



Dealing with

INFERTILITY

By Marlo Schalesky

Author of *If Tomorrow Never Comes*

Dear God,

How could You do this to me? Is it some kind of cruel trick? That's the only explanation I can find to what's happened. Or should I say, what hasn't happened, despite the thousands of dollars we paid for in vitro fertilization. But it didn't work, even though I prayed so diligently, believed in Your power, had faith when hope seemed as faint as smoke on the wind. And still I'm barren, a word that describes more than the condition of my womb. It tells of the pain in my heart...

So writes a woman in the midst of the journey through infertility. These could be the words of Kinna Henley, the main character in *If Tomorrow Never Comes*. They could also be my words. Because I too have struggled through months and years of longing for a child, of treatments that fail, of hopes dashed. I, like Kinna, have discovered that there are few desires more powerful than the urge to have children of your own and see them grow and mature into adulthood. After all, even when I was a little girl and boys had cooties, I knew that someday I'd grow up, get married, and have children. Didn't everyone? As I entered adulthood, everything seemed to be going along fine. I met a wonderful man, got married, and on our honeymoon we had fun discussing what we might name our future children and how we'd bring them up the best we could to know and love God.

But the years passed, and no children came. No morning sickness, no rounding belly, no baby showers filled with cute little booties and boxes of diapers. Soon, hope turned to fear and trips to the mall changed to travels to the doctor's office.

Tests and more tests, fertility drugs and ovulation sticks became a part of my everyday life. But still, no babies.

Despite my ache of longing, the world continued as it always had. My friends had children, relatives announced the arrival of new babies, mothers wiped the noses of their toddlers and sent them off to Sunday school. And there my husband and I sat, alone and lonely, sure we were the only ones in the world who were denied the joy of having children.

Later I would discover that many couples have difficulty conceiving. For them, like us, and like Kinna and Jimmy Henley, infertility is a hard and heart-wrenching road. And sometimes, it can become a monster.

It sneaks up on you, taking a bite here, a nibble there. It feeds on your life, and on your relationships. And if you let it, it can devour a once-healthy marriage. Kinna and Jimmy faced the monster. And my husband, Bryan, and I have too.

Yet, for a long time in my own journey, I didn't recognize the monster. Then, one day, I saw it—in my reflection in the dresser mirror. There it was, staring back at me through the dullness in my eyes, the stress lines around my mouth, the droop of my cheeks. I didn't always look like that.

I remember how my gaze dropped to a photo that sat askew on the dresser. There, my husband and I grinned from the confines of the wooden frame. Bryan's arms looped around my shoulders in a casual embrace. Behind us, the waters of Yosemite Falls plummeted in silver glory. Back then, we were young, in love, and looking forward to a future filled with the promise of giggling children. Those were good days. I could see it in the shine of

my eyes, could hear it in the laugh that would spill from my lips a moment after the camera's shutter clicked. I could almost remember it, almost recall how easily Bryan and I used to laugh together, how he would tease me when I wanted to take just one more photo, how I would chuckle and skip away from him as I asked yet another stranger to snap our picture. But that was B.I.—Before Infertility—and those days were gone.

I sighed and traced my finger over the image of my face in the photo. Then, my gaze again rose to the mirror. Who was the woman who stared back at me from the glass?

Gone was the beautiful, sexy, loving wife my husband married. Instead, I felt like a baby-making machine that for some reason was broken. Barren. As a result, our love life had become sterile and mechanical. The purpose of intimacy was no longer to share our love, but to produce a baby. No longer to enjoy one another, but to accomplish a goal. We acted based on the reading on an ovulation predictor stick and according to the instructions given by our doctor. No more romance, no more spontaneity, no more passion.

Slowly, I turned from the dresser mirror, walked downstairs, and pulled a photo album from beneath the coffee table. Then, I sat on the couch and flipped through the pages. In photo after photo, I saw the joy of our life together. Bryan making a face at me from behind a glass of sparkling cider. Me grinning from the top of a tall boulder where I'd climbed during our summer trip to Yosemite. The two of us dancing at a friend's wedding. A snapshot of me, hair rumpled, as I sipped a cup

of hot chocolate at the breakfast table.

As I looked at the pictures, I realized that it wasn't just our love life that had changed. Our daily interactions had also been affected by the infertility beast. Once, I had been a normal, even-tempered woman. But now, the monster had nibbled away at me, leaving a person who constantly teetered on the brink of anger or tears. When Bryan was late to our appointment at the infertility clinic, I accused him of not caring. When he tried to tease me like he used to, I called him callous. When he said it would be okay if we never had children, I spewed hurtful words and ran to the other room. In my sane moments, I knew he was doing his best to understand me. But somehow, it just wasn't enough.

As I stood there, studying the difference between the woman in the photos

and the one who had looked back at me in the mirror, the thoughts I'd been fighting for months flooded over me. Bryan should have married someone else. Then, he could have had a family by now. How could he still love me? Did he regret the "I do" spoken so many years before? Could we ever recapture the love we once had? Would we ever feel normal again?

It seemed like every week that passed, every month when I found out I still wasn't pregnant, the monster grew stronger. Every day it chewed up a little more of the love between Bryan and I. Somehow we'd forgotten each other in this pain-filled journey through infertility. We'd forgotten how to really see one another, to rejoice in what we loved about the other. Instead, we'd become so focused on the goal of having a baby that we'd become blind to everything else.

We needed a change. I needed a change. Because how could I love a baby that God hadn't given me when I wasn't loving the husband that He had given?

A week later, the day came when the ovulation stick again read positive. But this time, I was determined to make things different.

That night I dressed in my best, black velvet gown. I curled my hair, put on makeup, and fastened on the special sapphire earrings Bryan had given me three years before. I bought a bottle of wild, new perfume and dabbed it on my wrists and ears. Then, I looked in the mirror and smiled. It was a forced smile at first, but at least it was a start, a beginning to recapturing the woman of fun and romance that I'd once been.

The first stars just started to peek from the evening sky as I set up our back patio table with candlesticks and our best china. My husband's favorite meal was bubbling in the oven and light music drifted from the stereo in the family room when he arrived home. I still remember the look of surprise on his face.

"What's the occasion?"

"Because I love you, and I love us." I lifted my chin and offered the smile I'd practiced earlier. "Tonight we're celebrating each other."

Bryan raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're my wife?"

I grinned and pointed to the camera I'd placed on the table. "How many pictures do I have to take to convince you?"

He laughed. "Oh, only a hundred or so."

I picked up the camera and snapped his picture. "Now go up and change your clothes and hurry back. It's date night."

"Whatever you say." He jogged upstairs to our room while I finished preparing the meal.

As we sat down over baked lasagna and glasses of sparkling cider, I realized something, I felt attractive again. I felt alive. And I noticed how handsome my husband was, more handsome than the day we married.

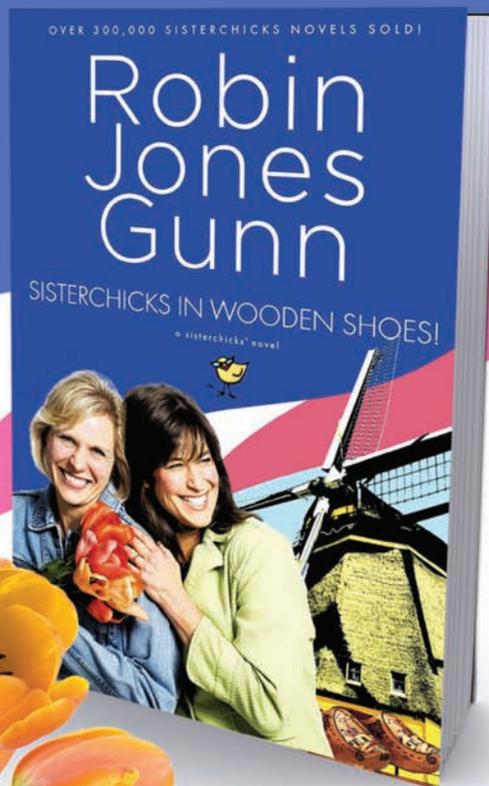
For the next hour, we talked and chuckled and reminisced about our favorite memories as a couple. Then, when we finished our meal, Bryan stood and reached one hand toward me. "Care to dance, m'lady?"

I nodded and placed my hand in his. There, under the moonlight we danced with my cheek on his shoulder and his mouth near my ear.

Welkom to the land of windmills, dutch chocolate, and wooden shoes!

SISTERCHICK® *n*: a friend who laughs with you till you cry and cries with you till you laugh; a gift from God.

An abnormal medical test result. A best friend in Holland. Summer trades fear for adventure among the tulips!



"We're going to make it through all this, you know," he whispered.

And for that moment, I believed him. There, beneath the stars, with my husband's arms around me, the monster of infertility grew weaker until I thought that perhaps, just perhaps, we might be able to survive the pain, the disappointments, the sorrows yet to come—if only we could remember to love each other.

After that night, we planned a special date night whenever the ovulation stick read positive. The next month, Bryan brought me roses and took me to my favorite restaurant. The following month, we snuggled in front of the fireplace and toasted marshmallows over the flames.

They were simple things, but important in reminding us to listen to each other and care. These dates soon became times we cherished as we focused on appreciating each other, on listening to one another and hearing the other's heart. In doing so, they took the pressure away from performance, away from the goal of making a baby, and instead gave us time to pay special attention to our relationship.

To my surprise, after a few months, we began to find it easier to enjoy each other during other, "regular" times like when we did yard work together or washed the cars or folded clothes. Soon, we found ourselves planning more trips together. With the expense of infertility

treatments, we didn't have the money for vacations at Yosemite Lodge anymore, but we could take a walk on the beach, or see a funny movie, or take a drive to the country to watch the sun set. On Saturday afternoons, we started to enjoy picnics in the park like we used to do in our college days before we were married—anything to help us remember how to laugh again, to remind us why we fell in love.

And that, I discovered, is how the monster of infertility is beaten, by me, and by Kinna Henley. It's beaten not by the miracle of having a child, but in the beauty of love, of laughter, and of rediscovering the woman who once smiled into a camera in front of Yosemite Falls. ■

Tips for When a Friend is Infertile

Do you know someone praying and hoping for their miracle child, someone dealing with the reality of infertility every day? Below are some suggestions on how you can help:

What not to do:

- Don't try to make your friend feel better by complaining about your own children or by telling her she's "lucky" not to have to deal with the stresses of having children.
- Don't offer unsolicited advice on how to get pregnant. Suggestions such as "just relax" or "if you just adopt" are not helpful.
- Don't give assurances that "God will give you a child." There are no guarantees that every couple will be able to have children. Children may not be in God's plan, and if that's the case, your words will only make it harder.
- Don't avoid any mention of children or pregnancy. Your awkwardness will only make your friend feel awkward in return.
- Don't offer reasons or excuses for God like Job's friends did. Telling your friend why God may not want her to have children is not only painful, it's presumptuous.



What to do:

- Do let your friend know that you're continuing to pray for her. Your support and caring will let her know she isn't alone, even in the hardest times.
- Do remember her on special days, such as Mother's Day. A simple note saying "I know this is a hard day for you. Just wanted to let you know that you're in my thoughts and prayers" can mean so much.
- Do be sensitive about asking her to be involved in children's ministries. Some infertile couples find joy in ministering to children, while others find it difficult. The same applies to attending events such as baby showers.
- Do feel free to ask questions. Infertility can be emotionally, physically, and financially stressful. Your friend will appreciate you asking how treatments are going and how she's holding up, rather than if the treatments are "working."
- Do provide your friend with a safe place for venting her spiritual questions and doubts. It is not unusual for those going through infertility to question God's love or fairness in the midst of this difficult time. A listening ear is more helpful than pat answers.

The longing for a baby.
The crushing blow of infertility.
The silver locket and mysterious woman
that can restore their *hope*.

With their marriage thinly held together by strands of the past, childhood sweethearts Kinna and Jimmy Henley must embrace the redemptive power of love before it's too late.

“A beautiful and bittersweet story of dreams crushed, but not destroyed. Of first love dying, but not yet dead. And of a merciful God who holds all our fates in his hands...”

—RICK ACKER, author of *Blood Brothers* and *Dead Man's Rule*

