

# Meet George...

An extract from *The Butterfly Summer*

I suppose here is probably the best place for a little biographical interlude. In February 1986, when I was nearly six months old, my father went on an expedition to the Venezuelan rainforest to search for the Glasswinged butterfly and he never came back. At the age of about twelve – it was after Mrs Poll died, I know that – I made it my mission to know all I could about Glasswinged butterflies. The local library soon ran out of books to help me and I think my poor mother might have remembered the London Library membership then; I borrowed every book I could on the subject and read them all, understanding very little. I hated butterflies, really: like any self-respecting London child I was rightly wary of bright, fluttering insects that flew into your face. I knew they'd lured my father away, yet somehow it was soothing to learn about them: it made me feel in control.

He'd also been studying Batesian mimicry – I knew this from the news report too. On the off chance you're not fully conversant with Batesian mimicry, it is the syndrome where butterflies who are particularly vulnerable to attack in the jungle learn to evolve so they resemble a totally different species of butterfly, one not attractive to enemies. My father was, apparently, doing important work in this field. He was seen as a forward thinker in the matter of butterfly evolutionary theory – he and Nabokov, would you believe it?

I don't think he wanted to go on the trip. My mother once told me it was terribly difficult for him, leaving his wife and baby daughter behind. Mum knew virtually no one in London: several years earlier, you see, she had been like one of those heroines in a novel, who gives up everything for love.

When she was nineteen, in 1979, Mum had come to Oxford on a Fulbright Scholarship. She met my father at the Bodleian Library when her book fell off her desk on to the floor; George Parr

happened to be walking past and picked it up. (I'd always imagined this book to be *Anna Karenina* or *The Last of the Mohicans*, something sweeping, torrid, worthy of their love, and was disappointed when, one of the last times we talked about my father, Mum revealed that the book in question was a study on the exodus of Cornish tin miners to California during the Gold Rush.)

My mother's fingers closed over my father's as he handed the book back to her and, at that touch, their eyes met. It was the same for both of them: they knew instantly.

There is a photo of them from their first summer together. They're standing in front of the Bodleian. My father is blond and square-jawed. He has his arms around my mother, as if showing her off to the camera, and she, in return, has one arm locked around his torso. Her hair is a halo of frizzy curls around her freckled, apple-cheeked face, her nipples like hard little beads in her thin spaghetti-strapped vest, and the arm that is free is outspread wide, and she's smiling, head tilting up to the sun, and my father is grinning at her, as though he cannot believe he's with this exotic, sensual goddess, because that's what she is.

(I don't look like either of these golden, beautiful people, I'm sad to say. I'm dark, lanky and cross-looking – 'Bitchy Resting Face', Jonas says it's called, though I'm not doing it on purpose. People used to come up to my mother and peer into my 1950s-era sprung pram, one of many donations from the Islington Women's Collective. 'What a lovely bab—' they'd begin, and the words would freeze on their lips as I'd glare at them furiously, lips pursed in an angry asterisk.)

After her perfect year at Oxford Mum had torn herself away from my father, both of them sobbing so uncontrollably at their parting by the airport gate that the TWA air stewardess had asked them to remove themselves as they were upsetting the other passengers. They had broken their favourite Vashti Bunyan album in two and each taken half – oh, young love! When I was a child this part used to make me wide-eyed with admiration of such hooliganism, then as a teenager moony-eyed at the romance of it all. Now I roll my eyes when I think of it: what a waste of a perfectly good LP.

Mum went back to New York to finish college but then, to the eternal disapproval of her parents, abandoned her degree and, selling the pearl necklace that she'd been given for her sixteenth birthday, flew back to London, dramatically turning up at my father's door in Oxford. She moved in then and there. They kept the empty necklace case above the front door, a symbol of their love.

One day, a year or so later, they decided to get married. The way she always told it, it was something of a lark. They'd gone to the registry office with a neighbour and a couple of old friends as witnesses, then had lunch in a pub out towards Headington afterwards. No family. My father's upbringing was eerily similar to Mum's: only child of elderly parents, in his case both dead by his mid-teens. He had stayed with friends in the holidays from boarding school during the last couple of years before he went up to Oxford. He had one second cousin called Albert, in Birmingham, whom he'd seen only once or twice in his life and Mum had never met. So it was just six of them that cold November day. My mother wore a white lace dress she bought from an antique shop – it was slightly too small and you can see, in the wedding photo, one of the buttons from the seam at the back flapping over her shoulder as she stands with my father, oddly formal, facing the camera.

She was twenty-two when she married, he twenty-three. Who took that photo? Who took the photo of them outside the Bodleian, the one that was always on her mantelpiece? I remember her talking about them buying the basement flat in Noel Road, marvelling at how cheap it was. The day they moved in, my father carried her over the threshold and they fell down the slippery steps: he injured his back and had to lie on the floor for a week.













When Mum used to talk about him, she always told these stories with a smile. I filed it all away, in my neat little brain. I had perfect recall of everything she told me about my dad.

'We thought we'd invented being in love,' she said to me once.

She'd tell me about the happy times they had in Islington, how I was born, the walk at midnight through Bloomsbury to the hospital, but she became vague on details after my birth: she doesn't like

remembering that period. Because then my father went away and didn't come back.

Up in Matty's room was where I kept important things: my favourite books, my best dresses for Matty to wear to appease her, and my Father File. This was a box file Mrs Poll had given me, containing carefully written-out lists of known facts I had about my father – a few coaxed out of my mother, the rest just acquired, somehow.

	 My Father George Parr 
	
	1. George William Parr was his full Christian Name.
	2. Grew up in a house with lots of butterflies.
	3. Knew lots about butterflies, was very kind to them and their friend. 
	4. Had blond hare. In photograph is tall and handsome. Like Doctor Kill Dare. (Mum says this.)
	5. Died in the jungle. They buried him there because of disease and heat. That is why we don't have a place to leave flowers for him like in Grave Yards like Jonases's Granny Violet.
	  

Each point written in a different coloured pen, the border decorated with butterflies. It was stuck up on Mrs Poll's fridge for years, until the Sellotape turned brittle and dry in the sun. Besides, it seemed babyish, that and the other things of his I kept around. At some point, I don't know when, I must have put it in the file, along with various other silly little items, like his old broken watch strap, his favourite book, *Nina and the Butterflies*, and this cutting, long learned by heart:

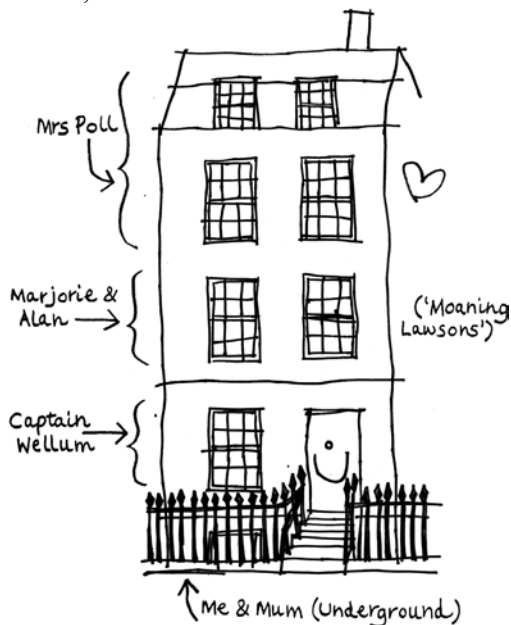
### **Noted Young Lepidopterist George Parr Dead in Venezuela**

reuters Caracas, March 1986: The Oxford Museum of Natural History confirmed yesterday night the death from a suspected heart attack of the youngest member of its expedition to the tropical Andes. George Parr, 27, was a noted young entomologist recognised as one of the most brilliant of his generation whose work in the field of Batesian and Müllerian mimicry, and the varying mutations of lepidoptery, was rapidly gaining attention in the wider scientific community. He leaves behind a wife and six-month-old daughter. The museum has yet to respond to questions surrounding the circumstances of his death.

In my more attention-seeking phase, and especially after Mrs Poll died, I was very proud of that cutting: people at school didn't have fathers whose deaths had been in the papers.

I don't know when but, gradually, we stopped talking about him. The house changed again, things were moved around, and the box file was put on a shelf in my mother's study. The list and the photographs and the book were all, slowly, forgotten.

For years that photo of my parents outside the Bodleian Library was in Mum's bedroom: I saw it every day because she and I shared the front room of the dark, damp, rat-infested basement – Mrs Poll was on the top two floors. The Lawsons lived below her, and Captain Wellum below that, above us:



123 Noel Road

Most of my earliest memories are of the kitchen of our flat, and the Islington Women's Collective. I have two very clear snapshot pictures of them and this time. Firstly, the evening Tanya, de facto head of the Islington Women's Collective, brought Mum a coat one of their members, Elsa, had been wearing when she'd been knocked down by the number 19 bus the previous week. Mum actually took it and cried, and more and more of them turned up and they all sat around the kitchen table hugging each other and drinking elderflower wine. She wore that coat – a dark pink fluffy thing, gradually coloured yellowing-grey by London pollution – until last year, when

the moths finally polished off the last bits upon which they hadn't already feasted. They meant well (the Collective, not the moths, who were a bloody pain in the neck for years until Malc sorted them out), but they tended to take up a lot of space and time – time I wanted with my mum, by myself, instead. I wanted to show her she didn't need anyone else, she didn't need to be sad, because I could look after her.

They cried a lot, the Collective. When Tanya appeared at the front door, I knew to scarp up stairs, past the laundry, avoiding the naughty nail in the hallway where the carpet had worn bare, under the sheets Mrs Lawson used to hang over the bannisters to dry, up, up to the top of the house, to Mrs Poll's. I never much liked any of them. I think it's because they were almost comically uninterested in me except as a future oppressed minority. 'Can't your kid cook for herself?' Allison asked Mum once, wearily, when Mum broke off from a Collective meeting to fix me some tuna-out-of-a-can-on-toast – our favourite meal. I was five.

I wasn't ever scared Mum would hurt me. But I was often frightened of her. When the gas was turned off, or when the damp was really bad, or when the Moaning Lawsons had a go at her about something – and when, I suppose, the toughness of her situation made her feel even more trapped than usual – she'd get angry and start slamming the kitchen doors. Then something really would go wrong – a broken cup, a leaking tap, I'd make a mess by dropping some food – and all hell would break loose. I knew she didn't mean it. I understood that, even then, but I was still scared of the mercurial nature of her moods.

The second memory is that, when I was five or so, Tanya sent the manuscript of Mum's book, *The Birds Are Mooing*, to a book editor she knew. Mum had been working on it, in secret, for years, on and off: I was often aware of her, sitting up in bed with me half asleep next to her as she furiously typed on her old mushy-pea-green electric typewriter. She'd agreed to let Tanya see it, because Tanya had nagged and cajoled for weeks. Then one night, out of the blue, Tanya turned up on the doorstep and announced she'd posted the manuscript to her friend that morning. Expecting Mum to be pleased.

My mother's rage was like nothing else I'd seen before. She saw it as a betrayal of trust, of everything the Collective stood for. She was so cross, yelling and throwing things, that I hid under the table. I didn't want to move, because I was terrified, and so I wet myself. Eventually Mr Lawson came downstairs and banged on our door and told her to shut up, but Mum ignored him. Eventually, after Mum and Tanya had been screaming at each other for about twenty minutes—

*Delilah, I think it's really sad you don't want to help yourself, and help us validate you.*

*For Christ's sake, you had no right to do it, Tanya! How dare you interfere in my life, I don't need any help and I can't stand people sticking their noses in! We're doing fine! We don't need anyone!*

—even Mrs Poll appeared in the doorway, to suggest they keep it down a bit, and took me back up with her. I remember kicking at the door, wanting to stay down there for once, not wanting to leave Mum. But Mrs Poll was surprisingly firm, and hauled me upstairs for a bath and pyjamas, then cheese on toast with chips. She let me watch *Hi-de-Hi!*

For a few days afterwards Mum constantly said Tanya had stabbed her in the back. I think she was simply terrified. And Tanya was right, because the editor loved it and made Mum an offer to publish it, and though Mum was dead against the idea at first, she came round, though I don't think her friendship with Tanya was ever quite the same.

The book is dedicated to me. 'For little Nina: I hope this makes things better.' I think that's such a sad inscription.

*The Birds Are Mooing* is about a young girl called Cora who wakes up one morning and finds everything is different. The sky is made of cake sponge, the flowers smell of gravy, the birds are mooing, and her mum and dad are tiny creatures she puts on the mantelpiece whose voices are so small she can't hear what they're saying. The little girl has to work out why it's happened and whether she can turn everything back the way it was.

She never read it to me, that's the funny thing. I read it – I read all her books, of course. Teachers at school used to say I was the



luckiest girl in the world, having a mum who wrote books especially for me. ‘Are they about you? I bet they are!’

I couldn’t ever say what I’d worked out at about seven or eight: ‘No, they’re about Mum.’

She writes books about the little lost girl she was and still is, but I don’t think she’s realised that’s what they’re about. The truth, which I’ll say once and then never again, as it makes me feel crummy, is: I’ve never got on with Mum’s books, I don’t know why. I just don’t quite believe them. And that makes me, in my way, the worst, most ungrateful daughter imaginable. *The Birds Are Mooing* sold, and sold – it’s in every library in the country. I should love it, because it saved our bacon: just before it came out, my head teacher had called in Social Services about my shoes and clothes being too small, again, but this time there was a social worker circling. Mrs Poll had to lend Mum money to buy me some proper warm shoes (not those canvas ones with the rubber soles, which had long ago split and were too small) and a coat (not last year’s, which the moths had enjoyed all summer and whose arms only reached my elbows).

Once *The Birds Are Mooing* had been a success and we had some money, we bought Captain Wellum’s ground-floor flat after he died, and I kept the basement bedroom – by now damp-proofed and papered with rose wallpaper from Laura Ashley, along with matching rose duvet and pillow set. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.

And that photograph of my parents outside the Bodleian went into Mum’s new bedroom on the ground floor. It was always there, for years, on the mantelpiece next to her brass tree she’d bought at the antiques stall in Camden Passage. She started buying necklaces, after the book deal, when she had a bit more money: just junk things, coloured plastic or glass, or shells. She hung them everywhere; sometimes they’d knock together like wind chimes if the windows rattled in a storm, or when someone slammed the front door. So Mum bought necklaces, and we started having holidays – not very successful ones, but time away nonetheless – and when I was seven, she gave up waitressing at the Italian down the road. I think she was afraid of not having money again, so she kept on with it longer

than necessary. I went to Mrs Poll's, on those evenings – which I preferred, anyway. Poor Mum.

Then the Moaning Lawsons moved into a home, and we bought their first-floor flat off the Council. Mrs Poll used to look down at us from her landing. 'You're creeping up, like ivy,' she'd say. 'You'll have the whole place off me while I'm sleeping, I bet.'

When she died, Mum was contacted by Mrs Poll's extremely serious and grand solicitors. Convinced she'd been landed with a bill for something, Mum was instead flabbergasted to learn Mrs Poll had left us a bequest of £50,000, to be shared between Mum and me, and that she had also left us her flat: 'So that Delilah and Nina have a house of their own and can be a family.'

We hadn't felt like a family up till then, she was completely right. So that's how we came to own the whole of this tall, higgledy house by the canal. Bad luck, then grit and hard work, then good fortune: as I say, it has been quite a journey, to that top floor. And at some point, Mum must have put the photo of her and my father away, because though its image, their smiles, their postures are burned into my memory, it never reappeared.

You hear people say it all the time these days: 'I'm a bad mother.' 'She's not a very good mother.' 'Oh, I'm an awful mother.' As though it's something you can call judgement on, either way. That person there: bad mother. Three along to the right: good mother. I have never thought of Mum in those terms. She's the only mum I've had, so how would I know any different? I always knew she loved me, even if sometimes I didn't have a bath for a week or never went to birthday parties because we couldn't buy presents. She was always trying to make things better.

Besides, I was lucky. I had someone else looking out for me.

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# *The Butterfly Summer*

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