

Unbecoming

Also by Jenny Downham

Before I Die
You Against Me

Unbecoming

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*For the Erbe women
For Andrew, Jack, his brothers and the others*

PART ONE

One

It was like an alien had landed. Really, it was that weird. Like an ancient creature from another planet had crashed into Katie's day. She should have been at home studying, not sitting on a plastic chair in a hospital corridor trying to make conversation. And there were only so many times you could ask someone if they wanted anything from the drinks machine and not feel like an idiot when they refused to acknowledge you.

'Hot chocolate?'

Silence.

'How about a cappuccino?'

More silence.

Even ET had a wider vocabulary.

Katie didn't know what to call her either. She'd tried 'Nan' earlier, but that sounded strange and got zero response. Mrs Todd? Grandma? There were no rules.

What was good was that you could stare at her and she didn't seem to mind. She was quite pretty actually, had a soft lined face and her cheeks were all rosy with the fading light.

What was *bad* was that she smelled (bread left to fester in a plastic bag was Katie's closest approximation) and she was also really thin. You could actually see her collarbone pushing up from the top of her cardigan, like it wanted to escape, and the skin at

her neck was so transparent you could see her pulse quivering.

At the end of the row of chairs (was that supposed to be discreet?), the social worker was asking Mum endless questions. *Did Mrs Todd have any medical conditions? Was she usually so confused? Was her late husband her carer?*

'I'm not sure how far we're going to get with this,' Mum said. 'As I keep telling you, I haven't seen her for years.'

'You're named as emergency contact on her husband's medical bracelet,' the social worker said. 'That seems strange if you were out of communication.'

'Well, I assure you I'm not making it up!' Poor Mum was getting increasingly stressed. 'And he'd have been a boyfriend, not a husband. She wasn't a fan of commitment.'

'She *is* your mother though?'

'I'm not sure she qualifies for that role. Look, surely she's better off staying here? Can't you find her a bed somewhere?'

The social worker looked mildly shocked. 'Your mother isn't a patient. She arrived with her partner in the ambulance and there are no medical reasons to admit her. Are you telling me you're unwilling to take her?'

If Mum had an answer to that, she managed to keep it down, and her silence was clearly taken for compliance, because the social worker smiled and turned back to her paperwork.

The old woman just sat there, eyes shut now. She wasn't asleep though – you could tell by the tip of her chin. Maybe it was a trick? Maybe she wanted them to think she was napping, so she could scarper when no one was looking? Her boyfriend was dead, the doctors thought she was too vulnerable to go home and her daughter didn't want her. Why not escape and start a new life somewhere else?

Chris appeared back from his trip to the toilet. He stood in front

of them grinning and jiggling his feet, clearly buzzing with the strangeness of it all. 'There's a café.'

Mum shook her head. 'Not now.'

'I'm hungry.'

'I said not now.'

He hopped from foot to foot and back again. 'Why not?'

'You want to sit here?' Katie tapped the chair next to her. 'Come and say hello?'

He shook his head, feigned sudden fascination with his shoes. 'I'm quite thirsty as well.'

The social worker stared at him. She was probably thinking, What's the matter with this one? Why's a hulking teenager acting like a kid? How many things can go wrong in one family?

'Welcome to my life,' Katie wanted to say. But instead, she stared back, because that's what always worked best. You let them know you'd noticed and they looked away.

'The café's not a bad idea,' the social worker said, avoiding Katie's eyes as she turned to Mum. 'This may take a while.'

Mum sighed as she opened her purse and handed Katie a ten-pound note. 'Stay together. And come back as soon as you're done.'

Katie nodded. 'Anyone else want anything?'

Mum shook her head. The social worker didn't even bother replying. Katie looked at the old woman. Maybe she'd like a meat pie or a sausage roll – something traditional and bulky to feed her up. Katie leaned in and whispered, 'Do you want anything to eat, Gran?'

No answer. No movement. And 'Gran' didn't sound right either.

The queue in the café was ridiculous and there was hardly anything left when they got to the front. They bought a packet of

cheese sandwiches and two boxes of orange juice, and because the café was closing and Mum was bound to be ages they sat on the wall outside to eat. The sun had sunk beyond the horizon completely now and it was cold. Chris huddled next to Katie and rested his head on her shoulder. She didn't stop him because it was dark and no one would see.

Over the road was a kebab shop. It had a sign in the window that advertised 'shish, doner, falafel'. The smell of frying onions was delicious. They should have come out here in the first place and got kebabs for supper. Would Mum have minded? Yes. She'd be worried about food poisoning from spit-roasted meat and additives in the chilli sauce. Also, since it looked a bit run-down, she'd probably think they'd be offered drugs alongside the kebab. Katie sighed. Mum was very predictable.

Wednesday evening's family plan had been: two hours' revision (Katie), make supper (Mum), homework (Chris), eat supper (all of them). Then Chris would be allowed an hour's Xbox while Katie did a practice maths paper and Mum trawled the exam board's website for mark schemes and examiners' reports so that when Katie finished they could go over the paper together to see where improvements could be made. After that, it would be bedtime. Katie would have her usual chamomile drink (Restful Nights), so she got plenty of sleep and woke up refreshed for tomorrow's study session at school.

But none of that had happened. Instead, they were at a hospital miles from home – no revision, no supper, and the very real possibility of a total stranger coming to stay with them. Katie felt an odd sense of lightness. Because if predictable evenings could be turned upside down with a phone call, then maybe anything could be flipped on its head? Even the worst things in the world. She got out her mobile and dared one more text to Esme: PLSE LETS TALK.

Chris sat up suddenly. 'Where's the dead husband?'
'Boyfriend,' Katie said. 'Apparently, she didn't believe in commitment. And I expect he's in the morgue.'

'He might be a zombie.'

'I doubt it.'

'That can happen.'

'Only if you play too much Xbox.'

He stuck his tongue out. 'You don't know. That woman might be one as well.'

'Let's hope not. And "that woman" is your grandmother, who might be coming to stay with us.'

He blinked at her. 'Where's she going to sleep?'

Excellent question. Why hadn't that crossed Katie's mind? They only had a three-bedroom flat.

'Katie?'

'I don't know. Stop asking me stuff.'

'Will it be my room?'

'Yes.'

'Serious?'

'Yeah, and the zombie boyfriend's going to live under your bed.'

Chris gave her a V-sign and shuffled along the wall.

She didn't care. Let him get angry. She shoved her own V-sign at his big face and another at his little eyes and a third at the general bulk of him and the way his body seemed to take up more space in the world than hers was ever allowed. It *wouldn't* be his room, would it? It'd be hers and she'd be expected to bunk in with Mum. And Mum would be stressed, which meant she'd demand Katie's help and attention even more than usual. *Thank goodness for you, Katie, always so reliable.*

She leaned back and stared at the sky. It was grey and heavy

with cloud. Any vague optimism she'd felt leaked away. In fact, she hoped a giant storm was coming – something that would rupture the fabric of the earth. Because her life had just got worse. First Dad. Then Esme. Now this.

A bus stopped in front of them. It was going to a place Katie had never heard of. That was the third bus in ten minutes and they all had different destinations on the front.

'Hey, Chris, you fancy hopping on that bus and seeing where we end up?'

'No!' He looked terrified.

Only two people got off – a girl, who walked past them, talking into her mobile: 'I might see you later. I'm not sure what I'm doing yet.' And a man, who stopped just in front of them holding a can of beer. 'Hello,' he said, and then he looked at Chris while pointing his beer at Katie. 'Is she with you?'

They didn't say anything and the man walked away.

Chris said, 'We should go inside.' He said it gently, like it mattered to him. 'We shouldn't be out here now.'

Katie shook her head. 'I don't want to.'

'It's dangerous.'

'Not everywhere's dangerous. It's statistically impossible.'

'Why are you getting down, then? Where are you going?'

'Nowhere. My legs have gone to sleep. Stay there.'

She walked a little way along the pavement. Across the road, three men came out of the kebab shop. They unwrapped their food and took great steaming bites. I don't know any of you, Katie thought. I will never know your names or see you again. It felt so liberating. To be away from the claustrophobia of the town where they lived – the dull streets, the unexciting shops and cafés, the tiny arts centre, the one school. A place where once rumours began, they easily spread.

Breathe, breathe. Don't think about that now . . .

If she lived in this city, no one would know her. She'd reinvent herself. New clothes, new hair, maybe a piercing or a tattoo. She'd get a job, take a gap year instead of going straight to uni. She'd be like that girl getting off the bus. *I'm not sure what I'm doing yet.*

Imagine that.

Katie licked her dry lips and closed her eyes. When she opened them, only a few seconds later, Chris was jumping off the wall.

'It's Mum!' he cried.

'What on earth are you two doing out here?' Mum pulled Chris to her as if she hadn't seen him for months. 'I've been looking everywhere. I thought you'd been kidnapped.'

'Kidnapped?' Katie said. 'That's ridiculous!'

Mum frowned at her. 'Terrible things happen in the blink of an eye.'

Old men die. Old women get abandoned. Hospitals phone up out of the blue.

And that was just today.

Chris was crying. A great sob welled up from deep inside him. 'I don't like it here.'

'Oh, sweetheart,' Mum said, 'it'll be all right. We just need to get you home and safe. Don't worry, we're leaving now.'

Across the car park, arm in arm with the social worker, the old woman appeared. She looked totally bewildered.

'The four of us?' Katie asked.

Mum nodded, all the light squeezed from her face. 'The four of us.'

Two

Mary had a blanket over her knees, and she was clutching her handbag tight and she didn't know where she was, but she wasn't at home and that was reason enough to be wary. Was she supposed to be working? No, this wasn't a theatre, it was too domestic for that. Here was a sofa, a television, a lamp on a corner table, a little column of drawers and a carpet. Here was a girl setting down a tea tray.

Was this a hotel, perhaps?

'Here you go, Grandma, a nice cup of tea. Shall I put it on this table for you?'

Who?

'It's Katie, remember?'

The girl was staring, expecting an answer. To distract herself from the unease growing in her belly, Mary picked up the cup and took a sip, held the liquid in her mouth and swallowed. She took a breath, did it again. See? Everything normal, nothing to look at here!

'I wasn't sure if you took sugar,' the girl said. 'But we don't actually have any, so is it OK like that?'

Mary wiped her mouth with the hankie she kept up her sleeve and tried to think of a suitable sentence to pacify the girl. *What charming windows you have. How lovely the sky.*

The girl leaned against the balcony door, watching her. She

looked upset. Or maybe it was a trick of the light. 'I thought I didn't have grandparents,' she said eventually. 'And now it turns out you were there all along.'

She had no idea what this child was talking about. Her heart gave a little leap of fear.

'We're the smallest family ever now Dad's gone, not even any cousins or aunts. We're like three sides of a triangle holding each other up.'

Mary struggled to sit taller, snatching at the girl's mention of family, afraid the meaning would disappear like things sometimes did when she concentrated too hard. But then she heard a noise. That was something, that noise. That sounded like a door, like someone breezing in from outside.

'It's Chris,' the girl said. 'He finds it hard to be quiet.'

And then there were two children standing in front of her. Two. And still no clue who they were.

Unimportant questions were asked, like: Are you warm enough? And, Do you need more milk in that tea? Mary was told their mother was upstairs rearranging beds and soon they could all get to sleep and wouldn't that be nice?

It was the girl doing the talking. The boy gawped, gimlet-eyed. Something was wrong with him, staring at her so unnervingly.

'He's shy,' the girl said, as if she could read minds. 'He'll speak when he gets to know you.' She turned to the boy, grinning. 'And after that, he won't shut up.'

The boy laughed, which made the girl laugh too. Something stirred in Mary, watching her do that.

Think woman, think. Who are these people?

Air filled her lungs. Her lungs expanded. Oxygen whizzed around her body. Air came out again in a rush of warmth and a soft, 'Oh,' escaped her lips.

'You OK, Granny?'

No, she was not! Because she'd remembered suddenly and precisely, as she had at least twenty times that day already, exactly what was happening. She'd gone with Jack in an ambulance to the hospital. The doctors were terribly sorry, but they couldn't save him. They also couldn't allow her to go home. Instead, they'd located a daughter.

Caroline.

Then these two children must be . . .

Caroline's children.

It rendered her speechless. Just the thought. After all these years.