

Beyond grief

Delivered at five months, Pippa Vosper's son lived for only a few minutes, but he changed her life forever

In January 2017, I found out that I was pregnant. My husband and I had spent almost three years trying to conceive naturally, eager to give our son, Astie, a longed-for sibling. With my 40th birthday approaching, we had agreed it was time to explore IVF. It's a gruelling process, with multiple scans, blood tests and rounds of injections, so when we were successful at the first attempt, I was elated.

Life was good: as the owner of my own fashion store, I was finding my work fulfilling and loved spending time at home in west London with Astie and my husband. My first pregnancy had been fairly straightforward (bar pre-eclampsia and the resulting emergency caesarean), so it didn't occur to me that this one might be any different. Yes, there was the morning sickness and the juggling of work with hospital visits, but those were part and parcel of a journey I had taken almost five years ago, with Astie.

I announced the news on Instagram with a picture of my barely-there bump. Reading each congratulatory message, both from friends and strangers, was heartwarming. My morning sickness waned, and I finally figured out how to dress my expanding bump. I was excited about the future.

Five months into my pregnancy, I woke at 3am with pains akin to mild period cramps. I am an eternal optimist, but I knew instinctively that my baby was going to die that night. I woke my husband, my waters broke and we dialled 999. We will be forever grateful to the woman who answered our call: my baby was already in view, and she instructed us on how to deliver him on the floor of our bathroom.

And there he was – a perfect, tiny copy of my elder son. And he was alive. I loved him instantly, and I know he felt

my love as I kissed his hands, while my husband listened to the advice on the phone and started mouth-to-mouth.

Astie was woken by the ambulance outside, and my husband protected him from seeing me, as I continued the efforts to breathe life into our baby. My fear in those brief moments is indescribable; in shock at having just given birth, I was now responsible for keeping our precious boy alive.

I remember two paramedics standing above me. Their presence seemed to fill the room as they gently advised me to stop the resuscitation. My baby was too young to live, they said. His lungs couldn't cope with the outside world. In front of me lay my beautiful son, his arms slowly moving. As I watched him, I experienced a moment of extreme calm amid all the madness: my baby and me understanding what had just happened to us. It may seem strange to some, but it is those brief minutes – those moments that belonged just to us – that fill me with the most love.

Parts of those early-morning hours are unclear, but I know that, as I went from my home to the hospital, from A&E to the recovery room, I must have repeated the words, "My baby died," at least a hundred times.

Astie and my husband had followed the ambulance in our car. I was unable to stop the silent tears that came when our confused little boy asked why I was in hospital. I told him his baby brother had died, but that everything would be fine. He was upbeat as friends came to collect him, not understanding the enormity of what had just happened.

Doctors, midwives and nurses crowded my cubicle bed as questions were asked, forms were ticked and my placenta was pushed out (thankfully an easy transition – I overheard a doctor discussing taking me to theatre if things didn't go smoothly). And then it went silent. I had been wheeled into a dimly lit room, and now it was just my husband beside me. It was then that it really hit me: I had gone into labour; my baby >

"Pregnancy loss remains a difficult subject to broach." Pippa Vosper photographed by Jamie Morgan. Sitings editor: Julia Brenard

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had been delivered; he had died. My husband and I held one another and cried more deeply than I could have imagined possible. Tears came first, then wailing, then painful, gut-wrenching, uncontrollable sobbing. The midwives were kind and listened patiently as I talked about my baby, telling the story over and over again in disbelief.

Then came the question that hadn't entered my mind: did I want to hold our baby? I did. When the midwife laid my son, Axel, in my arms, concealed inside a tiny blanket, I thought I would break from my physical longing for him. We gently unwrapped the blanket, and there was our baby. I had been scared of how he might look, but he was perfect, his body small but perfectly formed.

I didn't know how long it was since I had last seen him – we had arrived at the hospital in the dark, and now the sun had been up for some time. I willed him to open his eyes. It wasn't strange to kiss his cold body; it was the lightest feeling that filled me with an overwhelming love for him. I kissed his soft face for much of the two hours we spent together.

The hardest part was the final goodbye. Soon after my son had been carried out of the room, forms were placed beside me with choices to be made about a postmortem and a funeral service. We would be attending our baby's funeral – another part of this surreal story that was not supposed to be happening to me.

Leaving hospital was like a scene from a predictable film, as we walked into a lift with a pregnant woman who looked relaxed and happy. We exited at the next floor to walk down the remaining five – I figured no one pregnant would be brave enough to tackle those stairs.

For days after my baby's death, I just sat on the sofa and cried. I didn't eat and I barely slept. Whenever I saw the hospital's number on my phone, I truly believed that they were calling to say they had good news, that they had managed to revive our son and that he was waiting for us to collect him.

I started to tell my closest friends, my mind so hazy that I have no recollection of speaking to some. But they know the entire story, repeating parts in a way that only I could have told them, so I must have. In the weeks that followed, I felt somehow fraudulent when I spoke of "my baby dying", but the term "miscarriage" didn't – and still doesn't

– feel like a word that conveyed the depth of the suffering I was experiencing.

Why had he died? Of course I blamed myself: maybe I shouldn't have done that spinning class; perhaps it was the stress of starting a new business. But it was neither of those things. Specialists have repeatedly assured me that working out and working hard do not cause late miscarriage. I just got really, really unlucky. My cervix had shortened, and my body could no longer hold my baby. A week later, this would have shown up at my scan, and my baby would, most likely, have lived.

To the outside world it looked as though life was normal. Five days after I said goodbye to my baby, I was back

now into the hundreds. I hadn't wanted to share my news like this, it was so unbearably private, but I knew it would be the fastest way to let people know that I was no longer pregnant, to stop many of the thoughtful questions about a bump that was no longer there.

The days that followed opened my eyes to heartbreak that wasn't only mine. Email after email arrived in my inbox from women telling me that they, too, had lost a baby. Some had lost theirs later than me, some earlier, but it was the same pain. I had known some of these women for many years, yet there had never been any indication that they had experienced anything so traumatic.

But I'm not surprised that I didn't know about my friends' pain. There is little mention of pregnancy loss outside hospital walls, and it remains an incredibly difficult subject to broach.

If I hadn't been so open about my pregnancy on social media, mine would have remained a private experience, too, spoken of only with those closest to me. And there wouldn't now be so many women who were kind enough to tell me their stories, allowing me to feel that this didn't happen only to me.

Three weeks after Axel died, my husband and I went on a road trip from LA to San Francisco, leaving Astie with his grandparents. We had booked the flights months in advance – it was supposed to be a celebratory trip. An energetic 12 days of staying for no more than two nights in any one place

was the mental distraction I needed. Finally, slowly, I began to feel a little lighter, a small movement in the darkness. I wasn't expecting a miracle and I didn't get one, but there was a minute shift that made me feel there was some hope.

I'm unsure whether I will ever be able to fully accept what happened, but I know that I'm grateful for what Axel gave me. When Axel died my heart broke in a way that I would find impossible to describe, but he also changed my world in a way that I will thank him for forever. I'm neither spiritual nor religious, but I believe that a positive can come from anything.

My path did change. I changed. I didn't notice it at first, but as time passed, the weight that had once occupied my mind and body was no longer a heaviness but a grounding: I was stronger. I am lucky to have had that night with my son, when he came into my life, and for a small moment everything was quiet. ■



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