs with missing lids in the fridge.

Phinn had laid down the third plate on the table next to the kitchen when his mother crossly peeked over his shoulder. 'Where's Mary's plate?' Phinn did not sigh. He rarely revealed his exasperation to his mother.

Claudia was not so circumspect. 'I thought it was just us.'

'Your aunt wants to see you – she might be coming around.' Rachel's tone stopped any complaining from Claudia. The ingredients for a successful evening were in place but it still turned on Rachel's whims.

'Well, these sausages are going cold and I have the salad so let's eat.'

The three sat down in the formation that had existed for almost thirty years. Rachel at the head of the table, Claudia at her left, with her brother sitting across from her. If the other two had been there they would have sat in the next seats down, the oldest, Zoe, next to Phinn, and Poppy next to Claudia. Phinn reflected on an article he had seen on how the Queen fed her

waiting corgis by seniority, but, as always, thought better of mentioning it.

Rachel bowed her head for a quick prayer, more out of habit than any real devotion, and the three soon were enjoying an easy banter. The camaraderie was built upon an unofficial truce between mother and daughter, enacted years before when they had both decided to stop fighting one another. They had never discussed the reasons, but Rachel assumed that Claudia might have realised that her mother was actually not the most idiotic person she had ever met, and perhaps her mistakes were just as forgivable as anyone else's.

Tonight, unusually, Rachel privately indulged in what was for her a very risky thought: life was easier with just two children. Claudia and Phinn would not fight, almost could not fight. They were not rude to her; they didn't roll their eyes when they thought she wasn't looking. Sometimes she thought they actually liked her. Back when they were all hers, a bunch of still-random cells sitting in the bottom of her belly, causing her breasts and stomach to swell, Rachel had wondered a lot of things. She had wondered if they would be a boy or a girl, if they would have dark hair and light eyes, if they would be smart, if they would make friends easily. But it had never occurred to her that they might not like her. She had never wondered if they would like her. And she missed the bliss of being so naïve.

'Why didn't Dylan come home with you?' Rachel finally asked her daughter.

'Well, I thought it would be nice to hang around without him.'

'You thought it would be nice to hang around without your fiancé?'

Claudia snorted. ‘Mum, it’s fine to not want to be with someone all the time, to be your own self. You have to keep a bit of yourself for yourself.’

‘Why?’ Rachel seemed genuinely puzzled. She was one of eight children, she had married young, she’d had four children. Being a family member had always been full-time work for her; it was an alien concept to be by herself for any extended period of time, let alone to actively seek out seclusion.

‘It’s good for you. You can’t be defined by your partner, you lose yourself a bit. You’ve always got to be able to survive by yourself.’

‘Claudia Carter, are you already setting yourself up for divorce?’

Claudia started laughing. She knew her mother was not angry, but sometimes she could not believe how oblivious she was.

‘Don’t you think you learned that lesson?’ asked Claudia. ‘Don’t you wish you’d held on to yourself a bit more?’

Rachel thought for a moment. ‘I never felt like I lost myself. Certainly in the beginning I would’ve liked to have been with my husband in the week leading up to the wedding.’

Phinn sniffed. ‘Claudia’s problem is she wants to be adored and she wants to be left alone: it’s profoundly inconsistent.’

Claudia had only a split second to decide whether she should take offence, but found herself laughing instead. ‘He’ll be here in a few days and you can all calm your farm.’

The tranquillity of the evening was shattered by the sound of the door swinging open. Claudia knew who it was from the rhythm of the footsteps. Poppy appeared in front of them,

leaning across Rachel to take the rest of her sausage from her plate and waving hello with her mouth full.

She wore R.M. Williams boots and torn stockings potentially made specifically to annoy Rachel. She was taller than the rest of the women in her family, and wore her dirty-brown chin-length hair brushed out of any real shape. Despite her cowlick she had a fringe and the overall effect was a bush framing a face that always seemed to be tinged pink. Her eyes widened as she stopped chewing, momentarily enjoying the suspense.

‘Hello fellow fuckheads!’

‘Hello,’ Phinn responded, deadpan, but Rachel was already standing up to hug her and deliver the habitual lecture.

‘Why do you talk like that? You didn’t learn it here.’

Claudia didn’t say anything. If there was an upper hand to keep it was importantly maintained by refusing to give her younger sister anything to react to. But then she noticed her bright pink socks dotted with teddy bears.

‘Are those my socks?’ she asked as Poppy grinned at her over their mother’s shoulder.



Rachel’s house was old but solid and had been subjected to more than one harebrained renovation. Spread over three storeys, it had rooms that led into other rooms which led into bathrooms which led into dead ends, and there were odd built-in cupboards all over the place, with knobs too high and hidden doors. The siblings had given up on any notion of having their own rooms years before, and now on trips home they slept in whichever

room they came across that was still free, sometimes still forced into beds together when Rachel was too enthusiastic with her guest list.

Claudia dragged her feet up one stair at a time, the slow steps a way of bracing herself. Earlier she had staked out a room for her visit, but now when she opened the sliding door she was confronted with Poppy, sprawled across the bed, her boots still on each foot as she lay on top of the doona flipping through Claudia's diary.

Claudia snatched it from her hands, but not with enough righteous vigour: after all, she was well aware that Poppy read the dog-eared notebook she used as a diary every time she saw her.

'You know, if someone read your diary without knowing you, they would think you were single, did not have a brother and completely hated your sisters. It's borderline obsessive about Zoe and me in there.'

'The only thing I care more about than myself and the only thing I hate enough to write about is you two; it is a classic Rachel move to go straight for this you know,' Claudia said, putting the diary back at the bottom of her now empty duffel bag, its other contents spread across the floor following Poppy's arrival.

'Some interesting stuff in there about your wedding.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you have a cigarette?'

'Yeah.'

The sisters changed into bed socks and Claudia stuffed two cigarettes into her bra before they crept downstairs in tandem.

Poppy peeked around the corner. 'Clear, Mum's watching *The X Factor*,' she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

In coordinated movements honed over many years in another house when they were much smaller, they silently crept past the living-room doorway and didn't speak again until they had unlatched the back door, closed it behind them and were standing beside the two wheelie bins in the part of the garden that was hidden from sight of either the kitchen or verandah.

Claudia lit each cigarette in her mouth and handed one to her little sister.

'We are the last twenty-somethings in the world still smoking.'

'We are also the last twenty-somethings in the world still scared of our mother.'

'We're not scared of her, we respect her! I've told you!'

Claudia smirked.

'So what's wrong with you?' Poppy finally asked, breathing a steady column of smoke in the general direction of a frangipani tree.

Claudia shrugged. 'I don't know if I want to get married.'

Poppy shuddered with the visible effort of keeping her laughter silent. 'And this is the week you've finally thought you can do something about it?'

'I can't quite put my finger on it. I love Dylan. Well, I am pretty sure I do. But is this it? What if I broke up with him and met a minor royal, some cousin of Wills and Harry, and he was my next boyfriend?'

'Well, you couldn't marry him either.'

'Catholics are allowed to marry into the royal family now,' Claudia told her sister.

‘But back to your actual country town wedding, where, at the very least, there will still be a very nice picture of the Queen near the pokies of the pub everyone goes to afterwards.’

‘HMMMMMM. Yes. Classic first-world problem here. I love Dylan. Sometimes I adore him. I like my job. I like feeling powerful.’

‘You’re not powerful – your boss runs the bank, not you.’

‘Thanks for the reminder. I like all of this. Nineteen-year-old Claudia would look at this life and just be fucking ecstatic. I pulled it off, I really did. I shook off the dirt of where I came from, I made a life for myself where this town doesn’t matter, our parents do not matter, even you don’t matter. I fell in love, and it was all going well until I decided to get married.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I have become such a magnificent class traitor I can now dwell on this lovely life and really indulge in the superfluous question of whether I am happy. It’s triggered a really weird mind-frame for me. Or maybe my crisis triggered my decision to marry Dylan. I keep wondering if this is it; if this is the right path for me or if I am giving up other opportunities, places to travel, even maybe a better relationship. It’s like the clichéd Aesop’s fable about the dog, who is running off with a stolen bone, who stops and sees his reflection. I have a great, juicy bone – say, marry Dylan – but then what? Is there another bone? So I take the bone that is marrying Dylan and miss out on the bone that is a dream job somewhere because now I have to consider someone else. In the fable, believing that the dog in the reflection has a better bone, he opens his mouth to bark at it and the dumb dog loses his own bone and is left with nothing. The

story's moral in Olde English is that "the one who all coveteth, oft he loses all".'

'You mean like in the Devo song?'

'What? "Whip It"? Isn't that about leaving out cream?'

'No, no. "Freedom of Choice",' Poppy started humming. 'You know, about the dog finding two bones in ancient Rome and dropping dead after going in circles between the two.'

Claudia stubbed out her cigarette and turned to creep back into the house. 'So freedom of choice means I drop dead?' she whispered over her shoulder.

Poppy smirked and thrust her hips aggressively. 'Maybe. Or just maybe you're the one who needs a bone.'