

Tracking
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As I walk toward the restaurant receptionist I catch sight of myself in the mirror wall. The tie looks wrong. I tried every tie I have, Windsor knot every time, and this was the best. But it doesn't look right. And nobody else is wearing a tie. I don't get out enough.

“Yes, sir, do you have a reservation?”

I'm pulling the tie off as I speak. The knot has tightened and I'm struggling.

“Manning, for two, 8 o'clock.”

They always take such a long time to search for the booking. How hard can it be? It's eight o'clock now, people are going to be arriving with bookings for eight o'clock. This is one time you don't really need a database. You can use a book and get away with it. She's running her finger down the page, frowning as if she can't find it. I made sure the booking was correct in every detail. I spelled my name out. I had her read it back. It has to be there.

With a database, of course, you wouldn't get this. Put in the name, or the phone number, some unique identifier, and out it comes. And you could mine it for statistics. Repeat customers, favorite meals, trends in eating. Manage some kind of loyalty program. Invite customers back for special promotions. Correlate it with TV food shows, magazines, newspapers, to see if people were influenced by what they saw or read. The database could drive food purchases, plan menus. Then think about linking databases from other restaurants, supermarkets, agribusiness, a worldwide food database that controls and optimizes the food chain all the way from the source to the destination. This is taking far too long.

“Manning, M-A-N-N-I-N-G.”

“Yes, sir. Is the other member of your party arriving later?”

“If she is not here already.”

“Yes.”

She gestures and another restaurant functionary appears.

“This way, please sir.”

I remember now. The reason I don't get out much is because I don't like out. Trapped at a tiny table, insulted by some species of synthetic consumer ambient pseudo-jazz, music so derivative it no longer evokes any human cultural or emotional experience, deafened by the clanking cutlery and crockery, the creaking and banging of the kitchen and bathroom doors, the shouted conversations. They have to shout to be heard. What is it about restaurant acoustics? Do they deliberately construct everything from reflective surfaces to get this effect? Is the echoing noise for the same reason as the mirror wall, multiplication to create an illusion of size? What's so great about size? Is it the illusion of activity, being part of something busy? Aren't we frantic enough? Is there supposed to be some pleasure in losing yourself in a crowd, the anonymity? Aren't we lost enough?

My functionary is back, leading a tall red-headed woman. I leap to my feet and my chair falls over behind me with a crash. She walks to her chair and smiles. I leave the chair where it is and muster a smile in return.

“Therese Margaret Philips?”

“Tessa. You must be...”

“David Manning.”

“No middle name?”

“Well, yes, it's Clarence, but...”

“It's just that you knew mine, I thought I should know yours.”

“Ah, I see. Well, won't you sit down?”

She sits. I manage to turn in the cramped space and pick up the chair without knocking anything else over. I get myself adjusted and take a sip of water. She smiles at me, waiting for me to speak.

“I'm a little surprised, ah, Tessa.”

“Why is that, Mr Manning?”

“David, please. Your hair. I was expecting a more brownish shade, and less curl.”

She stops smiling. She takes a sip of water.

“Mr Manning, have we met before? I'm sorry but I don't recall.”

“Dr Manning, really. Not medical. Ph. D, biochemistry. But please call me David. No, we haven't met before. But I feel that I know you very well.”

“I understood you had some important information for me. David. And I already knew my natural shade was brown.”

“You look younger than thirty four.”

She narrows her eyes.

“David, are you under the impression this is smalltalk?”

I open my mouth to reply but the inevitable has happened. My brain has completely frozen. I should have known this would happen. Say something, anything.

“It's just that I'm attracted to you.”

She picks up her handbag.

“David, you don't know me. And I don't know you. Let's keep it that way, shall we?”

She begins to get up.

“No, wait, Tessa, I shouldn't have said that. I haven't the slightest idea what to say in this situation. I do have something important to tell you. It won't take long. That is...no, not if I leave out... not long.”

She hesitates.

“Your grandmother. Do you remember her?”

“What, there's something about me you don't already know?”

“Please sit down, Tessa.”

She sits again.

“Tessa, would you like a drink?”

“Am I going to need one?”

“It's up to you, of course. But don't ask for red wine. You're allergic to it.”

“Yes.”

“And don't order the chocolate mousse.”

“I'll manage my own diet.”

“Perhaps I should tell you a little about myself.”

The waiter interrupts. Tessa asks for a scotch and soda. I ask for a rum and coke. I really would prefer red wine.

“Yes, David. Tell me a little about yourself. Before you tell me anything more about myself.”

“I'm a researcher. Freelance, contract work. I work mainly from home. Searching databases.”

“Online?”

“Yes, they're all online, but many of them are not accessible to the general public. I can usually arrange access.”

She nods. She's beginning to see it.

“I do studies. Biomedical.”

“And you've found something out about me?”

“Do you remember an office break-in a couple of years ago? You gave your finger prints?”

“Yes. To eliminate them. I was never a suspect.”

“Of course not. Well, they sampled them for DNA.”

“But they didn't ask me for my DNA. I didn't give permission.”

“You didn't have to. There's no law protecting your DNA. No law protecting anything since the War on Terror. They matched up the finger prints you gave them with latent prints in the office, took samples from the latent prints. Nowadays of course they wouldn't bother with fingerprints. They'd just use a hand held and sample directly. Sequence it on the spot. Upload it wirelessly for matching.”

“So you're saying my DNA is on some police database?”

“That’s where it started, yes. But it’s available for research, and it’s transferred around from database to database as studies are carried out. It’s fantastic really, such a mine of information. We’re just skimming the surface. Complete genome sequencing is cheap as chips. In fact that’s why it’s so cheap, it’s the chips.”

She’s just staring at me.

“The sequencing chips.”

I suppose it’s unreasonable to expect her to find it funny.

“It’s shockingly inefficient at the moment. But when we bring all the databases together, we’ll be able to perform some truly extraordinary correlations. We’ll be able to see how the genome affects everything, from the color of your hair to the fluctuations of the economy. I’m quite sure we’ll be able to cure major diseases overnight. And matchmaking. The perfect partner every time. No more dating, thank God in heaven.”

“But my DNA. You’ve looked at it. Studied it.”

“Do you have any relatives in Portland?”

“Portland?”

“A sister.”

“I don’t know anyone in Portland.”

“Possibly a half-sister?”

“My father was originally from Seattle.”

“Is your father alive?”

“No.”

“Pity. You could have asked him. Possibly an illegitimate child. DNA is indifferent to civic relationships.”

“Are you planning to take her out to dinner?”

“Her? Oh, your half-sister? Well, perhaps not, the issue is on your mother’s side. Have you decided what you want to have? Don’t eat the oysters.”

“The issue? David, please get to the point.”

“Your nails have ridges, I notice. Corrugations, top to bottom.”

She curls her fingers under her palms. Her fists are clenched tight.

“Your face flushes easily. The throat too. It’s flushed now. I can’t see the rest, but I assume it’s gone quite pink.”

She’s biting her lip.

“Are you wearing contact lenses? It’s hard to tell in this light.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Could you please take them out for me?”

“What possible function would that serve? What are you looking for?”

“Your irises. There’s a configuration I’m expecting to see.”

“Flaws. Dark spots?”

“Yes, that’s right. Tell me, have the dizzy spells been getting any worse lately?”

“Everybody has dizzy spells.”

“But you can’t go out in boats. The motion sickness is debilitating.”

“What do I have, David? What do you know?”

The drinks arrive. She takes a few gulps and then a long pull. The ice clinks against her teeth. Chalky white, when I look closely. Which fits. I grab a waiter’s arm as he rushes past, eyes carefully averted. He wheels in shock and glares at me.

“The lady needs another drink.”

He looks down at my hand gripping his arm. I keep a firm hold.

“I’d like another, too. If you don’t mind,” I say, and release him. He hurries off.

Tessa is slumped in her chair. Her fists have unclenched.

She lifts her head.

“David, I'm finding this rather upsetting. Do you think you could explain why you called me?”

“I wish it were that simple, Tessa. Some name I could give you. I wish I could send you off with some keyword that you could look up, discuss with a doctor, something you could get a prescription for. But I can't.”

She gulps.

“Then what do you want? Why am I here? Is there anything you can tell me?”

“You see, what I do is find correlations. A gene here, a gene there, a behavior here, a trait there. Some of it is only marginally significant. But when you find something real, something definite, better than chance, you can name it. Naming it doesn't change anything, of course. That's a fallacy. The nominal fallacy. It has a name. Just saying I have identified Tessa Syndrome tells us nothing about Tessa. We don't have a prognosis, we don't have a treatment, we don't have a cure.”

“But surely, David, it's not just Tessa syndrome. I'll never be cured of that. If it were just me, it wouldn't be a correlation. You've found other people with the same, what, configuration, the same constellation of symptoms. What do you know about them? What happens to them?”

The waiter arrives with her drink. Tessa gives him a sweet smile and thanks him effusively. He's only doing his job. For a change. I suppose she thinks she's making up for my bad behavior. My social ineptitude. She's got a job of work ahead of her if she wants to compensate for that. She takes a sip and then puts it down. She's calmer now.

“As far as I know, nothing happens to them.”

“Nothing?”

“As far as I know.”

She gives me a long, somewhat bleary look, then shakes her head.

“I'm going. Thanks for the drink. David. I won't eat the oysters. Or the chocolate. Or anything. Please don't call me again. Ever.”

She gropes around for her bag and gets on her feet. She begins to walk off. I have to raise my voice.

“It's their children I'm worried about.”

She stops. Other people are looking at me. I meet their eyes and they drop their gaze.

“Do you have any children, Tessa?”

I'm still having to speak loudly. She turns and faces me.

“Please. Sit down.”

“David...”

“Sit down.”

She comes back and sits. She picks up her drink and tips it back. I catch the waiter's eye. I look at our glasses and back at him. He hurries off.

“I'm a little surprised you have to ask me that question, David.”

“Don't be. It's a measure of the primitive stage we've reached. I should be able to find out in seconds. And if my recommendations are accepted, I will. Would you believe that I have to interrogate upwards of forty databases to collect just the medical, dental and criminal records for a single individual? That's without even trying to piece together the financial information. For that you still have to cut through a swathe of red tape, and then it's a maze of negotiations and protocols. I'm one of the few people who can navigate it. I'm worth what they pay me. Every cent.

“But consider this. A central point. A database of databases. A single forensic and research meganode, a hub. You have clearance for that, you have clearance for everything. That's where the War on Terror comes in. It's probably not quite politically correct to say this, but 911 was the best day of my life.”

“Excuse me.”

I turn and look up. A rather red-faced woman is looking down at me.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind lowering your voice?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My partner and I are finding it impossible to enjoy our meal. We cannot avoid overhearing your conversation and it is offensive.”

“Please forgive me, I didn't realize you were eavesdropping.”

Her eyes flash and she turns and moves to a nearby table. Her partner, another woman, pats her hand and shoots a glare in my direction. This is their excitement for the evening. Something to bond about.

“Where was I? The War on Terror. What a crock of shit that is. If you ask me, the only practical thing to do is abandon all the security theater and let them do their worst. What do we lose? A few hundred here, a few thousand there. A population of six billion and climbing, it's not even a blip. But the wonderful thing is the buttons it can press for you. I am positively patriotic about the War on Terror when it comes to database access. It cuts through red tape like a 767 through an office tower.”

“Are you ready to order, sir?”

Tessa just shakes her head. I glance at the menu.

“Steak. Well done. Potato wedges. Without any coating, flavoring or spices. Just plain. And a green salad. Do you smother it in dressing out of a bottle?”

“No sir. You can mix your own dressing. I'll bring oil and vinegar.”

“The same for the lady. And a jug of water. I can't understand why you haven't already brought water. It's common decency. No ice.”

He nods and leaves. I turn back to Tessa.

“Recent experiment by a high school student. She compared the ice in fast food outlets with the water in their toilets. The ice had more bacteria.

“The sticking point for a lot of people, the difficulty, is a common id. Every database has a different system, so how do you ensure you retrieve the data you want? That's where my idea comes in. It's so simple. The unique id has to be something that doesn't change, that you carry with you all your life. Embedded chips? Too costly. Something that identifies you even when you're dead. When all that's left is a bone or a hank of hair.”

“DNA.”

“I knew you'd get it. You were sure to be bright, your genes said as much, and of course I've been through your academic records. But true intelligence isn't grades. It doesn't show up in an IQ test, some one dimensional, artificial measure, some bureaucratic apology for science.”

“You went through my school reports?”

“Tell you what, that Miss Pringle had it in for you. Must try harder. Lacks drive. Therese will never achieve her full potential until she learns to apply herself. What did you ever do to her?”

“Nothing. I always had the impression she liked me. I liked her. I think I disappointed her. I'd forgotten all about that. I hated disappointing Miss Pringle.”

“What did she know? Freelance graphic design. Not bad. I'm no artist, but your stuff looks good to me. The way you pick colors.”

“You googled me.”

“Your site layout could be better. Nice pictures but some of the information is hard to find. Must try harder.”

Our drinks arrive, with a little basket of bread.

“Eat something, Tessa. Do you want wine? White wine?”

She takes a slice of bread and starts tearing little pieces off and dropping them onto her plate.

“I lost a dear friend on Flight 93.”

It's red-face again. She and her partner are leaving.

“A million deaths a year in this country alone. Alcohol, junk food and tobacco. Who needs terrorists? Your health.”

I toast her in rum and coke. She's white with fury now. She turns abruptly and almost knocks over our waiter. He manages to save our meals. He places them down in front of us.

“That was quick.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Are you sure they're well done?”

“If they're not cooked to your satisfaction, sir, please let me know. Would you like cracked pepper?”

“Well I don't know, do I? I haven't tasted it yet.”

“Enjoy your meal, sir. Madame.”

“Can I ask a question, David?”

“Of course, Tessa. Anything.”

“Why did you want to meet in a restaurant?”

“Neutral ground. Neither my place nor yours. I thought you'd be more comfortable.”

She nods and keeps shredding her bread. I'm trying to remember what I was saying.

“DNA. The perfect ID. Soon sequencers will be virtually instantaneous. We'll be able to use it as a security pass. Touch a pad and your DNA is matched. Not yet. Doesn't matter. We can stage it. For now we can carry ID cards with our DNA on a chip.

“They're already using something like it in government agencies I work for. They track every door I pass through, every step I take. They called me once when they thought I was taking too long in the bathroom. Gastric problem. How's your steak? If it's not cooked enough we just send it back.”

She's not eating. She's needs iron. I haven't tried mine. I cut into it and check. Not a trace of pink. This place isn't too bad.

“It's possible to imagine a day when we'll be able to track everyone, through every aspect of their lives. From the research perspective, it's a bonanza beyond belief. Just a fantastic opportunity. The entire world becomes our laboratory.”

“The children.”

“Sorry?”

“You said you were worried about the children.”

“Yes, that's right, I did. Are you in a relationship?”

“Not right now. Or in the foreseeable future.”

“No children as yet?”

“None as yet.”

“So, the relationships. They just haven't worked out?”

“Oh, they did in their way. To an extent. For a time.”

I cut off a piece of steak and pop it in my mouth. It's really quite tender.

“How would you define sexual compatibility?”

“I don't know that I would.”

“Some people would say it's pheromones. You find someone who smells right. The right chemical profile. Maybe that's a crude way to tell the structure and mix of their proteins. But what determines the mix?”

I wait. She's not eating. She's finished tearing up the bread, and she's balling the pieces up into little round pellets. She sighs.

“I'm supposed to say DNA.”

“Right again. Why not go straight to the source? Do you want to know how I would define sexual compatibility? Well, let's be precise here. Let's confine ourselves to sex in the service of reproduction. How do I define reproductive compatibility?”

She's gathering the little pellets into shapes. She makes a square, then a triangle. Thirty six. I don't even have to count them.

“I'll tell you. It's the complementary set of genes most likely to result in healthy, vigorous offspring. That's what we're all programmed to want, Tessa. Somehow, in our genes, is the template that determines our reproductive behavior, directs us to the right partners, makes us smell good to each other.

“But it's a flawed process, Tessa. Maybe it worked better once, long ago. But today, we've lost touch with our hindbrains. We've lost our sense of smell. Why not improve on it? We have the knowledge of the genome, the processing power, to make better decisions than our noses ever could.”

“Please, David. You're shouting.”

“You for example. You have genes that are better repressed in your progeny. You need to find someone whose genes will dominate them, mask them, prevent their expression. I'm the same. There are things I see in myself, I don't mind telling you, that I'd rather not see in my kids. I'm being completely open with you.”

Tessa is nodding to herself. It's as if I'm confirming something she has been thinking for some time. She's a bright one, all right.

“David, I think you've given me the background I need to follow any further remarks you care to make. On the subject of DNA, the genome, reproductive templates and so on. I think now would be an excellent time to come to the point.”

She looks at her watch and then at me.

“The point?”

“I presume there's some point to all this. You don't appear to be alerting me to some rare disease. You don't seem to be saying that my boy-children are all going to be haemophiliacs. What are you saying?”

“How old was your maternal grandmother when she died?”

“Fifty seven. I was very small. I hardly knew her. Heart failure.”

“Heart failure. That'll do it every time. Loss of life. You want your children to live beyond fifty seven, don't you?”

“I don't have children. It's looking like I never will.”

“Do you want to?”

“Oh, David. Yes, probably, I do want to, all right, but I've become somewhat reconciled to the possibility that it won't happen. Tonight is doing nothing to improve my prospects.”

“Are you sure about that?”

She gives me a long, searching look. She really has very lovely eyes, but of course, that could be the contact lenses.

“David, I have a bad feeling about this. Out with it.”

“I'm not talking about sex, if that's what you're thinking. In a case like ours, we want to be able to examine the embryos before they're embedded. In vitro fertilization is superior in so many ways. Ah, here's the water at last. Better late than never.”

Tessa takes the jug from the waiter, giving him a dazzling smile.

“Yes, better late than never.”

She straightens her arm to its full extent and upends the jug of water over my head. I gasp and blink and cough. Tessa stands up, slips her bag over her shoulder and marches out. And suddenly I'm the only one still in my seat. They're all on their feet. The applause is deafening.