

‘I’ve got my longed-for baby... thanks to a man I’ve never met’

A series of devastating heartbreaks looked set to threaten *Liv Thorne*’s lifelong dream of becoming a mother. Resolutely single and turning 37, she realised her only chance of making it happen was to go it alone

I didn’t ever dream it would be like this. As a girl, in my naive fantasies about my life as an adult, not once did I think about having to buy sperm or make the decision to have a baby on my own.

No matter how many times I rewrote my life script, the main elements of it were always the same. There would be a loving relationship, followed by various thrilling chapters, which would end with me announcing to my parents that they were to become Granny and Grandad – or Sir, as my dad declared he wanted to be known. Not even in the footnotes had I considered having to buy sperm in order to get pregnant. Fast-forward to 2016, and here I was, aged 37, fairy tale smashed to smithereens, scouring the

internet for ways to become pregnant alone.

According to the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority, the use of donor sperm and donor eggs is increasing year on year, yet single patients still only account for three per cent of those seeking fertility treatment in the UK. As I stood looking at my solo life, I decided that I was going to become part of that three per cent. I was going to become a mum using donor sperm because without a partner by my side this was the only way I felt I could have a baby.

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I became an auntie at the age of 13 and from that moment on I knew that I wanted kids of my own. Yet now, at 37, I was the sort of single who didn’t even get a ‘plus

one’ on a wedding invitation any more.

I was alone because I had built a wall around myself. My childhood as the youngest of four was a happy one – our house was always full, and I have wonderful memories of huge Christmases with big tins of Quality Street. But when I was eight years old, Mum was diagnosed with breast cancer. Just as she was given the all-clear, Dad – an ultra-fit marathon runner – started to feel ill. He had poisoning from the asbestos he had used to insulate a barn on the family farm 30 years earlier, and died aged 49, when I was 12. Less than two years after Dad died, Mum’s cancer returned, and she died aged just 50, when I was 17.

At 21 I fell in love with a man who I adored, but the fact that I didn’t even have his phone number should tell you how serious he →



LIV WITH HERB AGED FIVE MONTHS, SEPTEMBER 2018

was about me. It culminated in him forgetting to tell me we were no longer an item. It is no surprise to me now that this was the last relationship I was in.

I couldn't take any more heartache. I couldn't have one more person I loved leave me. So, brick by brick, I built up an emotional wall to protect myself from any more pain. It was a real corker, with barbed wire on every inch, yet adorned with disco balls to convince people that I was completely fine. The wall stopped me from ever succumbing to a relationship and also made the chances of becoming a mother look increasingly remote – however much I longed for it to happen.

Yet I didn't want a baby in order to put a plaster over my historical pain – I wanted a baby because that is what every cell in my body was telling me it needed. On boozy nights out, I had spoken to my friends about the idea of sperm donation, yet I always found excuses not to carry it through. Now, however, I knew I had to try. I had to take the leap alone.

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Thinking about getting pregnant and buying sperm suddenly filled every waking minute. I felt so alive – as though I was on the cusp of something truly amazing. I told my siblings – the people I loved the most – about my plan and they were supportive. Once it was spoken aloud, there was no turning back.

The entry level, getting-pregnant-without-a-man procedure is called intrauterine insemination (IUI), where sperm is placed directly into the uterus. It is the least invasive, least expensive and least successful treatment available. Then there is assisted IUI (IUI+), which is the same but with added hormonal drugs for a higher chance of success. After that there is the more widely known in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), a much more invasive, more expensive and ultimately more successful process that involves removing your eggs and fertilising them in a laboratory setting before they are placed back into your womb. These are just a few of the fertility treatments available.

At the clinic, the consultant's preference was for IVF (owing to my 'geriatric' maternal age and weight) which has a much higher success rate and they (rightly) wanted it to work. But because of the invasive nature of this process and the higher cost, I wanted to try IUI first. This may not be the best option for everyone but it felt right for me. I was intent on trying IUI. I had no reason to suspect I had fertility issues and I was reluctant to pump my body full of hormones. The decision was made: I was going to have four rounds of natural IUI.

The one thing I still didn't have was the most important: sperm. I needed to choose

the genetic heritage of my unborn child without ever meeting the man to whom those genes belonged. Donating sperm in the UK is not a common thing to do – it's unpaid, for a start – but, luckily, it's one of Denmark's biggest exports. Danish men aren't as averse to it, presumably because they get money in return.

The sperm bank website featured a pram in place of a basket icon, and you could search through it as though you were doing your weekly shop. You were able to filter by ethnicity, height, weight, eye colour and blood type. But from all my research, I knew the one thing that was important to me was to have an open donor (one who had agreed to be contacted by any child born as a result of his sperm donation, once that child reached the age of 18).

There was a daunting amount of information about each man, including favourite colour, childhood memories, dominant hand, resting heart rate; the list went on and on. You were able to read a handwritten note about why he had chosen to become a donor, with an accompanying audio file, so you could hear his voice.

For a while, I was looking for someone who sounded as though they would be good to hang out with, like it was some sort of dating website, before it dawned on me that none of this meant anything. It suddenly became glaringly obvious that what could be passed down were any genetic health concerns. I didn't care whether this guy's favourite book was Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, what actually mattered was that his family's medical records didn't read like a script from *Grey's Anatomy*.

I made the biggest decision of my life based on a combination of familial health, a couple of keywords that convinced me he wasn't a total egomaniac, and the fact that he sounded the opposite of me in every way. I moved my mouse over to 'add to pram'. Three straws of grade A Danish sperm (you buy sperm in 'straws'), enveloped in a liquid-nitrogen duvet, would soon be winging their way to the UK.

The fertility clinic told me to call them the moment I started ovulating so that they could make an appointment for me to have my treatment the next day. The IUI procedure is almost exactly the same as a smear test, except there is no scrape; instead there is an injection of something that feels a little cold (the sperm). I couldn't believe that was it. I had to wait two weeks before taking a test and then ring them if it was positive 'for their records'.

If you have ever tried to get pregnant by any means you will know the dread of the 'two-week wait'. This is how long you have to



From top: Liv, three weeks before the birth; Herb at one day old, and eight months, in 2018



From top: Herb in the meadow near their home, April 2020; mother and son in October 2018

'I'VE ALREADY STARTED TO TALK TO HERB OPENLY ABOUT HOW WE BECAME A FAMILY'

wait between sex/treatment and taking a pregnancy test. It is a black vortex and there is absolutely nothing you can do to make the time go any faster. After the two-week wait, the final ten minutes seemed like a breeze. I did several tests, but the results were the same: 'not pregnant'.

I felt numb. It was 30 December and I crawled back into bed, alone. On New Year's Day, I went for lunch with friends. In hindsight, this was a bad idea. Being surrounded by children felt like rubbing vinegar on an open wound. One of my friends was eight months pregnant and another had just announced she was expecting her third. I felt the all-too-familiar tension of being thrilled for people you dearly love, but with a deep ache of jealousy and longing.

I tried to pour all my energy into feeling excited about the next attempt. But, in all honesty, I don't remember the details of the next two-week wait, the taking of the test, seeing the 'not pregnant' screen. Or having the next treatment and the crash of disappointment that would come with yet another 'not pregnant'.

I had used up all three of my sperm straws that had been waiting on ice at the clinic. Gone. No baby.

It would have been easy at that stage to talk to the clinic about IVF, but I had told myself that I would have four rounds of IUI and so I was going to have four rounds. I ordered a final straw. I genuinely didn't think it was going to be a success.

Sperm in. Knickers back on. Enormous amounts of cash handed over. I felt nothing. I was just pleased I had got the fourth attempt out of the way and could start to plan what my next steps would be.

This time the two-week wait didn't seem to drag on for as long as before. Time hadn't stood still. I knew I wasn't pregnant, so I didn't have to hold my breath for those 14 days. Instead, I went to stay with my brother and his family. On the 14th day, I noticed a pregnancy test in my bag and thought I probably should take it.

Afterwards, when I picked up the stick, there it was: PREGNANT 2-3 [weeks]. I read those 11 characters over and over. My mind was loud and chaotic; disbelief and excitement so tightly entwined that they were cancelling each other out and

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Herbert Leonard Elvis was born in 2018 at 11.50pm on what had been my Dad's birthday, 17 April. I had assumed that because I had reached my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I would perpetually be floating on air, staring at my offspring as though he was the living embodiment of love and joy. I'd had clouds over much of my late childhood and then my whole adult life, and I genuinely thought they would part and the sun would shine for ever as soon as my baby was nestled in my arms. What an idiot! It took time, of course it did. Yet I never felt alone. I had started to feel as though Herb and I were a team, in it together.

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So here I am, the solo mum of a brilliant boy who has now turned three. I have already started to talk to Herb openly about how we became a family. I have no intention of hiding any of it from him. I want my son to know that he was so intensely longed for that I decided to do everything in my power to make him a reality.

Would I do it again? I get asked this all the time and my truthful answer is that the only thing stopping me is finances. I have worked every day since I graduated, was gifted money when my parents died and yet I have still had to sell my home to be able to sleep without the crippling worry of how I am going to pay for childcare or to clear the monthly credit card bill. So if I could take the harsh practicalities of money out of it, would I do it again? In a heartbeat.

I cannot believe I made him on my own, with just a touch of science and the kindness of a man I am unlikely to ever meet. I am beyond grateful to Herb, every single day. He has allowed me to realise how very deeply my battered, bruised and tired heart can love.

This is an edited extract from *Liv's Alone: Amateur Adventures in Solo Motherhood* by Liv Thorne, which will be published on 19 August by Hodder & Stoughton, price £16.99*. For more information on sperm donation, visit hfea.gov.uk

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