

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Small World

Matt Beaumont

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About the Book

This is the story of a woman desperate for a baby, a stalker desperate for the woman and an au pair desperate for a new nose; a shoplifting sales assistant, a God-fearing nurse and a self-loathing policeman; a washed-up comedian, a luckless dope dealer and a murderer.

It's a story about a world where - whether you know it or not, and usually you don't - you are only ever two steps away from death or redemption. In short, it is a story about us, and the world we all live in.

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Matt Beaumont

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BLACK SWAN

For Maria, because this really is her book.
I just borrowed it and never gave it back.

Monday

Kate: What's going on in there? He sleeps beside me, betraying nothing. Two feet away; on another planet entirely. How can you be with a man for ten years only to be mugged by the realization that you don't know him? That inside his head there's a world to which you are not even an occasional visitor? Is this what happens to couples? You meet, learn his shoe size, favourite singer, general likes and dislikes – enough, basically, to feel *simpatico* – get married, switch off. Is this how he feels about me? That beyond how I take my coffee and my aversion to movie violence, he doesn't know me at all? No, I haven't got time for this. Not at two in the morning. In seven hours I have to stand before the partners and give the impression that I drafted the actual Employment Act all by myself. 'Contracts of employment: breach of contract and deductions from wages (PL810) . . .' Why am I reading this at gone two? Cameron's awake now. Crying. Poor little muffin. I'll go and see what— No! *I have not got time for this*. Probably wants his rabbit. Let Christie see to him. Come on, Kate, contracts of employment!

But, Marco, what the hell is going on in that pretty head of yours?

Marco: I'm outside the shop . . . Just like it is in real life, but enhanced . . . Shop: remixed . . . Pinker, more fragrant . . . Candles burning . . . Silky, pretty *things* everywhere . . . It's a shrine . . . To Her . . . And there She is. Where She always is, behind the counter . . . Just like real life, but

enhanced . . . Calling me . . . ‘*Marco*’ . . . She knows my name! I wonder if She really knows my name . . . In real life . . . That would be wonderful . . . But this is a dream, isn’t it . . . ? I wonder what She’s doing now. In real life.

Ali: I’m holding the pillow just inches above his head. I’m going to do it.

I am going to do it.

It looks so easy in the movies. Lower pillow, hold firmly over face, wait for thrashing to stop. Takes about ten seconds in the average Hollywood smothering. Probably considerably longer in real life. But I’m sure I could do it. Obviously, he’s stronger than I am, but with surprise on my side and my full weight on his chest – I’m a little heavier these days – I could finish him off, couldn’t I? And he’ll have died in his sleep. How utterly blissful. I’ll be doing him a favour because doesn’t everyone want to die that way? I know I do.

On he snores. Deafeningly.

In reality it’s not that loud. But over three hours the volume has swollen. The insides of my head must be acting as some sort of amplifier. It’s like U2 live; in a very big stadium; a humungous amphitheatre in Texas. No, not U2. I don’t mind them too much. Bono’s an irritating little oik, but I could possibly endure them for three hours without completely losing my mind. Someone more pointless. I don’t know. Let’s say Status Quo.

And on he snores.

Again and again.

And again and again and again and again and again and again and . . .

Status Quo sang that, didn’t they?

With each exhalation my body stiffens in anticipation of the inevitable, spirit-crushing inhalation. There is, as ever,

a beat – a second or two of silence before it arrives. But rather than offering respite, the pause only raises the tension. It's a Davina McCall trick. You know, when she announces, 'And the third person to be evicted from the *Big Brother* house is . . .'

before an interminable delay – and possibly a commercial break – calculated to draw out the suspense, but serving only to make me want to kill her.

I hate Davina McCall.

I hate my husband.

I would very much like to kill them both.

But this particular inter-snore lull is persisting. How long has it been? A good ten seconds. At least. Has he stopped? Has he actually bloody well stopped snoring? Can I *finally* close my eyes and go to sleep—

No, there it goes again, even louder, even more bestial than before. As if the little break has given him a second wind. I look at the clock: 2.47 the twinkling digits taunt. We came to bed three hours and six minutes ago. Paul fell asleep three hours and five minutes ago. Then, three hours and four minutes ago, I picked up the pillow and held it above his face. A little hasty, you might think, but I've been here before. Many, many times before. It's not the first time I've entertained murderous thoughts.

I looked into arsenic a few weeks ago. Small quantities slipped into food along with the salt, pepper and herbs build up to lethal levels over time and are virtually undetectable post mortem. I read *Flowers in the Attic* when I was seventeen. Everything you need to know about arsenic is in there. Everything except where to buy the stuff. I got nowhere when I typed it into the search box on the Tesco site. 'Do you mean Ariel?' it asked me. 'Bloody get lost, stupid web-bot, no I bloody do not mean bloody Ariel!' I shouted by way of reply. I was having a bad day. I attempted self-appeasement by adding Walnut Whips to my

shopping basket. My computer chose that moment to crash. A very bad day.

Just where does a girl get her hands on a deadly poison these days? Not at Britain's biggest retailer, evidently. And if not there, then where? Wasn't it true that in Dickens's day you could pop into the family apothecary and buy any one of several everyday toxins as easily as we now go into Boots for aspirin? I'm not imagining that, am I? I'm telling you, I stand firm with those who blame Tesco for killing the high street. Its chairman has long been on my death list. Above Davina. But below my husband. Who - in case you're wondering - is still snoring.

It is now sixteen minutes past three.

I can take this no longer. I have to work in a few hours. I have a shop to open, customers to smile at . . .

What customers? If I'm honest, the place is as dead as I'd like my husband to be. Let's blame Tesco, shall we? Some days I can count the customers on one hand. It's just me and Michele rearranging the displays as if they're deckchairs on the *Titanic*. Oh, we've got our stalker. But he never buys. Never comes into the shop, actually. He sits at one of the tables outside Starbucks across the street and stares. Once, sometimes twice a day, he's there, rain or shine - he has a cagoule. Michele thinks he's interested in me, but being eighteen and skinny and owning a different short skirt for every day of the week, she's far better material for an obsession than I am. No, it's Michele he's after. I don't know why he doesn't simply ask her out. She was single the last time I asked and he's extremely good-looking. Beautiful, in fact. A little old for her, perhaps, but who could refuse those eyes? I've only seen them from across the street, but they're like a pair of sapphire lasers. I wouldn't be surprised if they're visible from space.

Three twenty-seven. At 3.27 in the *morning* Paul adds insult to injury by letting one off. A prolonged farmyard fart. The evil, sick bastard.

Kill, kill, kill!

I inch pillow towards face. A downy murder weapon. Or Exhibit A, as it may one day be known. I'm going to do it. Clearly he has given me no choice. Any fair-minded (and preferably female) judge will see it that way.

'It is clear to this court that the accused acted only after years of brutal victimization. Paul Heath, a talented and conscientious journalist by day, transformed at night into that vilest of spousal abusers, the snorer. Over ten years of marriage and for at least seven hours a night, Heath relentlessly breathed *in*, before, with malice aforethought, breathing *out* again. Faced with such unremitting provocation, you, Alison Heath, were left with only one course of action, and, for your courage in taking it, society owes you a debt of gratitude. Now perhaps others like him will think twice before inflicting their heinous breathing patterns upon blameless partners. Alison Heath, you are free to go . . . What . . .? Yes, please, do take your pillow with you.'

Oh, maybe I won't get off so easily. It might take an appeal or two. But I'll be a *cause célèbre*, the subject of feminist articles in the *Guardian*. That'll be good for business, won't it? Sightseers will flock – possibly in tour coaches – to gawk at the woman who slew the snorer – and maybe they'll buy a velour throw, a scented candle or two while they're at it. With this pillow I can both suffocate my torturer and breathe life back into my little shop. Kill two birds with one stone, one of them literally.

That's right, Ali, lower the pillow . . . A little more . . . Just another inch . . . *Foiled*. He's shifted position, rolled on to his side. The offending nose is now buried in its own

pillow – no way I can get mine on top of it. And, if anything, the snores are louder. I pull the duvet over his head and get up. I'll bed down in a spare room. Only two of us in a four-bedroom house, so I have my pick.

2

Ali: Why don't I decamp permanently to one of the spare rooms? A fair question. I haven't moved out of the marital bed because, well, we're married. For better or worse and all that. It often strikes me as insane that on a nightly basis I squash up beside the world's loudest nasal passage, but what proper married couples have separate rooms? The Queen and Prince Philip? I rest my case. Besides, while I might hate Paul and sincerely wish him dead, I also love him.

'Juice?' I ask as he appears in the kitchen. It's half past seven. Paul nods and rubs at his eyes. The bastard has *sleep* in his eyes.

I pour from the carton.

'Blimey, I slept like a log,' he says. 'You?'

I yawn. Involuntarily. But if it hadn't come naturally, I'd have forced it out.

'Sorry,' he says. That's all, folks. *Sorry*. No need for more. As I said, we've been here before.

'Toast?' I ask.

'Think I'll go for All-Bran. I'm backed up like a Bombay sewer.'

As if it isn't enough to spend half the night listening to his bodily functions, he greets me the morning after with a report on the ones that I *can't* hear. If you ask me, it isn't a problem that ten-years-married couples don't talk enough. No, the issue is one of too much communication. I feel as if

I know my husband inside out and, frankly, I'd rather not. In the beginning, intimacy means moist kisses and sweet nothings. A decade on it refers to bowel movements.

'You look tired,' he says.

Tired does not even begin to cover it, baby.

'Why don't you go back to bed for a bit? Let Michele open up.'

'After last time?'

The last time she opened up she forgot to disable the alarm and when it went off she couldn't remember the code and after ten minutes of its Armageddon screech the police arrived, which was a good thing because while she'd been taking the necessary action – that is, running around in circles and pulling her hair out – some lowlife had snuck in and nicked the box of cashmere blankets that had been sitting seductively by the door. That, in a nutshell, is why Michele will never ever open my shop again.

'She'll be fine,' Paul says. 'Didn't you tattoo the code on to her forearm?'

'I wrote it on her Oyster card, but she lost it. Don't worry, I'll be OK. I'll just have a quick shower, then I'll be off.'

3

Ali: The shower has gulled me into feeling wide awake. Exhaustion has been replaced by sunny optimism. For now. I stare into the wardrobe and wonder what to wear. I jump as Paul's arms slide round my waist.

'What's the occasion?' he asks as his nose nuzzles my ear.

'What do you mean?'

'You're not wearing underwear.'

'Yes, I am.'

'No, it's *lingerie*. On a shop day.'

French knickers and camisole, lace-trimmed silk. I don't stock much in the way of underwear, but I couldn't resist these when a rep showed me the samples. I ordered conservatively and sold out within two weeks. Luckily I'd pulled out a set for myself when they came in. They've been gathering creases in a drawer for two months. To be honest, I was getting sick of waiting for a special occasion, so I'm wearing them today, a shop day.

'Very, very horny,' he whispers. 'If I didn't have that piece to finish . . .' I feel his cock harden and complete his sentence for him - brain and genitals singing from the same song sheet - and now I'm torn. To pieces, actually. This is the man that a few hours ago I wanted to kill, the man whose morning bowel bulletin left me frigid, the man that I'm mentally begging to take me right here against the wardrobe. I hate him, I love him, I hate him, I . . .

It's not him. It's me. Snoring apart, he's done nothing to deserve my mood swings. Am I difficult to live with? Well, sometimes, *I find me insufferable.*

He turns me round and slips his hand inside the camisole, but he's too rough. One of the vermicelli straps snaps with a pop and a triangle of silk flops forward exposing a breast. 'Oh, shit,' he says. 'Sorry.' Familiar annoyance bubbles up – it doesn't take much. But I'm still torn – rather like my brand-new camisole.

I hate you, I love you, I hate you . . .

The lust that lit up his face a moment ago has been replaced by fear as he waits for me to explode.

. . . I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you, I love you.

'Don't worry. I'll fix it later,' I say, shocking him by failing to hit the roof – if there's anything scarier than my temper, it's my unpredictability. 'What were you going to do just then?'

'Don't you have to open the shop?' he asks tentatively.

'What, for the five customers I'm going to get today?'

I shove him roughly towards the bed.

The phone rings.

'Let the machine get it,' I mumble into his chest.

Siobhan: 'Ali and Paul can't come to the phone, but leave a message after the tone . . . *Beep.*'

'Hi, Ali, Siobhan here. Just a quick one. I was wondering if you guys could come to dinner on Saturday. Sorry it's a bit short notice, but if you're free, we'd love to have you. Let me know . . . I'm home all day . . . OK then, bye.'

I put the phone down.

'Can they make it?' Dom calls out from the kitchen.

'Don't know. They're not there. I left a message.'

'I hope to God they can't,' he says, appearing in the conservatory.

'Oh, stop it. You and Paul get on great. And Ali's lovely.'

'Yeah, but . . .' he gives me a look ' . . . she's a moody cow, isn't she?'

I give him a look.

'Doesn't she just make you feel . . . you know . . . guilty?' he expands.

'No,' I say. 'Why would she do that?' When I'm dissembling, indignation is my default setting.

'Oh, come on. You, me: four kids; Ali, Paul: zero.'

'Don't be silly, Dom. She's amazingly strong. Whatever she's been through, she just wants to get on with her life. The last thing she'd want us to do is tiptoe around her and hide our children away.'

'Still, I'd sooner we met in a snotty restaurant. You know, the sort that thinks kids are bad for business. Like rats and cockroaches.'

'And what about this one?' I nod my head at Josh, who's clamped to my breast. Though he's small and exquisite, most maître d's wouldn't mistake him for a Gucci clutch bag.

'Who else are you going to invite?' Dom asks.

'I thought I'd ask Kate and Marco.'

My husband winces.

'*What?*' There goes the indignation again.

'No, that's fine,' he says. 'Just so long as you think sitting the woman who can't have a child next to the one who thinks giving birth was a monumentally bad career move is an excellent idea.'

'Kate's not that bad,' I protest. 'She's under a lot of pressure, you know. Her job demands an awful lot of her.'

'Why doesn't she give it up, then?'

'And live on what? Marco's income?'

'He's . . . weird, isn't he?'

I can't disagree with him. 'Beautiful eyes though,' I say.

'The eyes of a serial killer,' he says before returning to the kitchen to deal with Laura and Brendan, who, by the sound of it, have found the free toy in the cereal box. I shut out the screams and dial Kate's number.

Marco: The phone rings, but I ignore it.

'Marco, get that,' Kate yells from the hall. 'I'm horrendously late.'

I ignore her.

'*Marco!*'

'I'm on the other line,' I call back. I pick up the work phone on my desk and put it to my ear – just in case.

'Christie . . . *Christie!*' Kate shouts. 'The *phone!*'

No response. I heard Christie go out a few minutes ago with Cameron. I don't tell Kate that. I'm supposed to be on the phone, aren't I? I listen to her heels click angrily across the tiles. I listen to her snap *hello* at the telephone. Then: '*Siobhan*, hello, sorry, just running horrendously late. As usual . . . No, that's OK, I've got a minute . . . Dinner on Saturday. This Saturday . . . ?'

I cringe. Dinner at Siobhan's. Which also means Dominic's. He's a stand-up comedian. He nearly won the award in Edinburgh a couple of years ago. I've never seen him, but I'm told he's funny. He's never been particularly funny when I've been with him. He says it's because he's off duty. He says that when geography teachers go home they don't get up in front of their families and explain the structure of a rift valley. But actually, that's quite an amusing analogy, so I think he shot himself in the foot a bit.

I'm uncomfortable with Dominic. Even though he's not funny when I'm with him, I know that he *is*. The trouble is that I'm not – I have no sense of humour. So rather than say something painfully unfunny, I go quiet. Which makes Kate glare at me. Which makes me feel more uncomfortable. Which makes Kate glare even more. And so on.

'... Yes, we'd love to,' Kate says. 'Eight, lovely. Want me to bring anything . . . ? Just a bottle, then . . . Looking forward to it . . . Bye . . . Bye.'

She puts the phone down. I start speaking into mine. 'OK . . . Yeah, OK . . . Should take me a couple of days, I reckon . . . ' I hold up my hand as Kate's head appears round my office door. '... Email the jpegs to me and I'll call you back . . . OK, bye.' I put my phone down.

'That was Siobhan,' she says. 'We're going to hers on Saturday.'

'Oh,' I say.

'That's all right, isn't it?'

'Well, I—'

'Gotta fly. I am horrendously, *unbelievably* late. Who were you on the phone to, by the way?'

'Oh, just a cli—'

She's gone. Out the front door. I look through the window, watch her hurry across the block paving, shake the remote at her car, throw her briefcase on to the passenger seat, start the engine, disappear. I relax.

Today Kate is wearing a charcoal-grey suit – jacket and trousers cut straight up and down – and high black shoes. It's a scary combination. Though, actually, I think she wears it to hide the fact that she's the one that's scared. I don't get Kate. I don't really have any insights that shed light on her. Just that one, to be honest. You know, the power-dressing thing. She's presenting to the partners this

morning. She was awake half the night preparing. I was aware of her next to me. Fretting.

I turn to my Mac. I haven't got a lot on today. Nothing, actually. I should call some contacts, try to scare up some work. Email them at least. But I most likely won't. The wallpaper on my monitor is a picture of Cameron and Kate. They're on the beach, smiling, covered in sand. It's very sweet. I'm going to change it though. I go into System Preferences and set up a fresh backdrop.

There it is now. It's only a shopfront. But I can see her through the glass. She's plumping up some cushions in the window display. She's wearing a baggy green jumper and a big embroidered skirt that ends below her knees. She doesn't look scary at all. It's my picture of heaven.

Ali: I get to the shop twenty minutes late. Michele is waiting, talking on her mobile. Four cigarette butts are on the pavement at her feet. As I reach her she ends the call and grinds out a fifth with her shoe, but not before I've managed to get a whiff. I gave up seven years ago. Paul and I quit together after our first visit to the hospital. 'Your chances will improve markedly if you stop smoking,' the consultant told us. He was wrong, but, even so, we haven't started again. I love the smell of fags. It's nostalgic. Like Just Musk. I started both smoking and dousing myself with Musk when I was fourteen. My teens were the best years of my life (my memory having applied an airbrush to the Vesuvian acne, the crippling inferiority complex and the seven-year war of attrition with my mother), and I love it when a certain smell or a snatch of pop song transports me back. I wonder what Michele will associate with her teens when she's my age. Apart from cigarettes, she usually smells of McDonald's fries and something by Hugo Boss. That's my answer, then.

'Sorry I'm so late,' I say. 'You must be freezing.'

‘I’m OK,’ she says breezily. ‘What happened?’

‘Oh . . . Paul . . . lost his car keys. I had to help him look for them.’

This doesn’t – not even in a nudge-nudge *Carry On* way – begin to describe the sex. Which was good, all the better for being unexpected. And as I basked in the post-orgasm rush, I wondered, as I always do: *did he? This time did he make me pregnant?* That little bubble of idiocy popped when I spotted my busted camisole on the floor. *Clumsy bloody oaf*. Why couldn’t he be more careful? OK, so it’s easily fixed, but . . . He can be so fucking annoying sometimes. I wanted to yell at him then, but he was in the shower, singing a post-coital anthem. I’d calmed down by the time he emerged. Then we did it again. He bent me over the dressing table and jabbed it hard into my arse . . .

Ha, ha. You wish. What would you give for a graphic description of the kind of sex that got Sodom wiped off the map? What would *I* give? No, what he was sticking into my backside was a needle. A needle attached to a syringe. A syringe containing 450IU of Pergonal in saline solution. Pergonal, in case you’re wondering, stimulates the ovaries into producing lots and lots of little eggs. See? I’m no slutty sex kitten. I’m an in-vitro vixen.

IVF has governed my life for the last five years. Paul’s too, to be fair. This will be our . . . I’ve lost count. We’ve had a lot of attempts. Each time I get my hopes up a little less. Doe-eyed optimism turns into realism turns into cynicism turns into slit-eyed bitterness. The process is so gradual that you don’t even notice it happening.

If you go flat out, you can fit in an IVF treatment once every three months. Paul and I haven’t been going flat out for a while now, not since doe-eyed optimism packed its bags. We’re running out of steam. More accurately, *I* am. Paul simply goes along with my wishes, which is very sweet

but can also be intensely frustrating. Sometimes I long for him to sit me down and tell me in a kind but firm voice exactly how it's going to be. But, no, when it comes to attempting to make a baby, I make the running. To be honest, I don't know how much longer I can go on doing this. I want it to stop. I want to let the bitterness fade and be replaced by weary resignation.

Maybe then I'll be less moody. Sad, but - please, God - less *moody*.

'Run across to Starbucks and get us some breakfast,' I tell Michele, putting a tenner into her hand. Then I take my keys from my bag and open up the shop.

My shop. Heaven. That's what it's called.

I wanted a baby, but when that didn't happen, I got me a shop instead. It used to be a café, the kind that sells gingerbread men with Smarties for eyes and keeps a supply of toddler toys. N10 is mother country and the owner knew his market. When he sold to me the mums were gutted. Like junkies evicted from their crack house - I imagine. While I was doing the place up, they'd scowl at me as they wheeled by with their buggies. But they felt better when I opened up. I sell crack for mums: candles, cushions and throws, bath oils and beaded purses, leather-bound notebooks, handmade jewellery, the occasional bit of lingerie . . . My shop is beautiful. Heavenly, in fact. Basically, it's a shop for me. I'm someone who finds that when I can't get what I want, overpriced bubble bath helps enormously. I reckoned I wasn't the only woman whose brain was programmed that way. Not necessarily women who couldn't have babies but ones that needed convenient and preferably scented consolations whenever life came up short. I was right. Heaven has done very well, thank you. Though it has been worryingly quiet lately. Just a lull, I hope, before the Christmas frenzy.

As I'm switching on the till, Michele appears with coffees and croissants. I grab the bag from her and dive in. God knows why I'm hungry. I had breakfast at home. Must be the sex. I take a bite of buttery pastry and give her a hug.

'What's that for?' she gasps, slightly taken aback.

'Just a thank-you hug - for the croissant,' I explain. I'm not going to tell her I simply needed another nostalgic blast of stale tobacco.

Michele: I don't get her. When she was late I was sure she was going to be in a mood. You know, like she'd had a huge bust-up with Paul or something. When she arrived and saw me smoking I thought, like, *aagghh*. She hates smoking. When I nip out for a fag break I go round the corner so she can't see me. Then the hug. For a croissant. That *she'd* paid for. I just don't get her, man.

'Who were you talking to when I got here?' she asks.

'Only Nikki,' I say.

'How's she?'

That sounds really nosy, doesn't it? She's always asking me about my mates even though she hasn't met hardly any of them, but I honestly don't mind. She's just being interested. I think it's nice. I mean, she's over forty or something and she's dead posh compared to me so why should she care?

'Oh, she's moany as usual,' I tell her. 'Going on about how she doesn't have no life, how she never gets no sleep, blah, blah, blah. Honest, you'd think no one had ever had a baby before and it was her choice to . . .' I go quiet. God, have I blown it now or what? How stupid am I? The baby thing, of course! Ali's been trying for one for years. Then Nikki gets pregnant after like *one* shag or something and all she can do is moan. And I have to go and remind Ali

about it. She's going to be in a foul mood for the whole day now and I totally deserve it for being such an idiot.

She chews her croissant and looks at me. I try to smile at her, but it doesn't come out right. Then she says, 'If she's that hacked off, tell her I'll buy the baby from her. I'll give her ten grand - that's about the cost of two IVF treatments.'

My face freezes.

'*Joking*,' she says. And she's smiling, so I think she is. 'I feel sorry for Nikki,' she goes on. 'No one should be lumbered with a baby at her age. It's not fair, is it? Those that don't want them are stuck with them and those that want nothing else don't get a look in. Mother Nature, eh? Basically, she's a bitch.'

She's still smiling, but she could go off on one at any moment. I've seen it happen before. I'm nervous as she finishes her croissant. Then she says, 'Tell you what, nip over the road and get me another one - with chocolate in it. I am *starving*. Don't know what's got into me today.'

I don't know what's got into her either. As I head for the door she calls out, 'Oh, if you see your stalker over there, tell him to come in and buy something. We need the business.'

He's not my stalker. He's hers. I'm sure of that. She's welcome to him. He's a freak. And if he's in Starbucks, I won't talk to him. But she was joking about that, wasn't she? Who knows, the weird mood she's in?

I buy the chocolate croissant and sit down at one of the tables outside, the one that the stalker always sits at. I want to text Nikki. I feel bad now. I was a bit rude to her when we talked, and then Ali said she feels sorry for her. I get sick of her moaning, but I do feel bad for her. She hasn't been out once since Lulu was born. That was three

months ago. I text her. Tell her we'll go out tonight. I'll ask my mum to look after Lulu. She won't mind. Much.

Poor Nikki. She never meant to get pregnant. She's so dumb. Mind you, I've been dumb plenty of times. I've just been lucky, I suppose. But if it happened to me, there's no way I'd keep it. I'd have to be careful though. I couldn't go around mouthing off about abortions, could I? Not with Ali . . . you know.

Nikki texts me straight back. CNT CUM 2NITE LU GT COLD. What's wrong with that girl? Not Lulu. I know what's wrong with her. I mean Nikki. You give her a chance to have a break and she turns you down. It's not the first time it's happened. Daft cow. But I do feel sorry for her. I'll get her a present to cheer her up. Drop it off at hers later. I know, I'll get her one of those purses that came in yesterday. Tiny little things covered with floaty pink feathers.

Heaven is full of gorgeous stuff. Kind of makes up for having a boss who's a bit schizo. But I do like Ali. She saved my life six months ago. It was the first time I'd seen her shop. All this beautiful stuff. I'd never seen anything like it. It's all pound shops and fried chicken round where I live. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I was going to go in Ali's place and lift something. This pair of green leather gloves. I wanted to get them for my probation officer. She was trying really hard to sort me out and I wanted to say thanks. I saw Ali through the window. She was on her own and I could've got the gloves easy. Then I saw the little card. 'Help wanted'. I thought, wow, I could really work in a place like this.

I didn't think I'd stand a chance, to be honest. I reckoned she'd probably want someone with A levels and that, but she was so nice to me. She took a chance on me at a time when not a lot of people would, and I respect that. Big time. It was the first proper job I'd ever had. My

probation officer was dead pleased. Probably more pleased than she would have been with the gloves.

Mobile's ringing. The display says 'Ali'. I look up. I can see her peeping at me from behind the carousel with the handmade cards. I answer. 'Sorry, I was just having a quick fag,' I tell her.

'That's OK. Just hurry up or else I'm going to have to eat that pigeon.'

I see it. A scraggy one sitting on a parked car. A flash convertible. I so get where pigeons are coming from. 'Please don't eat it,' I say. 'I'm on my way.'

I stub my fag out, stand up and bump straight into him.

'Got any change, sweetheart?' he asks.

I've got what's left of Ali's tenner, but I can't give him that. 'Sorry,' I say. I offer him a cigarette. He takes two, sticks one in his mouth and one behind his ear. Doesn't even say thanks. I watch him shuffle off, looking for other suckers. I feel sorry for him, actually. I see him a lot round here, which is weird. You usually don't get tramps in areas like this, do you? Ali is at the shop window, scraping at the glass with her fingernails, making out she's dying. Better get over there.

His name is Steve: She had money. I could hear it in her pocket. What is she anyway? Black? White? She should make her mind up. Mixed ones are the worst. No fucker wants them. I see the next one. White girl with a pushchair.

'Got any change, sweetheart?'

You sick of hearing that coming at you in the street? Well, fuck it, 'cause I'm sicker of saying it. Over and over. But it's just like any other fucking job. Same old shit over and over. Just got to get on with it.

She doesn't hear me. Her brat's screaming. I do it louder. 'Got any change?' Her brat's fucking giving it some.

She ain't doing charity today. But her bag's open. Fuck, would you look at that? Purse is right on top. Dozy cunt deserves to get ripped off. Here we go. Into my pocket. Walk away. Fast. Head down. Get to the corner. Nip round. Anyone behind me? Course not. I can still hear her brat fifty yards back. Fucking hell, that was too easy.

Right, what's she got? Jackpot! What's that? A hundred? One *fifty*. Well, how about that? What's a kid like her doing with all that money? What else has she got? Photos, some plastic. I can get rid of that, earn a few more quid. Right then, plastic in pocket, cash in hand, purse in bin. I can get some new shoes now. The ones on my feet have had it. But first the offy. They normally turf me out, but they're not going to turn down a twenty, are they?

Christie: Stupid three-year-olds. I hate them. And I hate the idiots walking by, giving him pitying looks, glaring daggers at me. *He's not mine, you know*. Blame his parents. I'm just the staff.

He's still screaming and it's starting to rain. Thank you, God.

'Cameron, what is it?' I pull the hood over his buggy. 'Please tell me.'

Stupid question. I know exactly what his problem is. He's *three*! All the reason he needs to go mental. His face is crimson, his body is rigid and he's making those noises, the tiny gagging sounds that mean any second he's going to scream himself sick, literally spew his little guts out. It's chucking down now. I undo his harness, haul him out of the buggy and lift him to my shoulder. He's still screaming, but I cuddle him into me and with my free hand shove the dry cleaning and M & S carriers into the pushchair. I sprint for the car – not a car, a bloody great tank – at the far end of the Broadway.

Halfway there the screaming stops as quickly as it started. Now he's laughing. He likes running, you see, and he's letting out giggly whoops of delight. And even though I'm getting soaked, my legs are killing me and the buggy is threatening to tip over and spill shopping and dry cleaning into the road, I feel bad for hating him. I don't hate him, not really. Not now he's being cute.

But he's very . . . challenging. That's a nice way to put it. He wasn't like that when I met him at my interview. I reckon his mum must have dosed him up with Junior Valium before I arrived. And I reckon she must have popped a couple of the adult version because she was calm, sweet, laid-back.

Kate Lister is not one tiny bit laid-back. On day one I spotted the cameras. One in Cameron's bedroom, one in his playroom and one in the sitting room. They were disguised as those infrared burglar-alarm sensors. But I'm a professional nanny. I knew what they were. Me and Cameron were starring in Kate's very own reality TV show. One false move and I'd be voted out.

Yeah, yeah, she was only doing her best for her little boy. I was a stranger, I could have forged my brilliant references. She only wanted to make sure I didn't strap him down in his cot/feed him sweets from the banned list. But it didn't make any sense. Marco is home all day, every day. Couldn't he keep an eye out?

I've just had a thought. Maybe the CCTV was to catch *him* out. Who knows? He is a bit . . . odd. That's a nice way of putting it.

Whatever, the cameras have gone now. They were only there for my first month. I must have passed the test. And surveillance isn't cheap. Kate wouldn't have kept them there a moment longer than necessary. When it comes to money, she's very . . . careful. That's the nice way to put it.