My Period and Infertility 101, 201, & 301 in Brief

101

In 2009, at 30 years old, I was nowhere near partnered. I had been busy traveling the world, learning and having fun. When the decade turned over, the realization also dawned on me that I was 99.9% sure that having children was on my to-do list. My love life was, frankly, abysmal. And I knew that I wanted to have children with a partner, not by myself.

Equipped only with this knowledge, I went to my next physical and asked my doctor if she could order some tests to determine my general level of fertility. To be fair, I had exactly no idea what I was asking for. Just a general ballpark idea. Should there be something I need to be aware of? Some kind of fertility report card? Anything. My doctor looked at me blankly and said there were no tests for fertility. Confused but ignorant, I had no choice but to believe her. She was, afterall, the doctor. Why would she tell me anything other than the truth? **In case you are not aware, this is blatantly and unequivocally untrue.** I went on with my 30's watching my period like a hawk. It was regular, predictable, and any sign of concern I immediately went to a doctor to get checked out. After all, my body was now a ticking clock of which I had little control over.

We are taught all through our teens to fear pregnancy. To be careful. To avoid risky sexual behavior. Our period is not taught for its value, it is taught for its fear factor. It's bemoaned, accompanied by cramps, at times a cause for solidarity with girlfriends. But in general, it was just something to beware of, be careful of, and above all else, make sure it showed up every month.

Somewhere along the line, the narrative shifts. When does the memo come out where we are supposed to shift from virtuous maidens into reproductive goddesses? And somehow, we are meant to embody both those ideals in our lifetimes? Honestly, I think my fax machine was broken for both those messages. But I did get the message loud and clear that my timeline was not correct. I was late to the baby making party and if I didn't hop on soon, it would be far too late for me. And honestly, that wasn't 100% wrong.

201

I met my husband when I was 35 years old, and we were married a year later. I got pregnant within 3 months of trying when I was 36 years old. 10 weeks later at the first OB appointment, they could not find the fetus. I had what was called a "missed miscarriage" or a blighted ovum. I had all of the pregnancy symptoms, no signs of miscarriage, but also no viable pregnancy. A week later I had a D&C to remove the pregnancy tissue as my body had still not realized there was no actual pregnancy and produced a period on its own. I spent almost 11 weeks believing I was a mother to a child that would never come earthside.

The grief of a miscarriage is real and raw. People will tell you it's common. And that is true. Approximately 20% of pregnancies or 1 in 5 women will experience at least one miscarriage. Just because something is common, does not mean that it is ok or that it does not require support. To me, the grief of a miscarriage was isolating. I found it difficult to talk about, and hard for people to listen to. After the D&C, the hospital cremates the remains of what is removed and spreads the ashes in a local cemetery in Minneapolis in a specific location for prenatal and pediatric deaths. The first time I got up the courage to visit the cemetery, it was mid-spring. The ground was wet and cold. There was a sign that hung in the wind labeling the section of cemetery to identify it, "Babyland." I got out of my car, stumbled to the ground, wet, muddy, and sobbing. I had miscarried in September. We were now around the beginning of May. I eventually made my way to sit under a beautiful crabapple tree that was just starting to bloom and summoned the strength to talk to my never-known child. Years later, we now have a replica of that tree in our backyard. I still go to the cemetery on occasion, but I am so happy to have brought that peace home to our family here.

After all of those months, I still was not healed emotionally or physically. My period came sporadically for months. Trying to try for a baby again became so tedious and challenging. Doctors kept wanting us to wait it out before we recruited specialty clinics. This was all bad advice.

Thirteen months after I miscarried, I found my way to an OBGYN clinic specializing in infertility. What I found was that I had a significantly diminished ovarian reserve (meaning, basically, I didn't have that many eggs left), even for my age, and poor egg quality. I did 3 rounds of Intrauterine insemination (IUI), which is a procedure that slightly boosts the chances of pregnancy by giving the woman medication to increase egg development and then directly inserting sperm into the uterus during the fertile period. They were unsuccessful. I regrouped with my doctor shortly after and he referred me to an IVF clinic. He told me that they would likely recommend donor eggs for me due to my circumstances; my chances at success with IVF with my own eggs was going to be low.

301

He was right. My husband and I sat down with our IVF doctor about a month and a half later, in August of 2018. She gave us the facts. IVF using my own eggs would give me a success rate of less than 10% of having a baby. And it would cost tens of thousands of dollars. If we chose to use donor eggs- meaning, eggs from another woman that would be inseminated with my husband's sperm then transferred into my uterus via an IVF procedure, the chances of a successful pregnancy increased to 75%. My eggs= less than 10% chance. Another woman's eggs= 75% chance of a baby.

We went home. We talked. I cried. We went for a bike ride. I cried some more. We looked at adoption. We made pro/con lists. We went back to the IVF clinic a few weeks later and said, "Ok. We are ready. Let's do donor eggs." It wasn't just that easy. There were hoops to jump through, but the process was relatively smooth.

We accessed the donor registry of our clinic. I made a spreadsheet of the donors I was drawn to. Once I narrowed it down to the top 3, I gave the possible donors names (Mandy, Dawn, and Callie) to make them a little more real. Then, honestly? I just started to wait for signs. And they came. I started to see quotes in places that one of the donors referenced in her profile, I started to hear the music that she said she preferred. I saw signs in the sky as she noted loving stargazing; aligning that with my husband's nightly report during our infertility journey as he tried to lift my spirits saying "The stars are extra bright tonight. I think good things are coming." (Spoiler, the night we drove to the hospital for me to give birth to my son, the biggest, brightest falling star sprinted across the sky. He literally fell to earth via a star). It became obvious which donor was ours. It wasn't a lift to choose. She was the one. She belonged.

We have 2 egg donor conceived children now. We are incredibly lucky that we did two IVF transfers and have two healthy happy children. I wish I could say that IVF works that way for everyone- even with donor eggs. Sometimes, even with all of the assistance and support, there are still heartbreaking failures that are no one's fault.

Here's what you should know about my children. They are my children. 100% mine.

They grew from my body, they were nurtured from the blood and nutrients of my uterus. Even after all of the time that my eggs failed me, it was my blood that sustained them, my body that housed them, my warmth that nurtured and grew them. I spent years fighting with my period; crying tears the months that it showed up, when it was one of the critical building blocks that I could give to create my own children. I supplied that, and it is beautiful.

They do not share my DNA. That is of exactly no importance to any of us at this time. I don't envision a future where it will be a problem. They know that they have a donor/egg mommy. Since they are young (5 and 3) they don't fully understand all of the implications of it. But we talk about it frequently and we celebrate each of them on their own donor day (the day of their transfer) every year. Our donor is anonymous, so we do not know who or where she is. We celebrate her, regardless. We would not be a family without her. If there is one gratitude I could give, it would be to somehow put into words how her tiny little gift of life made our tired, broken, sad and grieving home into one of joy, love and fullness.