




BEFORE

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FINN



My name is Finn, as in Huckleberry, and there is nothing wrong with me. I know this because my dad has tried very hard to find something wrong with me, but I did OK in all the tests. It turns out I am just weird, and they don't have a test for that yet, or, if they do, my dad hasn't heard about it.

My surname is Rook-Carter, which also sounds weird because it is double-barrelled (which is the proper way to say it's two names stuck together). Mum said they did it so that my name had a bit of her and a bit of Dad in it. Only now they're getting divorced and they're fighting over who I'm going to live with, so I don't know what's going to happen to my name. Maybe I'll be Finn Rook on Mondays to Wednesdays, Finn Carter on Thursdays and Fridays and Finn Rook-Carter at the weekends when I switch between them.

When I say Mum and Dad are fighting over me, I don't





mean actual fighting, like a *Star Wars* battle, I mean they are arguing a lot and they both have solicitors who write letters to each other that make them angry. Jayden McGreevy in my class used to write notes to me, which made me angry when I was in year four, but my mum went in to school with one of them and he got in trouble and had to write another note saying he was sorry, even though I knew he didn't mean it.

Mum and Dad have both told me that the solicitors cost a lot of money, which seems stupid because if they asked Jayden, I'm pretty sure he'd write letters to make them angry for a bag of Haribos.

I can't eat Haribos because they've got gelatine in and me and Mum are vegetarians and the kids at school don't get that because you can't see bits of dead pigs or cows in sweets, so it's another thing that makes me weird.

I keep a list of things about me that they think are weird. There are actually loads of things, but people always do top-ten lists, so this is the top-ten list of the things they seem to think are most weird:

1. Not liking football or being able to name a single player
2. Not eating Haribos
3. Having curly, red hair and not normal straight, short brown hair like them
4. Not having a mobile phone
5. Not doing gaming
6. Never having been to a McDonald's





7. Liking gardening and my hero being Alan Titchmarsh
8. Playing the ukulele
9. Not liking football (they think it's so weird, I've put it in twice)
10. Having a bee rucksack

On the last one, I don't mean having a yellow and black rucksack in the shape of a bee. I had loads of those when I was little – Mum got me a different one every year – but on my tenth birthday she gave me a grey rucksack that had bees printed on. She said it was more grown up. Dad rolled his eyes when she said that, only he didn't let her see because they are still pretending to be nice to each other in front of me and especially on birthdays. I took it to school the next week and the kids still laughed at it, so I guess Dad was right.

Anyway, it doesn't matter. The way I see it, if you're going to be weird, you may as well be weird all over, rather than think there's a little bit of you that's not weird, because they'll still laugh at you anyway.

And when I go to secondary school in September, it's going to be a whole lot worse. Mum and Dad did a lot of arguing about that as well. Dad said I couldn't go to the school most of the other kids in my class are going to, because I would get 'eaten alive at a comprehensive in Halifax'. He didn't say that in front of me, he said it in one of the arguments I overheard. They thought I was practising my ukulele in my bedroom and I was but then I had to go for a wee and I heard them arguing in the kitchen (kitchens are rubbish for arguing secretly in





because they haven't got a door and I don't get why they don't know that). When Dad said I would get 'eaten alive', Mum's voice went funny and at first I thought it was because she is a vegetarian and didn't approve of anyone being eaten but then she said sometimes it was like he was embarrassed to have me as a son and he said he wasn't embarrassed, just realistic about the fact that I wouldn't fit in and she said that was why she wanted to home-educate me and he did a snorty sort of laugh and said I needed to go to a good school, not have half-baked lessons with her at the kitchen table, and she started crying and I couldn't hear anything else, so I went back to playing 'You Are My Sunshine' on my ukulele.

A couple of weeks later I had to go and play my ukulele and the piano at a different, old-fashioned-looking school near Ilkley on a Saturday morning and not long after that, Mum and Dad sat me down and told me I had got a place at that school from September. Mum had her smiley face on and nodded a lot but didn't say anything, which I think meant it was Dad's idea. She said not to tell anyone the name of the school because not everyone could afford to go to a school like that and they might not understand how music scholarships work.

I did tell Lottie, who's my best friend at school, well, my only friend actually, and she googled the school and said the real reason they wanted to keep it a secret was because it was a private school for posho boys like Tory MPs' sons. She knows about things like that because her mum is a Labour councillor and once sat next to Jeremy Corbyn in a soup kitchen for the homeless (her mum had made the soup and Jeremy Corbyn





was visiting. I thought it was wrong that Jeremy Corbyn ate the soup when she'd made it for homeless people, but I didn't tell Lottie that).

'Finn, do you want to come down and help me with the muffins?'

It is Mum's voice calling up the stairs. She thinks baking is a 'fun thing to do together' after I've come home from school. To be honest, pretty much anything is fun compared to school and if it gets me out of having to do homework, I don't mind.

When I get downstairs, I see that the ingredients are already out on the kitchen table. We are making the apricot, orange and bran muffins as usual. That is another weird thing about me. When they have charity bake sales at school, the cakes I take in don't look like the other kids' cakes. Mine are a sort of orangey-brown colour, instead of being chocolatey, and they don't have icing on or sprinkles or anything like that. I suppose that's why none of the other kids ever buy them. Mine are always the ones left at the end. Sometimes my teacher buys one, probably because she feels sorry for me, and sometimes we've even bought our own ones back at the end of the day, to save them being wasted.

Mum smiles at me. 'Right, are you being the Honey Monster as usual?' she says as she pops an apron over my head. Sometimes she talks to me like I'm still nine. I don't think she realises she's doing it.

'Yeah,' I say, smiling at her as she hands me the jar of honey from the table.

We have made these muffins together so many times that





we both know exactly what to do without looking at the recipe or anything. I do all the measuring of the ingredients because otherwise Mum just guesses, and I don't like that.

'So, how was school today?' asks Mum as I tip the flour into the bowl.

'OK,' I reply. I have worked out that this is the best way of answering the question. If I say it was great, she knows I am lying. 'OK' is a way of saying I didn't enjoy it, but I wasn't beaten up or anything.

'What's your class reading at the moment?' Mum asks, as she tucks a long red curl behind her ear.

'Nothing. We're just doing English SATs practice papers,' I reply.

'What, all the time?'

'Yeah. Apart from when we're doing maths SATs practice papers.'

Mum shakes her head and does something funny with her lips. She doesn't agree with SATs. She told me at the beginning of year six that I didn't have to do them, but I knew I would be the only one who didn't, and I get fed up of being different from everyone else all the time. That's why I said I'd do them.

Mum lets me crack the eggs into the bowl. I make chicken noises as I do it. It always makes Mum laugh, which is why I do it. She starts doing chicken noises too and funny chicken arms as she dances around the kitchen. I like it when she is like this. She used to be like this a lot more than she is these days. I start doing the funny chicken dance too. We are both doing it and laughing so much that we don't hear Dad's key in



the front door. We don't even realise he is home until we see him standing in the kitchen looking at us with one eyebrow slightly raised and a kind of half-smile on his face.

'Hello, what's all this then?' he says, ruffling my hair (everyone ruffles my hair, there is something about curly hair that seems to work like a magnet to people's hands). He is looking at me. He doesn't really look at Mum when he says anything, even if he is partly talking to her.

'We're doing the crazy chicken dance,' I say.

'Any particular reason?' he asks.

'Because it's funny,' I reply.

Me and Mum do it some more. Dad looks like he feels a little bit left out of the whole thing. He has never joined in with the baking, but he has always eaten what we made and when I was little, he used to take my muffins or cookies to work and take photos of them before he ate them to show me when he came home. I can't remember the last time he did that.

'Right. And have you done your revision yet or are you doing it later?'

Mum stops dancing and stares at him. It's like someone has stuck a big pin in our happiness bubble and made it go pop.

'We're having a bit of fun, Martin. If that's still allowed.'

'Of course it is.'

'Right. Well please don't spoil everything by mentioning revision the second you walk through the door? It's like you don't want to see that he's been having fun when you're not here.'

They have gone into the talking-about-me-like-I'm-not-here



thing they do. I don't know if I actually become invisible to them or if they think my ears stop working when they argue or what.

'You know that's not true.'

'So why bring up revision? He gets enough pressure about the stupid SATs at school, he doesn't need it here.'

I wipe my hands on my apron, even though they aren't actually messy. I cough as I do it to remind them that I'm still here. They both look at me, then look down at their feet.

'Right, well I'll leave you to get on with it then,' says Dad, putting a made-up smile on his face. For a moment, I think he is going to ruffle my hair again, so I step forward and pick up the wooden spoon. Dad leaves the kitchen without saying anything else.

'He didn't even ask if he could have one later,' I say.

'No,' replies Mum. 'He didn't.'

We go back to the baking but neither of us do the crazy chicken dance or the laughing again. When we put the muffins in the oven, I stare at them for a bit and wonder whether the arguing will have knocked all the air and laughter out of them, and they won't taste as good as usual. But later, when they have cooled down and Mum brings one up to my room on a plate, I find out they taste exactly the same as usual, which makes me feel a bit better.

I lie in bed that night, listening to them arguing downstairs. I can't hear the words, only the spikiness of their voices. They didn't always have spiky voices. I remember hearing sparkly voices and tinkly laughter. I don't know where they went.





Sometimes I feel like hunting around the house for them, in case they've left them in a cupboard or something and can't remember where they are. I wish I could find them again and give them back, so I don't need to listen to the spiky voices any more.

It never used to be like this. When I was little, we'd all go on walks together and Dad would tell jokes and Mum would groan, but be smiling at the same time, and we would stop and look at flowers and I would collect leaves and things and when we came home, Mum would help me make a collage and Dad would say nice things about it and everybody was smiley and there was no spikiness at all. At some point that I can't quite remember, it stopped being like that and started getting more like this and now it's a lot like this and I don't like it at all.

I turn over in bed and bang my head down on the pillow. The spiky voices have stopped, and they are back to the spiky silence now. Sometimes the silence is worse because, whatever they might think, you can still hear it. And what I want more than anything else in the world is to stop the arguing and the silences and make it go back to how it used to be: Mum's laughter tinkling about the house, her singing coming from whatever room she was in. I can even remember my giggles when I snuggled in between Mum and Dad in bed in the mornings when I was little and they started tickling me. I am very ticklish – just like Dad. Me and Mum used to tickle him to make him giggle. I want us to go back to being a family that make happy sounds again, but I don't know how to make



that happen. I know how to make apricot, orange and bran muffins and how to play the ukulele and stupid stuff like that, but I don't know how to do the one thing I really want to do.

I arrive in the playground at school. No one runs over to say hello, but no one runs over to call me a freak or kick me in the shins either, so I suppose that is an OK start to the day. Mum is hovering by the school gate with a weird look on her face, the same look she used to give our cat Atticus when we left him in the cattery before we went on holiday. I don't know why; I mean it's not like she's going to come back and find me all meowing and skinny because I haven't eaten for a week. She's only actually leaving me for ten minutes because she is coming to our celebration assembly. We have one every Friday morning and the parents get invited and Mum usually comes because she is self-employed, and people don't tend to book appointments for this early on a Friday morning. Mum is a homeopath and aromatherapist, which means she makes people feel better without them having to take drugs or go to hospital. I am not supposed to talk about it because some people don't believe in it. I wonder if it's a bit like God. We don't believe in God but I still have to sing about him in assembly and yet we've never once sung about a homeopath, which doesn't seem fair.

Mum doesn't agree with some bits of the celebration assemblies, like when Olivia Worthington was presented with her certificate for going scuba diving in the Maldives during the Easter holidays, and she doesn't like that they play 'Simply the Best' by Tina Turner at the start of it, because she says 'it

shouldn't be about being better than all the rest' (she sent an email to Mrs Ratcliffe suggesting they use 'Proud' by Heather Small instead but she never got a reply).

Anyway, Mum said she wouldn't miss this particular celebration assembly for the world because I am going to be playing the ukulele. I passed my Grade Three in music last week with a distinction and Mum told Mrs Kerrigan, my teacher, and she said I could play in assembly as 'an inspiration to others'. I don't think Mrs Kerrigan went to a school like ours because if she had done, she would have known that none of the other kids are going to be even the tiniest bit inspired by me playing the ukulele. I thought it would be rude to tell her that though, which is why I have my ukulele over my shoulder and am feeling slightly sick.

I wish I had someone to talk to, but Lottie never arrives until the last second before the bell goes and sometimes quite a few seconds afterwards. She's only ever had a mum to look after her, and Lottie's mum Rachel is also a health visitor, a member of Calderdale Council and volunteers at the soup kitchen, which Lottie says is why she is always late and in a rush and they have rubbish food at home. Lottie doesn't seem to mind but I would. I don't like being late. And I like Mum's cooking. I hope my mum won't get like that after the divorce. I glance over at her. She is still standing on her own near the gate. It always looks like the other mums have chats that she doesn't know the words to. She doesn't look like the other mums either. It's not just her red hair, it's kind of everything, all the way down to the wrong shoes (Mum doesn't

wear shoes, she wears boots all the year round, even in the summer). I often wonder if that is why I'm not like the other boys, because my mum is not like the other mums, but maybe it doesn't work like that. Even if it does, I'm not mad at her for it. She probably can't help it any more than I can. I watch as she follows the other mums into school. She is wearing her favourite green cardigan and I remember for a moment how soft and snugly it is.

Miss Dye rings the bell and we all line up in our classes. I try to be the last one – that way I only have one boy to bother me instead of two – but it doesn't work today because Ryan Dangerfield is late, so he has to go behind me.

'Ginger minger,' he says into my left ear. He says it loud enough that the other boys near me can hear but quiet enough that our teacher Mrs Kerrigan can't.

Lewis R (everyone calls him Lewis R because there is a Lewis B, so it's become like part of his name) starts laughing and says, 'Don't touch tree boy or you'll get Dutch Finn disease,' and they do some more laughing. Mrs Kerrigan smiles like she thinks we're all having fun together. Maybe school was different all those years ago when she went and kids were nice to each other, which is why she always thinks they're being nice when they're not.

Lottie runs onto the end of the girls' queue as we start walking in. Lottie doesn't look like the other girls because she has short hair, and all the other girls have long straight hair, like it's the law for girls or something. Lottie calls hers a pixie cut but I have never seen a pixie's hair, so I wouldn't know.

It's weird because everyone says I look like a girl and that Lottie looks like a boy, so maybe if we swapped heads we'd look right. I think that's why me and Lottie are friends, because we've both got the wrong hair. Well, she has the wrong hair, I have the wrong everything. I didn't know I had the wrong trousers until we were changing after PE once and Ibrahim picked up mine by mistake and started showing the other boys the label. They all started laughing because they said they were from the wrong shop, but they didn't tell me what the right shop was, so I didn't bother telling Mum. And anyway, I knew she still might not get them from the right shop if they didn't pay their taxes or used child labour. It turns out buying trousers can be a tricky thing.

I sit down next to Lottie. 'Hi Finn,' she says, 'will you sign my petition?' Lottie does petitions about everything. She also goes on protest marches with her mum. She thinks she might be a protestor when she's older, but I didn't even know that was an actual job.

I sign the petition without even looking to see what it is about. When you only have one friend there is no point in asking because you are going to sign it anyway. Lottie says something about being a friend of the badgers and I smile at her. I need all the friends I can get right now – even badgers.

When we get down to the hall for assembly, Mum is sitting on one of the benches at the back. She does a little smile, which makes me feel even more nervous than I already am. She thinks this is going to be one of those 'proud moments'. She has no idea.

I sit there with my ukulele in my lap, not really listening to what the head teacher Mrs Ratcliffe is saying until the bit when she says my name. I look up and she is holding my certificate and smiling at me. I stand up and pick my way through the legs of the other kids on my row and walk out to the front. Mrs Ratcliffe shakes my hand and gives me my Grade Three certificate and people clap, though Mum does it louder than everyone else. I start unzipping my ukulele case, while Mrs Ratcliffe explains that I'm going to play for them. My ukulele is yellow and has a big smile painted on the front. Mum got it for me when I learnt to play 'You Are My Sunshine'. I can see some of the kids laughing at it. Mrs Ratcliffe asks me to play the piece I did for my Grade Three exam. She asks me to tell everyone what it's called. I freeze for a moment, desperately hoping that the fire alarm will go off and save me, but there is silence. Mrs Ratcliffe is still smiling and waiting. Everyone is looking at me. I mumble "Fanlight Fanny" by George Formby. All I hear is the laughter from the boys in my class coming back at me. Like a massive wave of laughter getting louder and louder until it crashes over me. I can feel the tears coming and I don't want this to get any worse than it already is, so I do the only thing I can think of. I start playing my ukulele. Even though at that moment, I really hate George Formby.