

Good News Or Money

A stylized illustration of a young girl with blonde hair tied in a ponytail with a red bow. She is holding a black flip phone to her ear. The background is a complex collage of geometric shapes, including triangles and rectangles, in various colors like brown, blue, pink, and yellow. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century graphic design.

Patricia Ann McNair

Illustrated by Olga Kosheleva



FLYLEAF

*H*ello, is this someone with good news or money? No?
Goodbye!

Er...

*H*ello, is this someone with good news or money? No?
Goodbye!

Ha! Yeah, right. A *Thousand Clowns*. Jason Robards. Right. Ok, yeah. Hey. It's me. Surprise. Long time. I know.

So here's the thing. It's about Mom. Are you there? Are you listening? Can you hear me? It's about Mom, she asked me to call. I didn't want to, but she asked...

*H*ello, is this someone with good news or money? No?
Goodbye!

Goddamn machine. You wait a minute to try to collect your thoughts. It's about Mom, right? I got something to say.

Oh, wait. You probably think I'm calling about something bad. Oh, jeez. Wow. That's not...I mean...it's not bad. Nothing bad. No, hey. It's good. Ok, take two. Or whatever.

Hi, Dad? It's me. You know. Your daughter? The one you haven't seen in what, six years? Not since you moved up north—to the tundra or whatever? Well, the only one, I guess. Your only daughter. Maybe. As far as I know. Probably. Your only daughter, probably. Does that sound harsh? Sorry.

It's just...I've been thinking about things, you know? Things. Just things. All kinds of things...

*Hello, is this someone with good news or money? No?
Goodbye!*

Goddamnit! Are you sure you aren't there?

You always loved that movie, *A Thousand Clowns*. I remember. You made me watch it with you, what, a hundred times? Jason fucking Robards. That little kid who looked like a miniature man. Anyway. Mom wanted me to call you. She's got some news. So yeah, good news, I guess. Good news. But no money. Ha! That's a laugh, *me* telling *you* no money. When was the last time you sent us any money, Dad? Daddy-o? Remember when I used to call you that? I was little. Really little. Daddy's little girl you used to call me.

I'm seventeen now. But you know that. You should. You do, don't you? I'm seventeen.

Aw, shit. Hang on. I gotta blow my nose.

*Hello, is this someone with good news or money? No?
Goodbye!*

I keep expecting you're gonna pick up the phone one of these times. Maybe you do. Maybe you do pick up the phone. Funny, but when I remember your voice, it sounds like Jason Robards in that movie. Sorta smoked rough. Is that you, Dad? Are you on the line?

So here's the thing, Dad. Daddy-o. I have been thinking about that one time for some reason. Remember? That time you came home without your shoes and said you'd given them to some guy on the street. Some guy who needed them more than you, some homeless guy who lived on the street you said (what street was that exactly, Dad? Daddy-o. I always wondered what street was that exactly.)

I'm a little off topic here. Mom asked me to call. That's

why I'm calling. She asked me to. To tell you the news.

But that time you came home without your shoes, Dad. I can't stop thinking about it. There you were, in socks on the icy tile floor of the foyer, and you said you gave this guy your shoes because it was cold and he was barefoot. It was early morning. Spring. I remember the sky was sort of purple, it was so early. Purple like a bruise. Like grape jelly.

You remember. You must. We were in that yellow house in New Hope. The one with the tile floors and the toilet that always overflowed. The one with the basement that flooded all the time and smelled like wet dog. The one where Mom was pregnant for a little while.

And then she wasn't.

You remember.

And we didn't know where you'd been, me and Mom, and then there you were, wiggling your keys in the door like you didn't know which one worked and then you were inside and we were watching TV, me and Mom, the morning news, just in case. Just in case you were on it. In case you were news. An accident or something. Hurt maybe. But you didn't look hurt. Just shoeless.

And Mom was eating dry toast to try to keep from puking, the morning sickness was bad. And I was eating Lucky Charms.

The yellow house. You remember...

Hello, is this someone with good news or money? No? Goodbye!

Goddamnit! That was my fault that time. I hit the wrong button.

So Mom's news. Yeah. But wait, the yellow house first.

You went to bed without telling us where you were

all night, but we could tell you'd been drinking (not like we didn't know that already, but we could tell.) And Mom seemed okay that you had given your shoes away, happy even. Because it was something good you'd been up to. She was like that for a long time, you remember. Always wanting things to be good, to be right. Even that time we got evicted and they threw all of our stuff out on the lawn, she was out there making neat piles in front of the yellow house, loading what she could into the taxi, but making sure the rest was all orderly. Right. It was better that way, she told me. Maybe. Whatever.

But then a little later—I'm back to the morning you came home without your shoes. Sorry. Jumping around a bit here. Anyway, later that day without your shoes, when the sun was high and hot, and the kids were playing out in the backyards and someone was mowing the lawn somewhere—I always loved that smell of cut grass, so I didn't even mind when you made me do the mowing—this lady sneaks up our walk and takes something out from a shopping bag and she's looking nervous. And something else. Drunk, maybe. We're watching her out the picture window, me and Mom, we could see her from where we were on the couch. Do you remember that couch? You bought it on time. I came home one day from school, and it wasn't there anymore. Just a place on the rug that looked cleaner than the rest of the floor.

So this woman is on the front step and Mom pulls open the door, and the lady is there stuffing something—notebook paper or something—into your shoes. Pushing the toes right up against the screen door, neat, like she's setting them out for you or something. And Mom says, "hey!"—that's all she says: "hey!" The lady's eyes are sore-looking and blue and she smiles, says "excuse me," says, "his shoes." And I'm over Mom's shoulder and the woman

sees me and smiles again, but the smile breaks. Like it was plastic. Jeez, I don't even know what that means, but I thought that then. I remember it now. Her smile broke like something plastic. And she turns and runs away...

Hello, is this someone with good news or money? No? Goodbye!

Ok. This isn't why I called. This trip down memory lane or whatever. I called because Mom asked me to. She wanted you to know. She's getting married. She's happy. She wanted you to know.

But now I got something to say. I only now thought of it. And it's about your favorite movie. *A Thousand Clowns*. Jason Robards is a bad father. He's an asshole. In the movie, I mean. I never liked that movie. It made my stomach hurt.

Because I can't help remembering the one time you sat there in the living room on a kitchen chair where the couch used to be with a beer beside you on the floor. And the damn tape of that movie is on and you are staring at it like it's something important, maybe. Like there is something you have to learn from it.

"Dad," I said. "Daddy-o." Remember?

And you didn't even look at me.

"Mom's sick, Dad." And she was. She'd been bleeding since morning, only I didn't know that right then. I was too little to know much, but I knew enough. I knew she was curled up in a ball on the bed, and there was a towel underneath her and another one soaking pink in the bathtub. And she was sweating and crying.

"She's sick, Dad."

And you turned to me finally, and your eyes were big black holes. You blinked. And your face was wet. And you

nodded. You got up then, and went into the kitchen. And I could hear you in there on the phone. And then you came back with a fresh beer and sat on the kitchen chair and rewound the damn movie to where it was before you got up.

And in a few minutes, I could hear a siren.

So. There's that.

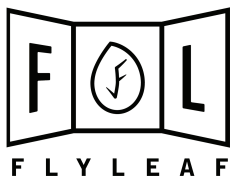
Anyway.

Mom told me to call you. She told me to tell you she forgives you now, but I told her I wouldn't tell you that. Because really, who can forgive a father for loving a movie more than his own wife, his own daughter. Because I think that sums it up pretty goddamn accurately.

And besides that, who can forgive a father for coming home without his shoes?

Not me. No sir. Not me.

Ok, then. That's all I got. No good news, not really. And no money. Just this. That's all. Ok.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PATRICIA ANN MCNAIR has lived 98 percent of her life in the Midwest. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago, where she received the Excellence in Teaching Award as well as a nominatin for the Carnegie Foundation's US Professor of the Year. McNair's story collection, *The Temple of Air*, was named Chicago Writers Association Book of the Year in traditional fiction, Devil's Kitchen Reader Awardee in Prose, and finalist in adult fiction by Society of Midland Authors. She's received numerous Illinois Arts Council Awards and Pushcart Prize nominations in fiction and nonfiction, and her work has been named a finalist for the American Fiction Prize twice.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

OLGA KOSHELEVA is a visual artist currently based in Chicagoland suburbia. A curiosity about different artistic disciplines and media has led her to explore fine art, graphic design, and illustration, which she often mixes and matches in her work. Her little corner of the internet can be found at www.envisualist.com.