

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Sarah's Diary

Sarah Griffin

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About the Book

From the outside everything about Sarah Griffin's family seemed normal. They appeared to be a typical happy family but in fact Sarah's young life was shaped by the ups and downs of her father's depression. On his good days he was like any other dad. But on his bad days, when the depression took over, everything changed and her dad - and the rest of the family - struggled to cope. They feared that this cycle would go on forever. Then, when Sarah was just sixteen years old, her father died.

Until now, few have had the courage to discuss depression and its impact on family life openly but Sarah Griffin has tackled the issue straight on, shining a light on the reality of living with the effects of this very common condition. This unflinchingly honest account shows both the wonder of the good days and the dark despair of the days and weeks she'd rather forget. Sarah's day-to-day thoughts, feelings and experiences make for a beautifully written and brutally honest account of her life, and that of her father.

About the Author

Sarah Griffin was born in 1987. She is currently studying for a degree in English and Philosophy at Leeds University. This is her first book. Sarah's blog, where she chronicles the writing and publishing of this book can be found at www.myspace.com/littlegriffin.

Sarah's Diary

Sarah Griffin



For Dad

PROLOGUE

I SUPPOSE YOU could say it all began in the early 1960s. The precise moment is, I've heard, difficult to pinpoint. Mum reckons it was when she was about six years old.

OK, I'll set the scene. Rivington County Primary School playground, St Helens, Merseyside. A little girl called Carol Cook falls on the hard, sloping playground. Flying through the air, she lands on both knees, and begins to cry as blood pours out of the left one. Looking up, she sees, coming over to help, a boy she recognises as the clever one in her class. His name is Robert Griffin. It's hard for me to imagine him without bushy eyebrows and a dark-brown moustache, but I guess he would have looked a bit daft with those features at the age of six.

My mum and dad were only classmates at that point, rivals for both the top spot in Maths and the favour of Mrs Hunter, their first teacher. Mum was popular; Dad was quiet and a bit of a loner. Yet maybe the six-year-old Robert saw something he liked in the impish face of young Carol because his appearances in her life became more frequent after that point, even when they went to different secondary schools at the age of eleven. He used to visit her house on the pretext of collecting newspapers for recycling, and even though the door was slammed in his face a fair few times it didn't put him off. On his sixteenth birthday, although the room was full of invited guests, when the time came for Mum to leave, he turned on all the lights and asked everyone to go so he could walk her home. Their first official date was organised by Dad's mum, Norah (Gran to me); a trip to the local cinema to see *Please, Sir*. (Funny how

courtship's changed over the years; I'd be mortified if Mum did that for me now!) They used to go to the local youth club and play table tennis, where the other kids would tease them by singing Donny Osmond's 'Puppy Love'.

It sounds like a perfect seventies' teenage romance, and I'm sure it was, but it didn't stay perfect for long. Things changed when they went to different universities: Dad to Lancaster to read Accounting and Finance; Mum to York, where she read Maths and Education. After a while, Mum started getting itchy feet. In the Easter of her first year she started seeing somebody else and told Dad it was over between them. The effects were disastrous.

Devastated, Dad refused to leave his bedroom for three days. Gran began to leave his meals outside his room. It was definitely a sign of things to come. Maybe Mum shouldn't have changed her mind. Yet change her mind she did, and she wrote him a letter apologising and asking him to meet her to sort things out. I think at that point Dad realised what he could lose. He proposed shortly before Mum's twenty-first birthday. (He was traditional and asked her dad for permission first.) On 15 July 1978, two years after graduating, they were married in the same United Reformed church where they had attended youth club a few years before.

But this childhood romance was flawed. Mum began to notice things weren't quite right with her new husband, though there had been warning signs at university. Even when he passed all his accountancy exams in his final year, for example, the black cloud of exam stress hadn't lifted. But now, when things seemed so perfect for her, why wasn't he happy?

The big wake-up call came in 1980 when she got a phone call to say Dad had been knocked down in Leeds city centre by a bus. What was more, it was believed that he had walked in front of the bus intentionally. He suffered a serious

head injury and had to be treated in hospital where they wanted him to receive psychiatric treatment. He refused.

Later on that year Dad took an overdose of sleeping tablets. Mum decided something had to happen. They talked about making a change (a conversation that was to be repeated many times in the years that followed) and decided to move abroad.

From 1981 to 1985 they lived in the Cayman Islands. Dad worked for a large accountancy firm and Mum taught at the island's middle school. They moved several times but lived mostly in apartments, including one that overlooked Seven Mile Beach, the infamous tourist spot. It was an area so beautiful it couldn't fail to make even the most melancholy of people crack a smile. Yet still Dad couldn't force himself to be happy. In 1982 came the birth of their first child, my eldest sister, Kathryn Jane. But walking along the golden sands of Seven Mile Beach with his newborn daughter in his arms, Dad still wasn't content. This wasn't just about materialistic happiness, Mum realised; there was something more to it. Two more daughters came: Emma Louise and Rachel Lynn. Yet still no improvement. The doctors in the Caribbean were made to feel inadequate by Dad, and they knew he needed help that they could not give him.

Persuaded by Mum, the young family moved back to the UK and settled in Huddersfield in the summer of 1985, just weeks after Rachel's birth. Another blue period soon came, however, and this time Mum sought out the help of a new young doctor, Dr Oakes, who became convinced Dad had what was known as depression. He referred them to a psychiatrist at a specialist local hospital called St Luke's. There he was told he had to be admitted for a minimum of three weeks so they could 'sort him out'. Admitted he was, and Mum, in her early thirties, with three kids under the age of three, supported him. Every day she tried to go and see him, and listened while he spouted lines of rubbish, sent manic by the 'liquid cosh' that was supposed to give the

doctors a 'clean slate' on which to work. Three weeks later he came out of hospital. Mum was expecting a changed man, an instant cure almost, but the results didn't last. There were simply good days and bad.

But things did improve enough for the good to outweigh the bad (at least I like to think so) and their love for each other was still great enough to produce a fourth and final child - me. I came into this world just after 2 p.m. on Thursday, 17 December 1987 at Beverley Westwood Hospital. Dad brought my three sisters in to visit me: Kathryn aged five, Emma three and Rachel two. The sight of them made Mum realise Dad couldn't live without her. None of their clothes matched and Rachel was even wearing her winter boots on the wrong feet.

I moved into our comfortable townhouse in Beverley just days later for my first Griffin family Christmas.

Throughout my childhood, I always thought I was pretty normal, just an average child with an average family. I went to Brownies, to swimming club. We went on holiday, we visited friends. Mum and Dad had dinner parties. It was ordinary. Even though I knew there was stuff going on at home, and that Mum and Dad often had arguments and long, complicated discussions, I never considered us to be different from anyone else.

The first time I could put a name to what happened at home was when I was about seven years old. Mum, Kathryn and I were walking down an empty street on a Sunday. As we passed a chemist, Mum began explaining why Dad was sometimes a little angry or sad, and why he sometimes wouldn't get up in the morning. I suppose he must have been ill at the time. She told me he had something wrong in his head that meant when he was upset or stressed, things in his brain didn't add up, so he had to take a few days' rest until everything got sorted, and this problem he had was

called depression and it happened to lots of people at different times.

I took all this in my stride because by that time I had obviously figured out that occasionally something happened to my daddy that I just couldn't explain. But what I couldn't accept was what my mum told me next. She said: 'Whatever happens, you have to promise me that you won't tell anybody about this depression. It has to be our secret.' Later I discovered that my mum's parents and sister knew, as did my father's parents and sister. As I became older, and the depression grew worse, Mum confided in a close friend and Dad disclosed his illness to a few colleagues at work. But at the age of seven I just couldn't grasp why I wasn't to tell anyone. I suppose I was just too naive to realise that when some people don't understand something it's easier for them to ridicule that thing and isolate it from their lives than it is to try to come to terms with what it actually involves. Because I had always lived with depression in my life I knew it was just a temporary illness, something horrible that happened to an ordinary man, who, to me, was the best father in the world.

That is why I'll always regard my childhood as a normal one, whether everyone else does or not. After all, most 'normal' children keep a diary, don't they? At least at some point. Mine started when I was about nine years old. It mainly listed things like what I had eaten for tea or that I hated my sisters because they got to stay up longer than me. In later years, my diary became an outlet for secrets, a place to write down which boy I fancied or which girl was to become my new best friend. Ordinary teenage things. But then, slowly, my diary grew into a record of this big family secret. I lived in a very smart townhouse, I went to a very good all-girls school, I had a very nice family. Everything about me was normal, ordinary, mundane even. That is, from the outside. Inside, the entire family kept Dad's secret, and I told no one except the pages of my diary.

Yet is it really so shocking? Depression is not rare, and it's not something that should be ignored, or regarded as a dangerous and contagious disease. It happens every day, to ordinary people leading ordinary lives, and it's time it was addressed and help given to those people who need it so badly. This is my family's story, which is tragic and very personal, but, sadly, not all that unique.

30 OCTOBER 2002

TODAY WAS OFFICIALLY the worst day of my life. Ever. I never thought it would get this bad. I always thought we'd be OK, however down he got. Today made me realise how naive I've been. I feel like I've aged about ten years and my childhood has been thrown out of the window. I mean, how can I retain any childhood innocence after I've just witnessed my dad trying to kill himself?

I think we got there just in time, unless, of course, he planned it that way. Maybe he couldn't go through with it and needed someone to stop him. I'm rambling on now; I guess it's the shock. I'll start from the beginning and explain properly. After all, you're the only one I can tell.

This morning began like any other Wednesday in October, pretty miserable and raining. Mum and I had gone to visit Emma in York to try and cheer her up after some boy problems. (I'm starting to think boyfriends might not be worth the trouble.) Dad was ill again - but not much more down than usual - so he stayed in bed this morning. We took Emma for lunch, but Mum couldn't stop worrying about Dad so we set off home early. I tried to call him a few times on the way. I think I knew when he didn't answer the phone that something was wrong.

We got home around half past three. Dad's Land Rover was on the drive. I was so annoyed with him for not making it in to work. But then Mum noticed that our car (the little green Ford Fiesta) wasn't in the drive where it should have been. We walked round the side of the house and she looked in the garage. 'Oh my God,' she said. 'The car's in the garage and your dad's inside.'

For a few seconds I didn't understand and then it suddenly hit me. I ran in front of her, jumped through the back doorway and round to the door connecting the main house to the garage. Through my tears I could see a little yellow Post-it note pushed through the key in the door. The first part in Dad's scrawl was illegible, but I could make out the bottom bit: 'Sorry. Love you all. Dad.' A suicide note.

Mum and I prised open the door to the garage but he'd barricaded it with stuff and we couldn't get in. As I screamed at him to get out of the car, I took in the scene. The hosepipe came around the side of the car and dangled in through a small gap in the driver's window. He was sitting behind the wheel. The radio was blasting to cover the roar of the engine but he could still hear our shouting. He looked up and I met his eyes. He was crying. As if in slow motion he switched off the engine and opened the door of the car. My stomach lurched and I collapsed on the floor. The relief that he was still alive washed over me but the shock that he might not have been hit me like a brick wall. What if we'd have been ten minutes later? I wanted to be sick so badly. I still feel like that now, almost disbelief that it happened. I feel as if someone *has* died.

Spent most of the afternoon crying. I didn't think I would ever stop. How could things have gone so low without me noticing? For him to think about doing that?

We got him out of the garage and sat down around the kitchen table. Even the dogs seemed to know something was wrong. Missie, our black Labrador, snuggled up to Max, our golden Labrador, and they both lay down in front of the Aga. I leaned against them both, stroking their fur because I couldn't bear to look at Dad. I couldn't believe he would let me witness that, or come home to something even worse, something unthinkable. Mum was so angry with him, mostly about the fact that I was there. But she was also incredibly upset, more so than I've ever seen her, and, my God, have I seen her cry a lot. I really couldn't see a way out of this.

How could we just get up and carry on after that? But just like every other time, we talked until the cows came home, drank sweet tea for our shock, and the cracks began to heal themselves. Always the same solution but I know it won't last for long. The nasty fuck keeps coming back to mess him up. Will he go all the way next time?

He's not been this low in a long time - well, actually, maybe it's not that long ago. It was at the end of July, I think, or the beginning of August when he was last really down. That was the day he just disappeared. Again, it had started out like an ordinary working day (for Dad, at least; the rest of us were on summer holiday from school). He had gone into work, suit on, briefcase in hand. It was about mid-morning before we realised anything was wrong. Andy (one of his colleagues) had rung to see if Dad was coming in today. We were worried obviously, because we presumed that if he hadn't arrived in the office then he must have been involved in an accident on the way. We tried his mobile phone, but it was switched off. We rang the police, the hospitals, everyone we could think of. The hospitals had no record of him or anyone matching his description being brought in, and the police had not been alerted to any accidents involving his car. We were also told by the police that we had to wait twenty-four hours until we could report him missing. Hours later we still couldn't get in touch with him, and there were no signs as to his whereabouts. Kathryn and her boyfriend Nick were in the Lake District on holiday at the time and came home early when we phoned with our concerns. By the time the two of them arrived home there was a police patrol vehicle outside. Mum had become more and more hysterical and had phoned the police again, this time informing them that she had reason to believe he might harm himself. So there we were, my sisters and me, Mum, Nick and two police officers all standing around the kitchen table. In the awkward silence that filled the gaps in the chaotic conversation, I faintly heard an engine, which

grew louder and louder until it was recognisable as Dad's diesel Land Rover. It roared past the window of the kitchen and pulled on to the drive. Dad rushed in, concerned about the police car in front of the house. It was only when he saw us all standing there that he realised the police were there because of him. He simply started crying.

It turned out that he had set off to work and then decided on the way that he couldn't face it. Instead of turning round and coming home he had gone for a drive to try and sort his head out. After driving for some time he had got so mentally and physically exhausted that he had pulled over in a lay-by and gone to sleep, and that was where he had stayed all day until he woke in a panic and rushed home because he knew he was late. He had no idea of the chaos and commotion he caused because he was so blind to anyone else's feelings but his own.

But that day was nothing compared to the situation we found ourselves in today.

The strangest thing about it all was this evening. Mum and I took Dad into the office in the hope that sorting out his room would make him more optimistic about going back to work. While he was buried in paperwork, we went over the road to the newsagent to buy lottery tickets. I come to this newsagent all the time to buy sweets for Dad and me when I'm cleaning his office after school. Standing in that queue was just so unbelievably surreal. It's like going to work when you've just murdered someone. We were so calm and acted if everything was completely normal, and even by our twisted standards it most definitely wasn't a normal situation. But lottery tickets? I mean, why the hell did we think it was our lucky day? Safe to say, we didn't win.

God. I'm so screwed up I don't even know what to say. I can't ever look at him the same way again. Why would he want me to see that? I'm fourteen years old. Is it selfish of me to want a parent who worries about me and what I'm doing rather than the other way round? More than anything

I can't understand why he would ever want to die, to leave us behind. Are we not enough for him? Does he not love me the way I love him? He can't. My love for him feels pointless now because I know however much I do and however much I show him my feelings, it's not enough to combat his depression.

My friends rang to see if I wanted to go round and watch a film. It's half-term and that is, after all, what normal fourteen-year-olds do in the holidays. How can I explain to them I've got much bigger things to worry about right now? Mum doesn't want me to tell anyone, not even my sisters. My own flesh and blood, and I can't even tell them their stupid prat of a dad wanted to kill himself today. It's not too difficult because Emma's away at uni till Christmas and Kathryn's still down in Cambridge for a while, but I tell Rach everything and she'll be back home tomorrow. I have to lie and pretend everything's OK when inside I'm falling apart. Life's really not fair.

Gonna go to bed. I can't stop crying and it's not doing me any good. Supposed to be spending the day doing homework tomorrow but it all seems so insignificant now. I hate him so much, but I love him, too, and want nothing more than for us all to be together and happy, just the six of us. Will it ever be possible?