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The Rosie Project

Written by Graeme Simsion

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The Rosie Project

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CHAPTER 1

I may have found a solution to the Wife Problem. As with so many scientific breakthroughs, the answer was obvious in retrospect. But had it not been for a series of unscheduled events, it is unlikely I would have discovered it.

The sequence was initiated by Gene insisting I give a lecture on Asperger's Syndrome that he had previously agreed to deliver himself. The timing was extremely annoying. The preparation could be time-shared with lunch consumption, but on the designated evening I had scheduled ninety-four minutes to clean my bathroom. I was faced with a choice of three options, none of them satisfactory:

1. Cleaning the bathroom after the lecture, resulting in loss of sleep with a consequent reduction in mental and physical performance;
2. Rescheduling the cleaning until the following Tuesday, resulting in an eight-day period of compromised bathroom hygiene and consequent risk of disease;
3. Refusing to deliver the lecture, resulting in damage to my friendship with Gene.

I presented the dilemma to Gene, who, as usual, had an alternative solution.

'Don, I'll pay for someone to clean your bathroom.'

I explained to Gene—again—that all cleaners, with the exception of the Hungarian woman with the short skirt, made errors. Short-skirt Woman, who had also been Gene's cleaner, had disappeared following some problem with Gene and Claudia.

'I'll give you Eva's mobile number. Just don't mention me.'

'What if she asks? How can I answer without mentioning you?' Sometimes people make impossible demands.

'Just say you're contacting her because she's the only housekeeper who does it properly. And if she mentions me, say nothing.'

This was an excellent outcome, and an illustration of Gene's incredible ability to find solutions to social problems. Obviously Eva would enjoy having her competence recognised and might even return on a permanent basis, freeing up an average of three hundred and sixteen minutes per week in my schedule.

Gene's lecture problem had arisen because he had an opportunity to have sex with a Chilean academic who was attending a conference in Melbourne. Gene has a project to have sex with women of as many different nationalities as possible. As a professor of psychology, he is extremely interested in human sexual attraction, which he believes is largely genetically-determined.

This belief is consistent with Gene's background as a geneticist. Sixty-eight days after Gene hired me as a post-doctoral researcher, he was promoted to Head of the Psychology Department, a highly controversial appointment that was intended to establish the university as a leader in evolutionary psychology and increase its public profile. Most people in the department disagree with Gene's view of the dominant role of genetics in human behaviour, and, presumably because of this disagreement, dislike him. This is, of course, a very unscientific attitude.

During the time we worked concurrently in the Genetics Department, we had multiple interesting discussions which continued after his change of position. I would have been satisfied with our relationship for this reason alone. However, Gene invited me to dinner at his house and performed numerous other friendship rituals, resulting in a social relationship. His wife Claudia, who is a clinical psychologist, is now also a friend. Making a total of two.

Gene and Claudia have tried to assist me with the Wife Problem. Unfortunately, their approach has been no different from the one that has been unsuccessful for me in the past, and which I abandoned on the basis that the probability of success did not justify the effort and negative experiences. I am thirty-nine years old; single, intelligent, fit, in excellent health and I have a relatively high status and above-average income as an associate professor. Logically, I should be attractive to a wide range of women. In the animal kingdom, I would succeed in reproducing.

However, there is something about me that women find unappealing. I have never found it easy to make friends, and it seems that the deficiencies that caused this problem have also affected my attempts at romantic relationships. The Apricot Ice-cream Disaster is a good example.

Claudia had introduced me to one of her numerous friends. Elizabeth was a computer scientist, highly intelligent, with a vision problem that had been successfully

corrected with glasses. I mention the glasses because Claudia showed me a photograph, and asked me if I was okay with them. An incredible question! From a psychologist! In evaluating the suitability of a person as a partner, to share activities, to provide intellectual stimulation, potentially to breed with, Claudia's first concern was my reaction to the woman's choice of glasses frames, which was probably not even her own but the result of advice from an optometrist. This is the world I have to live in. Then she told me, as though it was a problem: 'She has very firm ideas.'

'Are they evidence-based?' was my obvious question.

'I guess so,' Claudia said.

Perfect. She could have been describing me.

We met at a Thai restaurant. Restaurants are minefields for the socially inept, and I was nervous as always in these situations. But we got off to an excellent start when we both arrived at exactly 7.00 p.m. as arranged. Poor synchronisation is a huge waste of time.

We survived the meal without her criticising me for any social errors. It is difficult to conduct a conversation while wondering whether you are looking at the correct body part but I locked on to her bespectacled eyes, as recommended by Gene. This resulted in some inaccuracy in the eating process, which she did not seem to notice. On the contrary, we had a highly productive discussion about simulation algorithms. She was so interesting! I could already see the possibility of a permanent relationship.

The waiter brought the dessert menus and Elizabeth said, 'I don't like Asian desserts.'

This was almost certainly an unsound generalisation, based on limited experience, and perhaps I should have recognised it as a warning sign. But it provided me with an opportunity for a creative suggestion.

'We could get an ice cream across the road,' I said.

'Great idea. As long as they've got apricot.'

I assessed that I was progressing well at this point, and did not think the apricot preference would be a problem. I was wrong. The ice-cream parlour had a vast selection of flavours, but they had exhausted their supply of apricot. I ordered a chocolate chilli

and liquorice double cone for myself and asked Elizabeth to nominate her second preference.

'Nothing. If they haven't got apricot, I'll pass.'

I couldn't believe it. All ice-cream tastes essentially the same, due to chilling of the tastebuds. This is especially true of fruit flavours. I suggested mango.

'No thanks, I'm fine.'

I explained the physiology of taste-bud chilling in some detail. I predicted that if I purchased a mango and a peach ice cream she would be incapable of differentiating. And, by extension, either would be equivalent to apricot.

'No way,' she said. 'They're totally different. If you can't taste the difference, that's your problem.'

Now we had a simple objective disagreement that could readily be resolved experimentally. I explained this and ordered a minimum-size mango and minimum-size peach ice cream. But by the time the serving person had prepared them, and I turned to ask Elizabeth to close her eyes for the experiment, she had gone. So much for 'evidence-based'. And for computer 'scientist'.

Afterwards, Claudia advised me that I should have abandoned the ice-cream experiment prior to Elizabeth leaving. Obviously. But at what point? Where was the signal? These are the subtleties I fail to see. But I also fail to see why heightened sensitivity to obscure cues about ice-cream flavours should be a prerequisite for being someone's partner. It seems reasonable to assume that some women do not require this. Unfortunately, the process of finding them by devoting a whole evening to each candidate is impossibly inefficient. The Apricot Ice-cream Disaster had cost a whole evening of my life, compensated for only by the information about simulation algorithms.

I was about to lose another evening of my life, delivering a lecture on Asperger's Syndrome to a group of people with this affliction, while Gene had sex. I had no previous knowledge of autism-spectrum disorders, as they were outside my specialty. I assumed that my audience would already be well-informed. If you have a chronic disease, it is essential to become expert on the general symptoms, treatment and prognosis, and the specific manifestation of these in your own body. Failure to do so may result in less than

optimal treatment and even death, due to ignorance, poor communication or lack of a rigorous approach by medical professionals.

As a geneticist, it seemed appropriate to focus on the genetic aspects of Asperger's Syndrome, which might be unfamiliar to my audience. Most diseases have some basis in our DNA, though in many cases we have yet to discover it. My own work focuses on genetic predisposition to cirrhosis of the liver. Much of my working time is devoted to getting mice drunk. I sometimes share a drink with them.

Two lunchtimes were sufficient to research and prepare my lecture, without sacrificing nourishment, thanks to the provision of Wi-Fi in the medical library café. The subject was fascinating. Although I focused on the genetic aspect, it was impossible to avoid the description of the symptoms. I formed a provisional conclusion that most of the so-called symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome were simply variations in human brain function that had been inappropriately medicalised because they did not fit social norms—*constructed* social norms—that reflected the most common human configurations rather than the full range. The lecture was scheduled for 7.00 p.m. at an inner-suburban school. I estimated the cycle ride at twelve minutes, and allowed three minutes to boot my computer and connect it to the projector.

I arrived on schedule at 6.57 p.m., having let Eva, the housekeeper with the short skirt, into my apartment twenty-seven minutes earlier. There were approximately twenty-five people milling around the classroom, but I immediately recognised Julie, the convenor, from Gene's description: 'blonde with big tits'. In fact, her breasts were probably no more than one and a half standard deviations from the mean size for her body weight, and hardly a remarkable identifying feature. It was more a question of elevation and exposure, as a result of her choice of costume, which seemed perfectly practical for a hot December evening.

I may have spent too long verifying her identity, as she looked at me strangely.

'You must be Julie,' I said.

'Can I help you?' she said. Good. A practical person.

'Yes, direct me to the VGA cable. Please.'

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘You must be Professor Tillman. I’m so glad you could make it.’ It seemed we were going to be delayed by small talk. She extended her hand but I waved it away.

‘The VGA cable please. It’s six fifty-eight.’

‘Relax,’ she said. ‘We never start before seven fifteen. Would you like a coffee?’

Why do people value others’ time so little? Now we would have the inevitable small talk. I could have spent fifteen minutes at home practising aikido.

I surveyed the room and realised that I had failed to observe approximately twenty people. They were children, predominantly male, sitting at desks. Presumably these were the victims of Asperger’s Syndrome. Almost all of the literature focuses on children.

The Asperger’s ‘sufferers’ were making better use of their time than their parents who were chattering aimlessly. Most were operating portable computing devices. I guessed their ages as between eight and thirteen. I hoped they had been paying attention in their science classes, as my material assumed a working knowledge of organic chemistry and the structure of DNA.

I realised that I had failed to reply to the coffee question.

‘No.’ Unfortunately, because of the delay, Julie had forgotten the question. ‘No coffee,’ I explained. ‘I never drink coffee after three forty-eight p.m. It interferes with sleep. Caffeine has a half-life of three to four hours, so it’s irresponsible serving coffee at seven p.m. unless people are planning to stay awake until after midnight. Which doesn’t allow adequate sleep if they have a conventional job.’ I was trying to make use of the waiting time by offering practical advice, but it seemed that she preferred to discuss trivia.

‘Is Gene all right?’ she asked. It was obviously a variant on that most common of formulaic interactions, ‘How are you?’

‘He’s fine, thank you,’ I said, adapting the conventional reply to the third-person form.

‘Oh,’ said Julie, ‘I thought he was ill.’

‘Gene is in excellent health except for being overweight. We went for a run this morning. He has a date tonight, and he wouldn’t be able to go out if he was ill.’

Julie seemed unimpressed, and in reviewing the interaction later, I realised that Gene must have lied to her about his reason for not being present. This was presumably to protect Julie from feeling that her lecture was relatively unimportant to Gene (as it obviously was) and to provide a justification for a less-prestigious speaker being sent as a substitute. It seems hardly possible to analyse such a complex situation involving deceit and supposition of another person's emotional response, and then prepare your own plausible lie, all while someone is waiting for you to reply to a question. Yet that is exactly what people expect you to be able to do.

Eventually, I set up my computer and we got started, *eighteen minutes late*. I would need to speak forty-three per cent faster to finish on schedule at 8.00 p.m.—a virtually impossible performance goal. We were going to finish late, and my evening schedule would be thrown out.