

At this time of year, we edit out the dysfunction in our lives

The photos we carry around with us do not necessarily show the whole truth,

writes

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IF YOU'RE reading this, it means that you've survived Christmas Day and not been stabbed by one of your relatives, nor are you in custody for finally losing it and going the thump on Uncle Ron. From all of us here at Dysfunctional Family Central, congratulations for not going a member of your family with the good pair of scissors yesterday; God knows you wanted to.

People are going to write in accusing me of making light of domestic violence and informing me that this time of year is particularly stressful. I'm deadly serious. I know this time of year is a hot spot. Again, it's a case of not being surprised that it happens, but being stunned that it doesn't happen more often. Anyway, well done. Pat

yourself on the back and pour yourself another glass of restraint.

It's Boxing Day, one of the weirdest yet most comforting days of the year. Pav for breakfast, a ham as big as a nine-month-old baby in a pillowcase in the fridge and for some, the cricket. But not for me. If I want to be bored out of my brains for hours on end and sit on uncomfortable seats, I'll go to church. Or spend the day in the casualty waiting room of a public hospital.

Much of my Boxing Day will be spent flattening boxes, chucking out plastic packaging and finding places for the carload of merchandise acquired over the previous 24 hours. I'm also the mother of three boys, so for a fair whack of today I'll

be head down finding batteries, small plastic men and pieces of Lego the size of Tony Abbott's heart. At some point, I'm certain to find myself trawling through the rubbish to find that "really important bit" only for the entire dragon/mother ship/flashing gadget with annoying music to be crushed underfoot moments later. As I tip the broken dream into the bin, I will be overtaken by a deep sense of calm.

I'm feeling a little emotionally raw. Not a fan of this time of year. I like routine and effort. Not the drum roll and fanfare stuff. Which is one of the millions of reasons that I'm not married. The panic of getting everything right and the stress of orchestrating happiness makes no sense to me. The

grand gesture days are never the ones I remember. The moments I capture in my head to keep me warm when I'm old are always unexpected.

I spent Saturday afternoon at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art checking out

It's Boxing Day, one of the weirdest yet most comforting days of the year.

Richard Billingham's exhibition *People, Places, Animals*. Billingham is a photographer best known for images taken of his dysfunctional family "drinking, fighting, smoking, passing out, and pet-throwing in their cramped West Midlands council flat". His father, Ray, is a

toothless alcoholic often snapped struggling to get out of a chair or passed out next to the toilet. His morbidly obese mother, arms covered in tattoos, spends her days doing jigsaws and playing a game console. His brother Jason wanders around the flat with his shirt off, killing flies and smearing their guts into the smoke-stained wallpaper.

The exhibition is stunning. Most of the images are of his family or of animals in zoos. As a boy, Billingham's only escape from his dysfunctional family was the zoo. The images of the animals butting their heads against the doors of their enclosures, aimlessly pacing up and down, sniffing the same spot over and over all while being watched by curious

humans are heartbreaking. And even more poignant juxtaposed with images of his caged family.

His work is described as "a cathartic outpouring of his claustrophobic past". It really hit a nerve with me. Confronted by the images, I had tears pouring down my face. I could smell that cramped council flat, the sweaty upholstery, the unwashed clothes, the cigarette smoke, the stale bottles and the rubbish from the take-away. I was overwhelmed by the airlessness, the hopelessness, the desperateness.

There was none of the usual romanticisation of the underclass to make it palatable. This exhibition is not what you'd call a feel-good experience, but it is certainly a feel-something experience. Which is rare in this

era of being bombarded by images. Leaps in technology have led to a sharp shift from quality to quantity in photography. It's ages since I've been kicked in the guts by a photo.

Billingham's work made me think about the images of our life, our families and ourselves that we choose to display in frames and photo albums and carry around in our wallets, and the images and truths that we edit out. Billingham's decision to take the skeletons out of his closet, blow them up and put them in a frame I found liberating. The unhappy snaps, not the happy snaps. Most family dysfunction can't be photographed. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. I'm with Diane Arbus: "I think all families are creepy in a way."

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