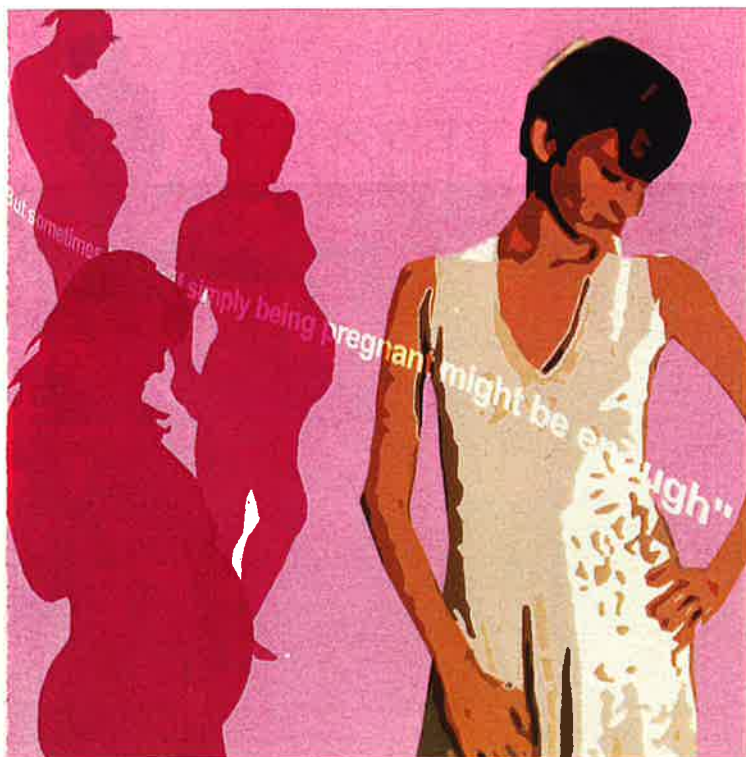




Sister love

She felt useless – after five attempts at IVF, she'd given up hope of ever having a baby... **By Pippa Kelly**

It would be easy to say that I'd always envied my sister, but I didn't. It wasn't like that. I had a wonderful husband, a good job – not as glamorous as Cassie's perhaps, but more secure – and a lovely house. I was delighted when she met Harry. Surprised when they married six weeks later – but then that was Cassie: flighty and impulsive.

Not like me. I gave up booze and started taking vitamin supplements six months before abandoning the pill. I began to think I should have followed Cassie's example. Pregnancy didn't dull her taste for alcohol, and it didn't seem to have harmed the beautiful baby girl she gave birth to on the first anniversary of her second marriage.

Holding Holly for the first time, I looked down at her scrunched face and said a silent prayer.

Then my sister gave up work. Motherhood suited her. She complained that her figure had slackened and compared it to mine. I saw only folds of female fulfilment.

When Holly was nine months, Cassie fell pregnant again. "Didn't think it could happen while I was breastfeeding – how am I going to cope?" she wailed. I walked home to an empty house and climbed the stairs to the neutrally-painted yellow room on the top floor. I pushed open the door and sank to the floor, hugging my arms around my toned, useless body. I was still sitting in the dark when Nick came home two hours later.

Looking back, that was the turning point. Obsession creeps up on you and pounces unawares. I knew the hormones made it worse, pushing things out of proportion, making every pregnant woman (and, right now, they were everywhere) an object of envy. But knowing didn't make it easier. Nor did Cassie's obscene fecundity.

Her swelling tummy proclaimed to the world that she was all-woman – procreating and expanding (literally) into her God-given role. "I know it sounds stupid," I tried to explain to Nick. "But sometimes I feel as if

simply being pregnant might be enough." Nick and I had three more goes at IVF. Each time, the consultant said the chances were good. For two weeks, my body and I waited, expectantly, for a flicker of life. But the only thing growing in me was bitter despair. IVF was a waste of money, emotion and time. So much time, ticking away. I was 36. I'd had five failed attempts. Cassie wasn't even 30. Her second baby was due any day. She waddled into our hall with her huge, burgeoning belly, and declared she had something important to say. She had come to offer me the most precious gift one woman can give to another. Yet I can't remember exactly what she said or how she said it.

It was probably the strain of it all, I don't know, but as Nick and I struggled to take in what Cassie was saying, her waters broke all over the floor. We only just got her to hospital in time. Nick drove like a maniac, Cassie was bundled away by the doctors, and Harry arrived just in time to see his son being born.

It wasn't until the next day that Nick and I were able to sit down and talk over Cassie's suggestion. By then, though, it was too late, and I think Nick knew it. He only had to watch me as I held my nephew to know my answer. Of course, it wasn't easy. Trying to get your head round the idea of someone else, albeit your sister, carrying your baby to term, is a tricky one. The baby, though, would be ours – Nick's sperm and my egg. Cassie was, as she said, merely the incubator, Harry was happy: he'd got his family. We were all set.

Cassie had contacted a clinic in Harley Street and knew just what to do. As soon as she'd finished breastfeeding Billy, Nick and I started another round of IVF. I was sure it would work: Cassie was made for producing babies – she only had to think about sex and she fell pregnant. It never entered my head that she might change her mind. This was my sister, not some anonymous "host" or surrogate mother. But as soon as I heard her voice on the phone I knew something was wrong. She asked if she could come round; and this time, I remember it all.

She sat on the leather armchair, Nick and I sat on the sofa. Outside

the French windows, the birds struck up their evening chorus. I'm not proud of how I reacted. I think I had a bit of a breakdown. I quit work and walked out on Nick. I took an Inter-rail ticket to the south of France, booked into a cheap hotel and pretended to be 19 again. I knew what I was doing: you don't see many pregnant women in St Tropez. But I missed Nick, and Cassie, and after a week or so, I came home. I turned the neutrally painted yellow room into a study, stopped reading up endlessly about IVF and slowly stopped wanting what I couldn't have. The shock of it all seemed to clear my obsession – it was as though I'd sobered up after an all-night binge. I tried to tell her it wasn't her fault. "It's just one of those things," I said, surprising myself with my reasonable voice.

Little Ella is eight weeks old today, and the spitting image of her father. She sleeps most of the day and virtually none of the night, but Cassie says that's par for the course. She should know – she's got three now, counting baby Luke.

As for me, I'm drunk with tiredness and awash with love. It was Nick who persuaded me to complete the IVF, after Cassie dropped the bombshell that she was pregnant yet again. I was convinced it wouldn't work and only did it to shut him up – I shudder to think of all those Pernods I consumed on the Côte d'Azur.

They didn't do any harm though. My daughter's perfect. After her lunchtime feed, we lie on my bed, nose to nose. Only the touch of her baby breath on my face reminds me I'm not dreaming. I remember, again, the moment I gave birth and I thank God for my sister's love, her obscene fecundity and her perfectly timed mistake. **S**

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Louise Joy Brown, the first test-tube baby, was born in Oldham General Hospital 25 years ago on 25 July 1978.

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