CHAPTER 4

RAIN MEN

> Genius may be an abnormality.
>
> —Temple Grandin

It was 9 o'clock at night by the time I got to LaGuardia to meet Jerry Newport. It was winter, the airport looked tired and half-deserted, the dense gloom of the low corridors and escalators touched by a scent of snow. By Terminal C, the retail outlets were even grimmer than they are by day, and exhausted Mexican staff were closing up the Sunglass Hut with elaborate rings of keys that made them look like guards in some desultory tropical jail. I went to the Wendy's and sat down under its undulating strawberry neons. Jerry Newport had not told me where exactly to meet him, merely that his fiancée would be arriving at Gate 4 from Houston and that I was to meet them both there. But what did Jerry Newport look like? And what did the fiancée of Jerry Newport look like? Jerry Newport was as much a mystery as his fiancée, and I may add that it was a further mystery to me why Jerry Newport had insisted that we meet inside LaGuardia airport at 9 o'clock at night. But he *had* insisted, saying with admirable certitude, "I'm afraid I can only be interviewed in an airport. Sorry."

I ordered coffee after coffee, looking constantly at my watch and wondering why Jerry Newport was late. For after all, as I said, it had been his idea. The arrivals terminal that he had suggested for a rendezvous looked like a pick-up zone for Cold War agents. Eventually, since I had no idea what Jerry Newport looked like, I wandered "with intent" (as the police have it) around the Sunglass Hut and the airport

Wendy's, looking for suspects. To tell the truth, I was a little resentful because although, as I have said, I adore airports, I cannot adore LaGuardia. It's a cramped, claustrophobic warren—exactly the kind of airport in which you can imagine terrorists settling in for some serious fun. No one looks quite wholesome inside LaGuardia. Faces become sallow, moods sour into anxiety. There is an underdevelopment to the texture of things, a nightmarish light like Greek Fire. There is that shifty energy that one finds in large bus stations like the Port Authority late at night when the laws of civility are wearing thin. Lonely figures, not quite bums, men waiting alone with little paper pots of ketchup and baskets of onion rings while Africans sweep the floors.

Under the phosphorous glare a single man sat hunched over a red tray, but it was not Jerry Newport. An hour went by and I felt like tapping this solitary diner on the shoulder anyway. I felt like asking him what the hell he thought he was doing eating off a red tray at the LaGuardia Wendy's. Instead, I sat down as far away from him as I could and waited for Jerry Newport. Another half-hour went by. I began to scrutinize passing faces to see if any of them could be called Aspergerish. But perhaps I should explain who Jerry Newport is.

Jerry Newport is the most famous Asperger savant in America. Although I had never met him, I had seen him once on an edition of *60 Minutes*. He was a chirpy man, on the edge of middle age, who made mathematical calculations at the speed of light. Perhaps it was the fault of a highly unreliable memory, but I seem to recall Jerry gaily dueling with a Princeton math professor and winning handily.

Nevertheless, I had no real idea who he was. Was he like the original Rain Man? Could he, too, calculate the precise number of a fistful of toothpicks dropped haphazardly on the floor? For a while I heard his name from afar. It would crop up on websites or in the middle of incongruous conversations on unrelated topics. He was a little like Darius McCollum, an Asperger fugitive whose claim to notoriety was not quite clear but who seemed to loom large somewhere in what could be called the Autistic Underground. Jerry was a genius; Jerry was a rebel. But did genius Jerry have a cause?

Jerry was a very modern kind of celebrity, a man celebrated more for his abnormality than for his actual gifts. He existed in a medical twilight zone. When I finally called him at his home in Los Angeles, I found myself hopelessly entangled with a piping, excitable voice, which

I imagined attached to a childlike body and a menacing grin. Entangled is the right word, because I felt at once that conversing with Jerry was like struggling with an optimistically tireless anaconda that never lets go. It was the Agony of Laocoön all over again. In the background I could hear a cackling and cooing of what sounded like an inordinate number of cockatoos. “My parrots,” Jerry said. “It’s what I collect.”

Over the next two weeks, we played cat and mouse by phone. Jerry was working for the accounts department of a Los Angeles telephone company but always appeared to be on the move. He was speeding between airports, driving hither and thither, rushing from point A to point B. Sometimes he would phone at five-minute intervals as he took cabs here and there. “Hi, this is Jerry. It’s 5.34 and I’m heading downtown on Interstate 495!” Then, “It’s me again, I’m heading southeast on Interstate 5, it’s 5.43!”

As I’ve already said, I have an affinity for airports, and it made me a little uneasy that Jerry appeared to like them as well. Could the roots of our respective affinities be related? At last, however, a beaming, rather roly-poly man came hurtling out of the gloom in a racetrack T-shirt that bore a picture of galloping horses and the words *Let It Ride!* He looked a bit like Jack Nicholson, with sandy hair and small tuft of hair on his nose. In one hand he carried a huge Willy the Whale soda cup with a molded orca rising from its lid.

His good-natured energy was obvious at once. It bounced around like a rubber ball, hitting everything and anything at will. But I noticed that, all around him, there spread a subtle, barely noticeable ripple of alarm. People gave him a swift second glance and then stepped a little to one side, as if he had winked at them out of turn—or as if that rubber ball had hit them square between the eyes. As soon as he saw me, however, Jerry knew who I was; he took a last sip on the straw protruding from the orca and wiped his hands on his T-shirt, which seemed already considerably used. He came up merrily, all handshakes and laughter.

“When were you born?” he asked at once.

I gave the date. “So,” he thought for a split second, “that would be a Monday. Correct?”

He sat down and put Willy the Whale next to him.

“Correct,” I said.

“Sometimes I get it wrong. But only by one day.”

“Isn’t Mary’s flight in by now?”

"No, no, it's late." His large mass shook with another small tremulation of merriment. "Mary's always late."

This, of course, was a joke; he looked keenly to see if I got it. Then he added, "What if we multiply the year of your birth with the year of your birth?"

It took him three seconds.

"Naturally," I said, "I can't verify if that's the correct answer."

"You don't need to. It's correct."

"What if you multiply that figure by 16?"

Rolling his eyes, he reeled off a preposterously long number.

"That's an easy one. What if you'd asked me to do a fraction?" His eyes took on a brief naive malice. "Ah, that would have been a different story altogether. It would have taken me a whole ten seconds longer."

Jerry can apparently do these enormous multiplications in his head faster than any Princeton professor using a pencil. But he is also happy to explain exactly how he does it, though it takes him far longer to utter the explanation than it does to do the calculation itself. As he was explaining to me how exactly he had multiplied the year of my birth by the year of my birth and then multiplied that figure by sixteen, his eye wandered up to the ceiling fan above us. Its motion clearly attracted him. When I asked him if anything was the matter he stooped down to the soda straw and blinked.

"Nothing's the matter. It's just that I like spinning things. I used to be a cab driver, you know. And when I was a cab driver, I would go to all the truck stops and watch the wheels spinning. I love spinning hubcaps. Anything that spins gets me going. As a matter of fact, I only like bars that have fans. If a bar doesn't have a fan, I pass it by. There's nothing in the bar that's spinning."

Now I confess that I had not come to my interview with Jerry unprepared. There is an Asperger writer in Los Angeles named Jonathan Mitchell who writes short stories that are often on autistic themes. One of them is about Jerry and it's called "Guess Who Isn't Coming to Lunch." Jonathan had been kind enough to send me a copy of it, and I had read it carefully in the hope that it might be able to tell me something about Jerry, whom Jonathan admires and likes. The first paragraph was certainly appealing enough, with Jerry cast as an autistic character named Arthur:

> Prime numbers and presidents. Petra had never dreamed that she would find these subjects sexy until she met and fell in love with Arthur. The way Arthur, her fiancé, obsessed over them was a turn on. He was mildly autistic and a mathematical savant. He was also obsessed with lurid facts about American presidents. She loved the way he could tell you what day of the week you were born on when you gave him your birthday, how he could do lightning-fast mathematical calculations, and how he rattled off the sleazier side of trivia involving every president of the United States from George Washington to Bill Clinton. Arthur also liked to look at license plate numbers and say (often out loud) whether the license plate was prime or composite. It was a nice pleasant mid April day. Arthur had also told her how many hours, how many minutes and how many seconds it had been since he had proposed but she had forgotten. What mattered was that she was in love.
>
> Arthur had been the most exciting man she had ever met. Arthur had until March 28 to propose to her. After all, 28 was his favorite number. It was the perfect number—the sum of its factors equaled 28.

I had wondered to myself if a real Asperger's person would propose to a woman on a given day simply because the sum of that number's factors equaled the number itself. Was this a window into an emotional universe I could even imagine? But I couldn't quite summon up the courage to ask Jerry if he himself had done this with Mary. For one thing, I knew that they had been married and divorced once before and were now engaged for a second time, and given this circumstance it didn't seem polite or fair to ask. When Arthur brings her a dozen long-stemmed roses at the beginning of the story, he and Petra kiss twice. "Two kisses," Arthur says, "for each factor of the roses before you get to a prime number."

> "Did I ever tell you that the license plate number on your car 3NXP613, or 3,613, is a prime number?" asked Arthur.
>
> "Only about a hundred times," said Petra, smiling a bit.

A little later, as they are anxiously discussing how Petra will inform her parents that she's going to marry an Asperger's man, Arthur suddenly nervously exclaims: "I'm one of the handful of autistic men who has managed to find a wife. I'm not the kind of guy one brings home to one's parents." And, thrown into an anxiety fit, he begins jumping up and down while shaking his hands in front of his face and exclaiming

"283 times 396 equals 112,068!"—something, the author adds, he often did when he was nervous.

I was fascinated. Was this what Jerry's conjugal life was like? Pillow talk as number crunching? Again, it didn't seem possible to ask him upfront, but Jonathan surely knew what he was talking about as a fellow Asperger's man. As for Jerry, he was more comfortable talking about himself. His life, he said, had been something of a blank slate between the ages of twenty-two and forty-five. After graduating, he worked in a variety of meaningless jobs, as most Asperger's men do. In his twenties, he went for an interview in the Transamerica Building in Los Angeles. The interview, he related, went something like this:

> Interviewer: So, Jerry, what do you want to do?
> Jerry: Go to Hollywood Park and eat ice cream.
> Interviewer: Next!

"It was worse when I was younger," he said. "I hate being touched by anyone. And I'd curse when I was walking in the street. I worked in a library, but I was fired for talking too loud. Then I went to see *Rain Man*. But I thought that can't be me, because he's in an institution. And I'm not Rain Man. For one thing, I've got Mary." He brightened at once. "Shall we go look for Mary?"

We went to look for Mary.

As we made our way to the arrivals gate, I noticed that Jerry has an oddly rolling gait—a kind of feverish shuffling about him, which certainly catches the eye of the average neurotypical. Normality and its opposite, I realized, are subtly and instantaneously perceived on a very physical level. It must, I thought, be an instinct of some sort. A circle seemed to open up around us, as if we were at the center of a force field of animal electricity that set off primitive feelings of attraction and repulsion.

"When I think of Mary," Jerry was saying, "I calculate backwards."

Jerry and Mary have now moved to Tucson, where they not only keep Jerry's collection of fourteen exotic birds (parakeets, lovebirds, cockatoos) but also spend their time betting at the local racetracks—dogs and horses. Jerry uses his mathematical skills to work the odds.

"We do pretty well, all in all. We could almost make a living at it."

I asked him what else he did with his time, apart from working as a substitute math teacher in the Tucson public school system. He replied that he was writing a self-help book for Asperger's people. "I like doing it, because it's slow." The main thing in his life, I surmised, was meeting Mary at an Asperger's Halloween party.

He was now getting fidgety and anxious, as the passengers from her flight trickled through the glass-walled exit corridor. I wondered if he was going to start jumping up and down, crying, "283 times 396 equals 112,068!" Then there she was: a redhead in a kind of leopard-spot suit. Jerry pitched toward her, but on contact the hug he gave was perfunctory. Mary seemed a little dazed after her flight and shook my hand quietly. I offered to drive them back into Manhattan to their hotel near Times Square.

As we wandered around the airport parking lot, I admitted that I couldn't quite remember where I'd put the car.

"Then you *must* be one of us," Jerry kept saying. "I *knew* it, Larry!"

No one ever calls me Larry. It's an irritating name, a name I hate. But I let it go. Jerry broke into a demonically innocent cackle. He had suddenly become incredibly voluble, releasing a pitter-patter stream of one-sided dialogue, while Mary nodded and nodded with an expression somewhere between forgiveness and fatigue. The drive into Manhattan was a verbal riot.

"Einstein," Jerry crowed, "definitely one of us. Wittgenstein, absolutely. Bill Gates. You didn't know about Bill Gates? Big secret! I wouldn't be surprised if old Bill had it. One look at Microsoft—"

"What about Glenn Gould?" I said.

"Glenn Gould? Never heard of that one. Have you heard of that one, Mary? But the group Herman's Hermits is a possibility. Maybe they all had it."

"Herman's Hermits?"

"Yeah, don't you know Herman's Hermits? Herman's Hermits wrote the ultimate autistic song."

And suddenly Jerry and Mary began singing together, rocking themselves slightly from side to side.

> I'm 'Enery the Eighth I am,
> 'Enery the Eighth I am, I am.

"It's the ultimate autistic song," Jerry cried triumphantly. "Do you know why, Larry?"

"I have no idea."

"Because every stanza is exactly the same as the first. Isn't it so, Mary?"

"I love Herman's Hermits," said Mary intensely.

The term "idiot savant" was coined by the English doctor J. Langdon Down, the same man who gave his name to another and much more debilitating childhood syndrome. In his 1887 Lettisonian Lectures to the Medical Society of London, Down admitted that he had "no liking for the term 'idiot.' It is so frequently a term of reproach." Nevertheless, it had to be used in order to describe the baffling paradox of extreme debility and superiority existing within a single individual.

One of Down's patients had apparently memorized much of Gibbon's monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. On his first reading of it, however, he had made a tiny error, and, thereafter, whenever reciting it, he would always correct the same tiny error. Down called this remarkable facility for memory "verbal adhesion." It was, effectively, memory without consciousness. He also noticed a capacity for "lightning calculation," which is self-explanatory, and a refined obsession with passing time. One boy, who could not read clocks, could nevertheless report the time accurately, as if he had an organic clock ticking constantly inside him. Down also noted that savants were almost always boys.

The most complete survey of savants in English is the American psychiatrist Darold Treffert's *Extraordinary People*, which was first published in 1973. In this remarkable book, Treffert gives us a complete history of the scientific unraveling of the idiot savant, from the work of Down to his own research into savantism. While Down was puzzling over brilliant "idiots" in London, Albert Binet (the inventor of the IQ test) and Jean Martin Charcot had begun investigating savant intelligence at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. It was Binet who first suggested differences between auditory and visual intelligence. And it was Binet who first pointed out that lightning and calendrical calculations might be linked. He also hinted that such calculation abilities might be

performed by the unconscious. In an 1894 treatise, Binet concluded:

> The unconscious which is within us, and which psychology has in recent years often succeeded in illuminating, is perhaps capable of foreseeing the solution to a problem or long arithmetic operations without carrying the details of the calculations.

How savants do their calculations has remained mysterious. In *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin argues that savants can actually visualize long chains of calculations in the same way that experienced Chinese mathematicians can shift the balances of abacuses in their minds without actually moving the beads of a real one with their hands. Grandin claims that she can guess the unfinished part of, say, a jigsaw puzzle by using what she calls her mental "video library." This is a vast store of remembered facts that can be consulted visually, as if each piece of information were a kind of photograph or short film. Chinese mathematicians work in the same way:

> When a mathematician becomes really skilled, he simply visualizes the abacus in his imagination and no longer needs a real one. The beads move on a visualized video abacus in his brain.

At a 1909 meeting of the Society for Psychiatry and Neurology in Vienna, a Dr. A. Witzmann showed a twenty-year-old asylum inmate who could spontaneously calculate the day of the week for any given date occurring between the birth of Christ and 1909. Witzmann pointed out, however, that for reasons unknown, this man's knowledge of the calendar stopped abruptly in the year 2000. Recalling that neurologists had previously noticed persons who could easily reproduce vast quantities of statistics about railway timetables, budgets, and accounts books, Witzmann decided to call such people "brain athletes."

Five years later, in 1914, the British doctor Alfred Tredgold, a Consulting Physician of the direly named National Association for the Feeble-Minded, published the classic paper on idiot savants in a chapter of his book *Mental Deficiencies* (*Amentia*).

In this paper, which is still a standard reference work in the English-speaking world, Tredgold reiterates that savants are almost always male but that their IQs rarely fall into the true idiot category of below 25. Some of his case histories were startling. There was, for exam-

ple, a hypothyroid cretin ironically named Gottfried Mind, who excelled at making spectacular pictures of cats. Mind, who was born in 1768 and died at the age of forty-six, was illiterate and had remarkably huge and rough hands. Yet his pictures of cats became so famous that he became known as the Cat's Raphael and figured a startled King George IV among his appreciative patrons.

Another patient illustrated remarkable powers of savant memory: a fifty-six-year-old man who could remember everything pertaining to his own life, even down to the most minute technical detail, and who, as a result, became a valuable record of everything that had transpired inside his institution! Tredgold also cites several examples of calendrical calculators as well as examples of musical savants and superior calculators, one of whom could instantly calculate how many minutes a person had lived. One rare female calculator could divide the number 576,560 by 16 almost spontaneously but could not do the most basic arithmetic. But perhaps Tredgold's most fascinating case history is a savant artist named James Henry Pullen, otherwise known as the Genius of Earlswood Asylum, after the institution in which he was confined.

Deaf and dumb from birth, Pullen entered Earlswood when he was fifteen and lived there for sixty-six years. "It is Pullen who comes to mind," Treffert writes, "when Dostoyevsky describes the idiot as a private, unrelated person, an outsider."

"Because of his deafness and muteness," Treffert goes on, Pullen "was isolated, eccentric and alone." He could hardly form sentences, crying in a mixture of monosyllables and hand gestures. Until he was seven years old, the only word he uttered was "muvver." But early on, he nevertheless became obsessed with model ships. He quickly became skilled at both carving and making intricate drawings of them. As he grew older, these works, often executed in dark chalk, decorated the gloomy corridors of Earlswood. One of them was a representation of the universe as a ship, with ivory angels hovering around it and a figure of Satan at the stern. At the age of thirty-five, Pullen embarked on his masterpiece, a huge model ship called *The Great Eastern*. It contained almost six thousand rivets and a vast number of planks, along with thirteen lifeboats hoisted on davits and fully decorated state cabins. After seven years of labor, this stupendous artifact won first prize at the 1883 Fisheries Exhibition in England, and Pullen became an instant national celebrity.

But Pullen was a dark character. Often wild and sullen, he was notorious for his unpleasantly unpredictable behavior. According to another nineteenth-century savant researcher, Dr. Edward Sequin, it took Pullen six months to learn the difference between a dog's head and its tail when he was a child. He never learned to read or write, and as he aged he became more morbidly suspicious, morose, and even violent. On one occasion he constructed a guillotine-like contraption over his workshop door, in the hope of injuring a colleague whom he disliked. He also constructed an enormous mannequin inside which he could sit, control its arms and legs, and communicate through a bugle attached to its mouth. And because he was unusually sensitive to vibrations coming through the ground, he devised an alarm system in his workshop based on that sensitivity. It made him aware of any approaching visitor. Tredgold concludes:

> His powers of observation, comparison, attention, memory, will and pertinacity are extraordinary; and yet he is obviously too childish, and at the same time too emotional, unstable, and lacking in mental balance to make any headway, or even to hold his own, in the outside world. Without someone to stage-manage him, his remarkable gifts would never suffice to supply him with the necessities of life. . . .

It seemed to Tredgold that Pullen's isolation had caused all the faculties of his mind to pour into one narrow, focused channel. This focus was what made him brilliant at one thing, namely building model ships. Others, however, pointed out that his defects seemed to run deeper. The contemporary doctor F. Sano observed that Pullen, "with both his eyes wide open to the bright world of London, and his skilled ten fingers under complete sense control, even after having been busy for months in the printer's shop at Earlswood, could not absorb, digest, or exteriorise the most ordinary sentence of politeness. To say, 'I am very much obliged to you' was strange to him in grammatical arrangement as well as in social meaning."

It would seem that Pullen suffered from a social illiteracy or Mindblindness, which brings to mind that of nondeaf autistics. His illness was more profound than an isolation brought about by deafness. Sano went out to perform a postmortem autopsy of Pullen's brain, one

of the most detailed dissections of a savant brain ever accomplished, the results of which were published in the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1918. A slightly overlarge corpus callosum—a bundle of nerves connecting the right and left hemispheres of the brain—and traces of arteriosclerosis seemed to explain at least some of Pullen's abnormalities as well some of his abilities, but nothing was proved conclusively.

Savants, in fact, litter the medical pages of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sequin tells the sad story of a blind American slave named Tom Bethune who was auctioned with his mother in Georgia in 1850 for nothing because he was thought to be useless. But Blind Tom, as he came to be known, became one of the greatest musical savants of all time, able to memorize pieces at the piano by Liszt and Beethoven merely by listening to them a single time. In 1842, at age eleven, he played to President Buchanan in the White House, and he later toured Europe with his master, one Colonel Bethune. Tom's performances were apparently quite bizarre. After announcing that "Blind Tom will play this or that piece for you," Tom would sit at the piano and adopt a curious position, while playing "with an unknown force," as Sequin has it, "which manifestly proceeds from powers higher up than his wrist."

After regaling his audience with wild laughter, face-rubbing, and "some uncouth smiles," Blind Tom would then go into a kind of musical and acrobatic trance that cannot but remind one of the groaning and rocking of Glenn Gould, though in a far more exaggerated form. Sequin goes on:

> As soon as the new tune begins, Tom takes some ludicrous posture, expressive of listening, but soon lowering his body and raising on one leg, so that both are perfectly horizontal, and supported upon the other leg, representing the letter T, he moves upon that improvised axis like the pirouette dancer, but indefinitely. These long gyrations are interrupted by other spells of motionless listening, with or without change of posture, or persevered in and ornamented with spasmodic movements of the hands. . . .

That Blind Tom was a musical genius was taken for granted by his audiences, even if he was largely a kind of glorified circus attraction. (The journalist Edward Podolsky described Blind Tom applauding himself violently at the end of his performances, "kicking, pounding his hands together, turning always to his master for the approving pat on

the head.") Yet in all other areas he seemed to be *ament*—that is, devoid of normal intelligence. "Most aments are fond of music," Tredgold observed, and Treffert adds: "The association of musical ability and mental retardation is frequent throughout the literature on the savant."

A hundred years after Blind Tom, in 1969, another American musical savant simply known as Harriet entered the literature, courtesy of the Boston psychiatrist Dr. David Viscott. Harriet possessed an IQ of about 73 and was admitted into Viscott's hospital depressed, psychotic, and hallucinating. Yet her musical intelligence approached genius level. She could recall thousands of compositions from memory and could play both the violin and piano. Not only that, Viscott writes, but also over the years she had memorized "the name, age, address, family structure, indiscretions, marital problems, and personal musical history" of every member of the entire Boston Symphony Orchestra. She could also give the date and weather for every day it had been given on the radio, had committed whole pages of the Boston phone book to memory, and could remember any event that had ever happened to her, though seemingly without any trace of feeling. One of her feats was to play "Happy Birthday to You" à la Mozart, improvising the relevant harmonies around the bass line of Mozart's first piano concerto to fit the birthday tune. She could also do this in the style of Prokofiev, Schubert, and Debussy, yet was unable to define even the simplest common words. For Harriet, Viscott concluded, "music became a special language and it remained the language of an endless infancy."

As the idea of genius has become increasingly discredited in the wider culture, it simultaneously has become increasingly medicalized. Talking to American graduate students, I often hear the casual remark, "There's no such thing as genius," often swiftly followed by the standard observation that, "Great men don't exist." It seems to be a mantra routinely handed down in liberal arts faculties across the country. And one can see why: it's a sentiment that appeals to American notions of equality. It is equality that is *normal*, not genius.

Even in the 1850s, Blind Tom may well have been more famous and popular in America than the Liszt he so uncannily imitated. A blind American-born slave boy, exciting both sentimental pity and scientific curiosity, may have been more accessible to the American mind than a haughty Hungarian domiciled in luxury in distant Paris. American democracy, indeed, would probably always choose a Blind Tom over a

Franz Liszt, for a Blind Tom doesn't threaten the sacred laws of democracy by being superior to everyone else—he's merely a scientific freak, like Rain Man.

But who was Rain Man? The fictional character of Raymond Babbitt in the film was based on an autistic savant by the name of Kim Peek, whose remarkable feats have been recorded by the film's writer Barry Morrow, who first met him in 1984. The thirty-three-year-old Peek astonished Morrow by reciting from memory the zip codes of every member of the Association for Retarded Citizens, as well as regurgitating endless amounts of baseball trivia. His popular nickname among his family and friends was Kimputer.

In his 1996 book *The Real Rain Man*, Kim's father, Fran, describes Peek as being a very Aspergerish autistic: "a warm, loving personality" who is also an accidental expert in a dizzying variety of largely useless subjects. These included the space program, the Bible, Mormon Church doctrine and history, telephone Area Codes, TV stations and their markets, Shakespeare, Kentucky Derby winners, details of 7600 books, and calendar calculations. "He could also," his father went on, "describe the highways that go to a person's small town, area code, and zip code, television stations available in the town, who the persons pay their telephone bill to, and describe any historical events that may have occurred in their area."

Peek's father is at pains to stress the usual lessons of American philanthropy. "You don't have to be handicapped to be different," he cries. "Everyone is different!" But the fact remains that the autistic savant is not a bright and merry mascot for the cult of Difference. Most bear no resemblance to the adorable Dustin Hoffman. Their difference is rarely approached in real terms, for it's obviously far more pleasant to marvel at their incredible feats from a distance. What lies behind the performing bear facade of a man like Jerry? I cannot help thinking that he must be a little like Edward Pullen.

Nevertheless, the genius has now been transformed into a lovable ament, a Forrest Gump with divine skills. Americans love what could be called divine idiots, a type brilliantly embodied by Harpo Marx. The whiff of divinity is what marks Rain Man out as a genius, because genius must still be magical in some way. Hoffman is said to have

remarked rather mawkishly to Peek, "I may be the star, but you're the heaven!" But mawkish or not, Hoffman probably meant what he said, and we can more or less understand the attraction.

What's off-putting, though, is a little harder to describe, or perhaps just harder to admit to. I, for one, have even found a certain sinister quality to Harpo Marx. Especially as a child, I found him absolutely terrifying. I often had nightmares about him blowing bugles, with his buggy eyes and blond Afro hair. And Jerry has this same quality, which is hard to pin down intellectually. Perhaps it's a kind of knowing unpredictability; perhaps it's the zany gift for logical illogicality. Both Jerry and Harpo are men-children hovering between an uneasy childhood and a scathingly mocked adulthood.

When we got into Manhattan, I left Jerry and Mary in the psychotic glare of the new Times Square. For a moment I felt a twinge of guilt leaving them in such a devouring place, two innocents singing Herman's Hermits songs arm in arm. But after all they were adults, and Mary knew the address of the hotel. They were going to walk around Times Square first and take in the sights—giant faces of anchormen and basketball stars spread over screens hung in the heavens.

Jerry shook my hand vigorously and almost clinically through the car window:

"Good luck getting back to Brooklyn, Larry."

He winked at me as if we two now had a little secret, and as if he were concerned about me, not the other way around.

"See you at the Autistic Conference in San Diego. You know what we're going to do?" He still, I noticed, had the Willy the Whale soda cup firmly in his hand, and his eyes had become momentarily feverish, malicious. The Asperger anarchist suddenly burned bright, fueled by a lifetime's subtle resentments.

"We're going to burn the *Diagnostic Manual* on the beach! See ya!"