

My wife, Denise, and I had married in November 2000 and on our honeymoon had decided we would try to start our family straight away. So we started trying, we both figured that within a few months we'd see a positive pregnancy test and everything would be great. It did not work like that. The first few weeks of trying turned into months and the first few months turned into a year without a positive test. It was beginning to get a bit frustrating. After two years of trying with no success, we decided to go to the doctors and get ourselves tested to see if there was any reason we could not get pregnant. I had my contribution tested and that was ok, Denise had her blood test done and the results were inconclusive and the doctor said it was not unusual and that we should repeat the blood test next month.

Denise didn't want to. She had it in her head that it was her fault we couldn't get pregnant. I did my best to persuade her that an inconclusive blood test didn't mean that and we should follow the doctor's advice. Needless to say Denise didn't. Without talking much about it we both had similar thoughts - perhaps we weren't to be blessed with children and that we should start thinking about what we'd do with our lives without children. By now we were in the summer of 2003 - which was a very hot summer and had given up trying. For some reason (and I forget why) one evening in July Denise decided to do a pregnancy test. IT WAS POSITIVE!! The feeling of seeing that second line on the test stick and realising we were going to be parents, that I was going to be a dad was bloody incredible. At the time we shared a house with Denise's parents so her mum, Freda, found out pretty much straight away. I quickly rang my parents and told them (to high pitched squeals on the phone) that they were going to be grandparents. Denise's dad was on nights at work so Freda rang Dave and got him off the production line to tell him he was going to be a granddad. Our first child would be due on St Georges Day!! Life was brilliant.

I was flying the next few weeks/days. I would walk to work past the school that our child would probably go to, anytime we went shopping we'd end up window shopping for baby stuff. We'd gotten carried away in the first few months of our marriage and trying to start a family and bought a few things thinking it wouldn't be long until we needed them. It'd got to the point that we'd started giving some of the baby stuff away as presents as we didn't think we'd need them. So now we were actually pregnant we held off buying anything for the time being. In the first few weeks the only black spot was our first scan at the local hospital. Denise followed the instructions and drunk all the fluid she was required and we turned up excitedly for our first scan only to have to deal with a radiographer who had a go at us and told us there was no way that Denise had drunk the fluids. We had a minor disagreement with her and tried to enjoy our first scan - especially looking at the picture of our baby on our way back from the hospital.

On 23rd September 2003 Denise's mum, Freda, died suddenly. It was a massive hammer blow to us. Denise was 13 weeks pregnant and we had to now make funeral arrangements at a time we should have been making babysitting arrangements for when the baby was born and Denise returned to work. The next few weeks dragged and it was impossible to try and improve the atmosphere at home. I was hurting over Freda's death I could only imagine what Denise and her father were going through so just tried to be there for them. A month later Denise was rushed into hospital. She'd been struggling with what we thought was her asthma for a few weeks, the weather had turned cooler and damper so the GP put it down to that and treated Denise accordingly. Over the course of 12hrs and transfers from Weston General Hospital to St Michaels Maternity Hospital in Bristol then to the intensive care ward at Southmead Hospital, the doctors had discovered that Denise had kidney failure and that the cause of her breathlessness was that she was only hours away from drowning in her own fluid. Through all this our baby continued to grow at the right rates and was

unaffected by all the drama going on around it. The renal doctors at Southmead Hospital in consultation with the obstetricians at Southmead decided that the best course of action for Denise and the baby was to commence dialysis 6 days a week and to aim to deliver the baby anytime from 32 weeks onwards. There was going to be regular scans of the baby and as soon as everyone agreed it was safe the baby would be delivered.

Ok that was it, there was a plan. The drama we thought was coming to an end. After a 3 week stay in hospital Denise was discharged but we'd need to travel to Southmead Hospital 6 days a week. We were incredibly lucky that my parents lived in Bristol so it would mean we didn't have to travel an hour or so each way from Weston super Mare every day. We spent half the nights of the week at my parents and half the week in our own bed at home. All the time trying to support Dave, Denise's father in his grieving. Christmas was soon upon us. Early on when Denise was on dialysis we'd had a brief conversation about buying baby stuff and decided that we'd get through Christmas and if everything was looking ok with the baby then in the New Year we'd start buying some things. Denise would be just over 26 weeks pregnant come New Year and if everyone was healthy enough we'd have one big shopping trip to buy what we'd need as we didn't know how much time Denise might spend in hospital before the birth.

A quiet New Year at home ready for all the action to come over the next few months only interrupted by regular dialysis sessions. We'd decided that January 2nd would be the shopping day. Denise had dialysis in the morning and we'd travelled up from Weston. Denise got settled onto her 4 hour dialysis session and I went into Bristol to collect my mum. After dialysis Denise was scheduled for a scan with the midwife on the other side of the hospital, this would be the first scan my mum would see of her first grandchild and then we were going to Bath for lunch and baby shopping.

Dialysis was done, Denise was led on the uncomfortable table in the scan room waiting for the midwife to arrive and do the scan and my mum and I were sat in the room and we were all talking about the rest of the day. The midwife came in and did all the usual checks (made sure she was scanning the right patient) and started the scan. We all went quiet waiting for the sound of the heartbeat to come up and for the image of our baby to appear on the screen. Ok, there was the image but no other sounds. The only sounds in the room were the sound of the air conditioning and of the ultrasound machine. The midwife prodded and poked around for a little while longer and didn't look at any of us, just kept looking at the screen. I reached a hand out and held Denise's hand. Very quickly and despite the calmness of the midwife it became apparent that something wasn't quite right with this scan. Very quietly the midwife informed us that she was struggling to find the baby's heartbeat so was going to get a doctor to assist. The midwife wasn't gone long before she came back with a doctor to check. Denise and I gripped each other's hand tightly hoping that the baby was just being difficult. The doctor picked up the ultrasound and started prodding around for a few minutes and tried to find the heartbeat to no avail. The doctor turned to us and just told us very brutally but simply that 'your baby is dead'.

I stopped breathing for a while and everything in the room seemed to turn black. the ultrasound machine no longer showed the outline of our precious baby. I shifted out of my chair and Denise and I just held each other and sobbed and sobbed. For me in those next few minutes it was as if my world had crumbled. We'd gone through all the trauma of the last few months and were getting closer each day to when our baby could be delivered only to find out that our baby had died. What was supposed to be a happy day of shopping for baby stuff was now the worst day of my life. After a few minutes of my wife and I holding each other and sobbing I remembered that my mother was in

the room with us. I turned to look at her and through my own tears I could see that she was sat looking very lonely herself crying over what was happening. I think I reached out a hand towards her to try and offer comfort. As I did so the midwife took over and gave my mum a hug and tried to console her. Denise and I sat there for a few minutes trying to take in the enormity of what we'd been told and work out in a state of confusion what the hell was going on. The midwife asked if we'd like to move into the room next door where we'd be more comfortable while she went and spoke to people.

The three of us moved next door and someone brought us something to drink. I sat there just completely stunned. Expecting at some point to wake up from this hideous nightmare. This couldn't really be happening after all we'd been through the last few months. The only words that were spoke until the midwife returned was Denise saying that we had to get back home so she could tell her dad face to face, she didn't want to deliver this news over the phone. The midwife returned and told us she had spoken to the necessary people and that Denise could be admitted straight away to be induced and deliver our stillborn baby. All Denise did was to repeat that she needed to tell her dad face to face. The midwife understood and went off to speak to others again. My tears continued to fall, this couldn't be happening, our child couldn't be stillborn. The midwife returned and told us to go home and to come back on Monday morning and Denise could be induced and deliver our child. The midwife told us that over the weekend Denise may spontaneously go into labour and if this happened we were to return to Southmead hospital as quickly as possible. Shortly after we left the room and walked through the maternity unit reception area like zombies. Thankfully the reception was empty as it was lunchtime and we'd been the last appointment of the morning.

We got back to our car and in silence drove across town and back to my parents house to drop my mum off. I remember being the first person to go into their house and my dad getting up to greet us as he'd not expected us back just yet. I remember standing in front of my dad trying to explain that we'd had the scan and that there was a problem and beginning sobbing again as I tried to tell him his first grandchild was going to be stillborn. I think I got half way through telling him before I hurried into the kitchen - I couldn't let my dad see me crying like this. I think he understood what I was trying to say as from their front room I could hear him and my mum crying. I took a few seconds and returned to the front room and saw my mum, dad and Denise holding each other. My dad saw me and broke away and embraced me in a massive bear hug. I couldn't stand being there seeing my parents so upset so said that we needed to get home as we still needed to tell Dave the news. My dad walked us out to the car and saw us off. I was driving and remember looking at my dad trying to be strong for me with tears coming down his cheeks and holding my hand through the car window as I drove off myself crying my eyes out.

To this day I'm not sure how I managed to drive the few miles from the hospital to my parents house let alone the 20 odd miles from their house to our house without crashing the car as I remember crying the whole journey. Apart from the sounds of Denise and me sobbing, the journey was made in silence with us holding hands all the way. We arrived back home and walked in the house. Dave came out to greet us and asked what we were doing home as he'd not expected to see us until tomorrow. Denise took him into his living room and broke the news to him. I went into our living room and put our bags down and sat there with my head in my hands breaking down in floods of tears again. After a few minutes I composed myself and not really knowing what to do I rung a friend of ours as I had to talk to someone and tell them. I spoke to Russ and I remember him asking how I was and what he could do. The truth was in that moment there was nothing he could do but I appreciated him just listening to me. I went into Dave's living room and joined him. We sat and

spoke for a while but I couldn't really tell you what we spoke about.

This was a Friday so we still had the weekend to get through before returning to the hospital on the Monday. The weekend dragged on. I telephoned a few friends to tell them and we had a few phone calls from other friends as the news spread. Over the weekend Denise and I spoke once or twice about what to take with us on Monday to the hospital. Should we take a camera to take pictures of our baby? Did we need to take anything for the baby? In the end we decided against taking a camera (something we wished we would have done) and we took a small stuffed toy with us (we took two a pink one and a blue one as we didn't know what sex the baby was) to give to our baby. Eventually Monday morning came around and we set off for the hospital. All we could hope for at this point was for the labour and stillbirth to be over as quickly as possible. We arrived at the delivery suite and pressed the buzzer and announced who we were before the door buzzed open. I don't know if it was coincidence but as we walked through the maternity unit the whole area seemed to go completely silent and we were shown to the delivery suite. We waited for a short while before a specially trained midwife called Christine came in and introduced herself and explained what would happen. Once she'd gone through all that she connected Denise up to a drip to induce her and to start labour off. For most of the day the labour progressed slowly and at one point we were told they couldn't give Denise any further medication that day to induce labour as she was at the maximum dose. This was something that I was dreading. I just wanted the baby to be delivered as quickly as possible so we could try and start healing. All of a sudden that evening the labour started progressing quickly. The shift had changed and a new midwife came in and checked Denise and said she wasn't quite dilated enough for delivery. A short while later Denise got up on the bed on all fours and decided to be push and try and deliver our baby.

All through the day I kept hoping that there might be small chance that the scan had been wrong and that our baby would be born breathing and alive. Shortly after she decided to start pushing, Denise asked me to have a look as she thought the baby was coming. I looked down at the business end just in time to see Denise deliver our baby and for me to catch the baby as it came out. Sadly the doctors had been right and our baby was born asleep. I carefully laid our baby on the bed and put my head out of the door to call the midwife and tell her Denise had delivered the baby. The midwife came in and cut the cord and picked our baby up and said she would bring the baby back shortly. For the first time since Friday we both broke down and began crying again. This part was over and we just cried and held each other. A short while later the midwife returned with our baby in a tiny basket. She'd cleaned the baby up and wrapped the baby up and put the baby in a small basket and presented us with what she told us was our son. We'd had a son. The midwife told us that when we were ready she would come and collect our son who we named Thomas straight away, and take some pictures for us and try and do some hand and foot prints for us. We sat there on the bed for a while holding the basket with our precious son in holding each other. The chances were this was as close as we'd come to having a family and although it hadn't turned out how we'd wanted it we were going to make the most of it. After a while we called the midwife back and she collected Thomas and took him off to take pictures etc as promised. In the meantime Denise had a shower and we were moved to a room down the corridor where there was a room with a double bed where we could stay for a few nights while Denise recovered and while doctors monitored her kidneys.

The midwife returned with photos and footprints and handprints of Thomas for us in a folder and with both of us thoroughly exhausted we fell asleep. When woke the next morning Christine was back on shift and told us that as we'd requested there would be a naming service for Thomas in the hospital chapel that afternoon and that they'd been in touch with undertakers in Weston super

Mare who'd be in touch to arrange the funeral. That morning we were taken over to the dialysis unit because Denise was scheduled for dialysis. The nurses on dialysis were brilliant - we'd got to know them well over the last few months with the amount of time we'd spent there. Some of them gave Denise and me big hugs, some just stopped by and put a hand on our shoulders clearly emotional themselves over the loss of our baby. As they were about to hook Denise up to dialysis one of the renal doctors (Dr Alison Armitage) came in and saw us there and hit the roof. She went mad and demanded to know who'd organised dialysis today and that nobody was to connect Denise to dialysis and they should organise for us to be taken back to maternity asap and left to grieve. Dr Armitage was apologetic to us about being taken over for dialysis and tried to comfort the both of us. All I could do was try and listen but look out of the window as the tears started again. We were back in maternity soon enough. Sat around in our room was torture. The NHS is great and the midwives that looked after us were amazing but we were still in a maternity unit and could hear other mothers in labour and their babies making their first sounds after being delivered. I didn't bear any ill will towards the mothers but it just felt like it was being rubbed in our faces that Thomas had died inside Denise.

Shortly after lunch transport arrived to take us to the hospital chapel for the naming service. One of the hospital chaplains - April met us and welcomed us. She showed us inside and in a tiny crib in the middle of the small chapel was our beautiful son Thomas. He was dressed in a tiny babygro with a small hat on and wrapped in a knitted blanket. Denise and I sat either side and held hands across the crib while April began the naming service. Once she started I welled up and saw the naming ceremony through tears. I don't remember much about the naming service. At the end we gave Thomas the small blue stuffed toy we had taken and asked for it to be buried with him so he'd have something to hold. It was over soon enough and we returned to our room in the maternity ward. The day after Denise was discharged from hospital, we returned home and began to attempt to recover and work out what normal would be. We started off with a simple enough plan - to wake up and get out of bed every day then take each day bit by bit as it came. A few days later we had a visit from a midwife from the GP practice. She was fully aware of what happened yet uttered one of the most incredulous and callous things I'd ever hear 'well both of you are young, you can try to have another baby'. I just couldn't believe a healthcare professional would say something like that to us. If I'm honest that one comment set us both back a few days. At the time I didn't want another baby. I wanted Thomas and no other baby would do.

On Friday 16th January, 11 days after Thomas was born asleep his funeral was held. It was around this time I was going through a selfish period of grief. All I wanted at the funeral was Denise and myself and April who'd kindly offered to come to Weston and conduct the short funeral service. Denise however changed my mind and told me that my parents and her father should be asked to come along if they wanted. They all did. The night before the funeral my parents came to Weston and stayed with us. At tea that night we decided to show them the photos of Thomas that the midwife had taken. I hadn't wanted to show them the pictures, I was being selfish and wanted to keep it between Denise and myself. Denise again talked me out of it and we sat down together and showed our parents the photos. The morning of the funeral was sunny but chilly. We travelled together to the crematorium in Worle and the undertaker (who'd buried Denise's mum) turned up with the tiny white coffin that carried Thomas and his stuffed toy. He handed me the coffin and Denise and I stood next to her mums grave as April conducted the service and we then buried Thomas with Freda, it was time now for Freda to look after Thomas. This was the one time I'd expected to cry but hadn't. I just stood there feeling numb.

Each day we got up out of bed and got on with the day, each day it became that little bit easier and the darkness seemed to disappear a bit each day. I've had people ask how you recover from a child being stillborn. If I'm honest I don't think you ever recover. At best you learn to live with what has happened. In the following months we tried to get our life back to normal. We took a short break to one of our favourite holiday places - Centre Parcs at Longleat. A place that held a lot of happy memories from the breaks we'd had there in the first few years we were married. It wasn't the same. I spent a lot of the week thinking what we'd have been doing with our baby Thomas - taking him swimming, pushing him on the swings. By the end of the week although I felt refreshed and ready to get back to work, I couldn't wait to leave there. It just didn't seem right and fair watching other couples with babies there I found it difficult to cope with. It's now thirteen years since Thomas was born asleep and there isn't a day I don't think about him. I wonder if he'd be tall, if like his dad he'd be into sports, what music he'd like, would he have a girlfriend. I wonder all of this while having no idea what he'd look like or how he'd sound.

A short while after having Thomas we met with the obstetrician at Southmead who told us that from the skin sample they'd taken there was nothing to suggest there was any congenital reason why Thomas was stillborn. We'd had the option of having a post-mortem but decided against it. Any answers from that wouldn't console us and if it turned out to be anything to do with Denise's kidney failure I knew she'd blame herself and to me that was not acceptable. The doctor told us that unless Denise had a kidney transplant that there was little chance that she'd get pregnant again and even less of a chance that the baby would be carried successfully. For us we accepted that was it for us for having children - it wasn't going to be for us. Tim Draycott (the obstetrician) did tell us that if Denise ever did get pregnant again that our first phone call should be to him and not our GP or anything. He doubted he'd see us again and as we departed he wished us well for the future.

I imagine that 4 months later he was surprised to receive a phone call from Denise informing him she'd had a positive pregnancy test. He was genuinely pleased to see us the next morning for his first appointment - that was how quick he wanted to see us. Although mentally draining, Denise carried this pregnancy to 32 weeks before we were blessed with the safe arrival of our son Harrison Peter Thomas Byrom on 2nd February 2005. After having safely delivered him by coincidence Denise was taken back to the delivery suites and put in exactly the same room. When it came to christening Harrison there was only one vicar that would do and we asked April to come to Weston to christen Harrison which she did. Harrison is now 12 years old and as soon as he was old enough we explained that he had a brother in heaven.

It will also change you. It can't help but change you. For a while after Thomas was stillborn I couldn't bear to be at my parents house which was completely irrational. They'd been nothing but helpful and supportive throughout the whole pregnancy. I also found that I became short tempered and didn't suffer stupid behaviour as much as I used to.

We love and miss Thomas every day and cherish and love Harrison every day.

Peter