

The Greed Gene

by

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The Greed Gene

DESCRIPTION

Genetic counseling will soon be able to reveal all of the intricacies of our human personality, but this abundance of knowledge is not necessarily a blessing, as Norman and Lauren Drago learn from Dr. Targus, their "Genie of Genes," as he explains to them what their new child will face in this "brave new world" as a possessor of the "greed gene."

CHARACTERS

- Dr. Marion Targus (**Note:** This role can be played by a man or woman. The male pronoun is used for convenience.)
- Lauren Drago -- she is pregnant but not showing
- Norman Drago

SETTING

- Dr. Targus' office

TIME

- Present

MISCELLANEOUS

- Table
- Two or three chairs
- Folders, charts
- Desk paraphernalia

The Greed Gene

DR. TARGUS' office. On his desk are folders, charts, etc. along with the usual desk paraphernalia. Or, if desired, charts can be set on an easel.

TARGUS

It's quite conclusive, Mr. and Mrs. Drago. Your child will have it.

NORMAN

Absolutely?

TARGUS

Nothing is absolute in this job, but in this case, it's a pretty easy call. Right there, on chromosome 29.

LAUREN

The greed gene.

TARGUS

That's what the press calls it. It's official name is tripolynomial kleptoavarensis -- but "greed gene" is easier for the Fourth Estate to type.

NORMAN

Amazing.

TARGUS

Yes, it is. Giant strides in the last few years identifying various genes for human behavior. My special favorite is the one for jaywalking -- the way it diffuses itself throughout the entire population of New York City, even in people who are just visiting.

LAUREN

Genes for almost everything!

NORMAN

Including --

TARGUS

Including, yes --

LAUREN

The greed gene --

TARGUS

The greed gene. You've heard the results -- what do you want to do?

LAUREN

Not an easy decision, doctor. What do you suggest?

TARGUS

Well, Lauren, as your genetic counselor, the Genie of Genes, so to speak -- a little joke making the rounds -- all I can do is serve up the information and help you digest your options.

NORMAN

And our options are --

TARGUS

In this case -- somewhat limited, I'm afraid.

NORMAN

Limited? Limited?

TARGUS

(hesitating)

You see, the greed gene is part of a family of genes which -- well, when I say "family," I mean that more in the sense of the Mafia than the Cleavers.

LAUREN

We don't understand.

TARGUS

A person under the pull of the greed gene does things that set other things in motion that then set other things in motion, and so on -- what we call "putting out the contract" -- all for the purpose of acquiring as many things as possible in the shortest amount of time with the least interference. It is the most selfish of the selfish genes. We're finding that it clusters in places like Beverly Hills, and Central Park West, and, now, in the gated communities springing up around the country. And we're also discovering that the gene is completely unaffected by the truth and justice genes on the first amendment to the 12th chromosome. But before we get too deep into the protoplasm of the matter, let's review what we know. Okay?

Picks up a folder.

TARGUS

It's important to understand that just because your child has certain gene markers doesn't mean that he or she will have those traits. But the list here looks pretty impressive, I'm telling you. Good, strong coding for blond hair and blue eyes --

NORMAN
Absolutely essential --

TARGUS
-- for where he'll be in life, and --
(picks up another folder)
-- for the way you've already plotted the child's
A.C.E. --

NORMAN
A.C.E.?

TARGUS
The Arc of Continuous Evolution?

NORMAN
Yes, yes -- I'm sorry --

TARGUS
-- Ivy League school, access to the trust fund --

NORMAN
-- How could I have forgotten that?

TARGUS
The child should "ace" that pretty well.

They all laugh.

TARGUS
The intelligence gene suite looks pretty solid,
too, with a tendency toward piquant extroversion
and a subtle phenomenological twist with a
Germanic flavor.

LAUREN
That comes from Norman's side.

NORMAN
My grandparents were renowned German idealists in
a neo-Hegelian vein, but they balanced that with
a mildly bon vivant style of Marxism that
emphasized dance instruction for the proletariat.

TARGUS
Good --
(runs his finger down the page)
Oh, and this -- the presence of some, well, early
artistic tendencies that indicate a dislike of
opera and a possible taste for multi-media
productions using feathers, garbage, and egg
white as a binder. Probably not fundable by a
grant. Is that all right?

LAUREN

That's from me. When I was at Bryn Mawr I had a fancy I'd be an artist, and I liked to experiment, you know -- Norman, you remember that homage to Macy's I did with gel and macaroni?

NORMAN

It looked edible. Even for an N. Rockwell kind of guy, like me, Lauren sure made a canvas look interesting.

TARGUS

Let's see -- no shopping gene, apparently, but there is an Eddie Bauer tendency along the fifth chromosome, with an opposing tendency for Salvation Army. Acceptable?

LAUREN

As long as she -- I mean, the child -- grows out of it by late adolescence.

TARGUS

That's up to the "nurture" part, which is you two. So, an intriguing composite: A nodding towards the New Yorker, most likely voting Republican -- with a mild but brief Libertarian rebellion -- but the chemical fingerprint for that is not strong -- an inclination to under-tip wait staff and treat doormen with slight but pointed contempt. And absolutely no signs of any telethon diseases!

NORMAN

All of it looking good. But the greed --

TARGUS

-- the greed gene, yes. The 800-pound gorilla planted on the sofa.

NORMAN

You said, before, "sets things in motion."

TARGUS

Instead of having a single expression itself, it essentially herds together other genes to produce synergistic effects, what we call the "Godfather-Disney synergy syndrome." And the genes it rounds up tend to be those chemically wrapped for negative or individualistic effects, such as the dickglyceride nixoniantis gene, which displays itself through a facility for lying and a five o'clock shadow that sometimes covers the entire body.

LAUREN

It takes all these "bad boy" genes and -- romps?

TARGUS

If you like gang imagery, then, yes, it "romps."

NORMAN

Is it strong in our child?

TARGUS

Pretty strong, I'm afraid. It carries all nine striations -- each striation controls a body function, such as the "lip sneer" -- and all six voices, which regulate vocal behavior, such as tendency to use "I mis-spoke myself" instead of "I lied." It also has a variation I've only seen in the literature, called the "Forbes findibulum," a protein spike which apparently governs the world-wide search for the highest interest rates on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis. The size of the findibulum can be quite large in proportion to the gene itself, and it seems to be linked directly to the genital genes on chromosomes 6 and 9.

A moment of dismayed silence.

TARGUS

As I keep saying, you're the "nurture" part of the nature/nurture equation. But I have to say - - though I want to stress that this is only tentative -- the greed gene, in as strong a suite as this, may have a built-in deafness to nurture, and pretty much go its own way.

NORMAN

Kind of like a gang leader.

TARGUS

Or a rugby team strung-out on Altoids.

LAUREN

But how bad can it really be?

TARGUS

As your counselor, I have to remain objective.

LAUREN

But your opinion -- as a person -- ?

TARGUS

(hesitates)

Just look around you. Our whole society is based on it.

LAUREN

But all our lives we've been taught that it's all right. Greed is good.

TARGUS

For some -- with the price usually paid for by many other people. If what you've learned today comes to pass, your child will probably be right at home in it, perhaps even one of its great apostles.

NORMAN

So the best for our child -- could be the worst?

TARGUS

I've really said enough.

NORMAN

What should we do?

TARGUS

I can't tell you that. At this point your two options are to go through with the pregnancy or terminate it; there is no "therapy" for this gene. The information you have is powerful -- perhaps too powerful. You want certainty, but these genetic data make that harder to get. I'll give you a few minutes to talk things over, then we can deal with any questions you have.

Starts to leave, then comes back.

TARGUS

One other thought, strictly person to person, since we've learned so much about each other over the last few months: Wanting what's best for your child is also about wanting what's best for all the other children in the world who aren't yours. We're all connected right down to the DNA: that much we know for sure. Like a spider's web: pluck one thread and the whole thing vibrates. I'll give you a few minutes.

TARGUS leaves.

LAUREN

Well.

NORMAN

Well.

LAUREN

What do you think?

NORMAN

What do you think?

LAUREN

I think we should go for the birth. Dammit, Norman, it's our kid, and we have the right to do what we need to do for it. We're Americans, for Christ's sake, and what's the point in being an American if you can't just go do what you want to do? I think it's great he's got the greed gene - - we're gonna have one famous puppy on our hands!

NORMAN

I don't know --

LAUREN

Oh, don't let that New Age claptrap about global responsibility sway you. It's all a plot to undermine the American way of life anyway, which has always been based on having as big a steak as you want when you want it. And we're going for the filet mignon here, Norman!

NORMAN

I still don't know -- Wait, listen to me. A lot of the world is in a bad way. We are poisoning ourselves trying to get the big steak! Our child could make that worse. He, or she, could buy up a lot of pollution tax credits and kill off villagers in Borneo making sneakers. Or glow-in-the-dark worms on key chains.

LAUREN

All right -- we don't know which way this thing will go. Like they say with mutual funds: past performance is no guarantee of future success. But we're good people! We'll be good parents! Our values are on the money -- he, or she, will grow up with a head screwed on right! Give ourselves a little credit here.

NORMAN

Maybe you're right. I wish I didn't know. There's no real joy in knowing. I feel like one of those people in a Greek tragedy, like Cassandra, who knows all the dirty laundry and can't convince anyone to wash it. I'll look at our child and always be wondering, not trusting. Is that fair?

TARGUS reenters.

TARGUS

Anything I can help you with?

LAUREN

We've decided to go ahead --

NORMAN

-- go ahead and talk about it some more. I'm sure we'll have more questions.

TARGUS

I think that's good -- but do it soon. I don't want the first trimester to get away from us. When you're ready, call and make an appointment.

TARGUS leaves. NORMAN and LAUREN walk out of the office. LAUREN is angry. The lines should overlap as much as possible.

NORMAN

Wait a second!

LAUREN

I'm really disappointed in you.

NORMAN

Wait! Just wait! Wait. I'm at a point -- where all this knowledge feels like knowing nothing at all.

LAUREN

It's like you don't trust me.

NORMAN

I'm feeling very uncharted.

LAUREN

We need to carry on the line, and that gives us the right --

NORMAN

The right -- ?

LAUREN

The right to have any kind of goddam child we want. Don't you want us to have this child?

NORMAN

Of course I do.

LAUREN

So grow up, then, and face the facts.

NORMAN

Which facts? And what do you suggest is our best face?

LAUREN

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just expected this whole thing to go -- easier. I thought knowing would make it easier --

NORMAN
And now we can't unknow what we know.

LAUREN
(chuckles ruefully)
I know.

NORMAN
(jokingly)
I no want to know anymore. I just don't feel so
brave in this brave new world.

LAUREN
Let's get some dinner.

NORMAN
I'll cook tonight. Okay? Let me make something
for us.

LAUREN
Just as easy to call out.

NORMAN
No, I'm going to cook. I suddenly want a kitchen
filled with the smell of cooked food, my cooked
food.

As they exit.

LAUREN
I wonder if you have the gene for cooking?

NORMAN
I don't even want to think about that.

NORMAN Stops LAUREN, takes her hand, and makes her face him.

NORMAN
"O brave new world!"

LAUREN
What?

NORMAN
"O brave new world, that hath such people in't."

They look at each for a beat, then LAUREN exits. NORMAN looks at the
hand that had held LAUREN's hand. He spreads out the fingers and
holds the hand up to face level. Taking the index finger of the
opposite hand, he runs the finger across the outspread fingers, as if
they were harp strings.

NORMAN
Pluck one thread --

He closes the hand into a fist, and exits.

BLACKOUT