

# Sweet Sorrow

*David Nicholls*



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

I

Copyright © Maxromy Productions Ltd 2019

The right of David Nicholls to be identified as the Author of the Work  
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without  
the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form  
of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar  
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,  
living or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 71540 8  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 71541 5  
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 71543 9

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural,  
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown  
in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes  
are expected to conform to the environmental regulations  
of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

## The Meadow

I'd not been here before. Bored of the ascent, I'd dismounted and noticed a footpath to my right, shady and blessedly flat. I'd wheeled my bike through woodland that soon opened up onto a sloping pasture, overgrown to waist height, the brown and green spattered with the red of poppies and the blue of . . . something else. Willow-herb? Cornflowers? I'd no idea, but the meadow was irresistible and I heaved my bike over the wooden stile and ploughed on through the tall grass. A grand timbered mansion came into view above me, one that I'd noticed from the ring road, a formal garden bordering the meadow at its lower edge. I had a sudden sense of trespass and dropped my bike, then walked on until I found a natural hollow in which to sunbathe, smoke and read something violent.

The great expanse of empty hours meant that, for the first time in my life, I'd resorted to reading. I'd begun with thrillers and horror novels from Dad's collection, dog-eared pages waffled from bath or beach, in which sex alternated with violence at an accelerating pace. Initially, books had felt like second best – reading about sex and violence was like listening to football on the radio – but soon I was tearing through a novel every day, forgetting them almost instantly except for *The Silence of the Lambs* and Stephen King. Before too long, I'd graduated to Dad's smaller, slightly intimidating 'sci-fi' section: scuffed copies of Asimov, Ballard and Philip K. Dick. Though I couldn't say how it was achieved, I could tell that these books were written in a different register to the ones about giant rats, and the novel that

I carried daily in my bag began to feel like protection against boredom, an alibi for loneliness. There was still something furtive about it – reading in front of my mates would have been like taking up the flute or country dancing – but no one would see me here, and so on this day I took out my copy of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, chosen because it had ‘slaughter’ in the title.

If I rolled a little from side to side, I could make a sort of military dugout, invisible from the house above or the town below. Straining for soulfulness, I took in the view, a model-railway kind of landscape with everything too close together: plantations rather than woodland, reservoirs not lakes, stables and catteries and dog kennels rather than dairy farms and roaming sheep. Birdsong competed with the grumble of the motorway and the tinnitus buzzing of the pylons above me but from this distance, it didn’t seem such a bad place. From this distance.

I took off my top and lay back, practised my smoking with the day’s cigarette, then, using the book to shield my eyes, I began to read, pausing now and then to brush ash from my chest. High above, holiday jets from Spain and Italy, Turkey and Greece, circled in a holding pattern, impatient for a runway. I closed my eyes and watched the fibres drifting against the screen of my eyelids, trying to follow them to the edge of my vision as they darted away like fish in a stream.

When I awoke, the sun was at its height and I felt thick-headed and momentarily panicked by the sound of whoops and shouts and hunting cries from the hill above: a posse. Were they out to get me? No, I heard the swish of grass and the panicked gasps of their quarry, running down the hill in my direction. I peered through the high grass. The girl wore a yellow T-shirt and a short blue denim skirt that hindered her running, and I saw her hoist it higher with both hands, then look behind her and crouch down to catch her breath, forehead pressed to her scuffed knees. I couldn’t see her expression, but had a sudden, excited notion that the house was some sinister institution, an asylum or a secret lab, and that I might help her escape. More shouts and jeers,

and she glanced back, then straightened, twisted her skirt further up her pale legs and began to run directly at me. I crouched again, but not before I saw her look back one more time and suddenly pitch forward and crash face first into the ground.

I'm ashamed to say that I laughed, clapping my hand to my mouth. A moment's silence, and then I heard her groaning and giggling at the same time. 'Ow! Ow-ow-ow, you *idiot!* Owwwwow!' She was perhaps three or four metres away now, her panting broken by her own pained laughter, and I was suddenly aware of my skinny bare chest as pink as tinned salmon, and the syrupy sweat and cigarette ash that had pooled in my sternum. I began the contortions required to get dressed while remaining flat on the ground.

From the house on the hill, a jeering voice – 'Hey! We give up! You win! Come back and join us!' – and I thought, *it's a trap, don't believe them.*

The girl groaned to herself. 'Hold on!'

Another voice, female. 'You did very well! Lunchtime! Come back!'

'I can't!' she said, sitting now. 'Ow! Bloody hell!' I pressed myself further into the ground as she attempted to stand, testing her ankle and yelping at the pain. I would have to reveal myself, but there seemed no casual way to leap out on someone in a meadow. I licked my lips, and in a stranger's voice called, 'Hello!'

She gasped, pivoted on her good leg and fell backwards all at once, disappearing into the grass.

'Listen, don't freak out but—'

'Who said that?!'

'Just so you know I'm here—'

'Who? Where?'

'Over here. In the long grass.'

'But who the fuck *are* you? *Where* are you?'

I pulled my T-shirt down quickly, stood and, in a low crouch as if under fire, crossed to where she lay. 'I was trying not to scare you.'

Sweet Sorrow

‘Well, you *failed*, you *weirdo*!’

‘Hey, I was here first!’

‘What are you doing here anyway?’

‘Nothing! Reading! Why are they after you?’

She looked at me sideways. ‘Who?’

‘Those people, why are they chasing you?’

‘You’re not in the company?’

‘What company?’

‘*The Company*, you’re not part of it?’

The Company sounded sinister and I wondered if I might help her after all. *Come with me if you want to live*. ‘No, I—’

‘Then what are you doing here?’

‘Nothing, I was just, I went for a bike ride and—’

‘Where’s your bike?’

‘Over there. I was reading and I fell asleep and I wanted to let you know I was here without frightening you.’

She’d returned to examining her ankle. ‘Well, that worked out.’

‘Actually, it is a public footpath. I’ve got as much right to be here—’

‘Fine, but I have an actual *reason*.’

‘So why were they chasing you?’

‘What? Oh. Stupid game. Don’t ask.’ She tested the bones of her ankle with her thumbs. ‘Ow!’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Yes, it *fucking* hurts! Running through meadows, it’s a fucking death-trap. I put my foot right in a rabbit hole, and fell on my face.’

‘Yeah, I saw that.’

‘Did you? Well, thank you for not laughing.’

‘I did laugh.’

She narrowed her eyes at me.

‘So – can I help?’ I said, to make amends.

She looked me up and down, literally up then down again, an appraisal, so that I found myself trying to jam my fingertips into my pockets. ‘Tell me again, why are you here, perverting about?’

'I'm just . . . Look, I'm reading! Look!' And I scrambled back to my foxhole to retrieve the paperback and hold it out. She examined the cover, checking it against my face as if it were a passport. Satisfied, she tried to get to her feet, winced and collapsed back down and I wondered if I ought to offer my hand, like a handshake, but the gesture seemed absurd and instead I knelt at her feet and, scarcely less absurd, took her foot as if trying on a glass slipper: Adidas shell-tops with blue stripes, no socks, a pale, mottled shin. I felt the slight prickle of new stubble, black like iron filings.

'You all right down there?' she said, eyes fixed on the sky.

'Yes, just wondering if—' I'd assumed a surgeon's air, probing with skilled thumbs.

'Ow!'

'Sorry!'

'Tell me, Doctor, what exactly are you looking for?'

'I'm looking for the bit that hurts, then I'm prodding it. Basically, I'm seeing if there's bone sticking out through flesh.'

'Is there?'

'No, you're fine. It's a sprain.'

'And will I ever dance again?'

'You will,' I said, 'but only if you really *want* it.'

She laughed up at the sky and I felt so debonair and pleased with myself that I laughed too. 'Serves me right for wearing this,' she said, tugging the denim skirt down towards her knees. 'Vanity. What an idiot. I'd better get back. You can let go of my foot now.' Too abruptly, I dropped it and stood by stupidly while she attempted to haul herself into an upright position.

'Any chance that you could . . . ?'

I hauled her to her feet and held her hand as she tested the ground with her pointed toe, winced again, tested again, and I tried to take her in while looking the other way. She was a little shorter than me but not much, her skin pale, her hair black and short but with a longer fringe that she now stowed away behind her ear, and which was carefully shaved at the nape

of her neck in a way that exaggerated the curve of her skull, so that it was somehow austere and glamorous at the same time, Joan of Arc just leaving the salon. I don't think I'd ever noticed the back of someone's head before. Tiny black studs in each ear, with two extra holes for special occasions. Because I was sixteen, I let my eyes slip out of focus to disguise the fact that I was looking at her breasts, confident that no girl had spotted this trick. Adidas, they said, on a bright yellow T-shirt with very short sleeves so that, in the soft flesh at the top of her arm, I could make out her BCG scar, dimpled like the markings on a Roman coin.

'Hello? I'm going to need your help.'

'Can you walk?'

'I can hop, but that's not going to work.'

'D'you want a piggy-back?' I said, regretting 'piggy-back'. There had to be a tougher term. 'Or a, you know, fireman's lift?' She looked at me and I stood a little straighter.

'Are you a fireman?'

'I'm taller than you!'

'But I'm . . .' She tugged her skirt down. '. . . denser. Can you lift your own weight?'

'Sure!' I said, and turned and offered up my sweaty back with a hitchhiker's flick of the thumb.

'No. No, that would be really weird. But if you don't mind me leaning on you . . .'

In a further gesture that I've never made before or since, I cocked my elbow to the side and sort of nodded towards it, hand on hip like a country dancer.

'Why, thank 'ee,' she said, and we began to walk.

The swish of the long grass seemed unreasonably loud and searching for a clear path meant there were few opportunities to turn and look at her, though it now felt like a compulsion. She walked with her fringe obscuring her face, her eyes fixed on the ground, but in flashes I could see they were blue, a ridiculous blue – had I noticed the colour of anyone's eyes quite so acutely



before? – and the skin around them had a bluish tinge too, like the remnants of last night’s make-up, creased with laughter lines, or a wince as—

‘Ow! Ow, ow, ow.’

‘Are you sure I can’t carry you?’

‘You are *really* keen to carry someone.’

There were a few spots on her forehead and one on her chin, picked or worried at, and her mouth seemed very wide and red against the pale skin, with a small raised seam in her lower lip, a fold, as if there’d been some repair, the mouth held in tension as if she was about to laugh, or swear, or both, as she did now, her ankle folding sideways like a hinge.

‘I really could carry you.’

‘I believe you.’

Soon the gate to the formal garden was in sight, the absurd house now grander and more intimidating, and I wondered: ‘Do you live here?’

‘Here?’ She laughed with her whole face, unselfconsciously. One of my smaller prejudices was a suspicion and resentment of people with very good teeth; all that health and vigour seemed like a kind of showing-off. This girl’s teeth, I noticed, were saved from perfection by a chip on her left front tooth, like the folded corner of a page. ‘No, I don’t *live* here.’

‘I thought maybe they were your family, the people chasing you.’

‘Yeah, they do that a lot, me and Mum and Dad, whenever we see a field—’

‘Well, I don’t know . . .’

‘It was a silly game. It’s a long story.’ Changing the subject: ‘What were you doing here again?’

‘Reading. Just a nice spot to read.’

She nodded, sceptical. ‘Nature boy.’

I shrugged. ‘Makes a change.’

‘And how’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*?’

‘S’okay. Not enough slaughter.’

She laughed, though I was only half joking. ‘I’ve heard of it

but not read it. I don't want to generalise but I always thought it was a boys' book. Is it?'

I shrugged again . . .

'I mean, compared to Atwood or Le Guin.'

. . . because if she was going to talk about literature, then I might as well push her into a bush and run.

'So. What's it about?'

*Charlie, can you tell the class something about the author's intentions in this passage? Your own words, please.*

'It's about this man, this war veteran, who has been kidnapped by aliens and he's in an alien zoo, but he keeps flashing back to scenes in the war, where he's a prisoner . . .'

*Yes, that's what happens, but what's it about? Keep going, Charlie, please.*

'But it's also about war, and the bombing of Dresden, and a sort of fatality – not fatality, um fatalism? – about whether life matters or free will is a delusion, illusion, delusion, so it's sort of horrible, about death and war, but it's funny too.'

'O-kay. Does sound a *bit* like a boys' book.'

*Use better words. 'Surreal! That's what it is. And really good.' Thank you, Charlie, sit down please.*

'O-kay,' she said. 'Okay. Usually when people say "alien zoo" I switch off, but maybe I'll read it. Have you read—?'

'No, but I've seen the film.' She looked at me sideways. 'I'm joking, I just mean that I've not read much. I'm not much of a reader.'

'Well,' she said, 'that's all right,' then, as if there were some connection, 'What school d'you go to?'

It was a dull question but decreed by law and I thought it best to spit it out:

'Just finished at Merton Grange,' I said and watched, expecting the usual emotions, the face you might reserve for someone who tells you that they've just left prison. Though I couldn't honestly spot a trace of this, I still felt a twist of irritation. 'You're Chatsborne, yeah?'

She tucked her fringe behind her ear and laughed. 'How did you guess?'

Because Chatsborne kids were posh, were arty stoners, were hippies. Chatsborne kids wore their own clothes to school, which meant vintage floral dresses and ironic T-shirts that they'd screen-printed themselves *at home*. Chatsborne kids were clever, were wimps, were wimps because they were clever, a school composed entirely of head boys and head girls, eating vegetarian tagine from self-carved bowls on furniture they'd made from reclaimed wood. Estate agents boasted of inclusion in its catchment area before they even mentioned the number of bedrooms, the circles of affluence and confidence and cool marked on the map like a radiation zone. Walk those streets on a summer's evening and you'd hear the violin, cello and classical guitar calling to each other at Grade 8 level. Of all our tribal instincts, above team or label or political party, loyalty to school was the strongest and even if we hated the place, the bond remained, indelible as a tattoo. Even so, I already missed the brief moments before we'd fallen into our roles of Merton Grange boy, Chatsborne girl.

We walked a little further in silence.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to steal your dinner money,' I said, and she smiled but frowned too.

'I didn't say anything like that, did I?'

'No.' I'd sounded bitter. I tried again. 'I've not seen you around,' I said, as if I roamed the streets looking for girls.

'Oh, I live . . .'

 and she waved vaguely towards the trees.

We walked a little further.

'Your school used to have those fights with our school,' she said.

'Up the precinct, outside the Chinese. I know. I used to go.'

'To fight?'

'No, just to watch. Was never much of a *fight*. Everyone used to talk about *blades*, there's going to be *blades*, but that was only if you counted a protractor. Mainly it was just kids chucking water and chips.'

## Sweet Sorrow

‘Never bring a protractor to a water fight.’

‘Merton Grange did always win, though.’

‘Yeah,’ she said, ‘but does anyone ever really *win*?’

‘War is hell.’

‘Fights up the precinct; it’s all a bit Sharks and Jets, isn’t it? I hate all that stuff. Thank God it’s over, I won’t miss that. Besides, look at us two now, completely at ease . . .’

‘Just talking . . .’

‘Getting along, breaking down boundaries . . .’

‘It’s very moving.’

‘So how d’you think you did in your exams?’

Thankfully, we’d reached the grounds of the big house, a rusted metal gate giving on to a patchy lawn, the great timbered mansion behind, imposing enough to provide a distraction.

‘Am I allowed in here?’

‘On t’mistress’s land? Aye, ’course thou art, lad.’ I held the gate open for her, then hesitated. ‘I can’t climb that hill without you,’ she said. ‘You are *literally* my crutch.’

We walked on, clambering over the sunken earthworks, called a ha-ha, both the source of and the response to weak jokes since the 1700s. Close up, the ornamental gardens seemed scrappy and sun-blasted; dried-out rose beds, a brittle, brown-tipped slab of privet. ‘See that? It’s the famous maze.’

‘Why didn’t you hide in there?’

‘I’m not an *amateur*!’

‘What kind of house has a maze?’

‘Posh one. Come on, I’ll introduce you to the owners.’

‘I should get back, my bike’s still down—’

‘No one’s going to nick your bike. Come on, they’re really nice. Besides, there’s people here from your school, you can say hello.’

We were crossing the lawn towards a courtyard. I could hear voices. ‘I really should get home.’

‘Just say hello, it won’t take a minute.’ I’d noticed now that she had looped her arm in mine, for support or perhaps to stop

me running away, and in a moment we were in a central courtyard, with two trestle tables laden with food and a crowd of ten or so strangers, their backs to us; the sinister private rituals of The Company.

‘Here she is!’ bellowed a florid young man in an un-tucked collarless shirt, flicking a great wing of hair out of his eyes. ‘The champion returns!’ He seemed familiar from somewhere, but now the rest of the coven had turned, cheering and applauding as the girl hobbled towards them. ‘My God, what’s up?’ said the young man, taking her arm, and an older woman with cropped white hair frowned and tutted as if the injury was my fault.

‘I fell over,’ she said. ‘This guy helped me back. I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.’

‘It’s Charlie Lewis,’ said Lucy Tran, the Vietnamese girl from Merton Grange, her mouth tight in frank dislike.

‘Bloody hell, it’s Lewis!’ shouted another voice. Helen Beavis cackled and gathered salad leaves into her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘Get out of here, you freak!’

‘I was just on my bike, in the field, and—’

‘Hello, Charlie, welcome aboard!’ said Little Colin Smart, sole male member of the school Drama Club, and now the young man with the fringe marched towards me, dark sweat marks in his armpits, hands outstretched, with such determined force that I took a step backwards into the wall.

‘Hello, Charlie, are you a new recruit? I do hope so! *We need* you, Charlie!’ and he enclosed my hand entirely in his and pumped it up and down. ‘Grab some salad and we’ll see how we can slot you in,’ he said, and I knew where I had seen this man before and what he represented, and that I should run away.