

Amanda Jeffrey

For Ichabod and Ezekiel - Icky and Zeke

I miscarried my first much wanted baby when nine weeks pregnant. I had some slight spotting and went to see the GP, who arranged for me to go to the hospital the next day for a scan. I won't forget the day that it happened-11th September 2001-the same day as the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. At home as I sat and watched the news broadcasts, little did I realise that my own little tragedy was unfolding before me.

I went with Nathan's mum to the hospital the next day and, desperate for the toilet just before the scan, found that I had started to bleed more heavily. The scan revealed what I had dreaded - that the baby had died, the size showing that it (I hate not knowing whether the baby were a he or a she) had died at about seven weeks. I was devastated, my tears flowing furiously as I called Nathan, desperate for him to be with me. It took him a few hours to get to the hospital as he had been at a meeting half way down the country.

In the time it took him to get there, I had seen a doctor who had explained the options. I had opted for a D&C in an effort to get it over with as soon as possible - I couldn't bear the thought of having to see this hoped-for baby coming out of me naturally. I was put on a general gynaecology ward, along with women who had had hysterectomies and one woman who was heavily pregnant and had come in for monitoring. A nurse had explained to me what would happen and eventually, after many hours, a registrar came to see me about the 'procedure'. I happened to be crying at the time and she asked me why I was crying. Did this woman know why I was here? "Because I have miscarried," I stammered. She asked me whether I had any particular worries about the operation. I didn't, and the operation went ahead.

Everything went fine and I was wheeled back to the ward an hour later - minus only a few cells. Unfortunately I had a rather odd reaction to the anaesthetic and was kept in for the night. I never did find out if the nurse managed to find a more medically acceptable term for 'high as a kite' to write on my notes! In the morning, the same nurse told me that miscarriages were far more frequent than people realised. Really I was lucky that I had conceived at all as some people couldn't conceive, and others miscarried far later in their pregnancies (how prophetic those words turned out to be). Was I meant to feel comforted by this? Or guilty that my emotions for this hoped-for baby were so strong when it was after all only a 'few cells'? All I know is that at that time, I felt, and still feel, love for those few cells busily dividing and growing, that little heart beat that I had seen in another early pregnancy scan. Statistics mean little to you if you're the one that's been singled out.

In between coping with the loss, we tried to remember Ichabod by collecting together a few mementos. We bought a special box and put his scan pictures in, a tiny little teddy bear and a silver heart with his name and a few words inscribed on it. Outside we put a plaque of a sunshine face on the wall. We still put flowers around the edges and take a little time to remember what might have been.

I was lucky enough to conceive again seven months later - the second time in over three years of trying. I can remember the feeling of incredible excitement tinged with fear when I found out. I tried to take the pregnancy day-by-day, week-by-week. Each time I was sick I was delighted - proof that my hormones were doing their job. Standing at the bus stop each morning, smelling the diesel fumes, was a sure fire way to feel sick, and I revelled in it! At nine weeks I had slight spotting again, but a scan showed that all was well, although the radiographer put my dates at a week behind those I had worked out. I made it to the 12-week mark and anxiously waited for the nuchal translucency scan that we had opted to have. The consultant performed the scan and took a great deal of time explaining what he was doing.

We delighted in the pictures of the baby wriggling and kicking. He looked so huge on the screen, but I have recently seen a photograph of a 12 week old miscarried baby - so baby-like, but so tiny, sitting in the palm of a hand. What a relief that again all was well. The 21-week scan came and went and my tummy began to get bigger. At around this time I worried for weeks that he didn't seem to be growing very fast and I had lost weight, not put it on. In hindsight perhaps this was an indication of a problem, but since his growth was still within the allowed percentiles who could have predicted that such a devastating event lay ahead. Oh, if only they had.

I left work just after Christmas, no more sitting down on tiny chairs designed for the average four year old! What relief. From here on I blossomed, each week marking a step closer to the baby surviving if he were to be born early. It's now almost sixteen weeks since the events of the night of Thursday 20th March 2003, but I can remember every detail as if it had just happened. Despite hearing a strong heart beat when visiting the midwife on the Wednesday, the baby's movements began to lessen. Initially I wasn't unduly worried, he had after all had quiet times before and of course many babies move less just before being born. However, the worry turned to greater concern and we eventually went to the hospital to be checked. I remember the sick feeling inside as we drove to the hospital and the way we told each other that it would be fine. How wrong we were.

We arrived at the delivery suite and a student midwife tried to find the baby's heart beat. She seemed to have some trouble so her colleague stepped in. A faint heartbeat was picked up, but this midwife went and fetched another, more experienced midwife, to check. The heartbeat we had heard turned out to be a

reflection of my own. No heartbeat could be found for the baby. A doctor came with a scan machine, and searched again for a heart beat. Nothing. The senior registrar was called in and she looked. Still nothing. In those few moments our whole world was turned upside down. The doctor turned the screen of the machine towards us and there we saw our baby, perfectly formed but without a beating heart. Dead. I vomited with the shock and Nathan clung to me crying.

This couldn't be happening, babies don't die this late in pregnancy - just a few days before they are due. My first words were "I'll have to give birth won't I?" This was confirmed and the midwives and doctors left us alone for a while. I have replayed this scene over a thousand times since and each time I am physically hit with the pain of it afresh. Even in my sleep I have no remission, I dream of it and wake up sweating with a racing heart. We telephoned both sets of parents at this point and then were taken away from the main labour ward, into a quiet corridor and into one of the rooms in the Rosemary Suite. This quiet self-contained room was to be our home for the next three days. We opted to stay in the hospital instead of going home; I for one had too many questions to ask, too many worries, to contemplate going home. There were two beds in the room, which meant that Nathan and I could be together. Both sets of our parents also visited us in this room. I realise how lucky we were to have this available to us. I can't imagine what it would have been like if we had had to be near other couples sporting a live and healthy baby.

I was eventually given a tablet to help soften my cervix and we managed to get a few hours disturbed sleep. The following day and a half is a bit of a fog. I can remember odd details; people coming to see us, thinking about a post mortem, the funeral, and more than anything the crying and the crushing sadness. As the induced labour approached I became more and more worried about what the baby would look like. Would he be decomposing? Would he be cold? I knew nothing of these things. The senior registrar patiently explained that in all likelihood he would appear normal, albeit with darker skin and the possibility of blister like patches. On Saturday afternoon at four o'clock a midwife gave me the first tablet to induce labour. Two and a half hours later I went into labour proper, sucking up the entinox mixture and eventually timing the next morphine injection to within seventeen seconds of the next due dose! As before, I had a rather odd reaction to the pain relief and provided much amusement to Nathan.

How we laughed in such a tragic situation remains a mystery to me. But laugh we did, and still do, about all the silly things I said. Requesting a running stitch from the midwife and a more elaborate cross-stitch from a senior registrar when a nasty tear was being stitched, still tops the list for Nathan. I never thought I would be able to say that giving birth to a dead baby would be a remotely positive experience. But in all honesty I can say this now. It was after all the one last thing that I could do for my son. The labour progressed quite quickly and at half past ten I began to push. The last stage seemed to last for ever and I couldn't seem to push more than twice with each contraction. I didn't

want to let that baby go, I was under no illusion about what had happened, but oh, the pain of letting him go was almost too much to bear. The two midwives were fantastic; encouraging, never making me feel that I wasn't doing well. I never knew how any of the midwives or doctors felt during this time, but they are after all only human and subject to the same pains and pleasures as all of us. What a job to have to do, what strength they must have to muster together. At twelve minutes past twelve on Sunday 23rd March 2003, I finally gave birth to the most beautiful baby boy - Zeke. Truly perfect. Nathan cut the umbilical cord and one of the midwives wrapped him in a white sheet and handed him to me. The entinox had made me so fuzzy that I was terrified of dropping him. I held him and kissed his head gently - he still felt warm. I passed him to Nathan who was enrapt at this beautiful little baby that we had made. Both sets of parents came in to the room and he was passed around. If perchance you should have looked in the room at this point you might have been forgiven for thinking we were talking about a sleeping baby. 'His eyes are just like yours, look at those gorgeous curls, oh he has his grandad's chin'. My only lasting regret of this time is that I do not have a photograph of just me holding my son in the sheet in which he was first wrapped. There was something so pure and simple about that moment that I wished it had been preserved in more than my imperfect memory.

The next morning, again terrified of how Zeke would appear, I was nonetheless desperate to see him again. A midwife gently helped Nathan to dress Zeke in the clothes we had bought to take him home in. His little cream sleepsuit and cardigan fitted him perfectly - he was so utterly beautiful. This same midwife had visited us earlier in the morning; Nathan was still fitfully sleeping so we quietly chatted. We talked about Zeke's birth and she explained what had first made her want to become a midwife. I made myself get bathed and dressed, even putting on make up. Any photographs we had taken at this time would be the only ones that we would ever have and I was determined to make them as good as possible.

I held Zeke - how exactly right and natural it felt. Nathan couldn't take his eyes from him, seeming to drink in every detail of him. I later relied on Nathan's recall of this time to help me remember what Zeke looked like, as initially, totally overwhelmed with grief, I found it impossible to remember even simple things. We spent a few hours with our son, wanting to share him with our families but jealously guarding our moments with him. The hospital arranged for a chaplain to come and bless Zeke. Although neither of us are church goers this time was very important and is a very special memory of our time with him. We went home later the same day.

Leaving Zeke was truly terrible. Who would protect and care for my baby? Although I knew that he was beyond help he was still my baby and the feeling of wanting to protect him was so strong. Knowing that he would be treated with respect was just as important. When we got home, empty armed, the all-

consuming grief really began. Some days have passed in a fog of feeling. I have read that the grief a mother feels for a stillborn or new baby is the loneliest of griefs. Oh, how true. The incredible amount of love I feel for my son sometimes comes as a physical shock to me. It seems to seep from my very pores, to spill over only to find no release. I did not know I was capable of such love - this love that has become pain by another word.

I have met and continue to meet with the women and babies from my antenatal class. Initially I didn't think I could even contemplate this, for I knew that the depth of the joy they felt for their babies was the only possible feeling that could match the intensity of my sorrow for Zeke. But how could I spoil their happiness with such intense pain? However, I will forever be grateful for the support they have given, for allowing me to talk about my baby and to ask questions about his all too brief existence. Holding their babies has allowed me some measure of release for the physical emptiness of my arms. I have come to see my life in two distinct eras - BZ and AZ - Before Zeke's death and After Zeke's death. I have one foot on March 23rd and one foot in the present. At the moment I am unable to contemplate taking a step into the future.

We begin to recover, but there is such disparity in our grief that this sometimes makes it harder. Nathan is able to see the worth in our relationship and recently I have begun to catch glimmers of what I continue to feel for Nathan, but which has become eclipsed by sorrow. I search for ways in which to make Zeke's death have meaning and his existence some semblance of permanence. I feel almost evangelical in my desire for this, but can find no way in which to express it. I don't want this to happen to me again, to another of my babies or to other people, but feel powerless to do anything. I dread the time when our parents will eventually die, for the sorrow that that will bring, but also because there will be even fewer people who will have briefly known our son-fewer people to remember him.

Like Ichabod before him, we have tried to gather mementos to help remember Zeke by - as if we could ever forget him. We bought a box similar to Icky's and have put in a little teddy bear (slightly bigger than Icky's one; Zeke is after all a bigger brother). We will soon have another silver heart and will no doubt put in his scan pictures. The boxes sit side by side; I sometimes feel as if I am collecting dead babies. We also have another sunshine plaque in the garden for Zeke - next to Ichabod's. We want to make a book of memories for him, but I can't yet bring myself to collect and put in some semblance of order, the blessing certificate, the cards and letters we received, and the many photographs. We pressed a flower from each of the bouquets we received and these too shall go into the book.

I have read that many parents feel anger towards the doctors and nurses that have cared for them, but I hold no animosity towards the medical staff that cared for me during my pregnancy or Zeke's birth. Medicine, as all things, is imperfect. All the staff from the hospital that we came into contact with were kind and caring; they still are. I think if they had not been, any of the strength I managed to muster to give birth would have dissolved in a few words. How glad I am that we don't live in the days when your baby was whisked away without you seeing him or her and you were expected to just get on with your life. Of course I wish that something had been spotted; he fought so hard to keep going and he almost did it, he really did. I blame no one but myself, the feeling of being unable to save the child I had inside me is the most shattering feeling I have ever had.

The only anger I feel is directed at the seeming unfairness of it all. That my son should be denied the chance of life has ripped apart any faith I felt in the fairness of life. Perhaps naive to begin with, but something I have lived by. Of course there is no reason why it should happen to another any more than it should happen to me, but didn't I try to do all the right things?

The remembered sight of Nathan carrying Zeke's coffin into the chapel will forever fill me with horror. The coffin, so small that it had to sit in the funeral car with us, represents to me all that is so wrong about Zeke's death. No parents should have to go to their own baby's funeral; no father should ever have to carry his child's coffin. This is not the way of things. With Zeke's death, all our hopes and plans for him also died. My job as a mother died, our role as parents died. Our love for him had nowhere to go.

The chaplain from the hospital readily agreed to conduct the funeral service for Zeke. We had already put a letter to our son in his coffin, along with two small teddy bears; the mummy and daddy bears to match the ones we keep in his memory box. The service was simple; we chose the music and a short poem to be read. We cried throughout. So much for being strong. We were touched and gladdened by the cards and flowers that people sent and by the genuine sorrow people have shown about the loss of our son. A school friend from many years ago came to see me a few weeks ago. I was showing her some photographs and talking about the funeral when she began to cry. She said that she had wanted to remain strong for me, but that it was just too awful. Those tears said more to me than any words she could have ever uttered. We have a small plaque in the grounds of the crematorium with Zeke's name and a few words. We visit it each week and put out fresh flowers for him. In time we shall sprinkle his ashes nearby, but not yet, it's just too soon.

In the weeks after the funeral I became an ardent researcher, trawling the Internet and medical books for answers. I had an insatiable desire to find out why this happened. Whilst not understanding a lot of what was written I understood enough to see that the majority of stillbirths remain unexplained and that those that are explained can still leave many unanswered questions.

What probably surprised me most was the relatively high number of stillbirths that continue to occur each year. But, I say again-statistics mean little to you if you're the one that's been singled out. We have such high expectations of a successful birth these days. I can't help wondering what it must have been like all those years ago when mortality rates were so much higher. Did those mothers feel the same sorrow that I feel, or do our expectations govern our grief?

Zeke's post-mortem showed that although he was a perfectly formed little boy, the placenta had many infarcts and was under half the size it should have been. He could potentially have been much heavier than the bouncing seven pounds seven ounces that he weighed in at. Of course, there will never be an answer to the one question we still have-why him and why us? The hospital Bereavement Counsellor recently told me that the paediatric pathologist handles her 'patients' with the utmost respect. We have a photograph of Zeke just before we said goodbye to him at the hospital and at the edge of the picture you can see a cuddly toy mole in the basket with him. If babies were taken to the pathologist with a toy then the toy remained with the baby throughout the post mortem. This brought such comfort to me - how wonderful for someone to show such care and understanding for my little one.

And the names, Ichabod/Icky and Ezekiel/Zeke? Well, 'It' has always seemed so impersonal when referring to a growing child, so we picked the two most unlikely names that we would ever call a child as a way of avoiding 'It'. But, when Zeke was born, this name was all we had ever known him as so we decided to keep it. It fits. If we are lucky enough to conceive again we will call the baby 'Yipper' during the pregnancy (a reference to a Dr Zeuss book-"And Zeke went into Yipper's room and Yipper went into Zeke's room"). So, for now, I carry my hope for another child like a torch that lights the lonely and dark road that I tread. Third time lucky? Who knows? Time is all we have, so we shall just have to wait and see.

Amanda Jeffrey, July 2003