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The Music Shop

Written by Rachel Joyce

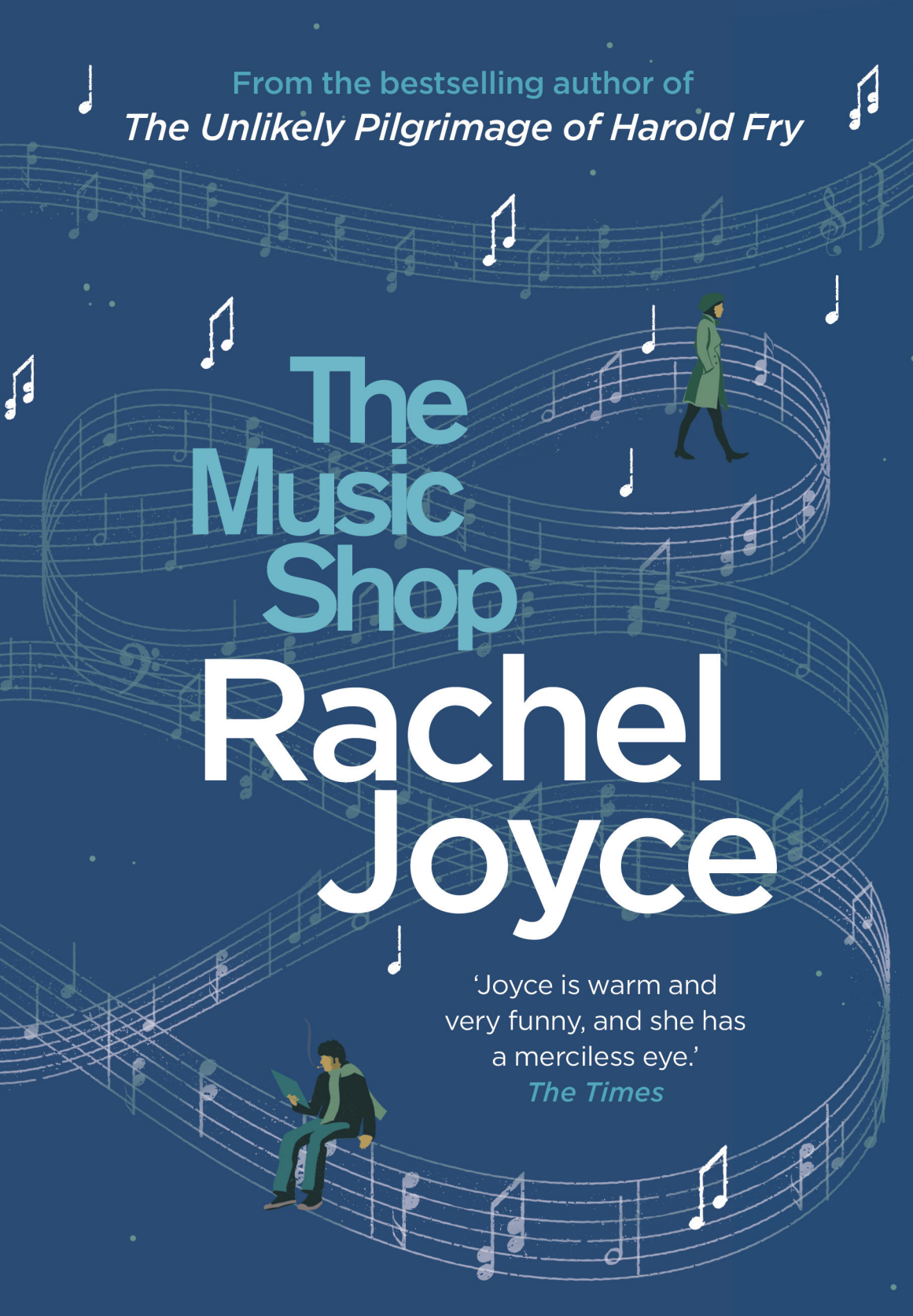
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From the bestselling author of

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry



The Music Shop

Rachel Joyce

'Joyce is warm and very funny, and she has a merciless eye.'

The Times

THE MUSIC SHOP

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THERE WAS ONCE a music shop.

From the outside it looked like any shop, in any backstreet. It had no name above the door. No record display in the window. There was just a homemade poster stuck to the glass. *For the music you need!!! Everyone welcome!! We only sell VINYL! If closed, please telephone* – though after that it was anyone's guess because, along with more happy exclamation marks, the only legible numbers were an 8 that could well be a 3, and two other things that might be triangles.

Inside, the shop was cram-packed. Boxes everywhere, stocked with every kind of record in every speed, size and colour, and not one of them labelled. An old counter stood to the right of the door and, at the back, two listening booths towered either side of a turntable; more like bedroom furniture than regular booths. Behind the turntable sat the owner, Frank, a gentle bear of a man, smoking and playing records. His shop was often open into the night – just as it was often closed into the morning – music playing, coloured lamps waltzing, all sorts of people searching for records.

Classical, rock, jazz, blues, heavy metal, punk. As long as it was on

vinyl, there were no taboos. And if you told Frank the kind of thing you wanted, or simply how you felt that day, he had the right track in minutes. It was a knack he had. A gift. He knew what people needed even when they didn't know it themselves.

'Now why not give this a try?' he'd say, shoving back his wild, brown hair. 'I've got a *feeling*. I just think it will work—'

There was a music shop.

SIDE A: JANUARY 1988

1

The man who only liked Chopin

FRANK SAT SMOKING behind his turntable, same as always, watching the window. Mid-afternoon, and it was almost dark out there. The day had hardly been a day at all. A drop in temperature had brought the beginnings of a frost and Unity Street glittered beneath the street lights. The air had a kind of blue feel.

The other four shops on the parade were already closed but he had put on the lava lamps and the electric fire. At the counter, Maud the tattooist stood flicking through fanzines while Father Anthony made an origami flower. Saturday Kit had collected all the Emmylou Harris and was trying to arrange them in alphabetical order without Frank noticing.

'I had no customers again,' said Maud, very loud. Even though Frank was at the back of the shop and she was at the front, there was technically no need to shout. The shops on Unity Street were only the size of a front room. 'Are you listening?'

'I'm listening.'

'You don't look like you're listening.'

Frank took off his headphones. Smiled. He felt laugh lines spring

all over his face and his eyes crinkled at the corners. 'See? I'm always listening.'

Maud made a noise like '*Ham*.' Then she said, 'One man called in, but it wasn't for a tattoo. He just wanted directions to the new precinct.'

Father Anthony said he'd sold a paperweight in his gift shop. Also, a leather bookmark with the Lord's Prayer stamped on it. He seemed more than happy about that.

'If it stays like this, I'll be closed by summer.'

'You won't, Maud. You'll be fine.' They had this conversation all the time. She said how awful things were, and Frank said they weren't, Maud, they weren't. You two are like a stuck record, Kit told them, which might have been funny except that he said it every night, and besides, they weren't a couple. Frank was very much a single man.

'Do you know how many funerals the undertakers have had?'

'No, Maud.'

'*Two*. Two since Christmas. What's wrong with people?'

'Maybe they're not dying,' suggested Kit.

'Of course they're dying. People don't come here any more. All they want is that crap on the High Street.'

Only last month the florist had gone. Her empty shop stood on one end of the parade like a bad tooth and a few nights ago, the baker's window – he was at the other end – had been defaced with slogans. Frank had fetched a bucket of soapy water but it took all morning to wash them off.

'There have always been shops on Unity Street,' said Father Anthony. 'We're a community. We belong here.'

Saturday Kit passed with a box of new 45-inch singles, narrowly

missing a lava lamp. He seemed to have abandoned Emmylou Harris. 'We had another shoplifter today,' he said, apropos of not very much at all. 'First he flipped because we had no CDs. Then he asked to look at a record and made a run for it.'

'What was it this time?'

'Genesis. *Invisible Touch*.'

'What did you do, Frank?'

'Oh he did the usual,' said Kit.

Yes, Frank had done the sort of thing he always did. He'd grabbed his old suede jacket and loped after the young man until he caught him at the bus stop. (What kind of thief waited for the number 11?) He'd said, between deep breaths, that he would call the police unless the lad came back and tried something new in the listening booth. He could keep the Genesis record if he wanted the thing so much, though it broke Frank's heart that he was nicking the wrong one – their early stuff was tons better. He could have the album for nothing, and even the sleeve; 'so long as you try "Fingal's Cave". If you like Genesis, trust me. You'll love Mendelssohn.'

'I wish you'd think about selling the new CDs,' said Father Anthony.

'Are you joking?' laughed Kit. 'He'd rather die than sell CDs.'

Then the door opened and *ding-dong*; a new customer. Frank felt a ping of excitement.

A tidy, middle-aged man followed the Persian runner that led all the way to the turntable. Everything about this man seemed ordinary – his coat, his hair, even his ears – as if he had been deliberately assembled so that no one would look at him twice. Head bowed, he crept past the counter to his right, where Maud stood with Father Anthony and Kit, and behind them all the records stored in cardboard master bags.

He passed the old wooden shelving to his left, the door that led up to Frank's flat, the central table, and all the plastic crates piled with surplus stock. Not even a sideways glance at the patchwork of album sleeves and homemade posters thumbtacked by Kit all over the walls. At the turntable, he stopped and pulled out a handkerchief.

Frank folded his big arms and leant forward. 'Are you all right?' he asked, in his boom of a voice. 'How can I help you today?'

'The thing is, you see, I only like Chopin.'

Frank remembered now. This man had come in a few months ago. He had been looking for something to calm his nerves before his wedding.

'You bought the *Nocturnes*,' he said.

The man wriggled his mouth. He didn't seem used to the idea that anyone would remember him. 'I've got myself in another spot of difficulty. I wondered if you might – find something else for me?' He had missed a patch on his chin when he was shaving. There was something lonesome about it, that scratchy patch of stubble, all on its own.

So Frank smiled because he always smiled when a customer asked for help. He asked the same questions he always asked. Did the man know what he was looking for? (Yes. Chopin.) Had he heard anything else that he liked? (Yes. Chopin.) Could he hum it? (No. He didn't think he could.)

The man shot a look over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening but they weren't. Over the years, they'd seen everything in the music shop. There were the regular customers, of course, who came to find new records, but often people wanted something more. Frank had helped them through illness, grief, loss of confidence and jobs, as well

as the more daily things like football results and the weather. Not that he knew about all those things but really it was a matter of listening, and he had endless patience. As a boy, he could stand for hours with a piece of bread in his hand, hoping for a bird.

But the man was gazing at Frank. He was waiting.

'You just want me to find you the right record? You don't know what, but so long as it's Chopin, you'll be OK?'

'Yes, yes,' said the man. That was it exactly.

So what did he need? Frank pushed away his fringe – it flopped straight back, but there it was, the thing had a life of its own – he cupped his chin in his hands and he listened as if he were trying to find a radio signal in the ether. Something beautiful? Something slow? He sat very still.

But when it came, it was such a blast, it took Frank's breath away. Of course. What this man needed wasn't Chopin. It wasn't even a nocturne. What he needed was—

'Wait!' Frank was already on his feet.

He lumbered around the shop, tugging out album sleeves, skirting past Kit, and ducking his head to dodge a light fitting. He just needed to find the right match for the music he had heard from the man who only liked Chopin. Piano, yes. He could hear piano. But the man needed something else as well. Something that was both tender and huge. Where would Frank find that? Beethoven? No, that would be too much. Beethoven might just floor a man like this one. What he needed was a good friend.

'Can I help you, Frank?' asked Kit. Actually he said 'Ca' I hel'?' because his eighteen-year-old mouth was full of chocolate biscuit. Kit wasn't simple or even backward, as people sometimes suggested, he

was just gauche and wildly over-enthusiastic, raised in a small suburban house by a mother with dementia and a father who mainly watched television. Frank had grown fond of Kit in the last few years, in the way that he had once cared for his broken van and his mother's record player. He found that if you treated him like a young terrier, sending him out for regular walks and occupying him with easy tasks, he was less liable to cause serious damage.

But what was the music he was looking for? What was it?

Frank wanted a song that would arrive like a little raft and carry this man safely home.

Piano. Yes. Brass? That could work. A voice? Maybe. Something powerful and passionate that could sound both complicated and yet so simple it was obvious—

That was it. He got it. He knew what the man needed. He swung behind the counter and pulled out the right record. But when he rushed back to his turntable, mumbling, 'Side two, track five. This is it. Yes, this is the one!' the man gave a sigh that was almost a sob it was so desperate.

'No, no. Who's this? Aretha Franklin?'

'"Oh No Not My Baby". This is it. This is the song.'

'But I told you. I want Chopin. Pop isn't going to help.'

'Aretha is *soul*. You can't argue with Aretha.'

'*Spirit in the Dark*? No, no. I don't want this record. It's not what I came for.'

Frank looked down from his great height, while the man twisted and twisted his handkerchief. 'I know it's not what you want, but trust me, today it's what you need. What have you got to lose?'

The man sent one last look in the direction of the door. Father Anthony gave a sympathetic shrug, as if to say, *Why not? We've all*

been there. 'Go on, then,' said the man who only liked Chopin.

Kit sprang forward and led him to a listening booth, not exactly holding his hand, but leading the way with outstretched arms as if parts of the man were in danger of dropping off at any moment. Light bloomed from the lava lamps in shifting patterns of pink and apple-green and gold. The booths were nothing like the ones in Woolworths – those were more like standing up in a hairdryer. Their headphones were so greasy, Maud said, you had to shower afterwards. No, these booths Frank had made himself from a pair of matching Victorian wardrobes of incredible magnitude he had spotted on a skip. He had sawn off the feet, removed the hanging rails and sets of drawers, and drilled small holes to connect each one with cable to his turntable. Frank had found two armchairs, small enough to fit inside, but comfortable. He had even polished the wood until it gleamed like black gloss paint, revealing a delicate inlay in the doors of mother-of-pearl birds and flowers. The booths were beautiful when you really looked.

The man stepped in and made a sideways shuffle – there was very little space; he was being asked to sit in a piece of bedroom furniture, after all – and took his place. Frank helped with the headphones and shut the door.

'Are you all right in there?'

'This won't work,' the man called back. 'I only like Chopin.'

At his turntable, Frank eased the record from its sleeve and lifted the stylus. *Tick, tick* went the needle, riding the grooves. He flicked the speaker switch so that the music would play through the whole shop. *Tick, tick—*

Vinyl had a life of its own. All you could do was wait.

2

‘Oh No Not My Baby’

Tick, tick. It was dark inside the booth, with a hushed feeling, like hiding in a cupboard. The silence fizzed.

Everyone had warned him. Be careful, they’d said. He just wouldn’t listen. So he asked her to marry him and he couldn’t believe his luck when she said yes – her so beautiful, him so ordinary. Then he took her a bottle of champagne after the wedding breakfast, and there she was, upside down in the honeymoon suite. At first he couldn’t work it out. He had to take a really good look. He saw a dress like a sticky meringue with four legs poking out, two with black socks, one with a garter. And then he realized. It was his new wife and his best man. He left the bottle on the floor, along with two glasses, and shut the door.

He couldn’t get that picture out of his head. He played Chopin, he took pills from the doctor, and none of it made a difference. He stopped going out; he cried at the drop of a hat. He felt so bad he called in sick at work.

Tick, tick—

The song started. A twang of guitar, a blast of horns, a chirruping ‘sweet-sweet-ba-by’ and then a bam-bam-bam-bam from percussion.

What was Frank thinking? This wasn't the music he needed. He went to pull off the headphones—

'*When ma friends tol' me you had someone noo*,' began the singer, this Aretha, her voice clear and steady, '*I didn' believe a single word was true*.'

It was like meeting a stranger in the dark, saying to them, 'You'll never guess what?' and the stranger saying, 'Hey but that's exactly how it is for me.'

He stopped thinking about his wife and his sadness and he listened to Aretha as if she were a voice inside his head.

She told him her story – something like this. Everyone said her man was a cheat; even her own mother said it. But Aretha wouldn't believe them. He was not like those other BOYS who lead you ON. Who tell you LIES. 'Oh-oh no not my baby!' She started the song calmly enough but by the time she got to the chorus she was practically screaming the words. Her voice was a little boat and the music was a Japanese wave, but Aretha kept riding it, up and down. It was downright pig-headed, the way she kept believing in him. There were strings, the bobble of the guitar, a horn riff, percussion, all telling her she was wrong – ('*Wohhh!*' shrilled the backing vocals, like a Greek chorus of girlfriends) – but no, she hung on tight. Her voice pulled the words this way and that, soaring up over the top and then scooping right down low. Aretha knew. She knew how desperate it felt, to love a cheat. How lonely.

He sat very, very still. And he listened.

3

‘It’s A Kind Of Magic’

Frank shook a cigarette from the packet and as he smoked, he watched the door of the booth. He hoped he wasn’t wrong about this song. Sometimes all that people needed was to know they were not alone. Other times it was more a question of keeping them in touch with their feelings until they wore them out – people clung to what was familiar, even when it was painful.

‘The thing about vinyl,’ his mother used to say, ‘is that you have to look after it.’ He could picture Peg now, in their white house by the sea, dressed in a turban and kimono as she played him Bach or Beethoven or whatever else she’d had delivered. Peg told stories about records, little things to help him listen, and she spoke about composers like lovers. She wore massive sunglasses even when it was raining, actually even when it was pitch black, and her arms were looped with so many bangles she jingled when she laughed. She had no interest in normal mothery things. Jam sandwiches, for instance, cut into triangles. A nice casserole for his supper or cherry linctus when he had a cough. If he showed her a shell, or a ribbon of seaweed, she tended to lob it straight back at the sea, and whenever she drove the old Rover into town it

was Frank who had to remind her about the handbrake. (She had an unfortunate habit of rolling forward.) Yes; being a regular mother was anathema to Peg but when it came to vinyl, she displayed a care that verged on sacred. And she could talk music for hours.

The song began to fade. The door of the booth gave a click and opened. Off went those mother-of-pearl birds, shaking their wings and taking flight.

The man who liked Chopin didn't come out. He stood at the door, looking candlewax-white and a bit sick.

'Well?' said Frank. 'How was it?'

'Well?' Over at the counter, Maud, Father Anthony and Saturday Kit were all waiting too. Kit jumped first on one leg and then on the other. Father Anthony had lifted his glasses on top of his head and wore them like a crown. Maud frowned.

The man who only liked Chopin began to laugh. 'Wow, that was something. How did you know I needed Aretha? How did you *do* that, Frank?'

'Do what? I just played you a good song.'

'Did Aretha Franklin make any more records?'

Now it was Frank's turn to laugh. 'She did actually. You're in luck. She made a lot. She really liked singing.'

He played the whole record, side one and then side two. As he listened, Frank smoked and danced in the cramped space behind his turntable, rolling his shoulders and swinging his hips – watching him, even Maud began to sway – while Kit did something that was possibly the funky chicken, but could equally be to do with his new shoes hurting his feet. It was Aretha at her best. Everyone should own a copy of *Spirit in the Dark*.

Afterwards Kit made cups of tea and Frank listened at his turntable while the man told him more about his wife. How he couldn't so much as touch her after the wedding. How she'd moved out a month ago to live with his best man. It was a relief, he said, just to tell someone all this. Frank nodded as he listened and reassured the man, over and over, that he could come to the shop whenever he needed. 'Just bang on the door if I'm not open. It doesn't matter what time it is. I'm always here. You don't need to be on your own.'

They were small things really, and pretty obvious ones, but the man smiled as if Frank had given him a brand new heart.

'Have *you* ever been in a mess like this?' he asked. 'Have you ever been in love?'

Frank laughed. 'I'm done with all that. My shop is all I need.'

'These days he hardly leaves,' piped up Father Anthony.

'Could I listen to my song again?'

'Of course you can listen again.'

The man shut himself back in the booth and Frank reset the needle on the vinyl. '*When ma friends tol' me you had someone noo . . .*'. His gaze drifted to the window.

So empty and quiet out there. Nothing coming, nothing going, just the thin blue light, the cold. Frank could not play music, he could not read a score, he had no practical knowledge whatsoever, but when he sat in front of a customer and truly listened, he heard a kind of song. He wasn't talking a full-blown symphony. It would be a few notes; at the most, a strain. And it didn't happen all the time, only when he let go of being Frank and inhabited a space that was more in the middle. It had been this way ever since he could remember. 'Intuition,' Father Anthony called it. 'Weird shit': that was Maud.

So what did it matter if he had no one in particular in his life? He was happy alone. He lit up another smoke.

And then he saw her. She was looking straight at him.