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## [Interview with a Woman Who Had Two Kids by Anonymous Sperm Donor](#)

By [Jia Tolentino](#) | [June 26, 2013](#)



*Maggie is a 44-year-old woman who lives in London.*

**Let's start from the beginning—what was your life like growing up?**

So, I was born in 1968 in London, the oldest of three sisters. Our dad left us when I was about six or seven, and our mom had a hard time of it. No one was getting divorced yet, so she was a bit alone in that—and she had elderly parents, plus us, plus she worked, plus it was the mid-seventies in England. Everything was just grim!

**Grim like?**

Like, on Saturday mornings we'd have to do the cleaning and there'd always be a row. My sisters and I would fight all morning and cry all afternoon, and mum would cry and none of the cleaning would get done, and it was all this slow process of dealing with the trauma that Dad had left.

**How much were you conscious of your dad's absence?**

There were five seats around our dinner table, and before my dad left, the kids always sat on the side benches and the parents at either end. But afterwards, I found myself quite literally taking his place. I knew my mum was struggling. I saw that she was devastated.

And my dad didn't handle it very well. He bought a flat on the other side of town, never had a single toy in the house. We slept on camp beds when we were there. There was lots of him calling my mum, shouting about money. My mum didn't bad-mouth him, but we were aware that, ultimately, he left us and that she wouldn't.

**So her example of single parenthood was really important to you.**

Oh, yes. My mum was very strong and competent and emotionally intelligent. I saw that a life doesn't all hang on being married, it doesn't all hang on a man.

**Has this affected your own relationships?**

Surely, although I can't pin down how. Relationships have always been somewhat of an unknown quantity for me. I'm quite a self-contained person anyway—when I was little my

sisters would be out playing with friends and I would be inside with my books. So, as a teenager, I just focused on school. And then when I was in university, my mum was quite unwell, and so I used that as a welcome excuse to not go out and [hook up](#) with lots of inappropriate boys. And then later, I went abroad quite a bit and kept having those moments when I thought, “This is the point where it all starts.” But it never did. My few relationships just never went anywhere.

Still, I wanted a family. So in my thirties I started to do [Internet dating](#), singles dinners, just hoping something would happen.

**Was it more important for you to find a romantic relationship or to [find someone](#) you could have kids with?**

It’s always been much more important to me to have children than to be married. I’ve never had the experience of imagining myself in a certain dress, with a certain centerpiece. Maybe I never gave myself permission to have that fantasy because I just felt like “Me? No, no.” But really it’s always been children that were more important.

I have to say, I think it’s so great that women can now really start to say, “I’m not sure I want kids,” that they don’t have to get sucked into a life they don’t want. Because for me, it was so plainly obvious that I wanted kids, such a sure thing. And I can’t imagine going through this whole process and not being sure.

**When did you decide to stop dating and just think about your options?**

I think in my twenties I started to consider other options. Relationships were not happening, and I was doing that thing where I was reading madly for dumb advice—am I too picky, am I not picky enough, am I too bossy, too nice, what is it?—and it was soul-destroying. I started to put these ideas in my back pocket, [about adoption](#) and sperm donation and gay friends who were interested in having children.

Then, when I was 34, my middle sister had her first child. She’s very happily married and I was always so happy for her, but when she had her baby it was very difficult—I felt like, “I’m supposed to do this first.” Like I’d accidentally picked up the script of someone else’s life and it was all reading like rubbish. Everyone was settling down and I was misfiring all over the place.

So I decided to do something about it.

**What made you choose sperm donation over the other options?**

It’s hard to adopt a child in the UK—very few children are given up for adoption here, and you have to look internationally, and it’s a very long road. And to have children with a friend seemed to be potentially tricky.

Also, my quasi-godmother’s niece had gone through the sperm donation process five years before. I didn’t know her personally, but just knowing that someone out there had done it, and it was all fine and good, was immensely reassuring.

**What’s it like to begin the process?**

Reasonably simple. You go to a clinic, meet with a counselor so they can verify that you are not a nutcase, and then you start fertility tests. This is where I found out about this virus called CMV, which I think about 90% of the population has had, and it’s no big deal normally but if you’re pregnant it can be very dangerous. So if you haven’t had CMV, you need to have a donor who is also CMV-free.

In practical terms, that meant that I essentially had no choice at all in the UK. There’s no payment for donors here—it’s illegal—and by the time I started the process they’d just made it illegal to have total anonymity. So the number of donors really dried up, and that’s how I ended up using a [sperm bank](#) in South Carolina.

**Are things done differently in the States?**

In the UK, the information you get is very minimal: your donor is 6 feet tall, brown hair, lives in the north. In America there are more clinics, more donors, more CMV-negative donors, and much more information.

They send you a book, literally, and you’re advised to go through and pick someone with similar coloring to you so that people aren’t always saying “Wow, how did your child get that amazing red hair.” So I just looked for a CMV-negative donor with my coloring and reported successful pregnancies, and when I found one, I was sort of like, “Good, let’s go.”

**You didn’t care about the other details?**

I didn’t. Sometimes I look back and think that I was quite ridiculous, spending so little time on picking a donor—like perhaps I should have tried to get my children some extra IQ points and artistic ability. But they’re so perfect to me as they are, I don’t know what I’d really be trying to achieve anyway.

**Same donor for both children?**

Yes.

**And you truly don’t remember details about him?**

I do remember that his written statement wasn’t *fantastic*—look at me being critical, maybe this is why I couldn’t keep relationships going, ha! I also remember that he had a baby photo, and he was a cute baby. I remember that. But that’s really it!

Maybe I was trying to prevent myself getting too engaged with the donor—it’s such an artificial process. You can look at it as if it’s a consumer choice, or you can look at it as if it’s a relationship, but it’s really neither, and I didn’t want to be picking my donor as if I was carefully selecting the best attributes for a new car. So I think I tried to remove myself from that part of the process. I have all of his information to share with my children [one day](#), but for now I rarely think about him except to think, “Thank you, you have given me something amazing.”

**Have you made friends with other women who’ve also had kids this way? Do they feel this way about their donors?**

I’ve got a few friends who’ve taken this route—met them on message boards and whatnot—and some feel like the donor is super important and some of us never think about them again.

But, if there’s anything that I regret, or feel slightly sorry about, it’s the fact that this donor is still donating. He actually has loads of offspring. In the UK, there’s a limit to the number of donor families that can be created, and I just thought it applied in the States too. But it doesn’t, and he’s got about 40 families out there—just that we know about.

**40 families! How do you know about them?**

There's a thing called the Donor Sibling Registry, and you can register with your code and share notes and ask things like "Anyone else suffering from hay fever?"

Luckily, most of the other donor families are in the US—all except for one family, who I literally bumped into *at the supermarket* down the street from my house.

**That's nuts. How'd you recognize them?**

You can put pictures on the website. But yeah, I'm 20 yards from my [front door](#) at Waitrose, and this woman comes up to me and says, "Are you Maggie?"

It turned out that she lived two blocks down from me, and at one point her child was scheduled to go to the same school as mine, in the same class even—and we decided, we need to make this *not* happen. I like this woman a lot, though. I think she's sensitive to this stuff in a way that only a very nice and thoughtful person could be—I think we'd be friends with each other under different circumstances.

**Did you find yourself having to answer for your pregnancy in a weird way? Did people know you'd conceived via sperm donor?**

My family knew and all my friends knew, but work people and neighbors sort of left it alone in this very polite English way. They didn't ask, and I didn't say anything, so I think with my first pregnancy they assumed it was an accident. If I were to do it all over again I think I'd be more confident and up-front. But everyone sort of figured it out by the time the second one came along, and truly, everyone has been really great about it.

**Did you always know you wanted two kids?**

No. It's so hard, having small children—and I knew it would be—but it's such a slog at first, and I didn't even consider it until my daughter was 18 months old and I started to get my life back. Then one day, my daughter did something cute and my mum, who really adores her, said, "You know, I think you should think about doing this again."

It was again this thing where I felt like I needed permission. And once I had that permission, I felt so lucky that really, I could just do it. I live in London, I have some degree of financial stability, I live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where you can sort of just *do anything*. How amazing to say, "I'm going to have one child like this," and then to say, "I'm going to have two." It felt almost transgressive to think that I could just build the family I wanted on my own.

**Have you talked to your oldest about her parentage yet?**

I've tried to make her story a normal part of our lives—that we don't have a daddy because mummy couldn't find a man to be her daddy, so she went to a clinic and found a donor. We read books about it and talk about it sometimes, but right now she's not interested—her best friend from school has two mums, so her life experience so far is that all of this is normal.

I do want to keep her knowledgeable about everything, because I don't want her to be caught out by a question she can't answer. I imagine she'll be content for awhile, then probably angry in the teenage years. I don't know what it's like to not know a side of your genetic inheritance, and I'll just have to support them both while they explore that, even if they get angry with me.

I hope, also, that they can process it together. I couldn't give them a father, but I could give them each a sibling, and I hope that helps.

**Do your children have any traits that have struck you as definitely coming from outside your own genes?**

My daughter has lovely long legs, which are certainly not mine—we have famously bad legs in my family. Both of them are also much more sociable than I was as a young child—they're vibrant, and love having fun with other kids, whereas I found play to be really boring and demanding. No unexplained talents yet, though.

**Do you ever think about dating still, or try to date?**

No, never! That's probably not a good thing, but I think I've switched off that part of me and I have no idea how to switch it back on, not that I want to at the moment—I have no emotional energy left for anyone else, or physical energy for that matter. Bliss for me is my double bed with no children in it.

I do try hard not to become Frumpy Mum though—it's the last bit of vanity left in me after all these years.

**What advice would you give to women who are considering having children via donor?**

I have advised a few people, and I've never told anyone, "You should definitely do this," but I think by the time people are confessing that they want to explore the idea, they're probably already there. The idea comes out as a whisper, but once they start talking and find out that the world's not going to recoil, they take ownership of it and start making plans.

And—it is absolutely exhausting and stressful to raise children on your own. But everything worth doing is exhausting and stressful at some point. If you're capable of contemplating this, you probably have a strong sense of your own abilities—and that's how you'll cope when you're managing a houseful of vomit, which is how it feels sometimes.

**How did the actual pregnancies go? Did you have any issues?**

I got pregnant really, really easily—but the first two, I miscarried. It was awful. And then with the third one, it was the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I was 35 or 36, and everything was completely fine until 16 weeks and then I discovered there was a genetic problem. So I terminated at 16 weeks, and it was this horrendous shock and trauma—I cried nonstop for 40 days, I didn't know how to stop, I felt blighted.

And then, my daughter, I conceived her within three months of that, and she was born within a year of that awful event. How amazing, it felt like. How lucky.

**Were you afraid while you were pregnant with her?**

Yeah, I was a bit neurotic. And then she was five weeks early and with no experience you don't know what anything means. Five weeks early, is it terrible? Is it okay? She took quite a while to catch up, so I did worry.

**Do you remember your first time holding her?**

Yes. What I felt was relief, absolutely. She's here, she's alive. I'm here, I'm alive.

(Previously: [Interview with a Person Whose Mom Came Out of the Closet.](#))