EUGENE

By Greg Egan

‘I guarantee it. I can make your child a genius.’

Sam Cook (MB BS MD FRACP PhD MBA) shifted his supremely confident gaze from Angela to Bill and then back again, as if daring them to contradict him.

Angela finally cleared her throat and said, ‘How?’

Cook reached into a drawer and pulled out a small section of a human brain, sandwiched in Perspex. ‘Do you know who this belonged to? I’ll give you three guesses.’

Bill suddenly felt very queasy. He didn’t need three guesses, but he kept his mouth shut. Angela shook her head and said, impatiently, ‘I have no idea.’

‘Only the greatest scientific mind of the twentieth century.’

Bill leant forward and asked, appalled but fascinated, ‘H-h-how did y-y-y—?’

‘How did I get hold of it? Well, the enterprising fellow who did the autopsy, back in nineteen fifty-five, souvenired the brain prior to cremation. Naturally, he was bombarded with requests from various groups for pieces to study, so over the years it got subdivided and scattered around the world. At some point, the records listing who had what were mislaid, so most of it has effectively vanished, but several samples turned up for auction in Houston a few years ago — along with three Elvis Presley thigh bones; I think someone was liquidating their collection. Naturally, we here at Human Potential put in a bid for a prime slice of cortex. Half a million US dollars — I can’t remember what that came to per gram — but worth every cent. Because we know the secret. Glial cells.’

‘G-g-g-g—?’

‘They provide a kind of structural matrix in which the neurons are embedded. They also perform several active functions which aren’t yet fully understood, but it is known that the more glial cells there are per neuron, the more connections there are between the neurons. The more connections between neurons, the more complex and powerful the brain. Are you with me so far? Well, this tissue,’ he held up the sample, ‘has almost thirty per cent more glial cells per neuron than you’ll find in the average cretin.’

Bill’s facial tic suddenly went out of control, and he turned away, making quiet sounds of distress. Angela glanced up at the row of framed qualifications on the wall, and noticed that several were from a private university on the Gold Coast which had gone bankrupt more than a decade before.

She was still just a little uneasy about putting her future child in this man’s hands. The tour of Human Potential’s Melbourne headquarters had been impressive; from sperm bank to delivery room, the hardware had certainly gleamed, and surely anyone in charge of so many millions of dollars’ worth

of supercomputers, X-ray crystallography gear, mass spectrometers, electron microscopes, and so on, had to know what he was doing. But her doubts had begun when Cook had shown them his pet project: three young dolphins whose DNA contained human gene grafts. ('We ate the failures,' he had confided, with a sigh of gustatory bliss.) The aim had been to alter their brain physiology in such a way as to enable them to master human speech and 'human modes of thought' — and although, strictly speaking, this had been achieved, Cook had been unable to explain to her why the creatures were only able to converse in limericks.

Angela regarded the grey sliver sceptically. 'How can you be sure it's as simple as that?'

'We've done experiments, of course. We located the gene that codes for a growth factor that determines the ratio of glial cells to neurons. We can control the extent to which this gene is switched on, and hence how much of the growth factor is synthesised, and hence what the ratio becomes. So far, we've tried reducing it by five per cent, and on average that causes a drop in IQ of twenty points. So, by simple linear extrapolation, if we up the ratio by two hundred per cent—'

Angela frowned. 'You intentionally produced children with reduced intelligence?'

'Relax. Their parents wanted Olympic athletes. Those kids won't miss twenty points — in fact, it will probably help them cope with the training. Besides, we like to be balanced. We give with one hand and take with the other. It's only fair. And our bioethics Expert System said it was perfectly okay.'

'What are you going to take from Eugene?'

Cook looked hurt. He did it well; his big brown eyes, as much as his professional success, had put his face on the glossy sleeves of a dozen magazines. 'Angela. Your case is special. For you, and Bill — and Eugene — I'm going to break all the rules.'

* * * *

When Bill Cooper was ten years old, he saved up his pocket money for a month, and bought a lottery ticket. The first prize was fifty thousand dollars. When his mother found out — whatever he did, she always found out — she said calmly, 'Do you know what gambling is? Gambling is a kind of tax: a tax on stupidity. A tax on greed. Some money changes hands at random, but the net cash flow always goes one way — to the Government, to the casino operators, to the bookies, to the crime syndicates. If you ever do win, you won't have won against them. They'll still be getting their share. You'll have won against all the penniless losers, that's all.'

He hated her. She hadn't taken away the ticket, she hadn't punished him, she hadn't even forbidden him to do it again — she had simply stated her opinion. The only trouble was, as an ordinary ten-year-old child, he didn't understand half the phrases she'd used, and he didn't have a hope of properly assessing her argument, let alone rebutting it. By talking over his head, she might just as well have proclaimed with the voice of authority:

you are stupid and greedy and wrong — and it frustrated him almost to tears that she'd achieved this effect while remaining so calm and reasonable.

The ticket didn't win him a cent, and he didn't buy another. By the time he left home, eight years later, and found employment as a data-entry clerk in the Department of Social Security, the government lotteries had been all but superseded by a new scheme, in which participants marked numbers on a coupon in the hope that their choice would match the numbers on balls spat out by a machine.

Bill recognised the change as a cynical ploy, designed to suggest, sotto voce, to a statistically ignorant public that they now had the opportunity to use 'skill' and 'strategy' to improve their chances of winning. No longer would anyone be stuck with the immutable number on a lottery ticket; they were free to put crosses in boxes, any way they liked! This illusion of having control would bring in more players, and hence more revenue. And that sucked.

The TV ads for the game were the most crass and emetic things he'd ever seen, with grinning imbeciles going into fits of poorly acted euphoria as money cascaded down on them, cheerleaders waved pom-poms, and tacky special effects lit up the screen. Images of yachts, champagne, and chauffeur-driven limousines were intercut. It made him gag.

However. There was a third prong. The radio ads were less inane, offering appealing scenarios of revenge for the instantly wealthy: Evict Your Landlord. Retrench Your Boss. Buy the Nightclub Which Denied You Admission. The play on stupidity and the play on greed had failed, but this touched a raw nerve. Bill knew he was being manipulated, but he couldn't deny that the prospect of spending the next forty-two years typing crap into a VDU (or doing whatever the changing technology demanded of shit-kickers — assuming he wasn't made completely obsolete) and paying most of his wages in rent, without even an infinitesimal chance of escape, was too much to bear.

So, in spite of everything, he caved in. Each week, he filled in a coupon, and paid the tax. Not a tax on greed, he decided. A tax on hope.

Angela operated a supermarket checkout, telling customers where to put their EFTPOS cards, and adjusting the orientation of cans and cartons if the scanner failed to locate their bar code (Hitachi made a device which could do this, but the US Department of Defence was covertly buying them all, in the hope of keeping anyone else from getting hold of the machine's pattern-recognition software). Bill always took his groceries to her checkout, however long the queue, and one day managed to overcome his pathological shyness long enough to ask her out.

Angela didn't mind his stutter, or any of his other problems. Sure, he was an emotional cripple, but he was passably handsome, superficially kind, and far too withdrawn to be either violent or demanding. Soon they were meeting regularly, to engage in messy but mildly pleasant acts, designed to be unlikely to transfer either human or viral genetic material between them.

However, no amount of latex could prevent their sexual intimacy from planting hooks deep in other parts of their brains. Neither had begun the relationship expecting it to endure, but as the months passed and nothing drove them apart, not only did their desire for each other fail to wane, but they grew accustomed to — even fond of— ever broader aspects of each other's appearance and behaviour.

Whether this bonding effect was purely random, or could be traced to formative experiences, or ultimately reflected a past advantage in the conjunction of some of their visibly expressed genes, is difficult to determine. Perhaps all three factors contributed to some degree. In any case, the knot of their interdependencies grew, until marriage began to seem far simpler than disentanglement, and, once accepted, almost as natural as puberty or death. But if the offspring of previous Bill-and-Angela lookalikes had lived long and bred well, the issue now seemed purely theoretical; the couple's combined income hovered above the poverty line, and children were out of the question.

As the years passed, and the information revolution continued, their original jobs all but vanished, but they both somehow managed to cling to employment. Bill was replaced by an optical character reader, but was promoted to computer operator, which meant changing the toner on laser printers and coping with jammed stationery. Angela became a supervisor, which meant store detective; shoplifting as such was impossible (supermarkets were now filled with card-operated vending machines) but her presence was meant to discourage vandalism and muggings (a real security guard would have cost more), and she assisted any customers unable to work out which buttons to push.

In contrast, their first contact with the biotechnology revolution was both voluntary and beneficial. Born pink — and more often made pinker than browner by sunlight — they both acquired deep black, slightly purplish skin; an artificial retrovirus inserted genes into their melanocytes which boosted the rate of melanin synthesis and transfer. This treatment, although fashionable, was of far more than cosmetic value; since the south polar ozone hole had expanded to cover most of the continent, Australia's skin cancer rates, already the world's highest, had quadrupled. Chemical sunscreens were messy and inefficient, and regular use had undesirable long-term side-effects. Nobody wanted to clothe themselves from wrist to ankle all year in a climate that was hot and growing hotter, and in any case it would have been culturally unacceptable to return to near-Victorian dress codes after two generations of maximal baring of skin. The small aesthetic shift, from valuing the deepest possible tan to accepting that people born fair-skinned could become black, was by far the easiest solution.

Of course, there was some controversy. Paranoid right-wing groups (who for decades had claimed that their racism was 'logically' founded on cultural xenophobia rather than anything so trivial as skin colour) ranted about conspiracies and called the (non-communicable) virus 'The Black Plague'. A few politicians and journalists tried to find a way to exploit people's unease without appearing completely stupid — but failed, and eventually shut up. Neo-blacks started appearing on magazine sleeves, in soap operas, in advertisements (a source of bitter amusement for the Aboriginal people, who remained all but invisible in such places), and the trend accelerated.

Those who lobbied for a ban didn't have a rational leg to stand on: nobody was being forced to be black — there was even a virus available which snipped out the genes, for people who changed their mind — and the country was being saved a fortune in health-care costs.

One day, Bill turned up at the supermarket in the middle of the morning. He looked so shaken that Angela was certain that he'd been sacked, or one of his parents had died, or he'd just been told that he had a fatal disease.

He had chosen his words in advance, and reeled them off almost without hesitation. 'We forgot to watch the draw last night,' he said. 'We've won forty-seven m-m-m . . .'

Angela clocked out.

They took the obligatory world tour while a modest house was built. After disbursing a few hundred thousand to friends and relatives — Bill's parents refused to take a cent, but his siblings, and Angela's family, had no such qualms — they were still left with more than forty-five million. Buying all the consumer goods they honestly wanted couldn't begin to dent this sum, and neither had much interest in gold-plated Rolls Royces, private jets, Van Goghs, or diamonds. They could have lived in luxury on the earnings of ten million in the safest of investments, and it was indecision more than greed that kept them from promptly donating the difference to a worthy cause.

There was so much to be done in a world ravaged by political, ecological and climatic disasters. Which project most deserved their assistance? The proposed Himalayan hydroelectric scheme, which might keep Bangladesh from drowning in the floodplains of its Greenhouse-swollen rivers? Research on engineering hardier crops for poor soils in northern Africa? Buying back a small part of Brazil from multinational agribusiness, so food could be grown, not imported, and foreign debt curtailed? Fighting the still abysmal infant mortality rate amongst their own country's original inhabitants? Thirty-five million would have helped substantially with any of these endeavours, but Angela and Bill were so worried about making the right choice that they put it off, month after month, year after year.

Meanwhile, free of financial restraints, they began trying to have a child. After two years without success, they finally sought medical advice, and were told that Angela was producing antibodies to Bill's sperm. This was no great problem; neither of them was intrinsically infertile, they could still both provide gametes for IVF, and Angela could bear the child. The only question was, who would carry out the procedure? The only possible answer was, the best reproductive specialist money could buy.

Sam Cook was the best, or at least the best known. For the past twenty years, he'd been enabling women in infertile relationships to give birth to as many as seven children at a time, long after multiple embryo implants had ceased being necessary to ensure success (the media wouldn't bid for exclusive rights to anything less than quintuplets). He also had a reputation for quality control unequalled by any of his colleagues; after a stint in Tokyo on the Human Genome Project, he was as familiar with molecular biology as he was with gynecology, obstetrics and embryology.

It was quality control that complicated the couple's plans. For their marriage licence, their blood had been sent to a run-of-the-mill pathologist, who had only screened them for such extreme conditions as muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis, Huntington's disease, and so on. Human Potential, equipped with all the latest probes, was a thousand times more thorough. It turned out that Bill carried genes which could make their child susceptible to clinical depression, and Angela carried genes which might make it hyperactive.

Cook spelt out the options for them.

One solution would be to use what was now referred to as TPGM: third-party genetic material. No need to make do with any old dross, either; Human Potential had Nobel prizewinners' sperm by the bucketful, and although they had no equivalent ova — collection being so much harder, and most prizewinners being well into their sixties — they had blood samples instead, from which chromosomes could be extracted, artificially converted from diploid to haploid, and inserted into an ovum provided by Angela.

Alternatively — albeit at a somewhat higher cost — they could stick with their own gametes, and use gene therapy to correct the problems.

They talked it over for a couple of weeks, but the choice wasn't difficult. The legal status of children produced from TPGM was still a mess — and a slightly different mess in every state of Australia, not to mention from country to country — and of course they both wanted, if possible, a child who was biologically their own.

At their next appointment, while explaining these reasons, Angela also disclosed the magnitude of their wealth, so that Cook would feel no need to cut corners for the sake of economy. They had kept their win from becoming public knowledge, but it hardly seemed right to have any secrets from the man who was going to work this miracle for them.

Cook seemed to take the revelation in his stride, and congratulated them on their wise decision. But he added, apologetically, that in his ignorance of the size of their financial resources, he had probably misled them into a limited view of what he had to offer.

Since they'd chosen gene therapy, why be half-hearted about it? Why rescue their child from maladjustment, only to curse it with mediocrity — when so much more was possible? With their money, and Human Potential's facilities and expertise, a truly extraordinary child could be created: intelligent, creative, charismatic; the relevant genes had all been more or less pinned down, and a timely injection of research funds — say, twenty or thirty million — would see the loose ends sorted out very rapidly.

Angela and Bill exchanged looks of incredulity. Thirty seconds earlier, they'd been talking about a normal, healthy baby. This grab for their money was so transparent that they could scarcely believe it.

Cook went on, apparently oblivious. Naturally, such a donation would be honoured by renaming the building's L. K. Robinson/ Margaret Lee/Duneside Rotary Club laboratory the Angela and Bill Cooper/L. K. Robinson/Margaret

Lee/Duneside Rotary Club laboratory, and a contract would ensure that their philanthropy be mentioned in all scientific papers and media releases which flowed from the work.

Angela broke into a coughing fit to keep from laughing. Bill stared at a spot on the carpet and bit his cheeks. Both found the prospect of joining the ranks of the city's obnoxious, self-promoting charity socialites about as enticing as the notion of eating their own excrement.

However. There was a third prong.

'The world,' Cook said, suddenly stern and brooding, 'is a mess.' The couple nodded dumbly, still fighting back laughter — in full agreement, but wondering if they were now about to be told not to bother raising children at all. 'Every ecosystem on the planet that hasn't been bulldozed is dying from pollution. The climate is changing faster than we can modify our infrastructure. Species are vanishing. People are starving. There have been more casualties of war in the last ten years than in the previous century.' They nodded again, sober now, but still baffled by the abrupt change of subject.

'Scientists are doing all they can, but it's not enough. The same for politicians. Which is sad, but hardly surprising: these people are only a generation beyond the fools who got us into this mess. What child can be expected to avoid, to undo — to utterly transcend — the mistakes of its parents?'

He paused, then suddenly broke into a dazzling, almost beatific smile.

'What child? A very special child. Your child.'

* * * *

In the late twentieth century, opponents of molecular eugenics had relied almost exclusively on pointing out similarities between modern trends and the obscenities of the past: nineteenth-century pseudo-sciences like phrenology and physiognomy, invented to support preconceptions about race and class differences; Nazi ideology about racial inferiority, which had led straight to the Holocaust; and radical biological determinism, a movement largely confined to the pages of academic journals, but infamous nonetheless for its attempts to make racism scientifically respectable.

Over the years, though, the racist taint receded. Genetic engineering produced a wealth of highly beneficial new drugs and vaccines, as well as therapies — and sometimes cures — for dozens of previously debilitating, often fatal, genetic diseases. It was absurd to claim that molecular biologists (as if they were all of one mind) were intent on creating a world of Aryan supermen (as if that, and precisely that, were the only conceivable abuse). Those who had played glibly on fears of the past were left without ammunition.

By the time Angela and Bill were contemplating Cook's proposal, the prevailing rhetoric was almost the reverse of that of a decade before. Modern eugenics was hailed by its practitioners as a force opposed to racist myths. Individual traits were what mattered, to be assessed 'objectively' on

their merits, and the historical conjunctions of traits which had once been referred to as ‘racial characteristics’ were of no more interest to a modern eugenicist than national boundaries were to a geologist. Who could oppose reducing the incidence of crippling genetic diseases? Who could oppose decreasing the next generation’s susceptibility to arteriosclerosis, breast cancer, and stroke, and increasing their ability to tolerate UV radiation, pollution and stress? Not to mention nuclear fallout.

As for producing a child so brilliant as to cut a swathe through the world’s environmental, political and social problems . . . perhaps such high expectations would not be fulfilled, but what could be wrong about trying?

And yet. Angela and Bill remained wary — and even felt vaguely guilty at the prospect of accepting Cook’s proposal, without quite knowing why. Yes, eugenics was only for the rich, but that had been true of the leading edge of health care for centuries. Neither would have declined the latest surgical procedures or drugs simply because most people in the world could not afford them. Their patronage, they reasoned, could assist the long, slow process leading to extensive gene therapy for everyone’s children. Well ... at least everyone in the wealthiest countries’ upper middle classes.

They returned to Human Potential. Cook gave them the VIP tour, he showed them his talking dolphins and his slice of prime cortex, and still they were unconvinced. So he gave them a questionnaire to fill out, a specification of the child they wanted; this might, he suggested, make it all a bit more tangible.

* * * *

Cook glanced over the form, and frowned. ‘You haven’t answered all the questions.’

Bill said, ‘W-w-we didn’t—’

Angela hushed him. ‘We want to leave some things to chance. Is that a problem?’

Cook shrugged. ‘Not technically. It just seems a pity. Some of the traits you’ve left blank could have a very real influence on the course of Eugene’s life.’

‘That’s exactly why we left them blank. We don’t want to dictate every tiny detail, we don’t want to leave him with no room at all—’

Cook shook his head. ‘Angela, Angela! You’re looking at this the wrong way. By refusing to make a decision, you’re not giving Eugene personal freedom — you’re taking it away! Abnegating responsibility won’t give him the power to choose any of these things for himself; it simply means he’ll be stuck with traits which may be less than ideal. Can we go through some of these unanswered questions?’

‘Sure.’

Bill said, ‘Maybe ch-ch-chance is p-part of freedom.’ Cook ignored him.

‘Height. Do you honestly not care at all about that? Both of you are well

below average, so you must both be aware of the disadvantages. Don't you want better for Eugene?

'Build. Let's be frank; you're overweight, Bill is rather scrawny. We can give Eugene a head start towards a socially optimal body. Of course, a lot will depend on his lifestyle, but we can influence his dietary and exercise habits far more than you might think. He can be made to like and dislike certain foods, and we can arrange maximum susceptibility to endogenous opiates produced during exercise.

'Penis length—'

Angela scowled. 'Now that's the most trivial—'

'You think so? A recent survey of two thousand male graduates of Harvard Business School found that penis length and IQ were equally good predictors of annual income.

'Facial bone structure. In the latest group-dynamic studies, it turned out that both the forehead and the cheekbones played significant roles in determining which individuals assumed dominant status. I'll give you a copy of the results.

' Sexual preference—'

'Surely he can—'

'Make up his own mind? That's wishful thinking, I'm afraid. The evidence is quite unambiguous: it's determined in the embryo by the interaction of several genes. Now, I have nothing at all against homosexuals, but the condition is hardly what you'd call a blessing. Oh, people can always reel off lists of famous homosexual geniuses, but that's a biased sample; of course we've only heard of the successes.

'Musical taste. As yet, we can only influence this crudely, but the social advantages should not be underestimated . . .'

* * * *

Angela and Bill sat in their living room with the TV on, although they weren't paying much attention to it. An interminable ad for the Department of Defence was showing, all rousing music and jet fighters in appealingly symmetrical formations. The latest privatisation legislation meant that each taxpayer could specify the precise allocation of his or her income tax between government departments, who in turn were free to spend as much of their revenue as they wished on advertising aimed at attracting more funds. Defence was doing well. Social Security was laying off staff.

The latest meeting with Cook had done nothing to banish their sense of unease, but without solid reasons to back up their feelings, they felt obliged to ignore them. Cook had solid reasons for everything, all based on the very latest research; how could they go to him and call the whole thing off, without at least a dozen impeccable arguments, each supported by a reference to some recent report in Nature?

They couldn't even pin down the source of their disquiet to their own

satisfaction. Perhaps they were simply afraid of the fame that Eugene was destined to bring upon them. Perhaps they were jealous, already, of their son's as yet unknowable — but inevitably spectacular — achievements. Bill had a vague suspicion that the whole endeavour was somehow pulling the rug out from under an important part of what it had meant to be human — but he didn't know quite how to put it into words, not even to Angela. How could he confess that, personally, he didn't want to know the extent to which genes determined the fate of an individual? How could he declare that he'd rather stick with comfortable myths — no, forget the euphemisms, that he'd rather have downright lies — than have his nose rubbed in the dreary truth that a human being could be made to order, like a hamburger?

Cook had assured them that they need have no worries about handling the young genius. He could arrange a queue-jumping enrolment in the best Californian baby university, where, amongst Noble X Noble TPGM prodigies, Eugene could do brain-stimulating baby gymnastics to the sound of Kant sung to Beethoven, and learn Grand Unified Field Theory subliminally during his afternoon naps. Eventually, of course, he would overtake both his genetically inferior peers and his merely brilliant instructors, but by then he ought to be able to direct his own education.

Bill put an arm around Angela, and wondered if Eugene really would do more for humanity than their millions could have achieved directly in Bangladesh or Ethiopia or Alice Springs. But could they face spending the rest of their lives wondering what miracles Eugene might have performed for their crippled planet? That would be unbearable. They'd pay the tax on hope.

Angela began loosening Bill's clothing. He did the same for her. Tonight — as they both knew, without exchanging a word — was the most fertile point of Angela's cycle; in spite of the antibodies, they hadn't abandoned the habits they'd acquired in the years when they'd been hoping to conceive naturally.

The rousing music from the television stopped, abruptly. The scenes of military hardware deteriorated into static. A sad-eyed boy, perhaps eight years old, appeared on the screen and said quietly, 'Mother. Father. I owe you an explanation.'

Behind the boy was nothing but an empty blue sky. Angela and Bill stared at the screen in silence, waiting in vain for a voice-over or title to put the image in context. Then the child's eyes met Angela's, and she knew that he could see her, and she knew who it must be. She gripped Bill's arm and whispered, dizzy with shock, but euphoric too, 'It's Eugene.'

The boy nodded.

For a moment, Bill was overcome with panic and confusion, but then paternal pride swelled up and he managed to say, 'You've invented t-t-t-time t-travel!'

Eugene shook his head. 'No. Suppose you fed the genetic profile of an embryo into a computer, which then constructed a simulation of the appearance of the mature organism; no time travel is involved, and yet

aspects of a possible future are revealed. In that example, all the machinery to perform the extrapolation exists in the present, but the same thing can happen if the right equipment — equipment of a far more sophisticated kind — exists in the potential future. It may be useful, as a mathematical formalism, to pretend that the potential future has a tangible reality and is influencing its past — just as in geometric optics, it's often convenient to pretend that reflections are real objects that exist behind the mirrors that create them — but a formalism is all it would be.'

Angela said, 'So because you might invent such a device, we can see you, and talk to you, as if you were speaking to us from the future?'

'Yes.'

The couple exchanged glances. Here was an end to their doubts! Now they could find out exactly what Eugene would do for the world!

'If you were speaking to us from the future,' Angela asked carefully, 'what would you tell us? That you've reversed the Greenhouse Effect?' Eugene shook his head sadly. 'That you've made war obsolete?' No. 'That you've abolished hunger?' No. 'That you've found a cure for cancer?' No. 'What, then?'

'I would say that I have found a way to Nirvana.'

'What do you mean? Immortality? Infinite bliss? Heaven on Earth?'

'No. Nirvana. The absence of all longing.'

Bill was horrified. 'Y-y-you d-don't mean g-g-genocide? You're n-not going to w-w-w-wipe—'

'No, Father. That would be easy, but I would never do such a thing. Each must find their own way — and in any case, death is an incomplete solution, it cannot erase what has already been. Nirvana is to never have been.'

Angela said, 'I don't understand.'

'My potential existence influences more than this television set. When you check your bank accounts, you will find that the money you might have used to create me has been disbursed; don't look so distressed — it's all gone to charitable organisations of which you both approve. The computer records are precisely as if you had authorised the payments yourselves, so don't bother trying to challenge their authenticity.'

Angela was distraught. 'But . . . why would you waste your talents on destroying yourself, when you could have lived a happy, productive life, and done great things for the whole human race?'

'Why?' Eugene frowned. 'Don't ask me to account for my actions; you're the ones who would have made me what I would have been. If you want my subjective opinion: personally, I can't see any point in existence when I can achieve so much without it — but I wouldn't call that an "explanation"; it's merely a rationalisation of processes best described at a neural level.' He shrugged apologetically. 'The question really has no meaning. Why

anything? The laws of physics, and the boundary conditions of space-time. What more can I say?'

He vanished from the screen. A soap opera appeared.

They contacted their bank's computer. The experience had been no shared hallucination; their accounts were empty.

They sold the house, which was far too large for just the two of them, but it cost them most of the proceeds to buy something much smaller. Angela found work as a tour guide. Bill got a job on a garbage truck.

Cook's research continued without them, of course. He succeeded in creating four chimpanzees able to sing, and understand, country and western, for which he received both the Nobel Prize and a Grammy award. He made it into the Guinness Book of Records, for implanting and delivering the world's first third-generation IVF quins. But his super-baby project, and those of other eugenicists around the world, seemed jinxed; sponsors backed out for no apparent reason, equipment malfunctioned, labs caught fire.

Cook died without ever understanding how completely successful he'd been.