

I know what every freckle on my mom's hand looks like. I know that she used to have a mole on her neck that I rubbed too much as a child until she had it removed. I know each of the soft splotches of pigment spreading up her arms, creating a blueprint for the constellation that will one day form, mimicking the same astrological pattern that defines my grandmother's back. I know how her hand feels holding mine. I know the sound of my mother's laughter; I can predict the crinkles that form at the corners of her eyes. I know that her laughter is raucous and unabashed and sometimes she cries when she can't stop. I know how to make her coffee and how to make her mad. I know the sound of her voice when she tells me she is disappointed, and I know the sound of her voice when she tells me she is proud.

I don't know my father's name.

When my mom decided to use donor insemination I think she prepared to answer a lot of questions, face adversity and fervent curiosity within our two-person family, but growing up I was generally uninterested in my conception. Retrospectively, I realize a large portion of my disregard was defensive, a veneer intended to protect myself from the vulnerability that would come with further investigation and contemplation. As a young child I was shameless and unafraid; I hadn't yet learned comparison or judgment. When both eventually graced me I fell silent.

During the Oxbow curriculum, I was given the chance to explore this part of my identity through introspective assignments. In English class we wrote about our relationship to our parents. I chose to write about my father, or lack thereof. With that assignment, I opened for the first time what seems to be a deep curiosity, a longing to know more.

I want to know what it means to society to be donor offspring. I want to know what it means to me. I want to know the distinction between "father" and "parent". I want to know why the nuclear unit remains the ideal family structure—is it because of persistent traditionalism or a merited preference due to emotional and logistical benefit? By exploring the differences between the biological implications of parenthood and the emotional involvement of a "parent," I feel I can ultimately understand the paternal gap in my life. With this inquiry I realize more and more how vast that disconnect is. The term "parent" is ultimately flexible and subjective, as expressed by the fact that I have many figures in my life who serve a more "parental" role than my actual father who fills no sector besides a biological one.

With research I realized how little I knew about every aspect of donor insemination—from the procedure itself to the philosophical, emotional, stigmatic, bureaucratic and scientific aspects of the process. Educating myself in the language and outcomes of donor insemination became crucial to achieving a personally fulfilling relationship with my subject matter: my conception.

The New York Times article "Hello, I'm your sister. Our father is donor 150" describes a woman who located four half siblings, they all shared eyebrows and forehead structures. They were four formal strangers who shared half a biological makeup, and through that made a deeper personal connection. I wonder if my eyebrows mimic those of an unknown sibling. I wonder if my unexplained mannerisms come from my donor. According to the same 2005 NYT article, the donor sibling registry had matched 1,001 half siblings, and an unrecorded number of donor-child matches. I think we all search for solutions and answers in others, and I'm exploring the validity to that process; just how much solace can we find in knowing, or knowing about another person? My mother empowered me at birth with her openness, strength and care. Now I've embraced the chance to realize if it is knowledge that will empower me or if it is satisfaction with my lack of information that will assure my sense of self and pride.

I don't remember a time when my mom sat me down and told me that I didn't have a father. Although I'm sure she must have explained it to me at some point, looking back it feels like it was always just known, a simple truth that I never had to "find out" in any dramatic revealing moment. When I was little my friends would ask me where my dad was and I would say I didn't know. They all basically accepted that as fact. We were right at the age where it seemed like all our friends parents were getting divorced, and since nobody understood anything about that, my situation didn't seem that different. One of my friends had a sister who was really curious though and she used to ask me if I was adopted over and over again, and I remember not really knowing what to say. I knew I wasn't adopted because I had eyes like my mom and my grandma but I also knew that when I said "no" there would be more questions that I couldn't answer. None of this plagued me though. I didn't think of it. I had a great mom and things were easy and happy and I had grandparents who loved me and took me to parks. I think I was wise then. I knew that things were good and simple and had no reason to question anything.

In middle school things became confused and pernicious. I think that's the time when identity feels the least secured. Everyone is pimply and callow and searching for answers. I had a classmate whose family was very conservative and religious and had told her the "evils of test tube babies" and how "fags" used them to have children that would burn in hell. I remember sitting at our table and putting my head down on my desk, crying into a curtain of hair. It wasn't always so hateful. Sometimes people just thought it was really weird or confusing. I suppose at some point I realized I didn't *need* to feel vulnerable. I could *choose* not to submit myself to any of it, any of the judgment or questions. So I just stopped talking about it.

From the sixth or seventh grade until the summer before my senior year I didn't talk about it. It wasn't that I was ashamed; I was just scared to face adversity on such a personal level. Retrospectively I can't believe that I protected that part of my identity so heavily. Still, I never say more than I need to people I don't trust, and saying the word "donor" to a person for the first time always feels like a naked reveal. The prominence of divorce in modern America allows people with non-traditional families a certain amount of anonymity without suspicion. Most people don't question you further than "I only live with my mom". It's easy to assume that my parents are divorced. Sometimes I answer that I don't know my dad and people think my parents split up when I was a baby or before. I don't like leading people to believe a story of loss when it's not the case. In a recent email with my mom she said:

"I remember once when I was pregnant, a friend of a friend who was unhappily divorced with a young kid said, "You're intentionally choosing my life? Are you crazy?" and I thought, I'm not choosing *your* life-you're all furious that your husband left your family and I'm really happy that someone's joining mine."

The idea of a single parent family being a positive choice, rather than the result of a broken family, is something people aren't accustomed to. This idealization of the nuclear family structure (commonly defined by a pair of adults and their children) runs deep. Even within the donor insemination industry, which caters specifically to those interested in "alternative conception", there is a certain norm-or preferred client. Many sperm banks actually won't work with single women. My mother said she "felt really judged" every time she made a phone call to a sperm bank and after going through an initial question and answer process, was turned away for being a single woman. I think people often initially hear single parent and feel comfortable because it is a familiar storyline in the media and is a somewhat common occurrence, now more than ever. Despite this notion, a lot of people still regard it as taboo. In recent history single

parenthood was considered absolutely shameful and inaccessible. In the religious arena, the stigma of the “bastard child” persists into modern times. Often too, I find people don't fully consider the implications of a one-parent household, or how much the deduction of an adult from a family unit changes the relationships and responsibilities of the remaining parent.

My mother does everything. Other than my obligations and contributions, there is no division of labor in our house. My mom pays the bills and fixes the plumbing. I am so proud of her independence, her ability to sustain not only herself but a child as well. I think I grew up knowing the worth of a lot of things, that I would've been ignorant to had I had two parents. In the years where I felt insecure about my conception, I never lost or disregarded the pride and admiration I have for my mother's choices. I was merely too nervous to reveal that part of my identity to others, for the threat of being “different” or judged. When I gained more confidence in myself on a general level, openness about being donor offspring followed. But it still feels fragile.

After years of ignoring the unknown, my capacity for curiosity has swelled dramatically. The main thing I struggle with is figuring out how important this is to me. I feel this innate want to know more and to make some sort of connection, but when I find myself to be wanting or wondering I feel guilty. I contemplate the endless possibilities of who my dad is, who my siblings could be, and what it would be like if I ever met any of them. Recently I registered on the national sibling registry website, an organization that links offspring, siblings, and donors that were conceived anonymously through the limited information they possess. There was a 75 dollar registration fee, which felt strangely dehumanizing because I didn't prepare myself for the bureaucracy that would mark something I find incredibly personal. I couldn't pay for it then; neither could my mom. I felt selfish and frustrated, reduced to my financial limitations once again. Later in the week, funds became accessible again and I registered. I instantly searched with every bit of information I had; IDANT Laboratories, donor code F676, 6'1", Russian-Jewish, Blue eyes, Brown hair, born 1966, Interests in cooking, film, art, tennis. I spent 2 hours scrolling through postings. No matches. I felt depressed and ignorant because I shouldn't have romanticized this idea of instant gratification. I like to think I'm not childish enough to expect the answer to all my questions, but I wanted something—some lead, some nugget of information, something worth 75 dollars. I left a posting and since then I've been checking it regularly. My mom showed me profiles for four other donors who were her other choices, I also checked their info. Two out of the four had postings; one had relinquished his anonymity and linked with four offspring. It's crazy for me to think that if my mom had chosen C358 or F646 instead of F676, I would know my father, or at least some half siblings right now.

There were two things on the donor profile form that made me really hopeful; a check “no” for kids of his own, and a check “yes” for proven fertility, implying that some other woman had become pregnant with his sperm. It's still possible that I have a half sibling, or many, or a donor who will reveal his identity. And they could post any time so I'll just keep waiting.

Sometimes I wonder about the spiritual weight of a biological connection. Would I know if some day I was in the same room as my father or half sibling? Would I somehow sense if my father died somewhere? Would I experience some unexplained wave of loss or sadness? I wanted to know who encouraged or discouraged my mother, how she made her decisions, and if she's every regretted them. My mother says her friends and parents were supportive, but everyone had reservations about how not having a father would impact me, and how not having a husband would impact my mother. She says that although sometimes she feels financially or emotionally overwhelmed as the only adult in our family, she never regrets the decision to have me how and

when she did. I am curious about how the presence of other male figures in my life has affected me in relation to filling some sort of “void” created by the lack of paternal presence in my house. When we made cards in school for father's day, I would decorate colored paper for my uncle or grandpa. My uncle or grandpa would come to school if we had Father's Day parties and make me feel included. I think my mom tried to surround me with positive masculine figures during my childhood. Sometimes she says my grandpa felt the need to be stern with me because he was worried I wouldn't learn discipline without a masculine presence in my home life.

Despite a recent boom in the amount of offspring who are coming of age, and a small trend in media representations (the film *The Kids Are Alright* or *Donor Unknown*-a PBS series), the practice is still relatively alternative and culturally stigmatized to a degree. Obviously any moral or religious code that honors marriage above all else is predisposed to favor a classically composed nuclear family. An objection that pulls little focus in the media and literature regarding the subject, but applies to my personal story is the socially concise aspect of creating a child through DI when there are many needy children already born and put up for adoption. My mother felt it would have been more socially responsible to adopt, but being a financially unstable single parent she expected a struggle with getting approved by agencies and wanted to experience pregnancy and childbirth. She also felt that giving a child one biological connection would be beneficial to their emotional state regarding curiosity and identity. One common objection is simple; children have a right to know their parents. This ideology is common among donor offspring or former donors who feel plagued and troubled by what the arrangements of their contracts or conceptions have kept from them. The comment section on a YouTube video of a Cryobank was littered with hateful remarks, but only one came from an involved source. This viewer commented: “I'm a child made through sperm donation and it sickens me, I hate it. Did you know depression rates are much higher among children who were conceived with sperm donation? It's not okay, it pisses me off....I just want to meet my father.” This argument extends to the belief that Donor Insemination is essentially “Cultural Patricide” and is degrading or disregarding the role of fatherhood. David Blackenhorn, author of “Fatherless America” writes that the acceptance of the DI practice “depends in part upon hostility-or at least indifference-towards the idea of fatherhood as a social role for men” (from pg 2. of article children of a lesser dad-SMH) Blankenhorn also argues that men have historically been berated for not being involved enough in family life, and the DI industry undermines the progressive potential for more attentive fathers. Blankenhorn prompts that this sort of adversity, asks us to question, “what *is* the importance of a paternal connection, and with a strong maternal bond and the possibility for external male influence-do we actually need both?” Obviously the two parent trend began with practicality, before there were medical procedures to take the place of one reproductive member-but now we can ask “to what extent does the nuclear family prevail due to traditionalism and nostalgia or do children have an emotional and biological need for both parents?” I have no intention do demonize or eradicate the importance of fathers. I merely question the idea that a second parent is always necessary and/or preferred in a family structure-is it better to have a despondent or hurtful father/mother or none at all? Daniel Callahan of the Hastings Centre for Bioethical Research explores the idea that DI is a social sanction allowing the irresponsibility of men to prevail in modern society “Women have been hurt throughout history by males who abandon their paternal duties, leaving to women the task of raising the children. A sperm donor is doing the same thing” (pg. 2). John Gonzales who screens donors at a clinic in London says precisely the same thing but argues for the continuation and cultural acceptance of DI: “ We have huge sectors of society were girls get knocked up in the back of a

car and the fathers disappear as soon as they discover they are pregnant, whereas we [the industry] are bringing children into happy homes where they are going to be looked after. Isn't it better to do that" (pg.3)?

The most concerning objections to the practice are those that resonate from the "victims" or "recipients of donor generosity." In one article, "My father was an anonymous sperm donor" (Washington Post), Katrina Clark brings light to the prevalence of "genealogical bewilderment syndrome": "I'm here to tell you that emotionally, many of us are not keeping up. We didn't ask to be born into this situation, with its limitations and confusion-it's hypocritical of parents and medical professionals to assume that biological roots won't matter to the "products" of the Cryobanks' services, when the longing for a biological relationship is what brings customers to the banks in the first place" (pg. 1). This hypocrisy is a huge flaw in the system, leaving many offspring to feel as though they have been reduced to nothing more than a vial of sperm. Genealogical bewilderment syndrome refers to the psychological identity problems experienced by children who lack a present connection with their biological roots. This problem is common among adoptees, Donor offspring, and those conceived with IVF (in-vitro fertilization) as noted in the Psychology Quarterly's "A fresh Look at Genealogical Bewilderment" by Michael and Heather Humphrey. In a study conducted by the Harvard human reproduction division, A.J Turner and A. Cole found "Participants consistently reported mistrust within the family, negative distinctiveness, lack of genetic continuity, frustration in being thwarted in the search for their biological fathers." This sort of distrust and distaste begs the question, is resentment of the process by which you were conceived with deliberate love merited, or a form of self hatred? Generally the same stigmas and problems apply to Egg donors, IVFs, and surrogates which are processes primarily used for single men or gay couples. Traditionally, it is regarded that single women are better equipped to raise a girl child than a boy and vice versa. Dr. Peggy Drexler has been conducting field research on this topic since 1996 and it is her conclusion that "boys raised in households headed by just mothers can grow up emotionally stronger, more empathetic and independent than boys raised in traditional two parent households." (Excerpt from *Raising Boys without Men-ABC*) She bases her thesis on the evident high estrogen content that occurs in single mother households providing boys with balance and taking stereotypical social pressures off of them at their most supple stage of growth. Dr. John Flemming of the Southern Cross Bioethics Institute believes that male children raised without access to a biological father are being subliminally told "Your sex is not valued" (Children of a lesser dad-SMH). Does this sort of thought promote an unnecessary gender binary or is there weight in the argument that a mother cannot emphasize with every issue a young boy experiences because she simply has not experienced the same issue herself? Objectively speaking, each situation is different. In my opinion there are obviously single father households that are better equipped to raise a female, and single mother households that provide an ideal environment for the child. What it ultimately boils down to is what is the best situation for the offspring?

Within the industry itself we face a whole new array of issues—the unavoidable truth of the business, the terrifying opportunity for pedigree children. When searching for Cryobanks you are repeatedly offered premium sperm services meaning sperm that is priced higher because the donors were tall, good-looking, or have very high I Q's. At this point there is a morality compromise. Obviously we are selective when picking a partner and that translates into the donor picking process but to what end? Cryobanks tell you height and physical features and an extensive health background check at all EOSB (equal opportunity sperm buyers) or clinics that have a going rate for donations. At some banks though you have the option of practically hand

designing a child for an accelerated price. The psychology of this opportunity is parallel to that of promoting an Aryan breeding ideal or genetically engineering super-babies free of physical, emotional or intellectual flaws—essentially promoting the degradation of natural selection. In the most extreme cases Cryobanks offer celebrity look alike donors (The Telegraph, *Ben Affleck Tops Celebrity Look-a-Like Sperm Donors List*). Medical professionals and policy makers are now faced with the question of how the industry can compensate for human need and assist potential mothers while avoiding purity breeding and the sterilization of creation.

Artificial insemination began in livestock breeding during the 19th century. By the mid 20th century the process was being used in select human fertility cases. Originally it was intended as a solution for traditional couples with male infertility. One of the main objectives of the industry was to offer couples a physical analysis of the donor in hopes of matching their physical features to those of the social (or raising) father. This initiative implies that the idea was to not inform the offspring that they were not the product of their two social parents. Later in the century the process became more readily available and popular among single women or lesbian couples (Single Mothers By Choice, by Jane Mattes). Today the industry is widespread but still in a sense underground. Many clinics are private and discreet. I came across a slanderous report of IDANT laboratories (where my mom was a client) by an ex-employee who noted that the conditions were terrible, there were little regulations regarding contaminated sperm resulting in children with disabilities and disease and that the bank had not been inspected for a prolonged amount of time resulting in a chaotic and unprofessional medical environment. This report made me uncomfortable because obviously people expect delicate medical procedures to be handled with the utmost care especially when dealing with the creation of a life. Despite the risk of discrepancies within a facility donors endure a long range of testing and questioning about their medical past. Still, not knowing half of your genetic makeup puts you at risk to not know things like family history of heart disease, this argument is commonly used in the promotion of ID release donors after a specific case where a donor offspring contracted a rare genetic disease which could've been diagnosed earlier had her family had hereditary information. I think it's important to realize any system is flawed and the possibilities for medical and legal problems are endless, but this industry has also done a lot of good and assisted a huge population for single, gay or infertile parents. Donor applicants go through a very specific and tedious screening process before they make an emission and receive a payment, usually somewhere between 50 and 100 dollars for EOSBs (Ty Coenski of Cryos-International). On the subject of money, I think a lot of donor offspring and clients feel strange about the money exchange and in a sense it is always uncomfortable when a profound and life changing (or life creating) action is reduced to cent value. Having said that, I rarely reflect on the financial side of my conception further than upon seeing a receipt for the check my mom wrote the sperm bank and knowing exactly how much "I" cost. There are many varieties of artificial insemination from the closed or anonymous contract to the ID release donor (contact available when offspring turns 18) to "natural process donors." There is a push to move away from anonymous donation on the basis that children should have a right to access information and it would help filter well intentioned donors from those just trying to make a cheap buck and possibly infiltrating the system. There is a small underground culture of men who try to get past donation limitation laws that are enacted to isolate a gene pool and make many emissions at many different banks as a steady income, or Cecil Jacobsen, the alleged fertility doctor who inseminated many patients with his own sperm under false aliases (Psych-Forums, Cecil Jacobsen Story). Many families prefer anonymous donation though because of the obvious risk for emotional and logistical dependency. Natural

process donors are donors who operate on a personal, often out of homes basis providing classical insemination or intercourse. Often women choose men they know who they are not in a relationship with to be natural process donors, but if and when money exchanges hands and intercourse is involved the possibility for a prostitution case is inevitable. The legal implications of “donor-hood” are full of grey areas. Some policy makers are pushing towards a sort of child support plan but that makes little sense in terms of the tangible relationship between donor offspring and donors. Many countries are slowly outlawing anonymous donor insemination, creating a new black market and border crossing trade for sperm that comes without any legal or emotionally binding contracts (Children of a Lesser Dad-SMH).

Essentially Donor Insemination deals with the individual’s personal relationship with the disconnect between their child’s conception and their upbringing. I don't know yet what any of this means for me. Throughout my research immersion I have remained to some degree jaded and unemotional, although I wanted to know more about this process and ultimately explicate my feelings regarding it. I did feel complete on my own and had little internal conflict regarding my subject matter. It's interesting though what little things feel emotionally heavy and profound for you; this is an excerpt from my journal:

“I just found 3 documents and a cover letter. The documents were long medical test analysis files and the cover letter was a disclaimer explaining that 3 out of the endless files headed with donor code f676 instead had two short dashes. The letter said these 3 papers were from preliminary screenings before they had assigned a donor code, and the black dashes were subsequent marks made to retain the donors anonymity- something about those two lines that made me feel really sad and disconnected and frustrated. I guess it was just the idea that the name was actually on the paper at some point and how close it was, and what it would mean to have a name. It was short maybe only 2 or 3 syllables total. It just makes me wonder so much, for the first time it feels like these documents really correspond with a person, and I wonder who he is.”

I still don't know the importance of this search in my life, or whether the sense of wholeness achieved from having two parents is biological or societal. I still don't know the importance of a classical family structure or how I would feel if I found anything out about my paternal side. I am, however, sure of the appreciation and respect I have for my mother and have never questioned that she has raised me better than an endless parade of fathers could have.

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