

A white graphic of a branch with small flowers and buds, extending from the top left towards the center of the page.

From  
Here  
To  
Maternity



A personal account of infertility, IVF & adoption

*Kylie Doust*



## *Starting Out*

**I**n many ways this journey began the day my future husband asked me to lunch. Considering the circumstances, complications were almost a given – as I will explain a little later. But as a wise person once said, life is something that happens while you are busy making other plans. Suddenly I was 31 years old with a wonderful husband, a beautiful house, a lovable puppy and a great job. I was also attending a fertility centre with little success. In the first six months of treatment we had three in vitro fertilisation (IVF) attempts. All three failed.

The uncertainty and strain of IVF treatment was not entirely new to me. Years ago I watched my sister endure a similar ordeal without a real understanding of her despair. Now I understood only too well. My sister eventually became the proud mother of five vibrant, healthy children, all of whom were conceived naturally. Was I jealous? No. Was I afraid? Yes. I never consciously planned to have children but with the certainty of youth I believed that when the time came, it would happen just the way it should. Fifteen months after discarding my oral contraceptive pill I began to wonder if motherhood and I were destined to collide. Considered objectively fifteen months was not such a long time. Many couples wait and hope for a lot longer, and some of those are rewarded with the ultimate prize – parenthood. Sadly, an uncomfortably large number remain unrewarded.

What is IVF like? It is exhausting – physically, mentally and emotionally, and it requires all the strength you have as an individual

and a couple to maintain balance and control. A clinic nurse once commented, 'We take over your body.' But more than that, IVF treatment takes over your *life*. We decided after our first attempt that we wouldn't allow that to happen. Brave words indeed, but with the support of two or three very close friends, and sheer stubbornness on our part we maintained an uneasy balance. As we discovered, no aspect of life remains untouched by the trauma of infertility and while the challenges are constant, comfort is scarce. I am the product of a strict Roman Catholic upbringing and although I no longer consider myself religious in the formal sense of the word, my faith is something I rarely question. However infertility challenged me on levels beyond the physical and raised questions to which there were no easy answers. As the months passed and the failures continued, faith was difficult to sustain. Every woman travelling the difficult road of assisted reproduction has to believe in one thing: eventually our persistence, patience and determination will win out and we will conceive. It is an irrational, blind faith, but without it we would surely lose the will to put our lives on hold and our health on the line. Blind faith allows us to believe. What happens when faith falters and belief fades? I can only tell you what happened to me.



## *How We Began*

**W**hen Glenn and I met, he was newly separated; I was recovering from a broken heart. Neither of us was looking for commitment and while our friendship developed quickly and easily, the romance took us both by surprise. As our relationship progressed a number of issues arose. Firstly and most obviously, he was still married. Separated yes, but still married and with children from that marriage to consider. Secondly and more importantly as far as our future was concerned, he had had a vasectomy after the birth of his third child. Initially I wasn't overly concerned. By unspoken agreement we were taking one day at a time. A year later I was preparing to embark on a long-planned overseas adventure, only to realise somewhat belatedly that I had fallen in love. Fortunately, it was mutual and a long-distance love affair began.

My international odyssey unfolded with few dramas and many highlights over the next five months: Africa was magnificent but difficult, and very lonely. Italy's beauty and history restored my spirit (I may be third generation Australian, but I'm convinced I have an Italian soul), and the UK countryside in autumn was frosty but friendly and absolutely beautiful. Meeting up with an old school friend for the next phase helped ease the worst of my loneliness and Alison's tolerance of my lovelorn behaviour was nothing short of remarkable. I managed to find work at Cheltenham General Hospital for two months and the daily challenges plus the friendly staff were sufficient to keep homesickness mostly at bay. For those five long months Glenn

and I wrote enough letters to wallpaper the Louvre and contributed substantially to Telstra's end of year profit figure. On a cold February morning Glenn joined me in London, and on Valentine's Day in Venice he proposed. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to say yes and thus began another odyssey of a very different kind.

Six months later, back in W.A. and both settled into new jobs, we found ourselves in a doctor's surgery discussing vasectomy reversal. Admittedly children were a little way down the road as we hadn't made it to the altar yet, but the clock was ticking and a Boy Scout mentality seemed appropriate. The Urologist we had been referred to had trained in the United States and we had complete confidence in his ability. The statistics weren't encouraging – the procedure had a 65% success rate – but we were young(ish), idealistic and we believed. We were told not to bother with a sperm count because the body takes up to a year to attain pre-vasectomy sperm production. This fitted with our long-term plans, so we hoped for the best and got on with planning our wedding. The day was glorious and we had the time of our lives. Our honeymoon was spent on the beaches and amongst the wineries of Western Australia's southwest. Life was good.

By this time my sister Tracy had given birth to her fourth child, Samuel. I remember one August day I was pushing Samuel's pram and my biological clock went into overdrive. It was an irrational, unexpected and overwhelming moment. In an instant all our plans to wait until Christmas flew out the proverbial window. Later that day in the supermarket with Glenn, I burst into tears because he didn't want to rush home and get pregnant right there and then. That night we had one of the most emotionally fraught discussions of our relationship. It wasn't how I imagined us reaching such a life-altering decision, and I was crushed by what I saw (unfairly) as his lack of support. As I stood crying in the shower I tried to appreciate his feelings. He wasn't ready

emotionally and was worried that we weren't ready financially. But I was impatient to get started. Much later we reached a compromise that weighed heavily in my favour. I would finish the oral contraceptive cycle I was currently in and then we would let nature take its course.

Like any woman contemplating motherhood for the first time I was filled with excitement and wonder at the thought of becoming pregnant. I couldn't wait to experience something that had always seemed a little mysterious and more than a little miraculous. But life had other plans for us, and had we known what the future would bring I'm not sure we would have begun the journey so light-heartedly.



## *To Tell or not to Tell*

I am by nature a private person. Glenn on the other hand is completely open. He has no secrets. This difference has been the source of much spirited discussion at various times as we try to find a balance between the two extremes. In this instance however, Glenn agreed to keep our pregnancy plans quiet, at least until we knew better where we stood. It is a decision I have never regretted. Trying unsuccessfully to fall pregnant was a constant cycle of ups and downs, and for me having to share those downs would have been too hard. I didn't want sympathy, unsolicited advice or uncomfortable silence; I just wanted to have a baby. So after three months without success, Glenn decided it was time to test our faith in our specialist. The time had come for him to produce a 'sample'.

The process of fertility investigations can be bearable or intolerable depending on a number of factors. The first is your attitude. A sense of humour is absolutely essential. Secondly, it is imperative to learn to deal confidently and honestly with a steady procession of health professionals, not all of who have good communication skills or kind bedside manners. In our case, we soon discovered that a degree in medicine doesn't come with a guarantee of sensitivity or compassion. My advice to anyone starting on the IVF roundabout is simple: if you are not happy with the service you are receiving then find another doctor as soon as possible. We found the staff associated with the IVF clinic we attended eternally professional, kind and exceedingly

competent. Our experience with general practice wasn't quite so good.

As any man can imagine, having a sperm count done is not the most comfortable experience. It doesn't help when you have to repeat the performance a week later because you were not informed of the correct procedure. It helps even less when you have to wait at a public counter with elderly ladies and the staff member asks loudly 'and did you obtain this sample by masturbation, Mr Doust?' (Have I mentioned the importance of a sense of humour?) However, the worst was still to come. When it was time to find out the result of the first attempt, a result with huge impact on our future, we were told over the phone by the doctor's receptionist: 'Sorry – the test showed no sperm whatsoever.' No explanation, no compassion and no confidentiality.

We were shattered. Glenn was disbelieving – the result of the test must be wrong. Wanting to believe that, we made some enquiries and this time were given more complete instructions, so we waited a week and tried again. By this time Glenn had revisited the doctor who obviously had more faith in the first result than we did and suggested a second vasectomy reversal. At the time we lacked information and were still in shock. Looking back we should have taken stock, done some research and discussed our options more thoroughly. Financially the choices open to us were limited. Our specialist described one suggested method as equivalent to a ten thousand dollar lottery. We weren't in the position to take that chance. So when the second sperm count showed zero, we packed up our hopes, took a deep breath and went back to square one.





## *Hurry Up and Wait*

**A**s a convent educated child the nuns often told me that patience is a virtue. Perhaps, but unfortunately it is a virtue I lack. I may procrastinate when making a decision, but once the decision has been made I'm ready for action. Not surprisingly, the snail's pace of our baby chase was driving me crazy. It was at this point that Glenn coined the phrase 'Hurry up and wait.' It seemed as though every time we approached a new hurdle, our best efforts at overcoming the problem were delayed by factors outside our control. So it was with our decision to return to the Urologist for a repeat performance. Specialists are busy people and just making an appointment for a consultation took weeks. Then we had to fit in with his surgery schedule. Just to complicate matters, we had planned a holiday in Melbourne for the beginning of January and our sanity wouldn't have survived a cancellation. So D-day was set for 23<sup>rd</sup> January. From a pre-Christmas point of view, it seemed like a lifetime to wait, but of course the time passed.

Our holiday was everything we had hoped: time to shop, time to catch up with a good friend who had relocated, and time to drive the Great Ocean Road and let the grandeur of nature put our problems in perspective. It was Glenn's insight at this point that helped me realise my obsession with privacy was creating a pressure of its own. By succumbing to pride or embarrassment or whatever emotion was keeping me silent, I was building a volcano of suppressed frustration, grief and anger which was threatening to erupt. Telling the world

wasn't the answer, but perhaps confiding in a friend was.

Upon arriving home I did two very important things. I resigned from my job and I cried on someone's shoulder. True to my somewhat uptight nature, I chose that shoulder very carefully. The day that Glenn spent in hospital for his second reversal, I spent with a friend who has shared most of the milestones of my life so far. We have laughed and cried and played and grown together all our lives and I knew that Anita would not only sympathise but also empathise. A mother of three for whom pregnancy did not come easily my friend knew that sharing my tears was as important as drying them. I left her that day feeling lighter than I had in months and much less lonely. There is only so much we can cope with alone, and only so much support our partners can offer when they are dealing with their own sadness. Good friends have enough distance to hold us up and enough closeness to hold us tight. I desperately needed both.

From this day the waiting began in earnest. Firstly, Glenn was immobile for a week to allow maximum time for healing. During this time he was pampered as much as work commitments would allow. His body was the one taking all the punishment thus far and I felt vaguely guilty that I couldn't share his discomfort. After that first week he was allowed back at work with strict orders to take things easy. It was six long weeks before a sperm sample could be taken and while we waited we tried to distract ourselves as much as possible. Moving house seemed like as good an idea as any, so a month after the surgery we were finally living in our dream home. Six months before our wedding we had fallen in love with a beautifully renovated, hundred year old house and despite our poor financial position at the time, we moved heaven and earth to buy it. Unfortunately it was 18 months before we could afford to live in it. (Why is it that waiting doesn't get easier with practice?) The opportunity to move came at exactly the

right time, and for a month buying new furniture and restoring old furniture kept our minds from dwelling on babies. In that month the pressure of ‘am I/aren’t I’ was absent. The knowledge that it couldn’t happen was a welcome relief and I actually relaxed.

It was a short respite. The day came when the waiting ended, and once again the news was bad. Strangely enough repeated bad news becomes easier to bear. This time we were resigned rather than distraught. Glenn’s GP referred us to a gynaecologist associated with one of the IVF clinics operating in W.A. and we dutifully made an appointment. By this time we had run a gauntlet of emotions and discussed various options from adoption to donor insemination. I bought Amanda Hampson’s wonderful book *Battles with the Baby Gods* and read it cover to cover in one sitting. Of course there were no answers, just more questions. Nevertheless, more information is better than less and thus suitably confused we made our way to yet another doctor’s appointment, with a lower level of hope and our expectations firmly under control. Perversely, this time the news was slightly encouraging, yet another example of medical miscommunication. Glenn’s vasectomy reversal Mk II was actually partially successful. There weren’t sperm per se but there were germ cells: baby sperm. No tails and therefore no motility, but still his genes, and accessible via a simple surgical procedure in sufficient numbers to mean that a biological child of our own was still a possibility. For us this was a better result than we’d expected and hope soared again.

Now it was time for my body to go under the microscope to see just how close we were to achieving our goal. Perhaps the waiting was almost over.



*'After three years and a total of nine embryo transfers, Glenn and I are hanging up our saddles ... For many, three years might seem an insufficient effort, but I am tired. My body is tired, my mind is tired and most of all my heart is tired. I still believe that IVF is a modern, medical miracle ... But I no longer believe it will be our miracle.'*

What happens when the quest for a family seems to bring only tears and despair? As Kylie and her husband Glenn discovered you simply take a deep breath and somehow find the strength to carry on.

*'As harsh as it seems, the experience of adoption in Western Australia can only be described as excruciating: intrusive, intense, bureaucratic and judgemental.'*

Kylie's struggle to conquer the intricacies and inconsistencies of the adoption process push both her and Glenn to the limits of their endurance, and just when all seems lost they are handed a lifeline that sees their hope of becoming parents flicker back to life.

*'Is it bad news?'*

*'No, it is very good news ... we have a baby for you, a little boy.'*

Honest, perceptive and deeply personal **'From Here to Maternity'** is a warm and ultimately joyful story about one couple's determination to overcome infertility and bureaucracy and become a family against all the odds.



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