

## *My Dear You*

*Well, you asked me how it felt, all this "infertility" business, and I'm not really sure that you're ready for this, but you did ask so, here goes...*

I love Christmas. I always have done. OK, so since I've grown up it doesn't have the sort of spine-tingling, early morning excitement that it had when I was small, but the idea of a champagne breakfast in bed, a long leisurely bath and then mooching about the house all day in my pj's has an appeal all of its own. We all know in theory it's a time for children, but you can have some wonderful adult Christmases too.

However, since we embarked on this fertility journey I've discovered another aspect. I can't possibly be the only one to discover the arrival of Christmas cards can I? Anxiously scanning the handwriting on the envelope to see if it's one of my elderly relatives or, more worryingly, one of my peers announcing the arrival of yet another little bundle of joy. Such a simple thing, Christmas cards, and yet every year the list of friends without children shrinks whilst others' families increase. I've agonised over opening these envelopes – and it makes me so mad that I should. Such a daft thing, but it's just another reminder that whilst the world moves on, we're stuck on the periphery, noses pressed to glass, voyeurs in a family-orientated world where we don't belong and can't take part.

It feels that there are so many things denied to those that want children, but apparently can't have them. Mother's Day and Father's Day are commercialised, over-hyped and ridiculously expensive, and yet who amongst us wouldn't want to go out and buy every piece of rubbish going if it meant that we actually qualified for one of those titles. Even going out to the supermarket is fraught; I've learnt never, ever to go at the weekend – that's family time. Mums and dads pushing prams, reining in toddlers, arguing with pre-teens, it's enough to make you weep. And I have.

At work there's no respite. If you're a woman of a "certain age", even if it's not actually spelled out, human resources assume that there's a possibility that you'll be disappearing to start a family, and automatically send you details on maternity leave and changes to maternity policy, but woe betide if you should ask for time off for fertility treatments. That's another kettle of fish completely and, to be honest, one which I don't have the strength to argue at present, but believe me, it's both agonising and time-consuming.

Then there are the family expectations. Fortunately that's not something that I've ever had a problem with, but I know many people are asked time and time again when they're going to have a baby. As if it's really anyone else's business. And what about those couples from backgrounds where it is expected to not only produce large families, but mainly sons, my heart goes out to them.

So many things we avoid – early shows at the cinema, Saturday morning shopping, trips to the beach, any holiday at all where there will be a children's club (which leads on to more expense when you decide to go to an adult's only resort, only to arrive and discover that most of the other

guests are exhausted parents having a break from their children); the list goes on and on. Even the most trivial things can lead to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Daft comments from complete strangers, a piece of music recollecting a childhood memory, the sight of a child hand-in-hand with their parents. To all the world we present a logical, calm, even happy-go-lucky exterior, and we go home and we cry.

But not any more. You see, my dear You, our miracle arrived. Last year, a bundle of joy of our own came shouting into the world early one morning. Throughout my pregnancy (even now I can barely write the word) I refused to believe that it was happening. I spent months in shock, and even after Alice was born I couldn't believe she was here. Self-preservation my doctor called it; so many disappointments, so many years of hoping, praying, injecting, testing, you name it, so when it finally happened I couldn't let my guard down, not even for a minute. Even when she was born it took several months for me to fully appreciate that she was here, and ours.

I'm sure I look at her in a different light to that which I would have if she'd come along earlier. She's a toddler now, racing round the house, bouncing into things occasionally, laughing, talking, shouting, crying (sometimes), doing everything she should do. I hosted our National Childbirth Trust meeting last week – nine mums and eleven children, the best turnout this year so far. After everyone had left I had an email from one of them commiserating on the amount of tidying up I had to do, I explained that I was in heaven. In my darkest moments I'd never dreamt I'd be tidying up after anyone else's children, let alone my own. And yet there I was, surrounded by dribble, wet wipes, muslins, chewed toys, squashed puzzles and in my element.

But it doesn't leave you. You would think that having had our prayers answered that I'd forget the horror of infertility, but I haven't. I don't think I ever will. It scars you, changes you, and how you see the world. I know what a miracle our daughter is and, yes, I do still get jealous when I hear of others falling pregnant at the drop of a hat. I know now that I'll always feel like that. It's not to say that I'm not delighted for others, just that I see things differently now.

One of the cruellest parts of infertility is that you never know if the treatment's going to work. How many other non life-threatening medical procedures have such a relatively low success rate (is it one in three or one in four?). I'd be interested to know, but there can't be that many. And still we try. Why? Because we have to. And after everything has been exhausted from a medical view point, still we hope and hope. Few of us want to get past the age where it certainly won't work without trying everything.

Of course there's always the adoption route. Is that a possibility? For me I don't think it would have been, but I sincerely admire those that do. All I know is that I don't think it would have been for us.

What did you say? Oh yes, your last question. Is she worth it? Oh boy ... what do you think!

*Lots of love*

*me*