

From **Matilda's Mistake**

Chapter 1. The Cornfords' Conception

Willow Cornford leaves a sample of her hair to be analysed at the reception desk in Roman Hall clinic. There are three desks, but one has the sign 'preconception screening service' hanging over it. A red box underneath the sign is labelled 'Specimens: please leave here'.

Willow feels a little worried, leaving her hair in the box to the unkind fate of being (presumably) dissected, immersed in chemicals and otherwise scrutinized. But it is what the doctor here recommended. She'd tried to bring a sample of her husband, Anthony's, hair as well, but Anthony had said he didn't have enough to part with any. She has the feeling he doesn't take this preconception health check-up very seriously.

In bed that night Willow tells Anthony they can't have unprotected intercourse until the hair analysis results are back. 'What if I'm deficient in zinc?' she asks rhetorically. 'Or cadmium? I could have too much lead, Anthony.'

'Then what would you do, my love?'

'Do?'

'To set it right.'

'The clinic makes its own herbal vitamin and mineral pills. I'd take those, Ant, until the lab says my levels are right.'

Anthony finds Willow's enthusiasms engaging but not overriding. 'I'm sure you're in perfect health, Willow, my love. Good enough for me, anyhow. Let's make a baby. We've been talking about it for long enough.'

'Well, Ant...'

Willow thinks about the cost of her hair analysis, but also knows from her temperature chart (the keeping of which on specially printed graph paper is recommended by Roman Hall) that she ovulated that morning. Intercourse on the day of ovulation is recommended for the conception of a male child. To this end Willow's also been careful to follow the high sodium and potassium diet (a lot of bananas) advised by Roman Hall.

Anthony's breath is slightly furred by Beaujolais nouveau - he's a wine merchant.

Willow is too conscious of that little egg in her ovary waiting to have its zona pellucida penetrated by one of Anthony's sperm to relax and enjoy the prospect of conception. She imagines the sperm like the tip of one of the many corkscrews lying about Anthony's shop. Her egg, on the other hand, has its golden yolk exposed, ready and waiting. After Anthony has ejaculated, expostulated ('God that was good, Willow, it feels like a long time since we did that') and lies sleeping peaceably beside her, Willow stays awake and imagines the hidden historical drama taking place inside her. Half of Anthony's sperm have gone the wrong way for a start. She feels sorry for them, for their fruitless journey and existence. Of the other half, most will die, exsanguinated on the way, impaled on some bit of her blooming pulsatile reproductive interior. But one, the longest corkscrew of all, will make it.

Eleven weeks later, the Cornfords are able to discuss over breakfast in their kitchen where the infant should be born. What kind of place should be his - naturally a test's already proved the child's sex - first experience of life on earth, parted from his present succulent and rosy intrauterine anchor?

'A home birth,' declares Willow resolutely. 'Our son must be born at home, upstairs, in our bedroom, with the light of the moon nudging through the branches of the apple tree. A child has the right to be born in its own home, don't you think, Anthony?' She tosses her long yellow hair over her shoulder and leans her miniature frame back against the wall, putting the palm of her hand lightly on her stomach in anticipation of a pleasant maternity. Anthony looks at his wife lovingly but with some irritation. Willow is American, and has some dangerously romantic ideas. It's on such occasions that he's made uncomfortably aware of them.

'You know what I think. Home birth is a thing of the past. It isn't safe, particularly not at your age.' Anthony's remarks are made in the same tone he uses for telling his clients about the best years for a Château Margaux. Willow starts to protest - she's thirty-six. Anthony realizes he's said the wrong thing. 'You don't understand, my darling, how concerned I am about you and the baby. You're both so precious to me. If anything happened . . .'

'Come on, Ant, why should anything happen?' Willow gets up and starts banging some plates around in the sink. Against the sound of running water, and the metallic

shaking of the pipes in the fourhundred-year-old cottage set in a shallow dip in the western Chiltern hills, Anthony hears Willow elaborate the philosophy of childbirth she's recently acquired from perusing the world literature on the subject. (In the same way, before the conception she reckoned she knew everything there is to know about how to get pregnant.) 'Ninety-seven per cent of pregnancies and births are normal,' expounds Willow. Anthony wonders where she's got the percentage from, but doesn't dare ask. 'It's important to assume normality, otherwise the doctors intervene all the time. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, you see' (he doesn't). 'And as for this thing about age,' she swings round to face him, her white teeth glinting in the pale morning light, 'there really isn't much more of a chance of complications having a first baby at thirty-six instead of twenty-six. The whole thing has to do with nutrition in childhood, that sort of thing' (what other sort of thing? Anthony wonders). 'Healthy women in their thirties or forties aren't at higher risk,' she concludes. 'The obstetricians just want to make it seem more difficult.'

She's convinced herself, Anthony can see that. 'Have our second baby at home,' he pleads, assuming there will be one.

'I'm not going into any damn National Health Service hospital,' she responds, 'whatever you say.' She bites her lip and stamps her foot on the old pine boards, reminding Anthony of the thoroughbred horses on the farm in Minnesota, from whence he'd removed her to the superior breeding of the English countryside. Anthony is aware of his wife's prejudices against the NHS - indeed, that was one of the reasons she'd chosen to go in for all this preconception stuff at the private clinic one of her health freak friends had told her about. After the pregnancy had been confirmed, Anthony had been amused when the hair results had come back declaring his wife severely deficient in nickel. But although he doesn't share Willow's prejudices against the NHS, the cutback in resources and recent militant action of the midwives do worry him. He has visions of his infant son arriving into the world on a bed without sheets or birth attendants of any kind, in an environment notably lacking in the prerequisites of health - nappies, warmth, Ovaltine, that sort of thing.

His wife's voice interrupts these miserable thoughts: 'Listen, Ant, you know that clinic where I had my preconception check-up, where I went for the c.v. test? Well, it

does birth as well. It's actually an Alternative Birth Centre - I mean that's the main thing it does. It's run by a doctor called Steven van den Biot; he believes in natural childbirth.' She opens a drawer in the oak dresser, and pushes around inside it looking for something. 'Here.' She pulls out a white brochure adorned with flowers not dissimilar to those on the Beaujolais nouveau bottles Anthony had been tasting on the day of the conception.

He takes the brochure. The front cover shows a white-painted Georgian mansion assertive against a copse of dark-green trees. On the gravel drive in front of the house a cream Porsche is parked. A man wearing a rainbow-coloured jersey holds the Porsche's rear door open for a smiling upright young mother who grasps a bundle of white cloth firmly in her arms.