

HORSING AROUND
Tallulah and Harlow play
on their rocking horse.

These are (not) my BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

Jennifer Ross underwent painful hormone injections and surgery to help another couple have kids. And that's just the beginning...

by **Holly Hays**

IT'S A TYPICAL NIGHT in the Brooklyn, New York, home of Stavros Tripi and his partner, Grahame Hubbard. The sound of little feet and gleeful giggles fills the air as 18-month-old Harlow, in PJs with rainbow-coloured snails, and her three-year-old sister, Tallulah, dart between the kitchen and the sitting room. Toys and teddy bears are scattered everywhere in their wake.

But this family is anything but typical. The girls' two dads watch the entire show, smiling as they patiently clean up the mess. And none of this would have been possible without the couple's close friend Jennifer Ross. Because five and a half years ago, Jennifer donated the eggs that would eventually become these two adorable little girls.

Jennifer is a trim, blond 33-year-old with an easy smile. The event planner first met Stavros and Grahame in Toronto in 2002 when she and Stavros worked on a project together. "I instantly loved them," she says, sitting cross-legged on the couch of her Manhattan apartment, hands wrapped around a cup of tea. "They were like the older brothers I never had."

Right around the same time, Jennifer befriended — and started dating — Stavros' brother. Their relationship continued on and off for over five years. "I always had a separate relationship with the two boys — I call Grahame and Stavros 'the boys,'" she explains. "It was funny: Whenever Stav's brother and I were on the rocks, the boys

would say, 'Don't worry, if you break up, we'll still be in your life.' And I honestly didn't worry because I loved them so much."

ROCKY ROAD TO FATHERHOOD

Both men always wanted a family. "That's one of the things that drew us together early on," says Stavros. "But we waited a long time because of our careers. And eventually we realized we were also nervous because we didn't know anything about the process. It's different when a traditional couple want to have kids; it's part of the whole

social fabric. We had to investigate." The couple considered adoption, but it was important to Stavros that the kids be biologically his. "I come from a big family and I really wanted to see myself in my kids' eyes."

The practice of hopeful parents using an egg donor and a surrogate is one that you hear about occasionally — Elton John and David Furnish had a son via this method in 2010; singer Ricky Martin had twin boys the same way — but the science behind it was developed relatively recently. The first baby created from an egg fertilized outside the >





PICTURE PERFECT

Above: Stavros and Grahame with Harlow and Tallulah. Below: Stavros, Tallulah and Jennifer skating at Rockefeller Center in New York.

womb was born in 1978. The first IVF (in vitro fertilization, in which fertilized eggs are implanted into a patient's uterus) clinic in Canada opened in 1983. Before that, the primary option for gay men who wanted a family was adoption.

Luckily for Grahame and Stavros, a friend had gone the surrogate route and talked them through what to expect. "We found out that it was important to do it in California because California is the only state that legally protects whoever intends to be the child's parent through the surrogate process," explains Stavros. "There's no risk of the surrogate or the egg donor fighting for custody. And you don't want to be in the middle of something

like that, especially because at the time we didn't yet know who those people would be."

The couple didn't seriously consider Jennifer at first. "We joked about me donating the egg," she says. "But I wasn't sure it made sense, and I said no." They went ahead and hired a donor and a surrogate, but the transfer was unsuccessful.

"A few months later, I met the boys for dinner and they explained how the egg hadn't taken. I'd never seen Stavros so upset. I don't know what it was; I thought, 'Wow, this is what they have to go through to have a child.' I went home and called Stavros' brother — we were still together — and said, 'What are your thoughts if I donate?' And he, as calm as could be, said, 'I'd be okay with that.' So I wrote the boys an email saying how much it would mean to me if I could help them. Two months later I started the process."

"Jen's email was beautiful," says Stavros. "We're firm believers that everything happens for a reason, and when it didn't work out with the first donor, we took a step back. We started thinking, 'Our child could take 50 percent of their traits from the donor and we don't really know that person. You have their medical history, you see photos. But are they a good person?' Maybe it should be someone we know."

They didn't start out thinking this way. In the beginning, the couple didn't want the donor to be a friend or family member. "We wanted it to be a business transaction and to keep emotion out of it. And we wanted to be 100-percent parents to our children," says Stavros.

"We have a lot of girlfriends who would have been happy to help," adds Grahame. "But they were starting to want children of their own or to feel like they'd missed out by not having kids. We felt the same way ourselves, so we understood that. But we worried that their donating eggs would complicate our friendships."

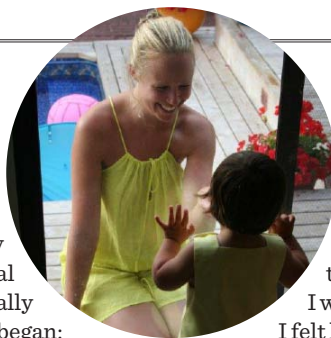
Jennifer, however, was 27 at the time and nowhere near wanting her own kids yet. The men also knew her family and felt comfortable with them. "So we thought, 'Let's do it,'" says Stavros. "Let's go with Jen."

THE REALITY OF BEING A DONOR

The egg-donation process has several stages: First, the donor takes a combination of hormones, generally via daily injections over nine to 12 days. The hormones are designed to speed up the eggs' growth and control their release. When a doctor judges the eggs to be ready, the donor is given another hormone that starts ovulation. Within 36 hours, the eggs are retrieved through a minor surgical procedure.

In order to be cleared by the San Diego agency that Stavros and Grahame were working >





with, Jennifer met with lawyers, gave her medical history and underwent psychological exams to verify she was mentally stable. Then the physical part began:

"I remember the day the kit with all the hormones arrived," Jennifer says. "It was in a freezer box with all these needles, and I thought, 'Oh my God. What did I sign up for?'"

By this point Jennifer had broken up with Stavros' brother and was living the fun single life. "My doctor told me I'd be pretty hormonal, but shortly before I started the hormones, I met the man who is now my husband. So I was in that blissful I'm-in-love state and I honestly think that helped temper everything. I really didn't feel overly hormonal or sad."

For the retrieval, Stavros and Grahame flew Jennifer and her mom to San Diego. (Egg donors can receive as much as \$10,000 for their services in the U.S., but it's illegal for a Canadian to be paid. The boys did, however, cover all of her medical, legal and travel expenses.) "The night before the extraction was the only

bad part," says Jennifer. "I had to give myself one more injection. It was an enormous needle.

I was ovulating with about 21 eggs. I felt like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*,

like somebody wanted to push through my belly. It was unbearable. My poor mom was sitting beside me in the hotel; tears were running down my face, and she couldn't do anything. But by the next morning, I was fine. They put me under. The retrieval was quick. I was back in my hotel room later that day."

Of the 21 eggs, nine were in good condition. With the help of two different surrogates, Stavros and Grahame used one egg to have Tallulah, and another to have Harlow. Stavros is the biological father of both girls. "Our initial idea was that the first child would be mine and the second would be Grahame's. But then we thought it would be amazing for them to be biological siblings," says Stavros. "It's a cost thing as well," adds Grahame. "Fertilizing the eggs is such an expensive process. Only one of us doing it saves enough to pay for a couple of years of college for the girls. [One cycle of IVF starts at around \$10,000.] And honestly, you can give me whoever, and I'm going to love them." On Tallulah's birth certificate, Stavros is noted as the father, Grahame as the mother. As evidence of how quickly things are changing, on Harlow's birth certificate the men are listed simply as Parent 1 and Parent 2.

THE HAPPY OUTCOME

Shortly after Tallulah was born, the couple invited Jennifer over to meet her. "I don't know if it was shock, but I remember holding her and thinking, 'I just don't feel the connection,'" Jennifer recalls. "But the second time I saw her, I started to feel it. And it got stronger from there until I was showing everyone at work pictures of the girls like a mom — but not."

Stavros and Grahame hoped to maintain relationships with Jennifer and both surrogates, but they wanted to leave Jennifer's level of involvement up to her. She's finding that as she gets older, she wants to be involved quite a lot. "I do feel maternal toward them; I would love to see them every day if I could. But I'm also trying to be respectful. It's an area where I tiptoe a little. I told the boys that I'd love to take Tallulah and them to see the Broadway play *Freckleface Strawberry*. And Stav said, 'You can take her on your own.' I got so excited. It was the first time I was alone with her. I know that whatever Tallulah and Harlow need from me in their lives, I will be there for them 100 percent."

"We've been so impressed that Jen's wanted >

FAMILY TIES

Inset: Jennifer and Tallulah enjoy a moment. Below, clockwise from top left: Jennifer holding one-week-old Tallulah in San Diego, California. Jennifer teaching two-year-old Tallulah to paint her nails. Grahame, Stavros and Jennifer with one-year-old Harlow at her baptism in Toronto.





**A FAMILY THAT
PLAYS TOGETHER**
Grahame with
two-year-old Tallulah
in Brooklyn.

to be a big part of the girls' lives," says Stavros. "She was the first one to paint Tallulah's nails and show her how to blow on them so they dry. We have a little video of it; it's brilliant. And at some point when Tallulah sees it, it's going to be an emotional thing for her. So the fact that Jen takes that initiative and there's balance and no awkwardness makes us feel very fortunate."

The girls don't yet know that Jennifer is their biological mother; they're not old enough to understand it. But their dads and Jennifer know that time is coming. "Tallulah is definitely starting to ask questions," laughs Jennifer. "The other weekend she said to me, 'Do you have a mummy? I don't have a mummy.' And I told her what I know the boys tell her: She's special because she has two daddies." And occasionally other people pick up on the connection. Once when Stavros, Jen and Tallulah were shopping, a sales clerk complimented them on their beautiful daughter. "We looked at each other like, we do have a beautiful daughter, but it's not quite what you think," laughs Stavros.

Stavros and Grahame don't know how exactly

they'll tell the girls, just that they definitely will. "In the end, when the girls are trying to identify who their mother is, it's Jen," says Stavros. Adds Grahame: "And at some point, when Jen has kids, they're going to have half-brothers and half-sisters. That's going to be cool."

Jennifer does indeed want kids. "I remember saying when I started the whole process how awful I would feel if for some reason it turned out I couldn't have kids. But it wouldn't change how involved I am with the girls." She agrees with Grahame that if everything goes as planned, it would be cool for the kids to know each other. "My husband and I were talking about it just last night, that it'll be a little weird, but also neat. I can already picture Harlow bullying one of them," she laughs. "And Tallulah being a know-it-all. When I first signed on for this, I didn't know how I would feel or what it would all mean. I was just thinking about what the boys couldn't have and that I could help them. I took each step as it came. But now, I've been considering the future more. It's pretty incredible to realize that we'll all be part of each other's lives forever." ❖

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STAVROS TRIPI AND GRAHAME HUBBARD.



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