

"WARM AND WISE, FRANKIE IS A WOMAN WORTH GETTING TO KNOW."

-BONNIE GARMUS, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

GRAHAM NORTON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HOME STRETCH*

FRANKIE

A Novel



Contents

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Graham Norton](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Everyone cared. Damian ...](#)

[Ireland, 1950](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[Ireland, 1957](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[Ireland, 1958](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[London, 1958](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[London, 1960](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[New York, 1965](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[New York, 1967](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[New York, 1981](#)

[Wapping, 2024](#)

[New York, 1987](#)

[London, 2024](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

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About the Author

Graham Norton has written four other novels, all bestsellers in the UK and Ireland. His fiction writing has won him critical acclaim from across all media and the literary community.

Holding won the An Post Irish Book Award for Popular Fiction. *A Keeper* was shortlisted for both the Specsavers Popular Fiction Award and the Irish Book Award for Popular Fiction. *Home Stretch* won the Irish Book Award for Popular Fiction and has been optioned for a major TV series. *Holding* was made into a high-profile ITV drama, directed by Kathy Burke, and *Forever Home* was shortlisted at the 2022 Irish Book Awards.

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Also by Graham Norton

NON-FICTION

So Me
The Life and Loves of a He Devil

FICTION

Holding
A Keeper
Home Stretch
Forever Home

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FRANKIE

Graham Norton



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Life ... [is] a lament in one ear, maybe, but always a song in the other.

Seán O'Casey

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Everyone cared. Damian understood that. Everyone aspired to, or at the very least pretended to care, but he was different. He was an actual carer. It was his job and he knew that he was good at it. He still bristled when people asked him what he really wanted to do, or his mother on the phone wondered if he'd like to go back to college – *Maureen Collins didn't do as well as you in the Leaving Cert and she got into law*. True, it had never been his dream job, but if he enjoyed it and it paid his bills then what more was there? It turned out that looking after wealthy old people in their large west London homes suited him. In his mind all the houses and flats blended together into a faded autumnal blur of thick carpets and gilt-framed paintings. The work itself was relatively easy, especially as he normally chose the creaking floors of night shifts. Some pill-giving and pillow-wrangling and then he could just read or watch films on his laptop. Come morning, if he had the time – and he usually did – he liked to head home on the bus and watch the city coming to life. So many people with things to do and places they needed to be. He imagined the cramped flats they had left, and would go back to, compared to the high-ceilinged spacious rooms he had spent the last twelve hours in. It wasn't fair, of course it wasn't, but equally he doubted anyone taking the tube escalator two steps at a time would envy the people he cared for, their skin like veined wax, the pain of night cramps making them scream out, crusty deposits in the corners of their mouths. At least they had Damian. To not feel abandoned and alone in the dark of the night seemed like such a simple human need, but the elderly people Damian cared for had to pay Hamilton Homecare handsomely for the privilege.

The bus shuddered and jolted its way slowly across London, heading back to the small terraced house in Shadwell that he shared with two permanently out-of-work actors. Damian leaned his head against the window, wondering if there'd be enough milk when he got home. A large poster on Tottenham Court Road reminded him that he wanted to upgrade his phone, and then, as

the bus idled in traffic near Aldgate, he thought about work. There was something unusual about his new client. Even after nearly two years, that word still felt so awkward to Damian – a *client* always seemed to suggest someone looking for advice on the most tax-efficient way to transfer foreign currency, not someone slumped on a toilet waiting to be rescued. His manager, Nadine, had sounded brighter than usual when she had called.

‘You live east, right?’

‘Yes,’ Damian replied warily.

‘Well Wapping is east, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, it’s just below me. Why?’

‘New client. She lives in Wapping. Frances Howe, eighty-four. Lives alone. Broken ankle. I’ll text you the address.’

‘How do I get in?’

‘Her friend will be there. Seven p.m. Don’t be late, Damian.’ A warning. There had been complaints in the past.

‘Why doesn’t her friend—’

‘Do you want to work, Damian? And she’s Irish so that’ll be nice for you. Seven o’clock.’ Nadine hung up without waiting for a response.

Damian was intrigued but also slightly irked. It annoyed him when Irish people were just lumped together. It reminded him of the way straight friends proudly announced the existence of their other gay friend. ‘You’ve got to meet him. You’ll love him.’ As if their sexuality reduced them to dogs on a playdate in the park. He failed to see how any amount of Irishness would give him something in common with an incapacitated eighty-four-year-old woman. What interested him more was that she lived in Wapping. He didn’t know the area well but it seemed unlikely that anyone of the age and means to use Hamilton Homecare would choose to live there.

Shadwell, where Damian and the actors lived in a tiny worker’s cottage, was only separated from Wapping by the Highway, a wide road that was constantly busy with traffic heading out to Canary Wharf and the mysteries of whatever was to the east of that. Damian had not been very adventurous in his eight years of London life. His first two decades on Earth had been

spent surrounded by the fields of West Cork, and he couldn't say that he had missed them very much, if at all, since he'd left Ireland. His life now was a strictly zones one and two affair.

Damian had never felt much inclination to explore Wapping. He'd made occasional forays into its little cobbled streets to have a drink in one of the ancient pubs that still managed to cling to the river despite the gentrification. The old brick warehouses were now all homes for wealthy young bankers and lawyers. If he ventured west, taking the scenic route to Tower Hill tube station, he'd pass through St Katharine Docks with its yachts and cafés, dwarfed by the drama of Tower Bridge. Damian had imagined that Frances Howe might live at that end of Wapping, where the trees were leafier and the cars shinier, but Google Maps disagreed. It led him to the edge of a plain little park about halfway between the Highway and the Thames. Damian stopped and looked up. 'Cleaver Buildings 1864' was engraved on a weather-worn stone plaque. Four storeys high, the building stood awkward and alone. Clearly it was a survivor, its neighbours having been demolished or perhaps bombed during the war. The whole place had an air of neglected romance. Sash windows, large and bright, sat in the yellow brick walls that surrounded stairwells and walkways painted in a dark red, but what made the building really appealing were the ornate railings that ran along each floor. It was what Damian imagined New Orleans might look like. There seemed to be two front doors on each landing. Some had bikes leaning outside, while others had planters of flowers. It was too old to be a council block, so Damian assumed it belonged to a housing trust. It remained unclear to him how an old lady who lived here could afford private homecare.

The evening felt mild, a premature hint of spring in the air. From the nearby park came a cheerful cacophony of dogs and children. Damian pushed open the metal gate and headed to the stairs; number four was at the far end of the landing on the second floor and had neither bike nor flowers. The windows were clean and the door looked recently painted. No bell. He knocked and the door opened immediately – clearly, he was expected.

Damian was greeted by an elderly lady with short, suspiciously dark hair. She was tall and stylish in a slightly bohemian way. Strings of multicoloured beads cascaded down her mannish white shirt, which she wore over a pair of brightly patterned loose trousers. Her mouth was a smear of red lipstick.

‘Damian?’ She smiled and extended a hand for a brisk, firm handshake, setting off a jangle of bangles.

‘Yes. Nice to meet you.’

‘Nor. Nor Forrester. I’m Frankie’s friend.’ As she spoke, she turned and walked into the gloomy interior. Damian followed, closing the door behind him. ‘Here she is!’ Nor was standing in what had once been a spacious room but was now completely filled with oversized pieces of furniture. Damian stepped forward. A dark wooden dining table was pushed against the wall under the window opposite a faded velvet chesterfield sofa, so large that Damian couldn’t help wondering how it had been brought into the room. Perched on a high-backed wing chair beside a cabinet of glassware was the person Nor had pointed to.

‘This is Frankie!’ Her voice seemed too loud, her cheerfulness forced. ‘Frankie, this is Damian.’

The old lady in the chair looked at him. She did not seem to be overly impressed. She nodded.

‘Nice to meet you,’ Damian said as he took off his light backpack, then the three of them all waited for each other to speak.

Frankie looked older than Nor. Her hair was grey and swept to one side with a black clasp. Her face was drawn and make-up free. On a small stool she rested her left foot encased in plaster.

‘Frankie had a bad fall.’

Frankie’s pale grey eyes darted to her friend.

‘I didn’t have a fall. I fell. I tripped. The end. Stop saying I “had a fall”.’ Her voice was a light rasp, as if she needed a drink of water.

‘Well, we don’t want you to have another one and that’s why young Damian is here.’ Nor turned to him. ‘I have to run, but let me show you around.’ She pushed past him into the cramped square hallway. ‘Kitchen in

there, bathroom ...' She pointed at the doors to the right. 'And this is your room.' She opened a door to a small narrow space containing a single bed. Damian peered in and saw the walls were hung with mismatched paintings and photographs. Most of the dark carpet was covered with cardboard boxes.

'More of a storeroom really, but you can keep your bag in here and I suppose lie down?' She seemed uncertain of how Damian might spend his night.

'Perfect.' He put his backpack on the bed.

Nor grabbed his arm and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Apologies in advance. She's not herself. Very cranky after the fall. I don't blame her, of course, but she needs help – not that she'd admit it. She has crutches, but this flat is like an assault course. If you make her tea and toast in the morning, I'll pop in to check on her before lunch.' Without really pausing, she raised her voice again. 'Well, that's me for the off. Be good, Frankie. I'll see you tomorrow.' All of this was announced from the hall. At the door she retrieved a large Daunt Books tote bag that was on the floor. Plunging her hand into it, she pulled out a set of keys.

'For you.' She handed them to Damian. 'Good luck.' She raised her eyebrows to suggest that he might need it. Then, with a rattle of beads and a clank of the knocker, she was gone.

This was always the awkward bit. That strange beginning when patient and carer tried to assess who they were dealing with, while also attempting to assert their specific role in the arrangement. Damian took a deep breath and dived in.

'Now, Frankie, would you have a cup of tea?'

The suggestion seemed to make her sadder than she already was.

'I would.' Her voice was quieter now, barely even a whisper.

'Milk? Sugar?' Damian paused by the door to the kitchen.

Frankie squinted as if she didn't quite understand, but then came the soft reply. 'Black. Half a teaspoon of honey. It's just by the kettle.'

The kitchen was small but very well stocked and organised. Uniform bottles of dried herbs and spices filled some open shelves by the cooker,

while fresh herbs flourished in pots on the windowsill. Woks and pans hung from hooks in the ceiling and a wide selection of what looked like expensive oils and vinegars were pressed together on the countertop.

‘You’re a cook, Frankie?’ Damian called through the open door. The old woman didn’t reply at once but then, in a voice that was surprisingly loud and firm, she announced, ‘Yes, I cook.’ Her tone suggested she did not want this to be the start of a conversation.

Damian rolled his eyes. This was going to be a long night. He hoped she went to bed early.

He turned on the kettle and found two clean mugs. He noticed the honey was French and the label handwritten.

‘Where do you keep the tea bags, Frankie?’ He kept his voice bright and positive.

‘There aren’t any. Loose tea is in the green caddy.’

Damian wished he had never suggested tea. Who didn’t use tea bags? Even his granny had moved on and she still made her own soda bread.

‘It’s there.’ Frankie’s voice was so loud in his ear, Damian let out a small shriek. The old woman was in the doorway, swaying on her crutches.

‘Away and sit down, Frankie. I’m here so you can rest.’ He gestured back towards the living room and her chair.

Ignoring him, Frankie continued, ‘Be sure to warm the pot. Then three teaspoons will be enough. One for each of us and one for the pot. It’s quite strong, Assam. Do you like Assam?’

Damian stared blankly at her. He liked tea. Did that count?

‘I’m sure it’ll be lovely.’

‘I used to get it from a little shop in Covent Garden but of course that’s closed down now. Nor picks it up for me from Harrods.’ She nodded towards the branded metal caddy. ‘Please don’t think I’m throwing my money away in that place.’

Damian wondered if it was Nor Forrester who was paying his wages.

‘You go away in and sit down. I’ve got this.’

Her expression was unnerving. Her pale eyes suggested she doubted that he had *got this*, or indeed got anything at all. Nevertheless, she did as she was told and slowly hopped back into the living room. ‘Use the tray,’ she barked.

Once the tea was brewed, Damian sat at the dining table with his mug. Frankie sipped hers without comment, which Damian took to mean she approved.

‘It smells so lovely in here.’

‘Peach oil.’

‘Oh.’ Damian was no wiser.

‘You dab it on the lightbulbs. You never heard of that?’

He shook his head. ‘No, no, that’s a new one on me.’

A moment of silence as they both enjoyed their tea and then Damian tried again.

‘You still have the accent. Light like, but you can hear it all the same. Whereabouts are you from?’

‘Originally just west of Ballytoor in County Cork.’ She delivered this information as if replying to an enquiry from a policeman.

Damian had met this type before and felt quietly confident he could crack her. He pounced.

‘Ballytoor? Sure, I know it well. I’m only from Mallow. My sister married a fellow from Stranach just beyond Ballytoor. Do you know it?’

Frankie’s head snapped towards Damian. Apparently she did.

‘Mmm, I do. Yes. I do.’ Her eyes drifted to the window for a moment and then she raised herself in the chair. ‘Would you put on the television there? The news channel. The BBC one, I can’t stand that Sky lot – and make sure the subtitles are on. They mumble. The whole lot of them.’

Damian did as he was told and then cleared away the tea. When he had washed and dried the mugs, he stepped back into the living room.

‘I’ll be in my room if you need me, Frankie.’

‘Right. Thank you.’ The old woman waved him away and then her hand went to her face. Was she wiping away tears? Damian wasn’t sure.

About an hour later, Instagram stories were beginning to repeat themselves when Damian heard Frankie moving around. He went to the door to check on her.

‘Do you need anything?’

‘No. No. I’m just going to get ready for bed. It’ll take me a while,’ she told him as she worked her crutches in the direction of the bathroom.

‘Let me help you.’

‘No,’ her voice sharp. ‘No, thank you.’ A milder tone. ‘I can do everything myself. Except my sock. I’ll need you to get that off.’

‘OK.’ He waited, ready to assist.

‘I’ll shout when I need you.’ The bathroom door shut.

Damian wandered into the living room and watched some reporter standing by the side of the road talking about floods. His eyes moved around the room. Paperbacks were stacked in haphazard piles on the floor and the walls were covered in a similar patchwork to the one he had found in his room. He didn’t know much about art, but these didn’t look like the pictures he normally saw in the homes of old people. These seemed too modern. Abstract and messy, some bright and geometric, others more like pale scribbles, they didn’t seem to fit with the old heavy furniture or indeed the small neat woman who was currently in the bathroom. Maybe a dead husband had collected them. Damian was fairly certain these pictures were not all by the same artist. Had she inherited them from a relative? He stored his questions away as kindling for the chat he was determined to have. He saw it as a matter of professional pride to get this old lady to allow him into her life.

Frankie’s bedroom was unexpected. If anything, it was even smaller than the one Damian had been given and what should have been the window was completely blocked up with precarious towers of books. The only light came from the bedside lamp, which shared its plinth with more books and an array of pill bottles. Frankie sat on the bed wearing a long-sleeved baby blue nightdress. The thin shiny ribbon around the neck made Damian guess it had been a gift. He very much doubted Frankie had gone into a shop and

chosen it. He looked up at his charge from where he was crouched on his knees peeling off her one sock. He rolled it into a ball, then, examining Frankie's feet, asked, 'Would you like to me to cut your toenails for you?'

'No!' She sounded shocked by the very suggestion and quickly pulled her legs up and under the covers.

'OK. Well, if you change your mind ...' A smile; his same calm, even tone.

Frankie reached for a book and then, as if remembering there was someone else in the room, said, 'Watch the television if you want. It won't bother me in here.'

'Right.' He stood to leave her. 'And what time would you like your tea and toast in the morning?'

Her brow creased. 'Sure, I can do that. Don't worry.'

'Frankie, come on, I'm being paid. Let me do something for you.'

A sigh. She opened her book without looking at him. 'Around seven thirty. And use the unsalted butter. Just a smear of marmalade.'

'Will do. Good night. Sleep well.' He began to slowly close her door.

'Please.'

He stepped forward. 'What was that?'

'Please. For the toast. I forgot to say please.'

'You're very welcome.' He made sure the door was closed before he allowed the smile to spread across his face.

Ireland, 1950

Happiness was not to be trusted. This was a lesson that Frances Howe had learned at a very young age. Eleven, in fact. No, she was ten, about to turn eleven, because she had been at Catherine Woodworth's birthday party and Catherine was the first in her class to leave the childish ways of ten behind. For the girls, the idea of turning eleven had become confused with how wealthy Catherine's father was. This was a party unlike any they had attended before. The function room of Langton's Hotel had been hired for the occasion. There had been little pastry pots stuffed with chicken in a sauce, and on the way out each child had been handed a party bag with a pencil and a bag of sherbet. Eleven seemed to be a world of untold sophistication.

When the party had finished at six, Frances gathered in the lobby with her friend Norah Dean, along with three other girls that Norah Dean's father had agreed to give a lift home. While the others chattered excitedly to Mr Dean about the fizzy drinks that had been served by actual waiters, Frances had sat quietly in the back seat, her head leaning against the window. This was what happy felt like. The whole afternoon it had seemed like she was finally in time with the music. She was looking forward to telling her parents what a good girl she had been; it seemed that being nearly eleven was having an effect on her. She hadn't just rammed her mouth with the sweet little butterfly buns, but had made sure to eat two boring sandwiches first. A napkin had been picked up and used. Remembering what her mother had told her, Frances hadn't been overly physical in her desire to win at musical chairs, and, despite knowing that there was a snow globe lurking under all the layers of gift wrapping, she hadn't held on to the parcel for too long as it was being passed around. In her mind's eye, she could see her parents