

Known and Unknowns

by Ilana Sherer

When people find out that we are expecting, they often ask how we decided who would carry the baby, as if this were a simple question with an answer that I could spit out between answering phone calls at work or over a latte. The truth is that it was an excruciatingly difficult decision, one that had no fair answer, and involved many hours of conversation and tears. We eventually came to the decision that my partner, “E,” would try to get pregnant first.

The origins of the sperm were much simpler. Our friend “B” offered to be our donor. He is kind, brilliant, and the type of trustworthy and empathic person we hope our child will be. We already had a loving, close relationship with him and jumped at the chance to welcome him as part of our chosen family. He also looks like he could be my partner’s brother. They both have beautiful blue/green eyes and light brown hair and white skin that burns easily in the sun. We are all Eastern European Jews, but I have kinky curly dark hair and olive skin that makes people ask if I am mixed, or assume that I am Arab or Latina or Italian. My large extended family delights in each new baby’s arrival, discussing whether he will have the same curls or she will share the same dark features, and my cousins swap tips on grooming our unruly hair. The choice to use B as our sperm donor meant that there will likely be no question that this baby does not look like my side of the family at all. I mourned that loss, and prepared myself for the inevitable, loaded questions from strangers about whether I was the nanny or my child looked like my husband.

Then, after harrowing months of trying to conceive without success, my partner and I decided to look into anonymous donors. We felt in some ways that we were losing this tight family connection we had built with our donor, and promised he could still be in our child’s life. At this point, though, the anxiety of achieving pregnancy trumped the desire to use a known donor. My partner assigned me the job of choosing a few donors from their online profiles, and I entered into the search engine that I was looking for an olive-skinned, curly haired, dark eyed man to create a child that would look more like a mix between E and myself. We felt grateful for technological advances and acknowledged our privilege to be able to carefully plan our family, but also felt the awkwardness of ordering our baby’s genes from a donor list catalogued by physical characteristics.

The men who fit my search criteria did indeed look like me (at least in their baby photos), and were healthy and fit, but they had ethnicities and races that did not match our own. Our favorite donor was a man who was part Palestinian. A few other favorites had Latino heritage, and another was Native American. These men’s sperm would indeed help us to create a child with features similar to both my partner and mine, but it would also require us to acknowledge the heritage and cultural background that would belong to our child, but not to us. We were well aware of the long histories of violence perpetrated on people from our donor’s background by people from our background and the current

privilege that we received from our whiteness that they perhaps did not. We knew about the erasure of culture from some of these communities by taking infants to be raised with White adoptive or foster families.

We were uncomfortable with the cultural appropriation when people who look like us celebrate communities of color in purely symbolic ways without engaging in the work that it takes to be a White ally and face very real currentday racism. When it came down to making this decision, my partner and I just could not justify continuing this sort of oppression by using their ethnic features to create a child who would grow up in a Caucasian family without sharing in the culture of their heritage.

Fast forward to October, when I first heard the story of the white Ohio couple who mistakenly conceived with sperm from an African American donor. I was of course shocked and embarrassed to hear that the parents of a healthy lovely bi-racial child would sue for wrongful birth, but I also

understood and respected the challenges they articulated and the unpreparedness they felt in raising their bi-racial child. In my perspective, they should be able to sue for breach of contract as they did not receive the sperm they had selected, but the manner they articulated the issue as a wrongful birth suit was absolutely heartbreaking. At the same time, I am glad that they did name the same struggles that many of us (white prospective parents) go through when choosing a sperm donor. So often we see public figures and celebrities adopting multi-racial children without comment, yet presenting their family as “race blind” is ignoring the reality of institutionalized racism. We felt that as a white couple, using a donor of color would feel like we were intentionally trying to exotify our family and using white privilege to appropriate and potentially whiten another’s cultural heritage.

In the end, we bought sperm from a donor whose ethnic background matched our own, but whose looks matched my partners’. And then, in another twist of fate, we decided to try one last time with our known donor...and it worked! By the time this article goes to print, we should be the happy parents (and donor uncle) of our first baby. Last week a friend at work remarked to me that E and I have such beautiful features—she can’t wait to see what our baby looks like, conveniently forgetting its genetic origins. And I realized that for some, our family is just so normal that there is no question that this baby will be completely mine.

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