

# DEBORAH MOGGACH

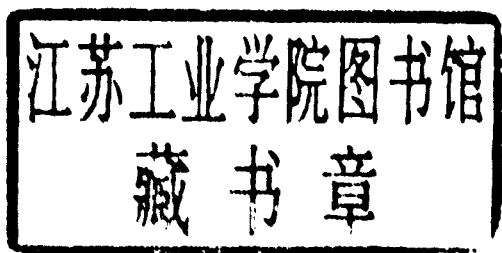


## STOLEN

An ambitious, dynamic novel'  
GUARDIAN

DEBORAH MOGGACH

— *Stolen* —



Mandarin

**A Mandarin Paperback**

STOLEN

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*For Roger, Cheryl  
and all the cast and crew.  
And especially for Tara,  
who started it all.*

# \_\_\_\_ PART ONE \_\_\_\_



## One

There's a woman in the next seat. She's Pakistani and she has this little boy with her. After take-off he brought out his colouring book; now he's filling up a cow with purple. I must have been staring at him, because he turns and stares back. He looks as solemn as a businessman; my son looked like that, once.

I don't talk on these flights, not usually. I can't read much, either. So I've put on my headphones but it's the same humour loop as last time, the Frank Muir one. His voice gets on my nerves. I switch past the pop music – batter-batter-thump, can't stand it, not today – then the classical, but it's something with a violin and my throat swells. I pull off the headphones.

The woman turns to me politely. 'Is this your first visit to Karachi?'

I shake my head.

'You've been there before?'

I nod. 'I was married to a Pakistani, you see,' I reply. 'Long ago.'

I went to this evening class, once a week, to learn French. I first spotted him in the canteen. He was sitting all alone, reading. It was 1968, the year of my suede miniskirt. Remember the sixties, when everybody wore suede and nobody got it cleaned? I didn't, anyway. Remember those Moroccan jackets that smelt of dead goats? They *were* dead goats. I wore musk oil, then. It was supposed to turn men into animals.

The next week I saw him again: a dark, handsome Pakistani. He had blue-black, shiny hair. I saw him through the glass, through the classroom door. I checked the list; they were doing Romantic Poetry in there. I was on my way to my French Conversation, which wasn't conversation at all, it meant talking into a tape. Outside it was a stormy night: branches knocked at the windows as I sat in my booth.

*'Je m'appelle Marianne. J'ai dix-huit ans.'*

The wind whistled in the phone wires. I didn't know anything then. Well, you don't when you're eighteen. I can hardly recognize myself. It's nearly twenty years since I first saw Salim, back in Ashford, Kent, where I was born and brought up.

I was living at home, then, and working at the Coach and Horses.

'He's all . . . smouldering,' I said to Sonia, who ran the pub. We were laying out ashtrays. 'He's got these big treacly eyes like Omar Shariff.'

'What's the rest of him like?'

'Slim –'

'Don't!'

'Lovely, tight little bum –'

'Don't!'

Bill, her husband, shouted across to us: 'Get a bloody move on.'

She looked at him coldly. 'Look at that lovely, tight little gut.'

He pointed upstairs. 'And Zara's crying.'

She ignored him. Their marriage was breaking up, but he didn't know that then. Sonia was screwing a plumber called Humphrey. She was my boss but she was also my friend: she told me everything. She was thirty-five; she seemed so experienced.

'What am I going to do?' I asked.

'Drop your books. It's an old trick but it always works.'

'I haven't got any books. We've got language booths.'

She straightened up, and looked at me. 'Marianne!'

The next week I waited, outside his classroom door. My arms were loaded. People clattered past me, down the corridor – old dears from *How to Write Romantic Fiction*, tired-looking blokes who were bettering themselves.

Through the glass door his class was rising. I was wearing my



angora sweater from Etam. When he came out I loosened my arms and the books fell on to the floor.

It worked. Everyone else pushed past, but he bent down.

He picked up a book. '*One Hundred Great Chicken Dishes*', he read.

'I'm doing French Conversation,' I said, blithe as anything.

In the canteen he introduced himself: Salim Siddiqi. We pushed along our plastic trays, one coffee on each. At the till he put both our cups on to his tray, and paid.

'We've been doing William Wordsworth,' he said.

'We did him at school.'

'I think he's one of your most wonderful lyric poets. Who do you like?'

'Bob Dylan,' I said. 'His lyrics are fab.'

We sat down. He was wearing a blue shetland wool sweater and jeans – and, oh, his eyes! You're supposed to hold a man's eyes with a steady gaze, sort of challenging, it said so in *Honey*.

'I haven't seen you around,' I said. 'You know, around here.'

'I've only been in England since three months. You've heard of Karachi?'

I hadn't a clue where it was, but I nodded. I was watching his mouth as he talked. All over my body, my skin prickled with lust and curiosity. My God, he was gorgeous. I've always liked dark, dangerous-looking men.

He said that his family lived in Pakistan. That's where Karachi was. His father owned a construction company and he knew the chairman of Cormorant Homes, here in Ashford. So Salim had come here to work. He worked in a sales office, out on one of the new estates. Ashford's full of new estates. His eyes were like a deer's, two deep pools. He said he was here for just a year, not only for work experience but to see a bit of England, go to the theatre, all that. He was obviously ever so cultured. He had a cousin in London, he said. He seemed to have bits of family all over the place – Montreal, New York – they must be dead rich. He said he lived in digs with a landlady who made him watch *Coronation Street* with her.

'Sounds a gas,' I said.

A gas?’

I was looking at his hands and imagining them under my angora sweater. They were beautiful hands – delicate, tapering, with fine black hairs.

We talked for ages. The other people seemed miles away, and when I looked up there was only one person left and the canteen was closing. With a clatter, the grille came down over the serving hatch. We both jumped. He smiled at me.

‘Fancy choosing Ashford,’ I said. ‘You must be daft.’

‘I didn’t know anything about England,’ he said. ‘I thought it would all look like a Constable painting.’ I wondered what his skin would taste like, if I ran my tongue over it. ‘I must say, I did expect the odd dreaming spire.’

‘You’ll have to make do with Allied Carpets,’ I said. ‘See, it’s a London overspill town, which means they got all the ugliest people to come and live here. It’s a dump. Wish I could get out. High spot of my childhood was spitting competitions in the bus shelter.’

He laughed. ‘I’m getting quite fond of it.’

‘You didn’t grow up here. Anyway, you haven’t met my parents.’

‘I’d like to.’

There was a silence. I looked at the skin on my undrunk coffee, and pushed some biscuit crumbs into a pyramid.

‘Aunty Hilda’s coming round to tea,’ said my mum.

*‘Elle est un cochon.’*

‘Wendy’s starting her Pitman’s in September. That young lady’s doing very well for herself.’

*‘Wendy est une vache grosse.’* I was sitting in the kitchen, eating Rice Krispies.

‘She’ll be getting engaged to Terence soon, I expect,’ said my mum.

*‘Je l’aime. Je veux faire l’amour avec lui.’*

‘What’s that?’

‘We’ve got to be cosmopolitan,’ I said. ‘One day they’re going to build a tunnel to France. Kent’ll be full of Froggies.’

‘It’s not the French I mind about; it’s all the other lot getting in. Catch me being prejudiced, but take our newsagents.’

*‘Je vais coucher avec lui. O la la.’*

‘Don’t be pert.’

I grew up in this terraced house, just behind the Ashford freight depot. They were small, mean houses, streets of them. I was dying to get away.

I used to smoke joints in my bedroom, listening to Radio Caroline. My bamboo wallpaper pulsed; outside, the backs of all the other little houses swelled and shrank, as if they were breathing. ‘Overspill’ made me giggle. Anything made me giggle. A haze of smoke hung across my Animals poster. How pasty they looked now, like boys next door – even Eric Burdon, the wicked one. They held their guitars like toys. I thought of Salim meeting my parents, and how my mother would talk too much, her usual reaction to shock. To anything, actually. My dad would compliment him on his English. Very good for an Arab. He’d probably expect him to have a camel tied up outside. My only daughter! he would think. So pure, so blonde, so English.

That made me giggle harder. I coughed, batting at the veil of smoke, breaking it up.

Salim came to the Coach and Horses, flinching at the smoke. The jukebox was playing Frank Ifield, remember him? *I remember you-hoo*. It was an old number, even then. Sonia had painted eyelashes for me, Twiggy-like, with a felt-tipped pen. Sixties spiderwoman, we all did it in those days.

I can’t remember what we said. Salim drank Britvic orange juice and looked out-of-place. I supposed alcohol was against his religion. With him there, the other customers looked more beery and leery. My boss Sonia, with her seen-it-all, leathery face, looked somehow blowzier.

He looked up at the beamed ceiling, with its nicotine stains; he looked at the horse brasses. ‘It’s charming,’ he said. ‘It reminds me of an Agatha Christie book.’

I nodded. ‘We had a knifing last week.’

'I just meant – I expect Miss Marple to come through the door.'

'You'll be lucky,' I laughed.

I stood behind the bar, pulling pints, feeling flushed and artificial. I felt I was performing on a stage. Tonight he wore a sports jacket; somehow, it made him look even more exotic.

Somebody put on the Stones. 'I won't be off till eleven!' I shouted over the din.

'You look beautiful,' he said.

I turned away to the shelves of mixers, so he couldn't see me blush. I had never met anybody like him before. He was like an interesting new cocktail – gentlemanly, but laced with something so fiery and dangerous that it only hit you later.

'You'll try anything new,' whispered Sonia, as she measured out a Gordons.

'Isn't he tasty,' I whispered.

She nodded. 'Just watch out.'

'What do you mean?'

The guitar swooped, the drums thudded. Beyond the bar, someone guffawed.

'He's not like us,' she said.

'Thank God.'

At that point I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. Nor, I think, did she.

We started going out together, me and Salim, in a shy way.

He hardly touched me, those first few weeks. I thought there must be something wrong with me. I ached for him, my ribcage hurt, I lost weight. I had never felt like that before, not with anybody else, not quite like that. Perhaps it was the sexual frustration. Most of the time I'd had to fight blokes off, struggling in the back of their Fords or their delivery vans, bumping into their spare petrol cans and steaming up the windows. Sometimes there wasn't much of a struggle at all. But Salim was different.

My skin felt tight and burning. I couldn't sleep. I wanted him, more and more. When I pictured his face, my insides clenched. Perhaps he was shy, I thought, because I was an

English girl. Perhaps it was his religion. I knew by now that he was a Muslim, and that they were strict about sex.

I washed the cigarette smoke out of my hair – pubs make you stink – and I sprayed myself with *Je Reviens*, classier than musk. Sometimes he took me out after work. We went to the Curry Paradise in Ashford High Street, which was the only place that stayed open late. It was deep red, like a womb, and we sat there till long after midnight while the sitar musak played and the waiter cleared his throat. Salim told me about his *ayah* – his native nanny – and how he and his sister would creep out when she dozed and steal mangoes from the next-door tree. He seemed to have grown up with a lot of servants – a cook-bearer, a *mali* who did the garden, except they called it a compound. His talk was full of strange words, strange vegetables and unpronounceable names. Perhaps I'd never reach him. His foreignness inflamed me, but sometimes I panicked. Perhaps they did it differently there, and when we got into bed I wouldn't know how. He was more than dark, he was a black void. I wanted to close my eyes and step into him. I wanted him to close over me.

Three weeks went by. He had a car, a Morris 1100. We drove out into the countryside, into places I'd never been before. The radio played; he liked classical stuff and I pretended I did. We walked hand-in-hand through the woods, blameless as the Start-Rite advert. Around us, the birds sang. He asked me what sort they were but neither of us knew anything about natural history. Then he spread his jacket on the grass and we lay down and stroked each other's faces. Sometimes we brought sandwiches but we weren't hungry. We just lay there for hours, kissing, our legs locked around each other. I got to know his body through his clothes. We must have broken all the records. I explored his mouth as if it was a new country, though the rest of the territory was forbidden. I was wearing jeans. Trembling, he ran his hand down my thigh, and then he pushed me away and sat up.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'I mustn't.'

'Why not?'

'I respect you,' he said. Then he paused. 'I love you too much.'

I didn't dare tell him I'd been on the Pill since I was sixteen. Even *I* wasn't that stupid.

The only person I could talk to was Sonia. She was the only person who had met him, and that made us closer. She was like a mother-figure to me, much better than my real mum. I remember one October day, waiting with her at a bus stop. She'd had an auburn rinse. She wasn't beautiful, but she looked game; she looked ready for anything. She was going to meet her boyfriend, and I'd promised to collect her daughters from school.

I was talking about Salim, as usual.

'Bet he thinks you're a virgin,' she chortled. 'Ho ho.'

'Keep your mouth shut or I'll throttle you.'

'You really fancy him, don't you?'

I couldn't answer because, just then, her bus came round the corner.

She looked at her watch. 'Now remember, fetch Zara and Kirsty at three-thirty, and I'm at the dentist.'

'Having your holes filled,' I said. 'What would Bill do if he found out?'

'Kill me.'

'Is it worth it?'

She smiled. 'You *are* young, ducky, aren't you?'

The bus arrived. Suddenly she looked radiant. She sprang in, flashing a smile at the conductor, at everybody.

She was right. I was too young to understand any of it, then. Adultery, Islam. All the words were just names to me, more foreign than my French. I was young and feckless, a bleached blonde in my white cowboy boots. I probably looked a bit of a scrubber, now I think about it, though I didn't think much about anything, then. I was just a child of the sixties, eager for sensations, eager to get away from home, itching for something foreign and exciting. And along came Salim, my handsome Pakistani. I hadn't a clue what I was letting myself in for. Not in those days. I just knew that when he touched me, I shuddered.

## Two

The little boy has fallen asleep, just like that, as if somebody has switched him off inside. He lies loose-jointed across his mother's lap. His hair is dark and damp; it's crowded in here, and stuffy. These flights always seem to be full of kids, behaving more obediently than British ones.

My son and daughter were dark, too. Are dark. Nobody would guess they had an English mother.

All these years; all these flights. Sometimes I've sat in the toilet for hours, while somebody rattles the door.

'Yesterday I parked in your street,' said Salim. We were sitting in his car. It was some weeks later. He was stroking the back of my hand. 'I waited for you to come out of your house.'

'Did I?'

He shook his head. 'You weren't there. Or if you were, you never came out.'

'You just sat there?'

He nodded. 'I thought of you growing up, all the years I've missed. Me in Karachi, you in England. My heart ached. I thought of you on your bicycle – did you have a bike? You and your friends I'll never know.'

'Did you really?'

'I even went to your post office. Around the corner. I just stood there. Well, in the end I bought some stamps. I just wanted to be where you'd been.'

I smiled. 'You daft thing.'

'I can't sleep,' he said. 'I didn't know it would feel like this.'

I kissed him, and rubbed my face against his shoulder. 'Nor did I.'

They're serving breakfast now. I can hear the rattle of the trolley. The little boy stirs and wakes. The stewardess passes me

a tray with a PIA omelette on it. The woman cuts up her son's for him, and butters his croissant. Outside, the sun is blinding bright. It had been raining in England.

She holds her cup, her little finger crooked, and turns to me. 'You said your husband's from Pakistan?' she asks.

I nod. 'From Karachi.'

'When did you get married?'

'Years ago. In 1969.' I sip my coffee. 'Twenty years ago.'

'We're getting married.'

'Come again?' asked my dad.

'Me and Salim. We're getting married.'

It was a Sunday morning that winter. I had just come down to breakfast. Outside stretched our garden, a shanty-town of sheds. There had been a frost. Dad's chrysanths had died, slimily. Their heads hung lolling from their stakes, like a row of executions.

My mum sat in her housecoat, waxy-faced. 'You can't.'

'When are you planning this?' asked dad.

'Next month.'

'Next month! What's the hurry?'

'But you can't!' said mum.

'Why not?'

'Are you, you know?' she asked.

'No.'

'What's the hurry then?' She stared at me. 'You can't!'

'Why not?'

'He's not – well, he's not –'

'What?'

'One of us.'

'Thank God.'

'You know what I mean!' she said. 'What's got into you?'

'Nothing.'

'Listen, love . . .' said dad.

Mum said: 'You planning on having kids?'

'Hope so,' I said.

'They'll be darkies! My own grandchildren!'



'All right, Dot,' said dad. He turned to me. 'Look, why don't you wait a bit . . .?'

'We don't want to wait.'

'He'll take you away!' cried mum.

'He wants to live here,' I said. 'He doesn't want to go back, his family's going to blow their top. He loves England – weird as that might seem when there's people like you calling him . . .'

'She's upset!' said dad.

'My only daughter!' wailed mum. 'He'll be locking you up –'

'Mum!'

'How many wives he planning on having?'

'Oh, five or six,' I said. 'But he says I'll always be his favourite.'

'Don't talk to your mother like that.'

'What're we going to tell people?' wailed mum.

'Tell them not to worry,' I said. 'He's fully housetrained.'

She leant across the table. 'He been giving you drugs?'

'He doesn't even *drink*.'

'Even the Beatles have. That Paul, he looked so dependable.'

I said: 'You haven't even asked if I love him.'

'Everybody loves him,' she said. 'He's got the nicest face.'

'Who?' asked dad.

'Not John, of course,' she said. 'Paul. Of course, they went to India, too. To the Maha-whatsit. Them and their granny specs.'

'All right, Dot,' he said.

I lined up the cruet, parallel to my placemat. I hadn't got this right, but how could I have done it? It made me sad, that I couldn't love them enough. Now that I was going to leave them they looked older and dumpier. I was the child of their middle-age and they had never quite learnt how to be parents. They had never, once, read me a story.

I had always escaped to other people. Salim and I weren't going to be like that. I wanted him so much, just then, that I thought I was going to be sick.

'I love him,' I said. 'He loves me. You don't understand anything.'