

**W**hat do you do when the plan doesn't go to plan? When the picture of what you thought your life would look like has not so much been redrawn, as scrunched up and thrown out, along with any notion of a timeline you had to go along with it. It's a curious position to find yourself in if, like me, you've always been a planner; a careful curator of lists and a fastidious follower of rules. Even as a child I guarded my colouring books jealously from my younger brother and cousins with their marauding Crayolas. I'd agree to share only on the condition that they let me shade a small border inside the edges of the pictures first. An extra margin of error; a safety net etched in the precise colours of my choosing.

So it is with some irony that, aged 32, I find myself scriptless; scribbling frantically outside of the lines. Having followed a well-worn formula, somehow managing to tick off steady job, house and marriage, a baby was meant to be the next thing on the list.

There were many factors and permutations my husband Dan and I had considered before deciding we were ready for children: money, parental leave, the possibility it might take a while to conceive – or might not happen at all. That we might face recurrent miscarriages – four in the space of 18 months with no discernible medical reason, the most recent in June – was most definitely not in the plan. Neither was it in any of the pregnancy manuals – no one gives you a book called *What To Expect When You're No Longer Expecting*, and if one miscarriage feels like a false start, lonely and acutely painful, four feels like an almost impenetrable detour off your chosen route. By contrast, when I first found out that I was pregnant in November 2016 after months of trying, it felt like someone had handed me a map, the road unfurling before me: first midwife appointment, first scan date, due date, first birthday and so on.

I thought I would be a mother by now. Albeit the exact details have been recalibrated with each miscarriage and subsequent pregnancy. First, I'd assumed we'd be planning for Christmas with an 18-month-old this year. Then, after losing that pregnancy and conceiving again, this was supposed to be Baby's first Christmas. After that, we thought we might have an eight-month-old, or finally that

I might still be pregnant – eight months gone and grateful to have got so far (and so fat). Instead, another year, another Christmas, and my uterus is empty – emptied. There is nothing quite like the swooping, sickening rush of the irrevocable as you realise you are miscarrying. A dizzying sensation, almost like vertigo, as you see that small stream of palest rose pink, trickling and traitorous; knowing you're powerless to stop it, forced to watch your status as a mother ebbing away. Your hopes and dreams quite literally in the toilet. No better – as has happened to us twice – is a 'missed miscarriage', when your body divulges no physical clues, deep in denial that the baby has died, instead leaving the news to a sonographer, who will pause just a fraction of a second too long, squinting at the

# WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE NO LONGER EXPECTING



Job. House. Relationship. Baby. After four miscarriages, writer Jennie Agg has learnt that when the best-laid plans don't happen, there is a way through the pain...

screen, then frowning. A breath that seems to suck all of the oxygen out of the room, before, 'I'm so sorry, there is no heartbeat.' I've had to hear those words four times now, because even on the occasions where I'd already started bleeding, they've done a confirmation scan. Just seven words that atomise your plans indiscriminately – short-term, long-term. A wicked magician's trick, really. Just like that – poof! – you're no longer going back to the office once you've wiped away the ultrasound gel. Instead, there will be decisions about surgery, pills, or 'expectant management' (just waiting for the inevitable, basically). And paperwork – forms with grim titles like 'sensitive disposal of pregnancy remains'. Once again – poof! – you're on the outside of parenthood looking in. Though, in a way, after one

## 'FOR OTHERS, YOUR BABY LIVES AND DIES IN A SINGLE SENTENCE'

miscarriage, you never truly experience pregnancy as another couple might – the way we did, that first time. While each new pregnancy still brings a small tiny tug of hope, we've never retrieved that pure, golden joy. The secret pride in each other, the almost giddy excitement, especially in those early days when no one else even knew we were trying for a family apart from my mum and some close friends.

A large part of the sorrow we both feel now stems from the loss of that innocence, I think. I mourn knowing I will never be able to tell Dan that I'm pregnant, test stick clutched proudly in my hand, and have him simply kiss me and smile. Instead, for us, it's all matter-of-fact; a string of waiting-and-seeing and 'not getting our hopes up'. It's a grim waiting game, holding our breath between appointments, focused only on seeing those next few millimeters of growth, willing there to be a tiny, flickering heartbeat. What you feel after a miscarriage is a kind of grief, albeit you're often grieving something most people didn't know existed in the first place. If you tell people at all, they generally only learn of your pregnancy once it's over – and so for them your baby lives and dies in a single sentence. There is no chance to get attached; it only ever exists for other people in a ghostly negative. This can mean it isn't always easy for them to understand in the normal framework of loss, but treating it as a bereavement is, I have found, the most useful thing friends and family can do for you. Not simply through saying 'I'm sorry' or sending flowers (though these small acknowledgements do help), but by understanding that there is a pain that may seem greater than the sum of its parts, that can't be accounted for simply according to the number of cells or weeks of gestation. It's about recognising that not only have you lost an 8-week old foetus, you have lost the baby that foetus would have become – and the toddler, the teenager, even the 20-something sheepishly boomeranging back home post-university. It takes time to let them all go.

Dan and I are well-practised now in negotiating each other's feeling after a loss. The biggest question is usually about whether we feel ready to try again (there's no medical reason you have to wait, once the bleeding's stopped and you've done a negative pregnancy test, you're good to go, physically at least). So far, we've been fairly in step – after the first couple of losses, we simply felt determined to try again. After the third, we took time out for the suggested medical investigations. After the fourth – and with a clean bill of reproductive health – we couldn't help but ask, 'What if it never happens for us?' It's a frank and frightening question to introduce into your relationship. The subtext being, 'Am I enough for you? Are you enough for me?' We have to be sanguine about the fact that after this many miscarriages in a row, the statistical likelihood of another is higher than normal. That said, our doctors say there is no reason we shouldn't go on to have a healthy baby. As for exactly what we do next, because miscarriage is still a largely unwritten, unspoken experience, I don't know what 'the done thing' is from here on in, and there is surprising power in that: a permission to shed some layers of expectation for how everything has to play out; a relinquishing of a little control. There may be no guide for where we find ourselves now, no map to triangulate from and no script – yet there are also fewer self-limiting 'shoulds', 'musts', 'best bets' or 'let's be sensibless'. With no option to trace the well-worn steps of other people, the only way through is to forge your own path, to breathe in deeply and listen to your own instincts, likes, fears, needs. A small point maybe, but I recently left my job as an editor on a national newspaper to pursue a career as a writer, something I doubt I would have had the courage to do before – no maternity pay when you're freelance, after all. I still don't believe in 'everything happens for a reason' (please never say this to someone who loses a baby), but is it too much to hope that the unmaking of our best-laid plans can sometimes prove the making of us?

### MISCARRIAGE: THE FACTS

One in four women will go through at least one miscarriage in their lifetime.

One in 100 couples experience recurrent miscarriage, which is defined medically as three or more in a row.

Several charities offer information and support after a miscarriage, such as Tommy's ([tommys.org/together-for-change](http://tommys.org/together-for-change)) or The Miscarriage Association.