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The Rosie Effect

Written by Graeme Simsion

Published by Michael Joseph

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The Rosie Effect

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To Anne

I

Orange juice was not scheduled for Fridays. Although Rosie and I had abandoned the Standardised Meal System, resulting in an improvement in 'spontaneity' at the expense of shopping time, food inventory and wastage, we had agreed that each week should include three alcohol-free days. Without formal scheduling, this target proved difficult to achieve, as I had predicted. Rosie eventually saw the logic of my solution.

Fridays and Saturdays were obvious days on which to consume alcohol. Neither of us had classes on the weekend. We could sleep late and possibly have sex.

Sex was absolutely *not* allowed to be scheduled, at least not by explicit discussion, but I had become familiar with the sequence of events likely to precipitate it: a blueberry muffin from Blue Sky Bakery, a triple shot of espresso from Otha's, removal of my shirt, and my impersonation of Gregory Peck in the role of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had learned not to do all four in the same sequence on every occasion, as my intention would then be obvious. To provide an element of unpredictability, I settled on tossing a coin twice to select a component of the routine to delete.

I had placed a bottle of Elk Cove pinot gris in the refrigerator to accompany the divers' scallops purchased

that morning at Chelsea Market, but when I returned after retrieving our laundry from the basement, there were two glasses of orange juice on the table. Orange juice was not compatible with the wine. Drinking it first would desensitise our tastebuds to the slight residual sugar that was a feature of the pinot gris, thus creating an impression of sourness. Waiting until after we had finished the wine would also be unacceptable. Orange juice deteriorates rapidly – hence the emphasis placed by breakfast establishments on 'freshly squeezed'.

Rosie was in the bedroom, so not immediately available for discussion. In our apartment, there were nine possible combinations of locations for two people, of which six involved us being in different rooms. In our ideal apartment, as jointly specified prior to our arrival in New York, there would have been thirty-six possible combinations, arising from the bedroom, two studies, two bathrooms and a living-room-kitchen. This reference apartment would have been located in Manhattan, close to the 1 or A-Train for access to Columbia University medical school, with water views and a balcony or rooftop barbecue area.

As our income consisted of one academic's salary, supplemented by two part-time cocktail-making jobs but reduced by Rosie's tuition fees, some compromise was required, and our apartment offered none of the specified features. We had given excessive weight to the Williamsburg location because our friends Isaac and Judy Esler lived there and had recommended it. There was no logical reason why a (then) forty-year-old professor of genetics

and a thirty-year-old postgraduate medical student would be suited to the same neighbourhood as a fifty-four-year-old psychiatrist and a fifty-two-year-old potter who had acquired their dwelling before prices escalated. The rent was high and the apartment had a number of faults that the management was reluctant to rectify. Currently the air-conditioning was failing to compensate for the exterior temperature of thirty-four degrees Celsius, which was within the expected range for Brooklyn in late June.

The reduction in room numbers, combined with marriage, meant I had been thrown into closer sustained proximity with another human being than ever before. Rosie's physical presence was a hugely positive outcome of the Wife Project, but after ten months and ten days of marriage I was still adapting to being a component of a couple. I sometimes spent longer in the bathroom than was strictly necessary.

I checked the date on my phone – definitely Friday, 21 June. This was a better outcome than the scenario in which my brain had developed a fault that caused it to identify days incorrectly. But it confirmed a violation of the alcohol protocol.

My reflections were interrupted by Rosie emerging from the bedroom wearing only a towel. This was my favourite costume, assuming 'no costume' did not qualify as a costume. Once again, I was struck by her extraordinary beauty and inexplicable decision to select me as her partner. And, as always, that thought was followed by an unwanted emotion: an intense moment of fear that she would one day realise her error.

'What's cooking?' she asked.

'Nothing. Cooking has not commenced. I'm in the ingredient-assembly phase.'

She laughed, in the tone that indicated I had misinterpreted her question. Of course, the question would not have been required at all had the Standardised Meal System been in place. I provided information that I guessed Rosie was seeking.

'Sustainable scallops with a mirepoix of carrots, celeriac, shallots and bell peppers and a sesame oil dressing. The recommended accompanying beverage is pinot gris.'

'Do you need me to do anything?'

'We all need to get some sleep tonight. Tomorrow we go to Navarone.'

The content of the Gregory Peck line was irrelevant. The effect came entirely from the delivery and the impression it conveyed of leadership and confidence in the preparation of sautéed scallops.

'And what if I can't sleep, Captain?' said Rosie. She smiled and disappeared into the bathroom. I did not raise the towel-location issue: I had long ago accepted that hers would be stored randomly in the bathroom or bedroom, effectively occupying two spaces.

Our preferences for order are at different ends of the scale. When we moved from Australia to New York, Rosie packed three maximum-size suitcases. The quantity of clothes alone was incredible. My own personal items fitted into two carry-on bags. I took advantage of the move to upgrade my living equipment and gave my

stereo and desktop computer to my brother Trevor, returned the bed, linen and kitchen utensils to the family home in Shepparton, and sold my bike.

In contrast, Rosie added to her vast collection of possessions by purchasing decorative objects within weeks of our arrival. The result was evident in the chaotic condition of our apartment: pot plants, surplus chairs and an impractical wine rack.

It was not merely the quantity of items: there was also a problem of organisation. The refrigerator was crowded with half-empty containers of bread toppings, dips and decaying dairy products. Rosie had even suggested sourcing a second refrigerator from my friend Dave. One fridge each! Never had the advantages of the Standardised Meal System, with its fully specified meal for each day of the week, standard shopping list and optimised inventory, been so obvious.

There was exactly one exception to Rosie's disorganised approach. That exception was a variable. By default it was her medical studies, but currently it was her PhD thesis on environmental risks for the early onset of bipolar disorder. She had been granted advanced status in the Columbia MD program on the proviso that her thesis would be completed during the summer vacation. The deadline was now only two months and five days away.

'How can you be so organised at one thing and so disorganised at everything else?' I'd asked Rosie, following her installation of the incorrect driver for her printer.

'It's *because* I'm concentrating on my thesis, I don't

worry about other stuff. Nobody asks if Freud checked the use-by date on the milk.'

'They didn't have use-by dates in the early twentieth century.'

It was incredible that two such dissimilar people had become a successful couple.

2

The Orange Juice Problem occurred at the end of an already-disrupted week. Another occupant of our apartment complex had destroyed both of my 'respectable' shirts by piggybacking on our washing load in the shared laundry facilities. I understood his desire for efficiency, but an item of his clothing had dyed our light-coloured washing a permanent and uneven shade of purple.

From my perspective there was no problem: I was established as a visiting professor in the Columbia medical school and no longer needed to worry about 'creating a good first impression'. Nor could I imagine being refused service in a restaurant because of the *colour* of my shirt. Rosie's outer clothing, which was largely black, had not been affected. The problem was restricted to her underwear.

I argued that I had no objection to the new shade and that no one else should be seeing her undressed, except perhaps a doctor, whose professionalism should prevent him or her from being concerned with aesthetics. But Rosie had already tried to discuss the problem with Jerome, the neighbour whom she had identified as the offender, to prevent a recurrence. This seemed a reasonable course of action, but Jerome had told Rosie to go screw herself.

I was not surprised that she had encountered resistance. Rosie habitually took a direct approach to communication. In speaking to me, it was effective, indeed necessary, but others frequently interpreted her directness as confrontational. Jerome did not convey an impression of wanting to explore win-win solutions.

Now Rosie wanted me to 'stand up to him' and demonstrate that we 'wouldn't be pushed around'. This was exactly the sort of behaviour that I instruct my martial arts students to avoid. If both parties have the goal of establishing dominance and hence apply the algorithm of 'respond with greater force', the ultimate result will be the disablement or death of one party. Over laundry.

But the laundry situation was minor in the context of the week as a whole. Because there had been a *disaster*.

I am often accused of overusing that word, but any reasonable person would accept that it was an appropriate term to describe the failure of my closest friends' marriage, involving two dependent children. Gene and Claudia were in Australia, but the situation was about to cause further disruption to my schedule.

Gene and I had conversed over a Skype link, and the communication quality had been poor. Gene may also have been drunk. He seemed reluctant to divulge the details, probably because:

1. People are generally unwilling to talk openly about sexual activity involving themselves.
2. He had behaved extremely stupidly.

After promising Claudia that he would abandon his project to have sex with a woman from each country of the world, he had failed to honour his commitment. The violation had occurred at a conference in Göteborg, Sweden.

'Don, show a bit of compassion,' he said. 'What were the odds of her living in Melbourne? She was *Icelandic*.'

I pointed out that I was Australian and living in the United States. Simple disproof by counter-example of Gene's ludicrous proposition that people remain in their own countries.

'Okay, but *Melbourne*. And knowing Claudia. What are the odds of that?'

'Difficult to calculate.' I pointed out that Gene should have asked this question *before* adding to his tally of nationalities. If he wanted a reasonable estimate of the probability, I would need information about migration patterns and the size of Claudia's social and professional network.

There was another factor. 'In calculating the risk, I need to know how many women you've seduced since you agreed not to. Obviously the risk increases proportionately.'

'Does it matter?'

'If you want an estimate. I'm presuming the answer is not zero,' I said.

'Don, conferences – overseas conferences – don't count. That's why people go to conferences. Everyone understands that.'

'If Claudia understands, why is there a problem?'

'You're not supposed to get caught. What happens in Göteborg stays in Göteborg.'

'Presumably Icelandic Woman was unaware of this rule.'

'She's in Claudia's book club.'

'Is there some exception for book clubs?'

'Forget it. Anyway, it's over. Claudia's thrown me out.'

'You're homeless?'

'More or less.'

'Incredible. Have you told the Dean?' The Dean of Science in Melbourne was extremely concerned with the public image of the university. It seemed to me that having a homeless person in charge of the Department of Psychology would be, to use her habitual expression, 'not a good look'.

'I'm taking a sabbatical,' said Gene. 'Who knows, maybe I'll turn up in New York and buy you a beer.'

This was an amazing thought – not the beer, which I could purchase myself, but the possibility of having my longest-standing friend in New York.

Excluding Rosie and family members, I had a total of six friends. They were, in descending order of total contact time:

1. Gene, whose advice had often proved unsound, but who had a fascinating theoretical knowledge of human sexual attraction, possibly prompted by his own libido, which was excessive for a man of fifty-seven.
2. Gene's wife, Claudia, a clinical psychologist and the world's most sensible person. She had

shown extraordinary tolerance of Gene's infidelity prior to his promise to reform. I wondered what would happen to their daughter Eugenie and Gene's son Carl from his first marriage. Eugenie was now nine and Carl seventeen.

3. Dave Bechler, a refrigeration engineer whom I had met at a baseball game on my first visit to New York with Rosie. We now convened weekly on the scheduled 'boys' night out' to discuss baseball, refrigeration and marriage.
4. Sonia, Dave's wife. Despite being slightly over-weight (estimated BMI twenty-seven), she was extremely beautiful and had a well-paid job as the financial controller for an in-vitro fertilisation facility. These attributes were a source of stress for Dave, who believed that she might leave him for someone more attractive or rich. Dave and Sonia had been attempting to reproduce for five years, using IVF technology (oddly, not at Sonia's place of employment, where I presumed she would receive a discount and access to high-quality genes if required). They had recently succeeded and the baby was scheduled to be born on Christmas Day.
5. (equal) Isaac Esler, an Australian-born psychiatrist whom at one time I had considered the most likely person to be Rosie's biological father.

5. (equal) Judy Esler, Isaac's American wife. Judy was a pottery artist who also raised funds for charity and research. She was responsible for some of the decorative objects cluttering our apartment.

Six friends, assuming the Eslers were still my friends. There had been zero contact since an incident involving bluefin tuna six weeks and five days earlier. But even four friends were more than I had ever had before. Now there was a possibility that all but one of them – Claudia – could be in New York with me.

I acted quickly and asked the Dean of Medicine at Columbia, Professor David Borenstein, if Gene could take his sabbatical there. Gene, as his name coincidentally indicates, is a geneticist, but specialises in evolutionary psychology. He could be located in psychology, genetics or medicine, but I recommended against psychology. Most psychologists disagree with Gene's theories, and I forecast that Gene would not need any more conflict in his life. It was an insight which required a level of empathy that would not have been available to me prior to living with Rosie.

I advised the Dean that, as a full professor, Gene would not want to do any proper work. David Borenstein was familiar with sabbatical protocol, which dictated that Gene would be paid by his university in Australia. He was also aware of Gene's reputation.

'If he can co-author a few papers and keep his hands off the PhD students, I can find an office for him.'

'Of course, of course.' Gene was an expert at getting published with minimal effort. We would have vast amounts of free time to talk about interesting topics.

'I'm serious about the PhD students. If he gets into trouble, I'll hold you accountable.'

This seemed an unreasonable threat, typical of university administrators, but it would provide me with an excuse to reform Gene's behaviour. And, after surveying the PhD students, I concluded it was unlikely that any would be of interest to Gene. I checked when I called to announce my success at finding him employment.

'You've got Mexico? Correct?'

'I have passed time with a lady of that nationality, if that's what you're asking.'

'You had sex with her?'

'Something like that.'

There were several international PhD students, but Gene had already covered the most populous developed countries.

'So, are you accepting the job?' I asked.

'I need to check my options.'

'Ridiculous. Columbia has the world's best medical school. And they're prepared to take someone who has a reputation for laziness and inappropriate behaviour.'

'Look who's talking about inappropriate behaviour.'

'Correct. They accept me. They're extremely tolerant. You can start Monday.'

'Monday? Don, I don't have anywhere to live.'

I explained that I would find a solution to this minor

practical problem. Gene was coming to New York. He would again be at the same university as me. And Rosie.

As I stared at the two orange juices on the table, I realised that I had been looking forward to the alcohol to counteract my anxiety about conveying the Gene news to Rosie. I told myself that I was being unnecessarily concerned. Rosie claimed to welcome spontaneity. This simple analysis, however, ignored three factors.

1. Rosie disliked Gene. He had been her PhD supervisor in Melbourne and technically still was. She had numerous complaints about his academic conduct and regarded his infidelity to Claudia as unacceptable. My argument that he had reformed had now been undermined.
2. Rosie considered it important that we had 'time to ourselves'. Now I would inevitably be devoting time to Gene. He was insistent that his relationship with Claudia was over. But if there was any chance that we could help to save it, it seemed reasonable to give temporarily lower priority to our own healthy marriage. I was certain that Rosie would disagree.
3. Factor Three was the most serious, and possibly a result of misjudgement on my part. I put it out of my mind to focus on the immediate problem.

The two highball glasses filled with orange fluid reminded me of the night that Rosie and I first

'bonded' – the Great Cocktail Night where we secured a sample of DNA from every male in attendance at the reunion of her mother's medical year and eliminated all of them as candidates for Rosie's biological father. Once again, my cocktail-making skills would provide a solution.

Rosie and I worked three nights per week at The Alchemist, a cocktail bar on West 19th Street in the Flatiron neighbourhood, so drink-making equipment and ingredients were tools of trade (although I had not been able to convince our accountant of this). I located vodka, Galliano and ice cubes, added these to the orange juices and stirred. Rather than commence my drink before Rosie, I poured myself a shot of vodka on ice, added a squeeze of lime, and drank it rapidly. Almost instantly, I felt my stress level returning to its default state.

Finally Rosie emerged from the bathroom. Other than the change in direction of travel, the only difference in her appearance was that her red hair was now wet. But her mood appeared to have elevated: she was almost dancing towards the bedroom. Obviously the scallops had been a good choice.

It was possible that her emotional state would make her more receptive to the Gene Sabbatical, but it seemed advisable to defer the news until the next morning, after we had had sex. Of course, if she realised that I had withheld data for that purpose, I would be criticised. Marriage was complex.

As Rosie reached the bedroom door, she spun around: 'I'll be five minutes getting dressed and then I'm expecting the world's best scallops.' Her use of the words

'world's best' was an appropriation of one of my own expressions – a definite indication of a positive mood.

'Five minutes?' An underestimate would have a disastrous impact on scallop preparation.

'Give me fifteen. No hurry to eat. We can have a drink and a chat, Captain Mallory.'

The Gregory Peck character's name was a further good sign. The only problem was the chat. 'Anything happen in your day?' she would say, and I would be obliged to mention the Gene Sabbatical. I decided to make myself unavailable by undertaking cooking tasks. In the meantime, I put the Harvey Wallbangers in the freezer, as they were in danger of warming above optimum temperature when the ice melted. Cooling would also reduce the rate of deterioration of the orange juice.

I returned to dinner preparation. I had not used this recipe before and it was only after commencing that I discovered that the vegetables needed to be chopped into quarter-inch cubes. The list of ingredients made no mention of a ruler. I was able to download a measuring application to my phone, but had barely finished production of the reference cube when Rosie re-emerged. She was now wearing a dress – highly unusual for dinner at home. It was white and contrasted dramatically with her red hair. The effect was stunning. I decided to delay the Gene news only slightly, until later in the evening. Rosie could hardly complain about that. I would reschedule aikido practice for the next morning. That would leave time for sex after dinner. Or before. I was prepared to be flexible.

Rosie sat in one of the two armchairs that occupied a significant percentage of the living room.

'Come and talk to me,' she said.

'I'm chopping vegetables. I can talk from here.'

'What happened to the orange juices?'

I retrieved the modified orange juices from the freezer, gave one to Rosie, and sat opposite. The vodka and Rosie's friendliness had relaxed me, although I suspected the effect was superficial. The Gene, Jerome and juice problems were still running as background processes.

Rosie raised her glass as if proposing a toast. This turned out to be exactly what she was doing.

'We've got something to celebrate, Captain,' she said. She looked at me for a few seconds. She knows that I am not fond of surprises. I assumed that she had achieved some important milestone with her thesis. Or perhaps she had been offered a place in the psychiatry-training program on completion of the medical course. This would be extremely good news, and I estimated the probability of sex at greater than ninety per cent.

She smiled – then, presumably to increase the suspense, drank from her glass. Disaster! It was as if it contained poison. She spat it out, over her white dress, and ran to the bathroom. I followed her as she removed the dress and ran water over it.

Standing in her half-purple underwear, pumping water in and out of the dress, she turned back to me. Her expression was far too complex to analyse.

'We're pregnant,' she said.

3

I struggled to process Rosie's statement. Reviewing my response later, I realised that my brain had been assaulted with information that appeared to defy logic on three counts.

First, the formulation '*we're* pregnant' contradicted basic biology. It implied that *my* state had somehow changed as well as Rosie's. Rosie would surely not have said, 'Dave's pregnant'. Yet, according to the definition implicit in her statement, he was.

Second, pregnancy was not scheduled. Rosie had mentioned it as a factor in her decision to cease smoking, but I assumed that she had simply used the eventual possibility of pregnancy as motivation. Furthermore, we had discussed the matter explicitly. We were having dinner at Jimmy Watson's Restaurant in Lygon Street, Carlton, Victoria, Australia, on 2 August of the previous year, nine days before our wedding, and a couple had placed a baby container on the floor between our tables. Rosie mentioned the possibility of us reproducing.

We had by then decided to move to New York, and I argued that we should wait until she had finished her medical course and specialisation. Rosie disagreed – she thought that would be leaving it too late. She would be thirty-seven by the time she qualified as a psychiatrist.

I suggested that, at a minimum, we wait until the completion of the MD program. The psychiatric qualification was not essential to her planned role as a clinical researcher in mental illness, so if the baby permanently derailed her studies, the impact would not be disastrous. My recollection is that she did not disagree. In any case, a major life decision requires:

1. Articulation of the options, e.g. have zero children; have a specific number of children; sponsor one or more children via a charity.
2. Enumeration of the advantages and disadvantages of each option, e.g. freedom to travel; ability to devote time to work; risk of disruption or grief due to actions of child. Each factor needs to be assigned an agreed weight.
3. Objective comparison of the options using the above.
4. An implementation plan, which may reveal new factors, requiring revision of (1), (2) and (3).

A spreadsheet is the obvious tool for (1) through to (3), and if (4) is complex, as it would be in preparing for the existence of a new human being and providing for its needs over many years, project-planning software is appropriate. I was unaware of any spreadsheet and Gantt chart for a baby project.

The third apparent violation of logic was that Rosie was using the combined oral contraceptive pill, which has a failure rate of less than 0.5 per cent per annum

when used 'perfectly'. In this context, 'perfectly' means 'correct pill taken daily'. I could not see how even Rosie could be so disorganised as to make an error with such a simple routine.

I am aware that not everyone shares my view of the value of planning rather than allowing our lives to be tossed in unpredictable directions by random events. In Rosie's world, *which I had chosen to share*, it was possible to use the language of popular psychology rather than biology, to welcome the unexpected, and to forget to take vital medication. All three of these events had occurred, culminating in a change of circumstances that made the Orange Juice Problem and even the Gene Sabbatical appear minor.

This analysis, of course, did not happen until much later. The situation as I stood in the bathroom could not have been worse in terms of mental stress. I had been taken to the edge of an unstable equilibrium, and then struck with the maximum conceivable force. The result was inevitable.

Meltdown.

It was the first occurrence since Rosie and I had met – in fact the first time since my sister Michelle's death from an undiagnosed ectopic pregnancy.

Perhaps because I was now older and more stable, or because my unconscious mind wanted to protect my relationship with Rosie, I had a few seconds to respond rationally.

'Are you okay, Don?' said Rosie.

The answer was a definite no, but I did not attempt to

voice it. All mental resources were diverted to implementing my emergency plan.

I made the timeout sign with my hands and ran. The elevator was at our floor, but the doors seemed to take forever to open and then to close again after I stepped inside. Finally I could release my emotions in a space that had no object to break or people to injure.

I doubtless appeared crazy, banging my fists against the elevator walls and shouting. I say doubtless, because I had forgotten to push the button for street level, and the elevator went all the way to the basement. Jerome was waiting with a washing basket when the doors opened. He was wearing a purple t-shirt.

Although my anger was not directed towards him, he did not appear to discern this subtlety. He pushed his hand against my chest, probably in an attempt at pre-emptive self-defence. I reacted automatically, grabbing his arm and spinning him around. He crashed against the elevator wall, then came at me again, this time throwing a punch. I was now responding according to my martial-arts training rather than my emotions. I avoided his punch, and opened him up so he was undefended. It was obvious he understood his situation and was expecting me to strike him. There was no reason to do so, and I released him. He ran up the stairs, leaving his washing basket behind. I needed to escape the confined space, and followed him. We both ran out onto the street.

I initially had no direction in mind, and locked in to following Jerome, who kept looking back. Eventually he

ducked down a side street and my thoughts began to clear. I turned north towards Queens.

I had not travelled to Dave and Sonia's apartment on foot before. Fortunately, navigation was straightforward as a result of the logical street numbering system, which should be mandatory in all cities. I ran hard for approximately twenty-five minutes and by the time I arrived at the building and pushed the buzzer I was hot and panting.

My anger had evaporated during the altercation with Jerome; I was relieved that it had not driven me to punch him. My emotions had felt out of control, but my martial-arts discipline had trumped them. This was reassuring, but now I was filled with a general feeling of hopelessness. How would I explain my behaviour to Rosie? I had never mentioned the meltdown problem, for two reasons:

1. After such a long time, and with my increased base level of happiness, I believed that it might not recur.
2. Rosie might have rejected me.

Rejection was now a rational choice for Rosie. She had reason to consider me violent and dangerous. And she was pregnant. To a violent and dangerous man. This would be terrible for her.

'Hello?' It was Sonia on the intercom.

'It's Don.'

'Don? Are you okay?' Sonia was apparently able to

detect from my voice – and possibly the omission of my customary 'greetings' salutation – that there was a problem.

'No. There's been a disaster. Multiple disasters.'

Sonia buzzed me up.

Dave and Sonia's apartment was larger than ours, but already cluttered with baby paraphernalia. It struck me that the term 'ours' might no longer be applicable.

I was conscious of extreme agitation. Dave went to fetch beer, and Sonia insisted that I sit down, even though I was more comfortable walking around.

'What happened?' said Sonia. It was an obvious thing to ask but I was unable to formulate an answer. 'Is Rosie all right?'

Afterwards, I reflected on the brilliance of the question. It was not only the most logical place to begin, but it helped me gain some perspective. Rosie was all right, physically at least. I was feeling calmer. Rationality was returning to deal with the mess that emotions had created.

'There is no problem with Rosie. The problem is with me.'

'What happened?' Sonia asked again.

'I had a meltdown. I failed to control my emotions.'

'You lost it?'

'Lost what?'

'You don't say that in Australia? Did you lose your temper?'

'Correct. I have some sort of psychiatric problem. I've never told Rosie.'

I had never told anyone. I had never conceded that I suffered from a mental illness, other than depression in my early twenties, which was a straightforward consequence of social isolation. I accepted that I was wired differently from most people, or, more precisely, that my wiring was towards one end of a spectrum of different human configurations. My innate logical skills were significantly greater than my interpersonal skills. Without people like me, we would not have penicillin or computers. But psychiatrists had been prepared to diagnose mental illness twenty years earlier. I had always considered them wrong, and no definitive diagnosis other than depression was ever recorded, but the meltdown problem was the weak point in my argument. It was a reaction to irrationality, but the reaction itself was irrational.

Dave returned and handed me a beer. He had also poured one for himself, and drank half of it rapidly. Dave is banned from drinking beer except on our joint nights out, due to a significant weight problem. Perhaps these were extenuating circumstances. I was still sweating despite the air-conditioning, and the drink cooled me down. Sonia and Dave were excellent friends.

Dave had been listening and had heard my admission of the psychiatric problem. 'You never told me either,' he said. 'What sort of –?'

Sonia interrupted. 'Excuse us a minute, Don. I want to speak to Dave alone.' She and Dave walked to the kitchen. I was aware that conventionally they would have needed to employ some form of subterfuge to disguise

the fact that they wanted to talk about me without me hearing. Fortunately, I am not easily offended. Dave and Sonia know this.

Dave returned alone. His beer glass had been refilled.

'How often has this happened? The meltdown?'

'This is the first time with Rosie.'

'Did you hit her?'

'No.' I wanted the answer to be 'of course not', but nothing is certain when logical reasoning is swamped by out-of-control emotions. I had prepared an emergency plan and it had worked. That was all I could claim credit for.

'Did you shove her – anything?'

'No, there was no violence. Zero physical contact.'

'Don, I'm supposed to say something like, "Don't fuck with me, buddy," but you know I can't talk like that. You're my friend – just tell me the truth.'

'You're also my friend and therefore aware that I am incompetent at deception.'

Dave laughed. 'True. But you should look me in the eye if you want to convince me.'

I stared into Dave's eyes. They were blue. A surprisingly light blue. I had not noticed before, doubtless as a result of failure to look him in the eye. 'There was no violence. I may have frightened a neighbour.'

'Shit, it was better without the psycho impression.'

I was distressed that Dave and Sonia believed I might have assaulted Rosie, but there was some comfort in realising that things could have been worse, and that their primary concern was for her.

Sonia waved from the entrance to Dave's office where she was talking on her phone. She gave Dave a thumbs-up signal, then jumped up and down with excitement like a child, waving her free hand in the air. Nothing was making sense.

'Oh my God,' she called out, 'Rosie's pregnant.'

It was as though there were twenty people in the room. Dave clinked his glass against mine, spilling beer, and even put his arm around my shoulder. He must have felt me stiffen, so he removed it, but Sonia then repeated the action and Dave slapped me on the back. It was like the subway at rush hour. They were treating my problem as a cause for celebration.

'Rosie's still on the phone,' said Sonia, and handed it to me.

'Don, are you all right?' she said. She was concerned about *me*.

'Of course. The state was temporary.'

'Don, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have just sprung it on you like that. Are you coming home? I really want to talk to you. But, Don, I don't want this to be temporary.'

Rosie must have thought that I was referring to *her* state – her pregnancy – but her answer gave me vital information. Riding home in Dave's van, I concluded that Rosie had already decided that it was a feature rather than a fault. The orange juice provided further evidence. She did not want to harm the fertilised egg. There was an extraordinary amount to process, and my brain was now functioning normally, or at least in the

manner that I was accustomed to. The meltdown was perhaps the psychological equivalent of a reboot following an overload.

Despite my growing expertise in identifying social cues, I nearly missed one from Dave.

'Don, I was going to ask you a favour, but I guess with Rosie and everything . . .'

Excellent was my first thought. Then I realised that the second part of Dave's sentence, and the tone in which it was delivered, indicated that he wanted me to overrule him, to enable him to avoid feeling guilty for asking for my assistance at a time when I was occupied with other problems.

'No problem.'

Dave smiled. I was aware of a surge of pleasure. When I was ten, I had learned to catch a ball after an amount of practice far in excess of that required by my schoolmates. The satisfaction every time I completed what for others would have been a routine catch was similar to the feeling I now experienced as a result of my improved social skills.

'It's no big deal,' Dave said. 'I've finished the beer cellar for the British guy in Chelsea.'

'Beer cellar?'

'Like a wine cellar, except it's for beer.'

'It sounds like a conventional project. The contents should be irrelevant from a refrigeration perspective.'

'Wait till you see it. It turned out pretty expensive.'

'You think he may argue about the price?'

'It's a weird job and he's a weird guy. I figure British and Australian – you guys might connect. I just want a bit of moral support. So he doesn't walk over me.'

Dave was silent and I took the opportunity to reflect. I had been given a reprieve. Rosie had presumably thought that my timeout request had been to consider the consequences of her announcement. The actual meltdown had been invisible to her. She seemed extremely happy with the pregnancy.

There need be no immediate impact on me. I would jog to the Chelsea Market tomorrow, teach an aikido class at the martial-arts centre and listen to the previous week's *Scientific American* podcasts. We would revisit the special exhibition of frogs at the Museum of Natural History, and I would make sushi, pumpkin gyoza, miso soup and tempura of whatever whitefish was recommended by the employees of the Lobster Place for dinner. I would use the 'free time' that Rosie insisted we schedule on the weekend – and which she was currently using for her thesis – to attend Dave's client meeting. At the homewares shop, I would purchase a specialised stopper and vacuum pump to preserve the wine that Rosie would normally have consumed, and substitute juice for her share.

Other than the amendment to beverage management, life would be unchanged. Except for Gene, of course. I still needed to deal with that problem. Given the circumstances, it seemed wise to postpone the announcement.

It was 9.27 p.m. when I arrived home from Dave's. Rosie flung her arms around me and began crying. I had

learned that it was better not to attempt to interpret such behaviour at the time, or to seek clarification as to the specific emotion being expressed, even though such information would have been useful in formulating a response. Instead, I adopted the tactic recommended by Claudia and assumed the persona of Gregory Peck's character in *The Big Country*. Strong and silent. It was not difficult for me.

Rosie recovered quickly.

'I put the scallops and stuff in the oven after I got off the phone,' she said. 'They should be okay.' This was an uninformed statement, but I concluded that the damage would probably not be increased significantly by leaving them for another hour.

I hugged Rosie again. I was feeling euphorically happy, a characteristic human reaction to the removal of a terrible threat.

We ate the scallops an hour and seven minutes later, in our pyjamas. All scheduled tasks had been completed. Except for the Gene announcement.