

BAZZAAR

Harpers



April 2011 £4.20
www.harpersbazaar.co.uk

EVA
HERZIGOVA

Natural goddess

THE INCONCEIVABLE TRUTH

For *BELLA LLOYD*, the decision to try for a baby in her late thirties kickstarted an eight-year emotional rollercoaster, with visits to IVF and donor clinics at home and abroad. Here, she tells the dramatic story of her struggle to get pregnant

It sounds so strange, but I think in my heart I always knew that I wouldn't be able to conceive naturally. It crept up on me in the middle of the night, like the slow onset of a headache; the fear that I could never give birth to my own baby. I often lay awake at 4am staring across the pillow at my husband Jack. I knew he still loved me, but how

could he not be disappointed in me? We hadn't used any contraception for five years, since we married at 35. Of course, I had moments of hope – that thrill of a late period, the butterflies inside me as I ran out to the chemist to buy a test. But, over time, that blue line I so wanted never came, and I had all but given up.

I'd never been one of those obviously maternal women. Certainly, when I was growing up, I'd never thought: 'I need to be a mother at all costs.' I am a lawyer, and, in my twenties and early thirties, I was busy building my career in a competitive environment. I just don't think I was ready back then. I'd married my university sweetheart, Jack, now a teacher, after remeeting him in my early thirties. He had never put any pressure on me to give him children, but with the onset of time, my maternal urge was growing. Every year more of my friends had babies and I would acquire another godchild. Slowly, the desire to be a mother began to overwhelm me.

After a few years of trying, investigations had found scarring on my fallopian tubes – the result, my doctor believed, of a nasty appendicitis infection when I was 15. I'd had a laparoscopy in 2004, aged 37, to treat the scar tissue, leaving a window of opportunity of a few years for me to conceive. For two more years we tried, but still nothing happened. As my 40th birthday approached, the night panics worsened. I knew I had to do something before it was too late.

In my mind, intervention had always been a last resort, but with IVF I still felt there was a chance that things might work out. I had heard of women getting pregnant with help in their forties and even

fifties, and the good news was that all the preliminary tests showed that my FSH (follicle-stimulating hormone) and Jack's sperm count were very good. The last thing I expected to hear, on our first visit to the IVF clinic, was such a negative prognosis. But there on the charts was a big plunging line at age 40, indicating the drop in IVF success rates: a big arrow to failure. The doctor might as well have said: 'You're how old? Forty! God, you'd better get on with it.' I sat there blankly looking at his computer screen, while Jack squeezed my hand. I felt numb, helpless. We were about to embark

on this marathon journey with, according to the doctor, only a five per cent chance of success.

Our first appointment at the IVF clinic had been so disheartening that I wanted to put things on hold for a while to absorb my options. Jack and I talked about our feelings on adoption, but we were both put off by how difficult it is in the UK; the endless interviews with social services and again the questions about age. At about this time, we went to a dinner party and met a couple who had been trying to adopt a child – of any age – for two or three years. They looked so dejected and weary. But I was impressed by how they were able to share all their emotions around the dinner table – so different from me. I buried my sadness, keeping my hopes and fears bottled inside.

To be honest, the thought of IVF scared me. I worked in a very masculine atmosphere in a big competitive company, and I worried that going through such a difficult process (the hormones and drugs you take, plus the stress of it all) would affect my performance. I'd seen friends grappling with IVF, and their despair was palpable. I suppose I was afraid of being made to feel so exposed, so vulnerable. Before I had tried to get pregnant, I had achieved everything I wanted through hard work and talent. But this was something beyond my control. I already felt a failure as a woman; what if it didn't work out again this time? I knew I wasn't ready to face all of that yet.

So, instead, I decided to get really fit – giving up alcohol, coffee and tea – to get my body in tip-top shape. As time passed, the gnawing in my stomach became stronger, a growing sense that my

life wouldn't be complete without a baby. Yet I was still confused. Jack understood and never put pressure on me to have IVF. His attitude was: 'I'll support you, whatever you want to do.' Rather than damaging our relationship, the stress of infertility had brought us closer. I loved him so much it only made me want to have a baby for him even more.

Around Christmas 2007, I went to my GP for a check-up. When I confided in him that I was struggling to come to terms with the thought that I would never have children, he suggested that I see an IVF specialist with a more holistic approach, who believed in using acupuncture and reflexology in tandem with the IVF procedure.

A few months after my 40th birthday in 2007, when one of my youngest girlfriends announced, at age 34, that she was pregnant, it hit me really hard. The nausea shot through my stomach so strongly that I thought I might throw up. She looked so beautiful pregnant, so sexy and happy. I made an appointment with the holistic-IVF clinic that day.

Even though the statistics were essentially the same, the consultant's tone was so positive. He made me feel that it was possible for me to have a baby. That bit of encouragement meant everything to me. He suggested that we try three rounds of IVF (at around £4,000 each), and if that failed there was also the possibility of donor-egg IVF. That appointment changed my life. Using a donor was not something we'd considered before. It turned out that there were huge advantages: using another – younger – woman's egg to conceive makes the statistics soar in your favour. Your chances of getting pregnant and carrying the baby without a miscarriage are the same as a woman of the donor's age. That night, I remember coming home and talking it through with Jack. Although he'd never pressured me, we'd always talked about how beautiful our children would be since we were kids in college. Now we were considering having a baby who would never inherit my DNA. It was something I had to reconcile myself with. In the end, like a typical lawyer, I was swayed by the statistics. I felt that I had to go for the most secure option. I just didn't feel that I could take another disappointment.

As soon as I had made my decision, I wanted things to start happening. In the UK, waiting lists for donor eggs are very long – at some clinics, from two to three years. I didn't feel I could wait that long, so my consultant suggested we seek treatment abroad. In Spain, for example, eggs are more readily available, as donors retain anonymity, unlike in the UK, and are paid up to €1,000 per round of IVF compared to £250 here. We were told that the statistics for donor-egg IVF in the Spanish clinic are around 60 per cent success rate per cycle, and 95 per cent if you have four rounds of treatment; this stays the same whatever your age (as long as your donor is young). The thought of this suddenly excited me. It was as if a new door had opened, giving us renewed hope. In the spring of 2008, we booked our tickets to Spain.

Madrid in March was a joy. The sunshine and warm air made me feel that anything might be possible. The clinic was extremely professional, but the whole thing was pretty surreal. It reminded me of an Almodóvar film with a tangled plot and all these flamboyant Spanish characters. They tested my blood group, took my picture and recorded my weight, height and hair colour, since the staff look for a donor who is a close physical match. I have heard in the States

that you can even flick through albums of photos to find your donor, with the most beautiful and intelligent donors asking the highest fees. I didn't care about that, really. I just wanted our own child.

The fee was €9,000, and for that we could expect six good-quality embryos. The donor eggs would be fertilised with Jack's sperm. They would implant two in my uterus and freeze the rest (frozen embryos survive, although they have about fifty per cent less chance of success). All we needed was to find a donor match.

One month after our visit to Spain, in April 2008, I got a call at work on my mobile from the clinic to say they had found a donor: a 24-year-old student. A woman – oh my God, 20 years younger than me! – was about to give us her eggs. I suddenly felt the butterflies in my stomach that I once had in my mid-thirties. All I could think was: 'That was so easy. I'm on my way to being pregnant!' I ran out of the office to call Jack, on a huge high. Our journey had begun. It suddenly felt real.

The physical side of the IVF journey was more difficult. A womb scan found that my fallopian tubes were full of liquid (a condition called hydrosalpinx), which would poison any embryo, and I needed an operation before the pregnancy could go ahead. In June 2008, after a procedure to tie my tubes (to stop the liquid escaping),

I had an ultrasound scan and finally got the go-ahead to start IVF. The first step was to take the Pill, to regulate my cycle and synchronise with the egg donor's cycle. Two weeks later, I had a period and started to use a twice-daily hormone spray, Synarel, which put me into a temporary 'menopause' to stop me producing any more eggs. This would interfere with the implantation of the embryo. It felt unnatural to be forcing my body into this artificial state, especially at a time when I was at my physical peak. I felt so tired.

Soon the attacks of dizziness began – one in a presentation to my new boss. I was sitting at the boardroom table and started having a hot flush accompanied by an out-of-body experience. I wanted to explain my strange behaviour, but how could I? Jack was so supportive, but it felt lonely sometimes, going through this on my own.

We returned to Spain on 21 September 2008, full of anticipation. Walking through a leafy Madrid suburb in the sunshine on the way to our hotel, I felt we couldn't fail. Within a few days, Jack gave a sperm sample at the clinic to fertilise the donor eggs. On 26 September, we went back and were sent up to a private room. I was told to undress and put on a hospital nightgown, and Jack put on green scrubs; we put on hairnets and special shoe covers. It felt so strange and clinical. After half an hour, they called us into the theatre, whereupon a female doctor inserted the two embryos into me through a catheter. Jack was holding my hand throughout. The whole process was weirdly unemotional; it was as if I couldn't connect it to the reality of having a child. The doctor left me with a scan of the embryos as a souvenir; and after a few days we returned home.

I had been told to take it easy for the next two weeks. And wait. I took a couple of days off work. At first I thought: 'Great! A chance to relax,' but in reality it was torture. For the first few days after the

I suppose I was afraid of being made to feel so exposed, so vulnerable. Before I had tried to get pregnant, I had achieved everything I wanted through hard work and talent. But this was beyond my control

procedure, I was on a total high. Every twinge, every tiny change in my body, I took as a positive sign. But after four days, back in London, I just didn't feel anything. My biggest mistake was looking up every symptom of early pregnancy on the internet; I grabbed at my breasts for signs of tenderness, and constantly felt for cramps. I'd be up late at night Googling under the covers on my BlackBerry as Jack slept. I was obsessed. Every day I cried when I got up and again when I went to bed. With each day, my anxiety got worse.

Going through IVF egg donation tests your relationship, but in our case it actually made us closer. Jack and I shared every emotion, every good and bad day. It felt as though going through the process was reconfirming our marriage vows. It was our closeness that gave me that inner strength to keep going, to carry on.

On 9 October 2008, I went to Harley Street for a blood test to see if I was pregnant. I asked my consultant to call me at home with the news, in case I broke down at work. At the end of the day, as soon as I walked in the door, I collapsed, sobbing on the wooden floor. When the call finally came, all I heard were his first words: 'I'm so sorry.'

Almost immediately, our Spanish doctor offered to implant two more embryos, within eight weeks of the first failure. But I felt I needed a break. The whole cycle had been an emotional rollercoaster, and I was still in deep shock – a result of the accumulative failures over the years. With the next cycle, using frozen embryos, the odds of getting pregnant would be reduced to 30 per cent. When we returned to Spain to try again a few months later, the mood was very sombre. Two weeks after the implantation, when we got 'the call', it was everything I had feared. The disappointment second time around was crushing. I finally gave up hope.

Life went on, but it was like living behind a sheet of glass. I had to accept that I might never have children. It had been hanging over me for six years, but somehow I just couldn't let go. Some days I felt numb. Others, I cried in the toilets at work. Although it conformed to every stereotype I hated, I struggled with my identity as a woman. What did the future hold for me without children?

In March 2009, I went for lunch with an old friend who mentioned that her 45-year-old aunt was trying to get pregnant at an IVF clinic in the Czech Republic. The treatment was cheaper – at €3,900 it was almost a third of Spanish clinic rates (sadly, the price was now a consideration. I'd already spent £20,000 on fertility testing and treatment). What was more, they offered PGT (pre-implantation genetic testing) – a technique that picks out embryos with the highest chance of survival. But the really special thing about their method, which might explain their six- to 10-month waiting list and high success rates, is that they offer blastocysts; using five-day-old embryos of such quality that their chance of implanting is very high – they are literally 'blasting out' of their shell.

That is how we found ourselves on a flight to Brno in the Czech Republic in June of that year, a city every bit as grey as Madrid was sunny. The clinic was state-of-the-art, and the clinical director was extremely positive. Instead of telling me I was old, he said: 'Yes, yes, yes, you'll be fine, you're so lucky, you're so young!'

It was the first time anyone had ever said that, and it felt great.

A few months later, in the first week of September, we had an email from the clinic to say that they'd found a donor. This time, after the embryo transfer in Brno, I felt different; much more hopeful. Within days, my breasts felt heavy. There were twinges and sensations, as if the embryo was settling in. The day before the official two-week blood test, I couldn't bear the suspense, and bought a pregnancy test. When the blue line appeared I shrieked, and ran downstairs with no knickers on waving the stick in the air to show Jack.

But we were by no means home and dry; in the sixth week, while we were staying with my in-laws in Dorset for the weekend, the symptoms stopped and I began to panic. I didn't sleep a wink that night. I crept downstairs at dawn and went online to find a private clinic in the area. I called first thing and managed to convince them to give me a scan the minute they opened. I just had to know. I was

At the end of the day,
as soon as I walked in
the door, I collapsed,
sobbing on the wooden
floor. When the
call finally came, all
I heard were my
consultant's first words:
'I'm so sorry'

in tears when the nurse put the camera inside me, looking for a heartbeat. All the horror stories I had read of women losing their babies at this stage were looping around in my head. Then the ultrasound technician said: 'There you are! There's the heartbeat and it's good and strong.' With tears rolling down my face, I hugged her. A few minutes later I was clutching the scan, a picture of our baby girl. I skipped back to the house, still sobbing – those wonderful hormones – crept back into bed and woke Jack clutching evidence that our baby existed. We hugged under the duvet.

Feeling my daughter grow and kick was incredible. I was so overwhelmed by the sensations, my body changing shape, that I never stopped to think, or felt that she was not my biological child. After the first trimester of my pregnancy, in which I had a little morning sickness, I felt in perfect health and full of energy. I even worked until a few days before the birth. As advised by the consultant, we had a planned C-section, and our daughter Daisy was born at 10.30am on a sunny morning on 21 September last year. Jack and I were in floods of tears. As soon as her umbilical cord was cut, and she was placed in my arms skin to skin, she stopped crying. She knew I was her mother. After years of struggle – pain, sweat and tears – at 43, I'd given birth to our little girl.

In general, I've shied away from telling other people the story of how Daisy was conceived. I only confided in my husband's sister and a handful of close girlfriends. It is easier to deal with it this way. I just don't have the courage to tell everyone, yet. I'm sure we will tell Daisy one day, but for the moment we haven't worked out how or when. It's a difficult story to explain, but there is time.

In future, IVF egg donation will probably be much more common – and it will be easier to talk about. Certainly, more and more women are doing it these days. It is a procedure that gives hope and the possibility of a child to those who believe it is too late.

For my part, I'm so glad I went through everything I did. Playing with Daisy every day makes me feel really blessed, and in my head I often thank the young woman who donated her eggs to us. Jack and I have even discussed going back to Brno to try for a second child – a sibling for Daisy. I believe things happen for a reason and that she was somehow meant to be our child. However she was conceived, and however much we went through, she is my daughter and I'm her mother. Everything else just isn't important. □

Some names and details have been changed.