

Wanted: A Few Good Sperm

Jennifer Egan

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Tired of
waiting for
the right guy
to come along,

more and more
women are just looking
for the
right sperm.

But for a woman
trying to have
a child alone,

choosing a
donor is only
the beginning.

Wanted: A Few Good Sperm

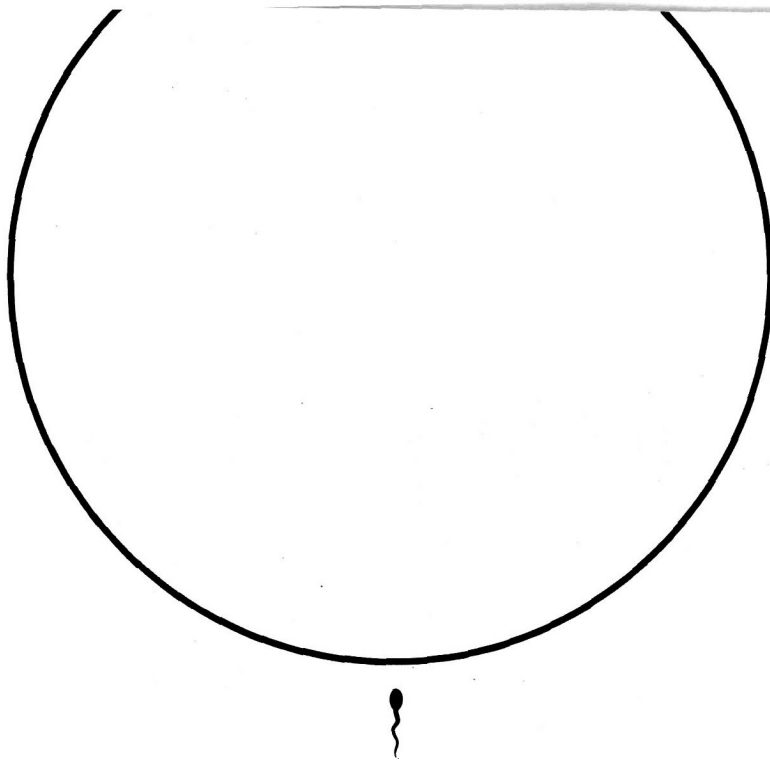
By Jennifer Egan

Daniela, a 38-year-old advertising executive, began by being inseminated with a known donor and now is trying anonymous ones.

Photographs by Jessica Wynne







when it became available. (All donor sperm must be quarantined for six months — the maximum incubation period for H.I.V. — so that the donor can be retested for the disease before it is released.) She told her parents and married sister what was going on, e-mailing the donor's picture to her father with an invitation that he meet his son-in-law. She also printed the donor's picture and kept it on the coffee table of her Manhattan studio apartment, where she sleeps in a Murphy bed. "I kind of glance at it as I pass," she said of the picture. "It's almost like when you date someone, and you keep looking at them, and you're, like, Are they cute? But every time I pass, I'm, like, Oh, he's really cute. It's a comforting feeling."

When I suggested that she must be a type who is prone to love at first sight, she just laughed. "With online dating, friends used to say: 'What about him? What about him?' I'd say: 'Don't like the nose. Ah, the eyes are a little buggy. He really likes to golf, and you know I don't like golfing.' There was always something. If I said this about everyone," she concluded, "I would have married someone about 75 dates ago."

Karyn said she hoped to join a population of women that everyone agrees is expanding, although by how much is hard to pin down because single mothers by choice (or choice mothers), as they are sometimes called, aren't separated statistically from, say, babies born to unwed teenagers. Between 1999 and 2003 there was an almost 17 percent jump in the number of babies born to unmarried women between ages 30 and 44 in America, according to the National Center for Human Statistics, while the number born to unmarried women between 15 and 24 actually *decreased* by nearly 6 percent. Single Mothers by Choice, a 25-year-old support group, took in nearly double the number of new members in 2005 as it did 10 years ago, and its roughly 4,000 current members include women in Israel, Australia and Switzerland. The California Cryobank, the largest sperm bank in the country, owed a third of its business to single women in 2005, shipping them 9,600 vials of sperm, each good for one insemination.

As recently as the early 60's, a "respectable" woman needed to be married just to have sex, not to speak of children; a child born out of wedlock was a source of deepest shame. Yet this radical social change feels strangely inevitable; nearly a third of American households are headed by women alone, many of whom not only raise their children on their own but also support them. All that remains is conception, and it is small wonder that women have begun chipping away at needing a man for that — especially after Sylvia Ann Hewlett's controversial 2002 book, "Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children," sounded alarms about declining fertility rates in women over 35. The Internet is also a factor; as well as holding meetings through local chapters around the country, Single Mothers by Choice hosts 11 Listservs, each addressing a different aspect of single motherhood. Women around the world pore over these lists, exchanging tips and information, selling one another leftover vials of sperm. (Once sperm has shipped, it can't be returned to the bank.) Karyn found both her sperm bank and reproductive endocrinologist on these Listservs. Three-quarters of the members of Single Mothers by Choice choose to conceive with donor sperm, as lesbian couples have been doing for many years — adoption is costly, slow-moving and often biased against single people. Buying sperm over the Internet, on the other hand, is not much different from buying shoes.

In the 25 years since she founded Single Mothers by Choice after becoming pregnant by accident, Jane Mattes, now 62, has seen her group's membership conceiving at younger ages (the median age among members is 36) and more often having second children. But the biggest change, Mattes says, is that the stigma attached to this form of single motherhood has largely faded. "People used to come into our meetings literally afraid to walk in," she told me. "We don't see that as much anymore. Everyone seems to know somebody who did it, which wasn't the case even 10 years ago."

One day last October, Karyn,

a 39-year-old executive, pulled her online dating profile off JDate and Match.com, two sites she had been using, along with an endless series of leads, tips and blind dates arranged by friends and colleagues, to search for a man she wanted to marry and raise a family with. At long last, after something like 100 dates in the past 10 years and several serious relationships, she had found the man she refers to, tongue only slightly in cheek, as "the one." It all began last summer, when she broke off a relationship with a younger man who wasn't ready for children and got serious about the idea of conceiving on her own. She gathered information about fertility doctors and sperm banks. "Then a childhood friend of mine was over," she told me. "I pulled up the Web site of the only sperm bank that I know of that has adult photos. There happened to be one Jewish person. I pulled up the photo, and I looked at my friend, and I looked at his picture, and I said, 'Oh, my God.' I can't say love at first sight, because, you know. But he was the one."

Sperm donors, like online daters, answer myriad questions about heroes, hobbies and favorite things. Karyn read her donor's profile and liked what she saw. "You can tell he comes from a warm family, some very educated," she said. He had worked as a chef. He had "proven fertility," meaning that at least one woman conceived using his sperm. Like all sperm donors, he was free from any sexually transmitted diseases or testable genetic disorders. "People in New York change sex partners quicker than the cross-town bus," Karyn said. "I'd be a lot more concerned about my date next week." But she especially liked the fact that he was an identity-release donor (also called an "open donor" or a "yes donor") — a growing and extremely popular category of sperm donors who are willing to be contacted by any offspring who reach the age of 18.

The next morning, Karyn called the bank and spoke with a woman who worked there. "She said: 'I have to be honest. He's very popular, and I only have eight units in store right now. I'm not sure how much longer he might be in the program,'" Karyn told me. "Most women in New York impulse-buy Manolo Blahniks, and I said, 'I'll take the eight units.' It was \$3,100." The price included six months of storage.

That hefty purchase, and the strong sense of connection she felt to the donor, galvanized Karyn: she made an appointment with a reproductive endocrinologist and gave up alcohol and caffeine. At work, she took on a position of greater responsibility and longer hours — with a higher salary — to save money. She went on a wait list to buy more of the donor's sperm

Jennifer Egan last wrote for the magazine about online dating. Her new novel, "The Keep," will be published in August.

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Karyn, who asked that I use only her middle name, never imagined her life unfolding in this way, she told me over dinner at Caliente Cab, where we sat outdoors on an unseasonably warm November night. She has big blue-green eyes, shiny brown hair past her shoulders and an ironic appreciation of certain parallels between her life and Carrie Bradshaw’s. She has always known she wanted to marry and have kids. “I certainly never thought I would be the last one standing,” she said. “You feel a little bit resentful, like, Gosh, how did I get here? Blind date after blind date — why can’t it be easy for me like it was for other people? Right up until I ordered the sperm and made the doctor’s appointment, I was filled with anxiety. I felt sad, overwhelmed. Now I’m completely at peace with it.”

In the month since we had first talked, she had seen the reproductive endocrinologist and received a clean bill of health. Her hormone levels looked excellent. She planned to have her first insemination in December. Her decision had meshed seamlessly with what had been, until now, a conventional life; her parents were driving in from Long Island the next morning to take her for a medical test to check that her fallopian tubes were clear. Of her mother, Karyn said: “She used to call me once a week with a blind date. Now she’ll call once a week with a friend of a friend of a friend who has a daughter who became a single mother by choice.”

Karyn carried a wallet-size copy of the donor’s photo between her MetroCard and her work ID: a fair, sharp-featured young man in a crisp

white shirt, his arms crossed. In the past month, she had had a couple of residual online dates, but now she seemed relieved to let that go. “People would say, ‘Oh, it’s just a date — don’t expect anything,’” she said, sipping her ice water. “‘Just go out and have a good time.’ But then you’d get four calls that night: How was it? What did you think? Did you like him? Why wouldn’t you go out with him again? There was so much pressure. It became a job.” Online dating has, if anything, made the search for a partner more callous and mystifying than ever; disappearing has become so easy. “I imagine one day when I get to heaven there will be a whole room full of missing socks and men :),” Karyn once wrote to me in an e-mail message. “I hope the men will be wearing the socks.”

Now, as we sat outside, she said: “There’s nothing I’d like more in life than to have the whole picture and to share it all. To have the baby, to have the miniwagon, to have the husband, morning soccer games and P.T.A. — he’s out manning the grill, and I’m mixing the margaritas. But I think if I had to choose today between becoming a mom or finding the perfect man and I could only have one today, I would choose becoming a mom. And hope that I have my lifetime to find the other.”

DISCUSSION OF SINGLE motherhood nearly always leads to talk of divorce. More than a third of American marriages end that way; often there are children involved, and often the mothers end up caring for those children mostly on their own, saddled with ex-spouses, custody wrangles and nagging in-laws. Considered this way, single motherhood would seem to have a clean, almost thrilling logic — more than a third of the time, these women will have circumvented a lot of pain and unpleasantness and cut straight to being mothers on their own.

Last October, when I visited the Manhattan apartment of Daniela, a 38-year-old German advertising executive who had recently been inseminated with the sperm of a male friend, her guest room was peppered with toys belonging to the young son of a visiting friend who had broken up with the boy’s father by the time he was born. “They got a child out of love, and the parents couldn’t deal with one another,” Daniela, who asked that I use only her first name, told me. “And now she lives in Germany; he lives here. He doesn’t pay any money if he doesn’t see the child. So there’s a constant battle over it. The child is torn in between. She has to deal with the father. I won’t have to deal with the father.”

Daniela’s apartment is neat and spare, with hardwood floors, a basket of colorful slippers by the front door for guests and an entire wall devoted to pictures of her family in Germany. (She also has a married sister with three children who lives in New Jersey.) A 6-foot-1 blonde who speaks with disarming frankness, she came to America 10 years ago with the man she would later marry, only to find that he didn’t want children. After their divorce, she was engaged to another man who kept postponing their wedding — she still has a set of “Save the Date” cards in her closet. Having always wanted passionately to be a mother, she decided to use a “known donor,” a close gay friend, also German, to help her conceive. Known donors have some big advantages over anonymous ones: they can contribute fresh sperm, which is more motile and long-lived than frozen. (As much as half of a man’s sperm dies during freezing, which is why sperm-bank donors need to have extremely high sperm counts.) With a known donor, there is a theoretically endless supply, and it’s free, whereas “washed” sperm, cleared of debris for an intrauterine insemination, or IUI (recommended for women using frozen sperm because the sperm is placed directly into the uterus and doesn’t have to swim past the cervix), generally costs between \$200 and \$400 a vial, plus \$100 for shipping, not to mention another \$100 if the donor is “open.”

The big disadvantage to using a known donor, as Daniela learned when she posted a query on a Listserv of Single Mothers by Choice (she had been avoiding the meetings, finding them too full of “personalities”), is that in

most states the donor will always have full parental rights, regardless of whatever deal he and the mother might have worked out in advance. This didn't worry Daniela; she wanted her child to have a father, even a partial one. "His parents are ecstatic about it," she said of her donor friend as we sat drinking tea at her dining table. "He's smart; he has a great character; he's a friendly person. I said, You don't have to pay for the child, but if you want to have it with you or you want to participate, you're more than welcome."

An unforeseen hitch emerged at the reproductive endocrinologist's office, where Daniela and her friend were posing as an engaged couple to avoid having to quarantine his sperm, as required by federal and New York State regulations before a woman can be inseminated by a man who isn't already her sexual partner: he had an extremely low sperm count. The doctor "spun" the sperm to concentrate it before placing it in Daniela's uterus, and she and her friend had already tried three inseminations, the last one a few days before my visit. She was now in the middle of what is known in fertility parlance as the "two-week wait" to find out if she was pregnant. She wasn't optimistic. In vitro fertilization might be more successful, but she has a stressful job and was leery of the intense hormone treatments.

Daniela also found anonymous donors deeply unappealing. "These people don't do that because they want to help the population, let's face it," she said. "They're doing it for the money and because they maybe want to populate the earth. A) you're going to have a lot of siblings out there. B) I question what kind of personality these people can be. You read characteristics like height and ethnicity, what kind of education — it's the information that you *don't* get that is much more important. I'm thinking about happiness or moods, these kind of things."

Sperm banks do try to address the amorphous question of character; many include psychological studies of donors as well as "staff impressions." Some offer audiotaped interviews in addition to the lengthy written questionnaires, but Daniela said she felt that these materials would only confuse her. She did have a few ideas of what she might look for: she wanted a man of her same blood type, O positive. Because she herself is so tall, she preferred a medium height. (Short donors don't exist; because most women seek out tall ones, most banks don't accept men under 5-foot-9.) She was also attracted by the idea of a donor of another race. "I believe in multiculturalism," she said. "I would probably choose somebody with a darker skin color so I don't have to slather sunblock on my kid all the time. I want it to be a healthy mix. You know how mixed dogs are always the nicest and the friendliest and the healthiest? If you get a clear race, they have all the problems. Mutts are always the friendly ones, the intelligent ones, the ones who don't bark and have a good character. I want a mutt." Her African-American friends questioned this strategy, suggesting that her child's life would be harder if he or she was perceived as nonwhite, but Daniela said: "If that's what I believe, I have to go by that. And it might help the world also if more people are doing it that way."

While many single mothers look for donors whose features and coloring resemble their own, Daniela's attraction to a diverse gene pool isn't so unusual. A 40-year-old African-American woman I spoke with wanted a Latino donor so that her child would have lighter skin and nonkinky hair. "I'm the African-American," she told me. "The child will get that from me." Q., a 43-year-old health-care manager who attended a yeshiva from kindergarten through high school (she asked that I use only one of her initials), first sought out a Jewish donor. "Everybody either had glasses, they're balding or their grandmother was diabetic and had heart disease — typical Jewish population," she told me. Her solution: a 6-foot-2 Catholic, German stock on both sides, with curly blond hair and blue eyes. "He really was the typical Aryan perfect human being," she said, laughing. "He was a bodybuilder. He played the guitar and the drums, and he sang. He was captain of the rugby team in college. When I had the in vitro process done, the embryologist said:

"This is some of the best sperm I've ever seen. It just about jumped out of the test tubes." Q.'s golden-curled, blue-eyed daughter has just turned 2.

For the moment, though, Daniela was still hoping that this recent insemination with her friend's sperm would take. She dreamed of a little girl. And like virtually all of the prospective single mothers I spoke with, she had every intention of finding a mate after the child was born. "Taking this whole 'I have to find the father of my child' out of the equation might make it a lot more relaxed and easier," she said. "The guys are smelling it, and they run." And even if the guy held still, he might not be the one you'd pick — or even consider — if you weren't desperate for kids. "I see so many women who are in unhealthy relationships, where they really just try to get married and then have a child and break it off," Daniela said. "If they would consider this as an option, I think they would be happier, and the children would be happier."

I went to a special meeting of

the New York chapter of Single Mothers by Choice a few weeks later, in mid-November. It had been arranged for members willing to have a reporter present. We met on the Upper West Side, in a long rectangular rented room whose high ceiling magnified the yelps and stomping feet of toddlers who had come with their mothers. Women contemplating single motherhood or trying to get pregnant ("thinkers" and "tryers") arrived an hour later, Karyn among them. It was her third meeting.

The mothers' discussion was mostly practical: a pretty blonde in a black T-shirt that read "Sweet and Toxic" had noticed a sign in her health club forbidding children over the age of 3 to change in opposite-sex bathrooms: what would she do in a year when her son was 3? She also wondered about teaching him how to urinate into the toilet bowl; a friend had suggested throwing Cheerios in for him to aim at. (A mother of a 4-year-old boy discouraged this practice; it might tempt him to throw other things into the toilet.) A woman trying to arrange a domestic adoption asked about nannies versus day care.

When the general meeting began, each woman in the largely white group introduced herself. Two were pregnant; another had twins; one had adopted a daughter from Haiti. One had not been able to conceive and planned to become a foster parent. Anyone walking into the room would have assumed that the women with kids had husbands or partners at home, but in three hours of discussion, the only men who were mentioned were donors, anonymous and known. These women's independence of male partners in their family-making often brings a corollary reliance on one another — for sympathy and information, for companionship (Single Mothers by Choice sponsors vacations every year for single mothers and their kids) and the chance to show their children other families like their own. At times, the relationships can become even more enmeshed: one mother I spoke with, whose twin sons were conceived using both donor eggs and donor sperm, gave her leftover frozen embryos to a friend who was having fertility problems. The friend is now pregnant with a child who will be this mother's own sons' full sibling.

While nearly every woman I spoke with had her own history of romantic near misses and crushing disappointments, most also saw advantages to proceeding on their own. "This baby will be my baby, only my baby," Karyn told me that night at Caliente Cab. "The thing I'm afraid of is that after doing this, I might not want to get married. It seems like a lot of hard work, a lot of compromise. Someone ends up short, and usually it's the mom, because by the time you get to the child and your husband and the dog, there's not much left."



Shelby Siems, 44, with her son, Christopher, 2, has a boyfriend but is expecting another son from the same donor who fathered Christopher.

After introductions, the group broke into smaller discussion groups, mothers and pregnant women at one end of the room, thinkers and tryers at the other. Among the thinkers, two women were holding off on making a decision while they looked for work — something I heard a lot. Such delays put these women in a bind, though; each month is precious in terms of fertility. “I can’t stress enough how much money worries me in this process,” I was told by a 35-year-old Canadian woman who will soon begin trying to get pregnant. “I’m alone; there’s no safety net. If you picture it like the scales, on the one side there’s my money and on the other are the years left to have children.”

Karyn had moved from the thinkers group into the tryers since her last meeting. She had brought a bag of pretzels, which she shared with the others, most of whom were slightly older than she — slightly in real terms, but through the telescopic lens of a woman’s fertility, the difference was vast. “Trying to get pregnant at age 41 is nothing like trying to get pregnant at age 38,” a 41-year-old grimly remarked when Karyn asked if she had begun trying. “My gynecologist wouldn’t even do any of the tests. She said because of my age, just go to deal with infertility, don’t waste any time.”

Because many single women have waited years, hoping the right man would come along, and because the majority use sperm that has been frozen, they are disproportionately at risk for fertility problems when they finally decide to have children. Many report being stunned that their fertility was so fragile. “I thought I could have kids until my period ended, and menopause is 50, right?” said another woman I met at a Single Mothers by Choice meeting in Washington, who began trying to conceive at 44. The sense of not having been informed, of being too late, is so often expressed by would-be single mothers in their 40’s that it has doubtless spurred some younger women in the Single Mothers by Choice network to act more precipitously. (I interviewed two women who conceived while still in their 20’s.) Still, the near-miraculous success of some older mothers can give hope — often unrealistic — to those still fighting the odds. Most doctors refused to take the 44-year-old Washington woman except as an egg-donor patient, but one did — and she became pregnant with a girl who is now almost 4. Another woman in the D.C. group went through 16 attempts and a miscarriage, using both IUI and I.V.F., before her son was finally born.

At 39, Karyn was still on the right side of this equation, but just bare-

ly. "I'm waiting for my next period to start the beginning of December," she told the older woman. "I'm about to start trying, either before or after Christmas Day."

But it didn't work out like that. A few days before Christmas, after receiving a string of e-mail messages from Karyn chronicling her march toward insemination, I found one with the subject line, "Do you believe in signs?" She had written: "Sit down, ready for this one? I arrived home from work again at 11:30 last night to be greeted by my doormen telling me how very sorry they were — a steam pipe explosion blew right through my apartment with a flood. . . . My apartment is destroyed and needs to be gutted. . . . I am taking all of the events as a sign that this is not the right month to get pregnant."

She planned to wait three months, at which point she would be weeks away from her 40th birthday.

In November, I met Daniela in

her Midtown office, which has a modern industrial design and faces east into what that afternoon was a bleak gray day. As she had feared, the last insemination with her donor friend hadn't worked, and she had resigned herself to the idea of using an anonymous donor instead. She had even found two that appealed to her, both from a small Manhattan sperm bank where she would save money on shipping by picking up the samples herself and carrying them to her doctor's office. As I sat across her desk, she pulled up the donors' descriptions on her computer. One was Indian: "He's got black straight hair," she told me, "brown eyes, he's six feet but he only weighs 150. Which is good. If I have a girl, she wants to be skinny, and if she can eat what she wants, that's perfect. You don't have to get in fights about food." The Indian donor's complexion was described as "medium/dark," and he had proven fertility. He had a master's degree in business. He was bilingual, Hindu, single and liked traveling and music. His family-health history looked good.

The second donor was a mix of Chinese, Peruvian and Italian. He was olive-skinned, 5-foot-9 and weighed 169. "Thick hair, which is also nice," she said, "because if I happen to get a son, I don't like bald guys. He's Catholic, which I would obviously like, because I am. He has a very interesting book collection: he likes Hesse, Henry James, Lorca. Excellent vision. His parents are pretty boring professionally, so I was a little concerned about that. But when they started their businesses, they probably didn't have all that many chances, the father being Peruvian and the mother being Chinese-Italian." She especially liked the fact that he was a full-time student in theater. "He has creative aspirations," she said. "Those things are hereditary."

Mostly from a sense of obligation, she Googled "sperm" and began scanning lists of donors at other banks, using O-positive blood type as her first criterion. "This one is a Hispanic fair," she mused. "But Hispanics can still be very, very fair. Then we have a Dominican-Honduran, black straight hair, olive skin — he is really too heavy, 220, are you kidding me? Now here we have a Caucasian. Research assistant in psychology — no. You don't study that if you haven't touched upon it somewhere."

At the California Cryobank site, the donors numbered in the hundreds. "All those Germans," Daniela murmured, scrolling down. "How am I proving my healthiness if I do the same race again? Black African, they do have three of them. Look how tall they are. And see how heavy the two O-positives are?"

Eventually she happened on a search engine that listed donors from all of the banks without revealing which bank they were from without payment. Visibly weary as she scanned the list, she reflected: "I still like my

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Chinese-Peruvian-Italian. He seems a little bit more special somehow. From this little bank . . . it's like a little country. There he is. There he is! Chinese-Peruvian-Italian, full-time student!"

The sheer familiarity of the Chinese-Peruvian-Italian made him leap from the haze of anonymous data like an old friend. And that feeling counts for a lot. It's no wonder that a number of single mothers I spoke with used the phrase "I felt a connection" in explaining their choice of donors. Despite the obvious parallels between shopping for sperm and dating online, there is finally no comparing them — a sperm donor is providing *half the DNA for your child*, and whether or not you choose to think about it, he'll be there forever in the child's tastes and choices and personality. No one wants a decision like that to feel arbitrary.

Daniela had other news: she had met a man she was interested in. It happened during a business trip the week before; he was meeting friends in the bar of her hotel. "He was so good with his friend's kid," she said. "I'm, like, 'Oh, you must have three kids.' He said, 'No, just nieces and nephews.'" They struck up a conversation, and she ended up joining his group

for dinner. She was honest with him about her plans to get pregnant, but the news may not have sunk in; he had been calling ever since, eager to see her again. He was in his 40's, African-American, and had his own business. "It's nice to know that just because you have these plans, you're not unattractive or undesirable," Daniela said. She felt more at ease with this man than she had with other men in recent years and attributed this to her decision to move ahead with motherhood. "It was a completely different feeling," she said. "It empowers one, because you're not relying on somebody else. You don't have to bring up the big life conversations."

While many women, like Karyn, relish their emancipation from the grind of dating and pursue motherhood with a single mind, others are intrigued by what romance could mean, absent the imperative of finding a father for their children. One woman, a 40-year-old graduate student in biology in the Midwest, told me shortly after her first insemination: "One of the things that was so powerful about deciding to have a baby on my own was saying, I'm taking charge of this piece of it; I'm not going to wait around for a guy to give it to me. And my feelings about what I want from men right now are really changed. I don't actually want a big relationship. Now I want occasional companionship and sex."

On a recent date, between inseminations, this woman noticed the difference. "It was one of these dates where the guy's just telling you his sad story and his complicated relationship with his mother. In my previous dating life, I would have been, like, I'm not going to get seriously involved with a man like this. I'm going to get rid of him. This time I was, like, I think he's hot, so if I just keep listening, maybe eventually we'll have sex. And we had great sex. It was really hot." At one point, she had sex with two different men in the same weekend (both times using condoms) not long after an insemination. Observing her own behavior, she said: "Maybe in six months or a year I'll have more insight about it, but something radical is going on in my brain about my relationships with men. O.K., so I'm not going to keep trying to have this picket-fence-y life. I'm waving the white flag. And now I have permission to directly pursue what I want. It's a very curious and ambivalent liberation, because I would rather not be single. It's not my first choice."

Daniela told me that regardless of what happened with the new man, she was certain of one thing: she would go ahead with her plan to inseminate. "I've done the mistake of putting this on hold several times, and I cannot afford it," she said. We looked together at her November calendar on her office computer; sandwiched among coming trips and meetings were her expected days of menstruation and ovulation, noted in German. She planned to inseminate in December, so she would have to pick the donor by the end of the month. Meanwhile, the new man had proposed coming to New York in mid-December, which happened to be the time when she thought she would be ovulating. Daniela said she wouldn't feel comfortable using protection with him while she was going to a doctor's office to be inseminated. "That would be weird," she said. "But leave it up to destiny? That's a possibility, I think."

I was astonished. Had she thought through the implications of having this man's child? I asked. What if the relationship didn't last? What if she turned out not to like him at all? Daniela countered that his parents were happily married, and he had good relationships with his siblings, but what I heard in her voice was confusion. Then I recalled something she had told me in a previous conversation: "I have this big fear in my life that I never will be pregnant. You see these pregnant women on the street, and you're, like, How does it feel? What's going on in your mind, in your heart? I want to feel it!" Remembering this helped me to understand: it is hard to want something so badly and to try to prevent it.

AS IT TURNED OUT, he didn't visit in December. Daniela didn't inseminate, either. Her Indian donor was out of stock, and the Chinese-Peruvi-

an-Italian's sperm was in quarantine until early January. Meanwhile, she had learned that her health insurance had a \$2,000 annual cap on fertility treatments that she had already exhausted on the inseminations with her gay friend.

So it was early January when I finally met Daniela at 8 a.m. outside the Empire State Building, where her sperm bank is located, to pick up two vials of sperm from her Chinese-Peruvian-Italian donor. She had hardly slept the night before from excitement, she told me. At the bank, a nondescript lab, Daniela paid \$450 and was given an 18-pound white canister with an orange "Biohazard" sticker on it. She had been there once before; her donor friend had had to go out of town and left frozen sperm for her. "You walk out on the street, and you've got the container in your hand," she said, "and then there's all these containers on two legs."

One such two-legged container was in the elevator when we got on: a workman surrounded by tools. "You're unbuttoned, you know that," Daniela said, looking at his fly.

The guy's fair skin turned crimson, and he buttoned up, grinning but avoiding her eyes.

She explained, "I think it's better that I tell you now, so you don't go through the day like that."

"If they notice, they shouldn't be looking there," he said in a strong Irish accent, smiling right at her now.

Daniela smiled back. "Are you Irish?" she asked. "I'm German. That's why I don't understand a word you're saying."

This was flirtation, right? I was still asking myself that question as we left the elevator, but I wasn't sure: what does flirtation even *mean* in the context of a woman hauling a canister of sperm to a doctor's office so he can inseminate her? Or, to put it another way, what's the point?

"He was a sweet kid," Daniela said briskly as we left the building and stepped onto the dusty, bacon-smelling street.

At the doctor's office, we repaired to an examining room, where Daniela's doctor, an avuncular man in wire-rimmed glasses, took a sonogram of her ovaries and uterus. "The lining looks very good," he said. "It's the proper time to do this. We'll thaw out the specimen."

In a different room, he removed a "straw" of frozen sperm from the canister of nitrogen and placed it into a tub of warm water to thaw. Most sperm banks use plastic vials nowadays, but this particular bank had stuck with an old system. The doctor left the room while the sperm was thawing, and Daniela filled me in on the new man. They hadn't seen each other since that first meeting two months ago; trips had been arranged and fallen through, often because he was short of money. Still, they were in close touch. Three days ago, she told him on the phone about the planned insemination, and his response was wary. "How do you react to dating a person that would be pregnant with somebody else?" Daniela said, paraphrasing his reaction. "Just like I am feeling completely weird carrying that bucket, it must be the same feeling for him when he meets a person like me." Yet she was hopeful that things might still work out. "If we're going to be great together," she said, laughing, "we're going to be great together with that Eurasian child."

The doctor came back and placed the straw of clear, yellowish sperm in a slim glass cylinder and removed a drop to look at under a microscope. "We have very good motility," he said. "This is a good specimen."

Daniela looked, too. "I see lots of them," she said, excited. "Last time I had to look for four."

The doctor left so Daniela could change into a gown and lie down. When he came back, he drew the yellow liquid into an oversize syringe that tapered into a skinny tube. It is hard to say what Daniela's chances of becoming pregnant would be; statistics on the success rates of IUI using frozen sperm suggest that they are between 8

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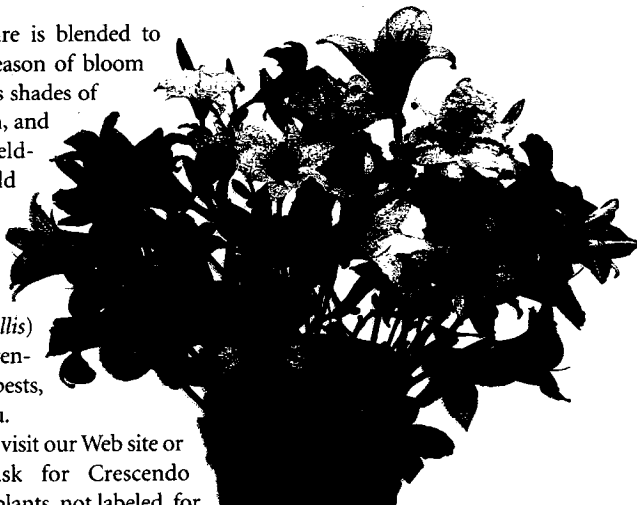
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DONOR DADS

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and 15 percent in a given cycle. Daniela would return the next morning for a second insemination; many doctors believe that consecutive inseminations increase the chances.

Wearing a small miner's light around his head, the doctor went to work. He was done in three minutes. Daniela lifted her hand, fingers crossed, as he left the room.

A week into Daniela's two-week wait, I heard from Karyn again. She had been living in a friend's apartment for weeks while the various insurance companies haggled about how much to pay out for the damage to her apartment. Her computer had been destroyed, along with many of her possessions, including her file of medical records and donor materials. "That's one thing that made me cry," she said. "Just to see all the papers with his information and history and his picture ... seeing it all soaked."

She had resigned from her job — the brutal hours were wearing her down — and said she believed she had other good prospects. Meanwhile, she had decided to go ahead with her insemination plan. The big day came two weeks later, in late January. Her mother went with her, and Karyn called me a few hours after, elated. The next day I received an e-mail message whose subject line read, "I think I already feel a kick :)."

OVER THANKSGIVING vacation, I took the train to Darien, Conn., to meet Shelby Siems and her 2-year-old son, Christopher, who had driven down from their home in Marblehead, Mass. Shelby, 44, grew up in Darien and had come to visit cousins and friends over the holiday weekend. She is part of a rising number of single mothers who

are having second children; when we met in Connecticut, she was four months pregnant with a second son by the same donor who sired her first. She and Christopher picked me up at the train station, and we drove to a nearby pizza restaurant that was still quiet at that midmorning hour. Shelby is fair, with long blond hair and pale blue eyes that are prone to tears. Christopher is also pale, a watchful, intelligent child with wispy reddish hair. At lunch, he said "please" and "thank you" and rolled a small green train engine over the laminated tabletop while Shelby and I talked. For a 2-year-old he was remarkably patient, but occasionally he cried, "Mama, Mama, I want to hold you."

"I'm right here," Shelby said.

Once a journalist for The Christian Science Monitor, Shelby was finishing up an M.F.A. in nonfiction. Her thesis project is a book about her experience as a single mother, an experience that has been more grueling than Daniela's or Karyn's will most likely be because Shelby has no immediate family; she was an only child of older parents who died by the time she reached her early 30's. She inherited money that has allowed her to go back to school and to support Christopher, but she is alone in the world. In Christopher's first weeks of life, there were periods of many days when they saw no one but each other.

Shelby does have a boyfriend: a 52-year-old bachelor who works at a pharmaceutical company, whom she met at a party when Christopher was a month old. "He's been a great person in my life and Christopher's life, but he's not going to marry me," she explained over the phone when we first spoke. "Some people just don't

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DONOR DADS

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want to do that, and he's one of those people."

The fact that Shelby is in a relationship at all is unusual; the majority of mothers I spoke with — even those with older children — had remained single. Many expressed a willingness to date if the opportunity were to come along, but they work long hours to support their kids, and when they're not working, they want to see them. For all the comparisons between being divorced with children and having them alone, there are critical differences: an ex-husband who spends any time at all with his kids frees up pockets of time when a woman could potentially see someone new. Even minimal child-support payments would reduce the financial burden on her, and substantial ones could allow her to work less. Perhaps most important, a child with only one parent is immensely dependent on that parent, and the mother of such a child tends to feel her responsibility acutely. It can be painful — and expensive — to leave your child with a baby sitter after a whole day away, just to go out on a date.

Despite her age — Shelby was 42 when Christopher was born — she was determined that her son have a sibling. "He has even less of a family than I do, because he doesn't have his whole father's side of the family," she told me. "The only person he has is me." She wanted to use the same donor again and put the matter to her boyfriend, who made it clear that he wasn't interested in fatherhood. She began stocking up on the donor's sperm (most banks keep a reserve supply of each donor's sperm for women who want second children) when Christopher was still an infant. "I want my son to have a full sibling," she

said. "I want to feel like he has one person in the world who is a complete blood relative after I'm gone. I did not want my son to feel deprived, that the other sibling had a father and he didn't." To be sure that there was no chance the child would be his, Shelby and her boyfriend were celibate for the year it took her to conceive, which she finally did at 43, after eight tries, using I.V.F.

The fact that a child born of an anonymous donor knows only half his biological family concerns single mothers with more robust families than Shelby's, too. The Donor Sibling Registry, a Web site where families can register children conceived by donor insemination in hopes of being matched with half-siblings or even the donor himself, has proved a boon for many single mothers. The site's founder, Wendy Kramer, estimates that the majority of the 7,400 registered members are single. Recent publicity has prompted a jump in the registry's membership and matches — more than 1,500 have been made so far, not just among half-siblings but also among sperm (and egg) donors, 320 of whom are registered on the site, and their progeny.

Q., the former yeshiva student who ended up choosing the 6-foot-2 German rugby player as her donor, developed severe hypertension during her pregnancy and had to be hospitalized several times. Her symptoms lingered even after her daughter was born, and she became preoccupied with what would happen to the baby girl if she were to die. Her brother and a sister are selfish, she says, and her mother is elderly. Last fall, she went to the Donor Sibling Registry and got a shock: the Aryan bodybuilder with the leaping sperm has fathered 21 children (and counting —

Continued on Page 98

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DONOR DADS

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he is still an active donor), including four sets of twins. These children are all 3 and under, and their families — four lesbian couples, three heterosexual couples and six single mothers — have formed their own Listserv, where photographs of the children (all blond, with a strong familial resemblance) are posted, and daily e-mail messages are exchanged about birthdays, toilet training and the like. They are planning a group vacation in 2007. "I was elated," Q. told me. "To quote the granny on 'The Beverly Hillbillies,' I wanted her to have kin. Now here's kin that look like her; that're in her same age range. I even thought that if I get to know somebody really well from this group, maybe I would pick one of these other mothers, if they would be interested, to be designated as a guardian for my daughter."

Q. is one of several people in the group with a keen desire to meet her donor one day. And they aren't sitting idle; one woman had magnified his baby picture, in which the donor is blowing out candles on his birthday cake, to the point at which a first name may be legible. Another mother has a hunch about the donor's provenance based on the way he pronounced certain words on his audiotape. At the Washington Single Mothers by Choice meeting, I met a woman who had easily identified the donor for her 9-month-old son using Google. "The person left specific enough information for me to just type in those words and click," she told the group. "But what to do with that information? I'm bound to keep him anonymous as per the contract, but what about when my son says: 'What do you know? Tell me anything about my dad.'"

When we'd finished our pizza and salad, Shelby drove to a playground. The brightly colored equipment was empty in the frigid cold, but Christopher bounced in his car seat. "Slides!" he cried.

He bounded out of the car, refusing mittens, and commenced to climb, panting plumes of steam. Whenever he was in earshot, Shelby spelled out the word D-A-D; lately Christopher had become fixated on the idea of a daddy. "He goes to a day care, and he's the only child of a single mother in his

class. I think they spend a lot of time talking about Daddy," she told me. Christopher had referred to a neighbor as Daddy, as well as Regis Philbin. "Interestingly, he doesn't call my boyfriend Daddy; he's 'mamma's friend.' The other day, I said, 'Someone special's coming to see you today — do you know who it is?' I expected him to say [her boyfriend's name]. But he said, 'Daddy?'" The single mothers by choice I spoke with generally hold that the story of their children's origins should be told to them from the time of birth, long before the child is old enough to understand it. But Shelby feels that at 2, Christopher is too young to hear that he doesn't have a father.

Shelby's son is part of a population of kids that is only now beginning to be studied, though a 1992 survey of teenagers raised by single mothers found that they experienced markedly fewer adolescent problems than children of divorce. A continuing study of a group of children in England, now 2, who were conceived by single women using donor sperm concludes that so far they are healthy and well adjusted. But the long-term questions of how these children will fare or about the different experiences of girls and boys have yet to be answered.

As we watched Christopher tear around the playground, Shelby reflected on her occasional frustration at the distance her boyfriend maintains from her family. Over Christmas, he would be leaving town for two weeks to visit his family, and Shelby and Christopher would spend the holiday alone. They had no plans, and Shelby felt pressure to make Christmas festive for her son. "On the other hand," she said of her boyfriend, "he's still attracted to me physically through all my body changes, and he and Christopher are so fond of each other. They have a very sweet relationship." Her boyfriend usually visits on Sunday mornings. "A huge wave of relief comes over me," Shelby said. She can relax or do dishes or take a nap. "I feel, like, Wow, this must be what it's like to have a husband every day of the year. I can do my own thing, but I love to just stand across the room and watch them together."

WHEN I NEXT spoke to Daniela, in late January at the end of her two-

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week wait, she was on a business trip. Her voice sounded weak and tired. She had just gotten her period. And the new man had finally made it to New York, but the visit had been a disaster. "I guess it has to do with the fact that I'm going through this," she said. "You kind of protect yourself. He was saying he was one of these what he calls old-fashioned guys: if his wife is going to have a child, he's going to be in the waiting room until the child is delivered and washed. I'm, like, wait a second. Don't you think you should go through this together? He said, 'No, I'm going to faint, and I'm going to throw up.'"

His visit to New York was supposedly a business trip, but in the end he didn't have much to do. "He's not cut out to be a provider, to be a protector or to be a patriarch," Daniela said. "He can't be there when the child is born; he can't make the living for the family. Maybe what bothered him is that he couldn't offer what he would like to offer. So he made it, like, taste bad."

I had never heard her so low. "Everything is so hard, and it's so degrading," she said. "You always think that you'd go through this with somebody that would support you. You don't think about having all the problems, let alone doing it on your own."

I was humbled by the grueling ordeals many women had undergone on their paths to single motherhood: years of trying to conceive, hormone treatments, hospitalizations, miscarriages, untold thousands of dollars spent — all without a partner to buffer the strains and disappointments. And being a single parent is no easier: whether it's a matter of trying to get a photo taken of you with your child or finding a way to shower without worrying that you won't hear your baby cry or accommodating a difficult work schedule, being a single parent can require compromises and jury-rigging that might awe a person with a partner. A longtime employee of New Jersey Transit spent a year working the 5 a.m. to 1 p.m. shift, which meant waking her daughter at 4 and walking her across the street in her pajamas to a neighbor's house. Her daughter slept on the sofa until the neighbor woke her and took her to school with her own children. "It's probably harder than you ever think it's going to

be," this mother told me. After a moment, she added, "My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner." It is a measure of how deep the pull toward motherhood can be that thousands of women from many different walks of life are making this choice, using reproductive and communications technology in ways that not only break with tradition but also make it seem obsolete.

Daniela did another insemination in early February, this time mingling the sperm of her Chinese-Peruvian-Italian with another donor from the same bank who had proven fertility. It didn't work. Neither did Karyn's first try. When I spoke with her early this month, she was preparing to move back into her apartment, whose renovation would soon be complete. There was still one last chance to become pregnant before her 40th birthday in April. "In a perfect world, I'll get pregnant this cycle," she told me. "I'll start working the

first week of April before I'm officially really pregnant, and we'll live happily ever after."

When I spoke to Daniela a couple of weeks ago, she had recovered from her disappointments and had just been inseminated again with the sperm of a French-English-German-Scandinavian attorney with proven fertility. She had also struck up an e-mail correspondence with another woman on the Single Mothers by Choice Listserv. They had met for a drink and hit it off, and Daniela planned to go with her to a Single Mothers by Choice meeting. She seemed reconciled to the fact that it might take a while to become pregnant, but she was no less determined. Her fellow would-be single mother is 36, Daniela told me, but her situation is complicated by a boyfriend who has children.

"Why don't you tell him you've got some kids, too?" Daniela recalled suggesting to her friend. "They're just not born yet." ■

ANSWERS TO PUZZLES

OF MARCH 12, 2006

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