

ALSO BY HEATHER TOSTESON

Visible Signs

*The Philosophical Transactions of Maria van Leeuwenhoek,
Antoni's Tochter (1668-1696)*

Hearts as Big as Fists & Other Stories

God Speaks My Language, Can You?

The Sanctity of the Moment: Poems from Four Decades

Breathing in Portuguese, Living in English

GERMS OF TRUTH

*Stories about families of all ages, stages, orientations—
and sperm banks . . .*



HEATHER TOSTESON

Wising Up Press Collective

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I

WE'RE ALL DONORS HERE



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DONOR

They ask you to say why you're doing this—and wait, with their pens poised, like it's a contest or something. Best cum wins was how I went into it—but it's different. Not so anonymous. The interviewers look at this book of movie stars to see who you most resemble. They review your check list and correct it as they see fit. When I hesitated about ethnicity, the woman interviewing suggested I put in everything. "Nobody's pure," she said. "Most of our clients like it that way." She's darker than me by four shades—but I chose to see it for what it was, a dis. I'm mixed, there's no denying it, mixed up, but skin color isn't a big part of it. Ethnicity either. What would it matter here if I listed myself as Pakistani or Sri Lankan? She consulted her book of movie stars again. That's what I put down, with a little Swedish thrown in for good measure.

"You're going to say I look like The Rock?" I asked her. "He's mixed. My brow's as broad, my nose as straight."

She looked me up and down. "I'm thinking more like Gael García Bernal," she said.

"I'm not Hispanic."

"Body type," she said without looking up.

I'm a senior at Emory. Pre-med. My parents would die if they knew I was doing this. It's my way of covering the cost of Victoria's abortion. I guess she'd kill me too if she knew what I was doing.

But I haven't been able to come up with a faster and more private way of getting the money. And, to be honest, I'm curious. I plan to go into an MD/PhD program concentrating on endocrinology and genetics. As far as I know, there's nothing to worry about here. I don't have a brother or sister with Downs or dwarfism or juvenile diabetes or cystic fibrosis or muscular



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SYNECDOCHE

I told Celeste if she wouldn't change her mind about this, she had to leave the final choice up to me. Unless she wanted to go it alone. I wasn't sure it was a bluff. She wasn't either.

"There's no question of fault here, never is," Dr. Jagerson said to us before he showed us the test results. "There isn't even any question of infertility. Your sperm, Ralph, are mobile and plentiful. Your ovaries respond to Clomid, Celeste."

"Is it just that I have an irritable uterus?" Celeste asked.

"No. Your uterus is normal. I have no doubt with an implanted embryo you could carry to term."

"What is it then?" I asked, eager to get to the point. It's been a rough year what with teaching seven composition classes as an adjunct at two colleges, frantically applying, like thousands of others, for every tenure-track position in the country—and Celeste with that thermometer in her right hand and her phone in her left, with me on speed dial, expected to drop everything when her blood heats up. "You promised as soon as you got your degree it would be my turn," she insisted.

"Bluntly," Dr. Jagerson cleared his throat and looked at the wall chart of a pregnant woman on the opposite wall, "there's a chemical antagonism between your sperm and her egg. They repel rather than attract."

"Like magnets?" I asked, my body filling with giddy air. I could see the little Scottish terriers scooting across the paper. I couldn't keep from smiling.

My wife, who is one of the most lovely beings on earth when things are going her way and a Siberian tiger when they're not, began to lift her upper lip. "This is no laughing matter, Ralph."

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MAGICAL THINKING

I don't know what I feel about it. I mean, I appreciate the concern, but it also made me feel weird. The woman's voice reminded me of this social studies teacher I had in middle school, Mrs. Jefferson, low and calm and clear. Even when we were talking about things like racism, sexism and genocide. I kept waiting for her to laugh like Mrs. Jefferson could, with this deep rumbling laugh that always made me feel safe. But of course the woman from the sperm bank, Melissa, didn't. She wasn't calling to make me feel safe. She was calling to alert me, to let me know that the rate of miscarriage with the donor I'd chosen was unusually high. In the last six months, since they first listed him, seven women had miscarried before seven weeks. I'm not sure if she included me in that number. I did report it, but now that I am sixteen weeks into my first real pregnancy, it feels like miscarriage was too strong a word for what happened back in October one week after my third injection and first implantation.

Now, if I were to lose Cynthia, I don't know how I would handle it. I recognize this feeling isn't going to get all that much better even after she is born. It may be the essence of parenthood. But I've decided I'm not thinking about parenthood, about the baby herself, until I can touch her. Until then it is a special kind of dream and a very precise kind of reality I'm living one day, hour, second at a time. Her name is part of the dream. The cream I rub on my belly is part of the reality. I decided this before I tried again.

But when Melissa from the sperm bank told me about all this—about how they were going to pull this donor until they learned how my pregnancy and that of the other woman who is still in gestation a few weeks ahead of me turn out—I suddenly had this very odd feeling, like I was floating above myself and looking down at myself at the same time and also looking down

at all the other women who were carrying or aborting half-brothers and half-sisters to this child who is so privately, so uniquely and only mine. Even if I refuse to imagine her at this time, I experienced a whole different mode and depth of knowing when I saw all these other women carrying babies as close genetically to each other as she was to me.

I mean when you go to a sperm bank, you have to realize that sperm is like money, it gets handled by a lot of people but is essentially impersonal. It's what you use it for that gives it meaning. There was a joke law recently passed in Maryland that defines every egg and sperm as a person, and suggests we make it a crime to waste a single one. And then there are these laws they're wanting to pass with no sense of humor where you force an ultrasound probe up into the vagina of a woman who is already feeling violated by life in the deepest way. Are they going to pass a law that embryos and fetuses can't leave the womb when they damn well please too?

These questions are all easier to think about than those seven women who, *at the very same time as me*, are using the same sperm douche as me, and are waiting, just like me, for something absolutely unique to happen to them. I think of those mass marriages Reverend Moon used to conduct, the aerial views you could see in *National Geographic*, so you were just concentrating on the pattern, like you would a herd of gazelles circling to escape a cheetah. There's a distance at which life looks redemptively orderly. Inhumanly so.

There were only two things I really cared about when I chose the sperm donor. I wanted somebody who seemed resilient, who'd already had some challenges in his life and had been able to bounce back. And I wanted to know he was stone cold sober and chemical free when he jerked off. I called specifically to ask about that. How complete was the drug panel? How often and when was it given? I wonder what the other women were looking for—and whether, when they lost their first dream of motherhood *that* was what they saw themselves as losing: a particular hair color or texture, physical build, an IQ, a curriculum vita, sobriety or can-do-ness. Or was it some barely formed sense of their new self they saw swirling so vividly in the toilet bowl or soaking through their sanitary pads? Someone who finally had exactly what she needed to be the person she wanted to be—and then losing it. When they wrapped themselves in their own arms, crying, or refused to do so—who were they comforting or ordering to buck up and get on with it?

I called my obstetrician after I talked with Melissa from the sperm bank. Dr. Laverne is great. She just suggested I come in for my next regular



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PROGENY

The other day out of the blue my mother asked me if I wanted to know my biological father. Maybe it's because it's my last year home and it's part of her holding on while I'm moving on. Like I couldn't start doing this on my own now that I'm eighteen. Evading, as usual, the *real* issue. She doesn't realize that I'm taking care of that on my own too.

My mom is a psychotherapist and prides herself on her insight, but maybe she should look outside herself more often. I know she feels like she's making this big gesture—acknowledging that there really is a biological father, that it wasn't the immaculate conception and my adoptive father, Bill, isn't Joseph to her Mary. Maybe it is just a natural identification since her own name is Mary. For years she kept insisting that I call Bill "Daddy"—until Bill himself asked her to let up.

I remember exactly when Bill came into our lives: April Fool's Day, 1999, the day after my fifth birthday. We were at the health food store. My mom was buying tea tree oil to see if it would work on my impetigo. Bill was floundering a little after his divorce, trying to decide if he wanted to stay in family law, change specialties, or change careers completely. My mom and I gave him the answer in one package.

The case he won for her, actually for them, was precedent setting. They've both become Christian since then, not evangelical or anything, that would be too hard to reconcile, I think. Episcopalian fits them, acknowledges their history and also holds it at a polite distance. But it's hard for me to get a biblical analogy for my own situation, whatever they feel fits theirs.

You see, I am a sperm bank child that my mother arranged to conceive while she was in a lesbian partnership. The question of whether it was a long-term committed relationship was what brought Bill and my mom

8

WE'RE ALL DONORS HERE

"You are essential to our success," they told us in the training course. "We're a non-profit, sure, but we need to break even. We provide a service that is half animal science, half romance. The romance is the clincher for everyone concerned. We need these guys to keep coming back—and much as they think it's for the cash, and tell anyone who asks the same, they're bound to experience some push back, some remorse. It's your job to make them seem attractive, genuine, a little noble."

Noble for jerking off twice a week to a porn video or a porn magazine in an empty room? I think.

"For jerking off all by their lonesome for a full year. Don't think it doesn't get to them. They feel virile at first. After awhile they can feel perverted, exploited. Your job is to write them up so they, and our clients, see them as loveable, *dateable*."

"Three-quarters of our clients are lesbians," a woman in army fatigues and a buzz cut, whose first name is Lacey but who prefers to be known as Wilson, protested.

"They're pretty adept by now at making gender translations," Delores said. She's our trainer. Delores is gorgeous. Long curly black hair down to mid-back, brown skin, tight jeans and a tight sequined T-shirt. She's a performance poet in her real life—but her poems are all stories, she emphasizes. She has an MFA from San Francisco State. She's here because her boyfriend has a three-year post-doc at Emory. He's in neuroscience and is going to be their financial bulwark and ballast, she says.

"And they're susceptible. You'd be surprised. We were. Our sales went up dramatically when we began including the interviews. The donors' own narratives weren't half as effective. The guys came out, well, like you

might expect. Like guys. Self-absorbed and a little boastful, or terse and flat. But when *we* described their physical appearance (muscular or tall, thin or broad shouldered, dimples, long lashes, a little tattoo showing under a neat blue shirt, a swagger or contagious laugh) or their attitude (withdrawn but slowly warming up, especially when talking about a beloved mother, grandmother, or younger sister; or brash but also self-aware with a keen sense of humor) something changed all around. The orders came rushing in. The guys completed their contracts and brought in referrals.

"And we, my dears, all of us starving writers, became indispensable," Delores said with a broad inclusive gesture to the four of us, which set her sixteen glittering bangles ringing. "But this is the course they don't give you in college or grad school, the one that puts a transforming gloss on real life. I need to tell you before we begin, it's contagious. It begins to infiltrate your whole life and, I'm sorry to say, your writing. Bid adieu to MFA angst and arid superiority—as if the meaninglessness of the universe is your own private secret. Think *juicy*. Two adjectives where once you used none. Think cute, adorable, charming, magnetic. Think women's romance fiction. Think prepubescent girls gushing over Justin Bieber."

We began to look at our hands, the door.

Delores, who knew her audience, looked at us with a gentle smile. "It's not *that* bad."

It was primarily a writing class. We were paired off in twos and asked to write a description of each other, from wide forehead and widow's peak to heart-shaped mouth and sensuous lips, arched or straight brows, strong or pointed chins. Hair texture, not just color. Touchable was a texture. Clothes, hipster or Green Peace, Occupy Wall Street or Goizueta Business School wasn't enough. Black pants, tight, with a beige metrosexual cardigan or green zippered hiker's pants and a plaid shirt.

We also had an interviewing class. We were taught how to create a comfortable interview environment, even in a fairly sterile office. A plant on a window sill—lucky bamboo or a flower without much scent, like carnations or daisies. Kleenex. A water heater, tea, real cups. Cookies on a plate. A warm but neutral expression.

We were told to tell them right off that our job was to get to know them so we could write a warm and positive description of them that would help interested clients know why *we* thought they would be a good choice for progenitor of that client's son or daughter.



II

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?



8

THE AIR YOU BREATHE

I know many people disapproved of my parents' choices. The psychiatrists and psychologists I was sent to regularly in my teens to treat my severe agoraphobia and social anxiety all made it clear—explicitly or implicitly—that they did and that they found in those choices of my parents sufficient cause for all my symptoms. My last three lovers might concur. I myself am not so sure.

Consequently, I've found it is generally wiser not to share the particulars of my upbringing anymore. This isn't denial. It just doesn't help me clarify my own responses. Certainly, I know I was shaped, permanently, by the events of my late childhood and prepubescence. I believe I would have been whatever choices my parents made. I'm not sure I see that formation as negatively as did Drs. Robinson, Freed, Smith, Dalton, and Ellis.

But it came up this afternoon in the conference about Sophia Greene. I found myself taking her side—to the surprise of everyone at the table. Sophia is fifteen. Her sister Chloe is seventeen and in severe heart failure. She is on a transplant list, but is very low on it because of uncontrollable pulmonary hypertension. Chloe is eligible for hospice, to her mother's great distress, but that only involves a weekly nurse's visit and monthly social worker's visit. She doesn't like staying home alone, and it also worries her mother if she does. Chloe isn't eligible for home health because she is mobile and able to care for herself. She is in virtual school. Her mother wants Sophia to go to virtual school with her sister Chloe this year so they can have as much time together as possible.

The girls are close and Sophia is fine with this plan. Sophia is a smart girl, extroverted and generous, and her homeroom and English teacher Annie Hughes's pet. Annie Hughes is the one who has insisted on calling in



8

SWEET SIXTEEN

It started five years ago with my niece, the oldest of my sister Helen's children. My niece (my only one) and I had a good relationship and I wanted to mark it by doing something special to celebrate her turning sixteen. To mark as well, I guess, that at forty-eight I was relinquishing all hopes, however vague, I had ever had of motherhood myself and that these five nephews and one niece of mine were my only live connection with the future. It was time, I decided, for me to know them and for them to know me as real people, not roles.

My sister Helen was delighted by the suggestion. "God, yes," she said immediately. "Take her to the moon for all I care. I'll even understand if you leave her there." I think they had been fighting over driving privileges—or was it dishes?

My niece Barley (a family name on her father's side) and I decided on Paris instead of outer space. We talked for months beforehand about it—where she wanted to go (the Louvre, Les Halles, the Eiffel Tower, a fashion show, a barge on the Seine and a bookstall beside it, the Folies Bergère). She came back with a trendy haircut, an expensive scarf, a new platonically long-distance boyfriend of Algerian descent, and a delightful aspiration to follow my own career path into high stakes consulting, even if it would require a major preliminary investment in time and hard labor to raise her grade point average, which she did. She's now at Boston University, graduating magna cum laude next month. "Not summa, Aunt Holly," she says apologetically.

"I couldn't be prouder if you were my own daughter," I assure her. And for all I know, it's true. "What's your next step?"

A job search from the luxury of my Milwaukee apartment, if my partner Larissa agrees to keep a detached but benevolent eye on her. I will



8

TARGET FIXATION

If there's one thing I've taught my son that will serve him really well in life, it's keep your eye on where you want to end up, not on what's in your way. I've seen too many guys crash when they don't. I taught him this for dirt biking and stock car racing, but I think it applies to life as well. We aim for what we're looking at. It's called target fixation. It's a physical response. You're racing around a track and the car next to you spins out and crashes and if you look at it, before you can think your own car is slamming into the metal, the wall, bursting into flames. *Keep your eye where you want to be.* If I've told my son once, I've told him a thousand times.

People were surprised when I had my son on his own dirt bike by the time he was five. He'd been riding a two-wheeler since he was three; he was ready. I explained this to my wife's family, but they still thought I was crazy. Life's dangerous, that's just a fact. It's how you take it on that makes the difference. You're never too young to learn that.

I should know. I came here from Tamaulipas by myself across the desert when I was twelve years old. My mom had six more kids to raise and my dad was dead. I was the oldest, so it was up to me to help her. My goal was really clear. I had my eye on more food for all of us. I worked in the fields, then construction. I still remember looking at the food on my shelf in that first apartment in Rio Grande, my amazement at what I'd been able to do: Feed myself until I was full. But I knew I had to do more. I joined the military when I was eighteen. Served in Vietnam. Got my green card. Got my GED. Became a citizen. Sponsored every one of my brothers and two of my sisters and paid their way. Now I work for the Border Patrol, fixing their motorcycles and jeeps so they can go out and catch people like me. Go figure.

You ask what I've kept my eye on through my life? I mean, after I was



8

DUTY BOUND

It's interesting how people are so eager to put words in your mouth. The more ambiguous the situation, the quicker they are. Take lingering death, for example. Or, more exactly, lingering dying.

"After all these months, years really, it must feel anticlimactic," my mother said coming in the front door as the men from the funeral home wheeled Sven out through the garage.

My mother has a taste for highs and lows. I have dedicated my life to everything that lies between these extremes, as close to the median as possible. "A tortoise has more bravura," is the way I heard my mother once describe me.

"My sweet certitude," Sven said last week as he rose to consciousness briefly before slipping back into the morphine haze that would see him through to his next, best, life. He didn't even have to search the room, he knew where I'd be sitting, in my armchair at the foot of the bed, facing him, the morning light from the window gleaming down on my book.

"Now it's *your* time, Laura," my best friend Justine said as she helped me make arrangements for the funeral. "Leif is on his own. You're going to learn to spread your wings."

"So you think champagne is in order?" I asked, looking up from my shopping list. "Or should we stick to coffee and tea? Mulled cider?"

I'd tried to discuss the arrangements with Sven, but he just yawned and said he would leave it up to me.

"Just don't get your hopes up about attendance, Laura," he warned me. "People have written me off for several years now." There was no rancor there. It was just a statement, a fact of life. Sven is—was—an engineer. He took calm satisfaction in facts, emotional as well as physical. We are who we



8

IT WASN'T MEANT TO END THIS WAY

It wasn't meant to end this way. That was all I could think. *It wasn't meant to end this way.* I felt so ashamed.

My friend Donna told me whatever I felt, whatever I wrote to relieve myself, *not* to push send. But I'm a passionate person—all Latinos are. Something touches our heart and it all pours out like a *chorro*—love or rage or despair or joy. Of course, I didn't listen. Of course I pushed that button. I knew it was a mistake, an irreversible one when I did it. But you hope, you know. Even at your wildest, your most childish, you hope.

I had never expected to feel this way again. Sitting there, reading that message over and over on the computer screen, I wished I never had.

For the past year, my son Luis has been making plans to have me move to Orlando where he lives now with his wife Sharon. She is expecting. He wants me to take early retirement to help them with the baby. Sharon is a lawyer and will want to keep on working. I told him, "I'm not retiring without full benefits." My friends think that it is ludicrous that I'm even considering for a minute giving up my job in the clinic to play nanny for my grandchild. I am a family medicine physician and work in a county public health clinic. I don't make a huge salary, but it is nothing to laugh at either. But I can understand Luis's reasoning. It is customary in our country. And my son doesn't think I have that long to live, that my talking about retirement is actually a form of denial. He also does not like the habits I have fallen into in the last ten years, the way I go to bed by six in the evening, seven at the latest, then get up at four to watch the *telenovelas* I have TiVoed before going to the clinic at seven.

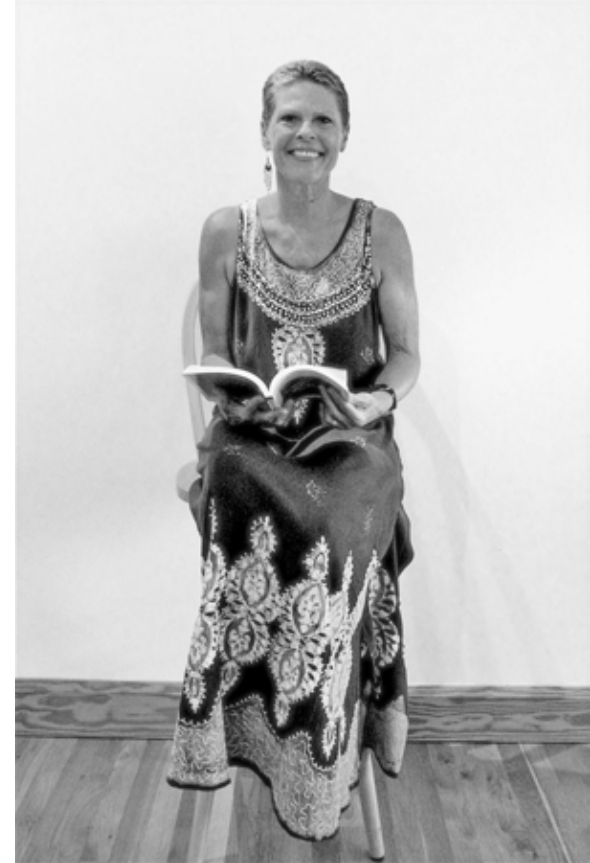
"That's despair, Mamí."

"I love my job, my little Cariño who treats me as the center of his

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