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We all see the world...

in a  
thousand  
different  
ways



CECELIA AHERN

# IN A THOUSAND DIFFERENT WAYS

Cecelia Ahern



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# Dedication

*For Blossom*

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blue

**I** MARCH TO THE BEAT of the uneaten apple clunking from side to side in my lunch box. Roll, thump, roll, thump. It's been in my school bag since Monday, it makes my lunch look healthy, but it stays there for the week, taking hits and getting more bruised by the day. My little brother Ollie trudges along behind me, head down, occasionally kicking stones that dare to block his path. Our house comes into view and I slow; school is too far away in the morning, not far enough away in the afternoon.

I study her bedroom window. Curtains drawn messily, like they've been pulled roughly and some clips have separated from the rings, leaving gaping holes at the top. The Gangulys next door have tied-back curtains, really fancy, like the ones you draw when you're little and think that's how a house should look. Their front garden is a neat lawn; pretty, colourful flowers around the edges with a red gate that matches the paint around the windows. Not like ours.

Our grass needs cutting, it reaches above the garden wall like it's desperate to see over the top, maybe escape, but at least the jungle hides some of the overflowing bins. Putting the bins out and cutting the grass was Dad's job.

I push our screechy rickety gate open, past the foul-smelling bins to the blue door, the brass 7 of the 47 slightly crooked. I pick up the warm milk on the step and bring it inside. It's nearly 3 p.m. but the house is quiet and dark and smells of stale morning. The kitchen table is decorated in sugar trails, our cereal bowls are in the sink, soggy cornflakes floating in sugary yellow milk. Chairs are pulled at odd angles from the table, the scene frozen from 8.30 a.m.

Ollie throws his school bag on the floor and falls to his knees at the playbox that's filled with mostly broken wheel-less cars from my big brother Hugh and my decapitated dolls with no limbs. He plays with his soldiers and wrestlers, making quiet boom-bash-bosh noises with his lips as they pick up on a battle where they left off. I've never known a child to whisper when they're playing, but he rarely speaks, is always just there, waiting, like the grass and the bins; silently growing and overflowing.

I place my schoolbag by the chair at the kitchen table where I'll do my homework. I wipe the table and scrape the hardened cornflakes stuck to the edges of the bowls before stacking them in the dishwasher. I pull the curtains open; the grey daylight reveals the dust particles floating in the air. I watch them hover, ear cocked to the silence. My brother Hugh will be home soon. He's older and finishes school at four. Everything is always okay when he's

home. But he's not here now. A pulsating throb in my temple like Morse code tries to tell me something. Nothing is different, but something feels wrong.

I tentatively peer upstairs, afraid of what I'll find. On the top step of the staircase our usually brown carpet looks blue. It looks like ground fog, low and still, resting at the top of the steps. I sniff to see if it's smoke, but it's odourless. I step onto the bottom stair, and the blue cloud slowly moves towards me. Ollie pauses play to watch me. It's an unspoken rule that we don't go upstairs when she's sleeping.

'Go outside,' I say.

He obeys, then I run upstairs through the blue, moving so fast I send it swirling upward in wisps. The blue hue gushes from under her door like there's a smoke machine inside. My heart is pounding as I place my hand on the door handle. She doesn't like to be disturbed. She has trouble sleeping, so when she's sleeping you don't wake her up. When she's sleeping you're happy she's sleeping, but this isn't any normal day.

I push the door open. The room is completely blue, covered in this odd dawn light. It causes a pain at the back of my eyeballs. I look around for the source of the light, maybe a new device to soothe her to sleep, but I can't find it, plus it's not calming. It feels thick, like I'm stuck in it and it's cold. In an instant I feel so sad, so alone, empty and spiritless, as if I want to surrender, lie down and die right there.

I see her shape beneath the duvet; she's on her side facing the drawn curtains, little pockets of grey light coming through the parts that have been pulled down from the rings. I walk quietly around to her side, her hair is over her face, lank and greasy. With trembling fingers I gently brush her hair back from her face.

'999, please state your emergency.'

'She's blue. She's ... she's ... blue.'

'Who am I speaking with?'

'Her face ... her arms ... b-b-blue.'

'What's your name?'

'Alice Kelly.'

'Okay, Alice, what's your address?'

'She's blue, she's all blue.'

'Can you tell me your address, honey?'

‘Briarswood Road. Finglas. The 47 is crooked.’

‘I’ll send an ambulance right away. Who are you talking about Alice? Who is blue?’

‘Lily Kelly.’

‘Is that your mum?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Are you with her now?’

I shake my head.

‘Alice, are you with your mum now?’

‘No.’

‘Can you go to her for me?’

I shake my head.

‘How old are you, Alice?’

‘Eight.’

‘Okay. Did your mum have an accident, Alice?’

‘I don’t know, I just got home from school.’

‘And where is your mum now?’

‘In bed. She’s blue.’

‘Can you go to your mum for me, Alice?’

I shake my head a final time and hang up.

There’s banging on the front door. I can’t move. I’m trembling. I put my head down between my knees and hug my legs. The doorbell rings a few times. Banging again and then I hear footsteps, up the stairs. My bedroom door opens, I hold my breath, then there’s silence and they leave. They try the next room. Her room.

A knock first, then footsteps. Then—

Screaming. Her screaming?

I block my ears and squeeze my eyes shut, shove my face closer into my knees. I can smell the grass from the stains on my knees from when Hajra rugby tackled me to the ground at playtime. I breathe it in, shuddering, unable to get enough air into my tight chest. The screaming stops and I hear talking. Raised voices. I stay as still as I can. Someone stays in there murmuring while somebody else goes downstairs. It feels like a long time, I was never good at playing hide and seek, would always need to run for a wee. My bladder’s full now, threatening to overflow. The footsteps are on the stairs again and my door opens.