

Praise for
It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's

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'Look out for this. With a sharp eye and tough warmth, Lisa Blower brings to life the silent histories and harsh realities of those living on the margins.'

—*Shropshire Star*

IT'S GONE DARK ^{over} BILL'S MOTHER'S



LISA BLOWER

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*For my two Nells—
from one storyteller to the next*

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Broken Crockery

MUM SAYS MY NAN'S in hospital with Margaret Thatcher. She said she'd tripped over the hearthrug and broke her arm by smashing it on the fireplace. I've never liked that fireplace. I don't like that china sausage dog that stares at me like I'm teasing it with something tasty in my pocket. When my nan's not looking I hide it in the bin. Nan says that sausage dog is the last of the Potteries. It deserves to be on show to make everyone remember what this place was. Mum says that when Nan fell, she broke the sausage dog's legs. Mum says bones get brittle. Sometimes, she says, they don't even mend. I asked if my nan's bones would mend. Mum said Margaret Thatcher could pay for new ones. That sausage dog is lying on its belly in our bin. Its legs are covered in teabags and burnt fruitcake.

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My nan doesn't like Margaret Thatcher because she'd kicked women in the shins and blew off kneecaps so a working man would know what mercy meant. She said that Margaret Thatcher drove a tank straight through the poor people and was only wearing a headscarf. She said that Margaret Thatcher said that everyone should have a house because that was the law. Mum says houses are greedy old things. They take up all your money and need new clothes all the time. I've bought my nan a new pair of slippers for her birthday. They're fashion ones, like my nan wants. My nan isn't old. She said in her head she's only thirty-three. 'How old is Margaret Thatcher?' I asked. 'The devil looks after its own,' said my nan.

Mum used to leave magazines open on the pages she wanted my dad to see, and stuck pictures of new ovens on the kitchen cupboards so he could see them when he made a cup of tea. I put a picture of a new telly there just in case. Nan says I should ask Margaret Thatcher for a new telly because that's what she's made the kids like today. Want, want, want, she says, they've got tellies in their bedrooms and chips on their laps and don't know what it is to have a good dinner or watch a proper telly show that isn't about murder or people acting up. Nan says kids don't talk any more, just write on computers. I said, 'I talk, Nan.' She said I don't count. 'You were born for a pot bank,' she said. 'But now we're a nation of salespeople. It used to be marvellous around here. Everyone was the same.' I said, 'What am I?' She said, 'You're different.' I said, 'No, I want to be a vet.'

Mum told me to give her a right big hug before she went to the hospital. 'What for?' I said. She said she needed it. I said I wanted to go too. She said I couldn't because the buses were scary in the dark. I pretended my arm was broken just like my nan's for a joke. Mum said, 'Broken bones aren't funny bones.' I said, 'Doctors mend bones. They have to.' Mum told me that

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some bones stay broken. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'broken bones are things like livers and kidneys.'

'Like in a pie?' I asked.

Mum said, 'Sometimes bones don't get better.'

'Like when you made that pie and you forgot about it in the oven and it all got burnt?' I said.

'And sometimes bones get buried,' she said.

'Like the dog in the bin?' I asked.

'Sometimes you can't heal bones,' she said.

'Yes, you can,' I said. 'If doctors can't mend them, God does. He makes up a big bed in the healing room.'

'Who told you that?' she said.

'Nan did,' I said.

'And what else did your nan tell you?' she said.

'That she's too pretty to die,' I said.

Mum said I should make Nan a card that said 'Get Well Nan, come home soon'. I got out my felt-tips and drew my nan at the bingo. She wouldn't want me to draw her in bed with a thermometer in her mouth. She'd rather have a fag, and anyway, my nan doesn't like sleeping. When she sleeps, she sees my grandad at the top of the road in his army coat waving at her. She tells him she's only going to be a minute, because she's just put a wash on. When she turns round, he's got fed up waiting and gone. 'Why doesn't he just come down the road and help you peg out?' I said. Nan said it doesn't work like that. 'It's just a nice dream,' she said. So I drew my nan winning the house on my card. 'Mum,' I said, 'is a hundred pounds a big win?' Mum told me to hurry up and colour my nan in. 'Make her skin pink,' she said. 'Her skin's pink, not white.' I told her that my pink felt-tip had dried up. Mum opened up her purse and started to cry. 'Write something sappy,' she said, 'just in case.'

Mum asked me if I had a fiver for bus fare and grapes. I said, 'Nan doesn't like grapes. They make her go.' Mum said

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that was the point. I said, 'But Nan's got a broken arm like Margaret Thatcher,' but I gave Mum my fiver because I'm not mean like my nan says Margaret Thatcher is. Nan says that Margaret Thatcher was so mean that she gave all her money to the rich people to make more money, and left the poor people with hardly any money to buy shopping. My nan can't stand meanness. 'You don't spend life from a purse,' said my nan. 'If that woman was still in power I swear we'd have oxygen tanks on our backs feeding it coins like a jukebox for the air that we breathe.' I said, 'Oxygen keeps you alive, doesn't it?' Nan said, 'No, family keeps you alive.' I'm dead glad my nan's my family. I'd be proper thick if it was just me and Mum.

Mum has gone to the hospital and told me that if I hear any noises or if a man comes to the door and I can spy on him through the bedroom net, I'm to call the policeman. She said, 'Don't use the oven, boil the kettle, or use a knife, and keep the telly on. That keeps away the burglars.' That was a treat. I'm not allowed to have the telly on after five o'clock. Mum says it's bad for my eyes and will make me go berserk.

On the news it said that Margaret Thatcher was doing well. I'm doing well at school. I wonder what Margaret Thatcher is doing so well at in hospital. I bet my nan's giving her a right earful. She's got lots to say about Margaret Thatcher. 'One day,' my nan said, 'I'll give that woman what for. She's made grown men cry.' It's not very nice to do well at making people cry. Those people are called bullies. Nan says that bullies are just jealous people and actually want to love you. Maybe my nan is bullying Margaret Thatcher and drinking all her Lucozade. Maybe Margaret Thatcher is still bullying my nan even when she knows my nan's bones are broken. I hope my nan has better pillows and more Get Well cards. I don't want my nan to be best friends with Margaret Thatcher. That would be weird. Margaret Thatcher would say our house was too small and

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needed a good bottom clean. She might even send my mum to war.

My nan said that Margaret Thatcher made us go to war but didn't have the bottle to go there herself. She just sent other people. She gave them guns and a ship and off they went. She said young lives got lost. 'Your grandad shovelled up his best mate into a wheelbarrow in the trenches,' my nan told me for my school history project. 'And when he came home, he used to drag me out of bed like I was a big gun he was loading. It used to make him cry.' I hope Margaret Thatcher's arm takes ages to get mended. Then she won't be able to write all those letters to all the presidents in the world about how many bombs they have and if they'd like to buy some more.

My nan once wrote to Mr Del Monte to tell him that she found a pear in her tin of peaches. They sent her a voucher for a new tin of peaches but she wouldn't spend it. She said, 'A pear don't make a peach.' My nan says that 50p to her might be nothing to others, but 50p is 50p and when you spend it on peaches, you expect peaches. 'I could've spent it on pears,' she said. 'But I didn't. I wanted peaches.' I went to the phone and called my mum. I said, 'Don't get grapes, get peaches. Nan likes peaches. They'll make her better.' I hope Margaret Thatcher doesn't have a bowl of peaches on her hospital cabinet. That will really nark my nan. Mum said it was too late. I checked the time. The shops had shut ages ago.

My nan has never left the country. My grandad went to Rome and freed some Roman babies. Then he came back and said the world was a dirty place. Nan said that Margaret Thatcher wanted to be American. 'She made us Little America,' said my nan. 'And when this country gets too full of people it will tip into the ocean.' Nan says we'll be OK though and I'm a good swimmer. I'll put my nan on a lilo and we'll sail off to Hawaii. They have dolphins there. People get mended when

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they swim with dolphins. I drew my nan another card. This one said 'Welcome Home Nan', and I drew her in her armchair with a whisky and the telephone and me. They're her favourite things. She said she needed no more than that. 'Margaret Thatcher won't beat me,' she said. 'I know what I'm meant for.'

Mum came home an hour ago and is sitting in the dark shaking, as if her body is a big bag full of broken bones all looking to fit back in their proper places. Sometimes bones just don't mend she said. Sometimes bones get buried or get burnt in pies, which is fine because kidney is rank and sticks to the roof of your mouth. Nan says some things should never go in your mouth and some things should never come out. Nan says we don't think about each other any more. We think only about ourselves. She said Margaret Thatcher taught her that. 'Call me old-fashioned,' she said. 'But values cost nothing.' I said, 'You're not old, Nan, you're thirty-three.' Nan said, 'Thirty-three dirty knees. I beg to no one.'

My mum was on the settee staring at the fireplace. I asked her how Nan's bones were. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'we're a pear in a tin of peaches. No one quite knows what to do about us.' I don't think my nan's bones got mended, so I rolled up the hearthrug just in case. Mum said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I don't want you to get broken.' Then I went to the bin and fished out that china sausage dog and washed it with Fairy Liquid like my nan would've done. It took me ages to glue on its legs and when I'd finished I put it on the hearth. Mum said, 'You'll make a good vet.' I said, 'No, I'm going to be like Nan and work on a pot bank.' Then I went into the kitchen and stuck a picture of my nan above the teapot. She'll like it there. That teapot's a Wedgwood.