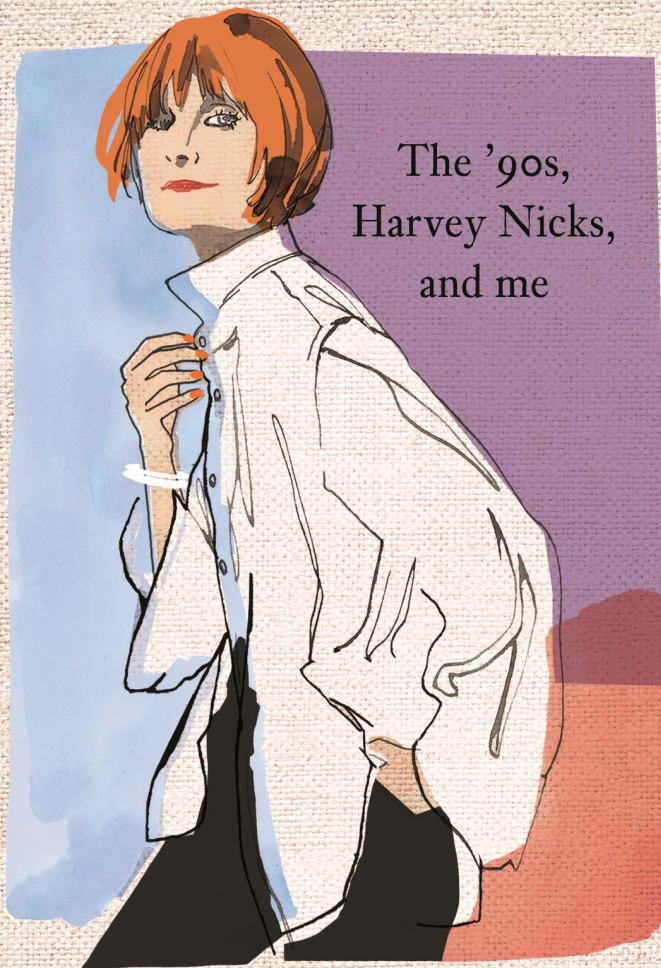


The bestselling author of *Shop Girl*

Mary Portas



'Absolutely irresistible' Joanna Lumley

I Shop, Therefore I Am

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I Shop, Therefore I Am

The '90s, Harvey Nicks, and me

Mary Portas



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1

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To the shopkeepers – who rise each morning with quiet
determination and hope in their hearts.

Because of you, the world outside our front doors
feels a little more like home.

This is for you – with gratitude and awe.

Disclaimer

RETAIL IS MORE THAN JUST a business – it is a stage where personalities, ambitions and human connections play out in a way that is both exhilarating and unpredictable. My journey at Harvey Nichols was no exception. It was a career filled with extraordinary people, unforgettable moments and lessons that shaped not only my professional life but also my perspective on business, leadership, resilience and the art of retail itself.

This book is a true reflection of that journey. While the events and emotions are deeply real, the characters you will meet along the way are, in some ways, not. They are an amalgamation of the talented, brilliant and sometimes challenging individuals I encountered throughout my career. Their names and identities have been reimagined, but their essence – their impact on me and on the business – remains very much intact.

I hope that as you read, you find joy in these stories, just as I found joy (and sometimes chaos) in living them. I hope you see the passion, the challenges and the triumphs that come with

working at the heart of a world-renowned luxury retailer. Most of all, I want to thank the real incredible people – the directors, the business heads and the teams that made it all happen. They were an extraordinary bunch, and I will always be grateful for the years I spent working alongside them.

So step into my world of retail, where truth and storytelling intertwine. It's a journey worth taking.

M.P.

June 2025

Introduction

An afternoon at Harvey Nicks

Autumn 1994

WE'RE FIVE MINUTES AWAY FROM curtains up on the catwalk show that kick-starts London Fashion Week and there's no sign of Naomi Campbell – the model who'll make or break this monumental gamble. As has become customary in my career at Harvey Nichols, the dowager department store we've taken from faded to high fashion in five years, I've taken a punt on doing something that could be legendary – or a disaster. Everyone from the UK fashion industry is crammed into the fifth-floor restaurant, knocking back one more mimosa before they must take their seats. I spot British *Vogue* Editor-in-Chief Alexandra Shulman chatting to a stylist who's been calling my team all week complaining about her second-row seat. We've refused to move her. There is a strict hierarchy of seating: editors-in-chiefs and fashion directors front

row, stylists second, and assistants so far back all they'll see are the Philip Treacy hats. Mind you, those alone are worth the trip. The stylist had tried every threat imaginable – 'I'll pull your looks from my *A Night at the Museum* pre-fall shoot,' she trilled – but my team has stuck to their plan, fearing one capitulation will lead to a tsunami of demands. Still, she's come. As have the buying teams from America's leading department stores, Barneys and Bergdorf, all flashy smiles and splashy budgets.

By giving the new voices of British fashion a platform, New Gen was designed to prove that Harvey Nichols is no longer a department store selling cashmere and quilts. It is a fashion destination for a newly emerging customer who wants glamour and grit. It's done just that, while also providing a welcome injection of cash and publicity to struggling designers.

But this season, we've gone rogue. Harvey Nichols has just become a household name, thanks to a starring role in BBC primetime show *Absolutely Fabulous*. A satirical look at the fashion industry through the eyes of Patsy and Edina, played by Joanna Lumley and Jennifer Saunders, it has managed a rare feat: winning over both the masses and industry insiders. And, by giving the actors a free rein to film (and shop) in the store, 'Harvey Nicks' has become a character itself, which is why we've decided to work with Jennifer Saunders, to spoof our own New Gen show. Betty Jackson has designed a collection of T-shirt dresses, underwear, bodysuits and tank tops, emblazoned with now-famous slogans from the show. 'I'm chanting as we speak' is the one I've got my eye on. You'll be able to

buy them in Harvey Nicks tomorrow. If we get through the next few hours.

Backstage, a team of dressers – no-nonsense women in their sixties, who are more interested in stitching than star-spotting, are helping the models into T-shirts and PVC trousers. In the corner is the bridal outfit Naomi Campbell will wear for the finale – only, there is no Naomi, and I am now getting skittish.

Desmond, a brilliant member of my design team who has styled the show, hands me a glass of champagne. ‘I know you hate the stuff,’ he says. ‘But trust me, it’s like angels pissing down on your tongue. So get it down you and relax.’

And then, *finally*, the clatter of my assistant Bean, who has risked a heart attack to run up six flights of metal steps to tell me that, ‘She’s arrived!’ I am grateful for my flat shoes – the ones I usually keep under my desk for meetings with the managing director, a short man who I feel is always looking for something to use against me – as I trot down to meet Naomi. ‘Oh, I love doing silly things like this,’ she giggles as I air-kiss her hello, her girlish voice defying a face that is so statuesque it looks like it’s been carved out of a single piece of marble. Des is styling her in a tight white T-shirt with ‘Fash Mag Slag’ written in sequins across it, white Calvin Klein briefs, a big gold Cherry Chau tiara and masses of white tulle tied around her with a grosgrain ribbon. She’s our camped-up version of the fashion bride that traditionally ends all couture catwalk shows – a bid for business from designers who need big-budget bridal commissions to keep their houses afloat. As Des talks her through it, Naomi laughs and strips naked. Then

she transforms into Naomi, the supermodel, wordlessly letting the dresser drape the silk tulle just so before striding around the room to practise her walk.

Meanwhile, Jennifer Saunders is front of house, introducing the show in her laconic fashion. 'This season I was inspired by neutrals, and more neutrals with a touch of more neutrally neutrals mixed in.' As the first models step out, wearing '100% sweetie darling' slogan T-shirts and swinging PVC bags that might as well be bin bags, there's a lightbulb moment as the audience suddenly get it. Then it's Naomi time. As she sweeps on for the finale, flanked by a Bolly-swigging Joanna Lumley, trying to flounce the wedding train, Saunders scoffs: 'This one can't walk, Pats.' There's a moment of silence. Naomi refuses to carry on until the song from her new album *Love And Tears* is played. It's unclear if she's playing up to her character or just too astute to miss a promo opportunity. But by the time the chorus hits, the audience are in hysterics, and my team are popping champagne backstage. In the melee afterwards, Naomi saunters up to Des, then bends down to plant a kiss on his cheek. 'Thanks, darling, that was fun,' she coos, leaving my team smitten. As for me? I'm already onto the next idea . . .

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

We're a long way from Watford

Spring 1989

OXBLOOD VELVET CURTAINS FRAME THE shop windows looking out onto Sloane Street. They're pinned and draped in such a way that your eye is drawn to the pair of Rayne green satin slingbacks sitting atop a neoclassical-style plaster plinth. Only I'm looking at the dead flies on the rug below, wondering why no one from the team has been in to vacuum the windows before the shop opens in thirty minutes' time. My team, I should say. Because today I start as Head of Visual Merchandising and Store Design at Harvey Nichols – the first woman to take up the role. That means that this ten-foot window will now be mine. Along with – I count them – the three, four, five, six . . . fuck me, twenty-seven windows I see as I walk around the shop to the staff entrance.

It's 1989, I'm twenty-eight and about to enter the world of luxury fashion – a space that, although alien to me, instinctively appeals. Department stores are still considered the pinnacle of

visual merchandising. Unlike individual boutiques, we have acres of windows and a curious, heady mix of fashion, beauty, accessories and even interiors to showcase. The balance of what and how to display these is a creative's dream. I stop and stand back to take it all in, those cavernous windows to refit with audacious ideas every eight weeks or less. This will be my stage.

I'd asked my sister Tish to get the same train as me that first day. Tish is the clinical editor of *The Nursing Times*, a newspaper that publishes out of an office behind a curry house on the Euston Road, so she's used to this journey. I'd spent the previous evening rifling through a pile of Topshop suits to try and find something to wear that said Lady Di rather than Cyndi Lauper, but I now realise the fluorescent orange shoulder-padded skirt suit isn't exactly subtle. The few women in our carriage in the sea of men are legal assistants or secretaries for accountants, wearing mid-calf skirts and trainers. They'll change into heels at their desk.

Tish and I sit together, nervously looking out for abandoned bags that'll prompt a message over the tannoy about security. The recent spate of IRA bomb threats has everyone jumpy.

'How are you feeling?' she asks gently.

I tell her what I know about Harvey Nichols. 'Harrods has all the money. Big budgets, zingy ideas, pots of dosh. Makes a fortune with the international market coming to ogle and spend,' I say. 'We're like the ageing dowager duchess down the end of the road living in the smaller property where the curtains are frayed and the china is chipped.'

I explain that I've been recruited to create window displays

that will get the place talked about. Many big American stores are doing the 'experience thing' and it's working. Management needs new ideas to get new customers through the revolving doors and spending.

'Ideas I can do,' I confess. 'It's the people I'm worried about.'

I've been put in the sales team. My boss told me at the interview he loved working with feisty women. 'Just not as much as I love my wife,' he added, laughing. 'Unbelievable taste, unbelievable friends.' He was joking. I think. Still, the only other woman I know of in management is the Fashion Director, a woman called Antonia Allard, who was so scarily fashionable that all of the editors looked to her for inspiration.

'Then there's my display team. Eighteen of them, most of whom will probably be my age,' I tell her. 'Do I look like I'm qualified to be a boss?'

'Well, you've never had much trouble bossing us all around,' she quips, taking my hand. She teases me about my gothic painted nails but I don't mind because I know that, secretly, she's proud I've found my place.

'Just remember what Mum would say,' she says as she ushers me off the train and towards the bus stop to catch the 390 to Victoria.

I think of what Mum often told me. 'You, my darling, are already enough just as you are. Hold your head high, not because you're better than anyone else, but because you owe it to see the horizon fully and claim your space in the world.'

As always, she was right.

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