

Saffron

It was an eventful week. Some might describe it as a journey, but as far as I'm concerned it was way more than that. This was an odyssey! It was seven days of revelations, realisations and unexpected events that spun me round, shook me up and spewed me out at the end.

It was a week where each day was like the turn of a kaleidoscope. Same life, wildly different order.

This is how it went.

Monday: Secrets and Lies

Saffron

He called it a white lie.

I called it a black lie.

In fact, I called it a mega enormous, ten-year-long kind of black lie.

I found it in the attic. His lie, that is. Hidden inside an old leather briefcase, waiting patiently for the years to somehow erase it from ever having existed.

I wasn't looking for it, and he, my dad, sure didn't want or expect me to find it, but find it I did . . . behind all the things in the attic, hugging its secret tightly with fat buckled straps, covered in dust – pretending to be forgotten.

I was looking for old photographs for an A-level project. The kind that have sepia ancestors staring across time with their pale, fixed eyes, as if a secret madness had been exposed by the flash of a Victorian camera.

I'd never been in the attic before. It had always been forbidden, something to do with slipping between the rafters and crashing through the ceiling to the room below. But at seventeen I figured I was capable of working my way across the rafters without ending up in casualty. And as Dad was at work, and she, Melanie, my father's second wife, was collecting their . . . child from school, I went on the hunt, safe in the knowledge that no one would know.

The dirty grey of ancient spider-webs hung threateningly close to my hair, while the yellow glow of a single overhead bulb, dangling by a wire, made everything look like it belonged in a parallel time, lacking the colour that belonged to real life. The air was still, heavy with the ingredients for a good jump-scare movie, and a kind of irrational disquiet threaded its way up my back as I peered through the murky space, trying to decide where to start looking.

Camping equipment and Christmas decorations waited silently next to old suitcases, and countless boxes of varying sizes were pushed into the gloomy shadows of the eaves. But right at the back of everything, crushed and old, was a briefcase.

So I looked inside.

And there . . . where I least expected to find them, in the yellow glow of that parallel time, stained with paint and crayon . . . were the contents of my own heart.

I rang him.

'I don't care that you're at work!' I screamed at my father, in a voice that didn't sound like it was mine. 'I'm in the attic . . .' I paused to let the impact of where I was hit him before dropping my tone to pure ominous aggression. ' . . . Tell me about the briefcase!'

The inadequate words that eventually followed his guilty silence totally messed with my head and everything I thought I knew. The dim attic air closed in on me, squeezing me too tight, and although I made it back down the step=ladder, I might as well have crashed through the rafters with the weight of what I'd just taken on board.

I ran from the house, gasping at the cold morning air until my lungs hurt and my throat burned, my sight muddled by an old memory that played on a loop behind my eyelids.

A memory so beautiful, it hurt.

Bright sunshine in a blue sky and cloudy cold breath.

Me – seven years old, kicking my way through crispy leaves, searching for conkers. Archie, in his pram, staring widely at autumn clouds, and Daniel lifting armfuls of reds and yellows into the air.

Our mother, crouching down, at eye level with me, holding a huge, prickly green casing in her hand. Her wide, red mouth smiling as I pull the casing edges apart, to discover the conker equivalent of Aladdin's cave. Shiny quadruplets in their spongy white bed.

Her red lips telling me there will always be treasures to find in the world if I look hard enough, while my younger self spins slowly round, my eyes scanning every tree and bush for the treasures she is talking about. Then she curls both our hands carefully around our prize, like its new, protective jacket before kissing my fingers with those red, red lips.

I stopped running when I reached the wall just inside the park at the end of our street, unable to link this beautiful memory with the awfulness of what I had just discovered in the attic. I leant against the wall until I could breathe without my lungs sucking air in so violently it burned. Stupidly, I looked for the lipstick traces of my mother's kiss on my fingers, as if it was an invisible tattoo the years had not yet deleted.

Learning to find life's treasures at the age of seven would have been great if I hadn't been slapped so often since by the big, cruel hand of surprise. I knew for sure now that the world was a damn sight crappier than the Disney ideal I had once believed it to be.

And like the vanishing Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, my mother's smile was all that hung in the air from those fairy=tale years, ten years after she too had disappeared.

The fact that my mother had simply 'gone' when I was seven, caused a kind of sonic boom to hit my family. She had walked to the shop to get some milk, and had never come back. My father had paced the floor that day, a tone to his voice I couldn't understand and I didn't like how it made me feel . . . all jagged inside. My youngest brother, Archie, then just a baby, screamed from being ignored and my three=year=old brother, Daniel, pulled at my clothes for something to eat. I found myself catapulted over the cavernous gap between child and grown=up, the responsible older sibling in a family that had just gone terribly wrong.

Cold lumps of butter and cheese triangles were squashed with the flats of my dirty hands between slices of white bread, as I built some kind of meal for them. I'd lifted Archie into his high chair, and cut his food into pieces he could pick up with his chubby little fingers as I'd seen Mum do, and, as I wasn't allowed to use the kettle, I made Dad a soupy mixture of tea and milk, using hot water from the tap, tea which had stayed untouched, unappreciated.

Gran had arrived the next day in her new shiny white car, skidding into the gravel on our drive. She'd emerged wearing her silver fox=fur hat and her most expensive expression, which she switched briefly for what I now know was a, 'what the hell are we going to do?' look for the benefit of my dad. Gran, however, would have phrased it differently, rolling words like frightfully and ghastly around the plums in her mouth. Then she smiled brightly at the three of us kids, reaching her leather=gloved hands towards us as she ushered us into the house.

The arrival of Gran with her overnight case brought a sensation of anxiety. I walked into rooms where the atmosphere was full of uncomfortable edges and angles, where secret conversations hushed and mouths spewed bullshit before twisting into fake smiles. Obviously, at the age of seven, I didn't realise it was bullshit then.

The worst thing about being a kid is when the adults try to keep stuff from you, so you go around only knowing half the story, trusting them that everything will be OK. And now, even at the age of seventeen, thanks to that briefcase, it would appear that I still only knew half the story, and everything wasn't OK.

Had my dad known . . . right from that very first day? Had he manipulated my world and that of my brothers' for some selfish reason? For some Melanie=shaped reason? Had he any idea how much I had wanted, needed, my mum over and over again, every birthday, Christmas, school play and particularly Mother's Days, which had always been so excruciating for me. Whenever I was down, Dad had insisted on pushing Melanie forward into a mother's role. I'd even been forced to give Melanie a Mother's Day card, because, in his words, 'she is a brilliant mother to you'.

The crowd of angry thoughts jostled inside my head, so much so that I could hardly bear the chaos of them. My hands shook with the intensity of trying to cut my nails into my own skin – to win the battle of physical over emotional pain.

The pain was crescent shaped.

Fingernails hardened by Black Grape Ultimate Shine nail polish dug deeply into the palms of my hands as I forced them further into my skin. I slid down to the ground, pressing my knees into my face, trying to squash myself into a smallness that would make me disappear entirely.

Stay in control, Saffy. Focus on the pain.

Something kicked my foot.

The stuff going on in my head left centre stage and moved impatiently to the wings, just as I glimpsed a pair of old brown leather boots with frayed laces. The boots kicked me again. Not hard, more like a gentle nudge. Enough to tell me that I should be looking up at the rest of the person they belonged to.

‘Go away,’ I mumbled through my knees but the boots turned the same way as mine, as the rest of the person slid down the wall next to me. ‘You’re not invited,’ I said, noticing the smears of mascara and tears left behind on my vintage fades.

‘Sleeve?’ The bottle-green cuff of a shapeless knitted jumper thrust its way towards the mottled blotch of my face. I knew that voice, of course.

‘Tom?’ His name came out through strands of my ginger hair, which were now stuck to my damp cheeks and across my lips.

‘Looking good,’ he said, and I cautiously checked for the dimples that pull at his cheeks when he thinks he’s being funny. They were there. I allowed myself the tiniest of smiles back.

Tom

I recognised the hair.

You couldn't really miss that colour, or the amount of it, like a box of crazy springs leaping in all directions.

She was running towards the park, and she was looking pretty mad. As usual.

Being the good friend that I am, I ducked behind a tree before she could spot me. I saw her lean against a wall, then slide to the ground like a sack of the proverbial. There was always stuff going on with Saffron and this time was obviously no exception. The fact that she was now sitting in a puddle meant that today's 'stuff' was substantial enough for her not to notice that she was wetting the arse of her designer jeans.

She was probably crying as well, judging by how tightly she was hunched over. I wanted to leave her to it. I wanted to stroll on by as if I hadn't seen her because Saffron Hayes no longer needed me in her life any more than I needed her in mine.

To get involved would be stupid. I knew for sure it wasn't a good idea. I wasn't going to do it.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting next to her on the ground getting the arse of my not=designers damp too.

Saffron

I plucked at the hair stuck to my damp face in a vague attempt to look less deranged. Then I twisted it round and pulled it over one shoulder. Looking good? A sarcastic laugh came out of my mouth and embarrassingly caused a bubble of saliva to pop from my lips.

Even the presence of Tom couldn't calm me like it used to, so we sat, side by side in a puddle, saying nothing, my face failing to return to its normal complexion – basically, white, with a million speckled pigmentation flaws that nature adds as an extra insult to gingers. When Tom eventually stood up I expected him to leave because he never stayed long any more. He just kind of came and went these days, like a spring tide, and as I probably looked a horrifying mixture of dribble and snot and mad hair and make=up, I couldn't blame him for wanting to make a fast exit.

This time however, his fingers reached down for mine, pulling me easily to my feet. 'Hot chocolate? You can tell me all about . . . whatever it is, when our butts aren't numb and damp. I don't know about you but I don't fancy spending any more time sitting where every dog in the neighbourhood comes to take a piss.' His eyes scanned the area around us.

He let go of my hand and I brushed the seat of my jeans down trying not to think about the dog piss thing. 'We used to call this place dog=shit park, remember?' he said, a lazy grin spreading across his face. 'And do you remember the time I rescued you from this exact spot?'

'How could I forget?' I muttered, noticing how his eyes followed my fumbling fingers as I repeatedly tried to tuck a springy curl of hair behind my ear.

I had been just eight when Tom, a whole two years older, had appeared as he frequently did out of nowhere and found me. I'd been in the park, bunking off after=school care, trying to pretend I was like the other kids – the ones whose mums picked them up from school – when I snatched a packet of sweets off another girl.

'That kid called me the "nasty girl with the ginger hair". . . just before she set her Rottweiler on me.' A pathetic laugh forced its way out – thankfully no bubble of saliva this time.

'Her Rottweiler?' Tom spluttered. 'You mean her mother? Nicking stuff from small children isn't the way to win friends and influence people, you know.'

'I hated what they had,' I muttered, still hating what they had. 'That girl had a real mum who sat on the bench handing out nice things for her to eat every day after school.' I knew I sounded petulant, like a spoilt child, when I said it out loud, but right now there was too much bedlam inside my head to care.

'But then you just stood rooted to the spot . . . when the Rottweiler came at you!' Tom laughed, encouraging another small smile from me. It was funny when you thought about it. Especially as the girl's mother had marched towards me, high ponytail

swinging, muscles bulging and teeth clenched, until Tom had appeared out of nowhere, grabbed my school bag and my hand, his blond curls and my red ones bouncing around our heads as we ran out of the park. Not exactly a white knight in shining armour but a streetwise kid with chocolate=button eyes and a dirty school uniform.

That was the day Saffron Hayes was reborn. Less of a butterfly though, more of . . . a bluebottle fly. I became the kid who, from that point, couldn't give a red=haired shit about anything. Apart from Tom. Being the girl who supposedly didn't care about anything was hard work but Tom always managed to find his way into my fortress. Being best friends with him had been crazy fun, like jumping into a kids' book and living a different life.

We hadn't gone to the same school, but we used to meet all the time whenever I went out, unplanned . . . like he was Peter Pan, appearing out of nowhere and belonging to no one. He wasn't like the other boys from my school, all name calling and shoving. Tom was different. Funny, easy going and totally wild, which made it even more exciting to know him.

Whenever we met in the park we'd sit perched at the top of the climbing frame and make it a castle, a ship or a mountain, or we'd look for squirrels and woodpeckers with make=believe binoculars, or climb trees and drop acorns at passing strangers, swing on the rope tyre hanging from the old oak, or wade in the river looking for fish. On rainy days he would come to mine and we'd invent things to do round the house. Like the piranha game where to touch the ground would mean dying the death of a thousand teeth. Or we would play hide and seek, or build a den, or we'd make a ski slope on the stairs using sheets of cardboard. Tom's imagination was endless and when he took me into his world with him, nothing else mattered.

Now as we head out through the park's huge iron gates I look back over my shoulder as if I might see us, as children, running hell for leather away from the girl and her angry mother. 'When we ate her sweets, you told me they tasted better because they were free . . . Do you remember?' I said, looking sideways at him. ' . . . Then I told you my mum was dead?'

I'd just come out with it that day. No fanfare. Punching the air with my words. Tom hadn't flinched. He simply squeezed my hand and breathed one word . . . 'Shit!' No pretence, no feel=good words, just a squeeze and a single profanity, and I had loved him for it. Then we had stood in silence by the river taking turns at throwing stones at an empty floating Coke can.

Disappointingly I could now probably count on my Black Grape teenage fingers and toes how many hours in total we'd spent together since puberty stole the last shreds of our childhood. We never 'hung out' any longer, just occasionally bumped into each other, and our encounters never lasted long these days, because Tom, for reasons he never gave, always had to leave.

This time, instead of dragging me along the path away from the park, yelling and laughing, we walked casually towards town in search of a cafe. The sun offered a generous warmth despite it being October, turning me pink and hot, and as I wiped my

hands on my jeans again, this time to remove the sweat that glistened in the creases of my hands, I was in no doubt as to why Tom had let go so quickly when he pulled me to my feet. No one likes a sweaty palm.

I studied him from the corner of my eye, my heart now a tiny bird fluttering in the cage of my chest. Tom was noticeably older, taller and broader now, although the blond curls that once leapt about on top of his head were now pulled round the back into a man=bun tied by a blue scrunchie. Gone was the dirty school uniform and instead were beige cargo shorts, ancient brown leather boots with their frayed laces and a collarless shirt under the shapeless bottle=green knitted jumper. He was a bit – well, actually a lot – Bohemian, and it suited him, made him more . . . edgy.

‘You’ve grown again,’ I said, noticing how his dark eyes now looked down at me from his impressive height.

‘You haven’t,’ he said, grinning.

‘Harsh. I’m five foot two . . . almost two!’ I said.

‘That’s almost like a real person,’ he said, our eyes catching, forcing me to look away. Unfortunately for me, with Tom, my insides kept flipping and I had to make them be still because that would be liking him and I didn’t want to like him . . . not in that way . . . not when he wasn’t interested in me. We had been best friends once and now we were just casual friends, and that was all, and part of me was glad now, because it was hard to ignore that Tom had grown into someone who was fit and I had . . . well, I had . . . not.

‘You have a habit of appearing when I’m not exactly at my best,’ I said, as if I looked much different when I was at my best.

He put a finger to his chin as if casting his memory across his mental diary. ‘Last time I saw you was outside your college . . .’ His dimples appeared again.

‘Mmm . . . Art,’ I confirmed, deflating just a little bit more.

‘Art,’ he echoed. ‘Covered in paint.’

On that particular occasion, I’d lost hold of the water pot and pallet I was carrying to the sink and I stupidly attempted to clutch them towards me instead of letting them drop on the floor, resulting in a modern=art explosion all down my front. I was surprised Tom didn’t run for the hills every time he saw me. ‘Shouldn’t you be at school now?’ he asked.

I answered with a frown. ‘Yes! But something has come up.’