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# David Nicholls Sweet Sorrow

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One life-changing summer

# Sweet Sorrow

*Also by David Nicholls*

Starter for Ten

The Understudy

One Day

Us

# Sweet Sorrow

*David Nicholls*

**H**  
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STOUGHTON

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What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory – meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subject to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion – is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.

William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*



Part One

JUNE

—

This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid.

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*



## The End of the World

The world would end on Thursday at five to four, immediately after the disco.

Until then, the nearest we'd come to such a cataclysm at Merton Grange were the rumours of apocalypse that took hold once or twice a term, the circumstances broadly the same each time. Nothing as banal as a solar flare or asteroid. Instead a tabloid would report a Mayan prophecy, some throwaway remark from Nostradamus or freak symmetry of the calendar, and word would spread that our faces were due to melt off halfway through Double Physics. Resigned to the hysteria, the teacher would sigh and pause the lesson while we squabbled over who had the most accurate watch, and the countdown would begin, the girls clinging to each other, eyes closed and shoulders hunched as if about to be doused with icy water, the boys brazening it out, all of us secretly contemplating the missed kiss, the unsettled score, our virginity, our friends', our parents' faces. Four, three, two . . .

We'd hold our breath.

Then someone would shout 'bang' and we'd laugh, relieved and just a little disappointed to find ourselves alive, but alive in Double Physics. 'Happy now? Let's get back to work, shall we?' and we'd return to what happens when a force of one Newton causes a body to move through a distance of one metre.

But on Thursday at three fifty-five, immediately after the disco, things would be different. Time had crawled through five long years and now in the final weeks then days, an air of elation and panic, joy and fear began to take hold, along with a crazed

nihilism. Letters home and detentions couldn't touch us now, and what might we get away with in this world without consequences? In the corridors and common rooms, the fire extinguishers took on a terrible potential. Would Scott Parker really say those things to Mrs Ellis? Would Tony Stevens set fire to Humanities again?

And now, unbelievably, the final day was here, brilliant and bright and commencing with skirmishes at the gates; school ties worn as bandanas and tourniquets, in knots as compact as a walnut or fat as a fist, with enough lipstick and jewellery and dyed blue hair to resemble some futuristic nightclub scene. What were the teachers going to do, send us home? They sighed and waved us through. With no plausible reason to define an oxbow lake, the last week had been spent in desultory, dispiriting classes about something called 'adult life' which would, it seemed, consist largely of filling in forms and compiling a CV ('Hobbies and Interests: Socialising, watching TV'). Today we learnt how to balance a chequebook. We stared out of the window at the lovely day and thought, not long now. Four, three, two . . .

Back in our form room at break we began to graffiti our white school shirts with felt-tips and magic markers, kids hunched over each other's backs like tattooists in a Russian jail, marking all available space with sentimental abuse. *Take care of yourself, you dick*, wrote Paul Fox. *This shirt stinks*, wrote Chris Lloyd. In lyrical mood, my best friend Martin Harper wrote *mates4ever* beneath a finely detailed cock and balls.

Harper and Fox and Lloyd. These were my best friends at the time, not just boys but *the* boys, and while some girls circled – Debbie Warwick and Becky Boyne and Sharon Findlay – the group was self-sufficient and impenetrable. Though none of us played an instrument, we'd imagined ourselves as a band. Harper, we all knew, was lead guitar and vocals. Fox was bass, a low and basic thump-thump-thump. Lloyd, because he proclaimed himself 'mad', was the drummer, which left me as . . .

'Maracas,' Lloyd had said and we'd laughed, and 'maracas'

was added to the long list of nicknames. Fox drew them on my school shirt now, maracas crossed beneath a skull, like military insignia. Debbie Warwick, whose mum was an air hostess, had smuggled in a carrier bag full of miniatures in the chocolate-box flavours that we favoured, coffee and cream, mint and orange, and we wrapped them in our fists and swigged and winced and spluttered as Mr Ambrose, feet up on the desk, kept his eyes fixed on the video of *Free Willy 2* that played in the background, a special treat ignored by everyone.

The miniatures served as an aperitif to our very last school dinner. Memories still remained of the legendary food fight of '94; the ketchup sachets exploded underfoot, breaded fish sent skimming through the air like ninja stars, jacket spuds lobbed like grenades. 'Go on. I dare you,' said Harper to Fox as he weighed a leathery sausage experimentally by its tip, but the teachers patrolled the aisles like prison guards and with the promise of brown sponge and brown custard to come, the dangerous moment passed.

In the leavers' assembly, Mr Pascoe made the speech that we'd all expected, encouraging us to look to the future but remember the past, to aim high but weather the lows, to believe in ourselves but think of others. The important thing was not only what we'd learnt – and he hoped we'd learnt a great deal! – but also the kind of young adults we'd become, and we listened, young adults, stuck between cynicism and sentimentality, boisterous on the surface but secretly daunted and sad. We sneered and rolled our eyes but elsewhere in the hall hands gripped other hands and snuffles were heard as we were urged to cherish the friendships we'd made, the friendships that would last a lifetime.

'A lifetime? Christ, I hope not,' said Fox, locking my head beneath his arm, fondly rubbing his knuckles there. It was prize-giving time, and we sank low in our chairs. Prizes were awarded to the kids who always got the prizes, applause fading long before they'd left the stage to stand in front of the photographer from the local press, book tokens held beneath the chin as if in an ID

parade. Next, led by Mr Solomon, Music, the Merton Grange School Swing Band clattered out to satisfy our craving for the American big-band sound with a cacophonous, lolling rendition of Glenn Miller's 'In the Mood'.

'Why? Just *why*?' said Lloyd.

'To put us *in the mood*,' said Fox.

'What mood?' I said.

'In a Shitty Mood,' said Lloyd.

'"Fucked off" by Glenn Miller and his Orchestra,' said Fox.

'No wonder he crashed the plane,' said Harper, and when the barrage came to an end, Fox and Lloyd and Harper leapt to their feet and cheered bravo, bravo. On-stage, Gordon Gilbert, looking quite deranged, held the bell of his trombone with both hands and sent it high, high into the air where it hung for a moment before crashing down onto the parquet and crumpling like tin, and while Mr Solomon screamed into Gordon's face, we shuffled out to the disco.

But I realise how absent I am from the above. I remember the day well enough, but when I try to describe my role, I find myself reaching for what I saw and heard, rather than anything I said or did. As a student, my distinctive feature was a lack of distinction. 'Charlie works hard to meet basic standards and for the most part achieves them'; this was as good as it got and even that slight reputation had been dimmed by events of the exam season. Not admired but not despised, not adored but not feared; I was not a bully, though I knew a fair few, but did not intervene or place myself between the pack and the victim, because I wasn't brave either. Our year at school was distinguished by a strong criminal element, bicycle thieves and shoplifters and arsonists, and while I steered clear of the scariest kids, neither was I befriended by the bright, obedient ones, those garlanded with book tokens. I neither conformed nor rebelled, collaborated nor resisted, I stayed out of trouble without getting into anything else. Comedy was our great currency and while I was not a class

clown – self-satisfied little sods – neither was I witless. I might occasionally get a surprised laugh from the crowd but my best jokes were either drowned out by someone with a louder voice, or came far too late, so that even now, more than twenty years later, I think of things I should have said in '96 or '97. I knew that I was not ugly – someone would have told me – and was vaguely aware of whispers and giggles from huddles of girls, but what use was this to someone with no idea what to say? I'd inherited height, and only height, from my father, my eyes, nose, teeth and mouth from Mum – the right way round, said Dad – but I'd also inherited his tendency to stoop and round my shoulders in order to take up less space in the world. Some lucky quirk of glands and hormones meant that I'd been spared the pulsing spots and boils that literally scarred so many adolescences, and I was neither skinny with anxiety nor plump with the chips and canned drinks that fuelled us, but I wasn't confident about my appearance. I wasn't confident about anything at all.

All around me, kids were adjusting their personalities with the same deliberation that they gave to changes in clothes and haircuts. We were plastic, mutable and there was still time to experiment and alter our handwriting, our politics, the way we laughed or walked or sat in a chair, before we hardened and set. The last five years had been like some great chaotic rehearsal, with discarded clothes and attitudes, friendships and opinions littering the floor; scary and exhilarating for those taking part, maddening and absurd for the parents and teachers subjected to those fraught improvisations and obliged to clear up the mess.

Soon it would be time to settle into some role we might plausibly fit, but when I tried to see myself as others saw me (sometimes literally, late at night, staring profoundly into my father's shaving mirror, hair slicked back) I saw . . . nothing special. In photos of myself from that time, I'm reminded of those early incarnations of a cartoon character, the prototypes that resemble the later version but are in some way out of proportion, not quite right.

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None of which is much help. Imagine, then, another photograph, the school group shot that everybody owns, faces too small to make out without peering closely. Whether it's five or fifty years old, there's always a vaguely familiar figure in the middle row, someone with no anecdotes or associations, scandals or triumphs to their name. You wonder: who *was* that?

That's Charlie Lewis.

## Sawdust

The school-leavers' disco had a reputation for Roman levels of depravity, second only to the Biology field trip. Our arena was the sports hall, a space large enough to comfortably contain a passenger jet. To create an illusion of intimacy, ancient bunting had been strung between the wall bars and a mirror-ball dangled from a chain like a medieval flail, but still the space seemed exposed and barren, and for the first three songs we lined up on benches, eyeing each other across the scuffed, dusty parquet like warriors across the field of battle, passing and sipping the last of Debbie Warwick's miniatures for courage until only Cointreau was left, Cointreau a line that none dared cross. Mr Hepburn, Geography, on the wheels of steel, veered desperately from 'I Will Survive' to 'Baggy Trousers' and even 'Relax' until Mr Pascoe told him to fade it out. An hour and fifteen minutes to go. We were wasting time . . .

But now came Blur's 'Girls & Boys' and, as if some signal had been given there was a great surge onto the dance floor, everyone dancing wildly, then staying on to bellow along to the pop-house anthems that followed. Mr Hepburn had hired a strobe light and now he jammed his thumb down with a wild disregard for health and safety. We stared at our flexing fingers in awe, sucking in our cheeks and biting our bottom lips like the ravers we'd seen on the TV news, arms punching and feet pounding until sweat started to soak through our shirts. I could see the ink on *mates-ever* starting to run and, suddenly sentimental about this relic, I pushed my way back to the bench where I'd stashed my bag,

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grabbed my old sports kit, pressed it to my face to check that it met the lowest of standards and headed to the boys' changing rooms.

If, as horror films had taught me, the walls and foundations of a space absorbed the emotions of those who passed through it, then this changing room was somewhere to be exorcised. Terrible things had happened here. There was the pile of fetid lost property, mouldy towels and unspeakable socks as dense and ancient as a peat bog, in which we'd buried Colin Smart, and there, there was the spot where Paul Bunce's underpants had been pulled up so violently that he'd been admitted to A&E. This room was a caged arena in which no blow, physical or mental, was forbidden and sitting on the bench for the very last time, carefully locating my head between the coat-hooks that had claimed too many victims, I suddenly felt fantastically sad. Perhaps it was nostalgia, but I doubted it; nostalgia for the pencil cases filled with liquid soap and the snap of wet towels? More likely it was regret for the things that had not happened, changes that had failed to take place. A caterpillar forms a cocoon and inside that hard shell, the cell walls dissolve, molecules churn and reorganise and the cocoon breaks open to reveal another caterpillar, longer, more hairy and rather less certain about the future.

Recently I'd found myself susceptible to bouts of this kind of soulful pondering and now I shook off the introspection with a literal toss of the head. Summer lay ahead and in this interval between past regret and future fear, might it not be possible to have fun, live life and make something happen? At this very moment my friends were nearby, dancing like robots. Quickly I tugged the old T-shirt down over my head, looked over the scrawled inscriptions on my school shirt and saw, near the tail, in blue ink, crisp and neat, these words -

*u made me cry.*

I folded it carefully and put it into my bag.

Back in the hall, Mr Hepburn was playing 'Jump Around' and

the dancing had become wilder, more aggressive, with boys hurling themselves at each other as if breaking down a door. ‘Goodness, Charlie,’ said Miss Butcher, Drama, ‘it’s all so *emotional!*’ Throughout the day the familiar passions, malice and sentiment, love and lust, had been ramped up to a degree that was not sustainable. The air hummed with it and, seeking some escape, I climbed the monkey bars, folded myself in between the rungs and thought about those four neat words written with care and purpose. I tried to recall a face, find it amongst the faces in the hall, but it was like one of those murder mysteries in which everybody has a motive.

A new craze had started now, the boys climbing on backs and crashing full speed into each other, jousting. Even above the music you could hear the slap of spines against the parquet. A real fight had broken out. I glimpsed keys bunched in someone’s hand and in the spirit of public order Mr Hepburn played the Spice Girls, a kind of musical water-cannon for the boys, who scattered to the edges, the girls taking their place, skipping and wagging their fingers at each other. Miss Butcher, too, replaced Mr Hepburn on the decks. I saw him raise his hand to me and dart across the dance floor, looking left and right as if crossing a busy road.

‘What d’ you think, Charlie?’

‘You missed your vocation, sir.’

‘Clubbing’s loss was geography’s gain,’ he said, folding himself into the bars beside me. ‘You can call me Adam now. We’re both civilians, or will be in, what, thirty minutes? In thirty minutes you can call me anything you like!’

I liked Mr Hepburn and admired his perseverance in the face of vocal indifference. *No offence, sir, but what’s the point of this?* Of all the teachers who’d aspired to it, he’d best pulled off the trick of seeming decent without being ingratiating, dropping tantalising hints of ‘big weekends’ and staffroom intrigue, displaying just enough small signs of rebellion – loose tie, stubble, shaggy hair – to imply that we were comrades. Occasionally he’d even swear, the bad language like sweets thrown into a crowd.

Still, there was no world in which I'd call him Adam.

'So – are you excited about college?'

I recognised the beginning of a pep talk. 'Don't think I'll be going, sir.'

'You don't know that. You've applied, haven't you?'

I nodded. 'Art, Computer Science, Graphic Design.'

'Lovely.'

'But I didn't get the grades.'

'Well, you don't know that yet.'

'I'm pretty sure, sir. I didn't turn up half the time.'

He tapped me on the knee with his fist once, and then thought better of it. 'Well, even if you haven't, there are things you can do. Retake, do something less conventional. Boy like you, boy with talents . . .' I still treasured the praise he'd lavished on my volcano project: the last word, the ultimate in volcano cross-sections, as if I'd uncovered some fundamental truth that had evaded volcanologists for centuries. But this was a small hook from which to hang the word 'talent'.

'Nah, I'm going to get a full-time job, sir. I've given myself 'til September, then—'

'I still remember those volcanoes. The cross-hatching was superb.'

'Long time since those volcanoes,' I shrugged and, unexpectedly, mortifyingly, realised that some switch had been flicked and that I might cry. I wondered, should I scamper further up the monkey bars?

'But maybe you can do something with it.'

'With volcanoes?'

'The drawing, the graphic design. If you wanted to talk to me about it, once the results are through . . .'

Or perhaps not climb the monkey bars, perhaps just push him off. It wasn't far to fall.

'Really, I'll be fine.'

'All right, Chaz, all right, but let me tell you a secret –' He swung in and I could smell lager on his breath. 'Here it is. It

doesn't matter. Stuff that happens now, it doesn't matter. I mean it does *matter*, but not as much as you'd think, and you're young, so young. You could go to college, or go back when you're ready, but you have so. Much. Time. Oh, man . . .' He pressed his cheek winsomely against the wooden frame. 'If I woke up and I was sixteen again, oh, man—'

And blessedly, just as I prepared to leap, Miss Butcher found the strobe light and jammed it down for a long, long burst and now there was a scream and a sudden surge of movement in the crowd, a panicked circle forming as, in the flickering light and to the sound of 'MMMBop', Debbie Warwick coughed and spewed magnesium-white vomit, splattering shoes and bare legs in a series of rapid snapshots like some hellish stop-motion film, her hand widening the arc like a finger pressed to the end of a hose, until she was left hunched and alone in the centre of a circle of kids who were laughing and screaming at the same time. Only then did Miss Butcher switch off the strobe and tiptoe into the circle to rub Debbie's back with the very tips of the fingers of an outstretched arm.

'Studio 54,' said Mr Hepburn, clambering down from the bars. 'Too much strobe, you see?' The music was paused as kids scrubbed at their legs with abrasive paper towels and Parky, building maintenance, went to fetch the sawdust and disinfectant that were kept close at hand for parties. 'Twenty minutes to go, ladies and gentlemen,' said Mr Hepburn, restored to the decks. 'Twenty minutes, which means it's time to slow things down a little . . .'

Slow songs provided a school-sanctioned opportunity to lie on top of each other while still standing up. The first chords of '2 Become 1' had cleared the floor, but now a series of panicked negotiations were underway at its edges as, courtesy of the lab technicians, a small amount of dry ice belched out, a cloaking device, settling at waist height. Sally Taylor and Tim Morris were the first to kick through the fog, then Sharon Findlay and Patrick Rogers, the school's sexual pioneers, hands permanently plunged

deep in the other's waistband as if pulling tickets for a raffle, then Lisa 'the Body' Boden and Mark Solomon, Stephen 'Shanksy' Shanks and 'Queen' Alison Quinn, hopping blithely over the sawdust.

But these were old married couples in our eyes. The crowd demanded novelty. From the far corner, there were whoops and cheers as Little Colin Smart took Patricia Gibson's hand, a corridor opening up as she was half pushed, half tugged into the light, her spare hand covering as much of her face as possible like the accused arriving for trial. All around the hall, boys and girls began their kamikaze runs, the suitors sometimes accepted, sometimes repelled and sent spinning off, smiling hard against the slow handclaps.

'I hate this bit, don't you?'

I'd been joined on the bars by Helen Beavis, an art-block girl and champion hockey player, tall and strong and sometimes known as The Brick, though never to her face. 'Look,' she said. 'Lisa's trying to fit her entire head into Mark Solomon's mouth.'

'And I bet he's still got his chewing gum in there—'

'Just knocking it back and forth. Little game of badminton going on. Pok-pok-pok.'

We'd made a few self-conscious attempts at friendship, Helen and I, though nothing had ever taken. In the art block, she was one of the cool kids who painted big abstract canvases with titles like *Division*, who always had something drying in the pottery kiln. If art was about emotion and self-expression, then I was merely a 'good drawer'; detailed, heavily cross-hatched sketches of zombies and space pirates and skulls, always with one living eye still in the socket, imagery ripped off from computer games and comics, sci-fi and horror, the kind of intricately violent images that catch the attention of an educational psychologist. 'I'll say one thing for you, Lewis,' Helen had drawled, holding some intergalactic mercenary at arm's length, 'you can really draw a male torso. Capes, too. Imagine what you could do if you drew something *real*.'

I'd not replied. Helen Beavis was too smart for me, in an un-showy private way that didn't require the validation of book tokens. She was funny, too, with all the best jokes muttered in a low voice for her own satisfaction. Her sentences contained more words than necessary, every other word given a twist of irony so that I never knew if she meant one thing or its opposite. Words were hard enough when they had one meaning, and if our friendship foundered on anything, it was my inability to keep up.

'You know what this gym needs? Ashtrays. Fitted flush at the end of the parallel bars. Hey, are we allowed to smoke yet?'

'Not for . . . twenty minutes.'

Like the best of our athletes, Helen Beavis was a dedicated smoker, lighting up more or less at the gates, her Marlboro Menthol wagging up and down like Popeye's pipe as she laughed, and I'd once watched her place a finger over one nostril and snort a good twelve feet over a privet hedge. She had, I think, the worst haircut I'd ever seen, spiked at the top, long and lank at the back with two pointed sideburns, like something scribbled on a photograph in biro. In the mysterious algebra of the fifth-year common room, bad hair plus artiness plus hockey plus unshaved legs equalled lesbian, a potent word for boys at that time, able to make a girl of great interest or of no interest at all. There were two – and only two – types of lesbian and Helen was not the kind found in the pages of Martin Harper's magazines, and so the boys paid little attention to her, which I'm sure suited her fine. But I liked her and wanted to impress her, even if my attempts usually left her slowly shaking her head.

Finally the mirror-ball was deployed, revolving on its chain. 'Ah. That's magical,' said Helen, nodding at the slowly spinning dancers. 'Always clockwise, have you noticed?'

'In Australia, they go the other way.'

'On the equator, they just stand there. Very self-conscious.' Now '2 Become 1' faded into the warm syrup of Whitney Houston's 'Greatest Love of All'. 'Yikes,' said Helen and rolled

her shoulders. 'I hope, for all our sakes, that the children *aren't* our future.'

'I don't think Whitney Houston had this particular school in mind.'

'No, probably not.'

'The other thing I've never got about this song: learning to love yourself – why's that the greatest love of all?'

'It makes more sense if you hear it as *loathe*,' she said. We listened.

'Learning to loathe yourself—'

'—is the greatest loathe of all. That's why it's easy to achieve. And the great thing is, it works with nearly all love songs.'

'She loathes you—'

'Exactly.'

'Thanks, Helen. That makes more sense to me now.'

'My gift to you.' We turned back to the dance floor. 'Trish looks happy,' and we watched as Patricia Gibson, hand still clamped over her eyes, contrived to simultaneously dance and back away. 'Colin Smart's trousers have arranged themselves in an interesting way. Weird place to keep your geometry set. Boing!' Helen twanged the air. 'I had that once. Christmas Methodist Disco with someone whose name I'm not at liberty to repeat. It's not nice. Like being jabbed in the hip with the corner of a shoebox.'

'I think boys get more out of it than the girls.'

'So go rub it against a tree or something. It's very rude, by which I mean impolite. Leave it out of your arsenal, Charles.' Elsewhere, hands were seeking out buttocks and either lying there, limp and frightened or kneading at the flesh like pizza dough. 'It really is a most disgusting spectacle. And not just because of my much-vaunted *lesbianism*.' I shifted on the bar. We were not used to frank and open discussion. Best to ignore it, and after a moment—

'So, do you want to dance?' she said.

I frowned. 'Nah. M'all right.'

‘Yeah, me too,’ she said. A little time passed. ‘If you want to go ask someone else—’

‘Really. I’m all right.’

‘No big crush, Charlie Lewis? Nothing to get off your chest in these dying moments?’

‘I don’t really do that . . . stuff. You?’

‘Me? Nah, I’m pretty much dead inside. Love’s a bourgeois construct anyway. All this —’ She nodded to the dance floor. ‘It’s not dry ice, it’s a haze of low-lying pheromones. Smell it. Love is . . .’ We sniffed the air. ‘Cointreau and disinfectant.’

Feedback, and Mr Hepburn’s voice boomed out, too close to the mike. ‘Last song, ladies and gentlemen, your very last song! Let’s see everyone dancing with someone — courage, people!’ ‘Careless Whisper’ came on, and Helen nodded towards a huddled group that now emitted a single girl. Emily Joyce walked towards us, starting to speak while too far away to be heard.

‘. . .’

‘What?’

‘. . .’

‘I can’t—’

‘Hello! I just said hi, that’s all.’

‘Hello, Emily.’

‘Helen.’

‘Well, hello Emily.’

‘What ya doing?’

‘We are being voyeurs,’ said Helen.

‘What?’

‘We’re watching,’ I said.

‘Did you see Mark put his hand up Lisa’s skirt?’

‘No, I’m afraid we missed that,’ said Helen. ‘We did see them kissing, though. That’s quite something. Did you ever see a reticulated python swallow a small bush pig, Emily? Apparently they dislocate their jaws, right back here—’

Emily squinted irritably at Helen. ‘*What?*’

‘I said, did you ever see a reticulated python swallow a small—’

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‘Look, do you want to dance or what?’ snapped Emily impatiently, poking at my kneecap.

‘Don’t mind me,’ said Helen.

I think I might have puffed my cheeks and blown out air. ‘All right then,’ I said and hopped down.

‘Don’t slip in the vomit, lovebirds,’ said Helen as we walked onto the dance floor.

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by David Nicholls

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