



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:8:00

## The Fox and Saffron

Author: Jac Slim

I didn't mean to kill her. Well ok, maybe I should have taken more care. Heavy rain and sun combined to bugger up my vision. After all, I was aiming through a glinting, slanting curtain. Maybe I should have checked what I had in my sights. But if I don't cull the foxes on my land, the neighbours who call themselves real farmers would whine that I should allow the hunt through. I am simply not going to let those supercilious posh nobs come whooping across my fields.

Oliver took it really badly. But honestly, it was time that the lad started to man-up. After all Saffron was a very aged bitch; he was going to lose her soon. A clean shot's as good an ending as most of us will get. Just my bloody luck that Saffron's coat was as tawny-red as a fox.

He's oversensitive and that's down to his mother – always protecting him from the real world. He needed to go through some tough times. It's not all kind hearts out there in the world of business. You have to be on the look-out for people trying to shaft you and maybe try and get one over on them in the process.

Why Anna brought Saffron over with Oliver that weekend, I don't know. Actually, I do have a suspicion that she thought that I didn't provide enough '*emotional support*' and that Saffron would

provide some sort of comfort to him while he was with me. I *also* don't know why Anna left me. After all, did I not build up a business that allowed her everything she wanted? I've practically engineered a monopoly in my niche of the re-insurance market.

What is really galling though is that although she's left me, any settlement will cost me a hefty wedge. I bet that, at this very moment, some of my hard-earned cash is being spent on that poseur, Keenan, whom she met on her creative writing course.

Once Oliver had calmed down, we got out spades and he helped me bury Saffron - you see I do understand about closure. I insisted that the dog's collar go into the grave with her. No sense in him pining over her each time he came across it.

The following weekend, Anna kept him back from the parental access visit on the flimsy pretext that I had caused some deep trauma to the lad. She was always molly-coddling him. I remember the time he was struck on the helmet at school cricket. Anna got hysterical and wanted him to come off. I sent him back telling him not to turn his back and never to take his eyes off the ball; then he would be able to evade it. Life skills are learnt on the playing field, aren't they? Anyway, Leon sorted her out. He's expensive but he's got me out of deeper holes than that. One letter to Anna and she promised to deliver him on the following weekend.

There's everything a boy could want at Tackfields farm: squash court, shot guns, quad bikes, cinema, swimming pool... Oliver had always shown faint enthusiasm for these things – not in a scornful way but as if they were not part of his world.

The Friday before he was due, I thought to go into town to replenish my shot-gun cartridges. Maybe we could try some clay-

pigeon shooting – get him used to shooting again. You know what they say: “if you fall off, get straight back on the bike”. I loved going into the field-sports shop, shot-guns, skinning knives, tweed coats, wax jackets, brass fittings and the smell of new leather, plus assistants with real knowledge not numbskulls from the jobcentre watching the clock. In my business there is no clock; you work until the instructions are placed and the risk covered.

It was definitely a blue-language day – one thing after another. Car coughed and died at the end of the drive and wouldn't start again. The gardener had taken the pickup to get the ride-on lawn-mower to the maintenance man. So, I had to order both a taxi and someone to come out from the local garage. No cell phone coverage here, so I crunched right back up the drive to the house to phone only to discover that I had left my front door keys in the car. In the end, after another walk up and back my not inconsiderable drive, the taxi came and we drove off.

But we didn't get very far. As we exited the drive, a fox dashed in front of the taxi driver who swerved putting the taxi into the ditch and me into a lot of pain as I twisted my leg on impact.

‘Where the eff did that come from?’ the taxi driver voiced both our thoughts.

We sat around blocking the lane for ages until my gardener and the man from the garage turned up almost at the same time. We winched the taxi out of the ditch but I was in no mood to go into town any more and I told the driver to clear off. He wanted paying but I pointed out that he actually hadn't taken me anywhere, so it was a case of: “Jog on fellah!”. I limped back to the house, ran a bath and then attended to my work emails. When much later, I came to my personal email account, I noticed that Anna had sent me one:

pleading for Oliver to stay with her that weekend. I referred her to Leon's letter.

Oliver arrived late that Friday evening. Why did she allow him to keep his hair so long? I was more irritated than usual at this; it was probably my leg. However, I bit my lip – and tongue and cheek too. Finally, after a tearful interval, Anna drove off. I tried to interest Oliver in a game of War Massacres on the entertainment PC but he said that he needed to practise with his guitar so I left him to it and opened a bottle of red in order to ease the pain.

It didn't work. I had a very restless night dreaming over and over about the accident and that fox that had flashed in front of the taxi.

I woke to a clear bright day, got gingerly out of bed and gazed out the window at the sodden landscape. Having little or no shotgun cartridges, I decided that we should take the quad-bikes out for a spin. Oliver accepted my suggestion with his habitual air of polite indifference and I phoned down to have them ready. Over breakfast we had a chat about what he enjoyed and what he did not at school. I urged him to give more thought to active sports rather than chess but not wanting to kick off on the wrong foot didn't press the point.

As with lawyers, I don't buy rubbish stuff – not for appearances, you understand, but for effectiveness. Two quad bikes stood gleaming outside the old stable block. They started first time and stood ticking over with a smooth, even thrumming that resonated unleashed power. We donned helmets, climbed aboard and gave each other the thumbs-up. Then I charged off followed more circumspectly by Oliver.

Tackfields ridge was one of my favourite places for driving a quad-bike. Powering along where the land fell away down the scarp slope, the rider gets a majestic view of the patchwork quilt that is the English countryside: irregular shaped fields of yellow and green interspersed with small woods and stands of trees. I was enjoying this view when the smudge of some animal dashed right out in front of me. I swerved and struck a boulder. I did try to hit the breaking but the attempt caused a spasm of pain in my leg.

In the instant of impact, the quad tipped and I was thrown out of the vehicle and landed some way down the slope. I was dazed but I could see that the quad was on its side up the slope from me. I could also recognise with growing panic that it was slipping slowly and inexorably towards me. I tried to stand but the fall had totally done for the leg that I had injured the day before. My attempt to get up was met with a shock of pain that washed up and down me and I collapsed.

The quad's slide seemed to be gathering pace; I watched it approaching as a condemned man. The next thing I was conscious of was Oliver shouting.

“Dad, crawl away quickly”

I looked to see Oliver between me and the vehicle with arms and legs braced holding it back but his legs were slipping on the muddy slope. With the last of my strength I crawled away from the quad's line of decent. I turned to see the machine start to topple. I heard Oliver panting to keep it back but his legs were slipping further down. Suddenly the machine toppled over and the panting stopped.

They found us fairly quickly; someone had spotted us from the bottom lane. I had passed out and my head was bloody having

beaten it against a stone. Oliver had died quickly; the life being crushed out of him.

Looking back, I hadn't had that much to drink the night before so I don't know why the thought occurred that the animal that dashed out in front of me was Saffron but I wouldn't have swerved if I thought it had only been a fox. But here's the really odd thing, next to Oliver, they found Saffron's collar which I swear we had buried along with her on that windy, rainy day.

© Jac Slim 2019