



Riverhead Books
Published by The Berkley Publishing Group
A division of Penguin Putnam Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

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First Riverhead hardcover edition: August 1995
First Riverhead trade paperback edition: August 1996
Riverhead trade paperback ISBN: 1-57322-551-7

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The Library of Congress has catalogued the Riverhead
hardcover edition as follows:

Hornby, Nick
High fidelity / Nick Hornby.
P. cm
ISBN 1-57322-016-7
I. Title.
PR6058.0689H54 1995 95-8469 CIP
813'.54—dc20

Printed in the United States of America

35 34 33 32 31 30

T H E N ...

MY

desert-island, all-time, top five most memorable split-ups, in chronological order:

1. Alison Ashworth
2. Penny Hardwick
3. Jackie Allen
4. Charlie Nicholson
5. Sarah Kendrew.

These were the ones that really hurt. Can you see your name in that lot, Laura? I reckon you'd sneak into the top ten, but there's no place for you in the top five; those places are reserved for the kind of humiliations and heartbreaks that you're just not capable of delivering. That probably sounds crueler than it is meant to, but the fact is that we're too old to make each other miserable, and that's a good thing, not a bad thing, so

4 don't take your failure to make the list personally. Those days are gone, and good fucking riddance to them; unhappiness really meant something back then. Now it's just a drag, like a cold or having no money. If you really wanted to mess me up, you should have got to me earlier.

I. ALISON ASHWORTH (1972)

Most nights we used to mess around in the park around the corner from my house. I lived in Hertfordshire, but I might just as well have lived in any suburb in England: it was that sort of suburb, and that sort of park—three minutes away from home, right across the road from a little row of shops (a VG supermarket, a newsagent, an off-license). There was nothing around that could help you get your geographical bearings; if the shops were open (and they closed at five-thirty, and one o'clock on Thursdays, and all day Sunday), you could go into the newsagent's and look for a local newspaper, but even that might not give you much of a clue.

We were twelve or thirteen, and had recently discovered irony—or at least, what I later understood to be irony: we only allowed ourselves to play on the swings and the roundabout and the other kids' stuff rusting away in there if we could do it with a sort of self-conscious ironic detachment. This involved either an imitation of absentmindedness (whistling, or chatting, or fiddling with a cigarette stub or a box of matches usually did the trick) or a flirtation with danger, so we jumped off the swings when they could go no higher, jumped on to the roundabout when it would go no

faster, hung on to the end of the swingboat until it reached an almost vertical position. If you could somehow prove that these childish entertainments had the potential to dash your brains out, then playing on them became OK somehow.

We had no irony when it came to girls, though. There was just no time to develop it. One moment they weren't there, not in any form that interested us, anyway, and the next you couldn't miss them; they were everywhere, all over the place. One moment you wanted to clonk them on the head for being your sister, or someone else's sister, and the next you wanted to . . . actually, we didn't know what we wanted next, but it was something, something. Almost overnight, all these sisters (there was no other kind of girl, not yet) had become interesting, *disturbing*, even.

See, what did we have that was any different from what we'd had before? Squeaky voices, but a squeaky voice doesn't do much for you, really—it makes you preposterous, not desirable. And the sprouting pubic hairs were our secret, strictly between us and our Y-fronts, and it would be years before a member of the opposite sex could verify that they were where they should be. Girls, on the other hand, quite clearly had breasts, and, to accompany them, a new way of walking: arms folded over the chest, a posture which simultaneously disguised and drew attention to what had just happened. And then there was makeup and perfume, invariably cheap, and inexpertly, sometimes even comically, applied, but still a quite terrifying sign that things had progressed without us, beyond us, behind our backs.

I started going out with one of them . . . no, that's not right, because I had absolutely no input into the decision-

6 making process. And I can't say that she started going out with me, either: it's that phrase "going out with" that's the problem, because it suggests some sort of parity and equality. What happened was that David Ashworth's sister Alison peeled off from the female pack that gathered every night by the bench and adopted me, tucked me under her arm, and led me away from the swingboat.

I can't remember now how she did this. I don't think I was even aware of it at the time, because halfway through our first kiss, my first kiss, I can recall feeling utterly bewildered, totally unable to explain how Alison Ashworth and I had become so intimate. I wasn't even sure how I'd ended up on her side of the park, away from her brother and Mark Godfrey and the rest, nor how we had separated from her crowd, nor why she tipped her face toward me so that I knew I was supposed to put my mouth on hers. The whole episode defies any rational explanation. But all these things happened, and they happened again, most of them, the following evening, and the evening after that.

What did I think I was doing? What did she think she was doing? When I want to kiss people in that way now, with mouths and tongues and all that, it's because I want other things too: sex, Friday nights at the cinema, company and conversation, fused networks of family and friends, Lemsips brought to me in bed when I am ill, a new pair of ears for my records and CDs, maybe a little boy called Jack and a little girl called Holly or Maisie, I haven't decided yet. But I didn't want any of those things from Alison Ashworth. Not children, because we were children, and not Friday nights at the pictures, because we went Saturday mornings, and not

Lemsips, because my mum did that, not even sex, especially not sex, please God not sex, the filthiest and most terrifying invention of the early seventies.

So what was the significance of the snog? The truth is that there was no significance; we were just lost in the dark. One part imitation (people I had seen kissing by 1972: James Bond, Simon Templar, Napoleon Solo, Barbara Windsor and Sid James or maybe Jim Dale, Elsie Tanner, Omar Sharif and Julie Christie, Elvis, and lots of black-and-white people my mum wanted to watch, although they never wagged their heads from side to side) to one part hormonal slavery to one part peer group pressure (Kevin Bannister and Elizabeth Barnes had been at it for a couple of weeks) to one part blind panic . . . there was no consciousness, no desire and no pleasure, beyond an unfamiliar and moderately pleasant warmth in the gut. We were little animals, which is not to imply that by the end of the week we were tearing our tank tops off; just that, metaphorically speaking, we had begun to sniff each other's bottoms, and we did not find the odor entirely repellent.

But listen, Laura. On the fourth night of our relationship I turned up in the park and Alison was sitting on the bench with her arm around Kevin Bannister, with Elizabeth Barnes nowhere in sight. Nobody—not Alison, or Kevin, or me, or the sexually uninitiated retards hanging off the end of the swingboat said anything at all. I stung, and I blushed, and I suddenly forgot how to walk without being aware of every single part of my body. What to do? Where to go? I didn't want to fight; I didn't want to sit there with the two of them; I didn't want to go home. So, concentrating very

hard on the empty packs of cheap cigarettes that marked out the path between the girls and the boys, and not looking up or behind me or to either side, I headed back toward the massed ranks of the single males hanging off the swing-boat. Halfway home, I made my only error of judgment: I stopped and looked at my watch, although for the life of me I don't know what I was attempting to convey, or whom I was trying to kid. What sort of time, after all, could make a thirteen-year-old boy spin away from a girl and toward a playground, palms sweating, heart racing, trying desperately not to cry? Certainly not four o'clock on a late September afternoon.

I scrounged a fag off Mark Godfrey and went and sat on my own on the roundabout.

"Scrubber," spat Alison's brother David, and I smiled gratefully at him.

And that was that. Where had I gone wrong? First night: park, fag, snog. Second night: ditto. Third night: ditto. Fourth night: chucked. OK, OK. Maybe I should have seen the signs. Maybe I was asking for it. Round about that second ditto I should have spotted that we were in a rut, that I had allowed things to fester to the extent that she was on the lookout for someone else. But she could have tried to tell me! She could at least have given me another couple of days to put things right!

My relationship with Alison Ashworth had lasted six hours (the two-hour gap between school and *Nationwide*, times three), so I could hardly claim that I'd got used to having her around, that I didn't know what to do with myself. In fact, I can hardly recall anything about her at all, now.

Long black hair? Maybe. Small? Smaller than me, certainly. Slanted, almost oriental eyes and a dark complexion? That could have been her, or it could have been someone else. Whatever. But if we were doing this list in grief order, rather than chronological order, I'd put it right up there at number two. It would be nice to think that as I've got older times have changed, relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel, skins thicker, reactions sharper, instincts more developed. But there still seems to be an element of that evening in everything that has happened to me since; all my other romantic stories seem to be a scrambled version of that first one. Of course, I have never had to take that long walk again, and my ears have not burned with quite the same fury, and I have never had to count the packs of cheap cigarettes in order to avoid mocking eyes and floods of tears . . . not really, not actually, not as such. It just feels that way, sometimes.

2. PENNY HARDWICK (1973)

Penny Hardwick was a nice girl, and, nowadays, I'm all for nice girls, although then I wasn't so sure. She had a nice mum and dad, and a nice house, detached, with a garden and a tree and a fishpond, and a nice girl's haircut (she was blond, and she kept her hair a sort of sporty, clean, wholesome, form-captain midlength), and nice, smiling eyes, and a nice younger sister, who smiled politely when I rang the doorbell and kept out of the way when we wanted her to. She had nice manners—my mum loved her—and she always got nice

school reports. Penny was nice-looking, and her top five recording artists were Carly Simon, Carole King, James Taylor, Cat Stevens, and Elton John. Lots of people liked her. She was so nice, in fact, that she wouldn't let me put my hand underneath or even on top of her bra, and so I was finished with her, although obviously I didn't tell her why. She cried, and I hated her for it, because she made me feel bad.

I can imagine what sort of person Penny Hardwick became: a nice person. I know that she went to college, did well, and landed a job as a radio producer for the BBC. I would guess that she is bright, and serious-minded, maybe too much so, sometimes, and ambitious, but not in a way that makes you want to vomit; she was a version of all these things when we went out, and at another stage in my life I would have found all these virtues attractive. Then, however, I wasn't interested in qualities, just breasts, and she was therefore no good to me.

I would like to be able to tell you that we had long, interesting conversations, and that we remained firm friends throughout our teenage years—she would have made someone a lovely friend—but I don't think we ever talked. We went to the pictures, to parties and to discos, and we wrestled. We wrestled in her bedroom, and my bedroom, and her living room, and my living room, and in bedrooms at parties, and in living rooms at parties, and in the summer we wrestled on various plots of grass. We were wrestling over the same old issue. Sometimes I got so bored of trying to touch her breasts that I would try to touch her between her legs, a gesture that had a sort of self-parodying wit about it: it was like trying to borrow a fiver, getting turned down, and asking to borrow fifty quid instead.

These were the questions boys asked other boys at my school (a school that contained only boys): “Are you getting any?”; “Does she let you have any?”; “How much does she let you have?”; and so on. Sometimes the questions were derisory, and expected the answer “No”: “You’re not getting anything, are you?”; “You haven’t even had a bit of tit, have you?” Girls, meanwhile, had to be content with the passive voice. Penny used the expression “broken into”: “I don’t want to be broken into yet,” she would explain patiently and maybe a little sadly (she seemed to understand that one day—but not now—she would have to give in, and when it happened she wouldn’t like it) when she removed my hand from her chest for the one hundred thousandth time. Attack and defense, invasion and repulsion . . . it was as if breasts were little pieces of property that had been unlawfully annexed by the opposite sex—they were rightfully ours and we wanted them back.

Luckily, however, there were traitors, fifth columnists, in the opposing camp. Some boys knew of other boys whose girlfriends would “let” them do anything; sometimes these girls were supposed to have actively assisted in their own molestation. Nobody had ever heard of a girl who had gone as far as undressing, or even removing or loosening undergarments, of course. That would have been taking collaboration too far. As I understood it, these girls had simply positioned themselves in a way that encouraged access. “She tucks her stomach in and everything,” Clive Stevens remarked approvingly of his brother’s girlfriend; it took me nearly a year to work out the import of this maneuver. No wonder I still remember the stomach-tucker’s first name (Judith); there’s a part of me that still wants to meet her.

Read any women's magazine and you'll see the same complaint over and over again: men—those little boys ten or twenty or thirty years on—are hopeless in bed. They are not interested in “foreplay”; they have no desire to stimulate the erogenous zones of the opposite sex; they are selfish, greedy, clumsy, unsophisticated. These complaints, you can't help feeling, are kind of ironic. Back then, all we wanted was foreplay, and girls weren't interested. They didn't want to be touched, caressed, stimulated, aroused; in fact, they used to thump us if we tried. It's not really very surprising, then, that we're not much good at all that. We spent two or three long and extremely formative years being told very forcibly not even to think about it. Between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, foreplay changes from being something that boys want to do and girls don't, to something that women want and men can't be bothered with. (Or so they say. Me, I like foreplay—mostly because the times when all I wanted to do was touch are alarmingly fresh in my mind.) The perfect match, if you ask me, is between the *Cosmo* woman and the fourteen-year-old boy.

If somebody had asked me why I was so hell-bent on grabbing a piece of Penny Hardwick's chest, I wouldn't have known what to say. And if somebody were to ask Penny why she was so hell-bent on stopping me, I'll bet she'd be stumped for an answer too. What was in it for me? I wasn't asking for any sort of reciprocation, after all. Why didn't she want her erogenous zones stimulated? I have no idea. All I know is that you could, if you wanted to, find the answers

to all sorts of difficult questions buried in that terrible war-torn interregnum between the first pubic hair and the first soiled Trojan.

And in any case, maybe I didn't want to put my hand under Penny's bra as much as I thought. Maybe other people wanted me to touch her more than I did. After a couple of months of fighting on sofas all over town with Penny, I'd had enough: I had admitted, unwisely in retrospect, to a friend that I wasn't getting anywhere, and my friend had told some other friends, and I was the butt of a number of cruel and unpleasant jokes. I gave Penny one last try, in my bedroom while my mum and dad were at the town hall watching a local dramatic society interpretation of *Toad of Toad Hall*; I used a degree of force that would have outraged and terrified an adult female, but got nowhere, and when I walked her home we hardly spoke.

I was offhand with her the next time we went out, and when she went to kiss me at the end of the evening, I shrugged her off. "What's the point?" I asked her. "It never goes anywhere." The time after that she asked whether I still wanted to see her, and I looked the other way. We had been going out for three months, which was as near to a permanent relationship as you could get in the fourth year. (Her mum and dad had even met my mum and dad. They liked each other.) She cried, then, and I loathed her for making me feel guilty, and for making me finish with her.

I went out with a girl called Kim, who I knew for a fact had already been invaded, and who (I was correct in assuming) wouldn't object to being invaded again. Penny went out with Chris Thomson from my class, a boy who had had more

14 girlfriends than all the rest of us put together. I was out of my depth, and so was she. One morning, maybe three weeks after my last grapple with Penny, Thomson came roaring into our form room. “Oi, Fleming, you spastic. Guess who I knobbed last night?”

I felt the room spin round.

“You never got so much as a bit of tit in three months, and I shagged her the first week!”

I believed him; everyone knew that he got whatever he wanted from whomever he saw. I had been humiliated, beaten, outperformed; I felt stupid, and small, and much, much younger than this unpleasant, oversized, big-mouthed moron. It shouldn’t have mattered so much. Thomson was in a league of his own when it came to matters of the lower body, and there were plenty of little jerky creeps in 4b who had never so much as put their arm around a girl. Even my side of the debate, inaudible though it was, must have appeared impossibly sophisticated to them. I wasn’t losing that much face. But I still couldn’t understand what had happened. How had this transformation in Penny been effected? How had Penny gone from being a girl who wouldn’t do anything to a girl who would do everything there was to do? Maybe it was best not to think about it too hard; I didn’t want to feel sorry for anybody else except me.

I expect Penny turned out all right, and I know I turned out all right, and I would suspect that even Chris Thomson isn’t the world’s worst person. At least, it’s hard to imagine him skidding into his place of work, his bank or his insurance office or car showroom, chucking his briefcase down and informing a colleague with raucous glee that he has

“knobbed” said colleague’s wife. (It is easy enough to imagine him knobbing the wife, however. He looked like a wife-knobber, even then.) Women who disapprove of men—and there’s plenty to disapprove of—should remember how we started out, and how far we have had to travel.

3. JACKIE ALLEN (1975)

Jackie Allen was my friend Phil’s girlfriend, and I pinched her off him, slowly, patiently, over a period of months. It wasn’t easy. It required a great deal of time, application, and deception. Phil and Jackie started going out together around the same time as Penny and I did, except they went on and on: through the giggly, hormonal fourth form, and the end-of-the-world “O”-level and school-leaving fifth, and on into the mock-adult sobriety of the lower sixth. They were our golden couple, our Paul and Linda, our Newman and Woodward, living proof that in a faithless, fickle world, it was possible to grow old, or at least older, without chopping and changing every few weeks.

I’m not too sure why I wanted to fuck it all up for them, and for everyone who needed them to go out together. You know when you see T-shirts piled up in a clothes shop, beautifully folded and color-coded, and you buy one? It never looks the same when you take it home. It only looked good in the shop, you realize too late, because it had its mates around it. Well, it was kind of like that. I had hoped that if I went out with Jackie, then some of that elder-stateswoman dignity would rub off on me, but of course without Phil, she

didn't have any. (If that's what I wanted, I should perhaps have looked for a way to go out with both of them, but that sort of thing is hard enough to pull off when you're an adult; at seventeen it could be enough to get you stoned to death.)

Phil started working in a men's boutique on Saturdays, and I moved in. Those of us who didn't work, or who, like me, worked after school but not on weekends, met on Saturday afternoons to walk up and down High Street, spend too much time and too much money in Harlequin Records, and "treat ourselves" (we had somehow picked up our mothers' vocabulary of postwar abstention) to a filter coffee, which we regarded as the last word in French cool. Sometimes we called in to see Phil; sometimes he let me use his staff discount. It didn't stop me from screwing his girlfriend behind his back.

I knew, because both Alison and Penny had taught me, that busting up with someone could be miserable, but I didn't know that getting off with someone could be miserable too. But Jackie and I were miserable in a thrilling, grown-up way. We met in secret and phoned each other in secret and had sex in secret and said things like "What are we going to do?" in secret and talked about how nice it would be when we didn't have to do things in secret anymore. I never really thought about whether that was true or not. There wasn't time.

I tried not to run Phil down too much—I felt bad enough as it was, what with screwing his girlfriend and all. But it became unavoidable, because when Jackie expressed doubts about him, I had to nurture those doubts as if they were tiny, sickly kittens, until eventually they became

sturdy, healthy grievances, with their own cat doors, which allowed them to wander in and out of our conversation at will.

And then one night at a party I saw Phil and Jackie huddled together in a corner, and Phil was obviously distressed, pale and near to tears, and then he went home, and the next morning she phoned up and asked if I wanted to go out for a walk, and we were away, and we weren't doing things in secret anymore; and we lasted about three weeks.

You'd say that this was childish, Laura. You'd say that it is stupid of me to compare Rob and Jackie with Rob and Laura, who are in their mid-thirties, established, living together. You'd say that adult adultery beats teenage adultery hands down, but you'd be wrong. I have been one point of a triangle several times since then, but that first point was the sharpest. Phil never spoke to me again; our Saturday shopping crowd wouldn't have much to do with us either. My mum had a phone call from Phil's mum. School was, for a few weeks, uncomfortable.

Compare and contrast with what happens if I make that sort of mess now: I can go to different pubs and clubs, leave the answering machine on, go out more, stay in more, fiddle around with my social compasses and draw a new circle of friends (and anyway, my friends are never her friends, whoever she might be), avoid all contact with disapproving parents. That sort of anonymity was unavailable then, though. You had to stand there and take it, whatever it was.

What perplexed me most of all was the feeling of flat disappointment that overtook me when Jackie called me that Sunday morning. I couldn't understand it. I had been plot-

ting this capture for months, and when capitulation came I felt nothing—less than nothing, even. I couldn't tell Jackie this, obviously, but on the other hand, I was quite unable to show the enthusiasm I felt she needed, so I decided to have her name tattooed down my right arm.

I don't know. Scarring myself for life seemed much easier than having to tell Jackie that it had all been a grotesque mistake, that I'd just been messing about; if I could show her the tattoo, my peculiar logic ran, I wouldn't have to bother straining after words that were beyond me. I should explain that I am not a tattoo kind of guy; I am, and was, neither rock'n'roll go-to-hell decadent or wrestling-team muscular. But there was a disastrous fashion for them at our school around that time, and I know for a fact that several men now in their mid-thirties, accountants and schoolteachers, personnel managers and computer programmers, have terrible messages ("MUFC KICK TO KILL," "LYNYRD SKYNYRD") from that era burned into their flesh.

I was just going to have a discreet "J ♥ R" done on my upper arm, but Victor the tattooist wasn't having any of it.

"Which one is she? 'J' or 'R'?"

"J."

"And how long have you been seeing this 'J' bird, then?"

I was frightened by the aggressive masculinity of the parlor—the other customers (who were all firmly wrestling-team muscular, and seemed inexplicably amused to see me), the nude women on the walls, the lurid examples of services offered, most of which were conveniently located on Victor's forearms, even Victor's mildly offensive language.

"Long enough."

"I'll fucking be the judge of that, not you."

This struck me as an odd way to do business, but I decided to save this observation for another time.

"A couple of months."

"And you're going to marry her, are you? Or have you knocked her up?"

"No. Neither."

"So you're just going out? You're not stuck with her?"

"Yeah."

"And how did you meet her?"

"She used to go out with a friend of mine."

"Did she now. And when did they break up?"

"Saturday."

"Saturday." He laughed like a drain. "I don't want your mum in here moaning at me. Fuck off out of it."

I fucked off out of it.

Victor was spot on, of course; in fact, I have often been tempted to seek him out when I have been plagued by diseases of the heart. He'd be able to tell me in ten seconds whether someone was worth a tattoo or not. But even after Phil and Jackie were ecstatically and tearfully reunited, things didn't go back to the way they had been. Some of the girls at her school, and some of the boys at ours, presumed that Jackie had been using me to renegotiate the terms of her relationship with Phil, and the Saturday shopping afternoons were never the same again. And we no longer admired people who had gone out together for a long time; we were sarcastic about them, and they were even sarcastic about themselves. In a few short weeks, mock-marital status had ceased to be something to aspire to, and had become a cause

for scorn. At seventeen, we were becoming as embittered and as unromantic as our parents.

See, Laura? You won't change everything around like Jackie could. It's happened too many times, to both of us; we'll just go back to the friends and the pubs and the life we had before, and leave it at that, and nobody will notice the difference, probably.

4. CHARLIE NICHOLSON (1977–1979)

I met Charlie at tech: I was doing a media studies course, and she was studying design, and when I first saw her I realized she was the sort of girl I had wanted to meet ever since I'd been old enough to want to meet girls. She was tall, with blond cropped hair (she said she knew some people who were at St. Martin's with some friends of Johnny Rotten, but I was never introduced to them), and she looked different and dramatic and exotic. Even her name seemed to me dramatic and different and exotic, because up until then I had lived in a world where girls had girls' names, and not very interesting ones at that. She talked a lot, so that you didn't have those terrible, strained silences that seemed to characterize most of my sixth-form dates, and when she talked she said remarkably interesting things—about her course, about my course, about music, about films and books and politics.

And she liked me. She liked *me*. *She* liked me. She *liked* me. Or at least, I think she did. I *think* she did. Etc. I have never been entirely sure what it is women like about me, but I know that ardor helps (even I know how difficult it is to