lovereading.co.uk Please print off and read at your leisure

The Book Boy

Joanna Trollope

Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

lovereading.co.uk

If you love reading, you'll love the unique benefits of lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author 'like-for-like' recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



First published in Great Britain 2006

Copyright © 2006 by Joanna Trollope

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 36 Soho Square, London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 8211 4
9780747582113

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Set in Stone Serif

Typeset by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All papers used by Bloomsbury Publishing are natural,
recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed
forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.joannatrollope.com

CHAPTER ONE

ALICE WOKE EARLY. She always woke early. Always had. Long ago, because of the babies. Now, when the babies were grown up, out of habit. She woke early and lay there, very, very still.

Ed didn't like it if she moved. He didn't like it if she got up, either. He grunted, if she moved. And if she got up, he'd say, 'Stop that!'

'Stop what?' she'd say.

'Stop waking me up.'

'But you are awake,' she'd say. 'And it's morning.'

That made him cross. If she told him it was morning, that made him cross, and then the start to the day was spoilt.

'Alice,' her friend Liz said, 'don't let that man bully you.'

Liz knew about Alice. She knew about Ed, too. Often, she tried to help Alice, but Alice was difficult to help.

'He doesn't,' Alice said.

But he did. He bullied Alice the way her father had bullied her mother. And both men, Alice thought, had an excuse to bully. After all, Alice shared her mother's secret. They both had – didn't they? – the same secret.

It had never struck Alice, as a child, that her father might have helped with her secret. Or her mother's. It didn't strike her that Ed might have helped her, as a woman. Or that her mother might have done something to help. The secret was just one of those things. Like frizzy hair or fat ankles. You had to live with it.

She turned her head. Ed's big body was turned away from her. His body was like a big dark hill against the dim light.

Alice would know the shape of Ed anywhere. She was good at shapes. If you were no good at words you got good at shapes. Shapes of people. Shapes of words. Sometimes, Alice could read a word because she knew its shape.

'Stop that,' Ed said, all of a sudden.

'Stop what?'

'Stop staring.'

'I'm not—' Alice began.

Ed rolled over. The duvet fell off.

'Stop staring at me,' Ed said.

'I wasn't staring.'

'You were.'

'I was looking,' Alice said.

He put his face right up to hers.

'Same difference,' Ed said.

'No,' Alice said. 'Not the same. Looking is just – is just –' She stopped.

'See?' Ed said. 'Can't tell the difference. What would you know, anyway? What would you know about words?'

Alice shut her eyes. Then she rolled on to her back and sat up.

'What are you doing?' Ed said.

Alice didn't open her eyes. 'Getting up.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Alice said, 'it's morning.'

She swung her legs out of bed.

'You woke me,' Ed said.

Alice opened her eyes. She looked down at her bare feet on the floor. In the summer, she painted her toenails pink, but they were bare now.

Ed put a hand on her back.

'Come to bed.'

Alice stood up. She still had her back to Ed. His hand slipped off.

'It's too late,' she said.

'No,' he said, 'it won't take too long.'

Alice began to move towards the door to the landing.

From the bed, Ed shouted, 'You woke me up!'

Alice went through the door, and shut it behind her.

In the bathroom, she ran water into the basin. Then she pulled her hair back into a clip and washed her face with some stuff in a tube, orange stuff that Becky had brought home. Becky was fourteen. She filled the bathroom with beauty stuff and then never used it. Alice used it instead, pink stuff, orange stuff, white stuff.

'I can't bear waste,' she said to Becky.

'I can,' Becky said. She was reading a magazine Alice knew was called *Heat* because people bought it in Mr Chandra's shop, where Alice worked. 'I can bear it with no trouble. Easy.'

Alice looked at her wet face in the mirror above the basin. There was orange stuff sticking to one eyebrow.

I am thirty-eight, Alice thought. Thirty-eight. I have a husband and a son and a daughter and a job.

She rubbed at the orange stuff with a towel.

I am lucky, Alice thought. I am lucky to have a family and a job.

She looked at her face again. She knew it so well she could hardly see it. She was very tired of it, too.

But I don't feel lucky, Alice thought. I don't feel lucky at all. I feel—

Someone banged on the door.

'Mum!' Craig shouted.

Alice stared at the mirror.

'Mum!'

I feel forgotten, Alice thought. Forgotten.

'Mum!' Craig yelled.

Like, Alice thought, something that fell down the back of the sofa. And got lost. That's what I feel like.

She went across the bathroom and opened the door. Craig stood outside. He was bare-chested and wearing track pants.

'Don't be so rude,' Alice said.

'You were bloody ages—'

'Don't swear,' Alice said.

Craig looked at her. He was now much taller than she was. He was going to look like Ed. In fact, he looked like Ed already.

'You're making me late,' Craig said rudely.

'For school?'

Craig looked amazed.

'Nah,' he said, 'I'm meeting Scott.'

'Craig,' Alice said, 'I don't like you seeing Scott.'

Craig pushed past her into the bathroom.

'You can't stop me,' Craig said, and slammed the door.

CHAPTER TWO

MR CHANDRA'S SHOP WAS on the corner of Alice's street. It took her two and a half minutes to walk there. Mr Chandra and his wife and his brother worked in the shop seven days a week from seven in the morning till ten at night. Sometimes, they worked till midnight.

When Craig was seven and Becky was six, Alice told Ed she wanted a job. Ed was reading the paper.

'A job?' he said. He laughed. 'Who'd have you?'

Alice was ironing. She folded a sheet and pressed on it. 'The shop.'

'What shop?'

'The corner shop.'

Ed put the paper down. 'Where the new Pakis are?'

'They're not Pakis,' Alice said, 'they're Indian.'

'So,' Ed said. 'They can't read English either.'

Alice pressed down on the sheet very hard. 'Mr Chandra says I can have a cleaning job.'

'What's wrong with cleaning here?'

'After I've cleaned here,' Alice said.

Ed looked at her. 'I don't want you cleaning a Paki shop.'

Alice picked up another sheet. 'I've said yes.'

'Then say no!'

Alice pressed down on the second sheet. 'I said I've said yes.'

Ed got up. His face was red.

He said, 'Well, maybe it's all you're fit for.'

Alice took a deep breath. She ironed very hard, very slowly. Ed went out of the room and, a little later, she heard the door slam.

That was eight years ago. For eight years, Alice had cleaned the shop, washing the floor, wiping the shelves, shining the windows. For eight years, she had learnt, by shape and colour, which the packets of rice were, which the boxes of poppadoms, which the jars of curry paste. She had learnt which chocolate bar was which. She had learnt which newspaper was which. She had learnt what to do with numbers.

Mr Chandra did not teach her.

'Ladies,' Mr Chandra said, 'don't need to know.'

Mrs Chandra could read and write in Bengali, but not in English. She used English for speaking only.

'She does not need,' Mr Chandra said. 'I need. I know.'

Mr Chandra read English newspapers and, when he thought no one was looking, girlie magazines. He was in charge of the money. He took it to the bank, five days a week. His brother was a silent man. He had a limp. He did what Mr Chandra told him.

Mrs Chandra was very noisy. She was in the shop, shouting at customers, or in the house, shouting at her children. She cooked, all day, big pots of red and yellow food. She gave food to Alice sometimes.

'Eat! Eat! You are like a stick insect.'

Alice liked the Chandras. They worked her hard and they paid her badly, but they did not speak to her as if she was a fool. They spoke to her as if she was one of the family. Mr Chandra gave her her money every Friday, out of the till. The bank notes were always dirty.

There was always something the matter with

the Chandra children. They were ill, or they were unhappy, or they were naughty.

'The children,' Mrs Chandra said. 'The children will turn my hair from black to white.'

Alice was cleaning a shelf where the tins stood. Tins of soup, tins of beans, tins of fish and fruit.

'I'm worried about Craig,' Alice said.

Mrs Chandra looked up. 'Your Craig? Such a handsome boy.'

'He's got a bad friend,' Alice said.

Mrs Chandra waved her hand. 'Oh, that will pass. We all have bad friends. It is exciting to have a bad friend.'

'This friend,' Alice said, 'is making Craig rude. He's called Scott. He's got rings and studs everywhere and I'm worried about drugs.'

Mrs Chandra looked alert. 'Talk to the boy's father. At once.'

'It's not so easy—'

'Why not?'

'Because,' Alice said, and then she stopped.

'Because what?'

Alice put down her cloth.

She said, in a small voice, 'Because Craig's

father doesn't think I know anything. He thinks I make things up.'

'Why?' demanded Mrs Chandra.

Alice looked at her. 'You know why.'

'No, I don't.'

'I can't—' She stopped again, and took a deep breath. 'I can't – read very well.'

Mrs Chandra looked amazed. 'What has that got to do with anything?'

'Everything,' Alice said. 'Everything. It makes me – different.'

'What you need to read for?'

Alice shrugged her shoulders. 'Everything,' she said again.

Mrs Chandra leaned forward. 'Why doesn't he teach you?'

'Oh,' Alice said, 'he couldn't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Because – it isn't his fault.'

'Not his fault?'

Alice picked up a tin of soup. 'No,' she said, 'it's not his fault. I was like this when I met him and he still married me. It's not his fault. It's mine.'

There was a silence.

Then Mrs Chandra said, in a very loud voice,

'You are mad. Quite mad.'

Alice put the tin on the shelf. 'Yes,' she said. 'That's what Ed thinks I am. And that's what Craig is starting to think I am, too. So why should they listen to me?'