

Saffron

Crocus sativus has six pale lilac petals with a darker heart. The saffron crocus bears up to four flowers, each with three vivid crimson stigmas.

She came from Iraq, although it could have been any country in turmoil. Nothing we did could make her want to belong. There were nine children in my class. Eight were delivered in the morning by women wearing hijabs, but Saffron was led into the classroom by a man, tall, erect and greying at the temples. His dark eyes looked directly at you, then slid away. She was always reluctant to let go of his hand, but he would prise away the small fingers and give her the slightest of pushes, propelling her towards me.

I tried to smile my welcome, to speak warmly. ‘Good morning, Saffron. How are you today?’ She remained blank, her eyes glazed and dull. She would turn away and find her place at the table. Each place had a laminated drawing. I’d chosen a crocus flower for her, its crimson stigma protruding like the antlers of a young male deer. When she understood more English, I would explain the origin of her name – Saffron, a spice derived from the stigma of the crocus flower.

The other children made progress. They were eager to learn. They were here to make a new beginning and, no doubt, were told by their parents that they must learn English to be successful in this country of refuge.

Together with the styles or stalks that connect the stigmas to their host plant, the dried stigmas are used mainly in various cuisines as a seasoning and colouring agent.

Saffron’s bed in the camp had been the hard ground and then the hard deck of their leaky vessel. It seemed there were only two soft things in Saffron’s life: the feel of her mother’s hand as she stroked her hair and soothed her into sleep, and the words her mother spoke so that Saffron would be less afraid when the darkness descended, when all you could hear was the smack of the water against the side of the boat and the groans of people crying out in terror for the hell they were in. The words her mother chose usually described the food she cooked in their home in Iraq and would cook again when they were safe. ‘When you are big,’

she would say in a voice as soothing as honey on a sore throat, ‘you will make my special rice.’

Saffron thought of the rice in the tin can tied inside her mother’s second hijab, there for them to eat later when they could no longer bear the hunger pangs. It would be grey and dry and feel like tiny pebbles in her mouth. But she would be hungry and her mother emphasised the necessity of swallowing it so that she would be strong when they arrived in this new land with its promise of a fine house, comfortable beds and food kept in refrigerators.

Her mother’s words distracted Saffron from the darkness and the fear. She would close her eyes and listen, her mind creating a comforting picture.

‘First you rinse the rice to wash away the husks,’ said her mother. ‘You heat the pan and swirl in the oil, add the spices to make a paste with the oil, and when they smell just so fragrant that you think your nose will burst, you add the washed rice and stir to coat it in the spices. Then chicken stock, more stirring and swirling, and finally the saffron, a strand of saffron as fine as a strand of your hair, my darling girl. Next is the most important part,’ she would say. ‘You must seep the threads in water to draw out the colour and aroma. It is like making tea. Use the threads and the water so nothing is lost. When the lid goes on the pan, the rice soaks up the flavour and the colour until it is ready to eat with the meats and vegetables you will also learn to cook one day.’

Saffron clutched tightly to her mother’s arm as the boat rocked and lurched in the dark until the vomit came and the memory of this wonderful dish was dashed away.

The price of saffron is tied to how much saffron is harvested in a particular country and how many middlemen handle it before it reaches the buyer.

I learnt about the value of saffron when I searched the internet, looking for a way to reach out to this bruised child and help her to speak. I thought of the boat and the price the refugees were prepared to pay for their freedom. War had harvested so many and sent them on their journeys and into the arms of the middlemen. Was any price too high to pay for the safety of their families?

Like the saffron, the children in my class had come from many different countries. They were the distillation of all the cultures with a troubled past. The thing that concentrated them together was their need to be somewhere else, somewhere there was a quality of life, somewhere safe. I tried to give them language. With English, they could make sense of this new life, give a voice to the old one and tell the story of their journey.

But Saffron ignored the language, hid her eyes behind a veil of hair and drew pictures on her paper.

Saffron's colouring strength determines its flavour and aroma.

When the boat began to sink, her mother tried to hold on to both Saffron and her baby brother, but she was pushed from behind and Saffron's hand was wrenched away. She clutched at her mother's clothing and pulled the hijab from her head. Saffron had only seen her mother's hair when they were in the privacy of their home. It tumbled about her face as she was falling and streamed behind her. Then they were in the water and only the cold gripped Saffron and the weight of the water held her down. She opened her eyes and saw – or perhaps only imagined, because this was the story she told herself as she drew her pictures in the English class – her brother float free of her mother's arms. The long strands of hair waved like strings of seaweed, but Saffron could not clutch onto them or twist the strands into a curl around her fingers as she had done in their home. And then there were only her father's arms, strong and brown, holding her head above the water and, finally, stranger's arms, lifting her and placing her down on the deck of a bigger boat where people spoke in this strange language.

Now she listens to the words of this language every day.

Her aunt helps her dress; her father takes her by the hand and they walk through streets where houses have green gardens with bright patches of colourful flowers and tall trees bend over the pavement, their roots making long snaking cracks like a line drawn crookedly on a piece of paper. She hops over these obstacles and it is a game she plays in her head, pretending that the cracks will open up and swallow her if she treads on them. She knows there are no bombs here, no peppery sound of gunfire to burn holes in flesh, no possibility that the ground will shift beneath her feet, toss debris into the sky only to fall and crush her bones. She likes to let the noises of this street wrap around her: the rumble of a tram, the whizzing tyres of a passing car, voices calling. These are safe sounds and the firmness of her father's hand keeps her anchored. When she arrives at the school, she does not like to let it go because maybe she will never find it again.

To get full value from the stigmas, you make a tea or an infusion in a hot liquid.

The staff plan a cultural day. A note goes home with the children asking them to bring food to share. On the day, the open space between the classrooms is decorated with pictures and flags and colour. I find a red-gold cloth and spread it on a large table, add white serviettes and crimson flowers in tall vases. The table is ready for the food the children will bring. They will come with their mothers and fathers and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters and cousins. They will bring their past with them, the flavours of home to taste and share.

I wait by the door as they arrive, anxious to see whether Saffron will come. She had taken the note, watched my mouth as I explained what was going to happen, and placed it silently in her small pink backpack. The other children had been excited and told me what they would make and my mouth watered at the prospect of chicken tagine, stuffed peppers and honeyed sweets.

I will soon have to move away from the door. I'm needed to direct the placing of dishes and to organise the stove so that pots can be heated. But before I turn away, she appears at the gate, her small hands gripping a large platter, a red cloth tucked and tied over it to protect the contents from spilling. Her father walks protectively behind, carrying a large black pot. Neither has a free hand, and I am aware this is the first time they have arrived without the connection of fingers. They are both serious. Concentrating. Nothing must be spilt. No waste.

Everything is distilled into the moment she moves past me, walks to the table and puts the platter down. She motions her father to place his pot next to hers and, like the best French waiters, they remove the covers.

There are many complementary flavours and textures for saffron. It can be used in both sweet and savoury dishes.

Saffron had shown the note to her father and said she did not want to go. She told him that the teacher might not like their food and think badly of Saffron and her family.

'Your mother told you how to make her special rice. I will help you make it. This dish the teacher will like,' said her father.

They went to a shop to buy the spices and – even though it was very costly – some threads of saffron. Together, they made a tea with boiling water and seeped the strands for many hours. She watched, fascinated, as the hot, clear liquid coaxed the red-gold from the brittle threads. The colour swirled into the water like the floating strands of her mother's hair; she stirred the liquid with a spoon and it became one colour. This liquid was added to the rice and

the aroma conjured an image of her mother standing at the stove, smiling and saying, 'Come and taste the rice. I have named you Za'faran after the special spice in this dish.'

As the golden rice is revealed, my student speaks her first words in English.

'This rice... my mother's... for you.'

Emotion squeezes my throat and strangles my words, but I manage to say, 'It smells delicious. It will be the first dish I try.'