

(1) The XY Files By Lori Gottlieb

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Forgoing a trip down the aisle, our correspondent heads straight to the sperm bank. But does she want the Truffaut aficionado or the mentor to underprivileged kids?

The morning I found out I was pregnant, I ran out of my gynecologist's office, whipped out my cell phone, and dialed my therapist's number. I didn't know who else to call. After leaving the good news on his voice mail, I decided to tell my friend Amy, my friend Linda, and then the clerk at Whole Foods, who directed me to the prenatal vitamins. By day's end I'd told everyone from my mother to my manager to my mailman.

(2) I didn't, however, tell the baby's father. I wanted to, but I have no idea who he is. I'm not married, don't have a boyfriend, and hadn't recently returned from a drunken one-night stand. Instead I got knocked up by half a cubic centimeter of defrosted sperm that had been FedExed in a nitrogen tank from an East Coast donor facility to my doctor in Los Angeles. Now, if all goes well, my dream will become a reality: I'll be a single mom.

(3) This wasn't my dream growing up, of course. Nor was it the dream of the other members of Single Mothers by Choice, a national group for women who want to have children but won't shack up with the wrong guy to do so. Its members—mostly attractive, smart, successful thirtysomethings—subscribe to the "somebody isn't always better than nobody" theory of marriage. Many, including me, have turned down engagement rings from eligible bachelors even as our biological alarm bells started sounding. As a friend put it, we're paradoxically "desperate but picky."

(4) I first learned about Single Mothers by Choice at the end of 2003, when I was thirty-six and almost two years into a relationship with a handsome, intelligent policymaker. Our personalities had been clashing, and I sought counsel from my married friends. "If relationships are work," I asked, "when do the benefits kick in?" It's not that I was looking for perfection; I just wanted a core connection. Was that too much to ask?

(5) One married friend, a feminist-studies professor with two degrees from Stanford, surprised me by suggesting that I marry my boyfriend and have children while I was still fertile. "You can always get divorced," she said. "Maybe you'll marry someone you're in love with later."

In other words, instead of "for better or for worse" I should go with "for better or for now." Before women achieved financial independence, they often had to choose between love and money. **(6)** In the new millennium my choice seemed to be between love and offspring. Granted, if I broke up with my boyfriend I might meet the love of my life and have kids soon thereafter. But I didn't want to date under that kind of pressure. Besides, what if I didn't meet the right man in the next five years? What if I met him in ten instead? To bear children or not to bear children – that was the question.

(7) Late at night there were others: Was I willing to pretend that a man who couldn't even begin to fathom my soul was my soul mate? What did other women do in this situation?

One day I asked my friend Amy (not her real name), who was single like me. We met during our freshman year at Yale, when we were still naive enough to believe we'd be married with kids and a fulfilling career by age thirty. As adults we were both in a series of relationships, and although I was aware of our age, it never occurred to me that we'd fall through the marital cracks.

(8) Apparently, it occurred to Amy. For more than a year, she told me, she'd been a card-carrying member of Single Mothers by Choice.

Jane Mattes, a New York psychotherapist, founded SMC in 1981, after choosing to become a single mom herself. An online support and information resource with local chapters that hold meetings, the group consists of women at different stages of the process: those considering single motherhood, those attempting to conceive, pregnant women, and those with kids.

(9) The average age of SMC members is thirty-five, and nearly all have completed college or beyond. Membership has risen by 33 percent over the past ten years, but that figure underestimates the group's reach, Mattes says, because most members leave soon after they have children. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the number of babies born to unmarried women in their thirties and forties rose by 290 percent from 1980 to 2002.

(10) If single motherhood by choice isn't yet considered mainstream, it's widespread enough to appeal to a mainstream audience—or so the current crop of television executives believe. In the ABC series *Jake in Progress*, which had its premiere last spring, the title character's boss is a single woman who says she is pregnant by a sperm donor. This year both Fox and NBC developed drama series set in fertility clinics and involving single women, while the WB and Bravo created sitcoms about sperm donors' meeting their offspring. (11) (NBC's *Inconceivable* makes its debut this month; the WB's *Misconceptions* will air in March.) And the producers of *Big Brother* are working on a reality show called *Make Me a Mum* (think *The Bachelorette* with sperm donors instead of dates). Meanwhile, the actress Halle Berry, who is thirty-nine and single, has said that she is considering using a sperm donor, which makes the phenomenon seem downright trendy.

(12) Amy and I never wanted to be trendy, though. Certainly we're grateful for the option to become a parent with or without a spouse. But had you said to us back in college, "In twenty years, girls, you'll be buying a nineteen-year-old's sperm off the Internet," I think we might have gotten in a car, *Thelma & Louise*—style, and driven off a cliff.

(13) I guess you could say I was cheating on my boyfriend back in 2003 when I logged on to the Web and typed in a sperm bank's URL. Or maybe it was more like viewing Internet porn: I wasn't scouring dating sites for actual boyfriends, but I was certainly fantasizing about what was out there. Could I find someone younger, taller, more athletic-looking, and mathematically gifted—but who also wasn't "real," and therefore wouldn't shoot icy stares at me across the dinner table?

(14) These mating sites, as I began calling them, ranged from high-end, FDA-registered cryobanks to, believe it or not, discount sperm providers. (I'll skimp on toilet paper but not on sperm.) After entering some basic criteria into one of the banks' search engines, I had dozens of matches. Did I want an M.B.A. or a Ph.D.? A lacrosse player or a violinist? A Truffaut aficionado or a mentor to underprivileged kids?

(15) Eerily, donor profiles read much like online dating profiles, but with the addition of health histories and SAT scores. Without charge I could click on the short profile (eye color, hair color, height, weight, race, religion, interests, and summary health stats). For \$19 (digitally transmitted by PayPal) I could order the long profile (detailed multigenerational health report) and donor essays ("What is the funniest thing ever to happen to you?" "If you could spend a week with any women [sic] in the world, who would it be?"). For an extra \$33 I could also hear an audiotape ("What is your idea of a romantic evening?") and see a photo of the donor as a baby.

(16) Sometimes the amount of information felt overwhelming. In the facial-features section alone each body part (eyes, eyebrows, nose, cheekbones, mouth, teeth, chin, ears, hair) was further dissected into several subcategories (the nose was broken down into size, width, length, bridge, nostril flare, and septum; the ears into size, set, angle, lobe size, and attachment). There was also a long list of "favorites": food, car, sport, color, animal, pet, movie, musician, song, play, book, holiday, season, ice-cream flavor, childhood memory, even vacation destination.

(17) Many of the guys sounded like men I'd want to date. Maybe, I thought, the sperm banks should just have a big singles party and cut out the middleman. Then I remembered my boyfriend—I'd met him through an online dating site, where I'd selected him, too, based on a written profile. On some level I must have been attracted to the same Darwinian characteristics.

The thought saddened me. Whatever happened to love? Or was believing in love today akin to believing in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and age-defying cosmetics?

(18) At the same time, it felt liberating to have the pick of the genetic crop. Without the emotional context, finding a donor seemed less like the intimate act of choosing my child's father and more like buying a car. I could select a basic model (tall, good-looking, healthy) and then accessorize with options (musical, adventurous, likes museums). Besides, the more I read, the more I was reminded how young these donors were. (19) Responding to a question about what message he would like to pass on to the recipient of his semen, one donor wrote, "Start a college fund early, so your child doesn't have to sell his sperm for tuition." Another replied to the query about what he hoped to accomplish in twenty years with "To be the top recording producer in the world." Another wrote, "I see myself with a successful practice in a rural setting with two to three kids, married, and enjoying life."

My single friends and I used to be that idealistic too. How the heck did we end up this way?

(20) Sylvia Ann Hewlett may claim to have the answer, but I don't believe we're single because we focused on our careers to the detriment of our love lives. We're Gen

X, slackers who rebelled against Baby Boomer careerists. Unlike women a decade or two our seniors, we took it for granted that we could do anything we wanted—which explains why a lot of us became paralyzed by indecision. With so many choices in jobs, relationships, and geography, we didn't know when it was time to pick something permanent.

(21) Even so, my various stints as a film executive, a medical student, and now a writer didn't prevent me from finding a potential mate. Rather, they put me in interesting situations where I'd be likely to find one. I never lacked for boyfriends—I just never found the right one. The way my generation sees it, if you're not forced to compromise, why should you? But sometimes we forget that if you don't choose anything, eventually you're left with nothing. And although having a baby alone might not have been my first choice, by mid-2004 I was starting to realize that it might not be my last.

(22) So I got out the phone book and made an appointment.

The modernist, ultra-chic waiting room at California Fertility Partners (or CFP, as it's more discreetly known), in West Los Angeles, resembles the foyer of a Hollywood talent agency. In fact, if you're sitting in one of the Eames-inspired chairs in the beautifully designed open space, the only clue that you're here to discuss progeny rather than "projects" is the neutral-colored eggshells subtly embedded, "Where's Waldo?"—style, in the veneer of the sleek reception desk.

(23) For \$400 I spent half an hour with a doctor at CFP. Affable and straightforward, he looked at my records and gave me the rundown.

With "fresh" sperm (delivered in a cup by a known donor, or the old-fashioned way by a partner) a fertile woman has approximately a 30 percent chance of getting pregnant within a few days of ovulation. But with frozen sperm the percentage goes down to a mere 10. The freezing process, the doctor explained, "wipes the blazes" out of a sperm sample (ejaculate is split into a dozen samples, each of which is mixed with antifreeze-like chemical solutions before being stored at -196° Celsius). (24) And whereas fresh sperm can last up to three days in a woman's body, defrosted sperm lasts only several hours. Each insemination must be exquisitely timed, and it's possible to miss an egg's release within that narrow window—even when tracking with ultrasound.

The doctor suggested trying a few cycles, and said if those didn't work we'd add some hormones to give me an extra egg or two. As he put it, "You'd get more bang for your buck."

(25) Actually, he had it wrong: without getting the bang I'd be putting out the bucks. CFP's billing office told me they "don't deal with" insurance, and Blue Cross told me they "don't deal with" a single woman trying to get pregnant—a medical predicament their representative described as "lack of proximity to sperm." For a garden-variety insemination cycle with ultrasounds I'd be paying somewhere around \$1,000 per try, and if I moved into fancy medicated methods the bill could climb to nearly \$20,000 a pop. Then there's the tab for the "donor" sperm—at \$750 for two thimble-size sperm specimens, it's not exactly a "donation."

(26) The irony wasn't lost on me: I was considering spending all that money when I had my boyfriend's good sperm at the ready. One friend suggested that I let him get me pregnant "accidentally" and then break up and ask for custody in exchange for releasing him from all financial obligations. Another friend suggested that I get pregnant, break up, and not tell him at all. But what kind of mother would I be, duping an innocent boyfriend into having a baby? Hard as it might be to tell my child about a sperm donor, I figured it would be far easier than trying to explain that Mommy was a conniving liar.

(27) The day after I broke up with my boyfriend, I registered with two online dating sites and three online sperm sites. I didn't think they were mutually exclusive. By then I'd heard stories of women who not only had gotten married after having a baby alone but had met their husbands during their pregnancies.

(28) I came across these women the way one might encounter fellow chess enthusiasts or wine lovers. Deciding to have a baby on your own is like being handed a passport to a thriving subculture of like-minded people. In addition to Single Mothers by Choice, there is the informal network of women who know somebody—their co-worker, attorney, real-estate agent—who just did the same thing and is happy to offer support.

(29) With one exception: you're on your own when it comes to your donor. I soon learned that mentioning your donor's identification number is considered bad form. And for good reason: the demographics of women with both the financial means and the temperament to go the sperm-bank route alone are so uncannily similar that just as we all competed for the same kinds of men in the dating world, now we were all competing for the same kinds of genes.

(30) When I began my search, Amy asked, "Back in college did you ever imagine that we'd be fighting over a sperm donor?" She joked that this was the first time she'd gotten the guy we both wanted. A few months earlier she had bought a dozen vials—which meant I had to go on the waiting list, because according to the sperm bank, this donor was "out of stock." (Amy had bought him "on layaway.") (31) In other cases two women discover that their babies are half-siblings because they unwittingly chose the same donor. This happened recently at an SMC meeting when a pregnant woman asked the group, "So, when my child asks who his daddy is, what do I say? 'Your daddy is donor No. 3165'?" A mother with a two-year-old replied, "Did you just use a random number, or is that the actual number of your donor?" Apparently they'd both used No. 3165.

(32) Some sperm banks claim to restrict donors to ten or even twenty-five births each, with an exemption for siblings (which, I suppose, could theoretically mean as many as forty or fifty kids per donor, especially given the high rates of twins and triplets with artificial-insemination treatments). But since there's no formal system for reporting births to the banks, and since a high percentage of women who postpone marriage live in big cities such as New York and Los Angeles, a high percentage of our children will live in the same communities. What if my future child falls in love with a classmate in high school and, unbeknownst to them, they're half-siblings?

(33) For this reason I considered choosing a less popular donor, but then I had second thoughts: Why didn't this donor have a waiting list too? What was wrong with him?

(My therapist pointed out that I make the same irrational judgments in the dating world. "If he's so great," I'll say about a man, "why is he still available?")

To get a more visceral impression I had to rely on the "lab girls," as they call themselves—the women at the sperm banks who meet the donors when they come in to "release." The lab girls provide written "staff impressions," which vary from "He can be a bit scatter-brained but does eventually get his stuff done" to "He has amazing biceps too!" Often they'll compare a donor to a celebrity, as in "He looks like a young George Clooney," or "He bears a striking resemblance to Lance Armstrong."

(34) Ordering the father of my child on a Web site was especially difficult for me, because I'm not a good online shopper. I can barely choose a blouse from BananaRepublic.com without calling customer service to get more information on the product description ("When it says blue, does that mean aqua or robin's egg?"). Likewise, I often called Maureen, a customer-service rep at New England Cryogenic, with questions such as "When it says his hair is curly, does that mean wavy or ringlets?"

(35) Maureen would describe donors to me like this: "You wouldn't look twice at him in the subway," or "He reminds me of that guy on *The Young and the Restless*, the one who plays Victor's daughter Vicky's husband, Cole? He's also been on *Days of Our Lives*. Oh, and he was one of the Martin brothers on *All My Children*. He's very handsome." But our frames of reference never meshed. I had no idea who her beefcake soap star was; she had no idea who Jon Stewart was.

(36) Some guys were easy to rule out on my own: The Mensan who didn't know the correct use of an apostrophe. The Harvard senior who was about to move to L.A. to work in film. (I worried I'd run into him at an Ivy League mixer.) The guy whose father had committed suicide and whose favorite color was black. The donors with what I called "genetic schmutz" in their families (schizophrenia, Parkinson's, breast cancer before age sixty). The Bible-study-group leader whose hero was Ronald Reagan. (I avoided both religious and Republican sperm in case those traits were stealthily genetic.)

(37) "My wife and I are currently working on renovating old homes," one donor, an architecture grad student, wrote. His wife? The idea of having a baby with a married man felt creepy.

Sometimes I'd take profiles to my therapist, who would analyze a potential donor instead of analyzing me. "Sounds like he has quite a dark side," my therapist said of the donor whose favorite movie was *American Psycho* and whose favorite books were *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Another he diagnosed as having "narcissistic tendencies."

(38) And yet there was a silver lining: by bypassing the uncontrollable world of romance, I was able to choose a man to father my child who might be completely out of my league in the real world. Instead of marrying a schlubby but lovable man and thinking, I hope our kid doesn't get his crooked nose or bad eyesight or thin hair, I could pick from cold, hard DNA.

Even my mother, who often complained that I was too picky about men, encouraged

my selectivity about a donor. Suddenly it seemed acceptable to rule out guys arbitrarily, based on some perceived flaw. (39) The second you separate mating from dating, it's okay to indulge hubristic fantasies of genetic engineering (must be over six feet tall, with a combined SAT score higher than 1500) in a group of social liberals who ordinarily freak out if anyone says "retarded" instead of "mentally challenged" or calls somebody "Asian" instead of specifying "Japanese" or "Korean." These same friends even logged on to the Donor Sibling Registry with me to view the offspring of various donors solely to judge who had the most physically attractive progeny.

(40) Finally the sperm bank called. I'd been moved up on the waiting list and could buy enough vials of my first-choice sperm for two tries. Did I wish to remain on the waiting list for more? Sometimes a woman will stockpile a particular donor's semen, because even if she gets pregnant relatively quickly, she may miscarry and have to try again, or she may want extra sperm for siblings.

(41) I wasn't sure I cared about using the same sperm for subsequent children, but just to be safe I stayed on the list. Of the many issues my artificially inseminated kids may have, the last thing I would want one of them to say is "But he got a better sperm donor than I did."

Unlike the customary fluorescent-lit doctor's office, the insemination room at CFP was completely dark except for the lamp that the doctor had positioned above my pelvis. (42) I wondered if the intention was to create a little mood lighting for this most unromantic act of conception. As he checked the status of my dominant follicle, I stared at the artwork on the walls: photographs of sea anemones and other creatures resembling vaginas, like underwater Georgia O'Keeffes.

"Your endometrium looks beautiful!" he said after he had squeezed K-Y jelly onto a phallus-shaped wand. He was looking at an ultrasound of my uterus. "Just beautiful!" he repeated, adding a little whistle of admiration.

(43) Although my feet were in stirrups and I was still fully dressed from the waist up, with a paper sheet covering my privates, I blushed, flattered by the comment. It reminded me of the things men say when making love: You have the most beautiful body. You have the most beautiful breasts. I wanted to feel beautiful—or at least human—during this sacred act of creating a child. Your endometrium looks beautiful. I'd even gotten a bikini wax for the occasion, and instead of neatly folding my panties and trousers on the chair, I left them strewn across the corner of the room, as if to mimic the scene of some wildly impulsive sex.

(44) "We're all done," the doctor announced less than a minute later, and I felt disappointed that I hadn't even known it was happening. My married professor friend later said I shouldn't bemoan the lack of romance. She reminded me that most women aren't having torrid sex when they conceive—and half the time they're left uttering the same two words to their husbands that I blurted out to the doctor: "That's it?"

(45) I got pregnant on the second try, and lately I've found myself talking to the baby growing inside me. I wonder what I'll say when my child talks back, when he or she starts asking, "Do I have a daddy?" I wonder if I'll feel a twinge of grief at various milestones, such as when I buy one of those "Where do I come from?" books for donor-conceived kids (titles include *I'm a Little Frostie* and *Our Story*). Even more

challenging, though, will be figuring out what to say if I have a daughter who at age thirty asks me tough questions about love and marriage and whether to wait for the right man.

(46) Perhaps by then I'll be married to a man who was worth waiting for. But it's equally possible that I'll have revised my "somebody isn't always better than nobody" theory and will tell her that some partner might be better than no partner, and that being lonely in a marriage wouldn't have been half as bad as being lonely outside one.

(47) I'm not alone in this ambivalence. The women I know who are having babies on their own aren't independent superwomen. In fact, most of us would like nothing more than to have a man around to help pay the bills, fix the dishwasher, take out the trash, give soothing back rubs, and change diapers. We want a man to hold the door open for us at a restaurant, and society to hold the door open for us to have a child while we search for the door-opening man.

(48) I was on a date the other night—no sushi, no wine, no talk of cervical mucus—when the guy asked me about my sperm donor. It struck me then how odd it is never to have met the man whose child is growing in my body—to literally be carrying a stranger's baby. My date pointed out, however, that women aren't the only ones grappling with this brave new world—not just because recent scientific studies have shed light on the male biological clock but because, men say, women will become even pickier as a result of having more options.

(49) He's right. Whereas women of a certain age used to marry their boyfriends in order to have children, nowadays it no longer sounds counterintuitive to hear a single woman say that she, like me, broke up with her boyfriend in order to have a baby.

But maybe that's a good thing, for both men and women. In fact, since becoming pregnant I've gotten a surprising amount of male attention. It's not due to some bizarre pregnant-lady fetish; until recently I wasn't even showing. (50) Rather, it seems that a man in his mid-thirties appreciates getting to know a woman without ulterior motives—one who likes him for his inherent qualities instead of for the children he might help produce. The men I'm dating realize that I already have everything else I want, so now I'm in this purely for a chance at love. Meanwhile, in just a few months I'll meet my new baby. It may not be the traditional fairy tale, but in a very modern sense my life these days feels incredibly romantic.

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