



DEBORAH
MOGGACH

THE
CARER

Mandy is such a godsend.
Or *is* she?



By the author of
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel

Robert

There were two women in his life who scared Robert. One was his sister and the other was his wife. They both knew him too well, that was the problem. Such different women, so vastly different, but they had this in common. That narrow-eyed look, their heads tilted sideways – he knew, of course, what they were inspecting. It was him. *Him*. The naked, cowering, cringingly inadequate human being, still curled in a foetal ball.

The children were different because he was their dad. However much they might complain, a dad's a fully formed adult. He's the constant; it's *they* who have the licence to change and grow, and change and grow they must. But they simply had no idea, no idea at all.

Robert was mulling over this as he took his afternoon walk. He missed his dog – still, after all this time. Without Bismarck on the lead his arm hung as useless as a flipper. He missed those moist brown eyes and unconditional love. Bismarck saw right into his quivering soul but unlike Robert's nearest and dearest he remained utterly devoted.

Did everyone feel this way? That if somebody cut them open they'd be appalled at what they found? He couldn't ask Farida; she'd dismiss it as the self-indulgent blathering of someone with too much time on his hands. His sister would be equally dismissive. She'd blame it on their parents

but claim that she'd been more damaged than him, that he'd been the favoured one because he was the first-born, and a boy. It would bring *that* old chestnut up again. If anything, their rivalry had worsened over the years.

When he'd mentioned this to Farida she just said, *Grow up*. She gave short shrift to middle-class neurosis. She'd inherited this toughness from her father. Salim was a self-made businessman who'd spent his childhood running errands in Bohri Bazaar and ended up owning the largest clothing factory in Karachi. Robert had never liked him and Salim had never liked Robert; he considered him a wimp, too spineless to take care of his daughter. After his expulsion from the City, Salim had become openly contemptuous and even Farida had had to stick up for her husband. How different was Salim from his own father, that gentle charmer! But then his father had always had it easy. Bookish parents, private school, nannies and dogs, top marks everywhere, that privileged upbringing that those who enjoyed it so totally took for granted.

The challenge was to get some of this into his book. Cross-currents, resentments, inadequacies, parental guilt, naked terror – in other words, normal family life. Robert's characters scraped a living on a smallholding in the wilds of Wales. Their days were spent in snowdrifts, pulling blood-matted lambs out of ewes, battling the elements, slaughtering bullocks, being trampled by runaway horses. Would they have *time* for all this family stuff, or indeed the vocabulary for it? Plus they lived a hundred years ago, which didn't make it any easier. To be perfectly honest, he didn't really have a clue what they were feeling at all. To admit this, however, was to surrender to panic.

Thank God, therefore, for Phoebe's wild man of the woods. Robert had never set eyes on the chap but he'd delivered the goods and for that he was deeply grateful. Because Torren had released his characters from their permafrost. The words started pouring from their mouths . . . *sythe, glantish, curmudden, glancrocket* . . . They rolled around Robert's tongue and onto his keyboard, visceral and earthy, filled with the stench of reality. They lifted his plodding prose and galvanised it. At last his farming family had sprung to life, cursing and cackling, stomping through the mud – the *kekke* – and at last, at long last, telling him their story. One event was leading to another with a momentum that was thrillingly out of his control. This is what novelists felt! Before, he'd been fooling myself. Now, miraculously, it had become a reality. In the mornings he could hardly wait to get to his shed and fling open his lap-top. No nap, either. In the past week he'd written 3,456 words. That was 3,267 more than he'd written in the whole of January.

'You're writing a book?' asked Mandy. 'That must be interesting. Help yourself to salad.'

'I believe it's set in Wales,' said his father. 'We used to have a cottage there.'

'Yes, love, I know.' Mandy gave Robert a wink. His dad had probably told her about the cottage, many times. The repetitions were getting worse.

'You could see the Black Mountains from the bedroom window,' said his father. 'At dusk, the bats streamed from the barn. The children ran free all day long.'

'You don't have to go to Wales for a story,' said Mandy.

‘Some of the people here, you should write a book about *them*.’

His father turned to him: ‘Did you know that Graham, next door, has no kidneys?’

‘Not even *one*,’ said Mandy. ‘That’s how he met his lady friend.’

‘He was having his dialysis, you see, and this woman came into the renal unit by mistake—’

‘She was looking for her goddaughter—’ said Mandy.

‘— who’d just given birth to twins,’ said his dad, ‘but nobody knew who the father was, though some people suspected a chap who’d installed her solar panels. Anyway, Janet recognised Graham – it turned out they’d met on some package holiday when they were both married to somebody else – and bingo!’

‘She said it was like she’d known him all her life.’

‘Isn’t that amazing?’ said his dad. ‘All these years and I’d had about three conversations with them. Mostly about that blasted Jack Russell.’

Robert watched him attack his corned beef. It was early in February and he’d driven down for lunch. Phoebe said she was worried about their dad but he couldn’t see why. The old man seemed in fine fettle. Frail, of course, and sometimes confused, but the chap *was* eighty-five. He could shuffle around the house and get in and out of the car. The steep, narrow stairs were now out of bounds but he seemed quite cheerful about that. Pointing at Mandy, he said: ‘She could be keeping a family of Romanians up there, and blessed if I’d know.’

‘And their pig,’ she said.

They both chuckled. Robert gazed at Mandy sitting there,

bathed in the sunshine that shafted through the window. She'd had her hair cut short, pudding-basin style. It was almost wilfully hideous; with that doughy face she bore a strong resemblance to Tweedledum. Or, indeed, Tweedledee. But on that winter's day she was dear to him. She had given Dad a new lease of life, and Robert certainly had no qualms about her, none at all.

A faint chirrup came from the kitchen. The great tit: two o'clock. Mandy cleared away the plates and brought in three mousses in individual pots: chocolate, strawberry and banana.

'Your dad and I can never decide which we like best so we toss for it,' she said.

Robert watched them squabbling playfully. Just for a moment he felt envious. It might be infantile but they were having a lark. A hoot.

'I know!' exclaimed his father. 'We'll all have a spoonful from each other's pots. Robert, being the outsider, can judge which is the best. His decision is final.'

Mandy said they bought the mousses at Lidl in Cirencester. 'It's our weekly treat, isn't it, Pops? We've got our favourite cashier, she's called Dymphnia. She's got a child with learning disabilities. She says her job's her lifeline.'

Lunch was over and his father suggested moving to the window where two armchairs had been wedged side by side. It was here that he and Mandy watched the birds. His enthusiasm was infectious and she was now an expert. A notebook lay on the table where they wrote down the different species: fifteen so far. Various bird-feeders hung from the branches of the apple tree – niger seeds for finches, peanuts for tits.

‘They come in from the fields because there’s nothing for them to eat there,’ said Mandy. ‘The big farm’s been bought by someone Chinese and wildlife is low on their list of priorities. They’d *eat* the birds if they had a chance. After all, they eat everything else, don’t they? Dogs and things.’

She said the Chinese owned the pub, too. The Foreign Secretary had been Instagrammed eating lunch there with some Chinese trade minister and the picture had winged around the world. Exports of the local beer had soared.

‘They like our Royal Family, you see,’ Mandy said, tucking a blanket around the old man’s knees. ‘British customs, bangers and mash.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Robert asked.

‘Bianka told me. She works behind the bar. She’s from Hungary but they’re almost like us, aren’t they? She said the old owner went bankrupt because there’s a supermodel who comes down at weekends and she kept booking a table for Sunday lunch, like for thirty people, then not turning up. All that good food gone to waste. So he’s thrown in the towel and gone to live in Spain. His wife stayed behind because she’s become a lesbian. She’s got a job at the riding stables.’

Robert was impressed. He had no idea all this was happening and nor, he was sure, had his dad. The village had seemed pretty boring to him.

‘I told you, somebody should put it in a book,’ she said.

Suddenly his own novel seemed pitifully dull and irrelevant. Why should anyone be remotely interested in hoary old sheep-shaggers a hundred years ago?

Mandy tapped his knee. ‘But I’m sure yours will be ever so interesting.’ He jumped. Had she read his thoughts? ‘You’re brainy, like your dad.’

She retired to the kitchen to do the washing-up, leaving him alone with his father.

They sat there for a while in silence.

‘Mandy’s certainly made herself at home here,’ Robert said. ‘In the village.’

‘You bet. She’s a people person.’

Robert looked at him. *People person?* But then he was using all sorts of new words nowadays.

‘I’m so glad you’re getting along,’ Robert said. ‘You and Mandy. The other two were such a disaster.’

‘We do, we do! She was devoted to her parents, you know, utterly devoted. She was an only child and very much loved. When they died she was devastated.’ He settled deeper into his chair. ‘I think she sees me as a sort of father substitute. And that’s fine by me.’

At the bottom of the garden stood a line of poplar trees, their branches lacy-bare, their trunks trousered with ivy. They cast their long shadows across the lawn, which was dusted with frost. *That’s fine by me.* Of course it was. By Robert, too.

Simpler, of course, to be a substitute; simpler than the real thing.

‘Fancy a martini?’ asked his dad.

‘What, now?’

‘Why not?’ He turned round and bellowed, ‘Mandy!’

Mandy seemed perfectly amenable, though she wasn’t a drinker herself. Robert heard the fridge door open and the rattle of ice-cubes, then she carried in the tray and two glasses. His father insisted on mixing the cocktails himself. His hand trembled, however, as he poured out the martini. Robert leaned over to help but Mandy got there first. As

her fingers folded over his, steadying him, she glanced at Robert. Was it a look of triumph, that she was the carer and now in charge? Or was it a look of collusion, that they both had to humour an old man and his eccentric demands? She wasn't like anyone Robert knew; he hadn't a clue.

'Tomorrow's a big day, isn't it, pet?' said Mandy, popping an olive into his glass.

'We're going to the Kidderminster Retail Park,' said his dad.

'Last week we went to Bicester Village,' she said.

'What an eye-opener *that* was,' said the old man. 'Have you heard of it? Streets and streets of shops in the middle of nowhere—'

'Burberry, Gucci, all the designer outlets—'

'We don't buy anything, of course—'

'Just window-shop,' said Mandy. 'And people-watch.'

'They pour in there, coachloads of them: Japanese, Poles, they come to England *especially to go there*. It's most extraordinary.'

Mandy nudged him. 'Be honest, what you *really* like is your lunch at Nando's. Tell Robbie what you like best.'

'Peri-Peri Chicken Wings,' said his father.

'With chilli jam.'

'With chilli jam.' He indicated Mandy. 'She's a wimp and just has a burger.'

Mandy giggled and cracked open a Pepsi. The two men clinked glasses and drank. Dad was right, of course. Martinis after lunch, who cared? He might die tomorrow. But Robert was starting to worry about his state of mind. That Rolls-Royce of a brain seemed to be dwindling into discussions about retail outlets and chocolate mousse. Was it due

to the company he kept, or was it simply an inevitable part of the ageing process? Whatever the cause, he seemed perfectly happy, and that was a cause of celebration. And, indeed, a martini.

‘*Dad, at Bicester Village?*’ Phoebe gasped. ‘You must be joking.’

‘He said he had a high old time.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Hanging out.’

‘*Hanging out?*’

‘Looking at the shops.’

‘*What?*’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘But it’s a ghastly place. Like a Dantesque limbo of Purgatory.’

‘Have you ever been?’

‘No! Of course not.’ She paused. ‘And he hates clothes. He’s always worn just any old thing. And Mum bought him those, anyway.’

‘They went to Nando’s.’

Phoebe burst out laughing. ‘No way!’

‘I know, I know,’ Robert replied. ‘He seems to be becoming a completely different person.’

There was a silence. He could sense Phoebe, down the line, considering this. ‘What’s she doing to him?’

The question startled him. He didn’t realise, till then, that he’d been thinking exactly the same thing.

Later, Robert thought about this conversation. Maybe he and Phoebe were being patronising. Why should they sneer

at something just because they didn't want to do it themselves? If, with Mandy, he was living another sort of life – well, bully for him. And bully for Mandy. She had a right to enjoy herself. It couldn't be easy, stuck in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter with a marginally incontinent old man with a fund of repetitive stories about people she'd never known. Cutting his toenails and taking him to the doctor. Bathing him and dressing him. Getting up in the small hours to help him to the toilet. Cooking and cleaning for him. Massaging his cold grey corpse's feet.

Neither Robert nor his sister was doing this. They had absolved themselves of responsibility by paying somebody else. So who were they to judge?

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THE CARER

by Deborah Moggach

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