

Discover Keepsake...
An extract from *The Butterfly Summer*

You pass through the arch with the fox and unicorn, Lionel's and the Queen's crests combined. The house is square, low. You walk under the long, imposing loggia of arches to the enormous wooden door – oak, long ago bleached white-grey. They say a baby elephant could fit through those doors – at least, that is what my grandmother used to tell me – but, like all her stories, one never quite knew if it was true or not. There is a statue of Lionel himself on the outer wall of the East Wing, in an alcove, hands on hips, beard pointed and bristling, as if to remind his guests of his importance. His head is missing. He has bombasted breeches, great stone rings on each finger, an intricately carved sword, but no head.

Our greatest treasure is not inside the house, however, but flanks it: the garden, a hidden paradise, laid out by my ancestors, cultivated and developed until it has become like nowhere else. Pineapple pits, the rarest blooms, the strangest trees, like alien creatures, a scent like perfume heady in the air. It is filled with our secrets, marvels that are too strange to relate here. The gardens slope up behind the house towards a meadow, and in front of the house they lead down towards the creek. Behind the head of the river and up to the harsher north coast of the country, in the moors, are the tin and copper mines, the source of our wealth for so many years and now long abandoned, sold or closed.

In summer the river and the sea are sometimes sluggish. The house is warm and dry, shaded by the trees which hug it close, the ivy and creepers that try to pull the house to the ground. In autumn the mists swirl around it and winds fly in through the windows and we shutter ourselves in, boarded up for winter. We are protected against the worst of the storms and the cold.

That is why the butterflies came.

For ten years, my world began and ended at Keepsake. I wasn't a prisoner there, I left the tangled headland that was ours many

times; by the time I was eight I could row myself along the Helford estuary, to where the river meets the wide sea. I knew the tides better than my times tables, and I knew the sound of the birds in the woods, the owls and the blackbirds, before I knew the sound of most human voices.

My father wintered in town, dozing at the Club, doing whatever work it was he said he needed to do to justify his existence, that of enjoying my family's money. So it was that I was brought up by two women: my mother and my grandmother. Mother taught me to sail, to read, to listen out for the sound of the birds. She taught me how to plait my hair, and she sat with me at night when I was feverish and cried out from nightmares. Grandmother taught me about butterflies.

My grandmother, Alexandra Parr, was a celebrated lepidopterist, one of the great late-Victorian bluestockings. She was perhaps the most important person in my early years: I adored her. My father loathed her, but the money was hers, of course, and I suspect that is why he remained away so often – until she died, and his reign could begin.

Grandmother was formidable. Her mother, Lonely Anne, had died young and she was brought up by her grandfather, Frederick the Vicar, one of the few Parr men to inherit. He, a widower, had no knowledge of children and simply raised her as a boy. She had no fear; it pains me how signally her children and grandchild failed to inherit this trait. She believed she could do whatever boys did, and what she wanted to do was study butterflies. No one before (with the exception of Mad Nina, my most notorious ancestor) or afterwards (with the exception of my poor son, George) in our family understood, or examined them so minutely.

The desire to acquire knowledge was a kind of madness with her. She was the only female allowed access to the celebrated Darwin collection at the Natural History Museum. She was an Aurelian, one of a tiny handful of women to be so honoured in the Entomological Society's illustrious and varied history. Her speciality was the Fritillaries, the flickering orange-and-black butterflies that were once widespread over England and are now all variously threatened. It

was my grandmother who taught me the difference between the Silver Washed, Pearl Bordered and Marsh Fritillaries, how to spot them, what they ate, where they rested.

My son has made a career out of his study of the glamorous butterflies of the rainforests: the Glasswinged butterfly, as translucent as day, the huge iridescent Morphos, or the Orange Oakleaf, which sits with its brown wings closed, looking so much like a leaf that it is often impossible to spot, before it opens itself out to reveal the most brilliant acid-orange and peacock-blue markings.

Grandmother would, I think, have smiled at this. I believe she made one trip abroad, to Portugal, in her youth, but preferred the native English butterflies. They are less glamorous, but more interesting. 'You could study Fritillaries for years, their habits, their flight patterns, their biology,' she'd say. 'They're remarkable little things. And what need have we to travel? We have them all to ourselves.'

In fact it was my grandmother who was remarkable. I miss her very much and wish she had not chosen the path she did. For years I held myself responsible for her end, thinking that I could have averted it had I been aware of her intentions.

When one comes from a family like this, one knows every member, their foibles and eccentricities. They live here, in the walls, in the air – they are in the house as much as the ivy. You might say one understands them better than many living people. I certainly understood the Parrs better than the scant outsiders I knew. Take, for example, the story of my most extraordinary relative, my great-great-great-grandmother, Mad Nina.

Mad Nina, the fifth of the line to inherit Keepsake, was born in 1790. She was the mother of the aforementioned Frederick the Vicar. She ran away one night, abandoning her son when he was still a small child, and not until he was in his late teens and fully expecting to inherit Keepsake did she return from the Orient, having quite lost her mind. Where had she been these fifteen years or more? Grandmama used to tell me that Frederick didn't recognise her. That she had been so changed by grief she looked entirely different.

She had always had a restless streak, the madness that haunts us

all being strong in her and ill-suited to a hidden life. Poor, troubled Mad Nina. From childhood it chafed upon her, rubbing against her sanity. She dreamed butterflies were trapped inside her, that they flew into her mouth and other parts at night, that she would one day give birth to thousands of them. When she married and had a child it became worse. Later, I was the same way myself; in fact, you might say at times her ghost has kept me close company.

One night, when there was a full moon and the countryside around shone silver-bright in the dark, Mad Nina had saddled her horse and, making for Portsmouth, had run away to Persia – yes, Persia. Who knows why? She had always loved Scheherazade and tales of distant lands, and since she was a child had longed to leave Cornwall. Yet she only got as far as Turkey, taking passage on a boat bound for Constantinople and disguising herself as a boy. She was soon discovered by the ship's captain and subsequent grave indignities were suffered by her, culminating in her being dressed in women's clothing again and being taken to a slave trader; he knew this exotic, English lady with skin paler than milk and huge, blue veins that throbbed visibly on her forehead and neck was a rare prize.

So my ancestor was sold into the harem of the Sultan in the Topkapi Palace, where captured foreign women were the majority of the concubines in that lavish prison. Nina, greatly esteemed by Mahmud II for her refinement and race, was tended to by her fellow concubines. We do not know if she bore him children – and indeed know very little about her life there at all – but we know the concubines were not allowed to leave the palace, or see anyone else but their rivals: they could be killed at a moment's notice, or thrown out to die on the streets on a whim. But after fifteen years, and with the delicate intervention of the English ambassador in Constantinople, Nina was permitted to leave. I think perhaps, by then, she had begun to wholly lose her mind.

She arrived back at Keepsake when young Frederick was not expecting her. She had suffered greatly on the journey home: she was not escorted but made her own way across Europe, as swiftly as she could. She had to, as you shall see. When she arrived back

she did not enter her home but went straight to the Butterfly House where she slept, waking only to tend to the butterfly garden. She died a year or so later, having spoken only once to her son, and that to say: *Look after them. Look after them for me.* And he did, for years, until he too died. My grandmother always said of him, 'He deserved better than her for a mother, poor man.' But I always felt sorry for Mad Nina.

By then the rumours had begun about what Mad Nina had concealed upon her return journey home, and they did not die for decades, rising to fever pitch when my own grandmother, as a young woman making her debut in London, would neither confirm nor deny the tales told to her of the extraordinary natural treasures to be found at her ancestral home. For there were rumours of the rarest of butterflies here, smuggled back from Anatolia, and able to survive only in Keepsake's hothouse environment. This was at a time when butterflies and their capture were akin to an obsession amongst a certain type of collector.

In my grandmother's youth we had Aurelians, and far less respectable collectors, creeping around looking for specimens – of course, they could not find their way to the house, much less into the garden itself. Boats were chartered to sail up the Helford, men creeping across the land on foot from Gweek or Helston. Some got close but none of them succeeded. Alexandra was quite impressed with, and eventually married, the one who managed to make it as far as the butterfly meadow above Keepsake. He learned the secrets of the house when he married her, though when he died – on a collecting expedition to India, leaving my grandmother with my mother and my Aunt Gwen, who was then but a baby – he was not greatly mourned by her. Grandmama had her butterflies and her daughters: she was content.

My grandmother often said that Mad Nina deserved a better legacy. I think often of her, of the poor, skeletal woman slumped in gratitude on the floor of the Butterfly House, not wanting to leave, only wanting to stay with them, home again after wanting to fly and be free, and after discovering what the outside world is really like.

From my earliest childhood, we three spent days in the meadow above the house, looking for butterflies: my mother, my grandmother and I, scuttling along behind them, short legs tangled in bloomers and skirts, crying out for them to wait for me. Over the fields and the meadows we would range, over our land and the common land, past walls hiding caterpillars and eggs, and hedgerows where friendly lemon-yellow-and-brown Speckled Woods flutter and rest. When I was quite small we had a pony and trap, and on long hot summer days Grandmother would drive us to Kynance Cove, almost the southernmost point of England, where the water is light turquoise and the sky is endless, and there we caught Clifden Blues that matched the sky itself. We ate crab sandwiches, which Pen, the scullery maid, prepared, and Mother and I removed our laced-up boots and ran in bare feet on the white sand while Grandmother, large hat on head, huge swooping net in hand, hunted for eggs and caterpillars amidst the chalky grassland on the cliffs above us.

When she caught a butterfly, with her long, looping, swooping action, she despatched it immediately with a pin, then took it home to be filed neatly away with the rest of her collection. It was understood that any serious study of diurnal Lepidoptera meant killing the object of your interest, but my grandmother was rare for her day in refusing to pin every butterfly she caught. She said, time and time again, that they were part of the air, as we were, and to kill each one was a grave mistake.

For me she wrote *Nina and the Butterflies*, so that I should understand my history, where I came from, why we were these people. So that I'd love these insects, as she did, she included a list of butterflies at the end, with descriptions that were interesting for a child. It was accepted by a publisher she knew in London, and proud indeed was the day we took possession of a copy.

Mother used to read this slim, modest volume to me over and over again, at my request. It is a strange book, there is no denying it – but then, our family's story is strange. She read to me every night for hours. Fairy stories and ghost stories, tales of pirates and Cornish giants. It is sixty years or more since she sat me on her knee and, tucking my hair behind my shoulder, whispering dear

words into my ear, carried me into a world of imagination with her soft, sweet voice, telling me the story of our home, as set down by her mother, my grandmother Alexandra. But I remember it still, I remember the smell of her, the feeling of warmth on my back as I huddled against her. These two women, Alexandra and Charlotte, raised in the history of the house, proud and tall and clever and beautiful as women should be, were the twin pillars of my early life.

But in the autumn of 1926 everything changed, for ever. Mother and I went away to stay with my Aunt Gwen in London. I thought of this as an enormous treat: I was seven, and old enough to think myself a young lady. We were gone for a while, at least six weeks, possibly two months.

On our return Turl met us at Helford Passage with my mother's boat, her beloved *Red Admiral*. He admired my new brocaded coat with its fine epaulettes, my matching hat. 'You're quite grown up, Miss Parr,' he said. 'Those weeks in London, I should barely know ye.'

I was terribly pleased at this. He handed us in and took the other skiff back alone, slicing on ahead of us. I was First Mate, as was usual, helping to push us away from the shore before leaping into the boat at the last minute.

When we were away, Mother said, 'I have something to tell you, Thea, my dear.'

I remember it so clearly: it is the moment my happy life changed. I was crouched in the prow, looking out over the river, watching the sunlight flashing on the clear water.

'Grandmama is dead. She died several weeks ago. She was ill, and she didn't want us to know. She has been buried.'

I didn't really understand her. I remember the salt in the air, the gentle breeze, like sweet balm on my skin after weeks in smoggy London. I remember my mother's graceful, fluid movements, hand on the oar, looking upstream, towards the setting sun, face twisted away from me so all I saw was her soft hair curled high on her head.

I said, because I thought I hadn't heard her properly, 'Sorry, Mama, I don't understand. Who has died?'

‘Grandmama, dear.’

I remember huddling into the prow, as though she had slapped me, pushed me away from her. I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t look at me, why her expression was so cold.

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because she died. Because we must all die, dearest one.’

‘But couldn’t we say goodbye to her, Mama?’

‘It was not possible,’ was all Mama said. ‘This is how it had to be.’

‘But I would have hugged her had I known,’ I said. ‘I would have hugged her especially hard.’

I could barely imagine her absence in the house. To never hear her booming, brisk voice, firm step, the way she owned every room. To never see her shining, cream-and-pink face, and those chocolate-brown eyes, the coil of cream-and-grey hair, the battered straw hat, the red-raw rough hands so unlike the rest of her, beautiful and dynamic. She was alive, every inch of her. How could she have been so ill she’d died, and we didn’t know?

‘I don’t understand—’ I began.

My mother interrupted, crisply. ‘You’ll understand one day, Thea, darling.’

She never called me Thea: that was my grandmother’s name for me. I tried to think of a question to ask that would sum up the many I had. ‘Are you sad?’

‘Yes, I’m very sad,’ my mother said. She grasped one oar in both hands, steering away from the path of a fishing boat making for the sea, raising her hand to them. ‘I’m very, very sad.’

‘Why aren’t you seeming sad?’

‘Because one doesn’t. One must put a brave face on it. She is dead now, and gone. We must get used to it.’ With that she steered a sharp left as we rounded the head of the creek, sliding quietly through the calm evening waters, along the creek, till we saw Jessie, the maid waiting for us with the rope. ‘There. We’re nearly home. One more thing. We mustn’t discuss it with your father. We can talk about her, but only when we are alone. Do you understand?’

I nodded, wanting to cry, but knowing she didn’t want me to. I

barely knew my oft-absent father, except as a brusque, sharp-tempered man who barked orders and spat out his food when he didn't like it. I was to come to know him now.

There began my mother's decline, and indirectly mine.

I see now that she began to push herself away from me, that I stopped being allowed to comb her heavy hair like chocolate velvet, or play the piano with her, or listen to her read to me in the endless winter evenings, in her little parlour, my head resting on her soft, brushed-cotton knee. She was often away, or stayed in her room: Jessie dressed me and read to me. Turl took me out in the boat with him, gave me liquorice root to chew as a treat, and said I was to be his First Mate now. Children learn to adapt: I didn't understand at first, but gradually I realised my mother did not love me any more. Over time I believed those happy days of my early years, before my grandmother's death, were just a scene from a painting, not my own life.

In the meantime there were other distractions: Turl, and the *Red Admiral*, and Jessie and Pen, and Digby, my little dog, who came everywhere with me. And there was Keepsake to explore, a place where you knew you might walk into any room and see a scene from another time and place, where ghosts seemed to hover just around the corner, whispering while I slept or ate or read. I never tired of the place: the secret platforms that looked out to sea, the tiny chambers hung with heavy silk tapestries, the Victorian nursery we never used – complete with cot and baby, battered train set, wooden bricks made light and lacy with woodworm. There were portraits of my ancestors long forgotten in dusty stairwells, doors that were never opened, carved wooden chests filled with old dresses, not worn for centuries. Engravings hung on rusting curling wire, discarded in corners.

I had a doll's house, which waits patiently still in one of the rooms on the top floor, cast out of my sight as it reminds me so exquisitely of that painful time. For I played with it for hours, with the tiny dolls and their clothes, the heavy metal furniture. It had electric lighting and a garage for a car: our doll's house was more

up to date than we were. I'd imagine the family who lived there, give them roles to play: the loving, intelligent wife who studied butterflies, the hard-working husband injured in the First World War, the sweet little boy who was the apple of their eye, and their elder daughter, a young me, who had soft chestnut hair I am sure was real and a painted china face which only ever seemed to express blank acceptance.

I wasn't lonely. I wasn't very happy, but I learned pragmatism. Then, when I was almost nine, I met Matty, and then I had her.

Down on the creek one day, with the *Red Admiral* moored up at the neck of the river, I was at the shoreline desultorily picking at the sand with a stick, skirts tucked up into my bloomers, boots caked in mud. I was trying to catch live whelks for Digby, and was debating whether to sail out a little further, or whether to walk up over the meadow. But when the tide was right and the wind and the sun were playing together, it was hard to be away from the water. Digby, next to me, was snuffling at a shell when we heard a cry.

'Hey! Get away, you're trespassing!'

I looked up to see a tanned, scruffy creature running down the slippery steps to the shore. 'Excuse me, this is my land,' I said, trying not to sound haughty. '*You're* trespassing.'

The figure passed a hand in front of its face, wiping mud off its nose and staring at me to reveal a pair of bright green eyes, which widened. It began to laugh. 'This is good! You're a girl, ain't you? I've got that clean wrong.'

Patting the old straw hat I had crammed on my hair, and looking down at my navy bloomers and thick boots, I stared up in annoyance. 'Yes, of course. How rude,' and then I laughed. 'Oh. Are you a girl, too?'

'I'm a girl all right,' she said, and held out her hand, gazing frankly at me. 'I'm Matty. I live in the gatehouse.' I knew the gatehouse of course, though I'd never been in. It had a neat curve of lemon-yellow roses that flowered around the front door each year and was the kind of house I dreamed of living in. Well-tended, pretty, compact. Two up, two down. I nodded recognition. 'Are you the little lady

they talk about, the one who'll have that big house all t'herself one day?'

Her tone was mocking. I took her hand, and shrugged. 'Matty's the name of someone in a book. My – she was a servant here, a long time ago. Did you know that?'

She shrugged. 'My name's Matilda. We been here for centuries, just like you, you know. Plenty of Mattys in my family. My ma says we used to serve you, long afore your grandmother were born. My gran, she was a wet nurse to your gran.'

'Oh,' I said, slowly. I knew there must be a grain of truth to what she said and I liked the idea that the Matty who helped Nina nearly three hundred years ago had a descendant called Matty who was here now, on this beach with me. 'More like great-great-great-great-however-many-grandmother.'

She shrugged, obviously bored of this topic. 'Something like that. What you doing?'

'Looking for whelks. This is Digby.'

'Lo.' She nodded at the dog; Digby cocked his head on one side. 'There's plenty more over by the old Wyckhams' beach, if you want to sail round there. I was up there yesterday.'

'Right,' I said, and with the straightforwardness of youth we didn't ask each other any more questions. I turned the *Red Admiral* over, helped the strange girl in, and we cast off.

I remember that day still, the scent of saltwater burning on skin, the mackerel we caught and roasted, the smell of woodsmoke. Lying on the tiny secret beach, wet sand and silver shingle cold between our toes. I remember the conversation, as if it were yesterday.

'What do you do all day, then?' she asked me.

'Me? I catch butterflies and I play by myself and I study with my governess. What about you?'

'I do what I want,' she said, and I glanced at her, admiringly. She was leaning back on her elbows, face to the sun.

'Well, I can't do that. Someone would stop me.'

'Yes, you can.' She turned to me then, green eyes glinting, as though stray beams of sunlight had become trapped in them. Her skin was like caramel – in those days, still, it was rare to see

someone deliberately tanned. Most of our lives were spent covering up from the sun's rays, for the shame of looking like a labourer. 'You can do anything you want, Teddy. Don't go thinking you can't.'

'Not me.' I laughed. 'It's Keepsake. I have to carry it on, no matter what.'

'Why? Because there's all that nonsense about your grandmother dying here and them over at Manaccan church refusing to bury her and all o'that?'

I put down the mackerel I was grilling. 'I . . . I hadn't heard that.'

'Oh.' Matty stood up, in front of me, blocking out the sun. 'Oh, right. Well, I'm sure you know better than me.'

'What do you mean, though? She was ill and she died—'

Matty raised one hand. 'Ain't none of my business. You forget it, yes? I'm right about one thing. There ain't nobody going to stop me doing what I want when I grow up, either. One day I'll just – I'll fly off, and I won't come back. If I fancy it.'

That morning Jessie had laid out my dress with the frilled, pin-tucked apron over the top, my black laced boots, polished so they gleamed, a new red ribbon for my hair. The idea I'd just do what I wanted was laughable. It was inconceivable.

I smiled at her. 'You'll have to show me.'

'You bet I will,' she said, fiercely.

We were friends from that day onwards. Probably I never had a better friend. Matty was two years older than me and could roam freely all day. She knew how to shoot an arrow, shoe a horse, light a fire, catch, bone and cook a fish, and after my grandmother died and my mother turned away from me she became the centre of my world. I had never had a friend my own age before, someone to explore with, to talk to, to share an apple with. Matty made everything better. I let her come hunting with me, and together we caught all manner of butterflies in my grandmother's laurel boxes and nets. I told her stories of the house, the sounds at night which terrified me. She made up ridiculous tales about goblins and circuses, invented wild jokes about Jessie and Turl and Talbot the agent and Reverend

Challis over at Manaccan church, which made us hysterical with laughter. She was naughty, I suppose; I'd never been that way and I loved it. We dared each other to greater acts of danger, balancing on cliff edges. We stayed out all day, coming back after dusk.

And then my tenth birthday arrived.

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The Butterfly Summer

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