

Monday, 16 December 1974

GINNY STERN STARED INTO the test-tube in disbelief. The 'doughnut-like ring', reflected in the little mirror at the bottom of the test-tube, was all too apparent. *But how could she be pregnant?* She had heard that episodes of vomiting, diarrhoea or not taking the combined pill at the same time each day could affect its reliability. In the five or six years that she had been taking it, she had not had a single pregnancy scare, despite a somewhat chaotic personal life. Until now.

It was true that the events surrounding the Frankfurt Book Fair, when her affair with Peter Newman had become public, had resulted in her drinking more than she was wont to, and, yes, throwing up on a couple of occasions. It was also true that she and Peter had spent a lot of time in bed during that period, but, even so, what the pregnancy testing kit was now telling her was damned inconvenient. From the very start of their relationship, the one thing she and Peter had agreed upon was an antipathy to having children. There was therefore little reason not to seek a termination forthwith. Indeed, might it not be better not to bother Peter with the news and simply attend to the matter herself? Yet, was this not also an opportunity?

For understandable reasons, mainly those relating to the chaotic way she had conducted her life in recent years, her father had been keeping her on a tight financial leash. She had, however, cleaned up her act considerably in the previous six months, a period that had coincided with her brief relationship with Steve Percival. It would be an exaggeration to suppose that Steve had been the cause of that improvement; she had already been on the road to recovery. But it would also be wrong to imagine that he had not had some kind of beneficial effect on her.

Unfortunately, her father, who was a very sick man, had not yet caught up with the progress she had made in stabilising her life. Under other circumstances she might have wished for his demise, but she was only too well aware of the arrangements he had made for extending that control beyond his death: unless she was married to a man of whom he approved, access to his considerable wealth post-mortem would be governed by a trust.

In those months that she and Steve had been together, she had seriously contemplated asking him to marry her in the hope of meeting her father's conditions. She was pretty certain Steve wouldn't have taken much persuading. Yes, he was younger than her, but not by much. He had good manners and was well-educated. The difficulty lay in his being something of a dreamer, with little to show for himself so far. While her father would have found it difficult to openly disapprove of him, she was fairly certain he wouldn't have gone so far as to approve of him either.

So she had jumped ship and thrown in her lot with Peter. He might be a curmudgeonly fellow, but everything else about him—his maturer years; the fact that he was the boss of a successful publishing company; his Jewish heritage; even his curmudgeonliness, for goodness' sake—was likely to find favour with her father and recommend him as a suitable spouse. In point of fact, the two men had bonded almost immediately. Relations had cooled a little when it became clear that Peter was already married. Still, weren't there such things as quickie divorces?

Well, yes, and no. Grace, Peter's wife, seemed in no hurry to grant him a divorce, and as the self-declared adulterer, Peter could not be the petitioner.

So here they were, in touching distance of Godfrey's millions, but unable to fulfil the formal requirements. Unless ...

Ginny put the bits and pieces of the test kit in the bin, washed her hands, and went back into the bedroom.

Peter was lying in bed reading a typed document. 'You were a long time in there. Are you feeling okay?'

'Can't give my little secrets away. Women need to preserve a bit of mystery.'

'Is that what you call plucking your eyebrows?'

Ginny attempted a light-hearted laugh. 'You wouldn't want me with beetling brows, would you?'

'I want you just as you are.'

'Be careful what you wish for.'

'Ginny, you are the sexiest woman on the planet.'

‘Well, that’s very nice to hear, but I bet you’ll soon be missing Grace’s curves.’

‘Nonsense, she doesn’t have a fraction of your raw sexual power.’

‘I’m sure Grace has her own magic.’

Ginny slipped into the bed and turned to embrace Peter, running her hand across his broad chest. Peter allowed her to hold him for a moment and then said, laughingly, ‘Not tonight, Josephine! I’ve got a very early start. I need to get my head around this document for tomorrow’s meeting.’

Ginny pouted theatrically, but secretly she was glad he didn’t want to make love. She needed some time to think what to do if she really were pregnant. Even so, it was not like Peter to work in bed, at least not in the short time that they had been living together. ‘What’s the meeting about?’

‘It’s with the bank. They’re being difficult.’

‘I thought the firm was doing well.’

‘We are, but we’ve also got cashflow problems.’

‘And they won’t extend your credit?’

‘Correct.’

‘So what can you do?’

‘We could raise some more capital, but I wouldn’t be able to participate in the funding round, which means my shareholding would be diluted and I would then control less than fifty percent of the shares.’

‘What’s the problem with that?’

‘I wouldn’t have absolute control of the company.’

‘Would that matter?’

‘Only when it matters.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know. Do you think your father would lend me the money?’

‘I doubt it. You know how he keeps me on a shoestring.’

‘But that’s absurd. He’s not going to be around much longer and you’re his only heir.’

‘I know, but he’s not going to dissolve the trust unless we get married.’

‘I thought he liked me.’

‘He does, but he’s a stickler for formalities, and that means you need to speed up the divorce from Grace.’

‘We’ve been through this. The law has changed. It now takes two years unless I admit to adultery, which I’m happy to do. But, in that case, I can’t be the petitioner.’

‘Why doesn’t Grace want to proceed with the divorce?’

‘You tell me.’

‘Surely she doesn’t still entertain hopes of you two getting back together.’

‘No, I think she’s just being bloody-minded.’

‘Actually, in her position, I think I’d be the same.’

Peter sighed and put his document away. ‘Women!’

Ginny sniggered. ‘Where would you be without us?’

Peter had no intention of replying to a rhetorical question. ‘Wouldn’t your father accept some kind of sworn affidavit from me?’

‘You know he won’t. We’ve had that discussion with him. You know what his terms are.’

‘It’s so Dickensian. Surely there’s something we can do, short of marriage, that would convince him to dissolve the trust.’

‘Well, it does occur to me that if I were to become pregnant by you, he might soften his stance.’

‘Ginny, even if we both wanted children—which neither of us does—it’s not going to speed the process up by much if we have to wait for the birth of a child.’

‘Pete, I think you’re missing something here. The fact of pregnancy might be enough to convince him.’

‘Okay, although it seems unlikely to me. But I’m not sure where you’re going with this.’

On an impulse, ignoring her earlier determination to keep the matter to herself until she had done another test, she said, ‘Supposing I were to tell you I was pregnant.’

‘Why would you do that?’

‘Because I was doing a pregnancy test in the bathroom and I got a positive result.’

‘How is that possible? You’re on the pill, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, but it is possible to conceive if you vomit or suffer from diarrhoea.’

‘Okay, but why did you think to test now?’

‘Because I seem to be having morning sickness and my breasts have been sore.’

Peter was thoughtful. ‘Well, I can tell you one thing. If you are pregnant, I am not the father.’

Ginny wrinkled her brow. ‘How can you be so sure of that?’

'Because I had a vasectomy a couple of years ago.'

'You never told me.'

'No, there was no need to. We both agreed that we didn't want children.'

'Why did you get a vasectomy? Did Grace twist your arm? Wanted to come off the pill, but didn't want a child to get in the way of her career?'

'No, quite the opposite. She wanted children and I didn't. It was a bone of contention between us.'

'So she must have been pissed off when you had the snip.'

'I didn't tell her about it.'

'As you weren't going to tell me.'

'Well, that aside, whose baby is it?'

'I think you probably know the answer to that.'

'Not Steve bloody Percival's?'

'I haven't had sex in the last six months with anyone else except you and him.'

'Well, I am not going to be the cuckoo that brings up Percival's child. You'll have to get rid of it.'

'Hang on a minute, Pete. This is all a bit unfortunate, but perhaps there is a silver lining.'

'Like what?'

'Early access to my father's millions. He won't know it's not your baby.'

'But then I'll be saddled with it for the rest of my life.'

'If we can persuade him that my pregnancy is a down-payment on our getting married, as it were, then he might agree to loosen the financial straitjacket. Which will mean that we'll have enough money for nurses, nannies and boarding school fees. It's the way the upper classes have always dealt with children.'

Peter pondered Ginny's words. 'Do you seriously think your being pregnant will unlock your father's coffers?'

'I think there's a good chance. It depends how persuasive we can be.'

'Surely he's not just going to accept our say-so.'

'No, but he might accept an ultrasound carried out by one of his own clinics.'

'When can you get it done?'

'In the next few days. Then we can talk to him.'

'Ginny, this isn't something you've been brewing up for some time, is it?'

‘You must be off your chump if you think I’m delighted to be pregnant.’

Peter threw the document that he had been studying on the floor. ‘In that case, the bank can go and get fucked. Is sex in pregnancy allowed?’

‘Oh, I think it’s highly recommended.’

Grace Mitchell had slept badly. She had tossed and turned all night, only falling asleep a little after six a.m. But when she woke a couple of hours later, her thoughts, after several weeks of turmoil, had clarified. By some miracle of the sleeping brain, she had now resolved to have a child, even though Peter Newman, her husband of ten years, had walked out on her several weeks earlier and, so far as she knew, she was not yet pregnant.

Grace drew the curtain back and looked out at the grey, dismal day. It was only eight days until Christmas, but she was finding it difficult to get into the festive spirit. She put on her dressing gown and went down to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee. Thank God, term was over, which meant, for a change, nothing in the diary. So it was an ideal day not only for making momentous decisions, but also for getting back to running. Her ankle had healed for some weeks now, and a run would do her good. But life itself was far from being back to normal.

During the years of their marriage, she and Peter had spent much time apart: he on the international publishing circuit; she buried in libraries in Paris, Berlin or Cambridge. But there had always been the comforting sense that it was only a matter of time until they were together again. Being on her own in the house in Glisson Road had not been a hardship. She had got on with her research, her writing and her teaching. But now, even though she resisted the implication that she might be missing Peter, she felt bereft.

It was as well, then, that they had not met since the breakup, and had confined themselves to a couple of brief telephone calls, during the last of which Peter had asked if he could come and get the rest of his stuff, mainly clothes and the contents of his filing cabinet. He had made it clear that he had no interest in the fixtures and fittings of the house. Grace saw no reason to object to the proposal and readily agreed to the date he suggested. But nor did she have any desire to be on the premises while he was dismantling the last outward signs of their relationship. So she'd asked

Branwen, her neighbour, to let him in and to lock up when he'd gone.

What hadn't been discussed in that telephone conversation was who was to arbitrate about those items where ownership was moot. If Grace had given the matter any thought, it was only to assume that it would be fairly obvious. Even at this late stage in the disintegration of their relationship, she had still not learned that Peter's approach to life was to abide by the letter but not by the spirit of agreements. It had not occurred to her that his definition of which items belonged to him would be considerably more expansive than her own. On the appointed day, when Branwen in her role as invigilator saw how full-blooded Peter's approach was to filleting the shelves and cupboards of the former marital home, she had felt more than a little uncomfortable but also, rightly, felt that it was not part of her remit to intervene. In any case, she had always had a bit of a soft spot for Peter, a fact of which he was keenly aware. So he gave himself *carte blanche* in deciding what was his.

When Grace arrived home later that evening, having dined at High Table, a perk of being a fellow of which she rarely availed herself, she was profoundly shocked at the sight which presented itself; empty shelves, cleared cupboards, and walls denuded of the paintings and prints that had adorned them, all the more noticeable because of the darker patches on the walls where the artworks had previously hung. It felt like an assault, a smash and grab. Feeling faint, she sat down on the chesterfield. How could she have been so stupid? She should have realised that Peter was not to be trusted and would not play fair. Why hadn't she asked her solicitor to make an inventory and act as an intermediary?

She went over to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a Scotch. At least he hadn't taken the whisky, or not all of it. As she sipped her drink, she looked around the room. She was surprised that Peter on his own had been able to extract so much so quickly. But then it occurred to her that perhaps Ginny had given him a hand. Grace already knew from Steve Percival's account of the transformation that Ginny had wrought on the little house in Ainsworth Street, which he had rented for the summer, about her almost magical powers in this regard. It somehow made it even more of a violation that not only had Ginny stolen her husband, but she had also contributed to the desecration of her living space.

Grace had no objection to a fair division. It was clear to her now, however, that Peter's definition of those things that were undoubtedly his was considerably wider than her own. At that

moment, while it was not immediately possible to identify the books and LPs that had been spirited away, it was much easier to identify the pictures that had been taken. But here, the annoyance was not so much with what had been taken, as with what had been left behind namely, several large nudes, for which Grace had been the model. Presumably, Ginny had put her foot down. She would not have wanted a constant reminder of Grace's rather more generous curves in pride of place in the Barbican flat which she and Peter now called home. But nor conversely did Grace want a daily reminder of the abjection that Peter had required of her, and not only when she was posing for him. Furious with herself, she strode across to Peter's homage to the Rokeby Venus, in which she flaunted her rump to the world, lifted it off its hooks and propped it with its face turned to the wall behind the small table next to the chesterfield.

Since then, Grace had come to feel that Peter had done her a favour. As long as his clothes and papers remained in the house, she would be unable to feel free of him. If the price of him clearing his personal effects from the house was the loss of books and LPs she really considered hers, it was worth it. In the end, it had not taken her as long as she had originally feared to reorganise shelves and cupboards, and to find new pictures to cover the darker patches on the wall. Soon the house no longer looked as if it had just been ransacked.

But as the effect of Peter's powerful glamour began to fade, other grievances rose to the surface. About this time the previous year, they had resumed the conversation that they had been having on and off for the previous ten years about whether to have a child. Peter had at least been consistent in his reluctance to become a parent. For many years that had also been Grace's view although she hadn't expressed it in such forthright terms. At the back of her mind, she had kept open the possibility that their views might change once they were both securely established in their respective professions. But in her case it was not so much professional advancement that had triggered a more positive attitude towards the idea of being a mother as a mounting realisation that she was now more than half way through the normal period of fertility. Pregnancies in a woman's later thirties and early forties were not unknown, of course, but could by no means be guaranteed.

She wondered now whether that last conversation on the subject, in which she said that she had changed her mind and would like them to try for a baby, had had some influence on

Peter's subsequent behaviour. He had certainly been less attentive to her sexually and had asked her on more than one occasion whether she was still taking the contraceptive pill. If so, it was ironic that he had gone off with Ginny, a woman ten years younger than Grace. On reflection, however, Grace would have to acknowledge that Ginny was probably the least maternal woman on the planet.

But now that Peter had actually left her, it made Grace all the more determined to have a child, on her own if necessary. It helped that she had just been appointed as a university lecturer and would probably also be confirmed as her college's director of studies in modern languages in the new year, all of which would boost her income. So, if it was too late to reliably find a permanent partner keen to become a father, perhaps one of her male friends would be prepared to supply the seminal material.

Her oldest and dearest male friend, and the one to whom she would feel most comfortable putting this kind of proposition, was Gary Lewis. They had met when they were both undergraduates, and had briefly been lovers. Gary had soon realised that while Grace might be his best friend, when it came to sex he preferred men. Grace had been dismayed at first. Had she actually put him off women? It had been a stupid thought. Gary had made it clear that he'd always supposed that that was the way he was made, but had not had the courage to reveal this aspect of his sexuality until he left the family home. Thereafter, the relationship with Grace was all the stronger for the brief period during which they had been lovers. They both felt able to discuss the joys and tribulations of their subsequent relationships, and could count on getting a sympathetic and sexually disinterested hearing from the other. When, eventually, Gary had settled down with Matt, she had been delighted for him. In contrast, Gary had had reservations about Peter from the start, reservations which were borne out long before the recent final rupture. He was unlikely to say *I told you so*, of course, but only because he'd said it on at least two previous occasions.

However, despite the fact that she and Gary had had a sexual relationship when younger, he might now, for all sorts of reasons, be reluctant to grapple with the female sex organs regularly and intimately enough to ensure a successful pregnancy. He had not been the most enthusiastic lover when they were undergraduates. Even then, before she had had much to compare it with, she had felt that he had been more than a little squeamish. Of course, there

were other ways of transferring the seminal fluid into her vaginal tract, but the use of yoghurt pot and syringe might be even more embarrassing than the more conventional penetrative act. There were also the feelings of Gary's boyfriend, Matt to be taken into account. Matt was a total sweetheart, but he would be entirely within his rights to find the arrangement not to his liking.

As she sipped her coffee in the big kitchen-dining room at the back of the house, mulling these thoughts, she realised that she had not seen Gary for many weeks, which was unusual. Had she upset him in some way? There was only one way to find out. She would invite them over for a pre-Christmas supper on Friday evening and decide then whether the conditions were right and whether she had the courage to put the idea to them. She went out to the hall and dialled Gary and Matt's number. A sleepy voice, that Grace recognised as Matt's, answered the phone.

'Hello?'

'Matt, Grace here. I'm sorry, I realise it's a bit early.'

After a beat, Matt said, more brightly, 'Oh, hello, love. Are you alright?'

'I'm sorry. Have I disturbed you?'

'If only! Lover boy is far too busy at the moment.'

Grace laughed. 'Too busy for you to come round here for some supper on Friday evening?'

Grace could hear a muffled conversation through the receiver. A moment later, Matt removed his hand from the mouthpiece and said, 'No, we'd love to. Gary has been promising me that he'd take an evening off soon, and he could hardly refuse one of his oldest friends.'

'Great. See you at seven-thirty on Friday then.'

Grace put the phone down. She was slightly terrified. She hadn't really sorted out yet what she was going to say to them, but she had a few days to focus her thoughts and work out whether this was a serious plan or simply loss of self-esteem consequent upon Peter's infidelity. In an attempt to clear her head, she now decided to go for the run she had been contemplating earlier.

She went upstairs and dug out her running kit from the wardrobe, making sure to put on several layers to protect her from the bite of the fenland air. As she was preparing to step out into the chilly morning, the postman pushed several letters through the letterbox. She flipped through them and saw that one of the letters was from her publisher. She tore it open and glanced over it, immediately wishing she hadn't. It wasn't a rejection as such, but

neither was it a green light. They thought her analysis of the existentialist movement couldn't be bettered. Nor did they object to the portraits of the personalities involved in the movement. In fact, they loved that aspect so much that they wanted it expanded. Grace sighed and put the letter on the hall table. What her editor was asking for would involve a lot more work. He was intent on a substantial rewrite with extended biographical sections. It didn't sound as if he wanted just a few more details to be slipped into the existing manuscript. She would have to think the matter over carefully before she responded.

She let herself out of the house, locked the door and tucked the keys under one of the flower pots in the porch. She set off on her usual route which would take her across Parker's Piece and down towards the river. Once she had got into her stride and had reassured herself that the ankle she had twisted in the Cambridge 10K was holding up, her thoughts returned to the letter from her publisher. The trouble was that since submitting the manuscript and in the turbulence surrounding Peter's decampment, she had agreed to give the Lent term lectures on twentieth-century French poetry, following the recent and sudden death of Frida Jedburgh. At the same time, she had been asked by her college to increase the number of students she supervised. She had been happy to oblige on both counts; the lectures because it was a mark of her standing in the faculty, and the increased student workload because it had seemed like a good idea to fill her diary for the foreseeable future. The result was that she would have little time in which to do the extra reading and organise the bibliography, which the expansion of the book would need.

But she had to hand it to Steve Percival, one of her former students. His intuition had been spot on. It had been his idea to look at the existentialist movement as a cultural phenomenon as well as a philosophical one. He had encouraged her to incorporate biographical material because, as he'd said, these philosophers were fucking each other and fucking each other up and documenting the whole *scene*, as he put it, in an avalanche of writing. When she had mentioned Steve's suggestion to Peter, he had said that it chimed with his own view of Steve as a talented generalist rather than a scholar or writer. Grace, who had been Steve's supervisor and was a published poet herself, didn't concur with this view of Steve's talents, but Peter, who was a successful publisher, had meant it as a compliment. He had even said that he was considering offering Steve a job. But that had been before a chance encounter

at the Frankfurt Book Fair had revealed Peter's affair with Ginny, a development which had not only ended Peter and Grace's marriage and Steve and Ginny's relationship, but had made it impossible for Peter and Steve to work together thereafter.

She was glad now that she had not passed on Peter's observations to Steve. He was unlikely to have been delighted by the knowledge that a leading publisher didn't consider him much of a writer. Poor Steve! She should never have taken him into her bed, not because it hadn't been enjoyable; quite the contrary. But neither of them had been in the right emotional state to enter a new relationship, even leaving aside the fact that not only was Grace considerably older than Steve, but she had also been his teacher.

With luck he'd got over her by now. The young were resilient. But it grieved her to think that he now probably considered her cold and calculating, especially as she had asked him not to contact her. It was sad, really, because until those terrible few days she had enjoyed his company. She'd particularly enjoyed their early morning conversations when they went running together. She wondered if he'd kept up his running. He had put in a good time for the Cambridge 10K and had the makings of a good runner. But if her assessment of Steve was correct, he had probably stopped running as soon as she was no longer on hand to chivy him. Lost in these thoughts, she suddenly realised that she'd reached Midsummer Common and was still feeling comfortable. No tweaks or twinges. She stopped to take a breather and re-tie one of her shoes.

As she set off on the return leg, she was unable to shake the image of Steve from her thoughts. Wouldn't it be odd if he had actually kept up the running and she were now to bump into him? Did that mean she would like to bump into him? Well, yes, if she were honest with herself, she would, though she doubted that he, for his part, would have any time for her now. Slightly perturbed by the direction her thoughts had taken, she raised her pace, and the consequent effort required soon drove such speculations from her mind.

Later that evening, as she sat down to her solitary supper, her thoughts returned to Steve. She owed him an apology. After the way that Ginny had treated him, the last thing he'd needed in that terrible week was to be abandoned by the only other person who knew exactly how much he was hurting and how thoughtlessly cruel Peter and Ginny had been. Yet Grace, more concerned with her own hurt and her work, had simply cut off from him. Hardly

the behaviour of the supposedly more mature partner in the relationship.

Thinking of Steve, it also now occurred to her that if she were looking for a source of copious and motile sperm from someone who had no reservations about frequent copulation, then Steve might be a better bet than Gary. It was a completely crazy idea, yet somehow she felt more comfortable asking him than asking Gary, or anyone else for that matter. But if she wanted Steve to impregnate her, she was going to have to find him first. Unfortunately, she had no idea of his current address or even if he was still in Cambridge. Their social circles didn't overlap. Nor could she approach Ginny, who might anyway be as much in the dark about his whereabouts as she was. Otherwise, the only solid piece of reasonably current information relating to Steve was that he had lived in Ainsworth Street. Well, that was something. Maybe his former landlady would have a forwarding address for him. It wouldn't harm to ask. Grace would go around the following day.