In 1979 a sperm donor entered a small room with erotic magazines at the back of a staff lunchroom at Baylor Medical Center. He ejaculated into a plastic cup, opened a small door in the wall and pushed a buzzer. The cup spun out of sight, with $50 in an envelope returning in its place. Like other men in his position, the donor probably spent the money taking his girlfriend to dinner, getting high or—if he was a frequent enough donor—paying tuition. He was promised anonymity and told not to give a moment's thought to what would happen to the sperm once it left that hole in the wall.

Now the result of that sperm donation, a 27-year-old graduate student named Kathleen LaBounty, is looking for her father. And depending on his own beliefs and life circumstances, the possibility that she will find him is either a modern Hallmark moment or something that will scare the bejesus out of him.

Since its inception more than a century ago, sperm donation has been shrouded in secrecy. In 1884 Dr. William Pancoast, a professor at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, treated an infertile woman by putting her under anesthesia and inseminating her with sperm from his best-looking student. Only when he realized the child looked just like the donor did he inform the woman's husband. The man said, “Fine, but don’t tell my wife.”

Even today donor insemination is conducted clandestinely. Couples who create children using donated sperm generally do not tell the child of his or her unique conception. Instead, they let the child, relatives and friends assume the baby is the infertile husband’s biological offspring. But changing social norms—including the use of donors by single women, cheap genetic testing and the sleuthing power of the Internet—have created a fissure in the wall of secrecy. About 10 percent of the million children who have issued from donor insemination now know a sperm donor seeded their life.

Single women usually tell their child at an early age that his or her biological dad was a donor. College professor Leann Mischel created a quasi-family by getting in touch with 18 other women across the country who, like her, used donor 401 from the Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia. With 26 children under the age of seven among them, they are now a support group that shares family photos and child-rearing tips. Once a year many of them gather at a theme park for...
a unique family reunion where the children, who are half siblings, can get to know one another. It's only a matter of time, though, before one of the women or children decides to find donor 401.

Technologies that were not anticipated when Kathleen LaBounty was conceived have helped children sneak up on donors. An enterprising 15-year-old tracked down his anonymous sperm-donor dad by matching his DNA to that of the donor's family on a genealogical website. The boy paid $289 to familytreedna.com for a genetic test that compared his Y chromosome with other Y chromosomes in a genealogical registry. He found several males with whom he had a biological link. By using the last names of those men, the known birth date of his biological father and county birth records, he was able to identify his donor.

An Internet registry that allows recipients to share information about donors also makes it easier to identify them. Wendy Kramer, whose son Ryan was conceived through donor insemination, started donorsiblingregistry .com, where donor-conceived children can find their half siblings. Moms and kids write to ask questions like “Who else has used donor 2064?” So far, more than 25,100 people have registered on the site, and 6,162 siblings have been matched.

LaBounty's mother was not given a sperm-donor number or any facts about the donor, other than that he had been a student at Baylor Medical School. Undeterred, Kathleen recently wrote to all 600 men who attended the conference. More than 750 sperm donors have registered on her website to learn the donor's identity when they reach the age of 18. That donor was not alone in his long wait for information about the child he'd created. Kramer was shocked when the donors themselves started joining online conversations. More than 750 sperm donors have registered on her website to contact their “children.” Other donors have hired private detectives or stolen a peek at private medical records to find out about their biological offspring.

Why would a man who was paid to masturbate now want a relationship with the child? Perhaps the experience of being a sperm donor is not always the lark the infertility industry assumed. Men usually donate sperm when they are young and haven't had children themselves. Later, when they marry and become fathers, some begin to wonder what happened to their other children.

And who wouldn't want a beautiful, talented daughter like Kathleen LaBounty without having to go through the stages of colic, potty training, second-grade recitals and driver's ed? But would donor 401 of Virginia be equally welcoming if 26 young offspring showed up at his doorstep?

The tens of thousands of men who serve as sperm donors each year may soon have to come to grips with those questions. Consumers' demand for more information as they choose donors may make tracking them easier. While LaBounty knows only the date and place of the sperm donation, women seeking sperm donors today receive anywhere from five to 20 pages of information about each potential donor. Although donor 1049's name is not included in his profile, a clinic's entry on him includes a photo showing a clean-cut, cute Californian. He says he's a member of the Clean Oceans Campaign and the Surfrider Foundation. He describes himself as “secure, sensitive, innovative, intelligent, creative, thoughtful, ambitious, competitive, respectful, comedic and optimistic.” His SAT score is 1355. His 54-year-old mother is a healthy, intelligent and adventurous painter who wears reading glasses. His brother is a developer, he adds. How hard would it be to track down this man?

Searching is not without risk. Jeffrey Harrison, a hot catch as donor 150 in the late 1980s, was described on his donor form as a blue-eyed, six-foot-tall lover of philosophy and music. Three years ago two of his sperm-donor children, daughters born into different families, found each other and began their search for him.
Robert Klark Graham offered prizewinning sperm.

As a newly minted lawyer nearly three decades ago, I was determined to practice reproductive-technology law. So when Robert Klark Graham opened the Repository for Germinal Choice, which offered sperm from Nobel laureates, I visited him in Escondido, California. Rather than show me a sleek laboratory or even a sperm supermarket, Graham took me to an old well house, where—in a space that looked like a suburban rec room—he pointed to a tank of liquid nitrogen. “Imagine the benefits to society if additional sons of Thomas Edison could be created,” he told me as we stared at the giant metal thermos.

Graham, a millionaire Mensa member who had invented shatterproof eyeglass lenses, was not alone in his quest to produce smarter children. Back in 1940 the Pioneer Fund offered the equivalent of about a year’s salary to deserving U.S. Air Corps pilots who already had at least three children and who agreed to have another. The money, to be doled out yearly starting when the child reached the age of 12, was to be used for the additional child’s education.

How did the children of these efforts turn out? In 1999 Wall Street Journal reporter Douglas A. Blackmon followed up on the children who had been born under the Air Corps program and found them to be quite ordinary: air-conditioning repairmen, factory workers. Nor have the Nobel Prize sperm-bank kids broken any records. In fact, the star of Graham’s stable of sperm-bank children, Doron Blake, seems just as adrift as any 20-something.

Perhaps that could have been expected. Nobel Prizes tend to run in laboratories (or in the University of Chicago economics department) rather than in families. William Shockley, a Nobel laureate and donor to Graham’s bank, once told Playboy his own children with his less distinguished wife had been “a very significant regression” to the mean. And even Edison, Graham’s hero, considered his own son a failed experiment. According to biographer Neil Baldwin, the great inventor was so ashamed of Thomas Edison Jr. that he offered him money to change his last name.

In 1999 the Nobel Prize sperm bank closed its doors. I wish I could report that the closure was based on a realization that such awkward attempts at eugenics were doomed to failure. On the contrary, mainstream clinics now offer catalogs of sperm and egg donors categorized by IQ and SAT scores. One enterprising man began to sell his own sperm over the Internet by claiming several royal families and Catholic saints as his ancestors.

But what if a couple pays extra for smart sperm and E=mc² isn’t the first thing out of their child’s mouth? Already a couple with three healthy children born with the help of a donor has sued the sperm bank. Among their allegations: If the bank had chosen a different donor, their children would be more attractive. And sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for. An unmarried man requested a surrogate mother who was a cross between Eleanor Roosevelt and Brigitte Bardot. Amazingly, the surrogacy center found someone who matched that description. The deal never went forward, though. The woman was too headstrong to agree to the terms of the contract.

—L.A.