Opening Extract from...

The Butterfly Summer

Written by Harriet Evans

Published by Headline Review


The Butterfly Summer

Harriet Evans




headline
review

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by
HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2016 by
HEADLINE REVIEW

1

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 2134 6 (paperback)

Typeset in Garamond MT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other controlled sources. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London, EC4Y 0DZ

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Chapter One

London, 2011

The kind of books I like usually begin by telling you about the family you're going to meet. 'The Fossil sisters lived in the Cromwell Road.' 'They were not railway children to begin with.' They have each other, that's what the author wants you to know.

I like stories about families. They're like fairy tales to me: I never knew my father and Mum is . . . not really like mothers in books. The people who really looked after me, who did the boring things necessary to sustain a child (teeth, zebra crossings, shoes that fit), are Malc, my stepfather, and Mrs Poll, the old lady upstairs – and I was wrong about them. Oh, I was wrong about all of it! And it's still such a muddle, the story of what happened, that summer everything changed. It jumps in and out of years and months like Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*: we never really escape our childhoods, do we?

But if you want a beginning, I suppose that day in April is where it began to unravel, and it was a tiny thing which started it all off: the zip on a new pair of boots.

Malc, my stepfather, says there are no coincidences, that everything happens for a reason. I would always have met her, he says; I went to the library most lunchtimes. But I still believe something else was at work that day. Some kind of old magic, the sort that's still at work when you need it, lurking just out of sight, hidden along dark corridors, up tall towers, and in long-forgotten corners of dusty old houses.

The reason I know the exact date is because 15th April was a dreaded day for me, marking two years since I had started at Gorings and two years since my divorce was finalised. It's strange, being

twenty-five and able to say that: 'My divorce.' ('Ooh. That's one to chalk up on the experience board,' one of my new colleagues said admiringly, as though I'd done it to be able to show off about having made a disastrous teenage marriage.)

The 15th of April 2011 was one of those spring days where even though the daffodils are bobbing bravely about, it might still be winter because it's so bitingly cold. My daily lunchtime walk from the office on Hanover Street to the London Library was eleven minutes, long enough to work out whether a pair of new boots is comfortable or not. I'd bought them the day before, at lunchtime, to cheer myself up. I put them on when 1 p.m. arrived, a sort of act of defiance against the date. '*Hey! I've got new boots on! You can't say my life's rubbish!*'

And yet, less than a minute after I'd left Gorings and was striding towards Piccadilly, I realised these boots had a zip at the back which ran from the base of the heel up to the calf and which rubbed, little teeth nipping at that tender skin above the heel bone. By the time I reached the library, my socks were worn through, each soaked in blood. This was a determined zip: the Achilles-heel-locator of zips. The London Library is definitely not the kind of place where one peels off one's bloodstained socks in the lobby and I hurried upstairs as fast as I could, hiding myself away so I could examine my gory feet in relative privacy.

There are over a million books in dark metal shelves known as the Stacks that rise up for four storeys in this unassuming corner of St James's. The library smells of things I love: mildewy dust, old leather and polish. I come here to be alone, away from ringing phones and typing and people calling out for a cup of coffee, away from chatter about husbands or the relative merits of different IKEA kitchen units. I hide amongst books all waiting to be picked, some unopened for forty, fifty years. There are shelf-marks with labels like:

Human Sacrifice
Nubian Philology
Papier Mâché
Snuffboxes

My father bought me life membership to the London Library before he went away. Mum doesn't like me coming here every day; I think she believes it makes me wonder about him.

When I was little, Mrs Poll and I would play a game where we'd pretend my father had come back. She'd move her kitchen table against the wall, set the two orange-covered dining chairs upside down upon it and fetch the tablecloth, under which I would crawl, feeling my way through the humid, tangled, grasping undergrowth of the Amazon where he was last seen, and I'd pretend to be escaping from a tiger who wanted to eat me, shouting:

'No! I will serve you these ten years now as your slave, if only you will not eat me, for I must return to my wife and child in London, a great city far across the sea!' – brushing leaves and other jungle detritus from my shoulders and backing away, as Mrs Poll roared convincingly, eyes huge, mouth bared in a terrifying rictus grin, and then she'd stop and hold out a paw for me to take.

Then we'd pretend I was home again. 'Delilah, my darling,' I'd say, quickly – because Mrs Poll always hurried through this part – 'I have returned. Where is my dear child, Nina? Here are some emeralds to match your beautiful eyes, now bring me an egg and ham sandwich, for I have not eaten anything but leaves and marmalade these last ten years past.'

'That's enough now, Nina,' Mrs Poll would say, gently, and the world I'd conjured up would recede, like cardboard figures on a toy stage sliding away, and it'd be me and her again, in the warm little kitchen. 'Time to go back downstairs. Your mum'll be waiting for you.'

That was a bigger lie than the rest of it: Mum was never waiting, we both knew that. Mum was often barely there at all, or she'd be lying under a blanket weeping, or shouting at someone down the phone – usually the Council. But I couldn't stay with Mrs Poll all the time, much as I'd have liked to, so I'd trundle down the stairs, feet scratching on the splintered wood that stuck up through the worn carpet, back to our flat.

Later, I realised Mrs Poll was trying to make me understand you couldn't keep hacking away at the same make-believe game and one

day expect things to change. When I was about twelve, and a know-it-all, I was ashamed of having played that game with her, mainly because there are no tigers in rainforests. But a little part of me still wondered about him.

I'm twenty-five now. Don't worry, I'm not stupid – I know he's not coming back.

After I'd stuffed as much lavatory paper as I could into my boots, I collected the book I'd set aside on the Saved Books Shelf and limped to a desk. I began to read, but the words meant nothing, and I stared out of the window, trying to buck myself up a bit and quell the rising tide of thoughts that seemed, at that time, to crash over me out of nowhere, leaving me limp, bedraggled, struggling to see anything clearly.

At that very moment someone tapped me on the shoulder. I screamed, jerking back in my seat.

'Lunch break's over. Get back to work,' the voice behind me whispered.

I turned around, slowly.

'Sebastian? Oh my God. You gave me a fright.'

Sebastian crouched down beside me and kissed my cheek.

'Sorry. The British Library didn't have what I wanted. I should have texted you to let you know I was coming. We could have had a sandwich.'

Sebastian is a teaching fellow in English Literature at UCL – it's where we met, seven years ago. He looked down at the book I was reading.

'*Children's Literature and British Identity* – wow, Nins, don't you just sometimes want to have a sandwich and look at rubbish on your phone? Like normal people?'

'I'm not like normal people. You know that.' There was a short, tense pause. I said, sort of jokingly, 'Anyway, my phone—'

He looked sadly down at my cracked, ancient, barely-smartphone. 'She's like a museum piece, ladies and gentlemen . . .'

He raised his voice and the old lady at the table next to mine, some two metres away, looked up crossly at us and then stared, open-mouthed, as though horrified at what she saw.

'. . . Yes, Nina Parr. Roll up, roll up. It wasn't until after we were married I discovered she had twelve copies of *The Secret Garden* in her childhood bedroom. Yes, twelve copies, m'lud.'

Sebastian's voice carried and I flushed. 'Shh,' I said. 'Don't be funny about it. Not today, especially.'

'Today?'

'Our divorce.'

'What about it?'

I looked at his smiling face. He didn't remember. I wondered why I did, why I hadn't just allowed myself to forget about it too. 'Two years ago today. The decree absolute, I mean.'

'Oh.' He looked down at me, contrite, as I shifted in my chair, the atmosphere deteriorating still further. 'I didn't remember. I'm sorry.'

The trouble with being friends with your ex-husband – whom you married, to the horror of your respective families, aged nineteen and 'out of hand', as they say in Georgette Heyer novels – is that you can often forget you were ever married, and that's a fatal mistake. You can be ever such good mates, like us: we liked each other enough to marry one another, after all. And it's all lovely until one remembers how awful it became. The rows, the heartbreak, the final showdown, the division of mess . . .

We should never have married in the first place, that's the trouble. We were a year-long university relationship, a first-love thing, and we should have burned out by finals time, instead of creating this storm of drama. I think other people were more wound up about it than we were – his parents, especially. It was ugly, and perhaps it was a terrible mistake, but the strange thing to both of us is we got through it. We're friends, close friends. His parents don't like that much, either.

Attempting to sound more jovial, I said, 'All is forgiven. And listen, on *The Secret Garden*, can I just say for the umpteenth time it's my favourite book? And it's not weird to own a few copies of your favourite book.'

'Not weird!' He gave a cheery laugh, and ran his hands through his scruffy hair. 'Nothing you do is weird, Nina. One man's psycho-intensity is another man's charming idiosyncrasy.'

'Oh, you patronising git,' I said, pushing him gently, but we were smiling.

'Agreed. Let's move on. Shake on it—'

And then, from the table next to us, came a harsh whisper:

'Would you, both of you, *please* keep the noise down!'

The old woman along the way was still glaring at us, and her huge eyes were dark with fury. I released my hand from Sebastian's and, turning to her, I said hurriedly, 'I'm so sorry.'

She stared at me. 'You—!' she hissed.

'Yes,' I said, pushing at Sebastian's bulky form and hoping he'd sort of melt away – he is, for such a thoughtful person, utterly blind to other people's moods. I, an only child, have spent most of my life studying people, watching carefully to see the impact of what they say. 'I'll call you later,' I hissed at him, almost desperately, because he showed no signs of seeing the old lady was probably going to explode.

'When, Nins?'

More to get rid of him than anything else, I said, 'Don't know. Let's have a drink sometime, shall we?'

'*Drinks?*' said Sebastian, faux-serious. 'Just you and me?'

'Why not?'

As soon as the words were out of my mouth we glanced at each other, nervously, smiling at what we both knew to be true: we didn't do drinks. We spoke on the phone, we had lunch every other week, he dropped over to our house all the time – Mum and Malc still adored him. We texted about silly things, but we didn't plan things, nor set aside time to meet in the evening. No, we didn't have drinks, just the two of us.

'Well, that'd be lovely, Nins.'

'Would you *please keep your voice down*!' The woman next to us actually waggled a finger at Sebastian.

Hastily, I said, 'Well, or with some of the others . . . Elizabeth . . . or when Leah's back from Mexico . . . you know. Just go, I'll call you later.'

'OK. Or, just you and me. Be nice. All right, I'm going, ma'am,' he said, to the old woman. 'She dies, you know,' he said, gesturing

at her copy of *Wuthering Heights*. 'They both do. Rubbish book, if you want my opinion.'

The old woman was shaking with a kind of stupefied rage, her bobbed hair shuddering around her head.

'Do I know you too?' she said, glaring at him. 'I think I know you.'

'Um—' Sebastian looked slightly apprehensive then, because his family knows absolutely everyone. 'No, I don't think so. Sorry.'

'Hmm.' She looked at him again, beadily. 'Well, listen, whoever you are, I don't want your opinion. If you don't leave immediately—'

'OK, OK,' Sebastian said, admitting defeat. 'Goodbye, Nina.' He waved at me. 'I'm . . . it was . . . it was nice to see you. Really nice.' And he was gone.

'Sorry again,' I said, softly. I half nodded and gave a smile-grimace to my furious neighbour, which I hoped encompassed contrition and a distancing of myself from Sebastian. I knew I'd have to head back to the office in a moment too: as office manager, I was supposed to reopen the phone lines promptly at 2 p.m. But some kind of pride made me sit there, reclaiming my own ground. I started scribbling messily in my notebook, imitating someone glad to get back to the very important work she'd been doing. I wrote:

I don't want to go back after lunch.

I don't care about Becky's kitchen extension or Sue's Easter egg hunt.

I hate making tea ten times a day. I hate being called 'Hey, you!'.

I shouldn't be having a drink with Sebastian. I should be going on exciting dates with people I've been set up with, or met on the internet, or something.

I don't want to do this any more. I don't want to feel like this any more.

I was writing so furiously I didn't hear the old woman come up behind me, and when she jabbed my arm with her pencil, I really did jump, properly scared out of my wits.

'I think you owe me a little more than that, my dear,' she said.

It was then I felt the atmosphere change. She was staring at me in fascinated horror, almost panic: I'd never seen an expression like that before.

'I've said I'm sorry – and I really am, if we disturbed you.'

'Are you? Are you?' She shook her head. 'Yes. Look at you.'

She was dressed almost entirely in black. The only note of colour was her tomato-red tights. Close up, I could see her face was lined, criss-crossed with age, her shingled hair white. Her eyes were entirely black and on her sack-like dress she wore a big jet brooch. The stones winked lazily in the hazy dusk of the Stacks.

'There isn't anything else I can do, other than apologise again,' I said, watching her curiously. 'He's very loud—'

'You could stop lying and tell me the truth.'

I thought she was a bit crackers. Slightly coldly, I said, 'You know, the Reading Room downstairs might be a better place for you in future, if you want peace and quiet.'

She stared at me in complete silence, scanning my face. Then she laughed, throatily, with a wild kind of freedom.

'Oh, that's good. That's very good. My dear Miss Parr.'

I stiffened, then I glanced down and saw *Nina Parr* scrawled on my notebook, and relaxed, but only a little.

She followed my gaze. 'Then I'm right,' she said softly. 'I'm right.' She rubbed her eyes. 'Oh, goodness!'

I didn't know what else to do so I sat back down. I heard a rustle as she pushed my bag aside with her foot, and grunted. I stared at my notebook again, pretending she wasn't there. I could hear her breathing – sharp, shallow – and then after almost a minute of silence she said:

'You really are just like your father, you know, Nina.'

I felt my scalp tighten, my skin prickle again: half anger, half fear. I didn't know how to respond.

'Did you hear me? You are very like him.'

As a stray beam of sunshine caught her I looked down at her glinting brooch and saw it was in the shape of a butterfly. And I

was scared then. Because butterflies are what killed him, and I sort of hate them.

'Look, Miss — I don't know your name. I'm sorry, but my father's dead.' Then, because she wasn't saying anything, I added, 'I don't remember anything about him. He died when I was six months old. All right?'

She barely spoke above a whisper:

'So that's what they told you, is it? Of course they did.'

I had twisted around to look at her, and I could see now that she was upset. Her face sort of crumpled and the dark, beady eyes were shining with tears. She brushed her hand away.

'They didn't tell me anything,' I said, sure she must be able to hear my heart, thumping in my chest. 'I don't know what you mean. My father's *dead*.'

'What about Keepsake? Is she still there?'

I shook my head. *Keepsake*. For a second, I thought I knew that name. 'What's Keepsake? Who's still there?' She didn't reply. '*Who's still there?*' I said, angrily.

'Perhaps it's not you.' She blinked, as though she was suddenly confused. 'I was so sure. You're like her, too. You're very like her.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' I said, but she was backing away. 'My father's dead,' I said again, in case she needed confirmation. 'Miss— ?'

'Travers,' she said, staring at the floor. 'My name's Travers. I have to leave now. She's coming. I have to leave.' And she turned, and disappeared.

'Miss Travers!' I called out after her, louder than before, and my voice echoed, bouncing off the metal shelves and into the gloom. 'What do you mean? *How do you know my father?*'

But she'd gone. And though, after a few seconds, I stood up and followed her into the labyrinthine darkness of the Stacks, I could find no trace of her. She'd vanished.