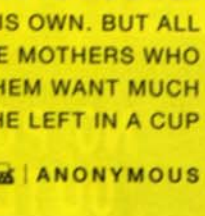
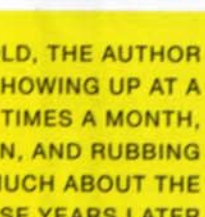
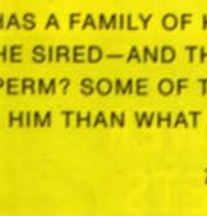
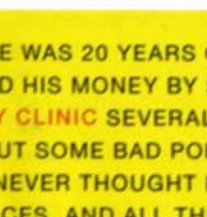
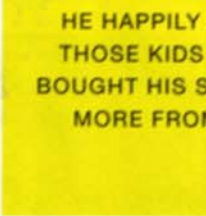
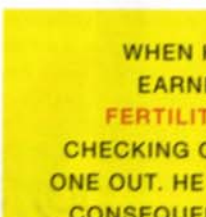




**HOW I BECAME** a father the first ten or twenty times was this: In the early '90s, I was a creative-writing student, rooming with a bunch of guys in a converted sweatshop and funding a cozy beer-and-ramen lifestyle as an anonymous sperm donor.

It was the easiest money I'd ever made. Landing the gig necessitated my filling out a questionnaire, providing a family medical history, passing a few blood tests, and then having my sperm measured for motility, or swimming aptitude, and count (I lucked out with 50 million per milliliter, >>



# All My Children

WHEN HE WAS 20 YEARS OLD, THE AUTHOR EARNED HIS MONEY BY SHOWING UP AT A FERTILITY CLINIC SEVERAL TIMES A MONTH, CHECKING OUT SOME BAD PORN, AND RUBBING ONE OUT. HE NEVER THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES, AND ALL THESE YEARS LATER HE HAPPILY HAS A FAMILY OF HIS OWN. BUT ALL THOSE KIDS HE SIRED—AND THE MOTHERS WHO BOUGHT HIS SPERM? SOME OF THEM WANT MUCH MORE FROM HIM THAN WHAT HE LEFT IN A CUP

ZZZ | ANONYMOUS



double the average). Once I cleared those hurdles, my only responsibilities involved showing up from time to time at a private clinic on an unassuming city block; greeting Keira, the dark-eyed, maddeningly attractive lab technician; locking myself in a closetlike "collection room" that contained a grubby office chair, a sink, and a VCR; and doing precisely what I did anyway pretty much every chance I got. The difference being that when I did it at the clinic, I earned fifty bucks, tax-free. And once I got the hang of ejaculating into a plastic specimen cup, the only remotely difficult part of the job was keeping the sperm count high by remaining abstinent between my weekly visits. It helped that my girlfriend, Daphne, lived in another state and was open-minded about it. Her only reaction to the news of my new sideline was to roll her eyes and joke that she wished she could do the same.

Back then, to the extent that I thought about it at all, I rationalized the decision to sell off my genetic material with the swaggering unconcern of a 20-year-old. I was getting off and getting paid. Whatever.

But there was something else, too, that went deeper than I was willing to acknowledge at the time. Being a sperm donor was a sort of anti-insurance policy, a guarantee that I wouldn't lead a boring life, at least not forever. Peering through the clouds of pot smoke wafting through our loft, I could glimpse the outlines of a ho-hum, vanilla destiny: Wife, family, paycheck—I wasn't the kind of guy who could escape that fate. My friends seemed to sense the same thing, which is why they all ran off to get

tattoos around the same time. But tattoos don't age well. Becoming a genetic hustler, now that was hard-core—a way of lobbing a grenade into my future. Anonymous or not, as long as those kids were out there, there was every chance they'd somehow track me down, and then who could know what the hell would happen? The explosion would come when I least expected it—with a letter, an e-mail, a knock on the door—blowing a hole in whatever prosperous and reasonable life I'd manage to build.

I donated sperm for a year, around fifty specimens in all, each of which was divided into ten or more vials for artificial insemination. Then I moved on and led precisely the conventional life I knew I would. I established myself in a vaguely creative but stable career. Daphne and I got married and had two kids of our own. And for long, long stretches, I didn't give a thought to the four visits per month that I made to the clinic years earlier, or to the guy I was then, rushing off to blow my fifty bucks on forties of OE and canisters of nitrous. But every once in a while, I'd have to do something not far from the clinic, or someone would make a joke about test-tube babies, and suddenly the whole experience would come rushing back—the little pleasantries with Keira and the specimen cups and the worn-out

copy of *Seymore Butts in Paradise*—and ultimately, of course, I'd find myself wondering about the numerous children I'd likely sired, scattered around the country or, for all I knew, my own neighborhood.

I'd think about how blithely I'd pulled the ring on that grenade and wonder when it was going to explode.

**DESPITE ITS** carefully cultivated aura of white-lab-coated sterility, the sperm business operates almost entirely without official medical scrutiny. The Food and Drug Administration—the only federal agency charged with overseeing sperm banks—requires only that they screen donors for a variety of diseases. Other than that, the industry mostly sets its own rules, or doesn't. No legal entity dictates how donor information is collected or guarantees its accuracy. Fertility clinics and private doctors are under no obligation to report pregnancy results. In fact, they rarely do, which means that no one keeps track of how many kids are born through donor insemination (estimates range from 20,000 to 40,000 per year; one study that will soon be published has the number at 5,000), much less how many are sired by each donor. Kirk Maxey, M.D., a medical researcher living in Michigan, donated sperm for nearly fifteen years, an unusually long run. He now figures he could theoretically have sired as many as 4,960 kids. "That's the top mathematical possibility," he says. "But, I mean, that's crazy." His conservative estimate, factoring in a reasonable failure rate and other variables, is a mere 432. Which helps explain why experts in donor insemination often liken the field to the Wild West: It's lawless new territory with a lot of indiscriminate shooting going on—guys popping off in every direction, with profound repercussions.

The lack of oversight is generally chalked up to secrecy, which has long been central to the process, to protect the anonymity of donors like me as well as the children's innocence. For years, parents of donor children—the favored term these days is "donor-conceived persons," or DCPs—were advised never to tell their kids the truth about their origins, the rationale being that what they didn't know couldn't hurt them. (A popular technique involved mixing donor sperm with that of the infertile husband, to maintain the illusion that Dad just might be Dad.) Of course, in many cases, the kids eventually got wise, and now the first wave of children born from

I FOUND MYSELF ALONE AT HOME ON A SATURDAY MORNING. MY KIDS WERE OFF AT THE MOVIES, AND DAPHNE WAS AT YOGA. CHECKING THE WEB SITE AGAIN, I QUICKLY NOTICED THAT MY CLINIC WAS NOW ON THE LIST. A FEW SECONDS LATER...BAM!

donor sperm are entering adulthood, some of them furious about having been lied to about the most fundamental matters of their existence.

Many fertility clinics, including the one I frequented, now ask donors if they're willing to be contacted by their offspring at some point in the future. Some pay a premium to donors who agree, passing on the added costs to the recipients. In Europe, a number of countries have long prohibited anonymous sperm and egg donation altogether, and in 2005, the UK joined them, adopting strict regulations requiring that donors be identified when offspring turn 18. The number of willing donors instantly plummeted, and a national shortage has led to media hysteria: **SPERM—YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU**, proclaimed the *Belfast Telegraph*.

So far, there's been little talk of adopting a similar policy in the U.S., but the wall of secrecy has begun to crumble, largely

in 2000 by Wendy Kramer and her donor-conceived son, Ryan, the DSR has resulted in over 4,000 sibling matches. It has also connected nearly 300 kids to their donor fathers. Membership in the DSR costs \$40 a year, which enables users to post an entry (essentially a want ad) and view contact information for other members. But anyone can browse the listings, which are organized by clinic.

A few weeks after reading an article about the site, I decided to have a look. Late one night, with the kids tucked in and Daphne asleep early (something that had

seen the naked showgirl, you can never return to the time when you saw only Freud's profile. Before I knew it, I was visiting the site every few days, scanning the listings, reading the heartfelt pleas, mildly obsessing over how I'd react if a child came looking for me. I started contacting other donors who'd come out on the site, asking them how it felt to meet their kids. Most of them seemed thrilled.

Chase Kimball, a lawyer in Salt Lake City, became a sperm donor in the late '70s, when, as he puts it, "things weren't going as I would have liked in the woman

**THE STUFF WORKED, THE BABY CAME. NOW SHE WAS BACK... FOR WHAT? MY DNA WASN'T ENOUGH? SHE WANTED TO BE A PART OF MY LIFE, WANTED ME TO GIVE HER TEENAGE KID AN "IDENTITY" BY EXCHANGING A FEW E-MAILS OR TURNING UP IN A FOOD COURT SOMEWHERE FOR A SBARRO SIT-DOWN?**



because of the Internet, where children of anonymous donors have been seeking out half-siblings with stunning success. I read with trepidation the story of one enterprising 15-year-old who reportedly tracked down his anonymous-donor father with the help of a \$289 DNA test and a genealogical Web site. The whole process took him ten days.

Another recent development, the Internet-based Donor Sibling Registry, invites donor-inseminated mothers and their children to post the kids' birthdays, the clinics where their DNA originated, and any other information they have as a way of connecting with half-siblings and solving the puzzle of where they came from. Begun

been happening with increasing frequency, as our pleasant union of twelve years had gradually turned hostile and tense), I fired up the computer with every intention of distracting myself with free Internet porn. And then, whether out of curiosity or loneliness or because it's so easy how can you not, I Googled the DSR. Seconds later, I found myself feeling woozy as I scrolled through the postings, waiting to stumble over that grenade I'd lobbed years before. To my great relief, my clinic wasn't even listed. Not yet, anyway.

**THE CLOSE CALL** was enough to change things, though. It was like looking at one of those optical puzzles: Having finally

department, and I was down about it." Though he later married, Kimball's wife had trouble getting pregnant, and after spending tens of thousands of dollars on fertility treatments without success, they eventually divorced.

When he heard about the DSR, Kimball started checking in regularly. "I figured some of my kids would come looking for me," he says, "and they did." Recognizing his donor number in one posting, he sent an e-mail. Before he knew it, he was the proud father of two girls, and he never even had to change a diaper.

The three of them soon sat down for a nervous date at a local ice cream parlor and talked all afternoon. "Turns out they're both voracious readers, like me," he says. They've seen each other regularly ever since. He often buys the girls gifts and has made plans to list them as beneficiaries on his life-insurance policy. Recently, Kimball bonded with his elder daughter's husband on a hike in the desert ("We took our pistols and blasted some bottles together"), and he's eager to attend the younger girl's wedding, even if he has to pretend he's one of her college professors. "I want an approximation of a daddy-daughter relationship," he says, "and we're working toward that."

Jordan never even considered the possibility of meeting his offspring when he became a sperm donor in 2000. "I was 22, and I really didn't give it a lot of thought in terms of the long-term repercussions," he admits. "I just thought, Ha-ha, I'm going to populate the world. It was just this amusing thing."

Still, shortly after hearing about the DSR, he became a member and posted his donor number. Within a couple of weeks,

Some identifying details have been changed.

an e-mail was in his in-box. "It was really short, just 'Are you really this donor?' " he remembers. "It was just like, Whoa. This is someone who actually purchased my sperm and has a child running around."

To date he's heard from at least eight mothers (he's lost count) asking him for medical information or wondering what his motivation was—most of all seeking reassurance. "One woman said, 'My 2-year-old throws tantrums constantly; did you ever do that as a child?' " he says. "And honestly, you know, not really."

A few of the mothers have also sent him photos of his offspring, and one even sent a video. "It was intense," Jordan says. "It was this toddler, a boy, just running around and playing, and it's just like, Holy shit, it's a person. How about that?"

**MAYBE HALF** a year after my first visit to the DSR, I found myself alone at home on a Saturday morning. My kids were off at the movies with their grandparents, and Daphne was at yoga class. Checking the Web site again, I quickly noticed—I remember the lump forming instantly in my throat—that my clinic was now on the list. A few seconds later...bam!

A woman named Laura was looking for me. I didn't remember my donor number, but everything else was a match—the month and year I was born, my convoluted ethnic background, height, weight, blood type, college major, and interests. It concluded: "Boy born March 1992."

The implications of what I'd done all those years ago hit me with full force. Presumably, this boy—a freshman in high school—was my son. He shared as much of my genetic material as my own children. He probably looked a lot like me. He might even act like me, or like my kids.

Personally, I'm not one to put a lot of stock in heredity. I believe, as I did fervently as a teenager, that we can, we *should*, outrun our parents. In fact, it's our sacred responsibility. Of course, if I were the sentimental type, I probably wouldn't have become a sperm donor in the first place. In that, I hadn't changed. But circumstances had. Now other people were involved, people who in all likelihood were sentimental, deeply so, about me.

Earlier, when I'd gone in search of donors to contact, I'd sent an e-mail to Wendy Kramer to forward around to members of the registry. Before long, mothers of DCPs had inundated my in-box with emotional entreaties, some with animated emoticons. "Life is too short to ponder," wrote one. "There may be some beautiful people out there who will enrich your life." Another had the subject line "Don't be afraid!"

The thing is, my life didn't need any enriching, and I wasn't afraid. Instead I felt sick to my stomach as it slowly dawned on me that my rather absurd gesture of

ONE MOM OF A DONOR-INSEMINATED CHILD WROTE ME ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF "A BOY'S QUEST FOR HIS IDENTITY, DURING TEEN YEARS ESPECIALLY." WHICH, FRANKLY, MADE ME CRINGE.

independence made so many years before was now boomeranging back in a very different form. I could see it in the distance, bearing down on me: a tsunami of sentiment, of deeply complicated emotions and needs. Of people grasping for connection, for closure, for wholeness. One mom of a donor-inseminated child wrote me about the importance of "a boy's quest for his identity, during teen years especially." Which, frankly, made me cringe.

**I WAS UNDER** no obligation to reply, of course. And Laura had no right to expect me to. She knew when she purchased my sperm and had it injected into her uterus that she'd taken a package deal: a baby and a mystery. She'd even signed a release form promising never even to attempt to track me down. It's not a perfect system—it's ridiculous, really, and actually kind of sleazy. But she got what she was after. The stuff worked, the baby came. Now she was back...for what? My DNA wasn't enough? She wanted my name, wanted to be a part of my life, wanted me to give her teenage kid an "identity" by exchanging a few e-mails or turning up in a food court somewhere for a Sbarro sit-down?

Lately, I've been reading a lot of children's literature—one of the joys of having kids—and I've been struck by how few protagonists actually have both parents. In fact, they're almost all orphans. Harry Potter. Luke, Leia, and Anakin. Pippi Longstocking, Heidi, Anne of Green Gables. Tom and Huck. Practically everyone in Dickens. Superman, Batman, Spidey. All orphans. Moses, Muhammad...orphans. Even Jesus, technically speaking, was a DCP, at least if you believe the Gospels.

We love a good orphan tale, not because we pity the parentless, I think, but because we envy them. Whatever heartache they may feel, they get to start over, hit the reset button, shake the Etch A Sketch. They're free. The truth is, there's no certainty when it comes to identity. Who we are is fluid. It can change in an instant. The more you know about what you're supposed to be, the less freedom, ultimately, you have.

I feel like writing Laura: Let it go. Your son—fine, *our* son—will find his way. Wondering isn't as bad as it's made out to be. And knowing isn't as good.

Then again, sometimes I'd wondered if it wasn't time to shake my own Etch A Sketch. Things with Daphne were brutal. The combined stresses of parenthood and work had caused long-buried resentments

to bubble up, and the rare moments we had to ourselves were given over almost entirely to the sort of emotional combat I'd never thought us capable of. She even began looking at apartment listings online.

In the heat of battle, I'll admit, the idea of another woman—a woman who'd given birth to my child, after all—exercised a powerful attraction. Recipients of donor sperm are divided into three categories: married women with infertile husbands, lesbians, and single women. I preferred to picture Laura in the last group, just waiting for me to stop by and consummate the affair. I had only to send an e-mail and I'd have another woman in my life, an instant relationship I hadn't screwed up yet. To Laura and her kid, I'd be a hero just for showing up. Maybe donating sperm wasn't a grenade at all, I began to think. Maybe it was an escape hatch.

It was the kids that made me hesitate.



## THE MEN WITH THE GOLDEN SPERM

What does it take to be the ideal donor? Stephen Feldschuh of New York-based IDANT Laboratories, one of the largest sperm banks in the country, explains.

- > All of our donors are men between 18 and 35. They have the highest sperm counts.
- > We recruit donors from colleges: Columbia, Fordham, NYU. We're not just freely advertising in the local Pennysaver. If you want to be a donor, going into higher education is a very good choice.
- > Obviously, we try to have attractive donors. It's a survival-of-the-fittest kind of thing. For a very long time, one of our most popular donors was this guy who was blond, blue-eyed, six feet four, 220 pounds. But of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We try to build a wide inventory. We joke that in some areas, being Irish Catholic is great. But if you're Sri Lankan, you probably want a Sri Lankan donor.
- > In addition to all the physical attributes, we have guys write essays to answer questions about life experience: what they like to eat, if they like to travel, etc. Shoppers want to fill in the soft, fuzzy part of what differentiates one person from the next.
- > The average donor produces two specimens a week. That often breaks down into about 400 vials, or "straws," in twelve months. If you're very popular, all of those could go in just a couple of years.—AS TOLD TO KATHERINE KINGSLEY



Daphne and I tried to protect them from our hostilities, but they could feel the change in atmosphere, and I could see the effects on them. My 9-year-old daughter, Samantha, was flirting darkly with becoming a goth. She also developed a rash and an interminable stomachache and missed enough school to make the principal start wondering what was up. And my 5-year-old son, Tom, began ignoring me altogether, wanting only Mommy and glowering when I asked him how his day went.

Whatever distraction Laura promised, I could see that people needed me already, people to whom I had made a real commitment. How could I ask them to share me?

**KIRK MAXEY HAS** been wondering the same thing. He has a wife and two young children, plus two grown kids from his previous marriage. He's also just learned he has a teenage daughter, whom he recently found on the DSR. "It was wonderful, it was great," he says. "It gave me a really misty-eyed, warm feeling." They have plans to meet for ice cream (it's always ice cream) at a local Stuckey's. Despite his excitement, he's wary. "I do have some fear," he says. "Now that I've been interacting with a mother and girl, I can see it's a big social burden for the donor—meet at the mall, have dinner, send a photo of her grandparents. If I had to do that for twelve or fifteen kids simultaneously, that would be hard. I have a wife and two kids who want to see me on Saturday. It's a lot of juggling."

Maxey is not the only donor to worry about the repercussions of giving up his anonymity. "Some donors, once they've made a few matches, have taken their information off the site," Wendy Kramer acknowledges. This despite her best efforts to keep them from doing so. "I understand they're overwhelmed, but I have a real problem with it," she says. "Is this a first-come, first-served deal? It's not fair to the kids who turn up too late."

Currently single, Kevin is a graphic designer living in Los Angeles. He's had e-mail contact with seven children and met four. A few have come with their mothers to visit, crashing at his place in L.A. He's taken them to the La Brea Tar Pits and Disneyland, attended a second-grade graduation, and built an ever-growing birthday and Christmas list. "For me, it's been 'What the hell,'" he says. "I'm a nice guy; I like to pick up the tab. And so far, it's been within my budget."

In principle, Kevin is all for openness, but he recently removed his information from the registry just the same. Wendy protested, he says, "but I explained that there are two issues: One is I can't spread myself too thin or it just gets absurd. And the other is the mothers—they're a handful. I don't mind having more kids in my life, but I can't take on more adult women."

One mother talked about moving across the country to be closer to bio-dad. Another came to visit and wound up coming on to him one night after their 5-year-old had gone to bed. "I have to admit, if she looked like Winona Ryder and I fell in love, it might be tempting," he says, "but it's a terrible idea." And then there's the pressure to pay equal attention to each child, so as not to incur the wrath of a jealous mom. There's a lot of balancing involved.

Still, when I ask Kevin what he thinks I should do, he tells me, "I don't want to say you owe it to them, because you don't, but what the hell? My opinion is, you've got to bite the bullet."

Much as I'd really rather not, I do see his point. I was ballsy, or foolhardy, enough to become a sperm donor in the first place—why not take it all the way? And I am getting a little curious—and not just about Laura and her son but also about the other women who'd chosen me to provide half their children's DNA. It's a heady thing, when you think about it. They'd browsed through a catalog,

studied my personal background, my SAT scores, my handwriting, and somehow selected me out of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of available options. Who knows what chance I might have had with them on a beach in Cancún: In the strange, scientifically mediated world of donor insemination, I was a total stud. When things got rough with Daphne, I'll admit, there was a much needed ego boost in that—at least when I imagined the women, as I usually did, to be smart, accomplished, and unbelievably hot. But of course, I knew zip. Genetically, I'd put myself entirely at their mercy—no more than a test-tube whore, really—selling myself to any eager suitor who happened to cruise by, waving a fifty. Not only did the resulting kids carry part of my DNA; they carried part of someone else's. Someone I probably wouldn't look at twice in a crowded bar. Someone who, for all I knew, had a Dilbert poster hanging over her sofa, wore too much makeup, and sang Maroon 5 songs at top volume while driving a Sequoia to her job as the assistant vice president for human resources at a pharmaceutical company or something.

Worse, she might be a terrible mom who was needy and overprotective and drank too much and yelled at her kid. My kid.

Just who was this Laura, anyway?

**IT'S A RAINY** Sunday afternoon in May, and I'm surfing the Web on a laptop while Tom and Samantha watch a rerun of *The Simpsons*, sprawled out on the rug—gorgeous, wonderful kids (fully recovered, by now, from the goth fantasies and stomach ailments and dad-hating rebellion of several months earlier). Daphne and I also seem to be back on track, heading off to our weekly couple's-therapy sessions, having our "date nights," and lately, sneaking cigarettes on the porch when the kids are asleep. Things are good.

And yet I still feel the tug of possibility—the quiet, implacable pressure of Laura's unanswered posting. I click on and read the message again, mulling over the idea, as I have hundreds of times now, of sending a response. It's the least I can do, really: Just a heads-up. I hear you. I exist. I accept responsibility—a bit of it, anyway—for the life you and I brought into the world. But sometimes obligations bump into one another and choices need to be made.

As *The Simpsons* ends and my daughter, my real daughter, begins angling for me to set up a sleepover and my son challenges me to a pillow fight, this feels like one of those times. I close my browser and click the laptop shut. Then I grab a pillow and deliver a shot to the gut followed by a sweet uppercut. Tom squeals and comes back at me, connecting with a devastating overhead slam. Laura and that kid of hers can wait a little longer. ●