

pushchair, and he has to be first at everything: first up the stairs, first in the bath. He has asked why it's no longer just the three of us; I try to explain as best I can. When I brought Melisande home from hospital, Mathieu asked if he'd grown in my tummy, too. I told him that he hadn't grown in my tummy but in my heart. It seemed to make sense to him.

The bond I feel with each of them is different, too. When Melisande cries, my whole body tenses up. When Mathieu cries, I do my very best to work out what's wrong, but it's not such a physical reaction. I can't say I love them the same; I don't think any parent loves two children the same. I cherish each one for their unique personalities. But I love them both with the same intensity and I would fight for them exactly the same.

We chose the name Mathieu, which means gift of God, because he was. But we also kept his birth name, Armen. He is of Armenian descent and we wanted to respect his identity. And the name Melisande has Armenian origins, which gives them a special link.

If Mathieu goes through tough times later in life because of being adopted, I have a sense his sister will be the one to help him. I think she's here for a reason, I believe neither of them would be here without the other - they're part of the same battle to have a family.

It was when I was 36, four years ago, after years of invasive tests, fertility drugs, failed treatments and two IVF cycles, that a doctor told me it was highly unlikely we'd have a child of our own. The realisation made me feel unwomanly, useless. But it also made me fight - I needed to prove to myself and to everyone else that I could create a family, even if I couldn't conceive.

The adoption process was intrusive and frustratingly bureaucratic at times. During the vetting stage, the social worker came to our house 10 times and went through every aspect of our relationship and emotional lives, together and separately. I remember him asking about my father's death when I was 23, and how I thought it had affected me; I was so worried I'd say the wrong thing.

It took nine months to get approved by the adoption panel. But just two months later, we were sitting in an office building on the outskirts of Moscow



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waiting to meet an eight-month-old boy who, fingers crossed, would become our son. Being French, we couldn't adopt in Britain unless we could find a child of French origin (the laws have changed since), nor in France because we were living long-term in the UK.

We were talking to the doctor when a carer came in carrying a boy in a bright orange sweater and trousers and shoes that were too big for him. The baby home had held a fundraiser that morning and dressed the children in their best clothes.

When the carer placed him in my arms I melted - it was such a powerfully happy moment, just like when the midwife puts a newborn on your chest. And then he turned to Cedrik and gave him this big smile and that was it, we were bonded.

We visited four times, taking bags of berries for the children because they only had apples and pears. Once we brought three electric fans from London - they were having a heat wave and the shops there had run out.

Each time, leaving Mathieu behind was tough. Cedrik and I would sit in silence for hours afterwards. But after three-and-a-half months of paperwork, we finally got to take him home. When we were packing to leave Moscow, he kept jumping excitedly in and out of the suitcases - as if he was telling us to take him with us, we told each other.

There were so many things to get used to at the start. We had to teach him to drink his milk more slowly; in the home, they'd slit the teats on the bottles to speed up feeding time. And we had to wean him on to water, as they only

gave them juice. In those first weeks, he'd sleep for hours on end - like he needed to shut down for a while, to recover.

We had our family, but I felt it wasn't finished. Just before the adoption, I'd got pregnant naturally, a real shock. But the pregnancy was ectopic - the embryo had implanted outside the womb - and I had to have a Fallopian tube removed.

Just getting pregnant had given me hope that we might be able to have a biological child after all, so after Mathieu settled in, I went for more tests and finally got a diagnosis that might have explained my earlier infertility. It turned out I had endometriosis, where pieces of the womb lining grow outside it. I had an operation to remove it, and, when I was 39, we decided to try IVF one last time. I give Mathieu a lot of credit for the fact that it worked. He'd made me so happy and given me so much love that I felt confident as a woman and a mum.

Being pregnant was lovely, and I was

looking forward to the baby. But then the birth was an awful experience: two days, an episiotomy, stitches that got infected. Melisande had a problem with her immune system, too, so we had to spend a week in hospital.

Now, I feel we're finally out the other side, a whole family. And I wouldn't change anything. I adore Mathieu for his story and I adore Melisande for hers; maybe Melisande's story needed not to be perfect, too, to be like her brother's. 

WHAT HELPED ME

•For advice and support:

British Association for Adopting and Fostering (baaf.org.uk); Adoption UK (adoptionuk.org); Infertility Network UK (infertilitynetworkuk.com).

•Books for parents: *First Steps In Parenting The Child Who Hurts: Tiddlers And Toddlers* by Caroline Archer (Jessica Kingsley, £15.99); *Adopters On Adoption: Reflections On Parenthood And Children* by David Howe (BAAF, £11.95).

•Books for children:

The Teazles' Baby Bunny by Susan Bagnall (BAAF, £5.95); *The Odd Egg* by Emily Gravett (Macmillan, £6.99); *A Blessing From Above* by Patti Henderson (Golden Books, £2.51).