

EXTRACTS FROM 'BEAUTIFUL DAY'

PHILIP

I don't think I've ever seen a picture of such complete misery. He was a big man and looked about forty-five although he was thought to be younger. He was sitting in a little scrappy armchair clutching a couple of plastic bags filled with colouring books and felt-tip pens. He was rocking gently, back and forth, and every so often would sweep his huge hand across his face and then shake his head as though in disbelief or as if he was trying to shake off whatever thought had just entered his befuddled mind – a gesture of utter confusion and fear.

'Hello, Philip,' I said. 'I've so been looking forward to meeting you.' And he turned to me and despite his bewilderment, gave me the most beautiful, watery smile.

He had a huge lumpy bruise on his forehead.

'What have you been doing?' I said. 'You look like you've head-butted a fridge.' But he said nothing and just looked at his feet.

As I went over to shake his hand, he stood up and a whiff came off him akin to an elderly wildebeest. Obviously, the first thing that was needed was a bath.

RACHEL

The following day passed in a fuzz of housework and the making of four cottage pies – one for that day and three for the freezer. All part of the new regime now that I was working. Henceforth, my

fridge would forever be full of home-cooked meals and my laundry basket empty.

Eventually, it was time to pick up the kids. As I crossed the playground to get Jess, my shoulders drooped at the sight of Alessandra. Alessandra is the most beautiful mother at our school. Along with fine bones and straight, thick blonde hair **the colour of Shredded Wheat**, she wears chic, understated jewellery and her clothes are well-cut and very expensive.

I'm as fond of her as I can be of someone with whom I have nothing in common and whose legs end roughly where my armpits begin. She's not a friend but then she's more than an acquaintance. Dom and I have been to supper at her house and big, good-natured family Sunday lunches. Her husband Mark is probably a total git to live with but he makes me laugh and is really good company. He's very rude to her and teases her incessantly and she doesn't seem to notice or if she does she doesn't mind. She is Italian and her son is in Luke's class. He is called Lorenzo which she pronounces 'Lorennnnzo'. I am ashamed to say that it gives me huge pleasure at going-home time when all the children and the teachers chorus: 'See ya, Loz,' and she winces.

All week, Luke had been saying, 'I'm going to see Lorenzo on Sunday!' and I hadn't taken much notice. I was due to be at work and Dom was having the children so there was no way he could go anyway. But as he tumbled out of the classroom, his arm around Lorenzo, he was saying, 'And have you got a Wii? What games have you got?'

'Hi there,' I said and both little boys looked up, clasped together as if they were taking part in a three-legged race.

‘On Sunday, can I take my *Guinness Book of Records* to Loz’s house?’

‘No, sweetheart. I told you, you’re going to Dad’s on Sunday.’ I was aware that Alessandra was now standing next to me. One glance at her made me uncomfortable. She took a deep breath and said awkwardly, ‘Actually, they *are* coming to us on Sunday.’ She tried to sound chatty and matter-of-fact. ‘Mark used to work with Deborah’s father many years ago and they have stayed in touch. So you can imagine when they made the connection, Mark said that they should all come to our house on Sunday for lunch and ...’ She petered out. I could feel my mouth had set in a strange grimace and I was turning red.

‘I see. Of course. Of course.’ I grabbed Luke and steered him towards the gate. Jess trotted along behind us.

‘Mummy, are we going to Loz’s house?’ she kept asking.

We galloped along the road, dodging children, mothers, scooters and buggies, and made it to the car.

‘Mummy! Are we going to Loz’s house?’

I sat down, shut the car door and put my head in my hands. I squeezed the tips of my fingers hard against my closed eyes, trying to pull myself together just as there was a little click and Alec let himself into the seat beside me.

He squirmed along and put his arm around me. ‘Mum? What is it? What’s happened?’

‘Nothing darling, I’m being so stupid,’ I said, determined not to let great black tears of yesterday’s mascara start running down my cheeks. Is this what a breakdown was? When you couldn’t last five minutes without either blubbing all over your children or screaming at them like an irate chimpanzee?

‘Are we going to Loz’s house?’ Jess said irritably from the back seat. ‘My seatbelt’s all twisty. When are we going to their house? Mummy? Are we going to Loz’s house with Dad? MUMMY!’

‘Yes, Jess, all right! You’re going to Loz’s house.’ I turned around and leant over the top of the seat trying to fix her seatbelt.

‘Are we?’ said Alec.

Trying to sound cheery I said, ‘Apparently, you’re all going over to Alessandra’s house on Sunday with Dad and Deborah and it just gave me such a shock that’s all. It’s the sort of thing we used to all do together.’

‘I won’t go. I won’t go to Lorenzo’s house. Do you want me to come home on Sunday? I’ll come back and we can do something together.’

This made me get a grip. I swept my hands across my face and gave Alec’s knee a squeeze.

‘No, honestly, I’m being ridiculous.’

At that moment someone hammered on the window. It was my friend Grace. Beautiful, calm, wonderful Grace. I was so flustered that although I pushed every button at my disposal, I managed to put down both the back windows but not the one she was at. So she just shouted through the glass, ‘Tea?’ and I gratefully pointed the car in the direction of her house and sanctuary.