

EGG DONORS NEEDED! MAKE A DREAM COME TRUE—BE AN EGG DONOR. \$3,500 STIPEND AND EXPENSES PAID. GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE!

Sara Raley

Writer's comment: The idea for this story began several months ago when, as editor of *The California Aggie*, I wrangled over the phone with a woman from a fertility clinic who wanted to place an ad calling for “thin, pretty females” interested in ovum donation. From an ethical standpoint, I cringed at the idea of so openly soliciting for women of a specific genetic type. That day, I learned a lot about the world of *in vitro* fertilization. I learned even more when my roommate answered such an ad. I was fascinated from the start by the 25-page application she filled out, complete with glossy photo collage. As she went on in the program, through batteries of tests, I decided to profile her for my English 104C (Journalism) class. The result surprised me; her candor and breeziness contrasted sharply with my own reservations. The writing process was rewarding as well, thanks to Jayne Walker’s open-ended assignments and helpful editing advice.

— *Sara Raley*

Instructor's comment: Sara Raley came into my class with a strong background in campus journalism and in “creative writing,” but had never tried channeling both these strands of her experience into magazine-style articles. Everything Sara wrote in English 104C: Journalism showed the imprint of a fine mind navigating the medium of language with such facility and grace that an A+ at times seemed an inadequate response. I can’t claim to have done more as a teacher than to give Sara the opportunity to try her hand at a form that, at its best, employs the craft of news reporting and the art of narrative. Her essay, a splendid example of a profile that illuminates a timely issue, shows both in abundance.

— *Jayne Walker, English Department*

When twenty-year-old Cara Packard first saw the ad in her college newspaper, she remembers thinking, “Damn, that’s a lot of money!” She called up immediately, envisioning an egg-plucking process that would be as quick and effortless as sperm donation. Disappointingly, the receptionist at Woman to Woman Fertility Clinic didn’t give her the time of day, mostly because that was last spring and Cara wasn’t twenty-one yet, but also because she seemed a tad too money-hungry for the well-to-do Alamo, California, clinic.

Looking back, Cara smiles a little sheepishly. Now, one year later, and halfway through the process of donating her eggs to an infertile couple, she knows what she’s in for, both emotionally and physically. Already, she’s wrestled with the idea of selling her genetic material to strangers-she’s taking the unusual step of meeting with the couple who chose her genes from a stack of manila folders. And now she’s overcoming a lifelong abhorrence of needles by playing doctor-she’s injecting a syringe full of milk into a grapefruit, mentally bracing herself for the ovary-stimulating hormones she’ll inject into her own thighs and buttocks for ten days next month.

But Cara’s taking both the emotional and physical sacrifices in stride because at the end of August-after ten or more of her eggs are retrieved from her ovaries-the Woman to Woman Fertility Clinic will cut her a \$4,000 check. The payment promises a soothing aloe to Cara’s staggering list of financial woes: crushing legal fees, spiraling credit card debt, student loan payments, and a hankering for a liposuction procedure that could cost up to \$4,000. Already, she spends long, hot Saturdays babysitting for a hyper five-year-old boy, and on weekdays leads troops of rowdy teenagers on tours through the State Capitol. Both jobs barely subsidize rent, groceries, and the weekend recreational pleasures that 21-year-old college students indulge in.

That’s why, after being rebuffed once, Cara called again four months ago.

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The information packet came in the mail only three days after Cara dialed the 1-800 number. From the vital statistics she provided over the phone-blond hair, blue eyes-she was an instant hit. The receptionist at the fertility clinic made her voice buttery sweet, over-eager to please. Later, the personalized letter attached to the application (“Dear Cara, We have a couple who is interested in your German heritage”) made it even more clear-this is a field where looks matter, where women with dimples and baby-doll features are courted vigorously. When Cara came in for her first appointment, the staff good-naturedly warned her that as soon she completed her application process, she’d better clear her calendar-prospective parents are clamoring for donors that match her description. The attention went to Cara’s head; she told me afterwards that her file would “go like that,” and snapped her fingers dramatically.

It’s not hard to see why Cara’s genes seem golden. The photo collages she included in her application show an angelically pretty toddler with glorious blonde hair and round blue eyes. Later, as an eight-year-old, decked out in cleats and baseball pants, she hams for the camera-the happy-go-lucky American athlete. As a high school senior, her blonde hair falls to her waist, and her dimples and coquettish eyes broadcast her popularity and confidence. Finally, in her most recent photos, she’s surrounded by laughing, smiling girlfriends.

Her profile is just as flattering. After an exhaustive personality test that probed her with fill-in-the-blank questions like, “I like to play…” and “I like to eat…”, she emerged as a motivated, outgoing, well-adjusted woman, according to the clinic’s psychologist.

Not surprisingly, in the ovum donation market, Cara is considered a hot item. She regrets now that she didn’t anticipate this when Woman to Woman originally asked her how much monetary compensation

she wanted for the egg retrieval.

“I didn’t want to be too greedy, so I said \$4,000,” she recalls. “But now I wonder if that was too low. I wonder whether some bum off the street, who dropped out of high school, could get that much.”

This preoccupation with her eggs’ worth isn’t entirely due to vanity on Cara’s part. In fact, stories about women selling their eggs for \$20,000 and more have rocked the in vitro fertilization field, plunging it into a capitalist arena that bizarrely resembles an auction. One case has become legend in the community: A Harvard graduate, attempting to locate an artistic five-foot, nine-inch brunette with an IQ of 140, will reward her egg donor with \$50,000.

“We react negatively to those ads,” says Emma Weber, a recruiter for the San Francisco-based Pacific Fertility Parenting Clinic. “Clearly, money becomes the motivation for that. We’d like it to come from the heart.”

Some clinics, like PFPC, refuse to accept clients-either donors or prospective parents-who want to barter eggs for more than \$6,000 or so.

“They attract the wrong crowd,” according to Weber, who has trouble with women assigning a monetary value to eggs “just because of ethnicity or education.”

“I get a lot of phone calls from women who ask, ‘Is there a bonus for being Asian?’ and I say, ‘No, but congratulations for being Asian.’ “

For the most part, Cara agrees with Weber and others who are frustrated with the growing salability of eggs. She disapproves of women who donate their eggs “for a living,” but then again, she resents the fact that egg donors are criticized for accepting compensation for a physically arduous process that can take up to six months to complete.

“I definitely wouldn’t do it for free,” she said emphatically. “This is a service.”

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Cara has a flippant, slang word for the ovum donation process: “doning.” When it’s used as an active verb, it allows Cara to form sentences like “I’m not doning just for the money.” It sounds official, almost medical. As a noun, though, the word seems to lose some of its glory; at once more diminutive and insignificant, it sounds as if she’s verbally brushing aside the whole project: “My doning is really messing up my hormones.” I can’t tell if she picked up the word at the clinic. It strikes me that she may have created it as a way of dealing with the procedure, bending weird science to fit into her own vocabulary. On the other hand, it may just be a form of verbal shorthand-the five-syllable phrase “ovum donation” is a tongue-twister.

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Tomorrow, Cara meets the couple that has shown interest in her file. A rendezvous like this one is rare, arranged only if both the prospective parents and the egg donor want to meet each other. For Cara, meeting the man and woman who will be the future caretakers of her egg was a must: “I feel like if I didn’t meet them, it’d be bugging me for the rest of my life,” she says matter-of-factly.

They’ve made reservations at a small local restaurant, and Cara expects it to be a little like a blind date. The big difference is that the couple already knows what she looks like-now, it’s Cara’s turn. When I ask her if she’s nervous, she responds defensively, suddenly possessive of the tiny eggs within her that contain her genetic code-her endowment to some unborn, anonymous child.

“I’m not just saying, ‘Eggs for sale,’ “ she says, with a haughtiness that surprises me. “They’re being selective, and I want to have that option, too. They want to know if I’m worthy of them-hey, I want to know if they’re worthy of me.”

Still, the pragmatic side of Cara is prepping for the lunch date as if it's a job interview. She's already planned her outfit-conservative skirt, blouse and sandals-and even knows what color eye shadow and lipstick she'll wear.

"I feel like they're going to be looking me up and down," she admits. "They're looking to see if I have pimples, if I'm overweight."

Lying stomach-down on her bed, hugging an oversized pillow and filing her nails, she looks like a carefree teenager, too fresh-faced and young for the bizarre task ahead of her.

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In a month or so, a surgeon will give Cara local anesthesia. She won't feel the discomfort of a needle being inserted through her vagina, or the yawning emptiness as the needle, guided by ultrasound, navigates its way into each follicle of the ovary, and draws the eggs into tiny test tubes. She will, however, be kept apprised of how things are going. After each egg is carefully separated from the follicular fluid that has nourished it up until now, and after each one has been safely transported to the embryo laboratory, the surgeon will give Cara a running total of how many eggs have been retrieved. The average plunder produces 16 eggs. The whole operation will take less than an hour, and Cara will be free to go home after two hours.

In purely medical terms, the procedure seems relatively innocuous. In purely visceral terms, however, it seems to me a disgusting invasion of the deepest recesses of the female anatomy. I ask Cara if she's struck by the same revulsion. Not surprisingly, she approaches the surgery with characteristic nonchalance: "I didn't expect this to be a breeze."

"Not everyone can do it," she says, shrugging her shoulders. "It takes a special kind of person." Something in her voice sounds affected, almost martyr-like, as if she's making a noble sacrifice that not everyone can fully appreciate.

Later, she tells me that she feels there's a stigma attached to the women who answer the ads for ovum donation and complete the process.

"Some people are very ignorant, putting someone down for doing this," she says. "If everyone felt that way-'It's a part of me, this is my child'-then *in vitro* fertilization wouldn't be a possibility for infertile couples."

Her rhetoric makes me think of the classified ad that drew her to the venture in the first place. She's adopted the jargon of the clinic; she's giving the "gift of life."

There's a twist, though. The gift of life now has a price tag.