

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Take A Girl Like Me

Diana Melly

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Acknowledgements

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## About the Author

Diana Melly has been a night-club hostess, model, mini-cab driver, novelist, wife, mother and grandmother. She has been married to George Melly for forty-four years.

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FOR CARMEN, KEZZIE AND GEORGE

DIANA MELLY

Take A Girl  
Like Me

Life With George

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



A simple crude fellow is a character fit to bear true witness; for clever people observe more things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little. They never show you things as they are, but bend and disguise them according to the way they have seen them; and to give credence to their judgment and attract you to it, they are prone to add something to their matter, to stretch it out and amplify it. We need a man either very honest, or so simple that he has not the stuff to build up false inventions and give them plausibility.

Montaigne, 'On Cannibals'

## CHAPTER 1

### *A Winter's Tale*

IN 1961 WHEN I met George I was twenty-four and married to my second husband. I had two children, Patrick who was six and Candy who was seven months. Some people thought I was beautiful, but not everyone. I had once been a model and when a famous photographer tried me out, he told a fashion editor, 'No matter what I do with her, she just looks like a little old lady.'

George was thirty-five, quite short and just getting to be rather plump; his feet were tiny so he minced slightly when he walked; he had brown eyes, a big nose, a huge smile and was famous for singing in a jazz band and being bisexual.

There is a side to George that has always been attracted to unstable, needy women - and that was me. I responded to almost any man who wanted me. Until I met George, this haphazard selection usually ended unhappily.

When I married Michael, my first husband, I was sixteen. He was an imaginative, feckless Irishman of aristocratic origins which impressed me at the time but meant that he considered most jobs beneath him. We lived in bed-sits on hand-outs from my mother who was working as a housekeeper. Debt collectors came round most mornings. One of them, who came with a writ from the gas board, ignored the fact that I was eight months pregnant

and made a heavy pass at me. 'Don't worry girlie,' he had said, 'I could sort this out for you if you're nice to me.'



When our son Patrick was seven months old, Michael was still out of work. Unable to afford the rent of a flat or even a room, we went to live with his parents in Sussex. My mother-in-law and I disliked each other and after a few weeks I walked out, left Michael and, taking Patrick with me, went home to my mother. Her employer only allowed us to stay for a couple of months, saying that I should stand on my own two feet.

I found a room, I waitressed at night and was moderately successful at modelling. During the day Patrick went to a crèche, at night he was left alone. Sometimes after leaving the coffee bar where I worked I went out dancing. Then Patrick got measles and I had to stop work. The money ran out and I sent Patrick, now two, to live with my aunt in Essex. After leaving Patrick, I went to live with a writer called Michael Alexander who took me to Afghanistan. We travelled there in his battered Land Rover while he gathered material for a book.

When we came back, he left me and married someone else. I got 'engaged' to three different men. None of them seemed too desolate when I changed my mind except for

one. Johnnie Moynihan was a journalist, we had the same friends, he was kind to his mother and I ran out of reasons for saying no.

But it was another year before Patrick came to live with us, because Johnnie wanted to wait until we had a child of our own. So when my aunt brought Patrick to the London flat, our daughter Candy was already three months old. Just six weeks later Johnnie was sent to Paris by his paper, the *Evening Standard*. The job was to last for two months and he was lent a large flat near Les Deux Magots on the left bank. I went too but we left the children behind: Candy with my mother and Patrick back with my aunt. Johnnie had given two reasons for not wanting the children to come: money, and the busy social life that we would have to lead. I missed them and, when Johnnie heard that he was being sent down to Monte Carlo for a further month, I decided to go home.

We had let our flat for the duration of the French assignment, so after visiting Patrick at my aunt's house, I squashed into my mother's tiny bed-sit with Candy, who at six months was still just small enough for a carry-cot. Five years before, when I'd run away from Michael taking Patrick with me, my mother and I had shared the same bed. Patrick had slept on two chairs tied together because I couldn't afford a cot.

Back there again, I still didn't like staying at home with my mother. I would often leave her to babysit and would climb the rather grubby stairs to Muriel's, a drinking club in Soho. Encouraged by Muriel, someone would usually buy me a drink and I would go and sit with it on top of the piano. I always imagined that my rather short legs would look better if I was high up. One night George came in and everyone perked up. He came over to me, and then said to Muriel, 'Who's the sexy mouse?' For some reason young women were called mice in the days before they were called birds. 'That's Johnnie Moynihan's wife,' said Muriel,

looking pleased. Any possible sexual encounter involving trouble always excited her.

I knew that George Melly was well known in a small circle of jazz fans and to habitués of Soho. I also knew that he wrote a strip cartoon for the *Daily Mail* and I had seen him on a news programme talking about the nuclear threat and wearing a ban-the-bomb badge. He had a reputation for being sexually wild and a boozier. There was a buzz when he was expected, either on a left-wing march or at a Chelsea bottle party. He had given me such a big hug at one of those parties that my breast milk (I was feeding Candy at the time) had soaked through the pads in my bra. At another party I was talking to his wife Victoria and another woman, both of them models. George swayed up to us and said he didn't know which of us was the more beautiful, or whom he should give the apple to. Once I arrived at a party in a studio in Paddington just too late to see him being carried off by a huge West Indian belly dancer. It was rumoured that she had first knocked him out.

George was flirting with me in Muriel's when the phone rang. It was his wife, Victoria, explaining that she couldn't meet him that evening to go to the opening of the Establishment Club. The idea for the club, a place where you could have supper and watch a satirical cabaret, came from Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. It had attracted a huge amount of publicity and invitations for the opening were in demand. Naturally I accepted when George invited me to take Victoria's place. Later on that evening George and I made love on Hampstead Heath.

The following day we met in a pub and rather casually decided that somehow we would live together. Victoria had recently agreed to move in with Roy Boulting, the film director, but Johnnie was angry and hurt. Coldly I ignored his feelings and, taking the children, moved into Andrée Melly's flat. George's sister was an actress and was away

rehearsing in Bristol, but she sent George a firm letter: yes, I could stay there until Victoria moved out, but Tizzy, their brother Bill's girlfriend, was also staying there and she was more conventional. The letter laid out the rules:

1. Not to let Tizzy be a penny out of pocket *re* food
2. Not to get tight and use bad language
3. Not to fuck in the flat
4. To be charming to Tizzy's mother.

Two weeks later I moved into George's house on the borders of Golders Green and Hampstead. He was singing three or four times a week with Mick Mulligan's band, and that night was on tour in the North. Victoria had moved out only that day. She had taken her child Pandora, her sports car, the brass cot from Harrods and the portrait of herself painted by Tim Whidborne, who she said was the father of her child. (Tim was a pupil of Annigoni, who painted the famous portrait of the Queen.) George rang me from the Manchester Jazz Club and asked me to hang 'the lamb painting' in place of her portrait above the mantelpiece. George had bought paintings since his father had given him £200 when he was eighteen. He was now thirty-five and it was a large collection: Magritte, Max Ernst, Picasso and others less well known. I searched the house for a lamb in any shape or form - Cubist, Surrealist, Kitsch. No lamb, and nothing signed Lamb.

I knew better than to own up to this hole in my knowledge of art. The previous week I had gone to a jazz club with George and had been asked to find 'Bix', the piano player. I found a man practising some chords on the piano and asked him if his name was 'Bix'. I hadn't heard of Bix Beiderbecke, the famous American jazz musician, and when Ronnie - for that was his real name - told the band of my ignorance they had a good laugh at my expense. They also enjoyed it when I clapped on the on-beat.

The only member of the band that I got on well with was Mick Mulligan, the band-leader. He was a tall, shambling man, good-looking with a strong sexual aura softened by a fatherly manner. Perhaps I also liked him because he said to George, on meeting me for the first time, 'You've got a good one there, cock.' I also liked Ian Christie, the clarinettist who became a film critic for the *Daily Express* when the band folded; but Ian thought I was a snob and didn't have much to say to me. The rest of the band didn't think my reign would last long and treated me accordingly.

When George came back from Manchester he asked me why I hadn't hung the lamb and I replied I had tried it and it hadn't looked good. It was some months before I spotted 'the lamb'. It was Wilfredo Lam, not a terrifically well-known painter, with an indecipherable signature.

In 1960, the year before I met George, there had been a demonstration against nuclear weapons culminating in a big sit-down in Trafalgar Square. I watched it on the TV and had seen George being carried off by the police along with Vanessa Redgrave, John Osborne and Doris Lessing. He always wore his ban-the-bomb badge, and once, when he was asked to remove it for a TV programme about trad jazz, he refused and his song was cut from the show.

Not all of his defiant gestures were equally attractive. I always disliked the point system. While travelling in the bandwagon, the Mulligan band would award themselves points whenever they had the opportunity to run over a disabled person. It was six points for a blind man and eight if he was also on crutches, and the same for a pregnant woman. But these were the days before political correctness, when de Sade was only seen as a great liberator. It was also before feminism and the British jazz world was as full of male chauvinists as other more conventional worlds. Men knew best and I never corrected them.





## CHAPTER 2

# *A Jazz Musician in Prosperous Circumstances*

GEORGE'S HOUSE WAS in a cul-de-sac that led on to Hampstead Heath. In the nineteenth century it had been a washerwoman's cottage and the deeds gave us permission to hang washing on the Heath and tether a goat there.

I immediately settled in properly by getting ill with bronchitis. George's sister Andrée came to see me when she was back from tour. She had taken on the task of telling Maudie, George's mother, the tale of the new woman in her eldest son's life, who had already been married twice and had two children. Maudie sent me a very long and chatty letter when she heard I was ill. We finally met on Victoria station, supposedly neutral territory. Maudie wrote to George saying I was 'very sweet', not at all what she had imagined, although she wasn't sure about black stockings worn with pink shoes.

The first time I went to Liverpool I was nervous. George was in love with his native city, and there was Maudie to meet, as well as all the girlfriends. They had been heavily romanticised by George: Lucy the flower-seller's daughter, Mary a performance artist. They were both very fey and looked like the girls in pre-Raphaelite paintings. At the Cavern where George was performing they came to inspect

me; word had got round that, surprisingly, George now had a permanent partner.

Back in Maudie's huge rambling Victorian house I questioned him thoroughly about them: how long had he gone out with Lucy, did she stay all night, did he do this with her, and did she do that to him. Perhaps he liked the attention, or thought it was proof of how passionately in love with him I was - and I was - but it must have been tiring.

We slept in what had been the room George shared with his brother Bill. George warned me that Maudie would wait twenty minutes after we'd gone up and then enter the bedroom with some excuse. I climbed into his bed and, just as we started to make love, Maudie entered carrying a long stick. This turned out to be a pole with a hook on the end. She marched across the floor, hooked the pole on to the window latch and opened it a couple of inches. She then left, saying, 'I shouldn't have thought that bed was big enough for both of you. What do you want for breakfast? When am I going to meet your mother?'

She also wanted to meet my children, Patrick and Candy. Maudie had adored Victoria's child Pandora, and before my arrival had not been told that there was any doubt about Pandora's paternity. Again it was Andrée who had the task of giving Maudie some rough news: George was not Pandora's father and therefore Maudie had lost her grandchild. It was very hard on her, but she was a kind, fair woman and she made a huge effort with my two. George had nicknamed Candy 'Miss Jolly Grin Grin' but Patrick he nicknamed 'Grunt'. Patrick had been accepted at the local primary school and also at a child guidance clinic in Camden Town. There, a kind woman, whom Patrick called 'Miss Horrible, Horrible', attempted to undo some of the harm that he had suffered.

Patrick was six years old when he came to live with Johnnie and me; now, five months later, he was presented

with another new father, a new home and a new school. But he was clever and his life had made him independent beyond his years. He was also popular with other children and extremely rebellious.

For Candy things were different. Apart from the four weeks I had spent in Paris, I had always been there and, although Johnnie loved his daughter, this was before the days when fathers cuddled their babies or changed nappies. Once a week my mother would spend the day at our house while George and I went to the pub so that Johnnie could come and look at his daughter for a couple of hours. Our behaviour was unbelievably selfish and heartless, we never avoided places like Muriel's where we might bump into him and we flaunted our romance wherever we went. It seemed as if we were drunk with sex and could never get enough of each other. One night while George was introducing me to the dubious pleasures of a 'knee tremble' in a dimly lit alley way, we became aware that a policeman was silently watching us. Hurriedly we adjusted our clothing and moved off. That was before my divorce and, had we been arrested, it might have jeopardised my getting custody of the children.

George was away singing with Mick Mulligan's band two or three days a week and I was terrified to let him go alone. I'd now been to enough gigs with him to know that the temptations of the willing 'scrubbers', as the female available fans were called, could be irresistible, particularly if they had red hair.

We engaged an au pair so that I could travel with him. First there was Florence, an art student from Paris who didn't like to start her day before eleven a.m. Then we found Betty who was sixteen and had been in care since she was four. Betty developed a huge crush on me: she would give me sloppy wet kisses as near to my mouth as she could get. She hated George and once took Patrick and Candy out on a boat. None of them could swim.

We 'let Betty go' and my mother volunteered to be our next au pair and left her housekeeping job. Because I was so practical, my mother started using the nickname that had originated when we had lived together: 'Miss Perfect', she used to call me in those days, because it was always I who remembered to make sure that we had coins for the gas meter, told her off if her hem was coming down, fixed the lights if they fused and called the doctor when she got her twice-yearly bronchitis; at fifteen I was already very bossy. George loved the name and when he drew cartoons of me, would always put a halo above my head.

I was now pregnant with Tom and pleased not to have the responsibility of the two children. I thought I needed to be with George. Maudie bought us a little green minivan, Andrée gave me driving practice and I passed my test with just three weeks of lessons. Now I could drive George not just to gigs but to the BBC if he was doing a programme, or to Fleet Street. The *Daily Mail* published a strip cartoon called *Flook*, for which George wrote the balloons and Wally Fawkes drew the pictures; they met every month with the editor. Most of the national papers were in Fleet Street then and, as there were no parking restrictions, I would wait for him in the car just to make sure he didn't get off with a secretary.

I'd never been to the Midlands or the North of England before I travelled with George and I loved the novelty of staying in artists' digs or sleeping in the back of the van. Once, having parked in a seemingly empty field, we woke to find the van swaying from side to side as a herd of cows rubbed themselves against us. We lay there for an hour waiting for the farmer to rescue us, drinking the coffee from a Thermos flask that 'Mrs Perfect' always remembered to take. In Swansea we stayed with Kingsley Amis. In the morning we made love in a bed that was propped up on one side with old paperbacks. Amis came in and retreated, apologising politely.

Going to jazz clubs, being one of the favoured few who didn't have to queue or pay to get in, was thrilling. But the best part was standing near the front of the enraptured crowd knowing that I was the envy of the other girls. In 'There'll be some Changes Made' George would point at me as he sang about changing his 'long, tall thin one' for a 'little short fat one'. I was shorter than Victoria, and, once pregnant with Tom, certainly fatter. In 'Mack the Knife' George sang about Sukie Tawdry, Lotte Lenya, and sweet Georgia Brown, pointing at different girls in turn, but I was always 'Sweet Georgia Brown' and his finger rested on me the longest.

Every year George sang at the Anarchists' Ball and in 1963 it coincided with the night that Hugh Gaitskell died. Gaitskell had been the leader of the Labour party since 1955 when Clement Attlee resigned; he was considered to be an honest politician and a man of integrity. He was also a very social animal; once I was specially invited to a dinner party because he liked to dance and needed a partner. We danced sedately round the room and I remembered him as being very funny and kind. It was a shock to hear his death being celebrated by an anarchist, who got up on stage and said, 'The only good politician is a dead one.'

As long as I could squeeze behind the wheel, I was determined to go on tour too. We wanted to get married before the birth but were waiting for both our divorces to be finalised. John Mortimer was my lawyer and when the judge asked him if the children would be well cared for, Mortimer replied, 'Mr Melly is a jazz musician in prosperous circumstances.' And because I was so obviously very pregnant the judge waived the necessity of waiting the traditional three months for the decree nisi.

On the day of the wedding I had just driven back from Edinburgh, and since the baby was almost due, on the way to the register office we picked up the box of sterilised

equipment needed for a home delivery. Outside the office was a taxi rank and when we came out the second taxi in the line was white. It was unusual for taxis to be anything other than black so George went up to the driver of the first one and, explaining that we had just got married, asked if he minded if we took the white one. 'About bloody time,' was all the reply he got. We went to the Ivy for a celebratory lunch, but I threw up in the Ladies and had to be taken home. Forty-eight hours later Tom was born.

He was a month early, and when I woke at five a.m. knowing I was in labour I rang for the midwife to come. She suggested that I ring back in a few hours, but an hour later George was delivering Tom and the midwife only arrived in time to cut the cord and wash him. George was thrilled, not only with Tom but because the midwife was a nun and had washed her hands under Magritte's painting *Le Viol*. Victoria hadn't allowed him to hang this painting, and Maudie used to ask him if he was famous enough to own it. The painting is of a woman's face, but instead of eyes, nose and mouth, she has breasts, a navel and a vagina.

I thought nothing would stop me going on tour, but once, in the middle of a five-day tour, I got a call from my mother saying that Candy had bronchitis and the doctor had told her to send for me. I left at once and drove back from Birmingham sick with anxiety, not just for Candy but because I'd seen an attractive redhead eyeing George. A few days later I got ill and then my mother did too. The doctor came and said that she should go to bed and I should get up.

My mother had often been ill when I was growing up; I hated nursing her then and I hated it now. It also meant that even with Candy better, I couldn't go on tour with George and I was full of adolescent fear and rage. From that moment it was obvious that our arrangement wasn't working and she decided to go back to her old job. We had

not always been kind to her: George had mocked her sad attempts to be clever or witty and often imitated her. She had blue eyes of which she was very proud and she was also tiny. She was not allowed to think that either of these physical attributes were anything but laughable and George would say 'I'm looking over a four-leaf clover - but only just' and then he would flutter his eyes. She was keen on quotations and had a slight lisp; she would say, 'A wose is a wose is a wose,' but no matter how much she was teased she was always maddeningly cheerful.

After she'd gone we decided to engage a mother's help with a child of her own. Our reasons, as always, were selfish: she wouldn't want to go out much, and being a mother herself wouldn't need mothering by me. Dorothy wasn't Welsh, but she had been working in a children's home in South Wales and the father of her child was Welsh. She affected a strong Welsh accent. Dorothy and Baby Jim came to us when Jim was six weeks old and Tom was five months. Dorothy's stories of the humiliations of the 'unmarried mothers' home' filled us with satisfactory indignation; not so much the endless floor scrubbing, but the girls and their bulges being paraded through the streets on their obligatory way to church every Sunday.

During those first three or four years we lived in a haze of irritating-to-others, uxorious bliss. Leaving the children with the various helps we spent our days in Muriel's club and Wheeler's restaurant. Both of these establishments were patronised by bohemian London. Francis Bacon was a glamorous and regular customer. One afternoon he stopped us as we were leaving the club and after embracing George, he poked a finger at me and drawled, 'I've never quite seen the point of you.'

I inhaled as many of George's interests as I could. Never again would I make the Bix Beiderbecke mistake. I knew every Ma Rainey song and every detail of Bessie Smith's turbulent life. I preferred Chicago blues to Louis Armstrong

but secretly admired Helen Shapiro and Adam Faith. My knowledge of pop music eventually became useful to George when he was asked to write a column for the *Observer*.

Surrealism was easy to mug up and I crammed books about Dada, Miró, Magritte and Ernst. Some of the latter we had hanging on the walls. I read *Nadja* by André Breton, and his portrait of the heroine made me realise just how much George liked mad, difficult women. It was his favourite book.

I didn't need to be taught about books; since I was eighteen I had read a lot and met a few writers and publishers. Through Michael Alexander, the man I had gone to Afghanistan with, I had met the publisher George Weidenfeld. It was one evening, when the three of us were having supper, that Weidenfeld had suggested Michael should write a book about a journey through Turkey and Iran to Afghanistan and take me with him. That was how I came to have my twenty-first birthday in an Afghan valley.

Weidenfeld and I had remained friends and, when I introduced him to George, he invited him to write a book about the jazz world. Weidenfeld was famous, not only for being irresistible to women and inviting everyone he knew to write a book, but also for his parties. Before it was published, George's book, *Owning Up*, had received an excellent reader's report and we heard that at least two important critics liked it a lot. We assumed that Weidenfeld would give us one of his famous parties, but, perhaps imagining that the jazz musicians and the scrubbers who might be invited would not look well in his drawing-room, he gave us £50 and suggested we host it ourselves.

Fishing was an obsession of George's, which I never took to. We had spent an early honeymoon in a gloomy Scottish hotel and while George fished in the pouring rain I sat in the sombre lounge flipping through *Country Life* or *Trout and Salmon* and eating sour cauliflower cheese in the



cold dining-room. At least, I thought, George was unlikely to be unfaithful while flogging the water.

Apart from fishing I tried to be everything to George and one way was by continually altering my appearance. I thought that if one day I was a blonde in blue satin and the next day a redhead in black leather with a feather boa, George could be fooled into thinking he had more than one woman.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Trendy NW1*

DOROTHY WAS HOMESICK for Wales, so we took a cottage there for the summer holidays. George could fish, Dorothy could meet her married lover, Jim's father, and I would take the children for picnics on the beach.

Outside the cottage was a stream where Patrick caught an eel, while Tom learnt to walk and Candy, aged three, who had just spent a month in hospital with a lung infection, played doctors and nurses. On the day that George caught four trout, she wrapped them in slices of bread, laid them out on the slate slab in the scullery and spooned cough medicine down their spiky little throats.

It must have been an unusually good summer because I loved Wales and I loved the cottage. By the time the holidays ended, I had persuaded George to take a Max Ernst off the wall and buy a place of our own.

'Gaer', as our cottage was called, was two miles from the sea and reached by a track that led from a farmhouse. The owners, a farmer and his wife, were very surprised by what we offered for the rather derelict building; but I had checked up on local prices and I offered £250 more than it was worth. I wanted it. The track was steep and rocky, but just possible for a car if you drove carefully. In the front of the cottage were fields and behind was a thicket that dropped down to a stream. There was an abandoned car