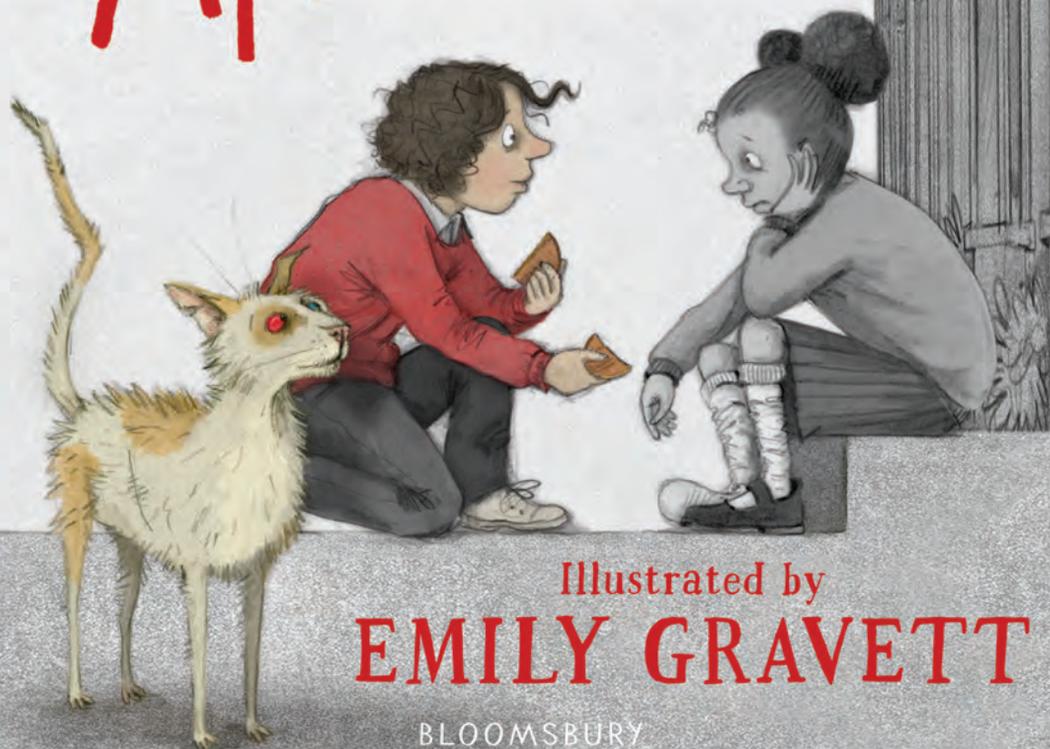


A.F. HARROLD

The Afterwards



Illustrated by

EMILY GRAVETT

BLOOMSBURY



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BLOOMSBURY
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PROLOGUE

An old woman returns to a town she once knew.

It is a bright day. A summer's day.

From the train station she gets a taxi to an ordinary street. Stops outside a shop that was once a bakery. Gets out. Looks in the window at the absence of doughnuts.

It takes time to walk from there to the mouth of the alley. Much longer than it used to take. But then, everything takes longer now. Walking, making tea, getting out of bed.

The sound of children playing echoes in the blue sky from a field somewhere, or a playground.

She unfolds a sheet of paper from her coat pocket.

It had been forgotten for such a long time, but recently, after Mo died, and after talking to the doctor, it had risen to the top of her desk drawer. It had found its way to her hand.

She steps forward, the paper cold in the warm sunlight.

It is time, she thinks. It's been long enough now.

She walks by herself, into the alley.

She is looking forward to seeing the cat one more time.

She wants to say 'Thank you' at last.



December ran up the stairs two at a time, tripping at the top and knocking a pile of paperbacks over as she caught herself.

She spun on the landing, ignoring the books, and hurtled into her bedroom.

Her hair was wet and dripping and she plunged her head into a towel that had been warming on the radiator.

‘Ah!’ she said

Luxury.

She’d been looking forward to this for ages, thinking about it the whole journey home.

It had obviously been about to rain, but her dad had insisted they go for a walk in the woods anyway. It was what families did on a Sunday afternoon, and they *were* a family, after all.

‘It’s a beautiful day,’ he’d said. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if the bluebells are out. This is just the weekend for it.’

The bluebells *had* been out, whole rippling beds of them underneath the trees, but so had the clouds and they'd got absolutely soaked.

It had been a long walk back to the car without an umbrella.

She hadn't spoken to him on the way home.

'Shoes!' he shouted from downstairs.

The front door banged shut.

She sat on her bed and looked at her shoes.

She'd scraped the worst of the mud off before they got in the car, of course, but they still weren't exactly what you'd call clean. And they certainly weren't dry by any stretch of the imagination.

There were dark footprints leading across the carpet straight to her.

Well, it was *his* fault, she reckoned, not feeling very guilty at all. If he'd had a warm, clean towel in the car, she wouldn't have needed to hurry upstairs to dry her hair. So she wasn't to blame. Not really.

She bent down and tugged at the laces. They didn't budge.

'Knots!' she shouted.



‘Ember,’ her dad said from the doorway. ‘There’s no need to shout. I’m right here.’

He was holding the books in his hand. He set them down on the corner of the chest of drawers.

He smiled at her.

‘Look at this carpet,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘You don’t half take after your mum. Just like her.’

He knelt down and lifted one of her feet.

‘Knots, you say?’

December nodded.

His fingers prised at the laces for a few seconds, and then he said,
‘There you go.’



She wriggled out of the shoe and lifted the other one for him to untie too.

‘What do you say?’ he asked.

‘What’s for tea, Harry?’ she replied, deadpan.

He stood up and poked her on the nose.

‘Bangers and mash,’ he said.

She watched as he picked his books up, the wet shoes dangling by their laces from the same hand, and went out on to the landing, pulling her door to behind him.

The ‘What’s for tea?’ business was an old routine and they both liked it. It was easier than saying ‘Thank you’ and meant more or less the same thing. You just had to remember not to do it when you were stood in front of the headmaster’s desk.



His name was Harry (and that was what she’d always called him, ever since she was little) and it was hard to stay mad at him for long. It was something about his smile, the width of it, the easiness of it, the quickness of it, the warmth of it. It was like a big, wobbly hot-water bottle looking at you.

December had known him ever since she was a baby – he was her dad, after all – and for as long as she could remember it had just been him and her. Her mum had gone away and they’d been

left on their own, her and Harry, Harry and her.

And it was all right.

That's what she thought. She knew it was all right because of that smile of his.



Her best friend from school, Happiness, had a dad *and* a mum, and they were always shouting at one another, even when December went and stayed over. She'd snuggle in her sleeping bag on Happiness's floor and listen to the noise downstairs. It was a strange way to go to sleep.



Harry never shouted at her mum. Her mum never shouted at Harry. Harry never had a bad word to say about her mum. He didn't say *much* about her, but when he did he smiled and looked at December and shook his head in a way that smelt of love.

She knew she was lucky. She felt lucky.

Having a dead mum meant even the teachers at school tried to be extra nice to her, even that time when she'd tripped up Emerald Jones in the playground accidentally-on-purpose and her tooth had come out. She got what they called 'the benefit of the doubt'.

All in all, life being December wasn't so bad.







'Deck! Deck!'

Happiness was shouting in the front garden.

December opened the door, feeling slightly embarrassed as usual.

Why Happiness couldn't ring the doorbell like a normal person she wasn't sure, but it had ever been thus.

They'd lived next door to one another for nearly three years and for most of that time they'd been best friends. Ness had thrown a football at a dog that had been chasing December a few weeks after she and Harry had moved in, and that was how they'd met.

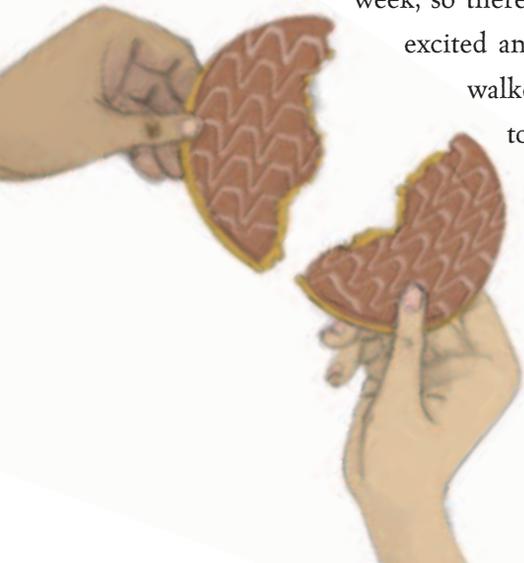
Now they were in the same class at school and sat at the same table. Their hands usually went up to answer questions at the same time. Sometimes they shared answers to tests if Miss Short was looking the other way.



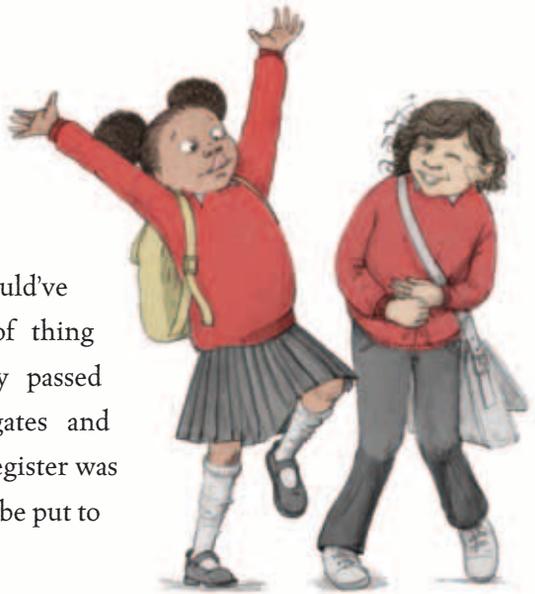
They swapped their packed lunches round because sometimes you needed a break from the same sandwiches and they always snapped their chocolate biscuits in two.

This Monday was the first day back after the Easter holidays and Ness had been away visiting her grandparents for the last week, so there was lots to talk about. She was excited and bouncing on her toes as they walked down the three streets that led to school.

It was all ‘Then Grandpa let out this most enormous –’ and ‘The dog fainted, and then Gran –’ and ‘Mum was so embarrassed when he said –’ and the like.



December dragged
her heels and laughed
at her friend. She could've
listened to this sort of thing
forever, but soon they passed
through the school gates and
the bell went and the register was
taken and gossip had to be put to
one side for a time.



In class they learnt
about the Vikings.

Then they
climbed ropes
in the gym.

They played football at lunch and December swapped her ham sandwich for Happiness's ham roll.



In the afternoon a light rain speckled the classroom windows, but it stopped by home time. There were hardly even any puddles to splash in on the way home. And so they walked together, dry-footed, skipping and swapping stories.

Yet again it hadn't been a bad day at all.

They parted on the pavement outside their houses.

'You wanna come to the park?' Happiness asked.

'Can't,' said December. 'Going out with Dad and Penny later.
Gonna have to wrap a box of chocolates first, *and* have a wash.'

'Well, see ya tomorrow then.'

'Yeah, see ya.'





Penny was Harry's girlfriend. (Although 'girlfriend' was hardly the right word, since she was over thirty, but no one seemed to notice that.)

She was nice. Didn't try to be December's mum. Didn't try to be her bestest best friend. She was just cool. Friendly enough, nice enough, kind enough.

Tonight they were going out for a meal since it was the one-year anniversary of December walking in on them kissing in the kitchen and finding out her dad had a girlfriend. If that wasn't worth going out for a meal with starters *and* afters she didn't know what was.

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