THE DRIVING SEAT

Abigail Abbas

Polygon

First published in 2026 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

1

Copyright © Abigail Abbas, 2026

The right of Abigail Abbas to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. This work is reserved from text and data mining (Article 4(3) Directive (EU) 2019/790).

ISBN 978 1 84697 692 6
eBook ISBN 978 1 78885 745 1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Typeset by Initial Typesetting Services, Edinburgh



Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

For Ali and Lily

Chapter 1

The woman hollered across the bays, 'Are you going to pay for those?'

She meant the blueberries. Everyone turned to look at me, the blueberry thief.

'Shh,' I whispered, exhaling all breath. I pointed at the pram.

The woman looked at the baby.

I pulled the packet out of the carrier bag and scanned it performatively. I put it back into the bag.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm just a bit tired.'

She eyeballed me. She had heard it all before. There were no flies. No wool for the pulling.

Someone else's checkout was pinging, glowing red. They were waving a bottle of wine about like a Neolithic club. They could not buy their wine until the checkout supervisor let them. Vanquished, she moved on. That got me off the hook.

I stowed the carrier bag in the net beneath the pram and steered it out through the fruit and vegetable maze, down the little slope and out through the automatic doors. I was a creature of such heft and breadth with my pram and my carrier bags. In a moment I was on the High Road in the blistering daylight – out into the carnival of buses and vans and

cars and all the people in whose way I was getting. A clunking, inconvenient juggernaut. What a nuisance I had become!

My eye hurt. I was squinting against the light as if I had just been released from a pit. There was something wrong with the white – it was red. I needed to get it looked at. But I was terrified of doctors and hospitals ever since I'd had the baby. It was a hot, new fear I had. It must have had something to do with the amount of time I'd spent in them – in hospitals – believing that there was something wrong with the baby when the doctors kept telling me there wasn't. If someone asked me to describe hell to them, I would say it's hospitals.

Back at home, the baby asleep in the pram in the hallway, I unearthed the shopping from its polyester cradle and went into the kitchen, which was a slim galley, and stored the contentious berries in the vegetable drawer in the fridge. They were a blue-black reminder of my very near misdemeanour.

I will give you a glimpse of my life as it was then, and I will try to keep it brief.

If I was just pottering around the flat, I would sometimes open the fridge and imagine that an officious health missionary from one of those television programmes about eating was standing next to me, or perhaps even someone from social services, and as they appraised its contents, they would clock the blueberries and would understand that all was well in this household. It was clean, salubrious; it was *good*. I was scrupulously domesticated and I, Emma Propeller, was not someone to put on a list, or on watch, because I had blueberries in my fridge. They could move on to the next person, and perhaps that person had half an onion face down on the fridge shelf that had been in there for a couple of weeks or an opened tin of baked beans with a spoon marooned in it.

That's what I pretended, and I think it helped me to keep things to a passable level of hygiene. Whatever it took. It's like that thing people say, 'dance like no one's watching', but it was the actual opposite for me: 'mother like everyone is watching, all the time'.

Dinner that night was a messy affair, one of the messiest I had encountered. The baby had squash all over it. It was riddled with squash. I decided to bathe the baby. It wouldn't very well sleep with squash all over it, and I loved the baby and regarded washing off the squash as an act of love that I could get on with without having to think too much about how I felt while I was doing it.

I had bought a little plastic tub, a miniature bath, that I could place anywhere I wanted in our flat: in the kitchen, in the living room, in the nursery. There was no bath so I couldn't draw a bath for the baby. We had a shower room, and that should have been as good a place as any to wash the baby, but I did not like to bathe the baby in there because there was an atmosphere in that room that I did not like and to which I did not wish to subject it. I can't say what it was apart from ascribing it to *dark forces*, a sense I had of not being entirely alone, and I felt this acutely when I was sitting on the loo; I would be in and out of there so fast that sometimes I would leave with a trickle down my leg. I've always been attuned to that sort of thing, to the supernatural. I put it down to my mum. She was into that too. Beliefs permeate, like osmosis.

My husband told me to use the kitchen sink as a baby bath, but I once watched a video on YouTube that itemised all the bacteria that live in sinks. There are so many, and they are horrifying in their unique infanticidal roles that I couldn't bring myself to do it. I bought the miniature bath instead and

made a pact with myself to use it, installing it in the living room while *Pointless* was on. I had to fill it in bowl-loads from the kitchen tap, while the baby sat in the bouncer gawping at Alexander Armstrong. I had to prove to my husband that it was not a frivolity, which is what he said it was. I'm not sure why he even cared – he was hardly ever home; he made sure of it. I knew that he hated it there.

I checked the time on my phone, taking care not to drop it in the bath. Dropping my phone in the baby bath would be the start of the end of everything. I couldn't imagine ever recovering from an event such as a phone in the bath or down the loo. I doubted I would adapt to life without it. I would have to tell myself *this too shall pass*. That is what I had been telling myself ever since I had had the baby because that is just something that people say. It's a word pill, like *let me kiss it better*, or *you'll just feel a little scratch*, or *I do*. You say it in the same way you might take a paracetamol.

When I first heard *this too shall pass*, I found it frustratingly unhelpful, but when the difficult things did pass, I could see that it is true – things pass. Although I have to say that I never want the good things to pass. They can stay. They don't though. And no one ever says, while you're having a great time, *this too shall pass* because it would be a real downer and I have tried and tried not to be that person.

I had been gazing for several minutes at the phone yet had failed to register the time. I had wandered off again into a daydream. I checked it again and made sure to take notice. It was saying half past six. James's flight had landed according to the airport app. He would be at passport control now. He had hand luggage only. He was a frequent flyer. I wasn't. (I used to be.) I was not thinking about that. I had put those thoughts to

the back of my mind and would not allow them to creep out of that hazardous brain cave.

So, no bags. There would be no need for him to hang around at baggage reclaim with the pedestrians, as he called them. He'd miss bedtime.

Getting in an Uber. 40 mins.

There was no kiss. It was a conspicuously kiss-free message.

I put the baby to bed and, with haste, poured myself a glass of wine, knowing that I would need to get it into myself with a practised swiftness and in enough time for the smell to disappear from my breath. My husband didn't like me to drink. He didn't drink. He wasn't allowed to, not since he got caught with three of grams of cocaine in his wallet and a bottle of Jack Daniels clamped between his thighs, driving the wrong way down Curtain Road, EC2. We didn't talk about that because he was easily triggered.

I stowed my secret wine in the bottom of my closet under a heap of old trainers and drank it while watching things on the television that he thought were stupid like *Gogglebox* and *Love Island*. When I was on my own, there was no requirement to consider his happiness. And if the baby woke in the middle of the night, I would bring the baby into bed with me. I would have only one glass because I did not want to crush the baby I loved so dearly in my sleep.

A face-down onion would be the least of my worries were I to drunkenly crush the baby I loved.

At that time, I tended to sleep in the nursery with the baby. It was easier that way because sleep was important to my husband, much more so than it was to me, he said, and if he did not get enough sleep, he would not be able to do his job and his job was the most important thing in our lives. He

worked in the music business and had to work long hours and travel far and wide.

I had a job too but that's a long story. That wasn't working out for me. I had every intention of being a financially independent woman. But I wasn't the great success I hoped I'd be, let's just say that.

Forty minutes came and went. An hour passed, then two. I texted him: *Where are you?*

There was no reply. I called him instead. The first time, the phone rang and I left him a message asking him if everything was all right. I left it a little while and then I phoned again. But the second time, the phone went straight to voicemail and I assumed that perhaps he was in a tunnel or on the phone himself. Or he was in an area with no signal and had not been able to reach me. I phoned a few more times for good measure, but it still went to voicemail, so I stopped doing that. I was repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome.

It was now 9 p.m. and there still was no sign of him. I had no idea what to do. Yes, there were times where he'd go out at night and not come home until four or five in the morning, when he'd said he would be back at eleven, or when he said he'd call if he was away on business but forgot to, and I was used to that level of unreliability, but this was different because there had been an incongruous sense of certainty about his text.

I became keenly aware that I was going to have to act in what appeared to be an actual crisis. My brain was awash with complicated, panicky feelings. I was beginning to feel too much.

I phoned my sister.

'What do you mean he's gone missing? Chance would be a

fine thing.' Hannah chortled. I could hear her sucking on her vape.

'He sent me a text when he was getting in the Uber and that was around half six. But he hasn't come back yet.'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' she said. 'He's a grown man. You know what he's like. He probably got a text from a mate in town and he's gone to meet him for a drink. He just couldn't be bothered to tell you. Or he's too much of a coward. He's done that before, right?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Well, there you go. Don't worry. Get an early night. Have some you time. Have some of your special chocolate. He's probably just gone out on a bender. I wouldn't put it past him. What a shit. You must be shattered from looking after the baby on your own all this time.'

'Okay,' I said. 'I am. I really am.'

I was feeling sorry for myself. I was feeling sad and holy. And then I had some of my special chocolate and I fell fast asleep. I always found that sleep came easily when I ate my special chocolate.