This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Small World

Matt Beaumont

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

Copyright © Matt Beaumont 2008

Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

BANTAM PRESS

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 slee—

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

Copyright © Matt Beaumont 2008
Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd
BANTAM PRESS

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

Copyright © Matt Beaumont 2008
Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd
BANTAM PRESS

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 fourbedroom 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

Copyright © Matt Beaumont 2008
Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd
BANTAM PRESS

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.'

Copyright © Matt Beaumont 2008

Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

BANTAM PRESS