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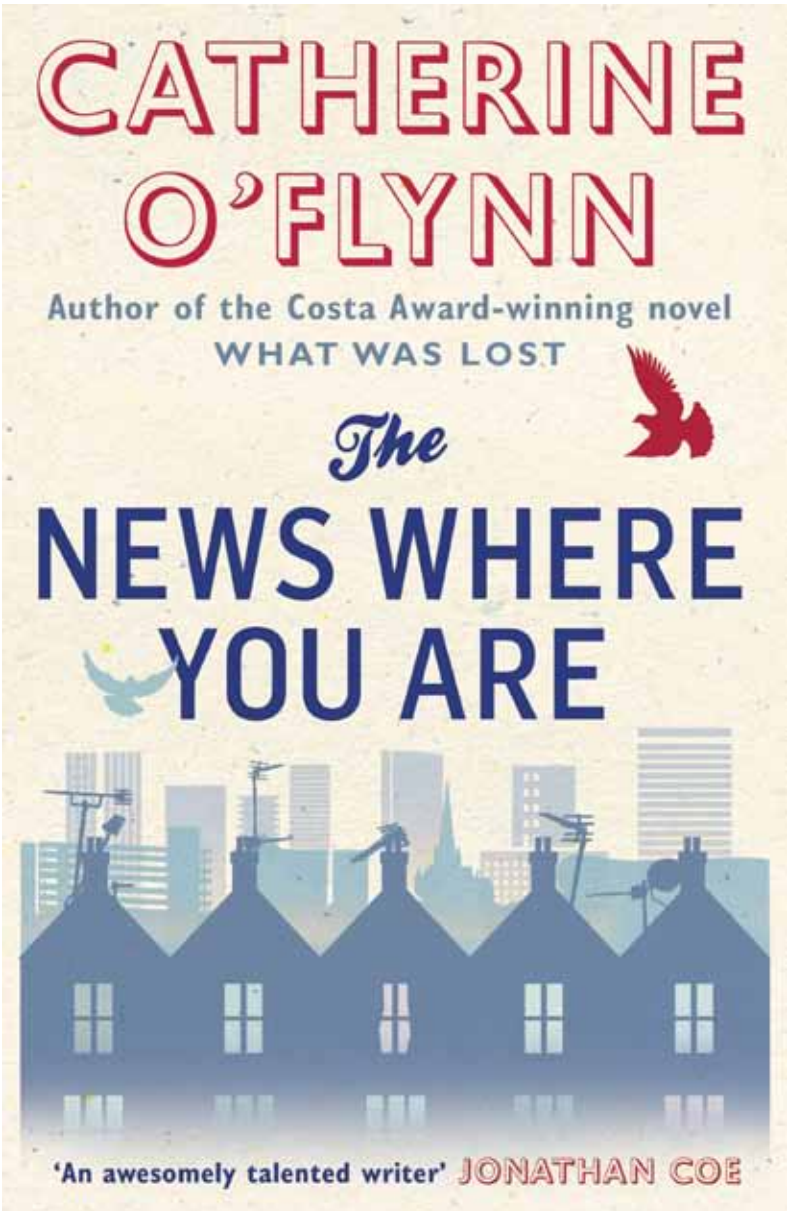
The News Where You Are

Written by Catherine O'Flynn

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by
Catherine O'Flynn

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Six months later

Frank's daughter sat in the front passenger seat humming the same tune over and over. The notes spiralled upwards and then abruptly plummeted, before starting the ascent again. Frank drove towards the city.

'What's the tune, Mo?' asked Frank.

'It's a song by The Beatles. It's a man asking questions about when he gets old.'

'What? "When I'm Sixty-Four"?'

'Yeah. That's it . . . Dad, do you want to know something?'

'Erm, yes, please.'

'When I'm sixty-four, I'll be eight times older than I am now. Eight times eight is sixty-four.'

'That's true.'

She looked out of the window. 'Eight hundred per cent!' She shook her head in amazement and began to hum again.

Frank frowned. 'But "When I'm Sixty-Four" doesn't sound anything like that.'

Mo beamed. 'I know! I invented a new tune. It's better.'

'Oh, okay.' Frank paused. 'It's very different to the original. Are the words the same?'

'I don't know, I'm just humming.'

'I know, but in your head are the words the same?'

'No. They're better too. He wants to know will there be robots, and will his cat be able to talk and will his car fly.'

'It's quite a strange tune.'

'It's how he thinks music will sound when he's old.'

'Oh, I see, future music. That explains it.'

Mo hummed another few bars and then, to Frank's relief, stopped.

'Dad?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think Gran ever listens to music?'

'Not future music. I don't think so.'

'No. I mean any music.'

'Yes, I'm sure she does sometimes. She has a radio in her room.'

'I know, but it's all covered in dust. She should listen to music. I think it would make her less sad. She could listen to stuff she remembered when she was young.'

Frank said nothing.

'Maybe I could take her some old music and she could listen to it on my headphones.'

Frank glanced at Mo. 'Sometimes old music makes people sad. It reminds them of the past and things that have gone.'

'Oh,' said Mo.

Frank reached across and squeezed her hand. Mo spent a lot of time trying to think of ways to make his mother less unhappy. It was a project for her.

'Are we going a different way to the supermarket?'

'I want to show you something first.'

'Okay.'

Frank put the radio on and they listened to a comedy programme. Mo laughed when Frank laughed.

He parked on a meter in a back street and then walked with Mo down to the busy ring road. A pedestrian bridge spanned the six lanes of traffic and Mo and Frank climbed the zig-zagging concrete steps to the top. Halfway across they stopped. Frank bent down towards Mo so she could hear him above the roar of the traffic. Her hair blew into his face.

'Remember I told you about my dad.'

'That he had a dog!' said Mo excitedly.

'Yeah, that's right. He had a dog when he was a boy. But do you remember what I said my dad's job was?'

'Yes. He was an architect. He made buildings.'

'Can you see that block over there? The tall one with the dark glass.'

'Yeah. I can see it.'

'That's called Worcester House. My dad designed that building.'

'Did he live in it?'

'No, he didn't live in it. We lived in a house. He made this for people to work in.'

'How many floors has it got?'

'Twenty.'

'Are there escalators?'

'No, there are two lifts.'

'Can we go up in them?'

'No, I'm sorry. We can't go in the building now.'

'Can we go and look at it?'

'That's where we're going.'

Mo ran across the rest of the bridge and then waited for Frank to catch up. The building was a little further away than it seemed from the bridge, tucked amidst a cluster of other blocks, converted townhouses and car parks. Worcester House was a classic mid-period Douglas H. Allcroft and Partners creation. Built in 1971 it was an uncompromising, thuggish-looking block, clad in precast concrete panels and devoid of all exterior decoration. Despite its height it appeared squat and defensive, occupying a large plot on the corner of Carlton Street and Newman Row, glowering down on the few Georgian blocks still remaining in the centre.

As they drew closer to it at street level, Mo noticed the white boards all around the outside of the building:

'Why are the boards there, Dad?'

'They're there to protect people when they demolish the building.'

Mo stopped walking. 'They're demolishing it?'

Frank nodded. 'That's why I brought you today; it'll be gone soon.'

'But why are they knocking it down? Is it broken?'

'No, it's not broken; it's fine. It's just . . . they don't need it any more.'

'But, Dad, loads of people could work here. Or they could use it to put homeless people in – that'd be better than sleeping on the streets. They could sleep under desks and go up and down in the lifts.'

'They want to build new homes in the city now – apartments for the people who work here – and this building isn't right for homes. Dad didn't build it for that,

and so they say it has to be taken down and started again.'

Mo thought for a while. 'Does that happen to all buildings? Do they all get knocked down?'

'Some stay for a long time. Like Aston Hall. But lots don't. It's a bit like clothes. You know, you wouldn't wear the clothes Mom and I used to wear – they'd seem really uncool to you – and sometimes that happens with buildings. People just don't like them any more; they aren't fashionable.'

Frank realized that unfashionable wasn't quite adequate. People did not feel about his father's buildings the way they felt about marble-washed denim or skipants. They might smile ruefully and shake their heads about their own lapses in taste, but not those imposed on their city. Aside from the family home he built in Edgbaston, only two of the eight buildings his father had created in the city remained. In a few weeks there would be only one.

Mo was squinting at the building, counting the windows. When she'd finished, she turned back to Frank. 'But, Dad, sometimes things come back into fashion. Like Mom always says the clothes in the shops now are the same as twenty years ago. Maybe if they waited this building would be in fashion again.'

Frank nodded. 'Maybe. People don't always agree, though. A few of us thought it should be saved, but others didn't and . . . well, they won in the end.'

'I don't think this building is uncool.'

Frank got out his camera. 'Anyway, I want to take a photo of you and the building behind you. So however many different buildings come and go you'll always know

this building was here, and that you and I stood on this spot and talked about it one morning.'

Mo wouldn't smile for the photo. She said it was for when she was grown-up and serious. Afterwards she said: 'Dad, are you sad that it's going to be demolished?'

Frank looked up at the top floor of the building and remembered looking out from there as a boy. 'Yes, I am.'

Mo held his hand. She looked at the other buildings in the street. Worcester House was the only one surrounded by boards. 'Me too.'

2

Two days later Frank listened to the countdown on his earpiece, took a swig of water and stowed the bottle under the desk. In the last few seconds his expression became attentive with the hint of a frown. He spoke on cue.

'Now on to a remarkable story of survival. Sixty-five-year-old Alan Purkis had something of a shock when he discovered a thirty-foot-deep hole had opened up in his back garden. The retired electrician from Droitwich was only saved from a plunge into the abyss by the timely arrival of a cuckoo.' Head inclined to one side, his quizzical expression segued into a reassuring smile: 'Scott Padstow gets the full story for us.'

The package ran. Frank had a headache and thought he should have eaten something before they went live. He thought of the Mars bar that had sat on his desk all afternoon and was filled with sharp longing and regret. He turned and looked at Julia's exposed arm and could imagine with terrible clarity ripping into it with his teeth. When he looked up, she was staring at him. He gave a little shake of his head as if coming out of some private reverie. He looked, he hoped, as if his thoughts had been on something distant and intangible or, failing that, on

anything other than eating her flesh. He gave a slight sickly smile. Julia was still in a foul mood.

'Great story. News that almost happens. A man doesn't fall down a hole.'

The producer's voice sounded in their earpieces. 'Come on, Joolz, can we get over this? The man almost falling isn't the story – it's the hole. Why is it there? Is it going to widen and open up in other gardens, maybe swallow entire houses? I think that is of some interest to people in our region.'

'Right – but that's not really what the link focused on, is it? It bills it as a "remarkable story of survival", and what about the cuckoo? Where's the news value in that?'

Another voice cut in: 'Back with you, Julia, in five, four, three, two . . .'

Julia introduced an item about a pub in Wolverhampton whose steak and kidney pies were doing well in a national competition.

Frank thought that a pie might be an option. Beef and Guinness. He knew he didn't have one at home, so that'd mean a trip to Tesco, and that was too depressing a prospect. He wished, not for the first time, that he had a local pub that served decent food. He thought of the Rose and Crown whose menu consisted of three types of frozen pizza – brittle seven-inch singles of misery that resisted any attempts at cutting. They came topped with a mysterious molten substance that clung to the roof of the mouth and burned straight through. Frank didn't expect much from food, but he thought it shouldn't injure you.

The story about pies was coming to a close. Frank read the next link just ahead of his cue and braced himself. He

tried too late and too half-heartedly to apply a mischievous smile and instead achieved only a half-cocked imbecile grin.

'Reaching the national finals of that competition is *pie* no means a small achievement!' He turned and beamed at Julia who looked back at him with bare-faced contempt. His grin faded. 'But seriously, well done to the Bull's Head there and good luck on the night.'

After the bulletin he apologized to Julia. 'You know I don't want to do the jokes.'

'Well, I wish you fucking wouldn't, then. There is no humour there, Frank; they are not recognizable as jokes. The only way I can tell that's what they're supposed to be is because otherwise what you've just said makes absolutely no sense. What the hell am I supposed to do? If I laugh, I look as if I'm mentally ill. If I don't laugh, I look as if I hate you.'

'Maybe just smile, pityingly. The viewers would understand that.'

'It's not easy to smile, Frank; believe me, it's not easy.'

'Try and imagine it's an illness. That's what I do.'

Julia shook her head as she got her coat. 'See you tomorrow, Frank.'

The door closed behind her and Frank was left wondering what to do for the evening. His hunger had mysteriously evaporated and he didn't feel like going straight home. That morning Andrea had taken Mo to visit her aunt in Bradford and they wouldn't be back till the next day. He found the house just about bearable when his family were there; with them away he avoided it as much as he could.

Sometimes he'd grab a drink with the crew, but tonight the thought of being that particular version of himself, of talking and listening and laughing in the right places, seemed too much effort.

He got in his car and headed for the Queensway. The car seemed to guide itself – gliding up over flyovers and swooping down into underpasses. The lights of the tunnels passed through his windscreen and across his face. Familiar glimpses of the city slid by and as they did stray names and faces associated with them from old news stories combined with memories from his own past. He was at his most susceptible to nostalgia and melancholy when he was tired.

The car pulled in at a garage and for a moment Frank had no idea why he was there, until he saw the buckets of flowers and realized that tonight he would pay his respects. He was too weary to resist.

The young man at the till recognized him and Frank switched his face on.

'I seen you on the telly, man.'

'Right, yes, that's me.'

'What's that other one? The babe. Julie, is it? She fit, mate. Flowers for her, are they?'

'These? No, actually they're for someone else.'

'Ahhh – you bein' a bad boy? Sniffin' up some other telly lady?'

'Yes, that's right. These are for Esther Rantzen.'

'You tell that Julie, if she's getting lonely, to come down

here and ask for J and I'll show her a sexy time. Tell her I know what she likes.'

'Well, I'll certainly pass that on J. She's a busy woman, but you never know.'

As he walked away, Frank heard the assistant say to his colleague: 'She could do a lot better than him, man.' Frank smiled, knowing how much that would amuse Andrea when he told her.

He drove out of the city on the Expressway and was surprised to find he remembered the way, despite the passing of time. The street was lined with parked cars on both sides, but he managed to find a space within sight of the house. It had changed since the first time he'd seen it. Then paint had peeled from the woodwork and the privet hedge in the front garden had expanded in all directions, covering the bay window and half the pavement. He didn't know how many people had come and gone in the intervening years. The windows were UPVC now, the front garden gone altogether and replaced by some slabs providing not quite enough space for a 4x4, which was wedged in at an angle, jutting out onto the pavement.

Frank was sure that whoever lived there now would know nothing about William Grendon. No one had noticed him when he lived and no one had noticed him when he died. The single thing that had brought his existence to the notice of the wider world was the smell of his decomposing body. He was discovered sitting upright in a high-backed chair with a twenty-six-day-old newspaper on his lap. Frank remembered there was no photo of William to show on the bulletin, so instead he

had delivered the story in front of an image of the outside of the house.

He pulled the flowers from the cellophane and then carried them loose in his hand to the front of the house. He looked at the houses on either side, the blue light of a television flickered through the gaps in the curtain of one. He dropped the flowers on the slabs.

Frank stood and thought of William Grendon. Something invisible had disappeared, but it left a mark. There was always a mark.

3

On Saturday he drove out to Evergreen. His mother sat in her room, a book on her lap, the same one she'd been reading for a year. She looked at Frank with a pained expression. 'Is it still sweltering out there?'

'No, Mom, it's October; it's cold.'

'I can't bear it. It suffocates me. I can't breathe. How do people live in those places like Spain? Why do people go to those places? Sweating on the beaches, roasting like chickens in an oven. I'd die. I'd die.'

'Do you want me to open the window?'

'We need some rain. God, anything to freshen the air. What I'd give for a downpour now.'

'Mom, it *is* raining. Look out of the window.'

Maureen moved her head slowly and looked out. 'Oh,' she said. 'Thank God.' Then after a pause: 'It makes my joints ache so.'

'What does?'

'The rain.'

Frank pulled up a chair beside her. 'So what have you been up to this week?'

'Sitting here, dying slowly. Too slowly.' Frank exhaled and his mother looked at him. 'Oh, I know it must be very boring for you to have to come and visit me, endlessly

clinging on. I've told you before, forget about me, leave me here, live your life. I'm dead already.'

Frank ignored this and looked over towards the window. 'They could do with someone clearing up the leaves out in the grounds. It all looks a bit grotty out there at the moment. Do the gardener and his mate not come out so much now?'

She shrugged. 'Maybe they leave them there deliberately. Maybe they think that dead leaves are exactly what we should be contemplating as we sit in here waiting to fall off the branch.'

'Mom . . .'

'You see how you fare. You'll be old one day. You see how you cope when all your friends are dead, and your senses are gone.'

'Your senses aren't gone, Mom. You're in excellent health . . .'

'Ha. That's a joke.'

'. . . You're in much better shape – physically and mentally – than most of the other people here, but you lock yourself away in your room. You're seventy-two, Mom – that's nothing. They sit and talk in the lounge, they listen to music, they walk in the garden.'

'"Why aren't they screaming?" Frank, "Why aren't they screaming?" Do you know who wrote that?'

'Larkin. You quote it every time.'

'Well, I'm an old fool too,' she snapped, 'and I forget.'

They fell silent for a while.

'Have you read this one?' said Maureen, indicating the book on her lap.

'No, no, I haven't.'

'Oh, it's terribly involved and clever. I can't wait to get to the end. It's about a man who discovers that he had an older brother that his parents never told him about and he tries to find this brother and it turns out that he's a . . . a . . . oh, blast . . . What do you call it?'

'A palaeontologist.'

'Exactly! I thought you said you hadn't read it.'

Frank smiled at her. 'I haven't. It was just a lucky guess.'

'Remarkable, of all the things he could have been.'

They fell silent again.

'Andrea sends her love. She's had to go on a course today.'

'Oh, Andrea, she was always one for the books, wasn't she. Is she still a great reader? I remember some marvellous conversations we've had about books. She'd love this one.'

'Well, you can tell her about it on Wednesday when she comes,' said Frank, knowing that Andrea had not only read the book, but had given her copy to his mother and listened to the same description of the first chapter each time she visited. The flowered bookmark she had given along with the book remained stranded at the same page in the book week on week.

Maureen looked towards the window. 'The rain should cool things down. It's good for the gardens.'

'It's October, Mom.'

'I know. I'm not a fool,' Maureen snapped. 'It's still needed, isn't it? We can't go all through the winter without rain, can we? We'd shrivel and die. Become withered husks.'

Frank didn't respond. His mother looked at him. 'I saw you on the television the other day. Something very sad.

A terribly sad story about a child waiting for an operation.'

He thought for a moment: 'Oh, Leanne Newman. Yes.'

'Will she get the operation in time?'

'I don't know, Mom.'

'I can't watch your programme – it's too sad. Always sick children, or horrible people hurting each other and dogs eating babies and young people losing their homes. It's a very upsetting programme. And that woman!'

'Which woman?'

'That wretched woman who sits next to you.'

'Julia?'

'I don't know how you bear to work with her. She smirks. She listens to those awful stories and then she smirks. She enjoys it. Pure evil.'

'Mom, she doesn't smirk. That's just her face. She's very professional.'

'Oh, she's a devil. I liked that other one.'

'Which one?'

'Oh, you know. The coloured lady. She was nice and cheerful. The programme never used to be sad when she was there. But that's just West Indians, isn't it? They're just lovely cheerful people. Beautiful singers as well.'

Frank drew in a deep breath and steadily exhaled.

'Your father had a lovely voice too.'

'I don't think I ever heard him sing.'

'He used to sing to me before we married. A lovely baritone. He'd sing "On the Street Where You Live". Poor Douglas. A beautiful voice. He used to sing for you too when you were very tiny. On long car journeys. Don't you remember? You'd cry out, "Monkey, Daddy, monkey," and he'd sing "Little Red Monkey". You loved it. You'd laugh

and clap your hands like the monkey in the song. You made us so happy. We were all so happy then.'

She was crying now. Frank held her hand. They looked out of the window together at the rain rolling down the glass.