

Mark and Claire's story

I'm 36 years old and have pretty much lived in south-east London all my life. I met Claire in March 2008 after separating from my first wife - a marriage which only lasted 4 months! We met on a dating website, which seems commonplace now but back then was kind of embarrassing to admit to friends and family, so for a time it was our little secret.

Our first date was at a local driving range - my choice, but not because I'm into golf, it was more of an excuse to get up close when teaching her how to perfect her backswing! We'd been exchanging emails for a couple of weeks so by that point we'd built up a good flirty banter, and to give her credit she managed to handle a golf club quite well despite her high heels! Later that afternoon we went for a post-golf pub lunch. We were on the same wavelength and made each other laugh. Confession time, I was actually seeing another girl at the time. The breakdown of my first marriage had left me kind of jaded, and I'd stumbled from one short relationship to another until I met Claire. The next day I broke it off with the other girl as I knew Claire was special. For the first time in over two years, I felt I'd found someone I really connected with.

One of the reasons I quickly felt that way occurred to me as we were having our post-golf lunch. A large family were seated near us and one of the couples was doting over their young baby. As we sat making awkward first date talk, I saw Claire look over at the couple giving them an admiring smile. I think she was thinking that would hopefully be us someday. Rather than being horrified that she appeared to be thinking about children on our first date, I was struck by how happy I was that she so obviously wanted to be a mum. I'd always wanted a family: a wife and children were pretty much all I dreamed of as I grew up. This in large part was because I was adopted as a young child, and I wanted to have the 'normal' family life that all my school friends had. Although my sister and I were lucky and were adopted by wonderful and caring parents, it doesn't stop you feeling that somehow you've missed out on something everyone else around you has. When I was young my dream grown-up life was like something out of a Gillette advert. In hindsight this was a contributory factor to the breakdown of my first marriage. I hadn't dealt with those issues fully and the pressure of a 'perfect' family was probably unfair to her.

Claire and I had a second and third date over the next couple of days, and after about two weeks she'd pretty much moved everything from her parents into my bachelor flat. Over the following months we became ever closer and inevitably talked about the future. I'm not exactly sure in those early days when we first talked about children, but strangely those hypothetical conversations seemed to be for me easier to commit to than the ones about 'our future'. Around this time Claire told me she'd had an operation a year or so before to remove a cyst on her ovaries and had been diagnosed with endometriosis. None of that meant much to me, I'd never heard of endometriosis at that point so I wasn't really concerned, but it seemed to worry her that she might have trouble conceiving.

As time went on her concern became ever more apparent. It wasn't like we were trying for children at that point, but I think she's always felt that something wasn't right. I still wasn't really that concerned, the sensible part of my mind thought we were still too early in our relationship to be actually trying for a family, but at the same point I knew that's where I wanted our future to go. However, it seemed best if she sought medical advice.

Numerous appointments with the GP and at the local hospital followed, and eventually led to Claire undergoing more treatment for endometriosis. I was so sure we'd have our own family that I'd even given a hypothetical name for our hypothetical child because I still didn't think it

was that much of a problem. To me it was just a hurdle we had to get over, but for Claire each stage confirmed her worst fears.

Claire had read a book by a fertility expert and discovered that acupuncture could help women with fertility problems, so in March 2011 (it was actually Claire's birthday) we met with a private specialist in fertility issues. For me this wasn't going to be the solution to the problem, but if it made Claire feel better then that's what counted. The specialist did however suggest we arrange to see a private **consultant gynaecologist**. This now not only seemed to be getting expensive but was starting to concern me that there really was a problem and that IVF might be our best option. Our local NHS trusts either didn't offer IVF treatment options, or only offered one cycle of treatment and the waiting time was considerable. Claire was only 33 at this point but waiting any longer to start treatment would only cause her more anguish.

We met with the **consultant gynaecologist** on one of the days of the London riots - perhaps it was an omen. His laid back approach instantly put us both at ease, and his unique use of a car metaphor to explain our IVF journey added good humour to the consultation. He told us that with our ages and lifestyles it would be unlikely we'd need IVF treatment and suggested we look at intrauterine insemination (IUI) instead. We had a series of tests to assess our fertility; all paid for at private hospitals, so that we could start the treatment as soon as possible. It now became very real for both Claire and I.

For Claire, IUI was a better option than IVF, but it was still heart-breaking for her as a woman to feel her body couldn't do what it was supposed to do naturally and would need science to help. For me this situation now became very real. We were in effect trying for kids! Up until that point, for me it all felt like a process we were going through until the time I/we were actually ready to start a family. I knew how much Claire wanted to be a mum, I'd see her with our friends' babies and how good she was with them, but also how much it hurt her that everyone else was getting pregnant except her. So I wanted to be able to give her the one thing she truly wanted.

The results of our tests showed Claire had a low egg reserve for her age. So **the** recommendation was we opt for IVF instead. This was yet another blow to Claire: the options seemed to be getting worse the more persevered. We undertook our first round of IVF at a private clinic in August/September 2011.

The first night Claire had to take the injections was heart-breaking. I remember her locked in the bathroom crying her heart out in despair because of the pain of the injections, but also the anguish that the treatment wouldn't work. I felt totally useless. I'm watching her go through all this physical and mental pain, and all I had to do was in a couple of weeks lock myself in a room with a magazine and a cup. There was nothing I could do to help other than being there to reassure her, but not actually feeling assured myself.

We quickly learnt the best way to deal with the treatment was to keep a sense of humour. Many nights Claire would be awake in the early hours in pain so to take her mind off the pain we started watching the episodes of Sex in the City. There was also an amusing incident involving Claire having to take her IVF medication in a toilet during a gig, or shooting up in the toilet as it became known.

After several weeks of injections and appointments at the clinic to assess the development of the eggs, we were finally in a situation where the egg collection and transfer could be done. Unfortunately, there were only a few eggs that were of good enough quality and so the chances of successful transfer were against us. We were due to go back to the clinic the next day for the transfer to take place but as we were sitting in the waiting room we got a phone call to tell us not to bother coming to the clinic because none had fertilised. The way we were told left a lot to be desired, and added to the pain we suffered. This was a hammer blow for both of us, but especially Claire. The dream was getting further and further away. We

couldn't really afford the private clinic prices at a prestigious address, but I guess naively we thought it'd give us more chance of success.

Regardless of the outcome, I'd already made the decision I wanted to propose to Claire. We'd been through so much by this point and were trying to create a family together so it seemed silly that we weren't already engaged. We'd already booked a few nights at our favourite hotel to relax whilst waiting for the fertilised eggs to mature to take our minds off the treatment. However, having not even got to the fertilisation stage of the treatment Claire was adamant she didn't want to go.

Having already planned my proposal and having got the ring I finally managed to convince her that the break would do us good. I wanted Claire to know that having children wasn't the reason why I wanted to marry her; it was because of who she was and how much I loved her. To be honest, by this point having children had started to feel so clinical that I'd been getting used to the idea of not having children. We had two cats and they were our family.

Three months later, we travelled to New York and got married on an unseasonably warm day in February overlooking The Lake in Central Park. Although we'd told our family and friends that we planned to get married in New York before we left, after the emotional turmoil of the previous few months we wanted to do something just for us, and hassle free. It gave us both a slice of happiness that was just for the two of us.

We tried another round of IVF in May 2012. This time we didn't even get to the egg collection stage. We were advised to change the treatment to IUI instead but the chances of success were slim. When the results came back negative the world dropped from under Claire's feet. It was now coming to the time to confront the thing she'd always feared, yet felt was in some way inevitable. My words of reassurance didn't ever seem to come out right. I have a habit of saying things how I see it, which is probably what people don't really want to hear.

We saw a second consultant who told us due to a combination of Claire's low egg reserve and the quality of the eggs, further treatment was just as likely to be unsuccessful. We could continue with IVF treatment and take our chances, or consider an egg donor. Claire knew she couldn't put herself through a third round of IVF, and we'd used pretty much all our savings and taken out a 0% interest credit card to pay for the previous two treatments. The thought of yet another failure was too much for her to handle.

Egg donation wasn't something either of us was comfortable with. Even though the donation would be anonymous, to us it felt as though there would always be a 'third' parent involved in our family. I was also worried that by using my sperm with a donor's egg, Claire might feel 'pushed-out' of any relationship with the child. Would the child be 70% mine and only 30% hers?!

So our thoughts turned to adoption. This was probably a more difficult time for me than Claire. Having been adopted I had mixed feelings about it. I felt hypocritical for having this as our 'reserve' option and choosing IVF in the first place. It felt daunting to me to have come full circle and be involved in the adoption process again, but this time as an adult. I was facing the prospect of not having 'my own' family which again felt hypocritical; I was lucky to have been given a second family, so how could I not do the same for another child? I felt selfish for having these feelings, but having been through the process I knew first-hand how hard it can be for adoptive parents to build a loving and stable family unit for a child that has suffered trauma at such a young age. Also, I wasn't sure if I could handle the reasons why many of the children were in need of adoption. In my circumstance, my birth parents had both died when I was a toddler. Without wishing to trivialise my own life, this seemed to me somewhat uncomplicated compared to children who'd been victims of sexual abuse, or who have learning and development difficulties brought on by foetal alcohol syndrome.

After several long discussions we decided that we'd apply to a local council for a first-stage interview. This didn't exactly go how I expected. Claire had been really worried that we'd be turned down: we were too young to adopt; we lived in only a one-bedroom flat; it was too soon since our last fertility treatment. I was adamant these things wouldn't really be an issue; after all we could move to a two-bedroom flat if we needed.

As we left the interview Claire was in floods of tears; she was sure we would be turned down, but I couldn't see why they wouldn't want two loving and caring people to be potential adoptive parents. However, Claire's worst fear had been realised yet again. Our 'backup' option had failed. I received a call from the social worker who informed me that they wouldn't be prepared to continue our adoption application at that time. Although very relaxed and informal, the interview had raised concerns in the social workers mind that we were applying too soon after the last failed fertility treatment. She worried that the repeated setback of those failures could affect Claire's emotional state when going through what could be a lengthy and traumatic adoption process. Unfortunately, I could completely understand why they had come to this decision. I wanted to tell Claire that they were wrong and we'd just apply to another council, but I knew what the social worker said made sense.

Up until that point, Claire had not sought counselling to help resolve her/our fertility issues. We'd moved on from one option to the next, and when that one failed it was on to the next option. Finally we had exhausted all our options. Claire was faced with the cold reality that something you've wanted your whole life, something you thought would be so easy was not going to happen. Although we could reapply in six months' time, the social worker recommended Claire/we sought counselling to help come to terms with this loss.

This was probably the hardest time for Claire, and it put a big strain on our relationship. I'm a go with the flow kind of person, so although I was upset for Claire I was quickly looking at the positives of not having children. Again, my habit of saying the wrong thing really didn't help matters. Claire was reluctant to see a counsellor, although having had counselling before I was sure this would help her come to terms with the situation. I was worried that unless she resolved this issue it would drive an immovable wedge between us.

It's now been almost four years since that adoption meeting, and although the road has been long, Claire and I are probably the happiest we've ever been. It's strange to say that not having children has probably made us closer and happier in many ways. As yet we haven't revisited the possibility of adoption. This is not really a conscious decision, it's more that life and our focus has moved in different directions. It may be something that we revisit again in the future, but for now we're happy with our family just being us, and our two cats.

In many ways we've both come to feel lucky that we don't have children. There's a certain smug feeling that we get to experience all the fun times with our friends' children but none of the bad times. We get to take them out for the day, fill them up with sugar and then drop them back with their parents! We can sleep in at the weekends (when I'm not working) or watch a boxset without it being interrupted. And we can have sex at any hour of the day or night!

While going through the IVF process I often felt guilty that I was spending thousands of pounds I didn't have on trying to create a family for nothing more than my own selfish reasons, when if I really wanted to be parent, and a father, there are so many children that are desperate to have a loving family waiting to be adopted or fostered - but I'm too concerned about my dream life to give them the love and a home that they so desperately need.