

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU WANT TOO MUCH

A novel by Emma Pivato

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my late mother-in-law, Meri Sabucco Pivato. In the few short years I knew her she taught me much on how to live and be in this world. And in the many years gone by since her death she has lived on in my mind as an enduring role model and a source of inspiration.

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Disclaimer: With the exception of the individuals mentioned on the acknowledgement page none of the characters mentioned in this book are meant to refer to anyone living or dead.

What Happens When You Want Too Much

Chapter One – A Morning with the Marchyshyns

Jesse opened her eyes slowly and squinted at the early morning light filtering through the vertical blinds. She lay quietly for a moment and then called out softly. She waited ... no response. Jessie called again, a little louder this time and ending with a warning cough. Presently her father appeared. She could just make out the white and brown stripes that he wore when it was dark. Jessie was cortically visually impaired. Her eyes were structurally normal but the occipital cortex, the part of the brain responsible for processing visual input, was badly damaged. She could see movement and make out high contrast objects, her fathers dark hair against his face, for example, and some patterns like the pyjama stripes, but that was all.

“What’s the matter, Jessie? Do you need to go to the bathroom? It is too early to get up yet; it’s Saturday,” he whispered in the soft, indulgent tones he saved just for her. She could not answer in words, of course, and he did not expect it, but she gave him an affirmatory little cry. “Okay,” he responded, and began undoing the night splints she wore preparatory to strapping her onto the commode that was always by her bed at night. After her bathroom needs were met he redressed her, washed her hands and face with a warm face cloth and placed her in her wheelchair to wait for her day assistant to arrive. “Amy will be here in 15 minutes”, he said, wheeling her out to the kitchen. “Just be patient!” He turned on the lights and some music and placed her at the kitchen table ready for breakfast. Then he left. She did not know where. Jessie did not understand “15 minutes” but she did know from years and years of experience that she would not be sitting there if someone was not expected to arrive shortly to look after her, so

she waited patiently. Soon, Amy arrived and her day began: breakfast, bath, dressing for the day, exercises, lunch, and then into the van for her daily outing. Today she was going to see an IMAX show at the Space Sciences Centre. Jesse did not know that, of course, but she knew when she heard the sound of the wheelchair lift in the van that interesting things were going to happen.

Just as Jessie was leaving her mother arrived and came up to the van to talk to her for a minute. “Where are you going, Jess? Sorry I was out this morning when you got up but I had business to do”. Jessie recognized the voice but could not make out the mother shape because of her mother’s light hair blending into her face. Jess understood the word, ‘sorry’. Her mother often used it and she was often away. Her dad never used it and he seemed to be always around somewhere. She did not know exactly where because she only knew the places where she lived: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and her work/recreation area. But she heard the words “stairs” and “work” often. Where her parents went, when they were not with her had something to do with stairs and work.

Ophelia entered the house and called out to her husband. “Are you there, Dan?” “Is that you, Phil? he responded. Everybody called her Phil. It wasn’t a very feminine name but it was better than Ophelia, her mother’s unfortunate whim of a name choice. Dan came up the stairs from his office to meet her. “Where did you go off to so early this morning?” he asked.

“I had to see a client. She has been out of town all week on a sales trip and this was the only time we could get together to select the samples for her new living room.”

Ophelia was an interior designer and the nature of the work meant that her schedule was largely dictated by the convenience of others. Dan was used to this. He was proud of his wife who had won several prizes for her innovative room decors but at times he wished

she was a little more domestic. It would be nice to come home to a clean, uncluttered house. Strangely enough, Ophelia's highly developed aesthetic sensibilities on the job did not extend to any particular pride or concern over her own domestic situation and there always seemed to be some degree of disorganization at home and more than a little dust if you knew where to look for it. Phil did clean sporadically but these urges were not that frequent and that crisp, newly cleaned and polished effect blurred after a few days. What did motivate her to clean up were their somewhat infrequent dinner parties, about the only time they ever had people to the house. Therefore, friends and acquaintances alike had the impression that Phil was a more conscientious housekeeper than was in fact the case. And she was an excellent cook when she put the effort into it.

“What would you like to do this afternoon?” Phil asked. “Jesse will be gone for a couple of hours and we have staffing for the evening for her.” “Actually, I’m in the middle of writing up a big contract and I’d like to get it ready before Monday,” Dan replied. Phil sighed in frustration. It was the story of their life together. When she wasn’t busy Dan was and when they did have some free time together they felt obliged to spend it with Jessie. Lucky they had never had any other children. It was difficult to see how they could have fitted them in. But even as she said this to herself Phil sighed wistfully. Then she felt guilty. She did have Jessie, after all. Even if Jessie could not walk or talk or sign and had to be helped to do everything she still brought a certain amount of joy and satisfaction to their lives - when they discovered something new that appealed to her, for example. Phil still remembered the first time they had taken Jessie to the new wave pool at West Edmonton Mall and how excited she had been when the waves hit her. That night Jessie had slept 10 hours straight, quite a switch from her usual behaviour which was to call out for attention once or twice throughout the night on average.

Phil went downstairs to visit with Dan who had returned to his office. Although they seemed to lead these parallel lives they were still each other's closest friend and got a lot of satisfaction out of talking and sharing. "A funny thing happened to me this morning!" Phil said. "What?" was the abstracted reply, as Dan turned another page. Phil said nothing. They had played this game a thousand times. If his contract was more interesting than her she was not going to waste her breath begging for his attention. In a minute Dan raised his head, belatedly recognizing his grudging response. "Let's go sit in the other room", he said. They moved to the cosy family room in the basement. Although it had no windows it was warm and lushly carpeted and decorated in varying shades of leafy green and egg yolk yellow. The effect, startling at first, was warm and appealing. Their choice to sit there was partly due to this, a visual escape from the Edmonton weather most of the year, and partly due to their desire for some privacy, given that much of the time there was an assistant working with their daughter on the main floor.

"Now, tell me what happened this morning ... and then tell me what we are having for supper." he added humorously.

"I don't quite know what to make of it", Phil responded. "I'm still trying to figure it out."

Dan perked up his ears at this, knowing it not to be a prelude to gossip or the normal type of observation he and many others would make. His wife had a peculiar turn of mind. In some ways she was almost obtuse, missing the obvious in her observations of both the animate and the inanimate. But in another way she was unusually astute, catching and storing nuances other people missed. They could sit in storage for considerable time before she would bring them out, put them together with something else seen, heard or imagined and create an original and often right interpretation of what often seemed like nothing more than a mundane

piece of trivia. So Dan listened more attentively than many husbands might have listened.

I got to the Elves house about 9:15 this morning and Megan met me at the door. I know she just got back from a buying trip last night and was probably still tired but she really looked terrible and she was wearing this ugly old dressing gown when she usually looks so smart. We had coffee together and when she picked up her cup I noticed her hand was trembling. She had put the cups on the dining room table and was carrying hers over to a chair and somehow she tipped it too much and a little slopped onto the new rug. She jerked her arm to correct the cup tilt and the sleeve on her gown fell back. Dan, there were these ugly red tracks all the way down it!”

“Sounds like she’s a druggie”, Dan replied.

“Yes,” Phil said. “But that is not all. There were some really wicked looking bruises on her arm as well. I tried to go through the samples with her but she just wasn’t into it. I finally agreed to come back in a couple of weeks, the next time she can fit me into her schedule”.

“Do you think her husband assaulted her?” Dan asked.

“I don’t know. He was just leaving the house when I arrived and he looked kind of grim, like maybe they had been arguing”.

“Sounds like a messy situation, whatever the details. Don’t get anymore involved than you have to and finish up with that contract as soon as you can. That’s my advice” Dan offered.

“I plan to”, Ophelia responded, but thought to herself: “Typical male! Only interested in him and his.”

Chapter Two – An Almost Terrible Accident

It was the following Friday that Phil had her next call from Megan Elves. Could she come on Saturday morning so the samples could be chosen? Phil thought quickly. She would like to get this contract over with but her day was already filling up. “I could come early, about 9:30, but I would have to bring my daughter with me. Our Saturday person is sick and the sub can only come in around 11:00. Would your husband be there to help me get her wheelchair up the steps?”. Megan was a tiny person and Phil was not about to try negotiating four front steps with only her assistance! “That is just fine if you bring Jessie. I’m sure that Jimmy will still be home at 9:30 but he may not be there by the time you are ready to leave, that’s the problem”. “That’s okay”, Phil replied. “I can back the chair down the steps if you hold the front to brace it a bit. We’ll see you tomorrow, then. Bye for now.”

Phil and Jessie arrived at the Elves the next morning, promptly at 9:30. The front door was closed and Phil had to leave Jessie at the bottom of the steps and ring the bell. It took a couple of minutes for Jimmy Elves to shuffle to the door and open it and a couple more before he had his jacket and shoes on to help. He came down the steps without a word, took the left side of the wheelchair and helped carry it up in silence.

Once Jessie was deposited in the front hall Jimmy retreated to the nether regions of the house and Megan emerged from the kitchen with a dishtowel still in hand. “Oh... hi. I was just finishing off the breakfast dishes. I’ll just put this down and be right with you. Take your coats off. There are hangers in the closet behind you”. That was never as simple as it sounded where Jessie was concerned, as her arms were very stiff, and it took Phil several minutes to wrestle Jessie’s jacket off and get her support straps re-fastened. Jessie complained

the whole time but then quieted immediately. It always amazed Phil how happy Jessie was to be out – almost anywhere... and how contented she was on these occasions unless she had a seizure or a muscle pain.

The three of them settled down in Megan's living room. After Megan had made the usual bright and stilted conversation for about five minutes, pretending she was talking directly to Jessie, and inquiring of Phil in circumlocutory terms about Jessie's "condition", Phil brought out her samples and they got down to business. They had worked for about 45 minutes, settled on the drapes and were just trying to choose between three slightly different shades of fabric for the sofas when Jessie started to cough. With practised efficiency Phil whipped out a bib and a sealed plastic water sipper.

Because of Jessie's difficulties in swallowing, saliva often built up in her mouth and then would trickle down slowly and cause her to gag. For some reason giving her water tended to break the resulting gag cycle and Jessie never went out without her water bottle. However, the water wasn't working this time and Jessie just kept coughing.. Then her face started to turn grey and she struggled convulsively. Phil recognized the signs of an obstruction and fumbled to get the wheelchair tray off and the straps undone so she could assist Jessie. In her preoccupation she did not hear Jimmy enter the room in his silent slippers. Before she knew what was happening he had plucked Jessie out of her chair, and was sitting down with her on his lap on a dining room chair. His hands were knotted under her rib cage and then he jerked them upward in a smooth and classic Heimlich manoeuver. A walnut chunk flew out of Jessie's mouth and she slumped forward against his arms. In a few seconds she started crying softly. Jimmy turned her sideways across his knees, cradled her body with his right arm around her chest and rocked her gently back and forth. His left hand was rubbing her back gently and he

was making soft, crooning noises. “It’s okay, now. You’re okay. Just relax. Poor little girl”. Jessie quieted and he continued to rock her silently and gently for a couple more minutes. She turned her head towards him and laid it on his shoulder, breathing in his comforting male smell. She felt safe with him and she felt like he understood her. He was one of the good ones.

“Jessie always knows the good people,” Phil said, reading Jessie’s thoughts as she so often did. But she remained collapsed in the rocking chair, breathing hard in recollection of what had happened and the horror out of what could have happened. Jimmy handed Jessie to her, saying matter of factly “I think she’ll be okay now” and left the room quickly before she had a chance to thank him. Phil rocked back and forth with Jessie for several minutes before her own trembling stopped and she could trust herself to speak. “That husband of mine” she said. “That man! He fed her breakfast and I bet he gave her some of his Muesli. He is always afraid she doesn’t have enough variety in her diet. Jessie has a high upper palate with a pocket like indentation in it like many people who have experienced oxygen deprivation at birth. Food can get packed in there and work loose later. That Muesli has nuts in it and I have told him it is dangerous but does he listen? No! He just gets on this sentimental jag about deprivation!”

All this time Megan had remained standing and silent. She did not look upset, just socially uncomfortable, and now she made the conventional noises about how terrible it had been and how hard the situation must be for Phil and Dan. Eleven years was a long time to hear this stuff and Phil’s antennae were pretty finely tuned at this point. She recognized the remarks for what they were, an endeavour to make a socially correct response to a totally novel situation that came more from an etiquette book than from the heart. Phil brushed it aside politely and returned to the subject of the sofa samples. She suggested they step outside with the fabric

samples to examine them in the morning light, assuring Megan that Jessie would be alright sitting in the rocking chair alone for a couple of minutes.

Once outside the decision became much easier and in 20 minutes all the decorating choices which Megan needed to make for the time being had been made. As she was putting on Jessie's jacket Phil gave the time lines to Megan. It was now August 3rd and the upholsterers would be finished with the furniture in three weeks if the fabric was in stock. The drapes would be ready about the same time and the painters had agreed to do their part within the next three weeks as well. Unless something totally unpredictable happened the new decor should be fully in place by the first week in December.

Chapter 3: A Family Fight and a Friendly Swap

When Phil got home with Jessie Dan was back at his computer. "Close it!" she said - "Or I'll shut it off myself. I have to talk to you right now!" Dan recognized the ominous tone in her voice and quickly saved his work and shut down the computer. He swivelled around in his chair and asked her what was wrong. She told him, sparing none of the details and telling him in scathing terms what she thought of his cavalier disregard for her conservative breakfast menu. Dan defended himself, blaming Phil instead for not bothering to explore new taste possibilities for Jessie, declaring that she was depriving Jessie in the only area in life where she had some freedom to explore. They continued to argue heatedly for several minutes until Jessie, waiting patiently on the sidelines, began to get upset by the tone of their voices.

They left the issue unresolved with Dan turning back to his computer and Phil going off to place Jessie on her commode and prepare her lunch. Neither of them felt very good about what had happened. As they grabbed a bowl of soup together later Dan told Phil that he had an appointment and would be going out shortly and returning that evening. The assistant

had arrived and was feeding Jessie lunch in the dining room. They were trying to be discreet so she did not have to be a party to their marital dispute but it was just as well Dan was leaving.

“Don’t forget Larry and Jan are coming over after dinner” she reminded him.

Phil had been looking forward to a visit with their good friends all week but now she dreaded it. She hated it when she and Dan fought. They were normally so close that it seemed like the world had turned to black and white. (Phil, a strongly visual person, categorized her emotions in terms of colours). How were they going to get through the evening? “I’ll grab a bite to eat downtown,” Dan said coldly, and be back before they arrive at 7.” He left without another word. Phil looked around at her dusty house morosely and ate a banana to finish off her skimpy lunch. She called out to Jessie and her assistant that she was going out for awhile and fled the whole depressing mess for a soothing visit with her best friend, Jackie, who lived just two doors down.

Just sitting at Jackie’s kitchen table and breathing in the warm, welcoming smells of the newly washed and waxed floor mingled with apples stewing on the stove made her feel better. Soon she was holding a fragrant cup of coffee, eyeing a plate of homemade peanut butter cookies and unburdening her woes to her ever-patient friend. Jackie listened quietly and then, as always, helped to put things in perspective for Phil. “You should be just glad he is around on Saturday morning to feed Jessie breakfast!” was her analysis of the situation. “He does so much for her. You can’t expect him to just meekly take orders from you like one of your staff and not invest himself in the situation. He loves Jessie as much as you do and he is only trying in his own way to improve her life. You don’t know how lucky you are!” As an afterthought she said “Either throw out the damn Muesli or put it through the food processor. You don’t have to make a federal case out of it. I wish I had had such problems with my husband; I might still be

married”.

The last came out with a bitter edge to her voice. Jackie had been raised in a traditional Italian family, fallen crazily in love with the high school football hero and wanted nothing more than to get married and have a family. But Rick had turned out to be a lot better in the football field than in the work field and after several failed attempts to hold a job down had turned increasingly to drowning his sorrows at the bar with his high school friends from his glory days. By this time Jackie had been pregnant with Mario and before he was born Rick was gone. Mario was eight now and Jackie had raised him alone. Her strong mothering instincts had kept her from focusing on either a meaningful career or another romantic relationship and she eked out a living clerking part time in a nearby store when Mario was at school, supplementing her income with the child support Rick grudgingly supplied and occasional and furtive stints as a cleaning lady. He had left her the house, a modest, three-bedroom bungalow purchased for them by his parents when they married, and Jackie spent all her energies that did not go into work on seeing to it that Mario’s life was as good as possible and keeping the bungalow as clean and appealing as possible. Phil often felt sad for her but Jackie seemed to be resigned to her lot in life

Phil did not respond directly to Jackie’s suggestion about the food processor, commenting instead that she could not stay too long because her house was a mess and she was expecting company that evening. She asked what Jackie’s plans for the day were and quickly their roles changed and it was Phil’s turn to commiserate. Mario was not your average little boy who was happy to play ball with his friends in summer and bring out the space guns and related fantasies in winter, filling up the in between spaces with ever more violent and convoluted computer games. His teacher said Mario was gifted, not just bright, middle-class, have all the

advantages gifted but *really* gifted. This had created on-going complications for his mother who more than ever longed for a quiet, ordinary domestic existence which, for one reason or another, appeared to be always eluding her grasp.

“You know what he wants to do this week-end?” Jackie asked rhetorically. “Go to the art gallery to see the travelling exhibit of the French Impressionists - and today is the last day it will be on display. His teacher told him about it and he is all excited. *I* wanted to take him to see the new “Flubber” movie which is on at the neighbourhood theatre but he is not interested. I even said he could bring a friend, two friends. Gerry and Max would like to see it. They told me so - but Mario couldn’t care less if he ever sees it. All he talks about is this stupid art show. What does an 8 year old want with the French Impressionists anyway? It’s that teacher of his, always putting ideas in his head!”

Jackie shook her own head indignantly and her shiny, soft brown curls bounced energetically back and forth. Phil hid a smile behind her hand, pretending to cough. She had heard variations on this theme many times before. She loved Jackie and found her quite interesting and intelligent to talk to in her own right but if ever a mother and a son were sadly mismatched it was Mario and Jackie. Phil had to admit that not many mothers could have coped with Mario with equanimity. The sophisticated adult concepts that frequently emerged from his child’s mouth kept you constantly off-balance when you were around him. But Phil enjoyed his company and often, after the two of them had talked for awhile, she found herself wondering wistfully what Jessie might have been like if her brain had not been so cruelly damaged at birth.

Meanwhile Jackie was going on. “I have no idea where I’m going to park in all that downtown traffic and it’s probably going to cost a fortune to see this stupid show. We are going to be late getting back and I won’t have time to prepare a proper supper and I will miss my

favorite tv program.”

Suddenly Phil had a great idea. “Listen!” she said. “I think I have just figured out how we can solve both our problems. My assistant is working with Jessie until 7 since she could not come this morning. I’ll take Mario to the gallery. It is no big deal for me. I already have my own annual pass and I know exactly where to park. I’ve seen that exhibit but I certainly wouldn’t mind seeing it again and there are some things I could tell him about the various painters I’m sure he would find interesting. Afterwards we will go for a quick snack and we should be back here about six. Meanwhile, if you would just vacuum the living room and front hall for me and kind of dust the obvious pieces and tidy up the bathroom a little, just enough so I won’t be horribly embarrassed when my company comes tonight, I would be incredibly grateful. After that fight with Dan I’m kind of depressed and even less willing and capable with reference to housework than I usually am.”

“Are you sure?” Jackie responded. “What a deal! I can have that much done in half an hour and meanwhile you’ll be stuck at that art gallery half the day!”

“Believe me”, Phil responded fervently. “I consider it more than fair. You are doing me and my mental health a favour, not the other way around.” Jackie looked at her unbelievably but agreed.

They broke the news to Mario. He was secretly delighted to be going out with his Auntie Phil who was always so interesting to talk to but muted his response somewhat, always sensitive to his mother’s need to be number one in his life. While Mario got himself ready to go Jackie and Phil went back to her house so Jackie could be shown where the vacuum cleaner and cleaning supplies were and then Phil and Mario left. They had a wonderful time at the art gallery and Mario was particularly struck by some of Cezanne’s paintings which were on display. He

listened attentively as Phil explained about the dot technique, how it had emerged and what the artists in this school of painting had been hoping to achieve through its use. They then went back and looked at the paintings all over again so Mario could identify for himself the telltale signs of this method. Phil was enjoying herself hugely and, as always at such moments, her thoughts went unbidden to an imagination of what it might have been like if only Jessie had been born normal. Mario's essential little boyishness did emerge later in his enthusiasm for a hot fudge sundae in a neighbouring Dairy Queen and Phil had to swear him to secrecy so that Jackie would not be angry with her in case the sundae ruined his supper. She did not think she could stand to have both her husband and her best friend angry with her on the same day. They reached Mario's house about 5:30. Phil rang the bell as Mario had forgotten his key but nobody answered. Mario spotted one of his friends across the street and called to him, explaining to Phil that he would like to tell his friend about the exhibit, that he would return in a few minutes in good time for supper and that his mother was probably still at Phil's house since she really got off on housecleaning and had probably gotten carried away and lost track of the time. Phil conceded that he should have a visit with his friend, said good-bye against Mario's barrage of thanks for the "truly exceptional day" and turned towards her own home. She opened her front door with a key and her first impression was that she had accidentally come into the wrong house. The pleasant smell of lemon furniture cream masked the more distant smells of bleach and pine sol emanating from the deeper regions of the house. A peek in the living room revealed the rug standing softly upright in geometric stripes where the vacuum cleaner had patiently stroked out the dirt. It never looked that way when Phil vacuumed, she thought! Tables, chairs and the dining room hutch all glowed softly with that newly polished look she had admired so often in Jackie's house. And the sofa and chairs looked unusually well groomed as well. Had they been vacuumed too? In the middle of

this homely scene was Jackie, just screwing the last couple of bulbs into the chandelier over the dining room table.

“My God, you cleaned the chandelier, too! And I was just thinking how ugly it was and how I needed a new one. Now it looks great. Maybe that was all it needed! Come to think of it I guess it must have been dirty. The last time I cleaned it was seven years ago for that big family reunion we had when Dan’s parents celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary!” Phil continued to wander around her house awestruck. Bathroom fixtures and mirrors glistened. The kitchen floor glowed. There was no clutter on the counters or anywhere else. Even her bed looked suspiciously like the sheets had been changed. “I hope you don’t mind and that you can find everything” Jackie said, a little nervously. “It was just such an interesting challenge that I got a bit carried away”.

“Mind!?!” Phil’s voice rose emotionally and she threw her arms around her friend. “Oh, Jackie, you shouldn’t have. You spent your whole afternoon here and you must have your own things to do - but it’s absolutely wonderful. I don’t know how you did it! It would have taken me three weeks to do all this!”

Jackie looked at her friend oddly. She admired Phil for her skills and her energy and her work ethic but she was really dumb in some ways, housework being one of them. “It is a very simple process to clean a house”, she said, with a slight severity. “You just have to be organized and approach the tasks methodically and not short-change any of them. And there are lots of little tricks you can learn. For example, for a kitchen your size a mop is useless. By the time you set it up you can have the floor half done on your hands and knees. Furthermore, if you just use a bucket and a soft cloth and a good cleaning agent - and rubber gloves to protect your hands, you can start by cleaning spots on the walls and doors and the door knobs and switch plates while the

water is clean before you ever do the floor. Then, when you are doing the floor you can clean the baseboards and the floor registers at the same time. And this should all be done last, *after* you've cleaned the appliances and the lights and the counters and dusted the ceiling, so you don't make extra work for yourself." Phil just stared at Jackie with her mouth open. Then she jerked open the door of her refrigerator. All the little pots of stuff she had been meaning to clean out, and also the musty odor she had been noticing lately, were gone. The newly organized fridge seemed half empty and the parts of the chrome shelves she could see gleamed. Phil sat down at the kitchen counter, put her head in her arms and cried.

Jackie again got that nervous look on her face. "I hope I didn't throw out anything you wanted too much, Phil. There were a couple of things that still looked usable, like that half a tomato and that leftover glob of potato salad, but I thought you wouldn't mind sacrificing them in the interests of having a fresh start." "No, no, it's not that" Phil sobbed. "It's all so beautiful. I was just remembering how it was when I was a kid and my mother was still alive. She died when I was nine, you know. Jackie, I don't know how to thank you. Please, let me give you some money. This is just too much!"

Jackie looked at her frostily and told her not to be ridiculous. "Tell me how you and Mario made out. Did he drive you nuts with all his questions?" It was Phil's turn to look surprised. "Not at all! I had a great time and I think he did, too, but you better ask him for yourself. Have you any idea how lucky you are to have a kid like that, Jackie? He is obviously destined for great things!" Jackie shook her head modestly and said what would be really great would be if he learned how to tie his shoelaces properly so he could quit tripping on them - but secretly inside herself she felt a warm glow from the compliment. "Well, I better get going." she said. "Mario will be wanting his supper." Phil said good-bye, feeling a little stab of guilt as she

did so because she doubted if Mario would be nearly so hungry as his mother anticipated.

The evening went well. She could tell Dan was impressed by his unusually pleasant surroundings and Phil was never at a loss when it came to being a gracious, relaxed hostess and serving up interesting things to eat and drink, cooking being the one part of domesticity which came naturally to her. After their guests left Phil and Dan looked at each other across the empty glasses and bowls of left over tid-bits. "I'm sorry." they said in unison.

"No", Phil said. "It's my fault." You've told me about the need to make Jessie's breakfast more varied a lot of times. I just haven't bothered." She paused a moment and then added "You know what Jackie suggested today? We could put the Muesli through the food chopper. What do you think about that?"

"Could work", Dan replied. "Whichever one of us gets up first tomorrow should try it. It would only take a minute and we could do up a bunch while we're at it. It won't even be much effort to clean the machine afterwards!" They were silent then, thinking maybe they had discovered another new possibility that would enhance their daughter's life and feeling the sheer pleasure of hope. But then Dan broke the silence to say "You were right, you know, Phil. Quality of life is important but it is no good without life itself. I should have known better. That was a foolish risk to take. I guess we are really lucky that guy knew what to do. What's he like, anyway? Phil savoured this rare, near apology for a moment and then responded. "Well, he is funny; not sociable at all, kind of rude really. His quick response to Jessie was not at all typical of any of the rest of his behaviour I have observed. And I don't get the impression he has too much use for his wife."