

The gift of hope

She'd seen the quietly desperate ads in the back of a magazine: "Egg donor wanted!" "Please help us!" And, grateful for her own fertility, **Kylie Ladd** answered the call.

FLAT ON MY BACK, I AM SEARCHED like customs. The ultrasound technician anoints my belly with blue lubricant, then urges me to relax as she carefully probes my abdomen. She should talk. I can feel her anticipation through the stylus. We both hold our breath as we gaze towards the monitor. The grey mist parts, and she smiles as she starts to count. "Six, seven, eight... and I think that's one at the back, too. Nine. Nine follicles! Oh, well done!" she says, as if I am personally responsible for this rich haul of human fruit. My fertility swells resplendent on the screen, ovaries blossoming like wildflowers.

It's day 12 of the hormone shots, four months into my attempt to be an egg donor. First had come the questionnaires and the counselling, the blood tests and the examinations. Once that was complete I was started on the pill, so that my cycle could be brought into line with that of my recipient. A month later a nasal spray was added, then, in another fortnight, a two-week

course of injections. In between I trekked in to the inner-city fertility clinic for regular ultrasounds to measure the precious cache gathering inside me, and to determine the retrieval date: too early and there wouldn't be any mature eggs, too late and they may have already been released or started to deteriorate. Today the technician is satisfied that mine are ripe for harvest. Pick-up is scheduled for two days hence.

WHY WAS I DOING THIS? AT THE MOST basic level, because I could. Our own children had taken a while to conceive; my husband's cousin battled infertility for more than a decade before giving up after she miscarried twins at six months; a number of friends had been through IVF with varying success. I knew the ache of empty arms, the hunger that made Rachel, Jacob's wife, demand of God, "Give me children or I will die." My husband and I had been lucky. I had a bad case of endometriosis, but it was diagnosed and then treated. The drugs

had done their thing and in due course a son and then a daughter had arrived, whole, vibrant, impossibly perfect. Now, though, I had no more need of my eggs. Month after month the supply ebbed away, the clock ran down. It seemed such a waste. I'd given blood since my teens, was on the organ donor registry. Why not offer these also?

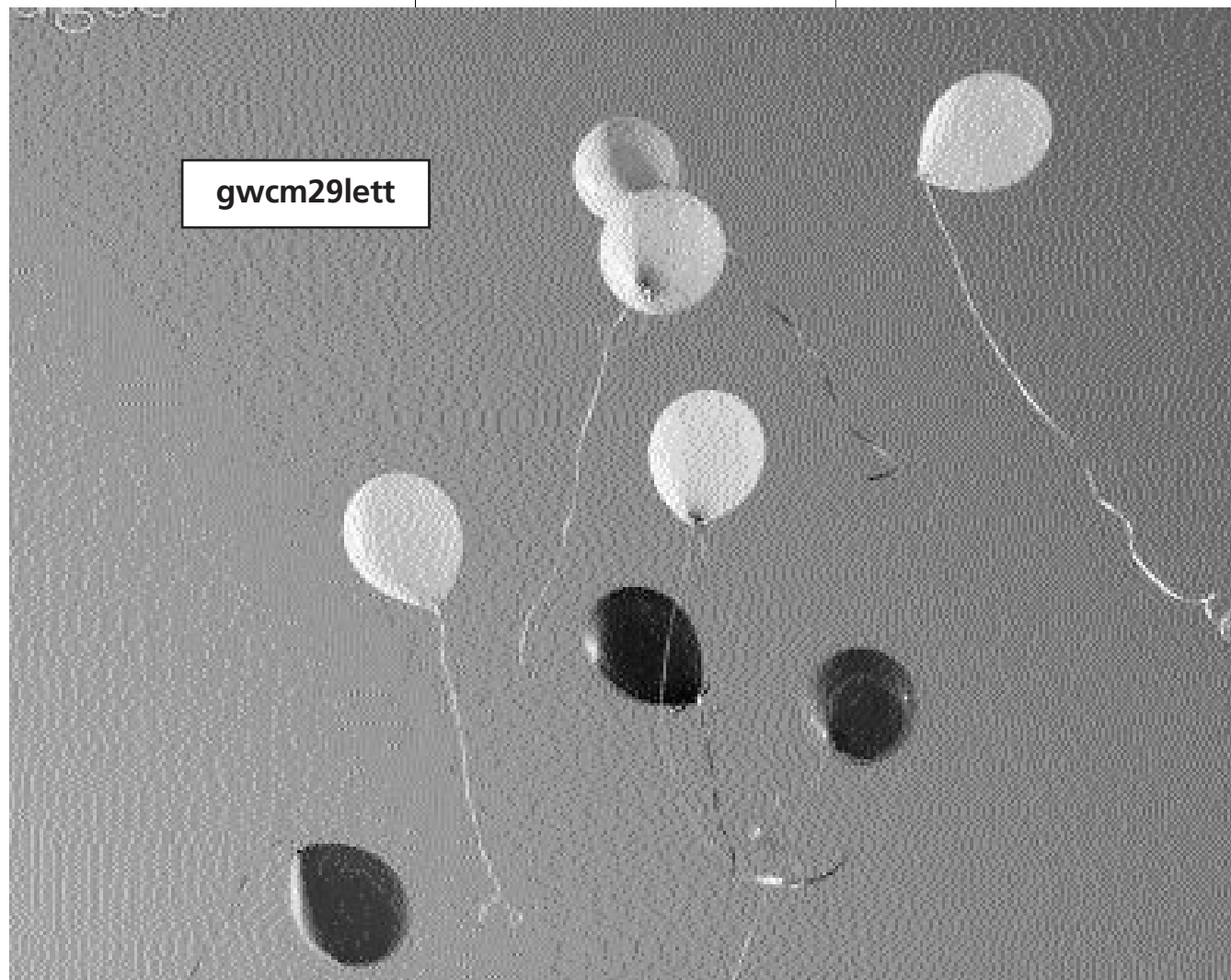
Then, too, I had seen the ads at the back of a magazine I sometimes wrote for. Just one or two to start with, grimly juxtaposed with the classifieds offering cribs for sale. Six months later they filled a column. "Egg donor wanted!" "Please help us!" "Give the gift of life." So many would-be parents desperate for those magic cells, their anguish barely disguised by careful phrasing and polite entreaties. It was too hard to choose any one couple, so instead I searched the web to find the centres managing egg donation in my state. There were two, and late one night I emailed them offering my services. When I logged on the next morning before dropping my

son at school, they had both replied.

Later I understood their hurry. Egg donors are hard to find: of the 10 or so centres that carry out the procedure in Australia, most manage to attract only about five or six donors who go through to pick-up each year. In the US, donors are handsomely remunerated for their efforts. Often recruited through professional "egg brokers", they routinely receive at least \$US10,000 for their ova. This can rise to \$US50,000 for donors with an Ivy League degree, or, in an interesting reflection of values, \$US100,000 for models under the age of 30. In Australia, however, the laws are much firmer, restricting the procedure to government-funded and -regulated clinics in major public hospitals. Couples needing eggs can either go on a waiting list at their clinic or advertise directly for a donor, but in either case payment for the donation (other than reimbursement of travel expenses) is illegal.

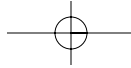
Though already in my mid-30s, and with my eggs thus at the outer limits of their viability, I was quickly engaged. Detailed investigations ensued: my current health, my medical history, my genetic make-up. Then followed two mandatory counselling sessions, the first to discuss ethical and moral issues, the second (after an obligatory month's thinking time) to complete the legal consent forms. My partner, I was told, would need to accompany me to the second appointment; given that we were married, my eggs were deemed to be joint property, and he would also need to sign them away. After barely a second to digest this, I was bombarded with questions. Why do you want to do this? What will you tell your children? Do you want to know details about your recipient couple? How will you feel if they have a different religious or cultural background to you? Are you prepared for potential contact with any offspring once they attain adulthood? In the case of superfluous embryos created from your eggs, do you want these destroyed or donated to a second couple? Some of these issues I had thought about; many I hadn't.

In due course the documents were signed, though I was reassured that I could withdraw my consent at any time. Afterwards I was given a small coolbox full of drugs, taught how to inject



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myself by practising on a sadly pocked resuscitation doll, and informed about the recipient couple. They sounded just like my husband and me – similar ages, heights, colouring and educational level. As donor and recipient are matched to be as alike as possible, we even shared many of the same interests. The only difference was that after five years of trying they had no children. I did, and I had eggs that had worked before. Every time I prepared an injection in the weeks that followed I reminded myself of those facts. There but for the grace of God... I swear the shots didn't hurt at all.

Pick-up took place early one morning in a small operating theatre at the rear of the clinic. By now my ovaries were palpably distended; tender, but not painful. Lying on the table, subdued with nerves and a twilight anaesthetic, I found myself stroking them in small

comforting sweeps, the way I'd once caressed the bumps of my babies. A nurse at my head noted my movements and stopped chatting with an orderly. "They're like two big bunches of balloons, aren't they?" she asked. Then she paused before adding, "Your recipient is right outside, you know. She couldn't bear to wait by the phone to hear how things went." I never met her, but as the surgeon prepared to retrieve my fecund cargo via a needle inserted through the wall of my vagina, I imagined I did, handing her first one balloon, and then another, until the whole bunch jostled and leapt in her hands.

THAT WAS TWO YEARS AGO. TEN ova were collected that day, then fertilised immediately with the recipient husband's sperm. Of the 10, six developed over the next 48 hours into

healthy-looking embryos. Two were then transferred to the recipient, while the remaining four were frozen for use in later cycles.

And that's where my part ends. I was given the option of being informed of any "live births" resulting from my donation, and my husband and I discussed the issue during counselling. In the end, though, I knew that if all six embryos had amounted to nothing I would feel disappointed, maybe even that I'd wasted my time.

Conversely, if any had taken I also knew that I would wonder about the child. Did he or she look like me? Was he healthy? Was she loved? There would be no answer to any of these questions, and thus, it seemed, no point asking them. It makes me happy to think that I gave someone a shot, some hope, and maybe, just maybe, a baby of their own.

But I don't need to know any more.

Individuals conceived using donor gametes (eggs or sperm) have a legal right to request identifying information about their donor once they turn 18. Studies suggest, however, that only around half of such children are ever informed of their origins, and fewer actually seek out their biological parents. Even so, friends have asked if I'm scared of that potential knock on the door two decades hence. I really don't think I am. If it does happen I'll be curious, certainly, and happy to answer any questions the person may have. But I hope that's it, or that I'll simply say, "I'm glad to have met you, and I wish you well. Give my very best regards to your mother." Because I know that's not me. I gave some time and some tissue, but nothing else. My balloons have flown. I hope they are soaring. ■

