

# THE ROSIE PROJECT

## GRAEME SIMSION



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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 possible exception of the Hungarian woman with the short skirt, made errors. Short-skirt Woman, who had 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?’

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

This was an excellent outcome, and an illustration of Gene’s ability to find solutions to social problems. Eva would enjoy having her competence recognised and might even be suitable for a permanent role, which would free 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.

During the time we worked concurrently in the Genetics Department, we had numerous interesting discussions which continued after his change of position. I would have been satisfied with our relationship for this reason alone, but Gene also invited me to dinner at his house and performed 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 tried for a while to assist me with the Wife Problem. Unfortunately, their approach was based on the traditional dating paradigm, which I had previously abandoned on the basis that the probability of success did not justify the effort and negative experiences. I am thirty-nine years old, tall, fit and intelligent, with 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 many friends. Elizabeth was a highly intelligent computer scientist, with a vision problem that had been 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 Elizabeth's suitability as a potential partner—someone to provide intellectual stimulation, to share activities with, perhaps even to breed with—Claudia's first concern was my reaction to her 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 Claudia told me, as though it was a problem: 'She has very firm ideas.'

'Are they evidence-based?'

'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.’

‘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.

‘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 tastebud 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.

‘They’re completely different,’ she said. ‘If you can’t tell mango from peach, that’s your problem.’

Now we had a simple objective disagreement that could

readily be resolved experimentally. I ordered a minimum-size ice-cream in each of the two flavours. 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 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 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.

Two lunchtimes were sufficient to research and prepare my lecture on Asperger’s syndrome, without sacrificing nourishment, thanks to the provision of Wi-Fi in the medical library café. I had no previous knowledge of autism spectrum disorders, as they were outside my specialty. The subject was fascinating. It seemed appropriate to focus on the genetic aspects of the 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.

Naturally, the books and research papers described the

symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, and I formed a provisional conclusion that most of these 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 short-skirted cleaner, into my apartment twenty-seven minutes earlier. There were approximately twenty-five people milling around the door and the front of 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 January 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?'

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.'

She extended her hand but I waved it away. ‘The VGA cable, please. It’s 6.58.’

‘Relax,’ she said. ‘We never start before 7.15. 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 had been focusing on Julie and the screen at the front of the room. Now I looked around and realised that I had failed to observe nineteen 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.

Despite their affliction, they 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 3.48 p.m. It interferes with sleep. Caffeine has a half-life of three to four hours, so it’s irresponsible serving coffee at 7.00 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. I thought he was ill.’

‘Gene is in excellent health except for being six kilograms 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 unimportant to Gene 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 schedule for the rest of the night would be thrown out.

## 2

I had titled my talk *Genetic Precursors to Autism Spectrum Disorders* and sourced some excellent diagrams of DNA structures. I had only been speaking for nine minutes, a little faster than usual to recover time, when Julie interrupted.

‘Professor Tillman. Most of us here are not scientists, so you may need to be a little less technical.’ This sort of thing is incredibly annoying. People can tell you the supposed characteristics of a Gemini or a Taurus and will spend five days watching a cricket match, but cannot find the interest or the time to learn the basics of what they, as humans, are made up of.

I continued with my presentation as I had prepared it. It was too late to change and surely some of the audience were informed enough to understand.

I was right. A hand went up, a male of about twelve.

‘You are saying that it is unlikely that there is a single genetic marker, but rather that several genes are implicated and the aggregate expression depends on the specific combination. Affirmative?’

Exactly! ‘Plus environmental factors. The situation is analogous to bipolar disorder, which—’

Julie interrupted again. ‘So, for us non-geniuses, I think Professor Tillman is reminding us that Asperger’s is something you’re born with. It’s nobody’s fault.’

I was horrified by the use of the word ‘fault’, with its negative connotations, especially as it was being employed by someone in authority. I abandoned my decision not to deviate from the genetic issues. The matter had doubtless been brewing in my subconscious, and the volume of my voice may have increased as a result.

‘Fault! Asperger’s isn’t a fault. It’s a variant. It’s potentially a major advantage. Asperger’s syndrome is associated with organisation, focus, innovative thinking and rational detachment.’

A woman at the rear of the room raised her hand. I was focused on the argument now, and made a minor social error, which I quickly corrected.

‘The fat woman—*overweight* woman—at the back?’

She paused and looked around the room, but then continued, ‘Rational detachment: is that a euphemism for lack of emotion?’

‘Synonym,’ I replied. ‘Emotions can cause major problems.’

I decided it would be helpful to provide an example,

drawing on a story in which emotional behaviour would have led to disastrous consequences.

‘Imagine,’ I said. ‘You’re hiding in a basement. The enemy is searching for you and your friends. Everyone has to keep totally quiet, but your baby is crying.’ I did an impression, as Gene would, to make the story more convincing: ‘Waaaaaa.’ I paused dramatically. ‘You have a gun.’

Hands went up everywhere.

Julie jumped to her feet as I continued. ‘With a silencer. They’re coming closer. They’re going to kill you all. What do you do? The baby’s screaming—’

The kids couldn’t wait to share their answer. One called out, ‘Shoot the baby,’ and soon they were all shouting, ‘Shoot the baby, shoot the baby.’

The boy who had asked the genetics question called out, ‘Shoot the *enemy*,’ and then another said, ‘Ambush them.’

The suggestions were coming rapidly.

‘Use the baby as bait.’

‘How many guns do we have?’

‘Cover its mouth.’

‘How long can it live without air?’

As I had expected, all the ideas came from the Asperger’s ‘sufferers’. The parents made no constructive suggestions; some even tried to suppress their children’s creativity.

I raised my hands. ‘Time’s up. Excellent work. All the rational solutions came from the aspies. Everyone else was incapacitated by emotion.’

One boy called out, ‘Aspies rule!’ I had noted this abbreviation in the literature, but it appeared to be new to the

children. They seemed to like it, and soon were standing on the chairs and then the desks, punching the air and chanting ‘Aspies rule!’ in chorus. According to my reading, children with Asperger’s syndrome frequently lack self-confidence in social situations. Their success in problem-solving seemed to have provided a temporary cure for this, but again their parents were failing to provide positive feedback, shouting at them and in some cases attempting to pull them down from the desks. Apparently they were more concerned with adherence to social convention than the progress their children were making.

I felt I had made my point effectively, and Julie did not think we needed to continue with the genetics. The parents appeared to be reflecting on what their children had learned and left without interacting with me further. It was only 7.43 p.m. An excellent outcome.

As I packed up my laptop, Julie burst out laughing.  
‘Oh my God,’ she said. ‘I need a drink.’

I was not sure why she was sharing this information with someone she had known for only forty-six minutes. I planned to consume some alcohol myself when I arrived home but saw no reason to inform Julie.

She continued, ‘You know, we never use that word. Aspies. We don’t want them thinking it’s some sort of club.’ More negative implications from someone who was presumably paid to assist and encourage.

‘Like homosexuality?’ I said.

‘Touché,’ said Julie. ‘But it’s different. If they don’t change, they’re not going to have real relationships—they’ll never have

partners.’ This was a reasonable argument, and one that I could understand, given my own difficulties in that sphere. But Julie changed the subject. ‘But you’re saying there are things—useful things—they can do better than...non-aspies? Besides killing babies.’

‘Of course.’ I wondered why someone involved in the education of people with uncommon attributes was not aware of the value of and market for such attributes. ‘There’s a company in Denmark that recruits aspies for computer applications testing.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Julie. ‘You’re really giving me a different perspective.’ She looked at me for a few moments. ‘Do you have time for a drink?’ And then she put her hand on my shoulder.

I flinched automatically. Definitely inappropriate contact. If I had done that to a woman there would almost certainly have been a problem, possibly a sexual harassment complaint to the Dean, which could have consequences for my career. Of course, no one was going to criticise *her* for it.

‘Unfortunately, I have other activities scheduled.’

‘No flexibility?’

‘Definitely not.’ Having succeeded in recovering lost time, I was not about to throw my life into chaos again.

Before I met Gene and Claudia I had two other friends. The first was my older sister. Although she was a mathematics teacher, she had little interest in advances in the field. However, she lived nearby and would visit twice weekly and sometimes randomly. We would eat together and discuss

trivia, such as events in the lives of our relatives and social interactions with our colleagues. Once a month, we drove to Shepparton for Sunday dinner with our parents and brother. She was single, probably as a result of being shy and not conventionally attractive. Due to gross and inexcusable medical incompetence, she is now dead.

The second friend was Daphne, whose friendship period also overlapped with Gene and Claudia's. She moved into the apartment above mine after her husband entered a nursing home, as a result of dementia. Due to knee failure, exacerbated by obesity, she was unable to walk more than a few steps, but she was highly intelligent and I began to visit her regularly. She had no formal qualifications, having performed a traditional female homemaker role. I considered this to be an extreme waste of talent—particularly as her descendants did not return the care. She was curious about my work, and we initiated the Teach Daphne Genetics Project, which was fascinating for both of us.

She began eating her dinner in my apartment on a regular basis, as there are massive economies of scale in cooking one meal for two people, rather than two separate meals. Each Sunday at 3.00 p.m. we would visit her husband at the nursing home, which was 7.3 kilometres away. I was able to combine a 14.6-kilometre walk pushing a wheelchair with interesting conversation about genetics. I would read while she spoke to her husband, whose level of comprehension was difficult to determine but definitely low.

Daphne had been named after the plant that was flowering at the time of her birth, on the twenty-eighth of August.

On each birthday, her husband would give her daphne flowers, and she considered this a highly romantic action. She complained that her approaching birthday would be the first occasion in fifty-six years on which this symbolic act would not be performed. The solution was obvious, and when I wheeled her to my apartment for dinner on her seventy-eighth birthday, I had purchased a quantity of the flowers to give her.

She recognised the smell immediately and began crying. I thought I had made a terrible error, but she explained that her tears were a symptom of happiness. She was also impressed by the chocolate cake that I had made, but not to the same extent.

During the meal, she made an incredible statement: ‘Don, you would make someone a wonderful husband.’

This was so contrary to my experiences of being rejected by women that I was temporarily stunned. Then I presented her with the facts—the history of my attempts to find a partner, beginning with my assumption as a child that I would grow up and get married and finishing with my abandonment of the idea as the evidence grew that I was unsuitable.

Her argument was simple: there’s someone for everyone. Statistically, she was almost certainly correct. Unfortunately, the probability that I would find such a person was vanishingly small. But it created a disturbance in my brain, like a mathematical problem that we know must have a solution.

For her next two birthdays, we repeated the flower ritual. The results were not as dramatic as the first time, but I also purchased gifts for her—books on genetics—and she seemed very happy. She told me that her birthday had always been

her favourite day of the year. I understood that this view was common in children, due to the gifts, but had not expected it in an adult.

Ninety-three days after the third birthday dinner, we were travelling to the nursing home, discussing a genetics paper that Daphne had read the previous day, when it became apparent that she had forgotten some significant points. It was not the first time in recent weeks that her memory had been faulty, and I immediately organised an assessment of her cognitive functioning. The diagnosis was Alzheimer's disease.

Daphne's intellectual capability deteriorated rapidly, and we were soon unable to have our discussions about genetics. But we continued our meals and walks to the nursing home. Daphne now spoke primarily about her past, focusing on her husband and family, and I was able to form a generalised view of what married life could be like. She continued to insist that I could find a compatible partner and enjoy the high level of happiness that she had experienced in her own life. Supplementary research confirmed that Daphne's arguments were supported by evidence: married men are happier and live longer.

One day Daphne asked, 'When will it be my birthday again?' and I realised that she had lost track of dates. I decided that it would be acceptable to lie in order to maximise her happiness. The problem was to source some daphne out of season, but I had unexpected success. I was aware of a geneticist who was working on altering and extending the flowering of plants for commercial reasons. He was able to supply my flower vendor with some daphne, and we had a simulated

birthday dinner. I repeated the procedure each time Daphne asked about her birthday.

Eventually, it was necessary for Daphne to join her husband at the nursing home, and, as her memory failed, we celebrated her birthdays more often, until I was visiting her daily. The flower vendor gave me a special loyalty card. I calculated that Daphne had reached the age of two hundred and seven, according to the number of birthdays, when she stopped recognising me, and three hundred and nineteen when she no longer responded to the daphne and I abandoned the visits.

I did not expect to hear from Julie again. As usual, my assumptions about human behaviour were wrong. Two days after the lecture, at 3.37 p.m., my phone rang with an unfamiliar number. Julie left a message asking me to call back, and I deduced that I must have left something behind.

I was wrong again. She wanted to continue our discussion of Asperger's syndrome. I was pleased that my input had been so influential. She suggested we meet over dinner, which was not the ideal location for productive discussion, but, as I usually eat dinner alone, it would be easy to schedule. Background research was another matter.

‘What specific topics are you interested in?’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I thought we could just talk generally...get to know each other a bit.’

This sounded unfocused. ‘I need at least a broad indication of the subject domain. What did I say that particularly interested you?’

‘Oh...I guess the stuff about the computer testers in Denmark.’

‘Computer *applications* testers.’ I would definitely need to do some research. ‘What would you like to know?’

‘I was wondering how they found them. Most adults with Asperger’s syndrome don’t know they have it.’

It was a good point. Interviewing random applicants would be a highly inefficient way to detect a syndrome that has an estimated prevalence of less than 0.3 per cent.

I ventured a guess. ‘I presume they use a questionnaire as a preliminary filter.’ I had not even finished the sentence when a light went on in my head—not literally, of course.

A questionnaire! Such an obvious solution. A purpose-built, scientifically valid instrument incorporating current best practice to filter out the time wasters, the disorganised, the ice-cream discriminators, the visual-harassment complainers, the crystal gazers, the horoscope readers, the fashion obsessives, the religious fanatics, the vegans, the sports watchers, the creationists, the smokers, the scientifically illiterate, the homeopaths, leaving, ideally, the perfect partner, or, realistically, a manageable shortlist of candidates.

‘Don?’ It was Julie, still on the line. ‘When do you want to get together?’

Things had changed. Priorities had shifted.

‘It’s not possible,’ I said. ‘My schedule is full.’

I was going to need all available time for the new project.

The Wife Project.

# 3

After speaking with Julie, I went immediately to Gene's office in the Psychology building, but he was not there. Fortunately his personal assistant, The Beautiful Helena, who should be called The Obstructive Helena, was not there either and I was able to access Gene's diary. I discovered that he was giving a public lecture, due to finish at 5.00 p.m., with a gap before a meeting at 5.30 p.m. Perfect. I would merely have to reduce the length of my scheduled gym session. I booked the vacant slot.

After an accelerated workout at the gym, achieved by deleting the shower and change tasks, I jogged to the lecture theatre, where I waited outside the staff entrance. Although I was perspiring heavily from the heat and exercise, I was energised, both physically and mentally. As soon as my watch

showed 5.00 p.m., I walked in. Gene was at the lectern of the darkened theatre, still talking, apparently oblivious to time, responding to a question about funding. My entrance had allowed a shaft of light into the room, and I realised that the audience's eyes were now on me, as if expecting me to say something.

'Time's up,' I said. 'I have a meeting with Gene.'

People immediately started getting up, and I observed the Dean in the front row with three people in corporate costumes. I guessed that they were there as potential providers of finance and not because of an intellectual interest in primate sexual attraction. Gene is always trying to solicit money for research, and the Dean is constantly threatening to downsize the Genetics and Psychology departments because of insufficient funding. It is not an area I involve myself in.

Gene spoke over the chatter. 'I think my colleague Professor Tillman has given us a signal that we should discuss the finances, critical as they are to our ongoing work, at another time.' He looked towards the Dean and her companions. 'Thank you again for your interest in my work—and of course that of my colleagues in the Department of Psychology.' There was applause. It seemed that my intervention had been timely.

The Dean and her corporate friends swept past me. She said, just to me, 'Sorry to hold up your meeting, Professor Tillman. I'm sure we can find the money elsewhere.' This was good to hear, but now, annoyingly, there was a throng around Gene. A woman with red hair and several metal

objects in her ears was talking to him. She was speaking quite loudly.

‘I can’t believe you used a public lecture to push your own agenda.’

‘Lucky you came then. You’ve changed one of your beliefs. That’d be a first.’

It was obvious that there was some animosity on the woman’s part even though Gene was smiling.

‘Even if you were right, which you’re not, what about the social impact?’

I was amazed by Gene’s next reply, not by its intent, which I am familiar with, but by its subtle shift in topic. Gene has social skills at a level that I will never have.

‘This is sounding like a café discussion. Why don’t we pick it up over coffee sometime?’

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’ve got research to do. You know, evidence.’

I moved to push in but a tall blonde woman was ahead of me, and I did not want to risk body contact. She spoke with a Norwegian accent.

‘Professor Barrow?’ she said, meaning Gene. ‘With respect, I think you are oversimplifying the feminist position.’

‘If we’re going to talk philosophy, we should do it in a coffee shop,’ Gene replied. ‘I’ll catch you at Barista’s in five.’

The woman nodded and walked towards the door.

Finally, we had time to talk.

‘What’s her accent?’ Gene asked me. ‘Swedish?’

‘Norwegian,’ I said. ‘I thought you had a Norwegian already.’

I told him that we had a discussion scheduled, but Gene

was now focused on having coffee with the woman. Most male animals are programmed to give higher priority to sex than to assisting an unrelated individual, and Gene had the additional motivation of his research project. Arguing would be hopeless.

‘Book the next slot in my diary,’ he said.

The Beautiful Helena had presumably departed for the day, and I was again able to access Gene’s diary. I amended my own schedule to accommodate the appointment. From now on, the Wife Project would have maximum priority.

I waited until exactly 7.30 a.m. the next day before knocking on Gene and Claudia’s door. It had been necessary to shift my jog to the market for dinner purchases back to 5.45 a.m., which in turn had meant going to bed earlier the previous night, with a flow-on effect to a number of scheduled tasks.

I heard sounds of surprise through the door before their daughter Eugenie opened it. Eugenie was, as always, pleased to see me, and requested that I hoist her onto my shoulders and jump all the way to the kitchen. It was great fun. It occurred to me that I might be able to include Eugenie and her half-brother Carl as my friends, making a total of four.

Gene and Claudia were eating breakfast, and told me that they had not been expecting me. I advised Gene to put his diary online—he could remain up to date and I would avoid unpleasant encounters with The Beautiful Helena. He was not enthusiastic.

I had missed breakfast, so I took a tub of yoghurt from the refrigerator. Sweetened! No wonder Gene is overweight.

Claudia is not yet overweight, but I had noticed some increase. I pointed out the problem, and identified the yoghurt as the possible culprit.

Claudia asked whether I had enjoyed the Asperger's lecture. She was under the impression that Gene had delivered the lecture and I had merely attended. I corrected her mistake and told her I had found the subject fascinating.

'Did the symptoms remind you of anyone?' she asked.

They certainly did. They were an almost perfect description of Laszlo Hevesi in the Physics Department. I was about to relate the famous story of Laszlo and the pyjamas when Gene's son Carl, who is sixteen, arrived in his school uniform. He walked towards the refrigerator, as if to open it, then suddenly spun around and threw a full-blooded punch at my head. I caught the punch and pushed him gently but firmly to the floor, so he could see that I was achieving the result with leverage rather than strength. This is a game we always play, but he had not noticed the yoghurt, which was now on our clothes.

'Stay still,' said Claudia. 'I'll get a cloth.'

A cloth was not going to clean my shirt properly. Laundering a shirt requires a machine, detergent, fabric softener and considerable time.

'I'll borrow one of Gene's,' I said, and headed to their bedroom.

When I returned, wearing an uncomfortably large white shirt, with a decorative frill in the front, I tried to introduce the Wife Project, but Claudia was engaged in child-related activities. This was becoming frustrating. I booked dinner

for Saturday night and asked them not to schedule any other conversation topics.

The delay was actually opportune, as it enabled me to undertake some research on questionnaire design, draw up a list of desirable attributes, and produce a draft proforma survey. All this, of course, had to be arranged around my teaching and research commitments and an appointment with the Dean.

On Friday morning we had yet another unpleasant interaction as a result of me reporting an honours-year student for academic dishonesty. I had already caught Kevin Yu cheating once. Then, marking his most recent assignment, I had recognised a sentence from another student's work of three years earlier.

Some investigation established that the past student was now Kevin's private tutor, and had written at least part of his essay for him. This had all happened some weeks ago. I had reported the matter and expected the disciplinary process to take its course. Apparently it was more complicated than this.

'The situation with Kevin is a little awkward,' said the Dean. We were in her corporate-style office and she was wearing her corporate-style costume of matching dark-blue skirt and jacket, which, according to Gene, is intended to make her appear more powerful. She is a short, slim person, aged approximately fifty, and it is possible that the costume makes her appear bigger, but I cannot see the relevance of physical dominance in an academic environment.

'This is Kevin's third offence, and university policy requires that he be expelled,' she said.

The facts seemed to be clear and the necessary action straightforward. I tried to identify the awkwardness that the Dean referred to. ‘Is the evidence insufficient? Is he making a legal challenge?’

‘No, that’s all perfectly clear. But the first offence was very naive. He cut and pasted from the internet, and was picked up by the plagiarism software. He was in his first year and his English wasn’t very good. And there are cultural differences.’

I had not known about this first offence.

‘The second time, you reported him because he’d borrowed from an obscure paper that you were somehow familiar with.’

‘Correct.’

‘Don, none of the other lecturers are as...vigilant...as you.’

It was unusual for the Dean to compliment me on my wide reading and dedication.

‘These kids pay a lot of money to study here. We rely on their fees. We don’t want them stealing blatantly from the internet. But we have to recognise that they need assistance, and...Kevin has only a semester to go. We can’t send him home after three and a half years without a qualification. It’s not a good look.’

‘What if he was a medical student? What if you went to the hospital and the doctor who operated on you had cheated in their exams?’

‘Kevin’s not a medical student. And he didn’t cheat on his exams, he just got some help with an assignment.’

It seemed that the Dean had been flattering me only in order to procure unethical behaviour. But the solution to her

dilemma was obvious. If she did not want to break the rules, then she should change the rules. I pointed this out.

I am not good at interpreting expressions, and was not familiar with the one that appeared on the Dean's face. 'We can't be seen to allow cheating.'

'Even though we do?'

The meeting left me confused and angry. There were serious matters at stake. What if our research was not accepted because we had a reputation for low academic standards? People could die while cures for diseases were delayed. What if a genetics laboratory hired a person whose qualification had been achieved through cheating, and that person made major errors? The Dean seemed more concerned with perceptions than with these crucial matters.

I reflected on what it would be like to spend my life living with the Dean. It was a truly terrible thought. The underlying problem was the preoccupation with image. My questionnaire would be ruthless in filtering out women who were concerned with appearance.