

‘I had an IVF BABY AT 54’

Carolyn Mayling, 68, from Maidenhead, Berkshire, explains the heartbreaking reason why she made the decision to become a mother again

The waiting room was full, but no one my age was there to ask the doctor the same thing as me. After all, who in their right mind would consider pregnancy at 49? I was considering an escape through the fire exit when my name was called.

‘I want another baby,’ I told my GP, swallowing the lump in my throat. She smiled at me, then said: ‘I’ll back you every inch of the way.’ Surprising? No, because she knew my story, and for the first time in nine months since losing my daughter Rosie, aged 11, hope began to flicker.

When another baby had first crossed my mind, I’d been shocked at myself for even considering it. It wasn’t that I was trying to replace my lost daughter – that would be impossible, but in my head, I could hear Rosie’s forthright voice saying: ‘Just do it, Mum!’

Years earlier, when Rosie was four and her sister Ellie was 11, my husband, David, and I took them on holiday to Cornwall. One evening, we left them with the hotel’s babysitter and went to watch a psychic giving readings.

We sat down opposite her and, after a while, she told us: ‘I see a child. He will



Carolyn with baby Dominic

‘When a baby had first crossed my mind, I’d been shocked’

come to you after a long gap.’

‘No chance,’ I thought.

Our family was already hectic enough, so I pushed the event out of my mind.

Life with the girls continued, full of fun and very busy. David was in the building trade and I ran a theatre school with my mum and sister. Both our girls loved the theatrical world. Rosie was vibrant and strong-willed, living life at high speed.

But at a sleepover party for her 11th birthday, Rosie was quieter than usual. She had a barking cough, which wasn’t responding to antibiotics. A few days later, I found her lying in bed, pale and clammy. ‘Mummy, I’m going to die of this,’ she said.

‘Don’t be a drama queen,’ I told her,

trying to make light of her terrifying words. But my unease was growing. I took her back to the doctors and insisted on a CT scan. The scans showed blood clots in her lungs and she was diagnosed with vasculitis, an autoimmune disease.

It was a desperate time; Rosie spent the next two months in hospital, her pretty face puffed up with steroids, while David and I juggled visits to see her with caring for Ellie.

She was still frail when she was finally discharged, though doctors hoped she’d regain strength and return to school. I wanted to wrap her up in cotton wool, but Rosie was sick of having her freedom restricted. One day, I watched through the kitchen window as she swung on the garden swing. Despite her skinny little legs, she was going higher and higher.

I ran out, calling for her to slow down and trying to catch the back of the seat. ‘Don’t limit my life!’ she shouted. I got the message.

BUILDING A LEGACY

But early the following morning, Rosie started coughing up blood and was struggling to breathe. We rushed her to hospital and she was taken straight into intensive care. ‘Be brave,’ I told her. ‘I love you, Mummy,’ she replied. ‘Tell Daddy and Ellie, too.’ Then she was sedated.

Soon after, there was a commotion and her consultant came running. Rosie had suffered a cardiac arrest. Over the next days as she lay on a ventilator, David, Ellie and I would read to her and stroke her hair, willing her to pull through. But, after a week, a doctor told us her brain stem was dead. We had no choice but to let her go; my Rosie had no limits now.

The next thing I knew, David and I were in the car, driving back to the rest of our lives without Rosie – it seemed impossible and unbearable.

I only remember the funeral in flashes, the sea of faces, the sobbing. How would I drag myself out of this black pit?

I vowed I’d raise money for children in hospital – something Rosie had wanted to do. At that moment, a double rainbow appeared. ‘Rosie’s Rainbow Fund,’ I thought. ‘That will be your legacy.’



From left: Rosie, aged seven; with Carolyn aged xx



Ellie, now 14, was an only child, watching *The Simpsons* on TV without her little sister, eating alone. Pasta bolognese, once their favourite, now made her feel sick.

When the thought of having another baby entered my head, it wouldn’t leave. I couldn’t get Rosie back, but wouldn’t a new sibling bring company and joy?

At first, David was against it, saying we were too old; but for me, it became a driving compulsion and I talked him round. There was no winning over Ellie, though. ‘I already have a sister and I don’t want another one,’ she stormed.

Mum had misgivings, too. ‘You’ll look like a granny, not a mum,’ she said. ‘How will the child feel when they’re 15 and you’re 65?’

I replied: ‘Just happy his parents love him so much.’ I was certain I would have a boy.

Mum came to accept my plans and my sister Sam was supportive, too. Finally, Ellie came to accept it as well.

So, following that initial appointment with the doctor, the plans got under way. I saw a fertility expert who told me that, at my age, the likelihood of conceiving naturally was a thousand to one. Even then, there was a high risk of miscarriage and foetal abnormality. Our best shot would be IVF with a donor egg.

BATTLING THE ODDS

When Sam, 38, heard, she offered to donate her eggs. ‘The baby would have

our genes so it would be practically the same as using your own egg,’ she said.

But it was still a huge consideration, and before embarking on IVF, Sam, her partner Phil, David and I had counselling.

Sam’s eggs were mixed with David’s sperm, and when I was due to have two embryos implanted, nerves, grief and hormones made me tetchy. However, the doctor assured me the embryos were ‘first class’.

Sadly, neither of them took. Before, I’d felt Rosie was guiding me. Now, she felt further away than ever. ‘I can’t believe it,’ Sam said when I broke the news. ‘I was so sure.’ ‘You’ll just have to try again,’ both David and Ellie told me.

But I felt bruised by failure, and, throwing myself into Rosie’s charity,

I waited two years before trying again. I was now 52 with enhanced risks, but all I could feel was fear for what would happen if my last chance to have another a child didn’t work.

‘The message was loud and clear: Not pregnant’

Sam had understandably already said she couldn’t go through it again.

The last embryo thawed well. ‘A little fighter,’ the doctor said as it was implanted. As test time approached, I felt nauseous and hoped it was an indication of pregnancy, but once again the message was loud and clear: ‘Not pregnant’. My womb was as empty as my heart.

Yet I also knew I couldn’t give up. Val, a dear friend, told us about the Logan Centre for Assisted Reproduction, ➔

which treated women up to the age of 55. There was a three-year waiting list for a donor egg, less at its centre in Cyprus, and its treatment was expensive, at around £6,000, but I started saving nonetheless. I had treatment in London, then in March 2008, with me aged 53, David and I flew to Cyprus. I knew from the brief information we'd been given that the donor was a lady from Moldova. It was Easter, and there were colourful displays of eggs wherever I looked, which felt appropriate!

Two embryos were implanted, and I spent the rest of the day by the pool, legs up, praying it would work.

Back at home on test day, I tried to prepare for more disappointment as I took out the tester kit. 'Oh my God,' was all I could manage as the results came through. I showed David the stick, but he was stunned into silence. I was pregnant.

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

This was brand-new life, a gift from Rosie and a reminder of the joy she'd brought us throughout her life.

Those next weeks were so precious... and terrifying. A scan at 20 weeks confirmed I was carrying a boy, and I stopped teaching dance three weeks later, reminding myself I'd be a mum of 54, not 24.

As my pregnancy progressed, I was carefully monitored and it was agreed a Caesarean was the safest choice. Arriving in hospital on my due date, I placed a photo of Rosie by my bed, suddenly frightened. What if I didn't

love this baby as much?

But as my 8lb 10oz son was delivered, all doubts disappeared. A promise of a future was born. Dominic looked at me steadily; here lay the proof that all things are possible.

'We've done it, David, he's really here,' I said, for once weeping tears of relief and joy, not grief and pain. He was equally besotted, if a bit shellshocked, and went off to call the family. Later that day, when Ellie, 20, visited, she held her brother's hand – a bond already forming between them.

Over the next weeks and months, my age felt irrelevant. Dominic was calm and content – and I savoured every moment. I relished a second chance to revisit the world of mother and toddler groups. I was readily accepted by the other mums and felt no judgement on playdates or picnics. I loved that our home was once again full of toys, clutter and chicken nuggets.

'Dominic is the proof that all things are possible'

Dominic adored his daddy and the feeling was mutual, but our marriage had been under severe strain for years. In November 2013, when Dominic was four, David and I split and became one of the many couples whose relationship couldn't withstand their child's death. But he continued to be a good father, and, in time, we were able to get along.

My survival skills were tested once more when I was diagnosed with breast cancer – Dominic was now seven. 'I can't die,' I told the doctor. 'I need to see my son grow up.'

Ellie, by now married with a baby of her own, cared for me and helped with Dominic. I felt bad that he had to put up with my illness and did my best to keep his life as fun as possible. Thankfully, I responded to treatment, and, after reconstructive surgery, was able to ease back into normality once more.

Now, Dominic is 14, 6ft tall, bright and popular. I couldn't be prouder of him. It's also nearly 20 years since Rosie left us.

I'm a grandma twice over and forever a mum of three. Whether I'm teaching tap dance, fundraising or putting on a show, I carry Rosie with me in everything I do, imagining her in a director's chair, high on her rainbow.

I'll never stop aching for her, but the brother she sent us is a blessing. He's brought happiness with him – something I never thought I could feel again.

• *The Future Is Rosie* (Alliance Publishing Press) by Carolyn Mayling is out now.

rosiesrainbowfund.co.uk

