



# Known Unknowns

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# Known Unknowns

Short Stories about Known Egg Donation,  
Inspired by Research

*Stories by Becky Tipper with  
an introduction by Leah Gilman and Petra Nordqvist*

## Acknowledgements

We are hugely grateful to everyone who volunteered to take part in the research on which these stories are based. Without you, they would not have been possible.

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We would also like to acknowledge and thank Sarah Norcross and the Progress Educational Trust for allowing us to use the brilliant title of their webinar on known donation for our title.

# Introduction

Dr Leah Gilman, The University of Manchester  
Dr Petra Nordqvist, The University of Manchester

What does it mean to donate your eggs in order that someone else might have a child? What ongoing significance might such an action have in the life of the donor and their family and what difference would it make if you knew them? This collection of specially commissioned short stories explores these questions, focussing on the experiences of women who donate eggs to someone they know rather than, anonymously, to a stranger. It is intended as a sister publication to our first collection, *Going Home: Short Stories about Egg Sharing, Inspired by Research*. The stories are the creation of award-winning author, Becky Tipper, working in collaboration with researchers at The University of Manchester. They are works of fiction. None of the characters are intended to represent any particular person. However, they are inspired by the 'real life' accounts of known egg donation, generously shared with us in the course of two studies.

## About the Research

These stories are based on findings from two ESRC-funded qualitative studies; the first, Leah's doctoral study of UK 'identity-release' egg and sperm donors, completed at The University of Edinburgh in 2017; the second, the *Curious Connections* study, led by Petra at The University of Manchester on the impact of donation for donors and their families. A total of 76 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, fourteen had donated eggs to someone they knew (a family member, a friend or acquaintance) or someone they had gotten to know in the context of donating. Their stories are the inspiration for this work of fiction.

## Why fiction?

As well as writing up our findings in more expected academic formats, we have also chosen to share our findings in the form of short stories. Through these works of fiction, we hope that readers will be inspired to imagine egg donation from the point of view of donors who know the intended recipients of their eggs. We particularly hope that these stories will enable readers to explore how they might feel in the circumstances of our protagonists, such as witnessing a close friend's pain of infertility, meeting a baby born from their eggs, wondering how the traits of their relatives could be reflected in a friend's child or navigating the new relationships created by donation. Readers may find that these stories resonate with their own (past or imagined) experiences or they may see things very differently from the characters we have created. In either case, we hope that they are useful in stimulating imagination and discussion about the many possible ways in which people live and make sense of egg donation. In this way, we hope the stories might be a resource for anyone who is considering, or who has experienced, a known (or unknown) donation and also the relatives of donors or recipients. In addition, the stories are intended to support counsellors and other professionals who wish to explore such questions with their clients.

# 1

## Comings and Goings

### COMINGS AND GOINGS

Here, at your kitchen table, is where you've told her each time you were pregnant, wrapping it up like a delicate, strange gift – desperate to share your news with your oldest friend, but well aware of everything she's been through. In the last six years, while you've had three babies (none of them exactly planned), Claire's only had the rollercoaster of hopes raised and dashed, countless 'big fat negatives', and endless baby gifts and cards to buy for people at work as if the universe is just taunting her.

So when she tells you, cradling her coffee, that apparently she has premature ovarian failure and that her only hope is an egg donor, it's so obvious, you don't have to think twice: 'Have some of mine,' you say.

It's not like you need them yourself – you're only flushing them away each month. And Claire says she'll think about it. But you cringe later, worry that you sounded glib. As if it's so easy for you – almost throwaway – which isn't what you meant at all. When all you meant was that if you could do something to help her have a baby, of course you would.

You don't hear from her for a few days, but that weekend she rings and says she's talked about it with James. And yes, she says. If you're really happy, then yes, she'd like to do it.

You and Claire sit at the table and talk through all the ins and outs of it. Sometimes Nick joins you and Claire brings James over with her. You imagine what it will be like, talk about what it will involve. Will it be weird? you ask each other. No, you all agree. You don't think it will. Although if, in the end, it is – if Claire finds it too difficult to live with – you say you'd give her some space. Step back from the friendship if that's what she needed. Even though you've seen each other every few days for most of your lives and you can't quite imagine what it would be like without her.

It turns out everyone else has something to say about it, too. People tell you it's amazing, that you are amazing, and you don't know what to make of that – wouldn't it be remarkable if you hadn't offered? You get used to brushing off odd comments, like Nick's colleague who declares that he certainly wouldn't let his wife make a baby with another bloke. Even your mum, for all she loves Claire, can't see how Claire would want to carry a child that's not a blood relation to her. And you don't know what to say to that either.

But there are surprises too – your dad, ordinarily flustered by 'women's things', is enchanted by the idea. He'd never even realised this was possible. He reads all about it on the internet and takes to texting you his discoveries: did you know you were born with all the eggs you'll ever have? More than a million of them! That even though it's your egg, Claire's DNA will decide exactly how the genes are expressed. Bloody marvellous, he says, what they can do these days.

After all the preparation, once you've donated, everything moves quicker than anyone hoped. Claire loves being pregnant, billowing around in maternity dresses and planning the birth, and there's only a

week to go when James phones from the hospital to tell you that she went into labour late last night. They've had a baby boy, but Claire's lost a lot of blood, he says. And you hear the tremor in his voice and understand it's serious.

When you see Claire, you try not to show you're shocked by how pale she is. James' face is still stony with the fear that she might not even make it. But when she looks at Oliver, she's glowing – happier than you've ever seen her. She laughs and tells you they kept the placenta, as per her birth plan, even when it was all going to chaos.

Later, she shows it to you, before she plants it under a tree in Oliver's back-garden naming ceremony. It's in a Tupperware container and looks like a steak, shimmery and red and crawling with veins. You never dreamed of keeping your placentas and are quietly horrified. But while James digs a hole for the tree and your daughter reads a poem, you watch Claire crooning at Oliver – nuzzling his nose with hers and the sun lighting up her face. You think about this bloody thing that she grew him with, and all the blood she lost having him, and you realise how wrong your mum was – surely this is a 'blood relation' if anything is.

Your dad's not there that day. His illness comes out of nowhere and takes everyone by surprise, and he never even gets to meet Ollie.

It seems so unfair to lose him right now, but your mum takes comfort in Ollie's arrival. She says it's funny how things turn out, isn't it?

How sometimes there's a sort of balance to the world, with all its comings and goings.

From the first, your girls adore Ollie. Your eldest, Izzy, is delighted that she almost has a little brother, after wanting one for so long. As time goes by, the kids call themselves cousins, although you don't know if it's their way of making sense of the donation or because you and Claire are 'aunties' to each other's families anyway. And despite your worries, you don't lose Claire – in fact, she moves two doors down from you so you see more of her than ever. Sometimes you can't even quite remember why it all seemed so complicated in the beginning, why there was so much to say.

So eventually there's a day, years later, when your three girls and her boy (all gangly and barefoot and grubby with summer) clatter into your kitchen after playing in the garden and ask you to settle an argument. 'Will Ollie be bald as a grown-up?' Izzy asks. 'Because Granddad was, wasn't he? And doesn't it come through your mum's side?'

And it takes you a long moment to remember that this child – and the unkempt mop flopping over his eyes – is anything to do with you.

You remember your dad's shining cue-ball of a head, and how hilarious you found it when you were little, and you picture Ollie one day as bald as your dad.

'Yes,' you say, laughing. 'I suppose he will.'

It feels so brutal, though, to give a small, floppy-haired boy such information. You want to soften it somehow – reassure Ollie that it won't happen for years yet, or tell him that your dad made up for it with an impressive beard. You want to find a way to say, too, that you're glad Ollie carries this little trace of your dad, and isn't it strange, you want to say, to think of all the people who make us who we are – the ones we know, and the ones we'll never meet.

But while you're reaching for the right words, the kids are already traipsing back into the garden, not giving it a second thought.

'We're off to Ollie's,' the girls call back to you as the door swings shut behind them.

So that by the time you start to speak, they're already gone.

## 2

# Meeting Prue

## MEETING PRUE

Mel's got her hands full with the cake carrier and the bulky present. She'd probably be all right, but the boys' door knocker is high and fiddly, so as Mel's reaching for it, there's a terrible moment when the pavlova box starts to slip out from under her arm. She feels the heavy slop of the pavlova shifting inside the box – her stomach lurching in sympathy with it – before she regains her grasp. Thank god, she murmurs. It would be ridiculous if she dropped the thing before she even got through the door.

Although, to be honest, she has started to wonder whether a pavlova was a sensible thing to bring at all. When she mentioned it on the phone to her mum this morning, Mel's mum said surely it would have been more useful for Mel to cook them a dinner they could keep in the freezer. A lasagne, for instance. Which, Mel had to admit, made perfect sense. But it was too late by then.

It had seemed festive, anyway. And while she'd had no idea what to buy for the baby (in the end, a friend at work had recommended some kind of tummy-time mat), she did know what Colin and Kev would like. She's used passionfruit, which the boys love, and although the meringue's probably a little too chewy, she's quite pleased with how it turned out.

And it was apt, of course, given the whole Great British Bake Off thing, which has been their theme all year. They'd bonded over it at the very beginning, and often, when the four of them got together at the weekend, Kev would make one of that week's challenges, and they'd decide on their favourite contestants. No one was above tittering about soggy bottoms. Plus, all of them being fond of puns, they'd revelled in the fact that Chrissie was going to have a bun in the oven and that Mel was providing a dozen eggs. Colin even had 'Team Bake Off' t-shirts printed for them.

When Colin opens the door, Mel goes to hug him, but what with the present and the pavlova and the baby strapped across his front, they can't reach each other. 'Proper hellos in a minute!' he says as they squeeze through the hall, past the pram, into the living room. Colin takes Mel's pavlova – 'Aren't you clever?!' – and says he'll be back in a minute and that Kev's just making up a bottle.

Mel moves a pile of tiny clothes from a chair so she can sit down. As she waits, glancing around the room, listening to the boys moving about in the kitchen, it strikes her that their Instagrammable lounge is hardly recognisable under the clutter of baby things, including – she notices – a play mat that looks a lot like the one she's got wrapped up.

\*

The Bake Off team had started as a bit of fun, although when Mel looks back, it seems to her that it was more than just silliness. There was something special about it. The kind of connection you didn't find every day. She'd never imagined they would all click so well – as if they would have been friends anyway, if they'd happened to meet other than for the purposes of making a baby.

While Mel was making the pavlova yesterday, it did cross her mind that she could wear the t-shirt for her visit today. In the end, though, she'd decided that would probably be a bit much and had put it back in the drawer.

She hasn't worn it since the scan, actually, back when Chrissie was five months pregnant. The four of them had gone along, all wearing their t-shirts, although it had ended up in a bit of a muddle. While they were waiting, a nurse had thought Mel and Chrissie were the mums. (Perhaps, Mel suggested later, the nurse had known the parents were a same-sex couple and had just picked out the wrong two.) But in the moment, not thinking, Mel had blurted out to the nurse, 'Well, yes, we're sort-of-mums.' And Kev had pricked and said sharply that no, actually, he and Colin were the parents.

Mel had felt stupid, but there was no time to explain. Soon after that, the boys and Chrissie were ushered in, and then the nurse said there wasn't space for everyone, so Mel had had to wait outside. It had taken ages, though, so in the end she'd just gone home on her own and texted to say she'd catch up with them all later.

There'd been talk, at the beginning, of Mel coming along to the birth. But after what happened at the scan, she decided it was best not to, that she'd only be in the way.

The boys have kept her updated, of course, and they've already sent her all the first baby photos. Although, really, Mel's mum's been much more excited than Mel – her mum's already printed the photos out and put them up on her fridge.

Mel's mum thinks the donation's wonderful (as long as the boys know what they're letting themselves in for – she's fond of saying that if the baby takes after Mel they'll have a time of it). She knows the boys' baby won't be her grandchild, but she's delighted anyway, since – as she says – it's the closest she's likely to get.

It's not been so easy to explain it to Mel's nan, who thinks it's tantamount to giving away a baby. She's convinced it's a sign that Mel's broody, and if she's not, she will be after today. 'There's nothing compares with the feeling of holding your own baby,' she keeps saying.

But it isn't, is it? Mel's told her a hundred times that it's just an egg. Chrissie's growing the baby, but Kev and Colin will raise her.

It's not Mel's at all.

Although, the thing is, Mel's never actually met a baby who's related to her; her brother's got no kids and they've never had younger cousins. She knows the baby won't be hers, but it's funny when she really thinks about it – how this is the only child in the world who carries anything of her.

\*

When the boys come in, Colin hugs her at last, although Kev's got his hands full with the baby now.

Colin tells Mel how the birth went, how Prue is sleeping, and how, yes, he knows they'd always said it would be ridiculous to name the baby after someone on the Bake Off, but when they saw her for the first time, they realised she simply was a 'Prue'.

Prue finishes her bottle and Kev props her against his shoulder to pat her, although it looks to Mel that Prue spews most of the milk right back onto herself and Kev's shirt, where a dark, damp patch now clings to his skin. Mel can smell it from across the room and she tries not to inhale too deeply, although she notices that Kev doesn't even flinch as he wipes Prue clean.

Colin chuckles and tells Mel that they recently discovered that spitting up is also known as possetting. 'Kev made Mary Berry's lemon posset once,' he says. 'But somehow we haven't fancied it lately. Anyway, would you like to hold her?'

Kev suggests they should wait until Prue's finished digesting, which Mel would be quite happy with, but Colin's keen – 'She needs to meet her aunty Mel,' he says, and he leans in to lift Prue from Kev's arms.

'Do you know how to hold her?' asks Kev.

'I think so,' Mel says, although she can't remember when she last held a baby. It might even have been that time she met her neighbour's baby when she was fourteen. All she remembers is being instructed to be terribly careful about the head, so she's startled when Colin presents her with Prue – his hands under Prue's armpits and her little body dangling, which doesn't appear to support the head at all.

Once Prue is settled in Mel's arms – her tiny body heavy and delicate at once, ripe with sour milk – Mel peers at the scrunched little face.

Presumably, whatever Mel's going to feel, according to her nan, she'll feel now. She waits for it – a flood of love, a tickle of recognition – but there's nothing. Nothing except the start of a hot ache in her left arm, which she's holding tense in the effort to keep Prue's head supported.

'Don't you think she has Colin's nose?' says Kev, who must have been watching her watching Prue.

And Mel says yes, she can see that, although she can't. To be honest, she thinks, Prue doesn't have much of a nose to speak of – just a little nubbins with pinprick nostrils that look hardly big enough to breathe through.

## MEETING PRUE

As if she's sensed Mel's critical thoughts, Prue begins to grumble.

'Are you sure you're all right with her?' says Kev.

Mel nods and tries to readjust Prue, but this only makes things worse, and before Mel knows it, Prue has squeezed her eyes shut and opened her mouth wide to release an awful, heart-rending wail. A sound so vast that Mel can't believe it could come out of that little body.

Prue draws a momentary breath and then launches another piercing scream, and another, until the whole room is filled with her wails. It's relentless, the noise almost a physical thing – each wave of bawling smothers Mel and fills her up at once, so that she can't move or even catch her own thoughts. Prue's begun to flail her tiny fists against her own face now, and is squirming so vigorously that it seems entirely possible she might launch herself from Mel's arms and flop right onto the floor.

Mel looks desperately to the boys for some sort of help, but – thank god – Kev is already there, bending to scoop Prue up. As he does, Mel gasps involuntarily, and realises she's been holding her breath this whole time.

It's instantaneous: Kev pops a dummy in Prue's mouth and presses her to his chest and rocks back and forth, and the room is quiet again.

'It's OK, it's OK,' Kev coos gently. 'Oh, it's all right.'

Mel's ears are still ringing, and it takes her a minute to adjust to the soft sounds around her. Prue's rhythmic suckling and occasional hiccups. Kev's murmured reassurances.

'It's all right. Yes, you're all right.'

Colin catches Mel's eye and grins. 'Are you all right after all that, Mel?'

Mel laughs and says yes, she thinks she is.

And it surprises her to say that aloud. Because she realises now, for the first time, that she wasn't entirely sure she would be. But they're all here, aren't they? And Prue's here. They've done this thing together and come out the other side. Even if she's not quite sure what the other side is going to be like.

Kev grins at Mel over the top of Prue's head.

'Yeah, I am,' she says. 'Actually, I am all right.'

## 3

# Making a Mum

Fay was only nineteen when she had her boys – totally unprepared for babies, let alone twins.

She wouldn't be without them for the world, though. It changed her, having the boys. And not just in the awful ways that her parents predicted back then. It was more that everything fell into place when she became a mum. Even now she can still conjure the clean, buttery smell of them; the perfection of minute eyelashes and fingernails and tiny clinging hands; the shocking pinch when they first latched on. And the feeling, when the nurse handed them to her, that she knew exactly what she'd been put here for.

The thought of someone wanting that and not being able to have it has always haunted her. It's partly why she donated eggs the first time.

That, and the fact that most of her friends were just getting started – everyone she knows has been having babies in the last few years. Fay's certainly not going to have any more of her own (since Dave and his kids moved in, they've got four teenagers in the house, which is more than enough kids for anyone). But it's hard, when you're barely past thirty, to admit that part of your life is over and done with. She wasn't quite ready to let it go.

She's got no regrets about that first donation. She never met the woman, and probably never will, but it was incredible when they called to say she'd had a baby boy. Fay even had to step outside at work to have a little cry when she found that out, bowled over that she'd actually helped someone have their family.

The thing she didn't expect, though, was how she'd feel afterwards – niggly and unfinished. As if it wasn't quite enough. She couldn't help but think it would have been nice to know a bit about their story and who they were. Maybe even hear what they called him. What she'd wanted, really, was to see how it had all turned out.

It's why she started looking for someone to donate to (even though Dave can't quite understand why she wants to go through the whole process again). And although she only started chatting to Naomi a few days ago, she already feels like she's known her for ages.

It breaks Fay's heart that Naomi was only twelve when she had her cancer treatment, and that Naomi knew then she might never have children. It stings Fay, the unfairness, when it's obvious Naomi would make a wonderful mum. She can just see it.

When they talk that night, Naomi tells Fay she's even got names picked out – Rilla for a girl and Gilbert for a boy, she says. She decided on them when she was eleven and obsessed with Anne of Green Gables. And yes, she knows it sounds a bit bonkers, but she's set on it, and thankfully Liam isn't fussed about names and is happy to leave that up to her.

It's only a little thing, but it knocks Fay for six. As she tells Naomi, she has a cousin of her own called Rilla because her aunty had exactly the same idea.

They both marvel at the coincidence. What are the chances, after all?

Fay can't help but think there must be something in it. That it's a sign, a little thread tying them together. That, perhaps, it's all meant to be.

And when, a month later, they actually meet each other – and talk to the counsellor with Dave and Liam, and begin the tests and injections and start to tell people – it seems to Fay that she can see exactly how it will all come together, as if she's looking out at everything that's just about to happen.

\*

What Fay can't know is that the journey will be so much longer and bumpier than she's imagined. That she'll rattle around full to bursting (so bloated that people will keep offering her a seat on the bus, assuming she's pregnant). She'll be so certain there'll be lots of eggs, but crushed when there are only seven. And she'll feel almost as if she's let Naomi down, even though there will be three embryos which Naomi will be delighted with, since, as she'll say to Fay, this is closer than she's ever been before.

And Fay can't know now that after the first transfer, she'll be as tense as if she was trying herself. (Nothing like her first donation, which was all over, really, once her eggs were retrieved.) This time she'll hang on Naomi's texts, eager for any news of twinges and nausea. And when Naomi isn't pregnant, Fay will be devastated, despite Dave telling her it's daft to put yourself through the wringer like this for a stranger. Except – Fay will say to him – Naomi's not a stranger now, is she?

But when it does work, on the second try, she'll be over the moon. She'll look forward to Naomi's updates, and her weekly emails about the growing baby. One week it's the size of a lentil. Then a blueberry, a kiwi, an orange.

When Fay doesn't hear from her for a few days, she'll assume Naomi's just busy. Until one night at 1am when she'll get a message that they're in the hospital because Naomi couldn't feel the baby moving, and now the doctor has told them there's no heartbeat.

Fay will feel the bottom has dropped out of her – a hollowness like she's just been plunged down a rollercoaster, except that the sensation won't pass after the initial shock and will linger for months.

She can't know how much she'll miss their texts and chats. Naomi won't want to talk so often

MAKING A MUM

afterwards, and won't say much about what happened – only telling Fay that she did get to see him. That it was a little boy.

And Fay has no idea now that it will be two years before they're standing on the edge of things again, talking about trying with the third embryo.

It will be different this time, not a dizzy adventure anymore. Both of them tentative now, a little tired. Naomi will say she's not even sure if she really wants to put herself through all this again, that they've started looking into adoption too. And Fay will say she knows Naomi will make an amazing mum, however it happens.

She's sure of it.

And Fay will remember, back when she and Naomi first met, how it seemed that Naomi's baby was so close. As if it was just waiting in the wings for the right moment to arrive. Almost as if she could have reached out, back then, and felt the little fingers wrapping around her own.

**'Known Unknowns'** is intended as a 'sister' publication to an existing collection of short stories, entitled 'Going Home: Short Stories about Egg Sharing, Inspired by Research'. 'Going Home' explores the experiences of women who donate their eggs as part of 'egg sharing' programmes. Egg share donors donate half the eggs they produce in one cycle of IVF, in exchange for reduced cost treatment for themselves.

**'Going Home'** can be read online:  
[https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/going-home\(54a120d3-8d01-493f-9f62-7b6beffee748\).html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/going-home(54a120d3-8d01-493f-9f62-7b6beffee748).html)

Professionals and volunteers working in the field of donor conception can request printed copies of both booklets by contacting [leah.gilman@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:leah.gilman@manchester.ac.uk)

## About the Authors

**Becky Tipper's** short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies and have won the Bridport Prize and a Society of Authors' Tom-Gallon Award. She also writes about fiction for the online magazine *The Short Story*. Her writing often explores parenthood, childbirth and family relationships.

**Leah Gilman** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, part of the Department of Law 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 and has subsequently worked as a researcher on two projects exploring the experiences of people affected by donor conception. Her research interests include family and personal relationships, reproduction, childhood and creative research methods.

**Petra Nordqvist** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of Manchester and Co-Director of the Morgan Centre. She has conducted a series of studies exploring the ways in which donor conception impacts upon, and is in turn impacted by, family relationships and everyday lives. She has studied this both from the point of view of recipient parents and grandparents of donor conceived children and, through the 'Curious Connections' study, from the point of view of donors and their families.

## 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 professional, a potential or past egg 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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