

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

HEATHER STEP STRUGGLED WITH INFERTILITY FOR YEARS BEFORE FALLING PREGNANT WITH HER SON NICHOLAS (NOW AGED SEVEN). THEN, IN OCTOBER LAST YEAR, HER HUSBAND BRETT DIED JUST MONTHS AFTER SUFFERING A STROKE

Originally, I'd started my blog to share my journey with infertility. But after Brett's passing, the blog took a different direction. I now use it to talk about widowhood. Infertility pales in comparison with this new struggle of not having my husband with me to share the joys of parenting.

Brett and I met online through a dating website. I was teaching in Taiwan at the time, while Brett was in SA. Although we met through the Internet, there were all sorts of real-life connections: he was a good friend of my brother-in-law's and was also friendly with the lodger at my parents' home.

Brett and I chatted online for seven months before meeting in person in December 2002. I think our longest chat lasted seven hours, interspersed with trips to the fried chicken stand downstairs. He also used to phone me a lot. At one point, he had to take out a loan to settle his phone bill!

We got engaged on New Year's Eve, with fireworks exploding around us in Port Elizabeth. At that stage



Brett had started a job in Joburg, so I moved there to be with him. We married in December 2003, after I'd obtained my Montessori teaching diploma.

Two years later, we started trying to conceive. The first gynaecologist I went to in 2007 treated me like a complete idiot just because I couldn't remember how long my periods lasted, or how long I'd been off the Pill. I was very ignorant back then and didn't even question the doctor when he merely counted days and didn't scan me to figure out exactly when I was ovulating. Needless to say, he wasn't helpful at all and I didn't fall pregnant.

I took a bit of a break after that and

so why should it now? But what the heck, we tried anyway. Two weeks later, I took a pregnancy test – and, to our astonishment, the result was positive! Not needing to undergo IVF was a huge blessing and after our son Nicky was born, all our focus for the next few years was on raising him.

Then, one morning in June last year, Brett just didn't wake up. At first I thought he was simply sleeping in, but I had to catch a flight to PE, so I needed to rouse him. I tried to do so repeatedly. I could see that he was awake, but his eyes just stared blankly ahead and he wasn't saying anything.

What followed was nothing short of

Nicky and wanted him to have fun and enjoy life to the fullest.

Nicky's coped exceptionally well – in fact, far better than I have. He's attended some play therapy sessions, but he displays a maturity about his father's death that's unbelievable. Recently his teacher told me they were working with hand sanitiser and Nicky told the other kids that he used it when he went to visit his dad in hospital. So they asked: 'Is your dad sick?' Nicky replied: 'No – he's dead.' One asked if he'd had cancer and he replied: 'No, it was a stroke.' I admire him for not shrinking from the truth and being open about it instead. This little boy is a miracle for whom I'm endlessly grateful. On the day that his father suffered the stroke, he gave me lots of hugs (in between driving his cars all over the hospital coffee shop) and he has given me more hugs every time I've cried.

I love blogging and find it very therapeutic getting all my emotions out. The other bonus is meeting fellow bloggers, whom I've found to be a tremendous support. I've done a lot of praying and crying this year. There have definitely been times when I've lost my faith. I've seen a psychologist to help me deal with the pain and having special friends and family around has also assisted me in coping with the loss.

I've just finished reading *City of Girls* by Elizabeth Gilbert. She writes about a 'field of honour' in wartime, where you have to do the right thing, even though you don't want to. It's been easier for me to live in denial than acknowledge the truth, but every decision that makes me a little stronger every day is a small step towards victory – even if it's something as simple as getting rid of some of Brett's things, like his books.

Nicky and I talk about Brett sometimes. He's been an immense support during this tough time. He's an incredible little person who's always inventing or building something, or just making me laugh. We reminisce about the fun times we had at the local steakhouse or driving bumper cars.

Brett will always be a part of our family and I know he's smiling down on us from heaven.

## 'INFERTILITY PALES IN COMPARISON WITH THE STRUGGLE OF LOSING MY HUSBAND.'

used the time to do more research so that I could be better informed. In 2010 I saw a different gynaecologist. This time around, I felt more optimistic and confident. He did lots of scans and gave me many injections. I boosted the treatment with acupuncture, took homeopathic tablets and followed a very strict diet where I cut out sugar, caffeine, dairy products and gluten completely. But we had another disappointment: this time the frustration was worse, because of all the effort I'd made.

A year later, Brett and I went to a proper fertility clinic where they did a battery of blood tests and a proper examination. The results picked up a thyroid issue. Hormones are fundamental for the body's function and certainly important for conception. I was also experiencing a lot of pain during my periods and was subsequently diagnosed with endometriosis. I had a laparoscopy done and the doctor cleared it up.

Three months later, I was ready for *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF). We'd paid the deposit and were ready to begin the treatment when, during a check-up, the doctor said I'd be ovulating in a few days' time and that we should try again naturally. I thought this was silly. Relying on ovulation had never worked before,

a nightmare. An ambulance arrived and paramedics took over. It turned out Brett had suffered a stroke. He had a history of diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure.

I spent the next three-and-a-half months going backwards and forwards between home, work and hospital, while the love of my life lay immobilised, unable to communicate, apart from a small eye movement to acknowledge my presence. He had to accept being unable to move or talk, which was incredibly hard. I learnt the true meaning of 'in sickness and in health': being there for the man I loved under those conditions nearly broke me. He passed away in October. I was devastated.

Apart from the loneliness, the tech issues and challenges lifting heavy items around the house, what I missed most in Brett was having a partner to help with Nicky. Whenever I lost my temper with him, Brett used to step in and take over. I would do the same for him. Parenting has been so much harder all by myself.

Brett always had fun with Nicky; they'd spend afternoons playing sport, with Brett throwing him around. Their favourite activity was playing Xbox and PlayStation. Brett also bought him a whole stack of *Tintin* and *Asterix* books and we've started reading them every day. Brett really loved