

Neither of us considered the possibility that I might miscarry. In the weeks after the news, we walked around as if shell-shocked. But, despite our grief, our desire to have a baby remained strong. It took another 18 months to conceive again – only to miscarry a second time at eight weeks. I was stunned. Why me? What had I done to deserve this? Leaving the hospital, I felt dazed, and Rafik had to hold me upright.

Returning to work a fortnight later was incredibly hard; sitting on my desk was the mug I'd been drinking milk from to keep up my calcium levels while pregnant.

A few months later, a friend from work – I'm a financial assistant – gave birth. I remember driving to the hospital and suddenly realising I should have been having my baby at the same time. A wall of grief slammed into me, and I almost lost control of the car.

We decided to seek specialist help, and unable to afford private healthcare, turned to the NHS. Six months later, I discovered, to my sheer delight and total surprise, that I was pregnant again. My new gynaecologist tested my hormone levels, and prescribed progesterone pessaries called Cyclogest. I began to feel hopeful again; maybe this new medication would prevent me from miscarrying.

LOSING HOPE

But eight weeks later, I lost a third baby. My gynaecologist performed a range of blood tests on me and Rafik. But they couldn't find anything wrong. By now, it was starting to sink in that I might have a serious problem. I began to feel very fragile around babies, or even just talk of children. If colleagues asked me whether I had any children, I found myself sobbing in the bathroom at work.

I became obsessed with the idea of conceiving; I'd lie awake imagining what my child would look like. But then another part of me dreaded being pregnant, knowing it might end in miscarriage.

Over the next four years I was prescribed a range of different drugs, and referred to an NHS recurrent miscarriage clinic. After my fifth miscarriage, in 2005, doctors discovered I was prone to blood clots, and I started injecting a blood-thinning medicine every day. I fell pregnant in 2006 – but again miscarried at eight weeks.

By the time I was 30, Rafik and I had been trying for a baby for nine years, and it was taking a heavy toll on our marriage. Making love had become a calculated affair that depended on when I was ovulating. When we'd started out



we were both desperate to have children. Now I knew Rafik was only doing it for me, and that only increased my sense of guilt.

When I discovered I'd lost my seventh baby, I was ready to give up. That day, when the doctor explained that there was no heartbeat, I ended up crumpled on the floor sobbing, begging him to check again, desperate to believe they'd made a mistake. But there was no mistake.

And so, for the seventh time, I was booked in for the procedure that had become so familiar to me – an ERPC. After the operation, the feeling would take days to dissipate.

My consultant gently suggested adoption or surrogacy, using my eggs and Rafik's sperm. But I refused to even consider it. I wanted to experience full-term pregnancy myself; I wanted the bump and a scan of a baby inside me.

And then, just as I was starting to reconcile myself to the idea that perhaps I wouldn't be a mother after all, a friend told me about a doctor she'd heard of who ran a private

recurrent miscarriage clinic.

Two weeks later Rafik and I found ourselves in the plush London office of a smiling gynaecologist, Mr Rami Atalla*. As he showed me pictures of all the women he'd treated successfully, all holding babies they thought they'd never have, I burst into tears, sure that this, too, would be another dead end. But Mr Atalla was calm and reassuring, and explained there were two possible causes for my miscarriages: endometriosis, which occurs when the womb lining grows outside of the uterus, and an infection in the genital system. So, for six months prior to pregnancy, I was treated with a drug to suppress endometriosis and antibiotics for genital infection. Nine months later I fell pregnant. In the end, doctors never discovered a clear-cut cause for my miscarriages.

I was excited, but determined not to get my hopes up. Secretly, I'd made a pact with myself: if it didn't work this time, I would stop trying.

'Suddenly a wall of grief slammed into me, and I almost lost control of the car'

By the day of the scan, I had worried so much that I felt strangely at peace, as though I had no emotions left. Lying on the hospital bed with the all-too-familiar chill of gel smeared over my belly, I braced myself for bad news.

So when I saw Mr Atalla's face break into a smile, before he gently told me that my baby was alive, I could hardly believe it. Tears streamed down my cheeks as he pointed out the tiny features – the little head, arms, legs – of our so-longed-for baby. For the first time in years, I dared to imagine that I would become a mother.

Throughout my pregnancy I was monitored closely, undergoing regular scans and taking a cocktail of drugs. Week after week, my bump grew. Every day, I'd stare at my reflection in the mirror, marvelling at the almost daily changes in my body. I was free to do all the things I'd dreamed about, from buying maternity clothes to shopping with my mum at Mothercare and Mamas & Papas.

Mr Atalla had recommended a Caesarean birth, and the day before the operation, Rafik and I bought bottles of champagne and charged our camera. That night, I couldn't sleep.

Arriving at the hospital on 2 December 2008 felt utterly surreal – and when, after the operation, I heard my little girl cry for the first time, it felt no less dream-like. My memories of that day are a collage of Rafik's tears and my wonder at the perfection of my daughter's beautiful, pure face.

Marianne is now two-and-a-half; I adore being her mother, and Rafik is an incredibly loving father. I'd love another baby one day, but for now I want to devote my full attention to Marianne. Becoming a mother has changed me in many ways – I'm more relaxed, more sociable – and the difficulties I experienced in falling pregnant have also taught me exactly how strong and determined I can be.

Throughout my pregnancy, I kept all my scans, and I've even made a scrapbook containing each one. One day, when Marianne is old enough, I'll show her the scrapbook to explain how much we love her – and how, when you want something badly, you should never, ever give up. ●

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