

CHAPTER 2

LITTLE PROFESSORS

“We had the best of educations—in fact, we went to school every day—”
“I’ve been to a day-school too,” said Alice; “you needn’t be so proud as all
that.” “With extras?” asked the Mock Turtle a little anxiously.

—Lewis Carroll: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

The Hilton Airport hotel in St. Louis stands in a tangle of roads which, seen from the air, resembles a half-nelson knot. There are cul-de-sacs, service roads, tarmac arteries feeding Sizzlers and International Houses of Pancakes, Airport Hiltons, and Red Roof Inns. You cannot help fretting about it. *How*, you think to yourself, *can I possibly get out of here?* What if you never get out of here? Where will you go to eat in the morning if you choose not to eat in the hotel? If you try to negotiate the roads you will be killed instantly; you are trapped, trapped in the St. Louis Airport Hilton with nowhere to go.

The upper rooms of the St. Louis Airport Hilton look out over the runways of the Lindbergh Airport, but because the windows are so efficiently glazed, the sound of the engines can’t penetrate the rooms. Here I sat for a considerable time watching America West jets taking off and landing in a dumb show. I began counting them, noting their numbers, model makes, and tail designs. Thunderclouds blanketed the takeoff zone, and the planes vanished into them with a kind of Third Reich aplomb. Then I remembered where I was. Sit in a Hilton Airport room for a while and you realize that the modern American hotel has successfully formulated the desires of its clientele who must in their sub-

conscious be looking forward to a grandiose old people's home modeled on a utopian nineteenth-century prison: there is perfect symmetry in everything. Every corridor looks like every other corridor, every room like every other room. Marble panels, suspicious hushing Persian carpetry, droplet chandeliers, plastic magnetic card keys, iris-motif bed-cover, picture of a field of poppies over the TV, coffeemaker, low-slung furniture set, sterilized plastic water cups.

As you step into your allotted corridor, you find yourself looking anxiously over your shoulder down a vast vista of smoke detectors, strip lights, and numbered doors. It is, in reality, a kind of mathematical puzzle, albeit one that is easy to solve. Out of curiosity, I often find myself taking the elevators to floors where I have no business being. I walk around, finding that the seventh floor is in every detail identical to the fifth where I am staying—as if this should not, could not be. Even the decorative bowls of silk flowers are the same: same ratio of artificial peonies to artificial tulips, same number of yellow carnations per perforated pot. It is an astonishing performance. In part, an Aspergerish feat.

Here, however, a book publishing company from Texas called Future Horizons was holding its 2001 Asperger's and Autism Conference. Future Horizons is actually a versatile media company, which, from humble beginnings, has grown into a booming business—the brainchild of its CEO R. Wayne Gilpin, former Director of the Autism Society of America and father of a seventeen-year-old autistic son. Indeed, Wayne's son Alex was his reason for creating the company in the first place. The spirit of American self-help is inextinguishable, and Future Horizons is in some ways a distant progeny of grassroots organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous. Today, it bills itself as America's leading publisher on autism and especially Asperger Syndrome, and its conference is a prestigious event—the annual national gathering that attracts the “cream of the field.” And while I cannot say why this estimable enterprise dedicated to the mysteries of Asperger's had chosen the Hilton Airport Hotel as its venue, the feeling of being inside an airport was actually undeniably delicious—for I believe I have already mentioned the pull that airports exert upon me.

Downstairs in the lobby, the bubbly Future Horizons staffers were giving out nametags to an equally bubbly crowd of teachers, psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech tutors. It was rather like a marketing conference—at least what I imagine a marketing conference

to be like. The attendees had gathered from all points of the nation to hear a three-day feast of lectures and seminars given by some of the top people in what could be called the “Asperger’s industry.” There was Elizabeth Gerlach on “Just This Side of Normal,” noted author Carol Grey speaking on the subject of “Confront, Concede or Teach,” and Dr. Liane Willey on “Pretending to Be Normal.”

It reminded me how popular conferences have become in every sphere of American life. There is no profession or interest group, however humble or obscure, that doesn’t have its own meetings circuit. From Ido (“Reformed Esperanto”) universal language jamborees to annual gatherings of the Association of State and Territorial Waste Management Officials, the special-interest conference, the gathering place of hopeful idealists or hardened realists, is a linchpin of today’s professional life. Each conference circuit has its stars and heroes, whom no one in the outside population has ever heard of. Who is America’s greatest conference star in the field of canine-grooming materials? I have no idea, but I’ll bet anyone that he or she surely exists.

In the lobby, meanwhile, I quickly found Wayne Gilpin. Wayne is a dry fellow, but likeably fatalistic in the way that many unstinting family men are.

“Look at all the folks,” he said quietly in my ear, “it’s packed. Are you going to hear ‘It’s a Long Haul, Wear Sensible Shoes’? It’ll be terrific.” This, it turned out, was Elizabeth King Gerlach’s lecture that day; naturally I said that I would.

“Good, good. Get a seat early. She’s quite a star, you know.”

He was an amiable man, and I felt more at ease. Since I had an hour to kill before “It’s a Long Haul, Wear Sensible Shoes,” however, I went to get myself a gin and tonic. The Hilton bar was crowded, and I peered around to see if there were any Aspies to chat up. There were none, though others were clearly neurotypical delegates. A school social worker from Lawrence, Kansas, told me that among her children “anxiety and depression,” rather than subtler forms of autism, were the norm. With no expression of surprise or bewilderment, she explained that the mental problems of children these days were indistinguishable from those of adults. And that they were treated in more or less the same way—that is to say, with the same psychotropic drugs.

“Doesn’t that alarm you?” I asked.

“Oh, no. We find Ritalin works perfectly for them. Makes them really calmer.”

“And what if you found an Asperger child?”

“We already have three of them. We’re thinking of using Auditory Integration Training. That’s AIT, you know.”

It was better not to ask what AIT was, so I nodded.

“AIT,” she smiled, “makes them really calmer.”

Meanwhile the bar was alive with what could be called psychiatric conversation. A woman behind us suddenly piped up, “Anyone know what NLD is?” The question shot back and forth across the room in high voices.

“Neurolinguistic Disorder?”

“Don’t know, honey.”

“Nonlinguistic Dysfunction?”

“Whatever it is, honey, I’ve been diagnosed with it!”

The Hilton lecture hall was indeed packed. Elizabeth King Gerlach was quite a beautiful woman, a young blond from Oregon whose son Nicky had been diagnosed with Asperger’s when he was seven. She stepped up to the podium and launched breezily into her lecture.

When he was seven, she began, Nicky was “out of control.” He would spin all the time, throwing himself around like a human top. When he was asked what he wanted to do when he grew up, his reply was, “I want to be a screwdriver!” Not a fireman? Elizabeth would ask him. “No, a screwdriver.” A human screwdriver. He was plagued by ear infections and sleeping difficulties, as well as having tantrums. Elizabeth took him to a therapist, naturally; the latter asked if he spun plates. No, she said, he didn’t, but he did like spinning and lining up his toys as well as rushing around throwing birdseed everywhere. The prognosis of the therapist was swift:

“Well, it was Oppositional Defiance Disorder.”

The audience sighed knowingly, and heads turned to each other with equally knowing nods.

“But I wasn’t satisfied,” Elizabeth continued. “So I decided it was autism. I found a diagnostic team at the University of Oregon to take the matter forward.”

What made the team at the University of Oregon conclude that Nicky had AS? In part, it was his obsession with ships. Nicky loved

ships so much that he turned his bedroom into one. On the projection screen, Elizabeth summoned up a picture of him, a slender fair-haired elf in a yellow hat sitting in his nautical room with a huge “sail” suspended above him. On the sail, a fish had been painted. He read *The Great Age of Sail* and sang the same songs over and over: “Sailing the Ocean Blue” and “What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?” He would spend much of his day building Lego ships, then destroying them. In all, he looked like an interesting kid, and I immediately wanted to meet him. His poetry was distinctly intense:

I hear the beat
It's inside my head
I always hear the beat
Can't stop the beat
It's always in my head

I wondered if he wrote similarly hypnotic stanzas about ships' rigging, nautical steering wheels, or the bad habits of Bluebeard.

But if Nicky appeared to be intense, the treatments applied to him were even more so. He was taken off sugar, wheat products, and cow's milk; given vitamin B6, magnesium, chiropractics, foot massages, therapeutic horseback riding, antifungals, Prozac, Valium, and doses of Auditory Integration Training. Following a thing called the Dan Protocol, a biological diagnostic test set up by the Autism Research Institute, his stools were analyzed for signs of yeast overgrowths and urinary peptides. The biological basis of autism, Elizabeth explained, could be seen in the metabolic areas; autism must therefore be chemically curable, just as cancer one day may be—even if the Prozac had backfired in Nicky's case.

A picture of a child dialing inside a telephone booth had appeared on the screen. Dialing 911, of course. Elizabeth shrugged.

“Prozac works wonders for me. It helps me contain my obsessive thoughts. But it sent Nicky to the moon.”

By now we knew that Asperger Syndrome was indeed a long haul. Of course, Asperger's was biological, not developmental. The bad old days of blaming Bruno Bettelheim's refrigerator mothers were long gone. A kind of low gasp of contempt swept across the audience as the word “Bettelheim” was spoken, and I was glad he was not present—or

even alive. I also began to feel a little uncomfortable. Might some iconoclastic colleague have written a blunt investigative exposé called *Prozac Mothers*? I very much hoped not. Moreover, Elizabeth's language had taken a serious turn. She was now explaining the Eight Elements of Effectiveness and the Early Intervention Program. There were lists of things to do and sublists of lists of things to do. "Initiate functioning interaction," she told her audience, "develop self-monitoring and self-management skills, create predictability."

It was clear that Elizabeth was speaking from cruel experience—the day-to-day heart-wrenching slog involved in enticing a dysfunctional child to behave. The key, presumably, is to create order and routine such that the child can follow it mechanically. But at the same time I couldn't help wondering at the language the conference attendees seemed to share. It appeared essentially to be a corporate lingo whose vocabulary was relentlessly technical. It contained phrases like, "the use of augmentative communication methods," "data-based management programs to track the child's progress," "functionality," "specialists," "programs," "models," "interactions," "sensory integration input modality," and so on. It dawned on me that today this is the accepted language of parents in dealing with their children: parenting as benevolent engineering. The language itself has become universal and smoothly internalized, unconscious almost, and the child is seen simply as a machine that has gone wrong.

It is a language that is also characterized by euphemism, so much so that euphemism is now almost synonymous with normality. I remember Rudolph Giuliani a few weeks after the World Trade Center atrocities talking to a group of schoolchildren in downtown Manhattan who had complained of their terror and the awful smell of death in the air. "What you children are going through," our usually blunt-tongued former mayor said to them as he held his arms open wide, "is a wonderful learning experience."

At the same time, a terrifying question must always confront the parent of an Asperger child: What exactly are you *supposed* to do? It's understandable, then, that people should go looking for a working language into which they can translate both their terror and their hope, a language that stubbornly asserts their optimism for the futures of their children. Despite my misgivings, I had to admit that I found it admirable.

Elizabeth actually spiced her lecture with a phrase she had seen the day before in an American Airlines brochure. “It’s important for good people to continue the good fight.” There was wild applause. Then something very strange happened. Reaching below the podium, Elizabeth hauled up a Groucho Marx mask and put it on her face. From behind the plastic nose, glasses, and exaggerated moustache, she exhorted her audience to have fun at their next school meeting. They should be subversives, play Frank Zappa in the background, create havoc among the complacent school administrators. In short, they should wear Groucho Marx masks and be like children.

“After all,” Elizabeth concluded triumphantly, still in her Groucho guise, “Asperger’s is everywhere around us. You know, I think my uncle John is AS. I’m sure of it—he’s really, really quiet. He never says a word. And he just loves windmills. He *loves* them.”



At lunch hour the next day I drove into St. Louis out of curiosity. The only part of the city I like is Soulard, the old French quarter with its little brick houses, rural-looking pubs, and crooked sidewalks with maple trees. I tried to remember that this was the city where T. S. Eliot had come from, and from which he’d fled, but the spirit of Prufrock belongs more in London, and the exquisitely American Greek-literate dandies of the 1890s are a long-departed curiosity. I wandered around the covered market listening to refugees from Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo discussing cabbages and the price of grapes in their own languages, and went for a winding walk through the hauntingly nostalgic grid of nineteenth-century lanes around it. I kept wondering why there were no children to be seen. Downtown is the same: lunchtime in spring and not a child in sight among the loopy glass towers and Gropius-like boxes. Our architecture itself has made the rambunctious presence of small children inappropriate, if not downright impossible.

After lunch I went to see a woman from Texas named DeAnn Hyatt-Foley, who delivered a lecture entitled “How to Be Your Child’s Social Skills Coach.” DeAnn began by telling us that her son, Matt, had read Liane Willey’s book on Asperger’s, *Pretending to be Normal*, and had promptly announced, “I have this!” Now this got DeAnn thinking. She became more and more certain that her husband Ryan

had it, too. Not only that, but it became all too clear to her that she herself has certain aspects of AS. Before she knew it, she had come to the realization that they were, in fact, an entire Asperger family. The symptoms seemed familiar enough: stiff posture, lack of facial expressions, a distinct style of dress, dishevelment. Consulting a thing called the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale, DeAnn realized that they were not at all normal.

But here there was a difficulty. "Where," DeAnn asked, "does the Asperger Syndrome begin and the child end, and vice versa?" To solve this very real conundrum, the parent must follow endless rules of engagement, as well as absorbing advice, using various systems, programs, clauses, scripting, role playing, and perhaps even a bit more equine therapy. I wondered if any parent would ever be able to remember even half the suggested exercises, programs, routines. It reminded me of the way in which children themselves are programmed to the point of exhaustion in American schools, harried from activity to activity without any intervening unscripted pause, without any time to gather themselves.

I had begun to feel a strange aura of gloom at the thought of all these therapeutic regimes when DeAnn herself brought up a quiz on the screen. It was a scripted moment of play. The quiz was about Texas. Which, the quiz read, is the least likely thing to happen in Texas? a) a white Christmas, b) a tornado, c) winning the Texas lottery. The adults assembled all began to hoot and raise their hands like a classroom of kids. A few minutes later, after a discussion of the Theory of Mind, another quiz popped up. What will an armadillo do if you see him? The audience erupted in giggles and calls. It seemed that they had already forgotten the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale and were psychically concentrated on these Texas quizzes. Nonplussed, I slipped out and into the bar next door. "My son," I heard DeAnn declaim from behind closed doors, "is obsessed with oscillating fans!"

That night I joined a few of the speakers at a dinner thrown by Wayne Gilpin at the Kreis's steakhouse on Lindbergh Boulevard in south St. Louis. I drove with Wayne, his daughter, his teenage autistic son Alex, and Alex's autistic friend Rob. The boys made laborious puns as we went, using TV commercials and passing neon signs as material: the Hilton became the Mountainton, the highway became the low way, and so on. Alex and Rob were more on Kanner's side of the fence rather

than Asperger's; they did not have the nervous, fluttering nimbleness that I had now come to recognize in Asperger people. They laughed uproariously and sometimes uncontrollably at their puns while the rest of us smiled politely. The warm bond between father and son, however, was touching; no interactive communication treatment modalities here. They spoke to each other normally, with direct affection. The boy had developed, it was clear, a supple warm relation to his father that was palpable, reassuring.

Kreis's is a shrine of Midwestern gastronomic luxury, with its cave-like dark interior, poker-hall lampshades, aproned waiters, and imitation impressionist paintings in boisterous gold frames on the walls. The fare was extravagantly bloody, but preceded by odd little bleached salads drowned in viscous sauces. I was seated with Carol Gray, DeAnn Hyatt-Foley, and a palely blond woman who told me that she was the mother of two Asperger boys. She promptly produced pictures of them, two adorable little imps. How, I asked, did she know they had Asperger's?

"They can't read other people's minds. And they persevere."

It was an odd word. I needed a translation. "They obsess?"

"They go on and on about a single subject that interests them. We call that perseverating. Of course, that could just be a male trait."

"Well," I said, "is that just a male trait? Can you read other people's minds?"

"No, but I can read body language. My husband has trouble reading body language."

"So does he have Asperger's?"

"Not really—"

She thought hard, her fingers crossed. "No," she repeated, "not really."

It was a jolly meal and I got fairly drunk on the house margaritas. At one point Wayne blurted out something quite interesting. "A lot of these diagnoses of Asperger's," he said bluntly, "are just completely off the wall, aren't they?"

The women protested.

"There are just a lot of gray areas, that's all," said Carol Gray.

"I didn't mean all of them," Wayne added quickly. "Just some of them. Some of them are just so vague. They're not specific."

"But that," said DeAnn Hyatt-Foley, "is the nature of all new syndromes. We're just getting started here."

"I just have this feeling," Wayne persisted, "that people are sometimes being misdiagnosed. . . ."

The women huffed and puffed. No, no, that wasn't it at all. They declared that some misdiagnosing was inevitable with a new syndrome. Far more significant, they pointed out, was that thousands, perhaps millions, of people had gone *undiagnosed*.

"There may be millions of them out there," said the pale mother of two. "I wonder about my own relatives. A lot of them persevere."

I thought about myself: Did I persevere ever? I was sure that I did, and that it was something of a vice. I surely perseverated about *Iron Chef* and other such idiotic things.

"I know I'm half Asperger," DeAnn said breezily, with complete confidence. "I must have at least three or four symptoms. What about you?"

"I have at least one," I laughed back. "I tend to persevere."

"Ah!"

But suddenly they were not laughing. They were nodding with serious compassion.

"Do you? Well, if you persevere," Carol Gray said, "perhaps you should go see your doctor."

I enjoy perseverating, I thought.

"Yes," I said, "that's an idea."

On Lindbergh Boulevard on the way back into St. Louis, Wayne told me how delighted he was with the high turnout of the conference. It had been booked out weeks in advance. Asperger Syndrome was all the rage these days; people were flocking to a syndrome for which there was not yet a scientific diagnosis. It seemed to explain so much to so many people: their eccentricities, their feelings of alienation, their tics and obsessions. It had become almost a barometer of the American psyche.

I wondered if this might be true, at least for some. Could a real medical condition give shape and substance to an unreal one, to a vague cultural feeling of un-ease or dis-ease? Or was it possible that a broad and growing cultural phenomenon was finally legitimizing a disease that heretofore had been really just an exotic rarity?

Then, floating by in the dark amid the landscaped communities and vast low-density malls, I saw a forbidding sign rising up on a small grassy knoll. It was the HQ of Monsanto, the multinational chemical and agribusiness and biotech company. Under the word Monsanto

itself, three other words were inscribed in the stone with an imperially Roman simplicity: Life, Health, Hope. I waited for Alex and Rob to make a bad pun, but none came. For some reason, this put me into one of my somber moods in which, interestingly enough, I tend to obsess and perseverate. Furthermore, I was brought to remember a strange refrain in a poem by an English Asperger's sufferer and writer named David Miedzianik, who is a frequent visitor to the annual St. Louis event. His poem, which I had found by accident a few weeks earlier, was entitled *At the Autism Conference in St. Louis 1997*, and it was now all too pertinent to my confusions. Miedzianik wrote:

Well I was at The Autism Symposium in St Louis again.
Some of the things they were talking about there were too hard
for my brain.

Back at the Hilton, therefore, I went up straight to my room intensely anxious to catch the latest installment of *Iron Chef* live from Tokyo. Luckily, I was just in time to see Bobby Flay, famed chef of Mesa Grill, defeat Iron Chef Morimoto in the Battle of the Japanese Lobsters.



To wax diagnostical about the mood swings of entire societies is always perilous. America is not a monolith, medically or any other way. Nor are its disorders unique to itself, for in the Western world there are always mutual cross-infections both benevolent and noxious, and there is often little distinction between European and American neuroses. And some afflictions seem to travel well beyond "the West." Eating disorders such as anorexia, for example, have spread around the globe from the industrialized nations to the formerly inaccessible rural interiors of societies like China and India. These disorders seem to follow in the wake of cable and satellite TV, as do newly experienced forms of depression. But when it comes to what is dubiously called mental health, America does hold a special place, with its extraordinary institutional skeleton, a now huge and complex and self-perpetuating apparatus, that seems to support an ever-growing array of psychiatric disorders of its own making, which as they grow express a peculiarly American notion of personality.

Nor is it rash to point out that in America, psychiatry has assumed an unusual importance—one that is gradually supplanting other and earlier authorities not just to treat, but to name and categorize and even, it must be said, invent illnesses of the spirit. The therapist is surely the contemporary version of the confessional priest who measures with some elusive instrument the fluctuating states of his flock's tormented souls. Although therapy is of course not the same as psychiatry, the former's ubiquity in its Hydra-like multiplicity is nevertheless an outcome of the rise of psychiatry's prestige and its acquisition of an authority, which now far surpasses the cloak-and-dagger glamour once enjoyed by Freudian analysis. Psychiatry today is America's secular religion. And in the case of people who actually need it, which especially includes people like the Mindblind, its extraordinary cultural prestige might actually be a double-edged sword.

For, strangely enough, therapy is what most binds the Mindblind to the emotion language of mainstream culture. Through it, the latter subtly enters their closed world and alters it. This is not only because of the inevitable nature of currently fashionable treatments. It is also because therapy itself often implies a particular view of childhood, though not always one that is explicit.

From that same Austrian import of the early twentieth century, today's therapies (which in their practically infinite variety have ceased to be anything very precise) retain at their heart a pursuit of a cure for the wounded inner child. The drug culture of the 1960s, which the Baby Boomers regard as their *Paradise Lost*, has quietly given this generation a more respectable means of indulging itself in its neurotic moods: the antidepressant, which bears an unexamined similarity to the substances with which it deranged itself thirty years ago. Looking for the child in themselves, the 1960s generation that now rules the nation has had great success in finding the hurt child within, but what of its own offspring? Their kids do not work in salt mines, they are hardly *Oliver Twists*. But they most certainly are the progeny of a therapeutic culture that has duly colonized them as successfully and as ruthlessly as Cecil Rhodes did when he took possession of the Transvaal.

The collapse of traditional cultures has meant the collapse of traditional therapies, which normalized people by taking them out of their purely private neuroses and immersing them in the vast experience of other generations. Psychiatry, which now regulates the inner life, has no

sense of historical time—it operates only in the present moment, or at most in the time frame of an individual life. Thus, it cannot take people out of themselves in a profound way; it can only make them dance around themselves in an eternally shallow waltz. As it does so, the “diseases” it can recognize begin to run amok, as if they have a life of their own.

According to a report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in May of 2002, 1.6 million elementary-age children had been diagnosed with some form of ADHD—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—by the end of 1998. Parents of 7 percent of all children reported that a doctor had accordingly diagnosed them as having the dread syndrome. The National Institutes of Mental Health, meanwhile, estimates that 4 million children have some form of learning disability, 20 percent of them associated with attention deficit. The NIMH also claims that one in ten American children suffers from some form of “mental illness,” mostly depression, ADHD, or “emotional disturbance,” while the American Academy of Pediatrics tells us that at any given moment one in five of them suffer from what it calls “mental health problems.”

As the number of children diagnosed with such problems has increased, so has the use of psychotropic drugs. The National Institutes of Health reports that by 1995, 6 million prescriptions for stimulants such as methylphenidate (Ritalin) and Dexedrine were being written every year, and that between 1991 and 1995 there was a 2.5-fold increase in the use of Ritalin alone. Lawrence Diller has written that “an increase of this magnitude in the use of a single medication is unprecedented for a drug that is treated as a controlled substance.” This suggests a problem, he adds, of “epidemic proportions.” Diller notes that in 1990, in his California practice, he needed a pad of one hundred Ritalin prescription forms every nine months, whereas by 2000 he needed one every three months.

Moreover, a paper published in February 2000 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* states that the use of psychotropic medications among two- to four-year-olds had increased 30 percent in the same period. Such prescribing of drugs for toddlers is known charmingly in current practice as “off-label,” because there has been no controlled study of the effects of such drugs on children so young. The NIH, however, does not dismiss the idea of their use altogether. Far from it. Instead, the institute frequently refers to its own recent study of

600 children aged from seven to nine who were treated with various psychotropic drugs over a period of fourteen months. This now-famous investigation, the results of which were published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in December 1999, has become a benchmark reference for those who believe that seven-year-old children can be effectively treated in this way. Results, say the report, were generally positive and safe. "Off-label" prescriptions might be dangerous and lead us into unknown waters, the NIH admits, but then so are the futures of disturbed children who remain untreated. For this reason the NIH now has seven Research Units in what it calls Pediatric Psychopharmacology. The feeling would appear to be that we are on the threshold of a bright new scientific era of subtly effective treatments. But in psychiatry, of course, we are always on the brink of a bright new scientific era.

Many feel that there has been a collapsing of the way in which children and adults are viewed by the psychiatric establishment. For just as there has been a steep rise in the number of children claimed to have ADD, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of adults claiming to suffer from exactly the same disorder. In part, the rise in medications among children reflects a crisis in the schools. The contemporary middle-class child is very unlike his or her privileged Victorian or early to mid-twentieth-century ancestor. There was a time, and it was not so long ago, that children, at least children of the upper class, were creatures endowed with plenty of leisure time, and childish apartness was actually exalted. Today's children, in contrast, are harassed creatures, whisked through punishing timetables in schools and pressed into a stifling conformity of socialization, participation, and group cooperation. The exceptional child, the child who perhaps prefers not to join in, is almost inevitably seen as problematic, if not downright disturbed (and disturbing).

Diller also wonders if the regimenting of children has led to a crisis of their beyond-the-norm individualism. "Is there still a place" he writes, "for childhood in the anxious, downsizing America of the late 1990s? What if Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn were to walk into my office tomorrow? Tom's indifference to schooling and Huck's 'oppositional' behavior would surely have been cause for concern. Would I prescribe Ritalin for them too?"

Drugs, then, are more the symptom of the problem than its actual cause. As children are driven into abnormality by the pressures of an onerous *normality*, so adults try to placate them by any means possible.

At the same time, new disorders are legitimized by ascribing them to endless numbers of illustrious figures. As with Asperger's, there is a minor cottage industry in diagnosing illustrious persons as having had "attention deficit." There are Beethoven, Ben Franklin, John Kennedy and various other U.S. presidents, not to mention the inevitable Einstein. One ADD expert even described Bill Clinton as being "one pill away from greatness." (As yet, no Béla Bartók.)

Part of what we are seeing may be a set of culture-bound syndromes intricately related to a complex historical change: the hemming-in and consequent decline of childhood itself. It's a claim most professional doctors and psychiatrists would scorn out of hand. But it could also be argued that their own failures and cumbersome confusions merit that we look at mental health in a wider context. Furthermore, though these issues may not directly explain Asperger Syndrome (because the latter is indeed a neurological disorder), they surely have a bearing on the way those suffering from the syndrome are socialized. If childhood normality is confined to progressively narrower definitions, what effect will this have on children themselves, normal or otherwise? What effect, for that matter, would it have on adults?

When I read the papers of Hans Asperger I am struck by his veneration for children, the clear separation of himself from the inner world of the child, which is seen as sacrosanctly different, if not categorically unknowable in many ways. He steps around them with a hesitant and unassuming fascination, but also not without a gentle presumption of authority. What a change a half century has wrought. The dialectic of adult and child has broken down. As the culture infantilizes itself and adult consciousness diminishes, we turn, as children are wont to do, to the Doctor and his multicolored remedies. Is it possible that children, with their increasing crises, are themselves simply responding to the end of childhood? And is psychiatry, like the criminal justice system, finding it more expedient to conceive of children in the medieval way—that is, as miniature adults capable of adult crimes? We have indeed come full circle if children are no longer seen as sacred—as being, as

Neil Postman beautifully puts it, “the living messages we send to a time we will not see.” Then again, neither do we see as sacred the adults who now sinisterly mirror them.



In children whose relations with the surrounding world are disturbed in some way, the issues of too-restrictive definitions of normality become intensified. But it can be a paradoxical intensification. Autistic children, like deaf children, are in some ways cut off from the cacophony of our culture’s media and exist mostly within themselves, in what’s been called a kind of “purity.” They can appear to us like islands of serenity and sanity. Above all, they make us think about the sheer differentness of childhood itself. What is a child, and how should a child speak and feel? Does childhood possess a kind of mysterious autonomy that we do not yet understand? Does childhood itself have a language?

When I visited my first Asperger school, in New York City, I wasn’t sure what kind of children I would find there, or even if they would be children in the ordinary sense at all. Would they be, like the untamed mutes of François Truffaut’s film *The Wild Child*, isolated by their failure to master the social language of the majority? Or would they be like creatures out of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*? By now I had met some Asperger adults who seemed to have learned the tricks of social language. But children are a different matter entirely. With them, everything is laid bare. In them, a disorder cannot hide beneath the wrapping provided by a subsequent education. As it turned out, I was to be surprised on all counts.

The STAR program is part of a charitable foundation called the New York League For Early Learning, which runs a school for Asperger children, a half-dozen cramped rooms halfway up a narrow building on West 19th Street. On my visit in the spring of 2001, I was met at the elevator by its director, Jeannie Angus, one of those stiffly resilient woman principals I remember from my own school days. She asked me to glide around the classrooms as quietly as possible: unexpected noise upsets Asperger children. “We teach them everything,” she whispered into my ear, as we crept into the main classroom to watch five six-year-old boys. “We teach them that when people ask, ‘How do you do?’ the

verb 'do' is just a manner of speaking, a metaphor. Of course, they have a terrible problem with that. They always say back, 'Do *what*?' We have to tell them, it's a kind of play, a way of pretending. We have to laboriously explain to them that words don't always mean what they're supposed to mean."

The boys were seated around a circular table drawing blue whales with crayons. Today's subject was "The Whale Who Got Stranded on the Beach." One bespectacled tot, Asa, was drawing his whale with the meticulous fussiness of an old jeweler setting a stubborn diamond. He had scrawled the word "wale" underneath. The room was filled with sunlit bean chairs, shelves of books like *The Great Kapok Tree* and *The New Club Hut*, a board with a vertical line of words that read *prudence*, *pretzel*, *prairie*, *purple* and next to it the cryptic sentence "Parrots live here, it gets dark and the insects come out."

I noticed that around the rim of the table the outlines of hands had been painted in different colors. The boys were expected, when asked, to control the motions of their hands by placing them over these silhouettes and remaining still. This motionlessness is enforced from time to time by the teacher, who asks each boy how well he thinks he has been sitting still. Each boy then gives himself a grade from one to three, three being the top.

"How was your sitting, Aster?"

"Three."

"Nice sitting, Aster. Were you polite, Henry?"

"Three," from Henry.

"Good work, Henry. How about focusing, Jean-Paul?"

"Three."

"Nice focusing, Jean-Paul. And what about looking in the eye, Asa? Did you look in the eye?"

"Three."

"Well, nice eye contact, Asa!"

They are then asked to put their hands on the silhouettes and hold them there for a few moments. Eye contact, hand control, focusing, and manners: the attributes of external normality, which Asperger children have to learn by rote and by example, almost as one learns a difficult foreign language. It is clearly a punishing routine for these young teachers, who have to patrol not only a child's normal disobediences but

also to iron out errant tics, drifting eyes, lapses of motor control, and the resurfacing of monomaniacal obsessions that often explode in the classroom with alarming force.

I noticed also that none of the boys had looked me in the eye, but that they had immediately noticed a Babar the Elephant pen that my girlfriend had picked up for me at the Guggenheim Museum gift store. It had a Babar head mounted on a flexible spring, a gimmick expressly made to invite twiddling. One by one, the boys broke away from the communal table and drifted over to me to make their inquiries about this elephant head that I was flicking back and forth with my thumb. Interestingly, as they did this, not one of them actually looked me in the face. Instead, their eyes were always directed elsewhere. The effect was like that of being stared at by someone who is cross-eyed.

“Where did you get that?”

“At the Guggenheim.”

“Is it French? Why is it prehensile? He must have a sore neck.”

I was sure I had never heard a six-year-old use the word “prehensile” before, and certainly not while actually knowing what it meant. But such precocity is not rare with Asperger boys. “They often have sky-high IQs,” Jeannie Angus said, as the boys scattered onto the bean-bag chairs and rolled around with their feet in the air. “They seem so normal, don’t they? But look a little closer, and you see these tiny cracks.”

She pointed out an angelic putto drawing by himself in a corner. “He used to come into school and squirm on the floor to get a feel for its texture.” Another boy, she added, had been terrified by butterflies during a school visit to the Natural History Museum. But when an old woman came up to him to try and comfort him, he began screaming at the top of his voice, “She’s trying to kill me!” I looked at the boy again. He was mouthing words to himself, sedately flopped into a chair, his huge lashes trembling restlessly as he flipped over the pages of a book. Jeannie pointed to yet another student, a slightly larger boy who was standing alone, playing with a stalagmite of play-dough. “Michael knew everything about tornadoes. He thought he *was* a tornado. He whirled around the room breaking everything. Then he would tell you what his velocity was.”

Michael also knew the velocity of every famous tornado in history, and was something of an expert on things like G forces and the statistics

of tornado-related destruction. “He was five years old and he was like a videocassette about tornadoes—a video that he could rewind and play over and over. He was really happiest when he was acting as a tornado.”

A little later, I peered into the room next door and saw a tiny girl with wild *Wuthering Heights* hair kneeling alone on a linoleum floor with a three-meter line of toy dinosaurs in front of her. The perfectly arranged procession seemed to stretch from one side of the room to the other. I had the impression she was the only girl there—a rare creature? She looked up with grave eyes and went on with her dinosaur count, touching each head as she made her way along the phalanx of beasts.

In yet another room, this time closed, Jeannie showed me through a window seven children diagnosed with more severe forms of PDD (Pervasive Developmental Disorders) sitting around a table trying to concentrate on an English lesson, their faces brimming with a kind of bridled energy that appeared to be on the brink of spilling over into violent farce. “You see the difference.” She made me look at their heads, which shuddered and twitched from time to time in a way quite unlike those of the Asperger kids. The latter, she said, really did seem to be in a category by themselves. “But why don’t you come and watch them learning faces?”

Learning faces is one of the truly startling aspects of Asperger remedial education. In the main room, the boys were now seated obediently in front of an easel, upon which stood a board covered with simplified drawings of human faces. Under the smiling face was the word “happy,” under the frowning one, “angry,” and so on. A teacher pointed to each face and asked the boys what each expression meant. It appeared that most of them had this exercise down pat. They knew exactly what a smile meant because they had been told so many times that by now they could hardly not know. The simplest syntax of emotion had been demonstrated to them, and little by little they were beginning to adopt its conventions. “One parent told me she thought Asperger boys were counterfeit bills,” Jeannie concluded. “But they’re bills all the same. We can teach them to pass as normal.”

A week later I met Asa with his parents at a Starbucks on East 87th Street. Asa’s father, Philippe, also has Asperger’s, and I was interested to see how father and son dealt with one another. Asa himself looks like the prototypical “little professor,” with his round wire Harry Potter specs and his long words, while Phil, his generational alter ego, is an

aspiring actor who grew up in Berkeley, the sheltered son of a law professor. I couldn't help thinking that Phil was the adult version of Asa, a matured version of an adorable and precociously dotty boy. Again, the nervous, bird-like delicacy of gesture, the unsure picking of words and expressions, and the dry self-deprecation that would have fitted better if he had been English. Like many Asperger adults, Phil is self-diagnosed but readily confirms a lifelong state of bemused noncommunication with the rest of the world. "I studied acting at Harvard," he said at once, while introducing his estranged wife Lisa, who is Asa's mother. "But my attempts at camaraderie and constructive criticism were immediately interpreted as acts of warlike aggression and hostility. I was thrown out, just like that." He snapped his fingers and grimaced. "It's life as one long non sequitur. One non sequitur after another. I have nightmares about non sequiturs."

I went off and got myself a coffee. For some reason I was having trouble breathing. It must have been the Starbucks itself. The master planners of Starbucks have understood only the technical appearance of coziness, not its real nature. Cramped in this cappuccino-serving dollhouse you are left feeling airless, perilously close to a non sequitur. It was a feeling that Asa understood, because when I asked him if he liked this place he frowned and shook his head, popping two index fingers into his ears. "Noisy?" I asked.

"I can't breathe," he said. "By the way, do you like those pictures on the walls?"

I looked up and saw that they weren't pictures at all but glossy coffee-table books about *The Cocoa Bean* and *Great Teas of the World*.

"I like those Indian ladies," he stuttered on, "picking tea leaves. Are they happy?"

"I couldn't say if they're happy. They're smiling at least."

"So are we. But we can't breathe, can we?"

Asperger people rarely marry, but Lisa and Phil had met while waiting on tables at the Vienna Café in Los Angeles. Lisa always knew he was a little odd but admits that she was drawn to that very quality. I thought she looked a little tired, as if her patience had been worn thin by long trials that may or may not have been connected to her ethereal ex-husband. Phil, on the other hand, seemed boyishly fresh and alert, the kind of person who is always bubbling with projects that might have been minted in his mind only the night before. Currently, he was

working on a long theatrical monologue about the inner trials of Asperger Syndrome. He immediately began an earnest conversation with Asa about their dreams.

"I saw my room collapsing," Phil began enthusiastically.

"That's cool. Were you scared?"

"Very."

"Do you have a lot of nightmares?" I asked Asa.

He blinked, his eyes huge behind the round lenses. "I can't sleep much. My mind doesn't stop. Not ever."

"And what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I hoped he wasn't going to say "screwdriver." But his reply was conventionally ambitious.

"I want," he said, "to be a doctor *and* a dentist."

His heroes, he went on, were Mary Poppins and Roger Rabbit. Roger Rabbit could *dance*.

Almost from the beginning, Lisa noticed that Asa was as odd as her husband. She could never banter with him in the way that a parent does with a child. He was too grown-up in his manner and interests, and, as with an adult, his conversations always had to have a point. Small talk was out of the question. For his part, Phil said he saw much of Glenn Gould in Asa; in fact, the great late Canadian pianist is a touchstone for Phil, the very type of the aloof, transcendent "Asperger genius" of impeccably inscrutable mystery. And Asa, too, is preoccupied with the Canadian virtuoso. For some reason, he refers to him as "Mr. Rathburn." When having minor tiffs with his parents, Asa will sometimes shriek, "I'm going to tell Mr. Rathburn!"—something that the original Mr. Rathburn would have relished immensely.

Asa also has an imaginary friend called Ehe (pronounced "ih"), who is an inventor and scientist. Ehe, in actuality, shares most of Asa's interest in things scientific. Ehe "asks" Phil to buy Asa science videos and shows him how to draw remarkably accurate diagrams of atoms. Asa's insights are sometimes worthy of Ehe, too. The previous night, Phil said, Asa had calmly informed him that written numbers were fast, and that spoken ones were slow.

"That's Asperger loveliness," he added quickly. "Things slip and slide like a saddle on a wild elephant!"

Phil is something of an Asperger activist, believing that these children have their own intellectual vector that should be neither denigrated

nor forced back into conformity. Indeed, according to Phil, it is Asperger intelligence, and not that of normals, that holds the keys to the future. The world might even be condemned to intractable crises without the guiding light of nonneurotypicals to correct its zany and dangerous ways. “I believe that very strongly—we are here to save you!” But in Asa’s case, the schools he had attended have been predictably reluctant to acknowledge such a gift. They were, instead, a nightmare.

He started out at PS 198 on the Upper East Side. One telltale difficulty was his inability to perform the fire drill. Asa stubbornly refused to recognize the fire drill’s logic because it was a form of pretence, of play based on pretence, and AS people cannot understand pretense. They can no more utter lies (or even innocuous social fibs) than they can run around in a fire drill pretending that their school is on fire when it is clearly not on fire at all. Perplexed by this relatively simple lack of metaphoric reasoning, the school suggested that Asa needed therapy, the instant panacea of the age. But what kind of therapy? Since Asa had not been diagnosed with any kind of disorder and because he was not obviously abnormal in any way, the school simply allocated him a posse of therapists: four of them in all. There was a communication therapist, a socialization therapist, a physical therapist, and a speech coach. These four specialists would follow Asa around during his school day and sit with him in his classes. “Needless to say,” said Phil wearily, “they made him feel ten times more abnormal than he had before.”

“I called them the Four Shadows,” Asa put in.

His anxious parents asked the school if they didn’t think this was a touch of overkill. Four therapists per child? The school replied that in general the kids “loved the attention.”

“It’s the culture of conformity in American life,” Phil went on. “Especially in American schools. They’re like touchy-feely penitentiaries. It’s a regime of control, pure and simple.”

Lisa: “We were told that he couldn’t get into the Lab School for gifted children because he was ‘too quiet.’ Quiet? Since when is a kid singled out for being *quiet*?”

But of course as well as being quiet, Asa would also alarm his elders by throwing himself on the ground, clasping his hands together, then jump up and down in a seeming fit of ecstasy. It’s behavior that the STAR school knows how not to repress.

I asked Asa if he liked to impersonate made-up characters (I'd read this in a book on Glenn Gould, who had many crazy characters up his sleeve). Father and son began chortling—I was going to say “lustily.”

“Like my dad,” Asa said. “He does that.”

“In school I was always inventing a persona for myself. One month I'd be Groucho Marx, then I'd be Sherlock Holmes. I was trying to find a character which people would like, but it never worked. Eventually, *they* called *me* Mr. Peabody, that pedantic little talking dog! That's me!”

“What about Mr. Rathburn?” Asa asked, his eyes now twinkling behind the professorial wire frames.

“He's a great character, isn't he?”

But Asa had now become matter-of-fact. His voice was level, poised, with that deadpan accuracy of the schoolmaster of yore, though not of now. Suddenly I could see why his mother could never have childish conversations with him. And yet in his sense of uncontaminated fantasy he was pure child. “Personally”—the voice hovered in a C flat—I'd rather be Roger Rabbit. Roger Rabbit can dance. I think Mr. Rathburn and Ehe would agree that Roger Rabbit can dance.”



One of the best known classification of the different types of Asperger child has been set forth by Lorna Wing, who in essence “rediscovered” Asperger's in 1981. Wing discerns four categories that seem to my ear quite characteristic of all children, autistic or not. She names them as follows: the “Aloof Group,” the “Passive Group,” the “Active but Odd Group,” and lastly the probably pretty melancholy “Over-Formal, Stilted Group.”

According to Wing, the Aloof Group is the most common. These children behave as if other people do not exist, and they show no interest in or sympathy for other people's pain. They seem “cut off, in a world of their own, completely absorbed in their own aimless activities.” The Passive Group, meanwhile, is the rarest of the four. Children belonging to it cannot initiate social interaction, but at least they have the virtue of being peaceable and compliant. The same is also true for the Active but Odds, but these latter have other problems.

Asperger people are conventionally said to have problems establishing eye contact, but the Active but Odds are all too disposed to it. In

fact, they stare at others in an intolerable way. Fred Volkmar of Yale once told me that one of his patients liked to stare at girls he found attractive in a university dining room. Sometimes the young man would stare and stare until the campus police were called. Was he an Active but Odd? Active but Odds also like to hug other people with a suffocatingly inappropriate tightness. Combined with their tendency to stare hard at others, this habit causes endless problems for the Active but Odds. Their bewilderment knows no bounds.

Lastly, there are the Over-Formal, Stilted folks. These are the most able of all the four groups, and their symptoms do not appear until later in adolescence. "They try," says Wing, "very hard to behave well and cope by sticking rigidly to the rules." Yet these same rules are things they do not understand for one second. As their name implies, the Over-Formal, Stilteds are excessively polite and formal. When Over-Formal, Stilted boys want a date, they walk up to a complete stranger with excessive formality and ask for a kiss with the same manners a nineteenth-century Spanish aristocrat might have used in asking for a woman's hand. The offer is rarely accepted, to put it mildly; sometimes there are yet more unpleasant scenes involving the forces of law and order. We can take it as Aspergerishly axiomatic that the Over-Formal, Stilted, like the Aloof but Odd, are doomed to dating hell.

Wing's definitions are not severely precise. Perhaps most children share at least some of these characteristics, for they are often withdrawn, moody, otherworldly, solipsistic, fantastical, and opaque. The oddness of any given child should be sufferable. The question for the Active but Odds and the Passives is only at what point their active oddness and passivity become either dangerous to themselves or ruinous to a "normal life." But then again, of course, it is we and not they who decide what dangerous (or for that matter inappropriate) is. Can a Passive child be happy in his or her own way, liberated from the necessity of joining in our social small talk or its concomitant field of gestures? Can the Over-Formal, Stilted avoid the ostracism that comes with overt strangeness and difference?

For that matter, how well do we ourselves suffer eccentrics, allowing them their own small talk and gestures, a logic at right angles to our own? I vividly remember my Irish great-aunt who lived with our family throughout my childhood. A retired schoolteacher, highly correct and strict, she was a model of severe normality. One day, however, Auntie

Mary summoned me to her room at the top of the house, drew me sweetly to the window, and pointed down at the hedges surrounding our garden. “Do ye see them?” she whispered in my ear, pointing earnestly at the hedges and raising her whisper to an agitated hiss. “Do ye? Do ye see them?”

“See who?” I said, feeling a little alarmed.

“The *wee people*,” she said, quickly making me promise not to say a word to my father about either our conversation or the *wee people*.

“Yes,” I said, “I see them.”

“Ay,” she said solemnly, shaking her head. “They’re out there every day with their shears. It’s *they* who do the gardening, ye know.” She took my hand and patted it; I was now a member of a secret club, the people who *could see the wee people*. I remember thinking at the time that I had now discovered something very dark, namely that our venerable matriarch Auntie Mary was mad as a hatter. But of course Auntie Mary was not mad. She merely saw the *wee people* in green waistcoats doing the garden where other people did not. I could not tolerate this at the time, but now I can. One cannot ask others to conform to a gray world in which the wee people do *not* prune the hedges of our gardens.

Of course, no one would suggest that Asperger children should not be helped to conform, because conformity is the price that they will have to pay to be able to hold down jobs, pay their rents, and put their names to marriage licenses. But the questions are still unavoidable, because they are the very same questions that are constantly being put to childhood itself. A child is never free to be himself or herself; he or she has to be socialized (that most folkish of all popular concepts). But the child’s individual warp, the acute sense of apartness and loneliness that children have, is not a perversity that has to be flattened out. The child needs his inner perversities.

Thus a somber question arises. Will anyone, I wonder, have the audacity to leave that fruitful perversity untouched in the Asperger child—that very child who seems most to be in need of stern corrections, remedial severities, and an artificially constructed sense of normality?



Surfing the Internet, I had learned of a nine-year-old Asperger boy in California named Nicky Werner. Nicky had written a slender book of

poems called *Thoughts*, which contained some strikingly haiku-like verses that were written out with the typographic form of a diamond. They were severe, compact, and unnerving, and above them Nicky rendered monochrome line drawings showing the simple element that was the subject of the poem. Like the poems, the drawings had a hard purity. One of them was about stars:

Star
big, bright
forming, dying, moving
makes me feel tiny
Sun.

These were quite unlike any poems I had seen from the pen of a seven-year-old, and I was intrigued. Nicky is the son of an Air Force recruiting officer who lives on an air base near Adelanto, California, in the Mojave Desert. I flew to Los Angeles with the intention of meeting him. But first I thought I would pay a visit to the head of the Los Angeles Asperger's support group, a man named Arthur Ringwalt. Arthur is well known in Asperger circles for his organizational abilities (a rare talent in those parts) and his strident views on the plight of autistics in the United States. I thought I might even ask him some questions about Nicky Werner, on the off-chance that he might know him. In any case, I arranged to drive to his apartment in Glendale and interview him. "Just let me know the time," a voice with what sounded to me like a dry Swedish accent said on the phone. "I'm an athlete, you know, and my tennis schedule is very strict."

As I was driving through the rush hour on Sepulveda Boulevard, I wondered why Arthur had a Swedish accent. Was he Swedish? His house stands on a quiet road called Elm, off Glenoaks Boulevard, where the old trolley lines rust between traffic aisles. Because it is Glendale, you can look up from the street to the San Gabriel Mountains, a narrow but towering pastoral vista. Arthur's condo is over a carport, and to the door came a wiry, tanned fellow in a purple Le Coq Sportif baseball cap and dark green tennis shorts. His eyes blinked and he waved me into a room of topsy-turvy clutter in which could be seen mountains of crates, boxes, and papers piled like the contents of a warehouse. No fan or air conditioner; we sat in the kitchenette, in the heat.

“So,” said Arthur in his faint and rather staccato Swedish-sounding accent, “you made it. You’re four minutes late. But I’m glad you came to the interview.”

I saw now that he had a carefully typed questionnaire in front of him, the two sheets stapled together.

“I’ve made it brief,” he went on, “so I hope you can bear with me. But I think you should read this first.”

He handed me a single typed page headed by the words *Arthur Ringwalt, Brief Bio*. “Read it,” he said.

The page began “I am single, male and 58 years of age. Gary B. Mesibov of the University of North Carolina diagnosed me with Asperger’s Syndrome in 1999.” A little further down, it went on: “I compensate for my disability. I am well organized, resourceful, and a good team player. Sports, particularly tennis, are an emotional release for me. . . . I am writing a pamphlet called ‘Hire People with Autism: Autistics Are Good Workers’.”

“So,” he said. “What do you think?”

“It’s succinct.”

“That’s what I was aiming for. I’ve also tried to be succinct in our interview notes. I have it all written out.”

So Arthur was going to interview *me*. He cleared his throat.

“First question, Mr. Osborne. Do you have or have you ever had any medical qualifications whatsoever for writing about Asperger Syndrome?”

“None whatsoever.”

“I see.” He scribbled quickly. “Second question. What kind of book is it that you are writing?”

I said I didn’t really know.

“I see.” More scribbles. “Third question. What are your other qualifications for writing this book? Is it a scholarly work? Anecdotal?”

And so on. While this grilling went on I looked around the room. There was a picture on one wall of a line of camels parading past the walls of an ancient Chinese city, the whole scene tinted with the artificial colors of a photograph from the 1930s. Across the room, Alpine pastures; on yet another wall, sporting snapshots: baseball heroes, the Joe Louis–Max Schmeling fight. Then there were the boxes. I now saw that they were packed with scores of containers of weight trainers’ protein powders. Lean Body, Met-Rx Engineered Nutrition, Hard Body,

and bottles of Refreshe water. The coffee table groaned with muscle mags. I spied at once the formidable *Testosterone* as well as *Muscle Media*. There were scores of them packed in sheaves. On the kitchen table, on the other hand, stood a bottle of Martinelli wine with a box of After Eights shrouded in plastic gift wrap and a well-thumbed paperback edition of *The Idiot's Guide To Managing Your Time*. Just as I was settling in, Arthur wrapped up his interview and suddenly handed me his professional card. It bore a Corinthian column and the words:

Arthur Ringwalt
Classical Technical Writing

"But," he confessed sadly, "the market's dried up. These are tough times for us technical writers."

Arthur turned out not to be Swedish at all. His father was an American diplomat in China, and the Ringwalts appeared to be a fairly prominent family in Virginia. Arthur was raised in boarding schools, but his mother had already noticed that there was something not quite right about him. At two, he was taken to the Boston Children's Hospital where his mother received the cheerful recommendation that he be institutionalized for life. What was wrong with him? Nobody really knew. If he had autism, why was he able to function so normally at school, despite being constantly teased and despite his great love of repetitively swinging doors? Wisely, his mother disobeyed the men in white coats, who so obviously do not always know best. One can imagine at the time the severe reprobation that this act of medical disobedience must have provoked. But at least Arthur was free to continue in special schools, in his case one for brain-damaged children in Wisconsin. There was no evidence that he had suffered any kind of brain damage. But his Aspergerish traits were too baffling for him to be classified otherwise. And so he was left to immerse himself in his obsessions, according to which he occasionally thought he was Napoleon, became extremely knowledgeable about English country houses, explored the outer reaches of astronomy, continued to swing every available door in sight, and made himself something of an amateur chess master. ("I can be beaten when I'm not concentrating!") It was, in short, a miserable childhood.

"I didn't talk until I was six. But I do remember hearing Rachmaninoff for the first time. That was an event. Otherwise it was hard. Asperger childhoods were not much fun in those days."

Nevertheless, he had something of an academic career: the University of North Carolina, the University of Denver, a math degree. He went on to teach but couldn't control his classes. He switched to selling the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but with little success. Prospective buyers of the august encyclopedia somehow didn't take to his strange accent, which is not a foreign accent at all but an Aspergerish lisp. "I didn't sell even one," he sighs. Supported by his trust fund, he drifted into "classical technical writing," whatever that is. And after he was diagnosed with Asperger's in 1999, he drifted on into the world of autistic advocacy, meanwhile avidly playing tennis in all his free time. In fact, athletics have more or less taken over most of his waking life.

"I live for it. Every minute. I am committed to putting on muscle."

He raised his skinny arms for a moment and his eyes fluttered, batted, as he echoed the word "muscle" a second time. He then explained that all he ate these days was muscle-building powder. Was it having any effect, I wondered? Arthur seemed to complement Alfred de Musset's assertion that a poet should not weigh more than ninety-nine pounds. Yet he went to the gym every other day and religiously drank his Carbo Max. "Relationships?" I asked.

"I think I've had three," he mused. "Let me think. One . . . two . . . yes, it was three. The best was an Israeli girl back in . . . nineteen-seventy-something. But she got sick of it. I had sex once with a girl in Denver, I think. I took a girl on a date once. Touched her breasts—big mistake." He sighed more heavily. "Big mistake."

Arthur was beginning to remind me of a character mentioned in *Goodfellas*: Jimmy Two Times, who says everything twice. He recalled that at school he had been expelled for writing a girl an admiring but impertinent postcard. The injustice of it still rankled him. Beyond that, the world of loving relationships was even more alien than it is to the rest of the population. His closest intimate was a guy called Myron who used to fly bombers during World War II. But all in all his friends, such as they are, seemed to be of less interest to Arthur than his diet. With rapid-fire stutters and sudden verbal salvos, often quickly repeated, he described his expeditions to the local Costco supermarket and his fever-

ish purchases of 10-percent-fat chicken nuggets and the strawberry par-faits at McDonald's. "As you see," he said mischievously, "I'm really organized." From his nutritional diet, we proceeded to the medical kind. He said he was on the antidepressant Luvox, which he took to subdue his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and whose side effects fascinated him. He proudly showed me the box, which duly warned against: "Abnormal ejaculation, tooth decay, blurred vision, frequent urination, nausea, gas and bloating, upper respiratory infection, vomiting."

"And you can't jack off," he added triumphantly.

What were his compulsions? For one thing, he rapped tables with his pencils a great deal. He was obsessed with bank mergers. Then, of course, there was tennis. Luvox, I wondered, for tennis addiction? But there was also Greek and Latin: Arthur loves Greek and Latin.

"I love anything written by Italians. Dante, the Italian movies, Fellini. I want to read the *Aeneid*. That's my next project."

I asked him then if he had ever heard of Nicky Werner, out in the desert. Arthur shook his head. How old was he? Nine? A tricky age. He got up and began pacing around the room in a burst of agitation. It wasn't easy for the small kids, he should know! How does one lead a profitable life if one isn't shown every encouragement at any age? Arthur's father had brushed him aside at that age because his oddities had alarmed him so deeply that Ringwalt Senior couldn't face them head-on.

"And what's this boy's name?"

"Nicky."

"And he's in Adelanto? That's in the middle of nowhere. Are you going there now?"

I said that was the plan.

"Then," said Arthur, "you're going to need some liquid refreshment."

"That is very likely."

With that, the interview, if it was an interview, came to an end, and we sauntered outside.

"It's an ugly street," Arthur remarked looking up and down placid Elm. The street is actually like most streets in L.A., neither better nor worse. Rows of little adobe-style villas with yuccas outside; I always think of that sinister line in the Beatles song *Strawberry Fields*: "underneath the blue suburban sky." I said it was a pleasant enough street.

"Pleasant?" he retorted. "Who wants to live on a pleasant street?"

Who does? I thought.

"I sometimes wonder," Arthur went on before turning away, "why everything has to be ugly. Why does everything have to be ugly?"

I confessed that, really, I had no idea why everything had to be ugly.

"That's just it." He snorted. "Nobody has any idea why it has to be ugly. Sometimes I feel so sorry for neurotypicals. They're so screwed up."

Then he politely asked what disorder I suffered from—it was clearly inconceivable that a fellow citizen might *not* suffer from a disorder of some kind. So I said, "I've got a case of Suburban Ennui Disorder Not Otherwise Specified."

"So," he winked, "that would be SED-NOS. Never heard of that one. Is it rare?"

We stood for moment looking up at the burned crests of the San Gabriel Mountains. A sarcastic smile had taken hold of Arthur's mouth and remained there as if fixed by an unpleasant thought. Then he abruptly raised his hand in a kind of military salute and removed me from his field of vision.

"Bon voyage," he said. "And remember to take your liquids."



Adelanto lies two hours out of Los Angeles on Route 15. I had a strange feeling going into the desert: It was sharply nostalgic for me to come back to the Mojave for the first time in seven years, a place where I had occasionally worked as a reporter for a San Diego newspaper, trudging the state's back roads in miserable solitude while investigating long-forgotten stories on migrant farm workers, bingo casinos, and the date farms of, well, Date. Stories that probably no one ever read. Now as then, I wondered who on earth would want to live in such an unrelenting place. The desert is actually filled with surprisingly normal people who go about surprisingly normal business. I remember a piece I once did on a small town's fire department. Those huge bronzed men talked about putting out fires in the desert as if it were the most mundane task a human being could be asked to do. They had not a whit of romantic feeling for their surroundings. Why then, I asked them, did they live in such an inhospitable place? "Ah," they said, "ain't nowhere like the desert." The meaning of this reply, of course, lay in its tone: childishly forlorn.

The road to Victorville is like all the desert roads, adamant as a Roman highway in conquered wilds. The badlands are partitioned out between military shooting ranges and imposing correctional facilities, and in between lie the eternal arroyos with their Joshua trees, their ocotillos shaped like upended jellyfish looming over dirt roads. I suddenly remembered how lonely I had been on these same roads, trawling from dust bowl to dust bowl while learning my Mexican Spanish from a Belts paperback. It's a landscape that lays a fear upon you. I wondered if Nicky Werner saw its gentle, opulent side?

At this point I was confronted with yet another of my rather Aspergerish traits. It happens that I am insidiously drawn to a motel chain known as the Red Roof Inn. Anyone who has driven around the U.S. knows that every freeway, every town, every intersection offers the same constellation of chain motels whose signs light up the sky with a barrage of competing prices. I could not say how much a Hampton Inns, a Motel 6, or a Travelodge differs from a Red Roof Inn, but there is something about Red Roof Inns that makes me search them out with an almost frenzied insistence. If I stop for the night in the middle of an unknown state, it has to be at a Red Roof Inn—which I have been told, incidentally, is the worst possible choice among the cheaper chain motels. What, then, makes me always go to a Red Roof Inn? I have no great love of them, after all. Rationally, I can easily see that it is a very bad choice of motel indeed. In fact, I loathe Red Roof Inns. I have a veritable catalog of complaints that I bring against the entire chain, and that long and bitter experience enables me to substantiate. But when all is said and done, these objections are merely rational and have nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that I am always bound to choose a Red Roof Inn for my stopover. I will go miles out of my way if I see the Red Roof Inn sign, and as soon as I am on my way to one I am filled with a childish satisfaction and calm—a soothing fore-knowledge of the Red Roof Inn experience, which instantly allays all my anxieties about being on the road while tired.

But here in Adelanto, to my severe dismay, there was no Red Roof Inn in sight. This had me stumped at once. I felt myself succumbing instantly to a minor panic attack. I was forced to stay at the Day's Inn in Adelanto.

Along Route 395, rigs roared all night long lighting up the desert like ferocious express trains while I paced up and down. Finally I turned

on the TV: Larry King. By one of those perverse alignments of which round-the-clock TV is marvelously capable, Larry King was interviewing the famous Dr. Phillip McGraw, alias “Dr. Phil.” Dr. Phil is one of the self-help gurus who has forged a special relation with Oprah Winfrey, but here he was explaining his new book, *Self Matters: Making Your Life from the Inside Out*, to Larry King.

Bald, with a southern twang and continually twitching eyes, Dr. Phil is one of the maestros of Relationship Therapy and says “Let me tell you” every fifteen seconds.

“I’ve got more degrees than a thermometer,” he was chuckling, “and let me tell you, that’s not how I got so wise.”

“What’s your secret?” King asked, or words to that effect.

“Each one of us has what I call a personal truth. I ask people to write down their personal truth and make it fit it into the Ten Laws of Life. Larry, let me tell you, this book was a process book. I got into the process of it all—the process of happiness. We need to address our issues with our wives and reopen negotiations. . . .”

Like the mad preacher in *Night of the Hunter*, Dr. Phil droned on about processes, negotiations, positivity, stress and distress, love and hate, listening to oneself, having one’s needs met, and yet more negotiations about issues. People called in from all over the country. *Hi Dr. Phil, do you have a formula for stress management? Dr. Phil, how can I get my needs met?* “This is Dr. Phil,” King said, “and our lines are open right now.”

Adelanto itself was just a scattering of wind-worn shacks. A Charlie’s topless bar at the crossroads, a Burger King, boarded cactus nurseries. Overhead, an immense cat’s cradle of power lines. The town’s strip is Palmdale Avenue, and, as it crosses 395, the car lots and bail bond offices give way to vast housing tracts in which the venturesome white race lives as if sequestered in barracks—interlopers in a land so ill-suited to their skins, always floating around on its surface like fragile water boatmen, insects skimming over a treacherously dark lake. Roman citizens in the outposts of the Sahara two thousand years ago. One can imagine the same thing throughout history: an entire race injected into a land that instinctively spits them out. I think to myself, *How long will we be here?* It is in one of these severe residential developments that the Werners live. Their streets seem exposed to some terrible solar blackmail, with names like Delicious and Palm, and the houses

struggle against malign, implacable elements. There is a purr of air conditioners that are never turned off.

The Werner house sits at the bottom of a somnambulant cul-de-sac. I felt a little like an astronaut descending from a shuttle to a friendly base on one of Jupiter's moons. What would one say to the stranded inhabitants? And there at the door was Trina, Nicky's mother, and her husband still in uniform after a day on the base. They are young, disciplined, intelligent—a model military family to my eye. He slim, quiet, reserved; she Mediterranean-looking, bodacious, extrovert. American military families are by nature rootless, and, unlike those of the majority of their compatriots, their perspectives on the world are often formed by the experience of living in many countries. The Werners said that they were pining for an eventual posting in Italy or Britain. Trina did not seem very comfortable in the desert or in Adelanto, though that may have been just my impression. She confided at once that she had loved living in Italy, where children are unconditionally adored.

"I wasn't very impressed," she said, "when I got back here. We don't love children in the same way Italians do."

There were three little boys inside, and Nicky was the oldest. As soon as I saw him, I thought to myself he was one of them, a classic Asperger boy. And indeed he was. Delicately unassuming, introspective, with huge blue eyes swimming behind professor spectacles. He shook my hand and told me gravely that he had no friends at school. I noticed at once that had a slight, well, foreign accent—or rather a faint trace of one.

"It's true," said Trina. "Up to the age of five he had a kind of Swedish accent. People thought he was Swedish."

At first, however, they thought he was deaf. Baby Nicky would never respond to his name being called, and although he had memorized words instantly when he was a tot, he barely spoke. Trina took him to a speech therapist. The therapist was nonplussed. Nicky couldn't speak easily, but he certainly knew all the names of cars, planets, and moons, the distances between the sun and every known planet and moon in the solar system, as well as the exact circumference of each. The Werners thought they had a little genius, but not an autistic one. After Nicky skipped kindergarten, he began to cause small, almost subtle disturbances at his school. He had to take things apart and see

how they worked. He'd drop sticks into the water tank to see how the ripples played out. Again and again, an annoyed principal summoned him to the office. It's much the same story with all Asperger children: a wayward, solipsistic individual of high intelligence pitted against an inflexible system that cannot accommodate the odd, the not quite socialized, the defiant, or the mildly uncooperative, or even the slightly anomalous. It's a recipe for war, or at the very least for disruption and classroom disorder. The Werners had therefore decided to home-school him, and it seemed likely that Nicky was thriving with it, as most children do now. He already scored in the ninety-ninth percentile in his SAT 9 test.

We went into his bedroom. The desert comes right up to the housing development, and through his bedroom window I could see sand and cactus. The room was scrupulously neat. On its walls hung a small boy's obsession with outer space—an astronaut's dried ice-cream sandwich packet, "A View of Earth From Space"—along with a shelf of meticulously arranged mineral and shell specimens that Nicky proceeded to identify with professorial calm: iron pyrites, abalones, quartz, pine cones, opals, and lumps of mica. Each was carefully posed as if in a display at the Natural History Museum. We looked through his equally neat rows of books: the odd *Sherlock Holmes* and *Treasure Island*, but mostly fact books on the natural world, things like the *National Geographic Guide* to Seashore Life or Insects. Then Nicky brought out the printed version of *Thoughts*. As we leafed through the handsome drawings and dreamy haikus, I asked him if he liked living in the desert.

"I like the heat," he replied.

And what about the air force base? Did he know all about planes?

"Some of them. When I grow up I'll be an astronaut."

At the end of the book there was indeed a four-line bio which read: "When he grows up Nicholas wants to be an astronaut, get out of this place and live somewhere else." Was that how he felt? I asked. "Sure," he said. "Get out of this place—planet earth—and live somewhere else."

Then he asked me, "Do you like reading poems?"

I said that I did it all the time. It felt like a confession of a dubious habit, which nowadays it no doubt is.

"Short ones or long ones?"

I'd never thought about the issue quite that way. "Short, I suppose."

“Me too. Short is best.” He fixed me in his drilling gaze, a complete inversion of the usual Asperger eye-avoidance. “What about Harry Potter?”

“Not really my thing.”

“Harry Potter’s almost as interesting as math.”

In *Thoughts* I came across another poem I liked very much:

Earth
big, blue
supporting, reflecting, drying
makes me feel small
People.

After this came two others that dealt with war:

Country
huge, strong
defending, fighting, celebrating
makes me feel proud
USSR.

USSR
vast, gone
forming, ending, launching
makes me feel glad
Rocket.

Hans Asperger had claimed a penchant for metaphor to be a defining characteristic of his boys, and Nicky certainly seemed to have a bent, if not for outright metaphor then, for compact associations. His mind was both disturbingly hyperfactual and blithely associative. Undeniably there was something a little sinister in the war poems, as if he had hit on absurd emotions lying latent in the nation’s collective airwaves, while he himself was merely “making sense” to himself as he wrote. On the other hand, there was nothing remote or stiff about him as he sat next to me on his bed showing me his drawings. The physical distance that Asperger children are said to always maintain between themselves and others was absent in him; in fact, he was affectionate and trusting. We peered through the window, and he told me the names of the plants sprouting in the dust. Although he sounded somewhat like a kind of miniature botanist—one of the more angelic creatures

from Dr. Moreau's island (a scientist interbred with a child?), his manner was confiding. He exuded a definite pleasure in showing a stranger around his den. Afterward, Trina described his fetishistic attitude toward food. When Nicky's fish fingers are cut up on his plate, it's imperative that no piece should touch another piece. There will be exactly eight pieces cut to the same length, neither more nor less, and the fork he uses cannot be allowed to touch the surface of the table. He is also allergic to eggs, peanuts, and milk.

"This latter," said Trina, spread Rubenesquely on the front room sofa as the boys swirled around her, "was especially interesting to me. You see, I'm studying to be a lactation consultant!"

Stumped for a moment, I asked her if she thought diet played a role in Asperger Syndrome.

"Genes," she said flatly. "After all, I *breastfed* Nicky."

She explained that her husband's half-brother was exceedingly strange. The father was a preacher and the mother a funeral arranger. Together with the half-brother they formed a kind of mobile evangelical funeral service. Religious fanaticism, as far as Trina was concerned, had made the half-brother even stranger than he already was. Did he too have Asperger's? No one had ever asked.

As I was leaving, Nicky told me that he had an inordinate fear of germs.

"They're everywhere! Staphylococcus."

"What about in the milk?"

He smiled shyly. "Especially in the milk."

I asked him if he wanted to come outside, but it was 102 degrees, and he shook his head. The family stayed indoors through the summer.

He asked me where I was going next, and I said San Jose. There was another Asperger boy there named AJ who was a couple of years younger than himself. At this, Nicky's interest perked up.

"Is he a military boy?"

"No, he lives with his grandmother."

"Is he normal?"

"I have no idea. I'll have to see."

"I wonder," Nicky said, "if he's interested in Jupiter?"

I said I would be sure to ask him some questions about Jupiter.

"Do you think he knows how many moons Jupiter has?"

I was already walking down the path to the car, cringing in the heat, while Nicky waved from the front door holding an iron pyrite in one hand.

"He might," I called back.

But Nicky was very serious, standing on tiptoe.

"Well, you ask him. Ask him how many moons Jupiter has. *I* know how many moons Jupiter has. I'll bet he does know. You ask him!"



San Jose is a city of handsome banks and relaxed ghettos, its streets shaded and vaguely Mediterranean, though devoid of any café tables. The San Jose Day's Inn reminded me very precisely of the St. Louis Airport Hilton. Every corridor mirrored every other corridor, while the rooms reveled in the same mass-production feel: sterilized water cups and fake bronze lamp handles, acrylic pictures of English country roads and iris-motif bed covers, stiff pleated curtains, courtesy soap packs, and racks of wire hangers. *The moons of Jupiter*, I kept thinking as I watched that night's *Iron Chef*. So far I knew nothing about this second little boy, AJ, except that he was interested in vacuum cleaners and not the moons of Jupiter. *Do the Mindblind*, I wondered, *have an affinity with each other regardless of their environment, attracted perhaps to the very idea of an obsession?* But this raises an unanswered question: What exactly *is* an obsession?

The notion of an unusual perseveration is becoming less and less abnormal as millions of people are diagnosed with OCD. The moons of Jupiter, vacuum cleaners, *Iron Chef*: we are all implicated. In fact, I watched with rapture as Grand Master Mitsua Harada of the Brighton Hotel in Kyoto came out to face Iron Chef Chen Kinechi, the king of Chinese cuisine. A superb gloom hung over the proceedings. Facing the camera, the demonic compere Takeshi Kaga picked up a yellow pepper, grinned sarcastically as if about to bite off the head of a small child, and sank his teeth into the pepper. I cannot say why this Nipponic kitsch enthralls me. I suppose it's the idea of the horrible, difficult raw material, which is always unveiled at the last moment, and which imposes upon the masters half an hour of exquisite torture. This time it was a battle with Spanish mackerel. A steaming pile of giant Spanish mackerel rose into the kitchen, and the masters began to sweat. The commentators, including the extraordinarily beautiful Chiruzo Azuma, became heated. "Why, he's wrapping radishes around chopsticks to make them curly!" "It looks like a Kudzu starch sauce served with

Spanish mackerel canapés!” “Unusually avant-garde but rigorously Kyotan!”

Harada’s victory gave a sudden rush of pleasure, and I danced around the room. It must, I thought, have been the whole grilled Spanish mackerel with hot bean sauce that had clinched it. But hadn’t Chen Kineshi, the mightiest of the Iron Chefs in his yellow satin hat, gone undefeated for nine months? Grand Master Harada’s victory, therefore, had a special historical significance. What had the bean paste grilled on the spine of the whole Spanish mackerel tasted like, or the Spanish mackerel porridge-style? What of the grilled Spanish mackerel laid on slices of lemon, or the Spanish mackerel skin grilled and served Peking Duck style?

And here is the Aspergerish rub of my *Iron Chef* perseverance. All the Iron Chef battles are organized around a single foodstuff. They are manic variations on a single theme, which is exactly how we don’t eat real food. It is, however, a well-known characteristic of Asperger people that they will eat only one foodstuff, sometimes for years on end. Apart from Glenn Gould’s infamous arrowroot biscuits, I remember a case history related to me by Yale researcher Fred Volkmar during a telephone conversation. One of his patients had invited a woman to his home after she had reluctantly accepted to have a date with him. Volkmar asked the Asperger man later how this dramatic event had gone—success or failure? The man was baffled. He had made an elaborate dinner for her, but as he had presented with some pride his elaborate third course the woman had burst into enraged tears, uttered an expletive, and fled the premises. “What,” Volkmar asked tentatively, “had the chef served her?” “Well,” the man answered, “I only eat sardines. The sardine is the perfect nutritional food. The ratio of fat to protein is optimal. So I served three courses of sardines. Sardines with baked tomatoes, sardines with melted cheese, sardines . . .” Volkmar added that the man couldn’t understand why people would eat anything but sardines—cereals, for example, or pastas. They weren’t as nutritionally efficient as sardines; therefore, eating them made no sense. Besides, he was used to eating sardines, and sardines were all he was going to eat. To eat anything other than sardines would be to change the rules, and changing the rules was a trauma.

The Aspie’s mania about food (which is never enjoyed as a carnal pleasure or even as an art form) has an interesting mirror image in the

wider culture. For the latter, too, is literalistic when it comes to food, generating hundreds of madly radical diet regimes and food-related hysterias. There is something distinctly Aspergerish about the way Americans insist that all foodstuffs carry a precisely analyzed list of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, and vitamins on their wrappings. Arthur Ringwalt, after all, was not so very different from followers of cult diets such as Calorie Restriction—a severe diet intended to prolong life expectancy—with their maniacal pedantry about the “calorific values” of every raw carrot, raisin, and alfalfa bunch they eat. Some obsessional dieters even have special kitchens built into their basements to create their outlandishly severe meals. Yet such attitudes are considered largely normal.

But the Aspie’s refusal to eat anything other than one thing also has a kind of crazy purity in which the Iron Chefs also indulge. This obsession lies with wanting to exhaust all the possibilities of a single foodstuff. It is rather like Arthur’s interest in bodybuilding protein powder drinks or a San Jose boy’s tenacious interest in vacuum cleaners. Pleasure is a difficult concept for Asperger people to grasp because it involves a notion of play, of *appearances*. In a world interpreted literally, but without rules from which they can depart with dashing spontaneity, they are nailed to their fixations like dead moths to a board. But then, I must humbly add, so are we all.

Trish Canepa lives in the Pepper Tree mobile home park off Monterey Avenue in Santa Clara County. Under the imperial palms, the units seem less gritty than they actually are. For a moment you wonder if you are in some Mafia motel in which there must be a casino and a slot machine hall somewhere. Trish is only fifty; she ran her own real estate company in San Jose before her daughter Dina spiraled into prostitution and drug addiction and lost control of her four small children. AJ was born in the Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas with 1000 ml of amphetamines in his blood, as well as 300 ml of opiates, barbiturates, cocaine, and an equivalent amount of benzodiazepines.

Hyperactive, nervy, he met me at the door with his teddy bear, his gaze slightly skewed—crossed, even. He told me at once that if I gave him two dollars he’d give me two dimes back. Then he asked me if he could use my keypad to set off the alarm in my car. Three seconds later, he was pulling me into the yard to show me the dirt patch he liked to dig up with a plastic shovel. I felt buffeted back and forth, as one does

when playing with a muscular puppy. He said, "I like to go to sleep with stones in my hands. If I don't have stones in my hands I can't get to sleep."

"It's true, he has to sleep with stones in his hands." Trish was matter-of-fact. We sat in the front room and AJ whirled around the unit, running from one end of it to the other on bare feet. AJ, she added, was first diagnosed with ADD before being identified as having Asperger's by the Children's Health Council at Stanford University. In kindergarten, at age five, he broke the nose of one of the mothers and was expelled; on another occasion, his school called the police to forcibly remove him from under a bus seat. "He throws terrible tantrums. But the vacuum cleaners calm him down!"

Trish is a reminder of how gutsy solitary grandmothers so often hold together a disintegrating social fabric. She married a scrap-metal dealer in her teens and had Dina when she was eighteen. At two, Dina was already out of control; at ten, they took her to a psychiatrist. "She was a sociopath, always stealing, lying. When she was sixteen, she was doing drugs heavily. She was just like her father, actually." Trish moved out when Dina was twelve and remarried. Back in Tahoe where the father had kept the children, Dina was soon convicted for aggravated assault and burglary. Thereafter she quickly progressed to prostitution. In and out of prison, she had four children with a variety of men. AJ's father was one of them, but Trish said that he remains an unknown.

"For all we know, it was one of her clients. It could have been an Oklahoma senator."

With no parents, AJ was at sea. His little sister is also disturbed, diagnosed now with OCD. Trish's common sense tells her that all these diagnoses of medical conditions are only tapping into the disturbances of a profoundly abnormal environment. But the disturbances are nevertheless as real as the rocks that AJ holds in his hands when he goes to sleep. ADD, OCD, Asperger's: the litany of childhood disorders provides the harassed parent or guardian with a kind of map with which she can orient herself as much as the child. Yet at the same time there is no easy escape from these same afflictions, no commonsensical road out.

After AJ's various diagnoses, the inevitable drug regime began. The psychiatrists prescribed Dexedrine, which AJ now takes daily with a 50 mg dose of Luvox and a 1.5 mg dose of Risperdone. They warned Trish that he might lose two inches of his normal height with lifelong use of

Dexedrine. Terrified, she began to have doubts. Ritalin was tried, but with disastrous results. On the other hand, she could see that the Dexedrine had helped him expand his normally ephemeral attention span so that he could actually finish a page of his coloring book. When the Dexedrine was cut, AJ spiraled out of control again. This presented Trish with a dilemma. Dexedrine may have helped AJ stabilize, but looking back at photographs of him taken before the regime began she noticed at once that then he was always smiling. Now, he doesn't smile at all. "The drugs have taken all the joy out of him. Something has been sucked out of him."

AJ was certainly agitated and stressful. He blinked impatiently, flitting from activity to activity without any noticeable change of emotional inflection. The conversation inevitably came around to vacuum cleaners. AJ loved the promotional video that came with the new Phantom model and watched it over and over, while rocking himself back and forth. To discipline his moods, Trish would occasionally snap at him that he wouldn't be able to touch the new vacuum, and a sullen look of castigated impotence would suddenly come over his face. The threat clearly worked. As we sat in the front room, he crushed a few soft rocks from the yard into the carpet, despite Trish's warnings, and then swiftly disappeared to fetch the Epic Series 3500 model from his bedroom. He gets a vacuum every year for his birthday. Taking up a dark red toy magnifying glass, he then crawled around the carpet with the glass pressed closely to the fibers. He explained:

"There are bad devils in the carpet that have to be vacuumed. It's gonna make mom feel much better." He calls Trish mom. "It'll capture every little one of them. You need the magnifying glass to see the devils and the baby dirt. That's what I love about vacuums. They go everywhere, you can take them anywhere, and you can pick up dirt even under tables."

Turning the vacuum on, he then began furiously running it over the carpet in all directions.

"Can I vacuum in the hallway?" he pleaded with Trish. Given permission, he was ecstatic.

"See how fast I picked them up with the bristles?" He then came sidling up to me and whispered very quietly in my ear, "If I use the vacuum I can get it out quicker!"

It is difficult to draw conclusions about that twilight zone where environment and genetic makeup collide. I thought about the differences between Asa, Nicky, and AJ—three boys diagnosed with the same specific neurological disorder, which should have made them much more similar than they actually seemed to be. Each one, of course, mirrored a specific environment, for good or ill. What, though, would be the kernel of their future personality? Is there, one has to ask, such a thing as an Asperger identity, just as there is presumably a schizophrenic one?

The child is always malleable and adaptable, and AJ is now in a remedial school for autistic children, where he'll probably thrive eventually, even if he ends up being something of a social misfit. As he walked me out to the car, he continued trying to cut little deals with me. Would I give him this if he gave me that? A quarter in exchange for a yard stone? Eventually I relented and gave him the quarter. He ran around the car squealing, "Yes! Yes!", then activated the alarm from the keypad. For a moment, minor chaos erupted in a quiet lane of the Pepper Tree mobile home park, and one small boy was in ecstasy. But Trish had to call down order.

"If you do that again," she warned, "I won't let you play with the new Phantom when it arrives next week!"

Immediate silence.

"You're my friend," he whispered in my ear. "When you come next time, I'll let you touch the Phantom."

I said that would be swell.

"You have to see the Phantom. It's the most amazing vacuum cleaner in the world."

"I'll bet it is," I said.

"You wait and see."

I drove off, crossing an abandoned one-track railroad line obscured by the smoke of grass fires. A few shabby men in undershirts hung around their rusted Le Sabres playing cards. For a moment, I had a compulsive desire to go out onto the mall nearby on Monterey and buy AJ a brand-new vacuum cleaner. For AJ, I mused rather preposterously, the humble vacuum cleaner was part of a sort of "song of innocence," which William Blake would have understood at once.



Afterward, I drove along Route 1. I had wanted to visit Henry Miller's house near Big Sur, or at least the queer little cliff-top museum that now is his temple. But after having lost my way (an almost impossible feat since there is only Route 1 to navigate), I decided to stop somewhere between Big Sur and Pismo Beach, completely lost in the dark and suddenly aware that my ability to remember maps was one that only applied to certain countries and to certain states, but not to Route 1.

I knew only that I was a couple of miles from the Hearst Castle, which I had always wanted to visit. Yet it was July 4, and fireworks lit up the sky above Pismo Beach; anyone not afflicted with Nocturnal Disorientation Syndrome (NDS) would have found the sign for Big Sur easily enough. There was only one thing to do, namely look for a Red Roof Inn. But here at the edge of the Pacific there was none to be found.

In any case, I did come across a silent place wedged between the road and the cliffs called the Jade Motel. Its lights flickered, huge signs crying *No Smoking* hung amid colonial clocks. *Psycho*, I thought. The Bates Motel! An old woman in an incredible plastic headscarf took me upstairs. "It's a shame you're here," she said. "You should be enjoying yourself in Pismo Beach." I rolled into bed in a numb fit of disillusionment when I had discovered at once that the room's TV set was no longer functional. This meant no *Iron Chef* and no Weather Channel for twenty-four hours. Furious, I was unable to sleep.

On the walls of the room hung some forbidding paintings by a man named Carl Hasch; Turner-esque imitations of rustic English scenes I should have known from life, but didn't: fords, stiles, shaggy horses, barley fields with ruddy swains in frocks. For some reason, they too bothered me, as if I had seen them somewhere I could now no longer recall.

Outside, the Pacific ground away against the back gardens of a row of suburban chalets. Alongside the chalets stood a lofty row of lampposts that cast a leprous light into the back part of the room, and they were keeping me awake as well. Finally, I got up and went outside down to the cliffs where the lamps were providing a buffer against the glittering lights of Pismo Beach. It was now two in the morning.

I went around each lamppost counterclockwise, making my way as far as the edge of the cliffs and looked down into mounds of driftwood and kelp. I had no idea what I was doing there. But, as I have explained,

I have a thing for lampposts: I cannot resist them, they draw me to themselves like great stork-like sirens. As soon as I am near a lamppost, I feel a resurgence of some childhood impulse to walk around it counterclockwise, to taunt, antagonize, and “ensnare” it. In short, I become abnormal around lampposts. This could be otherwise put, however: for I could just as easily say that lampposts have the same effect upon me as certain (to us) invisible navigational signs have upon homing pigeons. They are markers—signs that cannot be explained. And they trigger deep reactions that also cannot be explained.

When I came back to the Jade Motel—yes, exhilarated not by the moon shining on the kelp beds but by a simple colonnade of lampposts—the woman in the plastic hood popped out her head from the night office and scowled. She had seen everything, of course. Clearly irritated by my display of abnormality, she cocked her eyes toward the beach and, by implication, the lampposts, and said, “It’s dangerous down there, you know. I wouldn’t go down there, if I were you.” She elongated her words as if, being a retarded foreigner of some kind, I could barely understand even the simplest word. “It’s not meant for recreation. It’s private property.”

The next morning in the bookstore at Big Sur I picked up Henry Miller’s study of Arthur Rimbaud, *The Time of the Assassins*, and retired to the cliff-top Nepenthe Café across the road. This was not quite fortuitous. I had been thinking all the way what kinds of adults these Asperger boys would grow up to be. Wasn’t this the same question that you ask naturally about that quintessential child genius Rimbaud? If the kingdom of childhood has become threatened to the point of becoming extinct, how much more true is this of that other, equally mysterious category: genius? As we have seen, genius is also inextricably bound up with the symbolism of Asperger Syndrome. Some have even called it a “genius syndrome.” The Asperger person is held to be a prodigy, a savant, a nucleus of extraordinary abilities neurotypicals can only marvel at. “Civilization,” Temple Grandin has remarked, “would pay a terrible price if the genes which cause autism and Asperger’s Syndrome were eradicated.”

This may not tally with the realities of most struggling Asperger adults, or with the struggling parents of AS boys, but it is certainly the tack that Sacks took with Temple Grandin herself, and it is without question very popular among Asperger people themselves. To be excep-

tional, they argue, is a curse. But the flip side of the curse of having Asperger's is to be exceptional. How does the prodigy live in a normal society? Miller, being himself a kind of *monstre sacré*, asks the same question about Rimbaud.

Considered by any objective standard, the life of Rimbaud was one of catastrophic dysfunction, to put it mildly. It consisted precisely of a calculated warfare between himself and his society, a warfare that went far beyond the usual bohemian antics. For Miller, this could not have been otherwise. Technocratic civilization is so decadent that any exceptional being rebels against it as a matter of course:

. . . With what ghoulish glee, when it comes to shovel him under, do we focus attention upon the "maladaptation" of the lone individual, the only true rebel in a rotten society! Yet it is these very same figures who give significance to that abused term "maladaptation."

Reading this slim book I remembered what it was that had attracted me to Asperger people in the first place. It is the fact that they are lost, that they are unknown to themselves. They are all a bit like Rimbaud running illegal guns in the deserts of Abyssinia, estranged from country, family, lovers, friends, and gainful employment. That they are not lost for the same reasons as Rimbaud (though, who knows?) is of no importance.

Inevitably, one also asks whether this quality of being overwhelmed by an inner compulsion, of being a victim of oneself, is what we popularly mean by the word *genius*. It is, indeed, the very reason that we do not believe in geniuses anymore. For such a person is the reverse of ourselves, and we cannot bear anyone to be the reverse of ourselves, let alone superior to us.

Reading about Rimbaud—the teenage prodigy, the maladaptive loner, the spewer of metaphor—I could not help thinking about that other child prodigy and maladaptive loner, Glenn Gould. The question of genius is more disturbing than we think; it is, in any case, the next theme we must enter in our pursuit of the enigmas of Asperger Syndrome. But, as I whiled away an afternoon in the hills of Big Sur—like those of a gnarled, disappeared Greece before *moussaka* and topless night clubs were invented—sitting on the tourist terrace of the

Nepenthe, which, sadly, Miller would no longer recognize, I came across a strange brief paragraph that made me think of the collapsing dichotomy of child and adult that so hauntingly seemed visited on Asperger's orphaned children, who seem so bizarrely to resemble old men: "To the anabasis of youth, [Rimbaud] opposed the katabasis of senility. There was no in-between realm—except the false maturity of the civilized man. . . ."

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