# Baste Not, Want Not

A good man may be hard to find, but an ordinary kitchen utensil isn't

November 1, 1997 By Jonathan Keane

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It was 1988. Londoner Gill (pronounced "Jill") Hickman was free-falling out of a failed relationship, heading for the ground but determine to enjoy some sights along the way. Unfortunately, she forgot to pack a parachute. "I was 30-ish, single and knew about HIV," says Hickman, 42. "I knew I should use a condom, but there was this tasty bloke, and sometimes you just do now and think later."

For Hickman, "later" came the next year, when she was admitted to the hospital with a mysterious rash and flulike symptoms, only to return home diagnosed with HIV. Her reaction is best described as enthusiastic denial: She told no one except her sister, "dragging" herself back to work as a nursery school teacher. "I'm someone who just carries on," she says, in British stiff-upper-lip fashion. "My dad died around the same time, but when I was at work, I could forget everything." At home, it was more difficult to hide from the truth of her HIV status and the loss of her father. "It was the worst three months of my life," she says.

Like many before her, Hickman hoped that marriage would make her problems disappear, and soon after the man who had infected her died in 1993, she married one of his friends. "It was a horrible relationship," she says. "I allowed myself to be abused."

HIV positive, unhappily married and almost 40, Hickman decided to have a child. Though she ran about a 25 percent risk of transmitting the virus to her child, Hickman held firm to what she describes as "blind optimism. I didn't know any positive children," she says. "I was living in a safe bubble, and I didn't allow myself to think of the consequences."

If the moral dilemma her pregnancy posed was difficult, so were the logistics: A sort of homemade artificial insemination. "You'll like this bit," she says, laughing at the memory of her postcoital maneuver. "I inseminated myself with a turkey baster. I made love with my husband, then transferred the sperm from the condom." The recipe worked, and in December 1994, Malachai was born. Three years later, he remains HIV negative.

Her son's birth inspired Hickman to wake up to the reality of both her HIV status and her destructive relationship. "I realized that I didn't deserve to be treated like this, so I started on the difficult road of getting rid of my husband and changing my life," she says.

Today, Hickman works part-time for Positively Women, a support group for women with HIV, and she feels more fulfilled than she's ever been. "every minute with Malachai is so special," she says. "I want to see him grow up." Hickman is through with denial—she recently made a will—and has replaced it with hope. Still, "Malachai knows I might die," she says. "I believe you should always answer a child's questions."

What about the questions Malachai might ask when he's older? "I know a lot of women who definitely want to be there when I tell Malachai how he was conceived."

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