

CECELIA AHERN

PS, I Love You



HarperCollins*Publishers*

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2004
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Cecelia Ahern 2004

Cecelia Ahern asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

'With A Little Help From My Friends' – Words & Music by John Lennon
and Paul McCartney
©1967 Northern Songs/Sony/ATV Music Publisher Ltd.

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 717949-9

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

Chapter One

Holly held the blue cotton sweater to her face and the familiar smell immediately struck her, an overwhelming grief knotting her stomach and pulling at her heart. Pins and needles ran up the back of her neck and a lump in her throat threatened to choke her. Panic took over. Apart from the low hum of the fridge and the occasional moaning of the pipes, the house was quiet. She was alone. Bile rose in her throat and she ran to the bathroom, where she collapsed to her knees before the toilet.

Gerry was gone and he would never be back. That was the reality. She would never again run her fingers through his soft hair, never share a secret joke across the table at a dinner party, never cry to him when she got home from a hard day at work and just needed a hug, she would never share a bed with him again, never be woken up by his fits of sneezes each morning, never laugh with him so much her stomach would ache, never fight with him about whose turn it was to get up and turn the bedroom light off. All that was left was a bundle of memories, and an image of his face that became more and more vague each day.

Their plan had been very simple: to stay together for the rest of their lives. A plan that anyone within their circle would

agree was accomplishable. They were best friends, lovers and soul mates, destined to be together, everyone thought. But as it happened, one day destiny greedily changed its mind.

The end had come all too soon. After complaining of a migraine for a few days, Gerry had agreed to Holly's advice to see his doctor. This was done one Wednesday on a lunch break from work. They thought the migraine was due to stress or tiredness, and agreed that at the very worst he might need glasses. Gerry had been upset that he might need glasses. He needn't have worried, since it turned out it wasn't his eyes that were the problem. It was the tumour growing inside his brain.

Holly flushed the toilet and, shivering from the coldness of the tiled floor, she shakily steadied herself to her feet. He was thirty years old. By no means was he the healthiest man on the earth, but he was healthy enough to . . . well, to live a normal life. When he became very sick he would bravely joke about how he shouldn't have lived life so safely. Should have taken drugs, should have drunk more, should have travelled more, should have jumped out of aeroplanes while waxing his legs . . . his list went on. Even as he laughed about it Holly could see the regret in his eyes. Regret for the things he'd never made time to do, places he'd never seen and sorrow for the loss of future experiences. Did he regret the life he had had with her? Holly never doubted that he loved her, but feared he felt he had wasted precious time.

Growing older became something he wanted desperately to accomplish rather than merely a dreaded inevitability. How presumptuous they both were never to consider growing old as an achievement and a challenge. Ageing was something they wanted so much to avoid.

Holly drifted from room to room while she sobbed fat, salty tears. Her eyes were red and sore, and there seemed to be no end to this night. None of the rooms in the house

provided her with any solace, just unwelcoming silences as she stared around at the furniture. She longed for the couch to hold out its arms to her but even it ignored her.

Gerry would not be happy with this, she thought. She took a deep breath, dried her eyes and tried to shake some sense into herself. No, Gerry would not be pleased at all.

Holly's eyes were tender and puffy from crying all through the night. Just as she had every other night for the past few weeks, she had fallen into fitful sleep in the early hours of the morning. Each day she woke to find herself sprawled uncomfortably across some piece of furniture – today it was the couch. Once again it was the phone call from a concerned friend or family member that roused her. They probably thought that all she did was sleep. Where were their phone calls when she listlessly roamed the house like a zombie, searching the rooms for . . . for what? What was she expecting to find?

'Hello,' she answered groggily. Her voice was hoarse from all the tears but she had long stopped caring about maintaining a brave face. Her best friend was gone and nobody understood that no amount of make-up, fresh air or shopping was going to fill the hole in her heart.

'Oh, sorry, love, did I wake you?' the concerned voice of Holly's mother came across the line. Every morning her mother called to see if she had survived the night alone, always afraid of waking her, yet always relieved to hear her speak; safe in the knowledge her daughter had braved the ghosts of the night.

'No, I was just dozing, it's OK.' Always the same answer.

'Your dad and Declan have gone out and I was thinking of you, pet.'

Why did that soothing sympathetic voice always send tears to Holly's eyes? She could picture her mother's face, eyebrows furrowed, forehead wrinkled with worry. But it didn't soothe

Holly. It made her remember why they were worried and that they shouldn't have to be. Everything should be normal. Gerry should be here beside her, rolling his eyes up to heaven and trying to make her laugh while her mother yapped on. So many times Holly would have to hand the phone over to Gerry as her fit of giggles took over. Then he would chat away, ignoring Holly as she jumped around the bed, pulling her silliest faces and doing her funniest dances just to get back at him. It seldom worked.

She 'ummed' and 'aahed' throughout the conversation, listening but not hearing a word.

'It's a lovely day, Holly. It would do you the world of good to go out for a walk. Get some fresh air.'

'Um, I suppose.' There it was again – fresh air, the alleged answer to all her problems.

'Maybe I'll call round later and we can have a chat.'

'No thanks, Mum. I'm OK.'

Silence.

'Well, all right . . . give me a ring if you change your mind. I'm free all day.'

'OK.' Another silence. 'Thanks, though.'

'Right then . . . take care, love.'

'I will.' Holly was about to replace the phone when she heard her mother's voice again.

'Oh, Holly, I almost forgot. That envelope is still here for you – you know, the one I told you about. It's on the kitchen table. You might want to collect it. It's been here for weeks now and it might be important.'

'I doubt it. It's probably just another card.'

'No, I don't think it is, love. It's addressed to you and above your name it says . . . oh, hold on while I get it . . .'

The phone was put down, the sound of heels on the tiles toward the table, chairs screeched against the floor, footsteps getting louder, phone being picked up . . .

'You still there?'

‘Yeah.’

‘OK, it says at the top “The List”. Maybe it’s from work or something, love. It’s worth just taking a . . .’

Holly dropped the phone.

Chapter Two

‘Gerry, turn off the light!’ Holly giggled as she watched her husband undress before her. He danced around the room performing a striptease, slowly unbuttoning his white cotton shirt with his long slender fingers. He raised his left eyebrow towards Holly and allowed the shirt to slide from his shoulders, caught it in his right hand and swung it around over his head.

Holly giggled again.

‘Turn off the light? What, and miss all this?’ he grinned cheekily while flexing his muscles. He wasn’t a vain man but had much to be vain about, thought Holly. His body was strong and perfectly toned. His long legs were muscular from hours spent working out in the gym. At almost six foot he was tall enough to make Holly feel safe when he stood protectively beside her five foot five. Most of all she loved that when she hugged him her head would rest neatly just below his chin, where she could feel his breath lightly blowing her hair and tickling her head.

Her heart leaped as he lowered his boxers, caught them on the tip of his toes and flung them at her where they landed on her head.

‘Well, at least it’s darker under here, anyway,’ she laughed. He always managed to make her laugh. When she came home

tired and angry after work he was invariably sympathetic and listened to her complaining. They seldom fought, and when they did it was over stupid things that amused them after, like who had left the porch light on all day or who had forgotten to set the alarm at night.

Gerry finished his striptease and dived into the bed. He snuggled up beside her tucking his freezing cold feet underneath her legs to warm himself.

‘Aaaagh! Gerry, your feet are like ice cubes!’ Holly knew that this position meant he had no intention of budging an inch. ‘Gerry,’ Holly’s voice warned.

‘Holly,’ he mimicked.

‘Didn’t you forget something?’

‘No, not that I know of,’ he answered.

‘The light?’

‘Ah yes, the light,’ he said sleepily, and pretended to snore loudly.

‘Gerry!’

‘I had to get out of bed and do it last night, as I remember.’

‘Yeah, but you were just standing right beside the switch a second ago!’

‘Yes . . . just a second ago,’ he repeated.

Holly sighed. She hated having to get back out of bed when she was nice and snug, step onto the cold wooden floor, and then fumble around in the darkness on the way back to the bed. She tutted.

‘I can’t do it all the time, you know, Hol. Someday I might not be here and then what will you do?’

‘Get my new husband to do it,’ Holly huffed, trying her best to kick his cold feet away from hers.

‘Ha!’

‘Or just remember to do it myself before I get into bed.’

Gerry snorted. ‘Fat chance of that happening, my dear. I’ll have to leave a message on the light switch for you before I go, just so you’ll remember.’

‘How thoughtful of you but I would rather you just leave me your money.’

‘And a note on the immersion,’ he continued on.

‘Ha-ha.’

‘And on the milk carton.’

‘You’re a very funny man, Gerry.’

‘Oh, and on the windows so you don’t open them and set the alarm off in the mornings.’

‘Hey, why don’t you just leave me a list of things for me to do in your will if you think I’ll be so incompetent without you?’

‘Not a bad idea,’ he laughed.

‘Fine then, I’ll turn off the bloody light.’ Holly grudgingly got out of bed, grimaced as she stepped onto the ice-cold floor and switched off the light. She held out her arms in the darkness and slowly began to find her way back to the bed.

‘Hello? Holly, did you get lost? Is there anybody out there, there, there, there?’ Gerry shouted out to the black room.

‘Yes, I’m hhhhhowwwwwcch!’ she yelped as she stubbed her toe against the bedpost. ‘Shit, shit, shit, fuck, bastard, shit, crap!’

Gerry snorted and sniggered underneath the duvet. ‘Number two on my list: watch out for bedpost . . .’

‘Oh, shut up, Gerry, and stop being so morbid,’ Holly snapped back at him, cradling her poor foot in her hand.

‘Want me to kiss it better?’ he asked.

‘No, it’s OK,’ Holly replied sadly, ‘if I could just put them here so I can warm . . .’

‘Aaaaah! Jesus Christ, they’re freezing!!’

Which made her laugh again.

So that was how the joke about the list came about. It was a silly and simple idea that was soon shared with their closest friends, Sharon and John McCarthy.

It was John who had approached Holly in the school corri-

dor when they were just fourteen and muttered the famous words, ‘Me mate wants to know if you’ll go out with him.’ After days of endless discussion and emergency meetings with her friends, Holly eventually agreed.

‘Aah, go on, Holly,’ Sharon had urged. ‘He’s such a ride, and at least he doesn’t have spots all over his face like John.’

How Holly envied Sharon right now. Sharon and John had married the same year as Holly and Gerry. Holly was the baby of the bunch at twenty-three, the others were twenty-four. Some said she was too young and lectured her about how, at her age, she should be travelling the world and enjoying herself. Instead, Gerry and Holly travelled the world together. It made far more sense that way because when they weren’t together . . . well, Holly just felt as though she was missing a vital organ from her body.

Her wedding day was far from the best day of her life. Like most little girls, she had dreamed of a fairy-tale wedding with a princess dress and beautiful, sunny weather, in a romantic location surrounded by all who were near and dear to her. She imagined the reception would be the best night of her life, pictured herself dancing with all of her friends, being admired by everyone and feeling special. The reality was quite different.

She woke up in her family home to screams of, ‘I can’t find my tie!’ (her father), or, ‘My hair looks shite’ (her mother), and the best one of all was, ‘I look like a bloody whale! There’s no way I’m going to this bleeding wedding looking like this. I’ll be scarlet! Mum, look at the state of me! Holly can find another bridesmaid ’cos I’m not bleedin goin. Oi! Jack, give me back that feckin hair dryer, I’m not finished!’ That unforgettable statement was made by her younger sister, Ciara, who very regularly threw tantrums and refused to leave the house on the basis of having nothing to wear, regardless of her bursting wardrobe. She was currently living somewhere in Australia with strangers, and the only

communication the family had with her was an email from her every few weeks. Holly's family spent the rest of the morning trying to convince Ciara how she was the most beautiful woman in the world. All the while Holly silently dressed herself feeling like shite. Ciara eventually agreed to leave the house when Holly's usually calm dad screamed at the top of his voice, and to everyone's amazement, 'Ciara, this is Holly's bloody day, NOT YOURS! And you WILL go to the wedding and enjoy yourself AND when Holly walks downstairs you WILL tell her how beautiful she looks and I don't wanna hear a peep out of you FOR THE REST OF THE DAY!'

So when Holly walked downstairs everyone oohed and aahed while Ciara, looking like a ten-year-old who had just been spanked, tearfully gazed at her with a trembling lip and said, 'You look beautiful, Holly.' All seven of them squashed into the limo – Holly, her parents, three brothers and Ciara, and sat in terrified silence all the way to the church.

The whole day just seemed a blur to her now. She barely had time to speak to Gerry, as they were both being pulled in opposite directions to meet Great-aunt Betty from the back arse of nowhere, whom Holly hadn't seen since she was born, and Grand-uncle Toby from America, who had never been mentioned before but was suddenly a very important member of the family.

And nobody told her it would be so tiring either. By the end of the night Holly's jaw was sore from smiling for photographs, and her feet were killing her from running around all day in very silly little shoes. She desperately wanted to join the large table of her friends who had been howling with laughter all night, obviously enjoying themselves. Well for some, she thought. But as soon as Holly stepped into the honeymoon suite with Gerry her worries of the day faded and the point of it all became clear.

Tears once again rolled down Holly's face and she realised she had been daydreaming again. She sat frozen on the couch

with the phone still off the hook beside her. The hours just seemed to pass her by these days without her knowing what time or even what day it was. She seemed to be living outside of her body, numb to everything but the pain in her heart, in her bones, in her head. She was just so tired . . . Her stomach grumbled and she realised she couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. Had it been yesterday?

She shuffled into the kitchen, dressed in Gerry's dressing gown and her favourite pink 'disco diva' slippers that Gerry had bought her the previous Christmas. She was his disco diva, he used to say. Always the first on the dance floor, always the last out of the club. Huh, where was that girl now? She opened the fridge and stared in at the empty shelves. Just vegetables and yogurt long past its sell-by date leaving a horrible stench in the fridge. She smiled weakly as she shook the milk carton. Empty. Third on his list . . .

Christmas two years ago Holly had gone shopping with Sharon for a dress for the annual ball they attended at the Burlington Hotel. Shopping with Sharon was always a dangerous outing, and John and Gerry had joked about how they would once again suffer through Christmas without any presents as a result of the girls' sprees. They weren't far wrong. Poor neglected husbands, the girls always called them.

Holly had spent a disgraceful amount of money in Brown Thomas on the most beautiful white dress she had ever seen.

'Shit, Sharon, this will burn a huge hole in my pocket,' she said guiltily, biting her lip and running her fingers over the soft material.

'Aah, don't worry, Gerry can stitch it up for you,' Sharon replied with her infamous cackle. 'And stop calling me "shit Sharon". Every time we go shopping you address me as that. If you're not careful I might start taking offence. Buy the damn thing, Holly. It's Christmas, after all, the season of giving and all that.'

‘God, you are so evil, Sharon. I’m never shopping with you again. This is like half my month’s wages. What am I going to do for the rest of the month?’

‘Holly, would you rather eat or look fab?’

‘I’ll take it,’ Holly said excitedly to the sales assistant.

The dress was low cut, which showed off Holly’s neat little chest perfectly, and it was split to the thigh, displaying her slim legs. Gerry hadn’t been able to take his eyes off her. It wasn’t because she looked so beautiful, however. He just couldn’t understand how on earth such a little slip of material had cost that much. Once at the ball, Ms Disco Diva once again overindulged in the alcoholic beverages and succeeded in destroying her dress by spilling red wine down her front. Holly tried but failed to hold back her tears while the men at the table drunkenly informed their partners that number fifty-four on the list prevented you from drinking red wine while wearing an expensive white dress. It was then decided that milk was the preferred beverage, as it wouldn’t be visible if spilt on expensive white dresses.

Later, when Gerry knocked his pint over causing it to dribble off the edge of the table into Holly’s lap, she tearfully yet seriously announced to the table (and some of the surrounding tables), ‘Rule fitty-fife ov the list: NEFFER EFFER buy a spensive white dress.’ So it was agreed, and Sharon awoke from her coma from somewhere underneath the table to applaud and offer moral support. A toast was made (after a startled waiter had delivered a tray full of glasses of milk) to Holly and to her profound addition to the list.

‘I’m sorry bout your spensive white dress, Holly,’ John had hiccuped to Holly, before falling out of the taxi and dragging Sharon alongside him into their house.

Was it possible that Gerry had kept his word and had written a list for her before he died? She had spent every minute of every day with him up until his death and he had never even mentioned it, nor had she noticed any signs of

him writing it. No, Holly, pull yourself together and don't be stupid, she told herself. She so desperately wanted him back that she was imagining all kinds of crazy things. He wouldn't have. Would he?