



BETH TOMLIN

Proud Boltonian and stationery enthusiast Beth Tomlin enjoys catching spontaneous flights, drinking too much earl grey tea, and embarrassing her younger sisters on the internet. Beth started working on her first YA novel during her Creative Writing undergraduate at Bath Spa. In 2017, she was awarded a scholarship to the Winchester Writer's Festival, where she met the wonderful agent that helped her finish the manuscript a few months later. Beth was previously a bookseller at Waterstones, and now lives in Oxford, where she perfects her latte art in a local café and teaches workshops in creative writing for mental health recovery. Beth is represented by Gill McLay of Bath Literary Agency.

About *I Am Etta*

I am standing on top of a tall building in bad weather. I am not safe.

Seventeen-year-old Etta has been in a confused haze since waking up in her parents' living room. She has forgotten everything; her brother's name, her favourite film... everything except Violet, her dead best friend. Then Violet shows up in Etta's bedroom. She tells Etta her family can't be trusted. The two girls run away into the night, on a desperate hunt to find Etta's lost memories before her family catches up with them. But some memories are locked away for a reason.

What if the truth is worse than knowing nothing at all?

Told through flashbacks and real-time conversations, *I Am Etta* is a story about friendship, mental health, and being true to yourself – even when you can't remember who you are.

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I AM ETTA

I am not completely sure that I am safe.

I know I should be sure. I'm not a child. I'm not stupid. There are no men with guns, no bombs about to go off, and I am not standing on the edge of a tall building in bad weather. But still, I'm not sure that I am safe. In here. Inside my head.

I am not standing on the edge of a tall building in bad weather. The weather is bad, but I am in a warm room made from soft colours and softer blankets. There's a blanket on me, over my lap and around my shoulders. I am facing the window. Snow falls lazily. A fat flake sticks to the outside of the window. I reach out and tap the glass with my finger.

'Etta?' someone says from behind me. I jerk my hand back. That was stupid. I'm not a child.

I can smell coffee. It reminds me of Violet.

The someone moves to the side of me and sits on the arm of the chair. I feel the weight of them. I force my eyes away from the snow, and to the someone sitting on my chair. It is my father.

He holds the mug out to me, and I take it. It is too hot – scalding – and I wrap my hands around the blanket and then the blanketed hands around the mug. I remember, suddenly, that my father always makes coffee that is too hot. This is familiar, this feeling. I know it.

'Useless weather,' he says, but I don't reply because he sounds like he's talking to himself. We both watch the snow. I breathe in the coffee. I think of Violet. 'It'll be murder trying to get off this driveway.'

It'll be murder. What a strange thing to say.

'Are you hungry?' my father says. He puts a hand on my shoulder,

then snatches it away again. ‘I could whip you something up before we go.’

There is soil between my toes. I am wearing two pairs of socks, because it is cold, but I can still feel it. I wiggle my toes and feel the soil moving, crumbling, pooling at the bottom of my socks.

‘No,’ I hear myself say. My voice sounds different. My accent isn’t as broad as I remember it. Lighter, somehow. ‘I’m not hungry.’

I feel his frown.

From the dining room, my mother calls: ‘Two-minute warning, Jack. I’ll boil the kettle and defrost that windscreen.’

My father stands up. ‘It’s just boiled. Listen, don’t use the kettle – use that defroster I bought last week.’

That’s something else that I remember. My father says *listen* a lot, even if you’re already listening. That memory warms me, a little. I know him. I lean forward and rest my elbows and the mug on the windowsill. The coffee sends steam creeping up the glass towards the curtains. I am wearing a jumper that doesn’t belong to me. It’s beige and soft. Probably cashmere. Probably my mother’s.

Why am I wearing my mother’s jumper?

The front door opens and closes. I sip the coffee and watch my parents root around the back seats of the car. I think about what it would feel like to be standing on the edge of a tall building. I imagine the feeling of snow on my skin. I imagine falling, like snow. Inside my head, I’m up there. My toes are curled over the edge; full of soil, secrets.

My father produces the can of defroster from the dashboard and starts on the windscreen. After a while, he comes back in and gets the kettle. My parents talk together outside, their faces serious. Even though I can’t hear them, I know their voices are low and secretive. Their breath billows out in front of them like fog. I lean my forehead against the glass, close my eyes.

When I open them again, my mother is in the living room with me. My father is stomping snow from his boots in the hallway.

‘There’s soup in the kitchen when you get hungry,’ my mother says, shovelling keys into her bag. ‘You can heat it up in the microwave. Three minutes.’

I rest the mug of coffee on the ledge and lean back, bringing the blanket up to my chin. I tuck my legs up beneath me and pretend I can’t feel the soil worming between my toes. It has collected in the bottom of my socks and now I’m like a plant, growing from the earth.

‘Elijah will be here at two, okay? Etta?’ she says. She is by the doorway now, hovering. My father has gone to wait in the car. She pauses, then strides into the room and puts the TV guide and the remote control on the arm of my chair. She pecks my cheek. ‘I’m sorry we have to leave you by yourself, but it’s only for an hour or two. You’ll be okay, won’t you? He’ll be here at two.’

‘Two,’ I echo, so she knows that I know. ‘I’ll be fine.’

I watch them pull out of the driveway. My father drives slowly, carefully in the snow. My mother keeps her eyes on me until she can’t anymore.

I am teetering on the edge of a tall building in bad weather.

I am not safe.

My mother has left soup on the kitchen table with a note that says ‘Microwave – 3 minutes.’ I pour it down the sink, then scoop out the leftover bits of potato and mashed-up carrot from the strainer and put them in the bin. I rinse the bowl and leave it on the drying rack. There is dirt under my fingernails. I feel as though I am underground.

In the living room, I switch on the TV, open the TV guide, then leave it spread out on the coffee table. The half-drunk mug of coffee is still on the windowsill. My feet make soft padding sounds as I walk up the stairs. I focus on not falling, on the landing ahead of me, on making it to my destination. The house is quiet. The winter wind whips around my ears; my soil-filled toes grip the edge of the building.

My bedroom is where I remember it being; right at the end of the hallway, furthest from the top of the stairs. Inside, my mother has

changed the sheets. They used to be purple: dark, bottom-of-the-ocean, witches, magic, cloaks-of-wise-men purple. Now they are red and white, a cheap Christmas design with little snowmen on the pillows and along the bottom of the duvet. There are blank spaces on the walls where there used to be photographs.

Pyjamas are folded neatly on my pillow. They aren't mine. They aren't my mother's, either. There is still a tag attached to the label, so I tug it off and get changed. She's moved the mirror, so I can't see the damage. I climb under the sheets. I leave the socks on.

Elijah knocks lightly on my door three times, then pushes it open. I am buried under six feet of soil and a cheap Christmas bedding set. Elijah flicks on the light. I emerge from the duvet. It's dark outside, but the snow has collected on the window ledge, bright white.

'Etta?'

That's all people seem to say, these days. Just my name, over and over again. Maybe I'll change it – confuse them. Confuse myself. I heave myself up in the bed so that I'm sitting. There used to be fairy lights twisted around the headboard. They used to get caught in Violet's hair.

'Mum and Dad will be back soon,' he says. He's leaning against the doorframe. Why isn't he coming into the room? Perhaps he is afraid of me.

He looks like me, only older. He doesn't look as tired as I probably do, and he's stockier, and his nose is different. He broke it a few years ago and the doctors had to break it back into place. I remember. He scuffs his shoes on the side of the doorframe. Lilac paint flakes to the floor. It won't be long before my mother paints over that, as well.

'Come downstairs? I'll make you some tea.'

I run a hand through my hair. It is tangled and matted and the colour of earth. I breathe in, sharply. 'Coffee. I'll have coffee.'

He seems satisfied with this. He nods and smiles and heads back downstairs, leaving the door wide open. I get up, carefully, and go

to the bathroom, because I know there is a mirror there. I blink at my reflection. My hair is a dark mass; half-straight, half-curly. There are bags underneath my eyes, big, blue-purple bruises that shine if I tilt my head. A bruise has started to yellow by my right ear. My eyes are dark.

I am haunted.

The pyjamas have snowmen on that almost match the new bedding. I hadn't noticed. I don't like wearing these pyjamas, I have decided, because they don't feel like something that I would wear. But I don't want to put that beige jumper back on, either, and I'm not sure where I keep the rest of my clothes. Do I have any clothes anymore? Do I just wear my mother's clothes or what she buys me?

I walk slowly down the stairs, counting the steps, counting my breaths. Elijah is sitting on the sofa, watching a movie. There is a space next to him and a fresh mug of coffee on the table. He has moved the old mug from the windowsill and turned the armchair back around so it's facing the right way again.

I take the coffee and sit down next to him. He covers my knees with the blanket.

'Your favourite,' he says, quietly. I don't know whether he's talking about the blanket or the movie until I follow his eyes to the TV screen. It's a kids' film – an animation. There's a girl on a boat, and the sea talks to her. Is this my favourite? I can't remember. After a few minutes, Elijah rewinds the movie and starts it from the beginning without me asking him to.

I sink below the blanket and sip the coffee and focus on the movie because it makes me feel better. This is my favourite film, according to Elijah, so when I watch it I feel like myself. This is something I would've done months ago, I think. I am not on top of a tall building. I am here. I am a girl sitting on a couch watching her favourite movie with her big brother.

The phone rings. Elijah stands up to answer it. I watch the movie. I recognise the songs, now, I think. I feel like a child. I am not a child.

Elijah calls from the hallway: 'They've closed the M6 because of the snow. They might have to get a hotel in Manchester for the night.' He pauses. 'Mum wants to know if we'll be okay.'

You're the eldest, I want to say. You decide.

Instead, I call back, 'Of course we'll be okay.'

He relays this information to our parents. 'I'll stay the night here,' he tells them. Doesn't he live here? He has a bedroom here. I can't remember him moving out. 'Yes, I'll make sure she does. Okay.'

On the television, there is a man who is half-God, half-shark. Elijah slumps back onto the sofa. 'I'll drive you to your appointment tomorrow, don't worry. If we can get there with this bloody weather, that is. Hopefully the roads will be a little clearer then. Do you want some dinner?'

'My appointment?' I say.

'The outpatient thing. What do you want to eat? I don't know what we've got in.' He stands up and goes to clatter around in the kitchen. I don't want anything else to eat. I am still full from the soup. I tell him so. 'Let me make some pasta, anyway. Then you can have some later, if you get peckish.'

There is another song on the movie. Elijah hums along from the kitchen. I know the tune. I could hum along as well, if I wanted to. I think I have watched this movie with Violet. I am almost sure of it. For the first time, I wonder where she is.

'Where is Violet?' I ask, raising my voice above the television.

Elijah stops humming from the kitchen. I feel as though I've asked something I shouldn't have. I feel as though my toes are curling over a stone ledge and the snow is sticking to my warm skin. I fight the voice that tells me *I am not safe* over and over again, because I know that can't be true, because I am home with my big brother. He appears in the doorway.

He says, 'I'm sorry, Etta, I hate doing this.'

He takes a deep breath. I take a deep breath, too. I am safe.

He says, 'Violet died, Etta.'

He says, 'I'm sorry.'

I am not stupid. I am not a child. I say, 'Have you told me this before?'

He nods. He says, 'Are you okay?'

I swallow. I know that he has told me this before. I know that my parents have told me this before. I know that Violet is dead, and I shouldn't keep asking about it, but I keep forgetting that I've asked and forgetting what their answers were when I've asked them where she is. I want to say *I'm sorry*, because it feels like the good and right thing to say, because Elijah looks upset. But I also think that you shouldn't say sorry unless you really mean it. So, I don't.

I am on top of a tall building and the building is surrounded by other tall buildings, but none of them are quite as tall as this one. This is the tallest building around, and it is cold, but my skin is warm and the snow is sticking to it and melting.

I think I say, 'I'm going to go and lie down for a little while.'

I know that I have left another half-drunk cup of coffee on the table. I know that my brother is waiting in the doorway. I know that there is pasta cooking in the kitchen.

I feel as though I am falling.