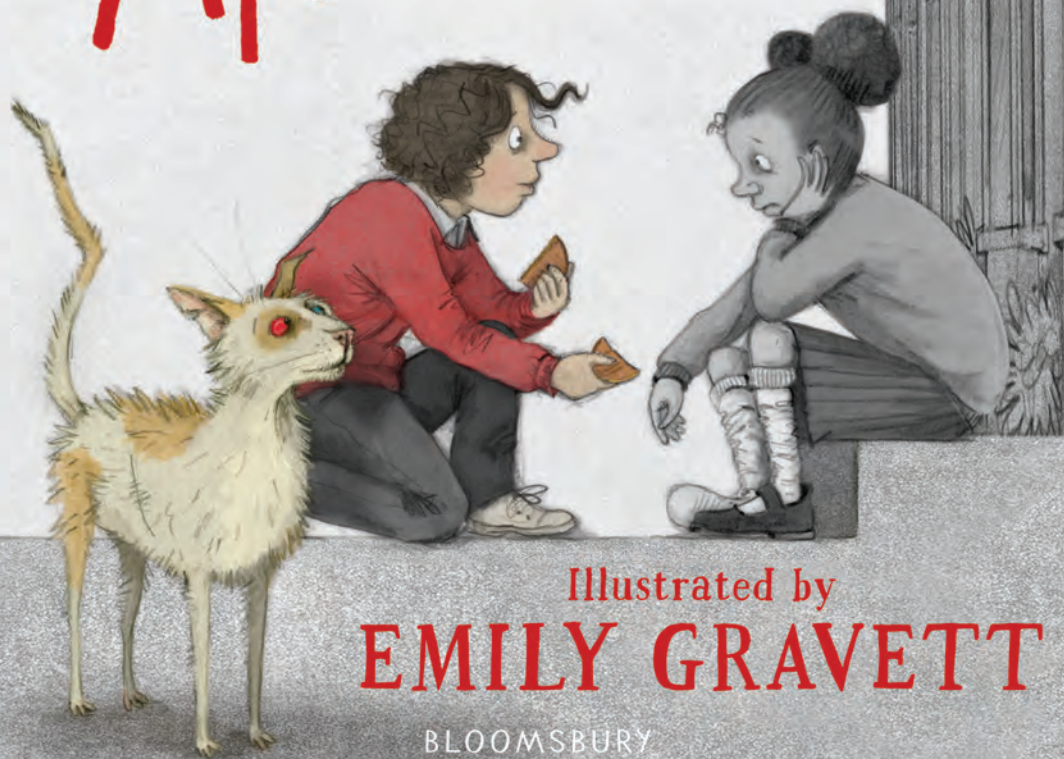


A.F. HARROLD

The Afterwards



Illustrated by

EMILY GRAVETT

BLOOMSBURY





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In the middle of the night December woke up.

There'd been a noise on the stairs.

It was pitch black and she couldn't move.

She was lying on her side under the duvet and now there was something in the room and she couldn't move a muscle.

She strained and heaved but her limbs were like lead, like stone. She stared at the wall, at where she knew the wall was in the darkness. Her back was to the door, to the room, and something was moving towards her.

She could hear footsteps – quiet, tiptoeing – tiny footsteps, and she wanted to scream, wanted to shout for her dad, wanted to make a noise to let whoever it was know that she knew they were there, wanted to hurl the duvet off and make a noise and scare them away.

But she was frozen.

Her heart thumped.

She could feel tears tickling over the bridge of her nose.

Lead.

Stone.

A statue.

Paralysed.

Petrified.

And then something landed on the bed.

Thud!

Something had jumped up and landed on the bed, in the dark.

Something had sat down beside her.

And then something cold touched her forehead, touched her ear, touched her cheek.

Cold and wet.

And a voice said, 'I see you.'



Ember sat up in bed, in the dark, her knees tucked up under her chin and the duvet wrapped round her.

In the darkness she could just make out the shape of the cat in front of her.

As it moved its head its eyes glinted, damp and shining.

It spoke and she listened.



Its voice was kind, firm, honest, sharp, but reserved. A short distance away from being warm.

'I know what you're thinking,' it said.

'I can hear you across the town,' it said.

'No good will come of it,' it said.

'You can't do it,' it said.

'Things are the way they are,' it said.

It licked its paw and worried at its ear.

Although she couldn't see it now, she remembered the ragged look of the ear, the ragged look of the cat. As if it had been dragged backwards through a hedge, a ditch and a scrub of cacti and hadn't bothered to comb its hair afterwards.

She didn't think a little lick and brush of the ear would be enough.

'Things are the way they are *for a reason?*' she said, half asking a question.

The cat stopped washing.

'No,' it said, after a moment. 'No reason. They just are, and that's all there is to it. Some things you just have to accept and move on from.'

'But she didn't deserve to die,' Ember said.

'No,' said the cat. 'Few do. But she died, all the same.'

'But I've seen her. I can bring her back. Bring her back here.'

'You've not seen her,' said the cat. 'All you've seen are echoes. Just an echo. You think too much. You think *so* much. You people. I. I. I. *Me. Me. Me.* All the time. It rings in the world like a bell. It takes a while to fade away, that's all. *Cogitatis ergo estis.*'

'What does that mean?' she asked.

'It means it takes a while to forget that *you were you.*'

'That place ... ?'

'It's where forgetting happens, that's all. Echoes. Echoes. Echoes. Your people echo longest, that's all. Nothing more.'

Ember thought of the snail she'd watched turn to dust and blow away.

'Snails?' she asked.

'Think very little of themselves,' said the cat immediately.

'Hardly even know that they *are*. Only that they *do*. No self-reflection in a snail's mind.'

'Betty? The dog?'

'Dogs think of themselves more, yes. It's all: *Does he love me? Why can't I see him now? Have I upset him? When will he get here?* Awful things, all their thoughts tangled up in their humans.'

The cat looked away, licked its shoulder. Stopped licking.

Ember nodded. She thought she understood. Then she thought of a different question.

'And Ms Todd ... is she ... ?'

The cat said nothing, but jumped down from the bed.

It padded across the floor, its feet soft, its tail crooked in a sudden shaft of moonlight between the curtains.

'Do not do what you are going to do,' it said, as it reached the door. 'She isn't your friend, and I won't be there to help next time. I'm busy. I can hear mice, voles, rats ... Warm. Crunchy. Thinking of themselves just enough.'

December wondered who the 'she' was. Did the cat mean Ms Todd or Ness? Or both?



She sat there in silence, in the dark, long after the cat had gone, thinking.

Her dad got up.

She heard him banging into things and swearing softly as he made his way to the bathroom.

The toilet flushed.

On the way past her room he stuck his head round the door.

'Oh, Ember,' he said. 'Did I wake you up?'

'No,' she said. 'I was just thinking.'

'Always thinking,' he said. 'Just like her. So smart, so full of ideas. You don't get that from me.' He paused. 'She could've changed the world, you know. If she'd been given the chance. Changed it all round ...'

He scratched at his pyjamas and came and sat on the floor beside the bed.

'Lie down,' he said. 'Shut your eyes.'

And, leaning on the mattress, with his fingers in her hair, he told her all about his day at work and the changes his client wanted made to the plans and how one sort of plasterboard is much better than another, but how, because it's more expensive, he was having a hard time making ...

But by then she was asleep and dreaming of nothing.







There's nothing more to say about it.

It is what it is. It is what will always be. **Ember and Ness.**

Then Ness dies. It is sudden and unexpected and leaves Ember completely empty. **How can this be?**

When Ember finds a way into the Afterworld, she determines to bring Ness back. Because that's what friends do, isn't it? They rescue each other. They help. They never give up. Ember and Ness. That don't change.

*A powerful, poignant, darkly comic
and deeply moving story about friendship
at its most extraordinary.*

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