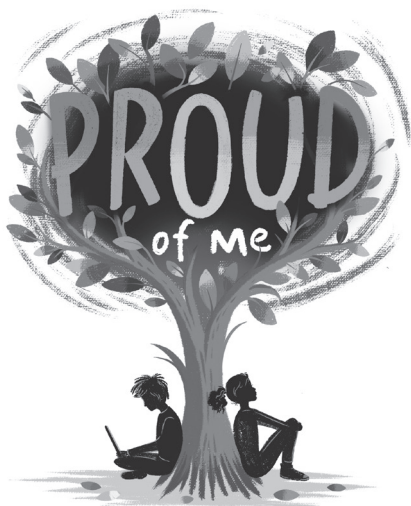




*It's always been the two of us. Him and me.
Why has he started keeping secrets?*

It's always been the two of us. Her and me.
Why doesn't she talk to me any more?

All I want is for my family to be...

PROUD

of me

SARAH HAGGER-HOLT



USBORNE

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When people ask about my family, I always say that Josh is my twin brother. It's easier that way. It saves a whole load of explaining.

But it's not exactly true.

We weren't even born on the same day. He's eight days younger than me – something I never let him forget. And he's not fully my brother, not in a blood-thicker-than-water, same-mother-same-father kind of way. But so what? Does that matter?

Isn't it enough that it's always been the two of us? In the baby photos: tiny heads peeping out from the matching fluffy blankets that Grandma knitted for us both. On our first day at school: standing stiff and awkward in our new uniforms, our eyes full of mischief

and Josh's hand squeezing mine. In our best clothes at our bar and bat mitzvahs – joint, of course. At every birthday party and family gathering, every holiday and holy day. Together.

The photos start even before we were born. My favourite is of two women, arms round each other as they pose for the camera, both with smiles as big as their bumps. One bump is Josh. The other is me. The women are our two mums: Ima – “Mum” in Hebrew – and Mum.

Ima usually takes the pictures, joking with us till we smile, and Mum prints them out and frames them. Unclip each one from its frame and you'll see her neat capitals written on the back – the date, the occasion, the cast of characters (left to right).

Josh asked her why once. “What's the point of all that labelling?” he said, just to wind her up. “You're not going to forget who we are, are you?”

Instead of answering, Mum sighed, crossed the room and pulled out a tatty cardboard box from the back of a cupboard. It was full of photos – some yellow-tinted colour Polaroids with thick white borders, but mostly ancient black-and-white shots of people with strange clothes and serious expressions.

We tipped up the box and spread the pictures out on the table, fingering the edges, turning them over to find faded, scrawly writing or nothing at all, picking them up to squint at what was going on in each image.

“Who are all these people?” I breathed.

“Precisely. Who *are* they?” said Mum. “We don’t know. And that’s why I label everything.”

“But you must know something about them. I mean, you must have these photos for a reason,” insisted Josh.

“Yes, okay.” She smiled. “Of course there’s a reason. These people are my family – your family too. I can’t believe I haven’t shown you them before.”

She looked down at the mess of photos. “Great-grandparents, my mum’s aunts and uncles, cousins, friends. Not one of them alive any more. No one now to explain who’s who or to tell their stories or give away their secrets.”

It felt sad when she said that, but there was something exciting about it too.

“It’s like a mystery,” I burst out. I was really into detective stories back then. “There are clues, if we can solve them. Like, if we knew when hats like this were in fashion” – I pointed at one picture of a group of women in elaborate bonnets, smiling in front of a fancy hotel –

“or when this hotel opened, we could work out what year these photos were taken, and *then* we could work out—”

Josh snorted.

I poked him. “What?”

“Well, we *could* do all of that, but it’s just guessing, isn’t it? We’d never know for sure if we were right.”

That’s totally Josh. Ima says that Josh will only believe something if he can touch it, taste it or see it. So like Mum. You can’t fool either of them. Without Josh, I’d always be getting carried away with some ridiculous dream.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t stop you wondering and wanting to know,” I told him. “I bet there are things you want to know, even if it might seem pointless to try and find out.”

Josh just shrugged and turned away. But I knew I was right. He might deny it to anyone else, even to Mum and Ima, but I knew there was one thing Josh had always wanted to find out.

“Hey, aren’t you going to help put them away?” asked Mum, as we both started to wander off.

So we shuffled the photos into rough piles, shoving them back in the box, and, as we did, one caught my eye. A woman, a girl really, probably in her late teens, looking

straight at the camera with a half-smile, like she'd just heard a really good joke and was trying not to laugh. She had a hat with flowers on and stiffly curled hair. The photo was old, faded, but her smile made her look totally alive. I flipped it over to see if there were any clues on the back about who she was.

"Look," I gasped, holding up the picture to Mum and pointing at the writing on the back. It was hard to read, but this was one word I'd recognize anywhere. My own name: Rebecca.

"Well, well," Mum said thoughtfully, sitting down and holding the picture up to the light. "That must be one of my grandma's sisters – they were a big family you know, nine children wasn't so unusual in those days. She *might* have mentioned a Rebecca. She'd be your great-great-aunt, I suppose."

"Was I named after her?" I asked eagerly.

"No, sorry."

She could see I looked disappointed, so she went on. "Ima and I chose your names together. We didn't name you after anyone. We wanted names that meant something. You know what Rebecca means, don't you?" I shook my head. "It means joining, like when two ropes are knotted together. Just like you, me, Ima and Josh are

all tied together as one family: two mums, two kids – and nothing can break us apart.” She gently laced her fingers through mine so that our hands were linked together and smiled.

“What about me?” said Josh, hanging back, more interested now.

“Now, Joshua, that one was Ima’s idea. It means ‘salvation’ or ‘God is generous’. After all, we’d tried and tried for so long for one baby, and suddenly here were two on their way! Generous indeed...”

She shut the box with a snap. Conversation over. “You can keep that picture if you like, Becky.”

I held onto that photograph. After that, I decided that I didn’t want to be a detective any more. I wanted to be a photographer – to take pictures that could make a person or place come alive to whoever saw them, just like great-great-aunt Rebecca had come alive to me. I wanted nothing more or less than to make magic.

Three years later, that picture is still tucked in the back of my diary. It usually remains hidden between the pages, but sometimes I get it out, and I look at great-great-aunt Rebecca and wonder what secrets she’s keeping behind that smile.



T hings that annoy me:

1. People saying “Yeah, but which one’s your *real* mum?” (They both are, stupid.)
2. Hair in the shower. (It drives me nuts. It’s gross. Everyone in the house has long hair except me. Mum’s is straight and fair but going slightly grey. Ima’s hair is dark and curly, and so is Becky’s. I find clumps of it in the plughole, strands stuck to the shower curtain. It gets everywhere. Ima told me I must be the only teenage boy in the world who cleans the shower without being asked. I said, “I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t leave it so disgusting and hairy.” She said, “Don’t let me stop you.”)

3. Having to learn stuff off by heart for tests. (What's the point? You can google it all anyway.)
4. People who talk like they are using exclamation marks all the time. (Archie, Becky's best friend, does this. Not everything can be that exciting all the time, can it? Just chill.)
5. Not knowing who my dad is.

It took me a while to realize that having a dad was a thing. Of course, I knew that most of my friends had dads, and I knew that I didn't. I like to think I was quite an observant kid. But not *all* of them had dads and, anyway, you didn't often see dads around. Not like people's mums, who were always at our house or hanging about chatting while we played on the swings down the park.

True, families in books usually had dads, but then all sorts of things happened in books, like talking animals or trips to space, so that didn't necessarily mean anything in the real world.

Once I was at school, I realized that although some people's dads weren't around much, or at all, everyone seemed to have one, somewhere. And they all assumed that I did too.

I think I was about six when I first asked Ima straight out why I didn't have a dad. We were in the car on the way back from swimming, Becky and I warm and dry and in our onesies, ready to head straight to bed when we got home.

"A dad?" echoed Ima. "You know why you don't have a dad, Josh. It's because you've got two mums. Think how lucky you are. Not many people can say they've got two mums. That's something special, isn't it? Two mums." She paused. "And you've got Grandpa and Uncle Noah too."

"Yeah, I s'pose."

But that wasn't what I'd meant. Having a dad wasn't anything to do with how many mums you had, was it? Couldn't you have two mums *and* a dad? We didn't even see Uncle Noah or Grandpa very often. I loved them, but neither of them were my dad. Loads of people have uncles and grandpas and *still* have a dad.

"What about the kind man?" I asked after a minute of hard thinking.

"What kind man?" asked Ima.

"You know," Becky piped up helpfully. "The kind man who gave you the sperm so you could have us."

"Oh," said Ima. "The donor..."

She and Mum always explained everything to us using

the correct words, even from when we were really small. Mum's a nurse, so she's not squeamish about talking about bodies and that kind of stuff, and Ima's never embarrassed about anything.

"Sweetheart, that's different. That's not like having a dad. He was just someone who helped us out, that's all. We didn't even meet him. We were lucky that we could get help from the doctors and from the donor to have you both, so that Becky could grow in my tummy and you could grow in Mum's. And we love you both very, very much."

"But *could* we meet him?" I asked. "One day, I mean, not today. Cos he's sort of like our dad, isn't he?"

"Well," said Ima slowly, "when you are eighteen, if you still want to meet the donor, then you can try and find out about him and see if he wants to meet you."

"Eighteen!" I gasped, outraged. "That's years and years and years away."

Ima didn't reply. It was still light outside and my head was full of questions, but the car was warm and my body tired out from swimming.

Becky and I had lessons together, us and about twelve other kids. I was always the slowest. Not like Becky. She could have swum fast and far enough to be in the higher class with the bigger kids. She never said anything, but I

knew she went slowly so that we could stay in the same class together. Swimming always wore me out. I was starting to drift off when Becky broke the silence.

“I made a card for Grandpa today at school.”

“Did you?” said Ima. “That’s nice. It isn’t his birthday though, not till November.”

“Not for his birthday, for *Father’s Day*,” Becky explained. “Everyone was making cards for their dads, so Mrs Williams asked whether we’d like to make cards for our grandpa and I said yes.”

“Oh, I see,” said Ima thoughtfully. “What about you, Josh, did you make a card for Grandpa too?”

“No!” I shouted. She didn’t understand anything. “Grandpa’s not my dad. Grandpa’s *Mum’s* dad. *She* should make him a card for Father’s Day, not me. Father’s Day is for fathers, that’s why it’s called Father’s Day, and I haven’t got one.”

“Oh, Joshy,” was all Ima said, as she slowed down and parked outside our house.

And even though that was years ago and we don’t really talk about it now, I still wonder what it will be like to meet our donor one day. And just in my head, without saying anything to anyone else, I’ve started to think about him as, not just our donor, but our dad.