

MARY PORTAS

The story

In this extract from her autobiography, **Mary Portas** recalls how she became hooked on visual merchandising at Harvey Nichols in the 1970s

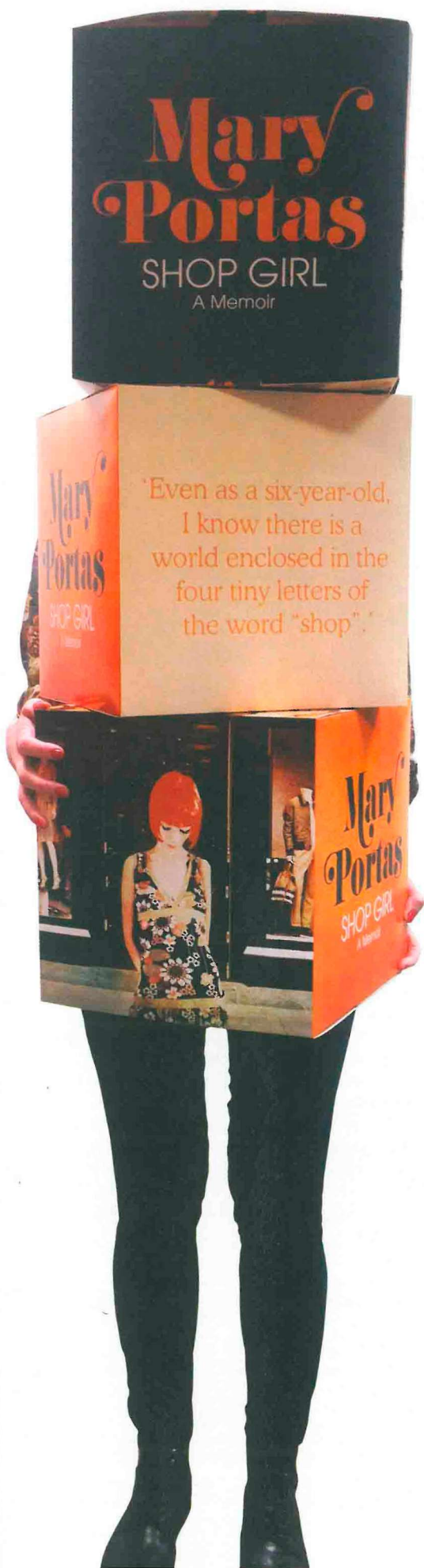
Harvey Nichols was like a Rolls-Royce: classic, comfortable and reassuringly expensive. The store of choice for the *grandes dames* of Knightsbridge, all they asked in return for their unwavering loyalty was understated and dependable luxury. They didn't want high fashion. They expected discreet expense, the kind that didn't scream money but whispered it, using cashmere, pearls and kid leather.

The 20-strong display team was responsible for showcasing everything that Harvey Nichols had in store. They were made up of understatedly chic men – like Andrew and his assistant, Paul, who talked in a voice honed by private school and sat in an office lined with books about architecture – young people dressed in the latest fashions, and screaming queens, whose barbs and histrionic mood swings were delivered with razor-sharp wit. These men were as exotic to me as Marc Bolan

had once been. Homosexuality had only been decriminalised 12 years before and it had not yet reached Watford, as far as I knew.

One tier below Andrew and Paul were the senior dressers and under them a team of juniors, who toiled like worker bees serving their queens. Huge store-front windows had to be filled to entice passers-by inside; mannequins styled and placed at the top of escalators to beckon people into departments; pedestals topped with products that customers

“These windows were art, drama, a fantasy landscape where anything could be played out, a performance”



Watch Retail Week's interview
with Mary Portas at
Retail-week.com/portasinterview

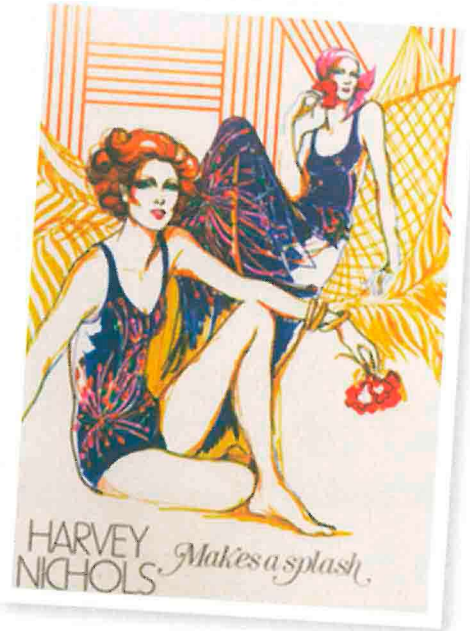


of a shop girl

Mary Portas

SHOP GIRL

A Memoir



had never known they wanted until they saw them; glass cabinets stuffed like treasure boxes to make people stop and stare.

The studio was the hub of the process, the place where everything that would bring the designs to life was stored or made. Mannequins were stacked – some naked, others wearing wigs but all ready to be transformed into a fantasy – beside huge bales of felt in every colour waiting to be stapled onto window floors, walls and ceilings to create backdrops. There were rolls of PVC and wire netting; shelves of shoes, socks, hosiery; boxes of props ranging from Japanese paper umbrellas, Spanish fans and Venetian carnival masks to lights, feathers and gilt cherubs.

The process started with the senior dressers making a three-dimensional drawing of the window that was signed off by Andrew and Paul. Then everything that was needed to fill it was prepared – props were made and products signed out from every department by the juniors.

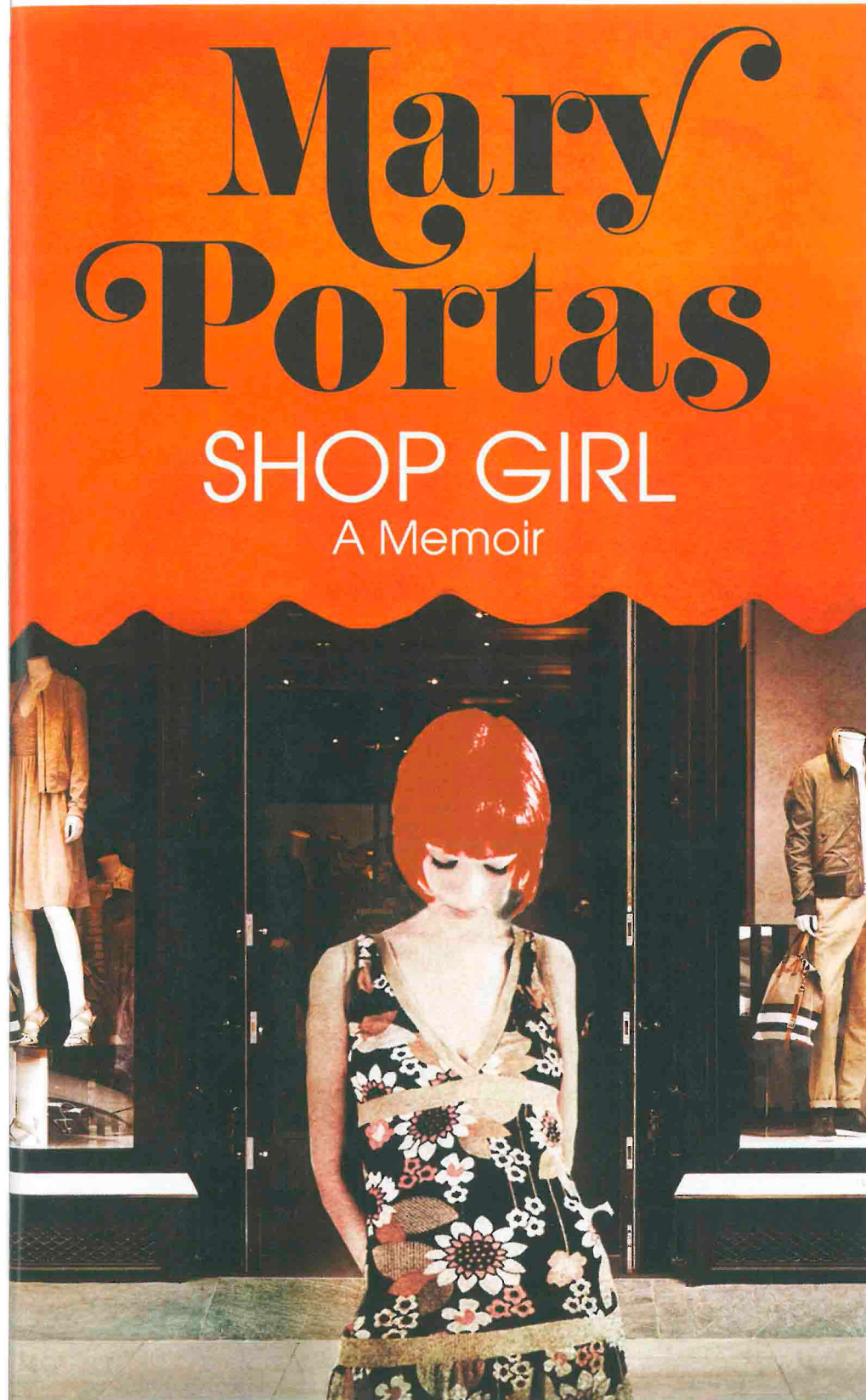
"I've got the Dunhill jumper from Menswear," they'd call to whomever they were assisting.

"What colour?"

"Pale yellow."

"But I need sunshine! Think of the Côte d'Azur. Not your Aunt Ethel's lemon curd. Now go and find me something else."

The radio was constantly on, ironing boards up and steamers going. Senior dressers pinning, pleating and styling while their juniors clutched tool kits containing display



MARY PORTAS



► wire, a glue gun, hammer, nails and double-sided tape, ready to fix a product into place at the arching of an eyebrow. When everything was ready the dressing teams would head off into the store to install the displays.

As people worked, I heard them chatting about what clubs and bars they'd been to, what theatre and exhibitions they'd seen and which clothes they were saving up to buy. It was a world of fashion, music and experimentation.

"I swear I'm going to have that Loewe belt if it kills me," a dresser would sigh. "I've not eaten for days. But I've lost an inch off my waist and saved myself three quid."

As I stared at the huge store-front windows at the end of the day, I suddenly glimpsed the possibility that Cassio might offer for the first time. Sitting in a lecture, I'd heard that Salvador Dalí had designed windows. So had Andy Warhol. Now I understood why. These windows were art, drama, a fantasy landscape where anything could be played out, a performance. They were a stage, and through them the audience of passers-by were transported just as they were when they watched a play. My love of drama had found a new outlet.

Suddenly the final year at Cassio didn't seem like a prison sentence any more as I worked in the studio making cups of tea, sweeping the floors and occasionally getting out a glue gun to stick something together. If I could work somewhere like this – a place where dreams were played out in the windows, rather than sticking a T-shirt on a mannequin at Chelsea Girl – I wanted to do it. But while I was desperate for a chance to put some of the ideas I had into practice, I didn't get a chance to go near a display until my final day.

"I've got you an accessory case by door number five," Duncan the redhead says, as he walks up to me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you've been chirping like a budgie ever since you got here so let's see what you can do on your own, shall we?"

"But what do you want in it?"

"Anything you like."

We walk up the staff stairs and onto the ground floor where we stop in front of a two-foot-wide glass display case close to one of the back doors.

"Everyone who parks in Harriet Walk or Cadogan Place walks in here and past this case so don't mess it up," Duncan says. "Any problems, I'll be up on the first floor. I'll come and find you in an hour."

"But what do I do?"

"It's simple, darling. Make it sing!"

With a wink, he turns on his heel and leaves me staring at the accessory department.

There are scarves and belts, wallets and jewellery, small leather goods, fountain pens and fragrances. Walking around the floor, I peer into glass-topped counters as I wonder what to put in my case. A pile of colourful silk scarves catches my eye. They remind me of the silk ties that I loved as a kid when I visited Austin Reed with Dad. One in particular stands out: orange, yellow and red. I pick it

up and feel it slip between my fingers. The softest silk. The label says 'Hermès'.

"Can I sign this one out, please?" I say to a sales assistant standing behind the counter. "I'm doing the display case by door five."

She purses her lips as she looks at me. "We're trying to push the Chopard," she replies. "Can't you use one of those?"

For a moment, I almost falter. But already a picture is forming in my mind. "Sorry, but I need that one."

With a sigh, she hands it to me and I fill out a chit for her to sign. A clutch bag in conker brown crocodile and a red Yves Saint Laurent lipstick are soon added to my pile. After walking down to the studio and attaching the chits to the notice-board listing what product has been signed out by whom, I get myself a tool belt and cut some pieces of yellow felt. With shaking legs, I walk back upstairs, open the case, and line the bottom with the felt, gluing it in place.

Then I take the display wire out of my tool belt.

Wiring fabric is one of the most important skills that a visual merchandiser can have. It sounds simple enough: just thread a hair thin wire along a seam and then mould it into whatever shape you want the fabric to follow. But while anyone can stick wire into a hem and make do, only the really talented can wire a product so delicately, so precisely, that the colour, pile and cut become three-dimensional as the fabric takes on a life of its own.

Unrolling the wire, I carefully start to thread it into the seam of the scarf. If I mess this up, I will never be able to set foot in this shop again. With shaking hands, I place the crocodile clutch half open at the back of the case and gently put the unwired side of the scarf into it. Then I arrange the wired section so that it cascades out of the clutch like snakes slithering across the bottom of the case. The lipstick stands livid red in the front right corner. A calfskin wallet is laid beside it. I stand back and wait for Duncan. I want him to think of a sunrise, see the scarf streaming out of the bag as the first rays.

Duncan stops six feet from the box and narrows his gaze. Then he walks up to the case, bends down and stares again. "It's good," he says, with a smile. "The scarf needs a bit of work but you've got some talent, haven't you, darling?"

"You like it?"

"Yes. I do. Now let's nip out and see what Harrods has done today with those shithole windows of hers, shall we?"

Extract from *Shop Girl* by Mary Portas, published by Doubleday in hardback at £16.99.

Readers can buy a copy of *Shop Girl* for the special price of £14.99 including free UK P&P. To order please call 01206 255 800 and quote ref: PORTAS

"It was a world of fashion, music and experimentation"