

by Julia Bloore



EMPTY ARMS

One mum's battle with miscarriage

A CONVERSATION WITH CATHERINE SYLVESTER



The average length of time it takes New Zealand couples to get pregnant is seven months. When they attempt to conceive, they try not to get their hopes up, understanding that it probably won't happen in the first month ... maybe not even the second ... maybe not the third.

Despite their best efforts, however, hopes do rise – and they fall dramatically as another month rolls by with no sign of a double line on that test. It can be an emotional journey, even when things do eventually turn out as planned.

So imagine the emotion involved in never seeing that faint second line, never feeling the surreal excitement that comes with it. Imagine months and months, years and years, of painful fertility treatment. Imagine having the positive test, having a scan, seeing the heartbeat ... but then miscarrying the young life inside of you. Imagine carrying your beloved child to full term, then losing him on the day he's born.

Statistics tell us that many people who've just read this paragraph will recognise it as *their* story. Catherine Sylvester, author of *A Common Thread*, is one of them.

GRAPEVINE: Catherine, give us a bit of the background ...

CATHERINE: Where do I start? I guess with Julian and I getting married in 2005. It was a good day! I was 32 ... which sounds so young now! And we thought probably we'd wait to have kids. But within a month of our wedding I had this burning desire to procreate, which I had never had before. It wouldn't go away. So I talked to Julian, and before long we were giving it a go.

The first time we tried we had this beautiful naivety about the situation. I would text Julian at work and say, "I could be pregnant now!" as though it would

happen in the first month. You spend half your life trying *not* to get pregnant – and then it's all on!

GRAPEVINE: It didn't happen first time then?

CATHERINE: No, a couple of months went by, and I just knew there was a problem. It hadn't been long enough to really know that ... but I just had an inkling. I got a few things checked-out and all was fine. But then I got pregnant and miscarried.

Again, one miscarriage, as terrible as it is, isn't enough to be really concerned about in terms of infertility issues. So we kept trying. But I still had that inkling ... maybe there was more to it?

GRAPEVINE: Did you have more tests?

CATHERINE: Well, in New Zealand, if you're under 35 you have to have been trying for a full year to be considered to have infertility issues. If you're over 35 it's only six months. We hadn't been trying for a year yet but decided to go private and see some specialists.

Everything seemed fine, but they gave me some medication to help me ovulate properly ... and again we got pregnant.

GRAPEVINE: That must've felt fantastic!

CATHERINE: Yeah, it did! But then we miscarried again!

Usually it takes three documented miscarriages before you're sent for recurrent miscarriage testing, but our doctor was fabulous and sent us for the tests anyway. Our earlier daydreams about future pregnancies had never once included multiple blood tests, internal ultrasounds, specimen collections, scans, specialist appointments or

CARRYING ON THE FAMILY NAME – Diane's Story

"We wanted to carry on the family name. My husband is his parents' only son, so it was up to us to do this for them. We dreamed of introducing our baby to a growing number of cousins and the delight they would find in this new little one. We dreamed of names and how we would raise this child, of how it would change our lifestyle. We dreamed of teaching and showing our little one the fun and exciting adventures of life in our world. But this was not to be."

fertility drugs with awful side effects. But these next tests were just the beginning: I had to have 11 bottles of blood taken from me ... on the day I was miscarrying, too. And Julian just had to have this one test.

GRAPEVINE: So they tested him as well?

CATHERINE: Yeah. It's pretty normal for women to think the problem is with them – but more and more these days, with stress, pollution and lifestyle, it can be 50-50 in terms of whether the problem lies with the man or the woman.

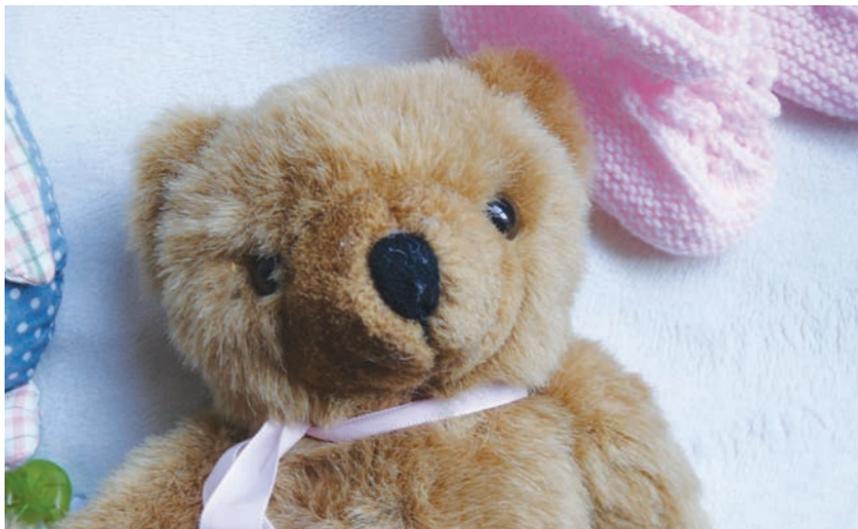
GRAPEVINE: So did these tests show anything?

CATHERINE: Well, all of my tests came back fine ... and then we nervously waited for Julian's results. It turned out that he had a 'balanced chromosomal translocation'. This didn't affect him at all, but when it came to reproducing, his sperm cells could end up with *extra* genetic material or *missing* genetic material – which in our particular case meant the embryo wouldn't survive past 12 weeks. What's more, for reasons they are unsure of, it sometimes means conception can prove difficult. And finally, there's *absolutely nothing* they can do about it.

Five days after getting these results we found out I was pregnant again. This time we had a scan at six weeks and saw the heartbeat ... then at the seven-week scan the heartbeat was gone. We were crushed.

GRAPEVINE: Oh no, that must've been devastating.

CATHERINE: It really was. About seven months later I got pregnant again, for a fourth time. A lot had happened in those months, and I really felt like this time was 'it'. At home on my own I took the



DAMAGED GOODS – Ellen's Story

"I began to feel like damaged goods. I felt guilty Tom was stuck with me – it was completely my fault we couldn't have children. I hated my body, hated the way it was irregular with periods and fooled us so many times into hoping and wishing, only to throw us down in disappointment time after time after time."

pregnancy test, then jumped in the car to deliver the precious stick to Julian at work. We were as excited as little kids, and quickly figured out our due date.

It's an understatement to say we were shocked when I started to bleed some time later. I did another pregnancy test and the beautiful positive sign was nowhere to be seen. Just a dark, ugly minus sign. I was minus a baby. Again.

However, finally, in 2008, we conceived our oldest daughter Estella. She came after 25 months of trying, nine cycles of fertility drugs, four miscarriages and more blood tests than I care to think about!

GRAPEVINE: Incredible! So what was that pregnancy like?

CATHERINE: Well, I didn't just get pregnant and say, "Sweet!" In fact, I was a bit of a basket-case. I had a blood test every two days right up until seven weeks. After that, we had an ultra-sound every week right through until 13 weeks.

After each scan, I'd be fine for a couple of days – but then, leading up to the next one, I was an absolute mess. I'd be

IN LOVING MEMORY – Priscilla's Story

"We got a silver ring for my little finger and engraved it with 'In memory of our first' ..."

a bundle of nerves driving to the hospital each week. But when all was okay, we had a little ritual: we'd stop at McD's on the way home and have a cheeseburger to celebrate!

Physically, it was an ideal nine months. Not a problem at all. However, throughout that time, with all of the stress and emotions, I actually ended up with antenatal depression – which is very common with people who've had infertility issues. Julian carried a load during that time as well. He was a great husband and a great friend, and he listened to all my fears.

GRAPEVINE: How long did it take to conceive your second daughter?

CATHERINE: When Estella was one, we decided to try again. We conceived Skyler in the second month with no fertility drugs. We were monitored very closely all the way through, and all the blood tests looked like we were going to miscarry ... but she's a fighter.

GRAPEVINE: Really? Is she still like that?

CATHERINE: Oh, she's a strong child – strong, independent, determined, capable ... so yeah, she's still very much like that.

GRAPEVINE: I love it – the personality coming through in the womb! But tell us the truth of it – tell us 'the real guts' of what your heart goes through when something like this is going on?

CATHERINE: I don't think a lot of people really understand that with miscarriage

ON & ON – Teresa's Story

"This road is wearying, the doctor's appointments tiresome, the months of wavering emotions seemingly endless ..."

A COMMON THREAD:

GRAPEVINE: The stats tell us that one in six couples are likely to experience infertility, and one in three to four pregnancies will end in miscarriage ... *A Common Thread* shares a lot of those stories. Tell us about your book.

CATHERINE: The by-line for *A Common Thread* is 'Sixteen personal accounts of faith, fertility and miscarriage.' I'm a talker, so when we were going through miscarriages and fertility treatment, I talked about it – and people came out of the woodwork and shared their journeys. I started to realise that even though the finer points differed, we all shared a common thread, an understanding of one another.

Someone who's had one miscarriage has more of an understanding of the pain that comes with several miscarriages than someone who has never miscarried before. Someone who has tried to conceive for seven months has a bit of an understanding of the desperation and heartbreak of someone who has tried for years. They will have travelled different roads – had different treatments, held different beliefs, responded differently emotionally ... but there's a grade of understanding one another, a common thread that runs through those journeys.

comes a real grief – a deep loss. People say things like, "Oh well, at least you were only 12 weeks ..." – but those sorts of comments are really painful. It's different for everyone, but most of the women I've spoken with acknowledge that there's a

GRAPEVINE: But surely there are hundreds of books out there already?

CATHERINE: Not as many as you might think! When I had my third miscarriage, I went to a bookstore to find something to help me. But I couldn't find anything that fitted my situation. I found a book about empty arms, telling the story of a couple who had never been able to conceive or adopt. I wasn't there yet. There was a book about a couple who had tried for a little while and then had a miscarriage ... well, we'd been trying for a few years by that stage and had been through three miscarriages. There was a book about going through IVF, but we weren't doing that. There was nothing that really fitted our situation, nothing for me.

I realised that each person's story, which they had committed to paper, was very specific to them. I decided that I wanted to bring something together that I could put into the hands of any couple trying to get pregnant and have them read something they could relate to.

GRAPEVINE: And along came *A Common Thread* ...

CATHERINE: Along came *A Common Thread!* In the book, all the stories are different. There's a story about successful IVF and a story of failed IVF ... there's miracle

pregnancies and multiple miscarriage, miscarriage after pregnancy, couples who've never been able to have children ... there's adoption and stories of couples who are still trying. You can pick it up and you can read it ... and you can relate to some part of one of those 16 stories, and know that someone understands.

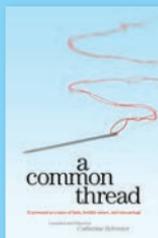
GRAPEVINE: It's like sitting and chatting with 16 friends ...

CATHERINE: Exactly. Those friends can say, "I know, I feel that too ... but you know what? There's a way through, and not only that, there can even be hope in the middle of it."

GRAPEVINE: Although the stats are high, most people reading this will fortunately not experience infertility issues.

We all want to say the right thing to our friends and family members who are dealing with infertility ... but it's very hard to know what the right thing is?

CATHERINE: I think the best thing you can say is just, "I'm so sorry ..." That's it. You don't need to explain or try to make it better, because you really can't. Just listen. And maybe say a little prayer for them ... if you're that way inclined. But being able to talk it out and have someone listen is very, very helpful.



genuine grieving process that needs to take place.

These days we know we're pregnant so early that we begin the attachment process sooner than in years gone by. I saw my baby's heartbeat at six weeks

– and, to me, that means life. I became attached almost immediately. Each time Julian and I would work out the due date; we'd go and buy baby-stuff; we'd talk names. Even early on in the pregnancy there's so much that makes you constantly



aware of this little life. You're nauseous, you might be throwing up, your breasts are sore, if you've had a pregnancy before you're quite often starting to swell ...

GRAPEVINE: So you're grieving the loss of what you had hoped was to come.

CATHERINE: That's right. And grief has no time-frame. Grief is a song with its own rhythm and melody. Some people bounce back very quickly ... and some take a long time.

I think we need to honour that process and support people as they deal with what they've lost.

THE LEAST OF THESE – Michelle S's Story

"The nurse who called with the bad news must've thought I was very brave and stoical for not crying. If only she could've seen me seconds after I hung up."

GRAPEVINE: How long did your grieving last?

CATHERINE: Well, each miscarriage was different for me; the levels of emotion were different each time. When Estella was nine months old I was asked to speak at an event in Australia. It was a memorial service for babies who'd been lost during pregnancy – whether it was from miscarriage, or even an abortion that someone might've been regretting.

I thought that I was emotionally healed, that I had finished the grieving process ... I mean, I had a gorgeous wee nine-month-old daughter! But they did this thing where you held a card, symbolically representing your lost baby. They had pink cards and blue cards, and I was standing there with four of these cards in my hands. Seriously, I wept like a goose – the ugliest crying you've ever seen! I just kept repeating, "My babies ... my babies ..." It was so cathartic to have something

in my hand representing someone I never got to hold.

We'd love to hold memorial services like that in New Zealand.

GRAPEVINE: So what was it that got you through? What was it that you guys held on to?

CATHERINE: Each other. Julian and I took a couple of trips – we really treated ourselves – we went to Disneyland! Then there were my friends. I held on to the ones who would let me just talk and rant and rave – which wasn't often, but it was necessary. They were friends who didn't try to fix anything; they'd just listen and say, "I'm so sorry you're going through this."

And my faith was a huge comfort to me, although, the whole experience really rocked it. I thought that because of my faith all should be wonderful, but I fast realised what the reality of faith is. I think faith is actually believing and continuing to hold on in the tough times.

GRAPEVINE: I love that the two of you took off to Disneyland!

CATHERINE: You really need to look after yourself in times like that. We had to acknowledge the enormity of what it was.

A TINY LITTLE FLUTTER – Naomi's Story

"On Day Twenty-One my drug-kit turned up: a black bag filled with about 65 needles and hormone drugs for the month. This was one scary bag ... We had the first scan at seven weeks. And there it was. A tiny little flutter. Our baby's heart. My official due date was my dad's birthday."

BEATING THE ODDS – Julie's Story

"With my situation and age, statistically it was almost impossible to conceive – and there was only a 2 to 4% chance that the baby would ever develop a heartbeat ... On December 2, 2003, our son was born weighing 9lb 1oz."

It's amazing how much power there is in doing something you really like. It might just be a walk on the beach, or a run in the bush, or you might like to lie in bed all day and read ... but then you need to give yourself a full-stop. *Okay, it hurts, but I need to get up and get moving now.*

Some days you feel fine, but other days it's literally a toe at a time.

GRAPEVINE: After the first miscarriage, or even the second, did you attempt to hold back from getting attached?

CATHERINE: I found that impossible to do. We tried not to hope ... but we couldn't help it. After the first miscarriage I thought, *Well, at least I know I can get pregnant.* However, I've had women say to me that they wish they could at least just get pregnant – that even if they miscarried, they'd be happy to know that conception was at least possible. But I don't think they understand the crushing nature of losing a child you've conceived – especially when you've been trying for so long.

After the second miscarriage, I was even more crushed. I thought, *crikey, that's TWO now.* The third one was probably the hardest, because we had seen the heartbeat – so even if I wanted to at that



HOLD ME – Amy’s Story

“Mike would often find me lying awake crying in the middle of the night, and he really didn’t know how to help me. Sometimes he would just wrap his arms around me and tell me everything was going to be okay. He found it very hard because, like most men, he wanted to fix the problem ... but felt powerless to do so.”

point, I couldn’t remove the hope I held. But it was that third miscarriage that made Julian and I discuss how long we would keep trying.

GRAPEVINE: You decided to continue though – obviously.

CATHERINE: Yes. And we eventually had Estella – which made it all worth it. But when we were pregnant with Skyler and the HCG levels were constantly inconclusive, I can remember thinking, *I can’t go*

through this again. We decided that, if we miscarried, we wouldn’t try again – we’d just enjoy Estella.

GRAPEVINE: How did Julian feel during all of this? What’s his story?

CATHERINE: At first he was pretty chilled about it. In fact, for the first year of trying

DOWNES & UPS – Samantha’s Story

“Even now it’s hard to look back on the pain we felt. It was a physical pain, like shards of glass being pressed into our hearts – and it hurt to even breathe. I miscarried on Christmas Day 2005. But later came our mountaintop experience: in November 2008 we adopted a little boy we named Reuben. Our ‘son of vision’ arrived. Words are inadequate to describe the joy we feel at finally being parents ...”

he was really relaxed. He was keen to try, but thought, *It will happen when it happens ...* Of course, a big part of our problem was caused by something in his body. It was completely out of his control, but there were times later on when he started to feel like it was his fault. We pounced on that pretty quickly and talked it through.

He found the second year harder. He struggled to understand what I was going through. There were times when I wouldn't want to go to a family event, or we'd miss another important moment – because there'd be young kids there, and I just couldn't bear it.

Christmases in particular were difficult for me. Each year I'd think that by the next festive season we'd be seeing our children playing beneath the tree and running around with their cousins. But after the fourth miscarriage we opted to stay home for Christmas ...

Julian didn't really understand that, but he was supportive of it. Men tend to look at things, find the problem and try to fix it, but Julian couldn't fix this.

GRAPEVINE: How did this whole journey impact your relationship with each other?

CATHERINE: We were lucky in that the experience brought us closer together. We agreed on all of the big decisions we had to make – and I know that's not always the case. Some couples disagree on how long they should keep trying, or they disagree on the methods they use. One of the stories in *A Common Thread* is told by a woman who is very honest about how it almost broke up their marriage. She describes how she became obsessed with what 'he' couldn't give her.

UNFORGETTABLE – Michelle P's Story

"We never got to hold Zac and Jordan, we never got to see them grow and develop new skills like smiling, but we won't ever forget them. With each new skill that Joel acquires, I will undoubtedly shed a tear or two for what we missed out on with Zac and Jordan."

GRAPEVINE: After hearing your story, all of the ups and downs, the tears shed, the battles fought ... it really must've been amazing to hold that little girl in your arms for the first time.

CATHERINE: It was slightly surreal. There were quite a few complications during the labour, so she ended up being born by caesarean – and it was a little while before I got to hold her. But the moment I remember as being amazing was after Julian and my parents had gone home. It was eight o'clock and she had arrived at four. I lay there in my bed just looking at her, and she had these huge blue eyes. She stared at me, very intently, for the longest time and my heart just melted. It was like nothing I could describe.

After all this time, this was *my* baby ... amazing. That's all. Amazing. 🌸

CATHERINE'S BOOK, *A COMMON THREAD*, IS AVAILABLE FROM AMAZON ALONG WITH HER NEW BOOK, *HOPE FOR TODAY*.



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HAVE YOUR SAY!**



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