

NEW SERIES

Will we ever have a baby?

When Amanda found love she thought babies would naturally follow. But sometimes, life can take the cruellest turns



We didn't know what lay ahead

My period had started and now I had to make the call. Phoning the fertility clinic, I felt both nervous and excited. 'Fresh or frozen?' the woman on the other end of the line barked. 'Pardon?' I asked, surprised. 'Fresh or frozen?' she said again, agitated. For a split second, images of a bag of frozen peas flashed through my mind. 'Oh, mmmm... fresh!' I spluttered. Unbelievably, what I was being asked so brusquely was if I wanted to start my first cycle of IVF treatment with my own

'fresh' eggs, or preprepared 'frozen' embryos. Being an IVF rookie, it hadn't occurred to me that not every round of IVF starts the same. Silently chastising myself for being so dumb, I listened intently as Miss 'Fresh Or Frozen' explained the details. A nurse would ring me back to organise my IVF timetable, then send my prescription for all the drugs I'd soon be snorting and injecting into my body. This phone call, at 9am on Day One of my period, was for me the real start of my IVF. Although I hadn't expected an angelic Mother Teresa figure to guide me through that first momentous step, I also hadn't expected to feel like I'd just spoken to some overwrought call centre worker, gagging for her next cigarette break! Afterwards I had to laugh. Bizarre didn't come into it. But then, the journey so far hadn't been far off unbelievable either... It had taken me a long time to finally meet my Mr Right. That old saying that 'sometimes, what you're looking for is right under

your nose' was certainly true for me. I was 36, a writer, and for years, Paul Simmonds had lived 100 yards from me in my then home town of Oxford — yet we'd never spoken. It wasn't until I lost my car keys that my mother spotted Paul's AA patrol van outside his house and marched over to ask if he could help.

After that day, we found more excuses to talk. And if there was anything wrong with my car, I'd be thrilled! When I was bitten by a dog a year on and ended up in hospital waiting for surgery...

How u feeling? Paul texted. Deranged with hunger! I replied. His next text sent my spirits soaring... I'll take u out for a meal to make up for it. I was wheeled into theatre grinning widely. 'You seem chirpy,' the anaesthetist remarked, puzzled. 'I've got a date!' I remember slurring, before going under. Two days later, with black,

bloodied stitching poking out from the bandage on my hand, I had my first-ever date with Paul in a quaint country pub. It sounds a bit clichéd, but after that night, we were inseparable. Paul, a divorcee with three kids, was manly and sensitive. Within a week, we both admitted we'd fallen in love. And just six weeks later, on a romantic weekend in Shropshire, Paul asked me to take a midnight walk. As we gazed at the rolling hills, Paul held my hand — now stitch-free — and asked me to marry him. 'Yes!' I said. 'I'd love to.' And at that moment — I'm not making this up — fireworks went off in the distance! By now, I was 37. Paul was 41. And I'd always wanted a child, so we decided to throw caution, and contraception, to the wind. But six months later, nature

I knew what a gruelling process IVF would be'

Attending a patient evening with lots of other infertile couples, I blanched as we heard I'd have to snort drugs to inhibit my natural hormones, then inject others to boost my egg supply. There was even a remote chance you could die if things went wrong. It was chilling, but I assured myself it wouldn't happen to me. As I was now 39, and Paul had children already, NHS funding was out of the question. The first cycle was going to cost roughly £5,000 — money we simply didn't have. But my dad immediately insisted on paying for our first shot. As all our preparations fell into place, I felt excitement tinged with a fair few nerves. But then, weeks later, Paul woke up with a lump on his neck. Doctors thought it was a cyst

and decided to remove it. But after the op, Paul looked terrible — yellow, with massive cuts round his neck. 'You look like Frankenstein's monster!' I joked, trying to hide my distress. But then... 'I'm afraid the lump wasn't a cyst,' the doctor said. 'It was a cancerous tumour.' CANCELS! 'Stop...stop right there!' I wanted to scream. Then I wanted to press rewind. But I couldn't. I remember my hand going to my mouth, my eyes boring into the surgeon's face. Next, I looked at Paul, sitting there stoically, listening intently. My mind felt as if it was going to explode as I tried to comprehend that the man who'd proved my life could have a Walt Disney ending, now had cancer. I burst out crying and hugged Paul's manly chest. He put his arms round me and comforted me. Looking back, we were both in shock and I sobbed gut-wrenching tears. All of a sudden, my life was no longer about creating a new life, but saving the life of the man I loved. So I phoned the fertility clinic, who sympathetically agreed to put our IVF on hold. We spent our days at the hospital's head and neck clinic, with people who'd been through surgery and had pieces missing from their faces. But I tried not to look at them. 'We believe the primary cancer is on the back

of your tongue,' a doctor told Paul. 'We may have to remove part, or all, of it.' 'I'm keeping my tongue — simple as that!' Paul replied. I begged him to reconsider, said I'd love him just the same. But he'd made up his mind. Next day, surgeons took tissue samples from Paul's mouth, throat and tongue. Afterwards, he was in incredible pain, although he wouldn't admit it. When we returned for the results, we were both sick with worry and dread. But what happened next, I can only describe as a miracle. 'Much to our surprise, we didn't find any cancer,' the doctor said. Not a



Paul needed a five-hour operation

single speck. What? I wanted to leap up and down with joy. Paul squeezed my hand tightly — I could feel him shaking slightly. I started blubbering something about 'getting out the champagne'. Paul's surgeon, however, was more cautious than celebratory. He explained it was very unusual they couldn't find where the cancer had come from, but it could be that Paul's own immune system had got rid of the original tumour. We both drove home from the hospital and felt like we were flying. Then I switched on the radio and Boy George's *It's A Miracle* was playing. Tears of relief poured down my face. As a precautionary measure, Paul still needed a horrendous five-hour operation to remove the lymph nodes in his neck. The doctors wanted to make sure there were no stray cancerous cells still lingering near the site of the lump. As one of the cancer nurses explained: 'It's like cracking a nut with a hammer.' It took Paul months to recover, but we both felt so lucky when we heard no cancer cells had been found. After all that had happened, I didn't just want, but needed, to have my husband's child. So at the start of this year — seven months after Paul's operation — I phoned the fertility clinic to tell them we wanted to start the whole process all over again. It meant we had to retake all the original fertility tests — and a few more, on top. But finally, in April, we were told that on the first day of my next period, I should ring up and tell them I was ready. So here I was now, phoning the clinic to start my IVF journey...and hearing those unforgettable words... 'Fresh or Frozen?!

I'm keeping my tongue — it's as simple as that!



We're ready to start our journey

AMANDA REVELL WALTON, 40, HIGHWORTH, WILTSHIRE

Next week... Amanda gets a surprise delivery by courier and soon discovers her route to getting a baby is going to be far from simple.



Frozen peas?



On a romantic evening out



My AA man

Photos: Tracy Griffin. Photo of Amanda on the phone is a reconstruction