



Going Home

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Going Home

Short Stories about Egg Sharing,
Inspired by Research

*Stories by Becky Tipper with
an introduction by Leah Gilman*

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Dr Leah Gilman, The University of Manchester

This collection of specially commissioned short stories spans the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. They are the creation of award-winning author, Becky Tipper, working in collaboration with researchers at The University of Manchester. The stories are inspired by findings from two research projects exploring the experiences of egg and sperm donors in the UK.

These stories are based on what women in our research told us about their experiences of donating eggs in exchange for reduced cost IVF treatment. In places, the stories reflect themes that arose in our interviews time and time again. At others, they are inspired by the narratives of just one woman. However, although they draw inspiration from real people's experiences, these stories are also works of fiction; the characters are not participants and the precise combinations of events described do not reflect any one woman's narrative.

About the Research

The stories draw on interviews conducted with egg-sharers across two ESRC-funded qualitative studies; the first, my doctoral study of UK 'identity-release' egg and sperm donors, completed at The University of Edinburgh in 2017; the second, an ongoing project led by Dr Petra Nordqvist at The University of Manchester on the impact of donation for donors and their families. A total of 75 men and women volunteered to take

part in interviews across these two studies – sharing their experiences of donating egg or sperm and reflecting on what donating means to them and to others in their lives. Of these, sixteen had taken part in egg-sharing schemes at clinics across the country. Their experiences were varied. At the time of interview, some women were parents, some were not. Some women felt that they had now completed their journey of fertility treatment; others expected they would cycle again in the future.

Why fiction?

Sociologists are usually expected to write up their findings in the form of a research report (perhaps a journal article, book or policy paper), presenting their findings and discussing the implications for the likely reader (another academic, policy maker or practitioner). Such reports are good at summarising and reviewing research data but that is not our intention here. Through fiction, we instead aim to provoke questions about egg-sharers' experiences and provide a way for people to imagine what it might be like to 'go home' after the donation and to reflect on being a donor in the years that follow. They are intended as a tool for thinking oneself into possible scenarios or futures and for exploring different ways of making sense of egg donation. We hope they will be useful for women considering egg-sharing or anyone interested in what egg-sharing might be like.

Something and Nothing

Addie's turning her bedroom upside down. She's thirteen next week and wants to paint it dark purple. The agreement was that Addie had to have a proper sort-out first, although Caron notices that a lot of things from yesterday's black bags bound for the charity shop have already worked their way back onto the shelves.

Caron hasn't thought about the book in ages. But there it is – among the piles of Lego and a vast collection of stuffed unicorns – the battered copy of *Our Story* they used to read when Addie was small. She remembers how Addie loved that book; loved being told how she came about: 'a nice man, your donor, gave us a seed and we grew you.'

Of course, Caron thinks, you never really know what kids make of it all. They still laugh about how, until the age of five, Addie called her donor her 'doughnut.' And then there was that time in the park when they'd seen a sycamore tree

showering its spinners down and Addie alarmed everyone in earshot by shouting at the top of her little voice, 'Look, a nice man is making babies with his seeds!'

Caron's not sure if it's finding the book that did it – or perhaps it's just Addie's age – but after hardly bringing it up it for years, this morning Addie is full of questions about her sperm donor. What did they know about him? Are there other children with the same donor? Could she ever meet him?

Back when they first explained everything, they did mention Caron's donation. 'Mummy gave away some eggs to help another family too,' they'd said, although Caron never made a fuss about it. After all, that wasn't part of Addie's story. And it wasn't a big deal – it had just seemed the right thing to do. A sort of karma. She and Gail weren't about to make a baby by themselves, and if you needed help it only seemed fair that you should give something back.

Besides, at the time there were so many other things to deal with and to explain. Little things, like when other parents assumed she or Gail was just Addie's aunty. And harder things – some that upset Caron even now – like that boy at nursery who couldn't get over Addie having one mum who dropped her off and another mum who picked her up. Caron remembers him meeting her at the door one day, his little eyes narrowed and stern. 'My nana said that's *naughty*,' he'd said. 'Having two mummies.'

Really, Caron's egg-sharing had seemed like the least of it. What mattered was the three of them – Caron, Gail and Addie – their little family. Even Caron herself has barely thought about it all this time, so it startles her now when Addie says, 'And do I have a brother or sister through you as well?'

'Well, it's not going to be your brother or sister, is it?' Caron says, her voice sharper than she intended. 'But, yes, the other family got pregnant. I don't know if they had a boy or a girl in the end.'

'They're *something* to me, though, aren't they?' Addie insists. 'They're not nothing. And will they be able to find us one day?'

'I guess so, when they're eighteen. Just like you could contact your donor.'

Caron can see how Addie might want to meet him (although two parents should be enough, she thinks, perhaps there's something about finding a 'dad' when you've never had one). But this is different; her recipient's child already has a mum.

So what exactly would that child want from Caron? They might need to know about her medical history, she supposes. But surely she put all that down on the forms.

'I'd just want to see them,' says Addie. 'My brother or sister or whatever. See what they look like. And wouldn't it be totally weird and cool if they looked like me?!'

'Well, you've got cousins who look like you, and you can't stand them.' The cousins have the same dark hair and bright blue eyes as Addie, but are sullen, monosyllabic and football-obsessed.

'It's years away, anyway,' Caron says. She hands a full bin bag to Addie. 'Is this one ready to go?'

Addie takes the bag from her mother and dumps the contents on the floor. 'I want to look through it again,' she says. 'Just to make sure.'

And Addie begins slowly to pick through the jumble of toys and books and too-small clothes. It had seemed like they were getting somewhere, Caron thinks. But now it looks as though they're right back where they started.

Pen Profile

It was impossible to write that letter to you back then – to tell you about myself and why I wanted to donate. Everything I put down sounded like I was writing a job application. And obviously, I wanted to sound nice and normal, to be someone that people might choose, because the egg-sharing made a big difference to us financially. Although of course I couldn't really say that.

It wasn't the only reason, though. I did feel for anyone who was in the same position as us. I wondered whether you'd been trying for a long time as well, maybe for even longer than we had. All those years of hoping and crossing your fingers each month, feeling like it was going to break you down. Whether it drove you crazy that you couldn't turn around for someone announcing they were pregnant, and how you'd try so hard to be happy for them. And at the back of it all, that slow, sinking realisation that it might never happen for you.

We probably went to the clinic for our transfers on the same day, didn't we? They tell you to have your bladder as full as possible for the ultrasound, but it was raining so hard and the whole world was drenched and sopping wet, which felt like torture. I thought that I maybe even saw you that day – I suppose you must look a bit like me if they matched us – dashing up the steps and shaking your umbrella, just as we walked out into the downpour.

I'd always hated the two-week wait, but that time seemed the closest I'd ever been to actually having a baby, and it was unbearable. I watched the news obsessively, anything to stop myself thinking about whether or not I was pregnant. In the end I don't know if it took my mind off it or wound me up more – the constant chatter about Brexit and the new prime minister, things that seem so long ago now.

I thought about you waiting then too. All the time, those lovely flowers you'd sent me to say 'thank you' were in my window, dusting the air with pollen so that the whole house smelled like honey. And I suddenly realised I was so glad that you were out there – how it took the pressure off because, for once, everything wasn't hanging on my own test result. If it didn't work out for me, at least you'd still have a chance.

But it did work out, thank God. And later, when they told me you'd had a little boy as well, I was over the moon for you.

Kai came four weeks early, but every year I always think about your boy's birthday the next month. And often, when I've shared pictures of Kai, I've wondered if you're doing the exact same thing – those very first photos when he was brand new, everyone proud and exhausted. Or him grinning in his high-chair, his face smeared with mashed carrots. Or dressed up in tinsel and sheets for a nativity. Or standing by the front door on his first day of school, all tiny in his uniform.

And now he's stubbly and probably taller than you, about to head off to university or start work, and you can't believe where the time's gone.

I do think of it more and more lately – with the boys about to turn eighteen – that your son might look me up. I'd be so curious to see him, and I wonder how he and Kai would get on, if they'd be alike and have things in common.

He might decide not to of course, and it's his choice. But if he ever did, I wonder if I'd get to meet you then as well. And I imagine, sometimes, what it would be like. If we'd sit down and have a cup of tea and chat about all the years that have gone between. If you'd be different to how I've pictured you.

And I think about how I had no idea what to say to you back then, but if I saw you now, maybe we'd feel like we'd always known each other.

Inside Out

It's been more than two years since Lucy started her first cycle. She still remembers how strange it was, the way it turned you inside out – seeing all those things you'd never realised were going on in your body. She'd been so surprised to discover what her follicles actually looked like, for instance. And she remembers how after they took her eggs (sixteen of them in the end – eight for her and eight for the other family), she and Matt had been in hysterics because it was so odd to think about those little bits of themselves getting it on in a dish back in the lab.

It was ridiculous really, but even through the injections and all the poking and prodding, she'd loved it. Everything fascinated her. Sometimes, she'd thought, it seemed almost magical.

She remembers lying with her legs in the air while the doctor explained how they'd sandwich the embryo between two air bubbles. The embryo was so small that it would be invisible

on the ultrasound, he told her, but the bubbles show up clear and white. And he'd sucked the embryo up into a long, wispy plastic tube.

Matt had held her hand and they'd watched the screen: the catheter tube snaking in, the glowing bright bubbles like two little stars. The dark space in-between that was their embryo.

'In you go, back inside your mum,' Matt said quietly.

And in that second it had seemed really possible for the first time – that she might become someone's mum, and her heart almost broke for love of that tiny thing, still too small for anyone to see.

Even before she took the test, Lucy knew she was pregnant. Matt didn't quite believe it until he actually saw the stick, but she hardly needed the two little lines to appear.

They kept it to themselves as long as they could, only telling their parents and Lucy's sister. But it was right at twelve weeks, just as they thought it was safe to make it official, that the bleeding started.

At first, the midwife said it wasn't necessarily anything to worry about. Just rest for a few days, she said. Lucy spent the whole weekend in bed, her hands on her belly, saying over and over, 'Just stay in there a bit, pet. It'll be all right.' Although she knew deep down that there was nothing she could do. As the midwife said later, it simply wasn't meant to be that time. Sometimes these things just happen.

They'd never have been able to afford the second try if not for the egg-sharing. Afterwards, when nothing came of it, she did wonder if they'd rushed things and whether she should have waited a while between cycles. Although when you're 35 you can't wait around forever.

If she could have donated again they might have tried a third time. It had seemed so unfair that she couldn't – she knew both her recipients had conceived, so her eggs must have been good, mustn't they? But by then the clinic had emailed to say she was over their age limit for donors, and thank-you-very-much for everything but they would no longer be able to keep her on their books. So that was that.

And Lucy thinks how strange it is that to look at her now, no one would know any of it had ever happened.

Matt didn't understand why she'd wanted to find out how the other pregnancies went. 'Best to let all that go now,' he'd said, and probably he was right, she was in no position to do it then.

But today she's ready.

She took the clinic's number off her phone ages ago, so she has to look it up again. As she waits and listens to it ringing, she thinks, yes, it's been long enough. Her life is what it is, and she's OK with that.

The woman who answers says she remembers Lucy. She asks how Lucy's doing these days, and says yes, she can tell her about the recipient families. She puts Lucy on hold for a few minutes while she looks it up. There was a boy for one family and a girl for the other, the woman says. Both born healthy and well last year.

Lucy puts the phone down, and it's a moment before she realises that the noise is coming from her – big, silly sobs bubbling up from deep inside. She never cries like this, she thinks. Not even back then. But the thing is, she's not crying for what she's lost or missed out on. Instead, it feels more like she's been given something. The fact of them, and that she did this, all of that is real and solid. Something to hold onto.

She might even meet them one day, mightn't she? And her heart does a little flip. For the first time, she lets herself really picture it, and just thinking of seeing them, of wrapping her arms around them and giving them a big hug, makes her feel like she's going to burst open.

It's probably best not to dwell on that, of course. She knows it might not ever happen. But even if she never saw them, they're still out there, aren't they? Because of her, there are two new people in the world, starting out on their lives.

And they'll do things she can't even imagine.

About the Authors

Becky Tipper's short stories, which often explore parenting and family relationships, have been published in magazines and anthologies, and her writing has won the Bridport Prize and a Society of Authors' Tom-Gallon Award. She also writes about fiction for theshortstory.co.uk, where she is Reviews Editor. Becky has a PhD in sociology and previously worked for several years in social research.



Leah Gilman is a sociologist in the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives at The University of Manchester. She completed her PhD on the experiences of 'identity-release' sperm and egg donors at The University of Edinburgh in 2017, prior to which she worked as a primary school teacher. Her research interests include family and personal relationships, childhood, creative research methods and research ethics.



Tell us what you think

This collection represents a new way of sharing research. As such, we are very interested to gather feedback from readers. Whether you are a potential or past egg-share donor or an interested member of the public, we would love to hear your views. In what context did you read these stories and how did you respond to them? How, if at all, did they change your thinking? Is fiction a helpful way to share research? For practitioners and stakeholders, how did you use this collection in your work and what impact did it have?

If you have any comments or questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch:

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