

The Greed Gene

by

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DESCRIPTION

Norman and Lauren Drago learn from Dr. Targus, their “Genie of Genes,” that their new child likely possesses 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
- Outside the office

MISCELLANEOUS

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

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DR. TARGUS’ office. On the desk are folders, charts, etc. along with the usual desk paraphernalia. Or, if desired, charts can be set on an easel or done as projections.

NORMAN and LAUREN DRAGO, along with TARGUS, are reading a report several pages long.

TARGUS

It’s quite conclusive, Mr. and Mrs. Drago, as you can see right there. Your child has it.

NORMAN

The greed gene?

TARGUS

Pretty easy call, right there on chromosome 29.

LAUREN

The greed gene.

TARGUS

That's what the press calls it—easier to type—

NORMAN

Easier for me to understand—

TARGUS

—which is why I wrote it down that way for you, but its official name—you can see it right there—is tripolynomial kleptoavarensis—I just wish they wouldn't use “greed gene”—it's so prejudicial—

LAUREN

I would think “wealth acquisition gene” would go a long way towards—

TARGUS

Believe me, I've tried, Mrs. Drago—

NORMAN

These days it's like all genetics all the time—

TARGUS

Giant strides in identifying the genes for human behavior. My favorite “odd duck gene” 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!

TARGUS

Well, actually, not “almost” at all—

Including— NORMAN

Including, yes— TARGUS

Norman, stop— LAUREN

I can't help [it]— NORMAN

TARGUS
Mr. and Mrs. Drago, in just a moment I am going to walk you through the absolutely phenomenal list of genetic gifts your child can look forward to—but I wanted to start off with this particular point because—well, your child may have the “greed gene”—

Or “wealth acquisition”— LAUREN

Yes— TARGUS

Good— LAUREN

TARGUS
But whatever we want to call it, there is nothing—and this is the point I want to make—there is nothing garden-variety about the variation your child is carrying.

Really? LAUREN
(excited)

Really? NORMAN
(dismayed)

TARGUS
As your genetic counselor, your Genie of Genes, so to speak—oh, I can't wait to tell you just what astounding—

NORMAN
I'm sorry, I don't mean to be impolite—

LAUREN
Again—

NORMAN
—but—

LAUREN
You shouldn't interrupt—

NORMAN
I know, it's impolite, but—can we hear the other list first?

TARGUS relents in her eagerness. She gestures for them to turn the page in their reports, which they do, as she turns her own page.

TARGUS
Of course, of course—and the list here looks pretty impressive.
Strong coding for blond hair and blue eyes—

NORMAN
Good, good—absolutely essential—

TARGUS
—for the way you've already plotted the child's A.C.E.—

NORMAN
A.C.E.?

LAUREN
Remember—the Arc of Continuous Evolution?

NORMAN
Yes, yes—

LAUREN
—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 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—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 Macys I did with gel and macaroni?

NORMAN

Even for a Norman 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

Which is up to the “nurture” part—that’s you two.

NORMAN

Yes.

TARGUS

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 no signs of any telethon diseases!

NORMAN

All of it looking good.

LAUREN

Satisfied?

NORMAN

Looking good. But—

TARGUS

Just let me jump right into this because as strong as our list is—

NORMAN

Yes?

TARGUS

It’s going to get even stronger—

LAUREN

Really?

TARGUS

Yes—when you both hear how—look, let me explain it this way. Tripolynomial kleptoavarensis is part of a family of genes which—well, when I say “family,” I mean that more in the sense of the Mafia. Instead of having a single expression itself, it essentially herds together other genes and uses these genes to acquire as many things as possible in the shortest amount of time with the least interference. Clear?

NORMAN

Oh yes.

TARGUS

And the genes it rounds up tend to be chemically wrapped for highly individualistic effects, such as the dickglyceride nixoniantis gene, which displays itself through an ability to lie with the absolutely straightest of straight faces. And we're also discovering that tripolynomial is completely unaffected by the truth and justice genes on the first amendment to the 12th chromosome. Just—just—well, what can I say?

LAUREN

It takes all these “bad boy” genes and—romps.

TARGUS

If that's what you like, then, yes, it “romps.”

NORMAN

And it's strong in our child.

TARGUS warms to her task.

TARGUS

“Strong” is too, well, mild. Your child 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 the tendency to use “I misspoke” instead of “I lied.”

LAUREN

(relishing the sound)

Dickglyceride nixoniantis—

TARGUS

It also has a—twist—I've only seen predicted in the literature, called the “Forbes findibulum,” a protein spike which apparently governs the world-wide search for the highest interest rates on a second-by-second basis. The size of the findibulum here is quite large in proportion to the gene itself, and it seems to be linked directly to the genital genes on chromosomes 6 and 9.

TARGUS notes their dismay. Well, NORMAN's dismay. LAUREN is not feeling dismayed at all.

TARGUS

As we keep saying, and you've got to hear this loud and clear, you're the "nurture" part of the nature/nurture equation—and you both bring an awful lot to the table.

NORMAN

Do we?

LAUREN

Norman—

NORMAN

I mean, I guess, do I?

LAUREN

Norman, all our lives we've been taught that this is all right. Greed is good, and there's no reason to stop—

TARGUS

Greed is good for some—we do have to make that distinction—

LAUREN

Well yes—

TARGUS

And the price for that is usually paid for by many other people—we can't deny that.

LAUREN

But if along with all the other things on our list this gene works the way you say [it will]—

TARGUS

Then your child, as I indicated, might possibly be one of its great apostles.

LAUREN

Wow.

NORMAN

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

LAUREN

Not everybody ever born gets to have the best—

NORMAN

Life is unfair, right?

LAUREN

Has it ever been anything else?

NORMAN

What should we do?

LAUREN

Norman?

TARGUS

At this point, Mr. Drago, you only have two options: go through with the pregnancy or terminate it; there is no “therapy” for this gene, if that’s what you’re looking for. These genetic data—you want certainty, but—

TARGUS gets up.

TARGUS

I’ll give you a few minutes to talk things over, then we can figure out what our next steps are.

Starts to leave, then comes back.

TARGUS

One other thought, to follow up on what I said a little earlier about the nature/nurture equation. Wanting the best for your child could also be about wanting the best for all the other children in the world who aren’t yours because the “nurture” part doesn’t have to apply only to your immediate circle. We’re all connected right down to the DNA: that much the data show us. Like a spider’s web: pluck one thread and the whole thing vibrates. That much we know for certain. Well—okay. I’ll be back in 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. Damn it, 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—tripolynomial kleptoavarensis—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, right? We are poisoning ourselves trying to get the big steak! Our child could make that worse. He, or she, could buy up pollution tax credits and kill off villagers in Borneo making sneakers or glow-in-the-dark worms on key chains—

LAUREN

All right, I agree, 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! Dr. Targus said so. We'll be good parents! Our values are on the money—our child will grow up with a head screwed on right! Give ourselves a little credit here.

NORMAN

Maybe you're right—

LAUREN

Of course I'm right.

NORMAN

But I wish I didn't know. There's no real joy in knowing. I can't help thinking that I'll always be looking at our child and wondering, not trusting. Is that fair?

TARGUS reenters. She puts two documents on the table and a pen on top of each document, and then slides them over.

NORMAN

What are these?

TARGUS

Non-disclosure agreements—I thought they'd be useful to us as we move forward in our work together.

LAUREN takes up the pen and pulls the document towards her.

LAUREN

Good, because we've decided to go ahead—

NORMAN pushes his document back to TARGUS.

NORMAN

(interrupting)

To go ahead and talk about it some more. I'm sure we'll have more questions—there will be time for documents.

LAUREN hesitates, then slides her unsigned document back to TARGUS as well. A tense silence. TARGUS does not look pleased but tries to hide it as she gathers up the documents.

TARGUS

(not meaning it)

I think that's good—but do it soon. I don't want you the two of you to slip through my fingers! Don't want the first trimester to get away from us! When you're ready, call and we'll make the necessary arrangements.

NORMAN and LAUREN walk out of the office. LAUREN is angry as she pushes the button for the elevator. 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 goddamn 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?

This calms LAUREN down—a bit.

LAUREN

I'm sorry.

NORMAN

See?

LAUREN

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

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

Dinner? 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.”

NORMAN holds up one hand, fingers spread.

NORMAN

Go ahead.

LAUREN

What?

NORMAN

Pluck. One. Thread.

LAUREN can't just pluck one. She runs a finger across all of NORMAN's fingers, as if across a set of harp strings. NORMAN vibrates his hand in response.

The elevator doors dings as it opens.

They grasp hands and enter.

BLACKOUT