

# 1. HEURISTICS

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Twenty years ago, I was working in a hospital for people recovering from brain injuries. I met a woman there who had sustained an anoxic brain injury – not enough air to her brain –after she had fallen down the stairs to her basement. I was curious, in an idle way, thinking *that's not how anoxic brain injuries occur*. Usually they are the result of cardiac arrest or carbon monoxide or suffocation. Falling down the stairs – not a common event in the life of a healthy thirty-year-old anyway – usually results in what is known as a traumatic brain injury. The pathology is quite different from anoxic injury, and so is the course of recovery.

My curiosity changed to intense interest as Carla recovered and began to remember the events that transpired. She remembered an argument with her husband, in the kitchen, near the basement stairs. Her next memory was at the bottom of the stairs and she couldn't breathe. She said, *he was holding a pillow over my head, or something*. As she was able to think more clearly and remember things better, she was sure that her husband had pushed her down the stairs and then tried to suffocate her with a pillow. They stored the pillows from their outdoor furniture in the basement during the winter. The pillows had broken her fall, but she remembered quite vividly the moldy smell of the canvas as she tried to breathe and he held the pillow down on her.

She was a lovely girl, about 35 and she had three children. She was a nurse, and her husband was a physician, a pathologist in fact. They had been married for 13 years. She thought that they had been happy together, but her health got bad. She developed terrible migraine headaches, and they just got worse, even with the drugs her doctors and her husband gave her. It was only intravenous Demerol that would help, and so he kept a supply on hand; when the headaches were really bad, once or twice a week, he would inject her. (Demerol is a strong pain-killer, an opiate.) After a while, in spite of treatment, she was having headaches all the time. She was taking a couple of migraine drugs, an opiate, an antidepressant, and a couple of tranquilizers. Her headaches were so bad she had to stop working as a nurse and she spent long hours, every day, in her bed. She and husband began having terrible arguments. She never had another headache, though, after her accident.

This was another clue. Chronic daily headaches are sometimes the consequence of severe migraine, but they most often occur as a result of misguided treatment. People who take pain meds every day for headache are prone to *rebound headaches* the next day, just as you may have a caffeine withdrawal headache if you suddenly stop drinking coffee. Patients with chronic daily headaches are the victims of a vicious circle of headache > drug > headache > more drug > more headache. They never get better unless they stop taking any medications at all. It's easier said than done, however; some patients never get better.

The more I learned about the relationship between Carla and her husband, the more I learned about how deeply pathological their relationship was. He was ten years older than she was, and they had been dating since she was 21 and was still in nursing school. She had never had headaches when she was young, but they began shortly after the birth of their first child. Her husband, from her description and then from my interviews with him, was a control freak. He had married a young, pretty and sweet girl and he had turned her into his perfect wife.

His idea of a perfect wife, though, was a reflection of his own pathology. He had chronic fatigue syndrome and he took numerous drugs for that, including pain pills, antidepressants and amphetamines. He was something of a hypochondriac, and had consulted with doctors in New York and Boston and at the Mayo Clinic. He had letters from the luminaries of the field attesting to his chronic fatigue and to his need for the various drugs he was on. When Carla had had her first migraine – it was probably just a postpartum headache – he took her to a migraine specialist in Tucson, where they were living at the time. He took her to migraines specialists in New York, Boston and the Mayo Clinic. He had ample documentation of her diagnosis and her need for all the drugs she was taking.

The accident – her fall down the steps -- was investigated by the police. There was no record of any argument. They concluded that her fall was the consequence of all the drugs she was taking. Her brain injury was from the fall. That it was an anoxic – not traumatic -- brain injury didn't register with them at all. She had hit her head, after all. Her memories of the argument with her husband and the attempted suffocation were unreliable, they said, because of all the drugs she was taking and her brain injury.

So after six months in rehab, Carla returned home, over the strong objection of the staff at the hospital and her parents, who believed her story, as I did. Her parents knew this fellow she was married to, and they didn't like him. They didn't think it was a healthy marriage. He was too old for her, they thought – he was 33 and she was 21, and he had an untoward influence on her. She simply didn't have the experience, or the personality, to stand up to a willful and self-centered man. *We thought he was self-centered*, her mother told me once. *Carla was just too young and too nice for him. But she was in love with him. What could we do?* They were uncomfortable with him, not because he was divorced, but because he had hardly anything to say about his ex-wife and his two kids by her. He hardly ever saw them.

There were other clues that made them uneasy, but Carla never noticed. Ivan never went out with Carla and her friends. Their dates were just the two of them, and they usually just hung around his apartment. As they grew more serious, Carla saw less and less of her friends. After they graduated from nursing school, a bunch of them went down to Cancun, but Carla stayed with Ivan. He had to work. After they got married, Ivan took a job in the Southeast. Carla saw her parents at Christmas. Ivan usually had to work, so Carla flew out to Arizona with the kids. For a couple of years before her accident, she missed Christmas. Her headaches were just too bad to travel.

Ivan knew that the people at the rehab hospital were suspicious of him, so for the first six months after Carla came home he was kind and solicitous. But I suppose it wasn't fun for him anymore. Carla had made an extraordinary recovery from her brain injury, and although she talked and moved more slowly than she had done before, she knew enough not to play her husband's nasty games. She was staying with him, she told me, only because he would keep the children if she left, and she was afraid of what he would do to them, especially the little girl, who was ten years old.

The story has an OK ending. After a year, she left him and took the kids. Her parents had moved to our state and they gave her a safe haven. Ivan didn't care if Carla left – he didn't have the control he once had. Her therapists kept close to the situation, and Ivan knew we were on to him. He fought to keep the children, of course, and the weapon he used was Carla's brain damage. She wasn't fit to take care of children. I had to testify a couple of times on her behalf. *Yes, she had had a brain injury, but she's made a terrific recovery, and she is a perfectly fit mother.* The kids stayed with Carla.

She is doing well now. The kids are grown, and she lives by herself, in a small house next to her sister. Her parents are nearby, but they are getting old, so she looks after them. She has never been able to go

back to work, but she lives an independent life. Like many of our patients who have had severe brain injuries, she has made a very nice recovery.

She has never remarried and she doesn't date. *I had a close call*, she told me once. *I don't know how I ever got into that situation, and I don't want to take a chance again.*

This is a book about how, in love and marriage, people make bad decisions. I shall tell you the stories of women who made decisions that seemed perfectly all right at the time, but they didn't turn out that way. My patient, Carla, for example. Did she make a bad decision or did she just have bad luck? Not every story in the book is quite as dire as hers, but there is a common thread to them all.

Here is the thread: there are some women whose marital careers seem to have no other purpose but to serve as a warning to other women. You certainly don't want to be one of those, and if you already are, you understand why I am so emphatic about it. My argument is based on the premise that there are certain types of men whom you don't want to marry. In fact, you should avoid them altogether, if you can. Such men come in a large variety of colors, sizes and shapes but only a limited number of types. None of them is particularly good for you, so you will be well-served if you know who they are.

My second premise is that certain good types of women are drawn to certain bad types of men. A corollary is that women in general have certain weaknesses that make them vulnerable to such men. Chief among these are a surfeit of trust and empathy; a tendency to assume that men and women mean the same things simply because they seem to speak the same language; and the determination to make the best of situations that a less trusting and empathic person would ordinarily consider hopeless.

Armed with the knowledge that will come from studying these two points, and exercising a modicum of good sense, you will be well positioned to know who is going to be an ex-husband long before he ever gets the chance to be your husband. I am sure you will agree that this is the kind of self-help book that a woman needs. Be re-assured, then, that it is written by no less than a *licensed physician*. If reading a self-help book is beneath your dignity, think of it preventive medicine for bad marriage.

How did I happen to write it? It is different from anything else I have written, mostly text-books with small readership and scientific papers in obscure areas of neuropsychiatry. Well, this is how it came about. Several years after I met Carla I met another patient, whose story was remarkably similar to hers. (You will hear her story in due time.) That extraordinary coincidence opened a bin in my mind that began to accumulate other stories, not nearly so dramatic, but similar in this way: a woman chooses to love a man whose purpose in life is nothing less than to make her life miserable. Over the years, the bin began to overflow, so it was time to empty it out and put it here.

This is not a book of sordid stories about how poor young girls are set upon by predatory men. My goal is not to titillate; I wouldn't know how to do that if I wanted to. No, I think we should approach this important topic from the scientific side. What I shall do is wear a naturalist's hat, describing events as they occur in the natural world and trying to make sense of them. There are two natural events I shall try to make sense of. One is this: *How did I ever wind up with that guy?* The other is: *What planet was that guy from?*<sup>1</sup>

*How you wound up with that guy* I shall demonstrate is a function of an evolutionary principle known as **sexual selection**. It is a term fraught with meaning if you think about it, but in its narrow sense it is usually applied to the mating behavior of small mammals and birds. I think that we should widen its application; sexual selection

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<sup>1</sup> My mind-bin labeled "men making wives unhappy" filled up much faster than the bin labeled "women making husbands unhappy." There is a reason why, but I'm not sure I will have time to get into it.

is not irrelevant to the lives of human beings, especially when it takes a wrong turn. We like to think that our courtship rituals and mating dances – love and marriage – are a bit more sophisticated than those of small animals and birds, more considered, less governed by instinct. That may be, but we are no less prone to make bad choices and good choices that turn bad. Arguably more so, since, in contrast to the little animals, our choices play out their consequences over a very long lifetime.

To illustrate how sexual selection might be applicable to the lives of human beings, consider how A got up with B. The circumstances that brought them together may seem to be the culmination of a mountain of improbable events.

*How, A, did you ever get up with that guy?  
It's funny. We met in a pottery class.*

It may seem improbable that of all the women in the world, A happened to be taking that pottery class, that of all the men in the world, B was taking it too. It is even more improbable when you consider that neither A nor B was interested in pottery and they were only taking the class because one of their friends dragged them along. An improbable fate seemed to have brought them together. A and B think nothing of such imponderables; life is random. Sometimes, you get lucky. A chance occurrence may be improbable, but once it happens, there it is.

Scientists refuse to accept the randomness of natural events. What could be more natural than A, a comely young woman, finding B, a healthy young man, and then all that naturally ensues from that sanguine combination. A biologist addressing this event observes, not its randomness but its regularity. He will point out that A also happened to meet C at a swimming party that same week and that B met D at a conference they both were attending in Chicago. But it was A and B who made a connection, not A and C or B and D, they hit it off, had a good deal of fun, settled down and proceeded to generate a number of little a's and b's. A scientist would say that what attracted A to B and not to C, and B not to D but to A, is an example of sexual selection. Or, more specifically, an example of **assortative mating**. This means that certain girls like A are attracted to boys like B and not to boys like C, and vice versa. He would aver that there is a degree of lawfulness in what most of us would consider blind luck. Scientists can prove such is the case by performing statistical analysis. Who are we, then, to argue with the laws of statistics? In my opinion, there is something to the theories of sexual selection and assortative mating. We should learn what that is. You don't want to wind up with the wrong kind of B.

*What planet is he from?* Is the second natural event we shall concern ourselves with. In that vein, most of this book will be concerned with men who are the wrong kind of B. I said that they come in a variety of colors and shapes. They also wear a form of camouflage that makes it difficult to discern their true color, at least when they are young and on the make. But if we keep our naturalist's hat on, we shall be able to see right through their protective coloration.

There is an improbable side to love and marriage. They are events given to endless variety, twists and turns and ups and downs. Love and marriage: we all do it, although these days it is probably more accurate to speak about love and marriage-equivalents. Be that as it may, it simply captures the fact that we all do it in our own highly individual and improbable ways. So, I am compelled to disagree with the sainted Tolstoy:

*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*<sup>2</sup>

In fact, I think he got it the wrong way round. It may be true that the ways we fall in love and the ways we find to stay together for a lifetime conform to certain statistical rules. They may be given to a certain regularity or

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Chapter 1, first line

lawfulness even, but they are most decidedly not all alike. On the other hand, the ways we fall out of love and escape from a lifetime of persecution are all very much the same.

Unhappy lovers are unhappy in only a limited number of different ways. Unhappiness in love and marriage happens in a limited number of strains. There is not much variation in the ways we let people inflict misery upon us or in the ways we inflict misery upon ourselves. There are only a certain number of human characteristics that are so egregious they can undo the love that brought A and B together. They have been well cataloged by a peculiar group of naturalists whom we call psychologists. If they know anything at all, it is that all of us make the same few stupid mistakes. You will be well-served by learning what those are.

On the surface, this is a book about mistakes. But since we all make mistakes, especially in love, it is really a book about human nature. Your ex-husband is in this book but so are a lot of other people you know.

## PREMISE

Your ex-husband is living proof of a mistake you made. He probably never tried to strangle you or inject you with noxious drugs. But there are many who are almost as bad and plenty who are a little bit bad. We shall not be talking about the ex-husbands who were just an innocent error: nice-enough fellows who just weren't right for you, or the timing wasn't right, and you're both better off going your separate ways. There may have been some hurt feelings and an argument about who got the convertible sofa or the Rolling Stones records, but that's history. The wounds weren't very deep. Your divorce was as forgettable as the years you spent together.

I shall exclude all of those "starter marriages." Adolescent stupidity will intrude itself into our deliberations often enough -- *I'll tell you how I wound up with that guy. I was young. I was stupid. I didn't know anything* -- but naiveté is not what we are about here. Stupid decisions made on the basis of inexperience and youthful blind optimism is just that and nothing more. *I got married because all my friends were getting married* is the psychology of a sheep following a Judas goat. Who cares about sheep?

The men in this book are worse than an innocent error. They fall into particular categories and each of which merits a chapter of his own. The character flaws such men have are evident when they are young and courting, although they do their best to hide them. Such men have certain personalities. They may be narcissistic, or sociopathic, or obsessive and controlling, selfish and immature or passive and inadequate. They may be philanderers or alcoholics. Some are brutish. Some are empty shells. Although there are a great number of such men, the number of types is small.

The traits that such men have are ones that many women sense almost instinctively. They drive women away even before a relationship gets off the ground. But here is a troubling fact, and I know it from years of study and observation: even the most untoward traits are attractive to some women. There is a lawful pattern to how some intelligent and perceptive young women fall into particular traps, sometimes over and over. Why do some women marry one alcoholic after another? Or one abusive husband after another? There is something about her that attracts him -- her blindness to his faults perhaps or her vulnerability -- but, more crucially, there is something about him that attracts her. Socrates believed that love was to seek the Good, but there is a lot of love that actively selects the Bad.

I am not about to suggest that you get what you deserve. No one deserves an abusive spouse, or to spend one's life with a degraded alcoholic or a man who gets angry at you because you left the lights on. That would be like saying a mouse deserves to be eaten by a snake. The mouse doesn't deserve to be eaten. He is just the unwitting victim of an event that recurs with statistical regularity in the natural world. There are lots of mice in the world, and plenty of snakes, too, and they tend to run into one another. Disenthrall yourself of sentiment in this regard: what is bad for the mouse is good for the snake. It is the order of the natural world.

Since love and marriage are inextricably part of the natural world, we have to accept that there are predators and prey, parasites and the hosts that they feed on. There are innocent mistakes that occur with statistical regularity but that have disastrous consequences. That is just the way it is. Fortunately, "the way it is" is not entirely random and it is not completely beyond your control. Although a lot of men are snakes, very few women are mice. Most men are neither predators nor parasites. But some are, and they are all in this book.

## NATURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Some words about method. This a naturalist's survey, a series of observations about the fixes women get into and the kinds of women who get into particular fixes. The observations have been made over the course of more than forty years practicing medicine, most of the time as a psychiatrist. Before that, they were made in a very large family that was colorful to a fault. It was the latter experience that influenced my point-of-view more than the other.

The men and the women in my family were prone to all manner of adventures and amours, happy and otherwise. Since we all lived within a mile or two of one another, there weren't many secrets; in fact, they were usually shared around Sunday dinner. I was the youngest grandchild so they didn't bother to send me away even for the meatiest stories. But I was a sensitive and intelligent little boy and I liked to listen. It was my introduction to natural psychology.

Natural psychology is something different from and much more important than the psychology you learn in school. Let me explain. A psychologist is someone who studies mind, brain and behavior.<sup>3</sup> I am psychologist of sorts, specifically, a neuropsychiatrist. I treat patients who have something wrong with their brains, like brain injuries, learning disabilities and dementia. Many of the things you will read here, therefore, are colored by the perspective of a neuropsychiatrist. I am aware that there is a danger to that approach: it is possible to psychologize too much. It's very easy for a psychiatrist to turn every human foible into a psychiatric disorder. Writers have taken note:

*The experts won't be satisfied until every last American is suffering from some kind of disease or syndrome. If you add together all the numbers compiled in the US, by all the institutes, the councils, the foundations, the PhD.'s and authors, you come up with one sorry statistical portrait of a nation. So if you believe the statistics, 77% of America's adult population is a mess. And we haven't even thrown in alien abductees, road ragers or Internet addicts. But give the experts a little time. With another new quantifiable disorder or two, everybody in the country will be officially nuts.<sup>4</sup>*

*In fact, if we were to follow logically, the medical approach, almost everybody would be mentally "ill." The present official classification of psychiatric "diseases" is already so broad that there is a real question whether anybody can claim to not fit into the category. To do so, one would have to be free of everything from anxiety...to acute alcohol intoxication. In short, all you have to do to qualify as "normal"...is to be a bowl of jello.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the book, I shall use the words "psychology" and "psychologist" inclusively: referring to all of the various sciences and professions that have to do with the the mind and the brain.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Windolf, Exec. Ed. of the New York Observer, "A Nation of Nuts" (reprinted in the Wall Street Journal, Oct. 22, 1997)

<sup>5</sup> Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, The Death of Psychiatry, (Chilton Book Company) P. 54. This argument, by the way, is compelling but utterly vacuous. Yes, it is true, that at one time or another in one's life, everybody does have something wrong with his or her brain. Getting drunk or having a migraine are examples of encephalopathy. Grieving the loss of a loved one is virtually indistinguishable from clinical depression. Tics and nervous mannerisms, spells of anxiety, nocturnal myoclonus, word-finding difficulties – such problems are ubiquitous, if not universal. But they are not mental illnesses or neurological diseases. Brain problems are universal. So are muscular disorders like strains, but strains are not neuro-muscular diseases. Joint pains are universal, even in young people, but only a few qualify as arthritides. Respiratory infections are universal but the vast majority are transient and self-limiting. So it is with most brain problems and most psychological problems.

Not everybody is mentally ill but I believe that everyone has a psychology. So, when I describe someone in this book who is certifiably insane, like Carla's husband, it will mainly for purposes of illustration. The reason such characters are illustrative is that some of their traits also occur, albeit in attenuated form, in people who are not mentally ill. When I describe how psychopaths behave, for example, it's not to suggest that every man who does you dirt is a psychopath. It is simply to illustrate that psychopathic traits like exploitative behavior and lack of empathy are latent in many, if not most men. Under certain circumstances they can be activated or amplified.

To maintain that everybody has a few untoward traits, the likes of which occur in exaggerated form in psychiatric patients, is not to suggest that everybody is or ought to be a psychiatric patient. Also, to suggest that everybody has a psychology is not to "psychologize" everybody. When we think about what someone else is thinking, when we talk about what people do and why they do it, we aren't indulging in psychobabble. We are simply being natural psychologists. It's what we are properly built to do.<sup>6</sup>

Natural psychology is something we inherited from the animals. The field mouse, for example, has a perfect understanding of the psychology of the snake. *He likes me*, thinks the mouse, *and he would like to have me for dinner*. The little animal understands not only the preferences of the other animals in the forest, he understands their motivations. This is a rather sophisticated bit of psychology if you think about it.

The songbirds in your back yard have an even more sophisticated psychology. With brains no bigger than a shot, a female wren can tell not only if a male wren is going to be a pretty good mate, but if he is going to be a loyal husband and a good provider to the chicks. Considering the divorce rate in the USA is almost 50%, this bit of predictive wren-psychology is better than half of us can do.

Natural psychology is an instinct with which all of us are endowed. It allows us to make correct decisions about the nature and qualities of our conspecifics, their motivations, and their likely behavior over a long span of time. It helps us to make the correct decisions most of the time. If we didn't, our species would have achieved an evolutionary dead-end a million years ago.

## HEURISTICS ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF NATURAL PSYCHOLOGY

The way wrens and field mice do their trick is not by following the five steps of rational choice theory. They take advantage of short-cuts in their little brains: something long and wriggly in the grass is to be avoided at all cost; a wren who chirps right and brings me juicy worms is a keeper. These cognitive short-cuts are what decision theorists refer to as "heuristics." They allow an animal to make accurate judgments without using much brain power. Human beings have a lot of brain power but we use heuristics anyway, especially to make judgments about other people. Animals with little brains have to rely on heuristics; humans employ them to lower the bioenergetic cost of day-to-day life. Heuristics allow us to minimize the number of considered decisions we have to make. You don't need a PhD in psychology or a seminar in decision theory to appreciate that a fellow you meet is an unfit mate. Your intuition tells you, quickly and with minimal bioenergetic cost, that he is a creep.

"Heuristics" is a technical word for what most of us understand as intuition. People value their intuition, but especially women. It is something that is largely built into a person's DNA, but women also learn a substantial part of it from their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. We value intuition because, in the interest of cognitive efficiency, we are hard-wired to take short-cuts whenever we can. If we can get away with not thinking too hard about something, we will. John Erskine said *You have a moral obligation to be intelligent*. The reason he elevated

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Most are transient and self-limiting. Is there any reason to think the brain should be less vulnerable to minor ailments than the muscles, joints or lung?

<sup>6</sup> Being aware that other people have minds, thoughts and motivations is known as "Theory of Mind." Patients with autism, schizophrenia, pathological narcissism and certain types of frontal lobe injuries are deficient in theory of mind, and are profoundly impaired as a consequence.

critical thinking to the level of a Mosaic commandment, I think, is because we all have a propensity to leave it alone.

Another familiar word for heuristics is bias, which literally means a leaning or an inclination in a particular direction. Political culture has made bias into a synonym for intolerance. In fact, it is a perfectly innocent word. Everyone is biased in one direction or another, especially people who pronounce themselves utterly unbiased. Everyone has an inclination towards things that they like and away from things of which they disapprove. Later on, when I discuss assortative mating we shall learn that mate-choice is not a perfectly random event, but that everyone has certain biases towards a particular kind of mate. For example, people tend to select mates who are physically similar to themselves, or intellectually similar, or who have similar or complementary temperaments.

Heuristics are central to natural psychology. Biases, like intuitions, are built-in. Since we are all practitioners of natural psychology, we use heuristics all the time. Because heuristics have a strong emotional component, they influence our decisions and judgments more than critical thinking does. And heuristics are preferable to rational choice in certain circumstances. When we don't have all the information we would like to have about something, it is appropriate to make a judgment "based on a limited number of simplifying heuristics rather than more formal and extensive algorithmic processing."<sup>7</sup> Intuition and bias are appropriate guides for decisions based on imperfect intelligence.

So, the decisions we make can be processed either by a mental system that utilizes intuition or by a different mental system that utilizes reasoning.<sup>8</sup> The paradox we shall contend with in these pages is that for the most important decision of your life – the single person you choose to share it with – it is necessary to use the first system – intuition – and not the second – rational choice theory. It's not only because, during courtship, men and women display their kind, warm and affectionate attributes and take care to conceal their ugly traits. It's mostly because we can't predict the future. People who are agreeable when they are young can turn sour when they get older. Mating decisions made by mere girls and boys govern the whole rest of their lives. In the face of this existential uncertainty, we rely on our intuitions, the heuristics we acquired growing up, our natural psychology.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE HEURISTIC STYLE

Everyone has a psychology: we all think, feel and behave, and we all have motivations that drive us to do so. We are all natural psychologists, too: it serves us well to understand the motivations and behavior of other people. Patients with certain psychiatric disorders are impaired in their natural psychology. Autistic patients cannot appreciate that other people think and feel. Paranoid patients misinterpret the behavior and motivations of other people. When someone's natural psychology is awry, the consequences are gravely disabling.

Heuristics are an essential part of natural psychology. Cognitive short-cuts – intuitions and biases – make it possible to perform efficiently in society. The alternative would be to spend all of one's mental energy parsing the behavior and motivations of other people, and most of the time they aren't worth the trouble. Critical thinking and considered judgment are expensive operations that are best saved for more important matters. An additional problem with rational choice is that it only functions well if one has perfect intelligence concerning all the variables relevant to a situation. Since this is hardly ever the case, especially in love and marriage, one relies on intuition and bias.

The problem with heuristics is that they can give rise to systematic errors. The errors are systematic in the sense that they are pervasive and tend to recur. The typical examples are a woman who marries one alcoholic

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<sup>7</sup> Heuristics and biases: the psychology of intuitive judgement. Thomas Gilovich, Dale W. Griffin, Daniel Kahneman. Cambridge, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Technically, the habit system or the mnemonic system.

after another, or one abusive husband after another. Heuristics, therefore, can sometimes be counterproductive. They can be the source of our vulnerabilities. Because our biases and intuitions derive from our genetic make-up and our earliest experiences, they don't always operate on a conscious level. It may take many years and a lot of unhappy experience before a person realizes that he or she has been operating on the basis of beliefs and assumptions that are wrong-headed or even dangerous. One of things one tries to accomplish in psychotherapy is to lead a patient to understand and correct them.

For example, the mating of behavior of some young women is driven by this heuristic: *I like men who are exciting*. Not an outlandish idea, by any means. Who wants to spend her life with a crashing bore? The heuristic equation, *exciting man = good mate*, however, is a dubious basis for making a life decision. It indicates a blind spot that may give you a psychopath for a mate. Psychopaths are exciting, after all. They just aren't good mates.

Consider this one: *I want a mate who is always there for me*. Who can argue with that one? You certainly don't want a husband who springs divorce papers on you just when your biopsy indicated breast cancer. But as we shall see, perseverance is a male mating strategy much beloved by certain classes of men, and they aren't necessarily good ones. Parasites, for example, are notably perseverant. Such men are ineffectual and dependent and their idea of mating is to find someone to latch onto. Women are vulnerable to this class of men when they are governed by this heuristic: *I am competent enough for both of us*, or this one: *Things go better when I am in control*. Oddly, successful professional women have a blind spot for this sort of guy: *I am so busy I need someone who will take care of things at home*. He'll be at home, all right, but you're the one who is going to have to take care of things.

Men who are unduly controlling are also good at persevering. They are sure enough there for you. In fact, they are just waiting to take over your life. Women are vulnerable to such types if they are influenced by this heuristic: *I am so scattered I need a man who is organized*. Perseverant men also take advantage of this heuristic: *I'm thirty years old. It's time to get married*.

In my family we had just a few heuristics but they were remarkably flexible. They were also quite tolerant; a large family inevitably contains a number of deviant types, ours probably more than most, and it was the custom to accommodate them all. Our intuitions and biases had mostly been forged in an Italian peasant culture, where the purpose of a family was to protect its members – different from present-day nuclear families, where the goal is to get rid of the children as soon as you can. In our family, it usually meant tolerating all sorts of mischievous, if not deviant behavior.

My family, at least those of us who has been born in Italy, were also fatalistic, another typical Mediterranean bias. One of their most cogent heuristics was: *Men are like that*. For example, there was my uncle Damie. He was a doughboy, but his job in France during the war (the First World War) was to carry mail from Paris to his unit in the trenches. That was a lucky thing, too, because his unit was one of those "lost regiments" that was utterly wiped out. He wasn't with his regiment very much because when he went to Paris to pick up the mail, he liked to take a detour to visit a neighborhood on the outskirts of Paris that was officially *défendu*. When he came back from France, if not a hero at least a survivor, he proceeded to infect my aunt Louise with one or more venereal diseases that were the reason that Parisian neighborhood was *défendu* in the first place. This, I learned at Sunday dinner, after Damie and Louise had had one of their terrible arguments, was why Aunt Louise could never have children and why she made the rest of his life miserable.

The heuristics that governed this arrangement might seem hopelessly archaic to most of my readers. The heuristic *Men are like that* was usually accompanied by this one: *What can you do?* There were other old-fashioned beliefs, like: *A good wife carries the family's burdens. She can complain but there is nothing else she can do*, and *A woman achieves emotional fulfillment in her children and the Church*. Mainly: *What can you do?* To a

modern woman, these biases are exemplary of female disempowerment. But in the context of the time, they were adaptive; appropriate to a society where the family's survival was the only social protection one had and marriage was an institution that belonged to the extended family, not to two individuals.

They aren't heuristics one could sell to a sophisticated young woman of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. For such organisms, the realization that *Men are like that* is ordinarily followed by an action step: *and I'm outa here*. Modern woman is clearly un-disempowered, and that, in my opinion, is a *good thing*. However, she does not always appreciate the heuristics that have been governing her supposedly un-disempowered life. For example, the purveyors of popular wisdom find it profitable to sell a different flavor of heuristics. They flatter young people to trust their instincts even in the absence of experience, guidance or critical reflection. *Try it. Learn from your own mistakes. Love will out*. Today's young woman doesn't define herself in matrilineal terms, following the advice and examples she learned from her aunts and grandmother. She considers herself independent and a critical thinker. She is experienced in the ways of love on the basis of her psychology seminars and a parade of compulsive couplings during college. She is seeking a sensitive, doe-eyed man who will share her dreams and tickle her erogenous zones.

Love, after all, is the ultimate heuristic. It is much more than that, of course, as I shall explain later on, but for now, think of it as a state of mind that mobilizes all of our biases and intuitions and banishes any need whatever for critical reflection. *I love that sensitive, doe-eyed man, and we will share our dreams together*. Her best friend, trying to protect her as an aunt or grandmother would, says, *But he's a jerk*. Perhaps what she means is that he's a unlikely candidate for her affections because he has a dead-end job, an ex-wife who is suing him for child support and two kids who are taking antidepressants and mood-stabilizing drugs. But, what can you do? Our independent free-thinker believes in *Try it! Learn from your own mistakes. Love will out*. (He has already moved in with her.)

In contrast to my grandparents, who grew up in a hostile and dangerous part of the world, our young friend has grown up in a place that is safe and loving. This is her guiding belief: *The world is a safe and loving place*. Thus liberated, taking a risk for love is OK. If she had listened to your grandmother, though, she would have learned a better heuristic: *The world is a beautiful place but it's not so safe and you have to be careful*.

This lesson is repeated in all the fables and fairy-tales we read to children. The Greek myths and the Grimm stories are all about people acquiring an effective natural psychology. The morals they convey are all variants of what your grandmother taught you. *The world is a marvelous, exciting place but there are bad people in it and good children can get in trouble if they're not careful*. They do it in fabulous ways, which is why children drink them in. The moral of Hansel & Gretel is, *You can't trust an old lady just because she lives in a gingerbread house*, and the Grimm's make the point in unforgettable terms:

*The old woman had only pretended to be so kind; she was in reality a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had only built the little house of bread in order to entice them there. When a child fell into her power, she killed it, cooked and ate it, and that was a feast day with her.*

The legends and the fairy-tales are full of such helpful lessons. Most of them are eminently applicable to the dating scene. For example, *You can't trust someone who looks like a wolf just because he dresses up like your grandmother*. How about Narcissus: *Don't spend so much time worrying about how you look*. There are countless stories, from Rumpelstilzken to The Little Mermaid that teach us: *Don't make deals with people you don't know*. And there are even more that teach us to *Be careful what you wish for*.

*Eos carried off Tithonus; she went to Zeus to ask that Tithonus be immortal and live forever. Zeus nodded his assent and accomplished her wish. Poor goddess, she did not think to ask that her beloved avoid ruinous old age and retain perpetual youth. Indeed as long as he kept his desirable youthful bloom,*

*Tithonus took his pleasure with early-born Eos of the golden throne by the stream of Oceanus at the ends of the earth. But when the first gray hairs sprouted from his beautiful head and noble chin, Eos avoided his bed. But she kept him in her house and tended him, giving him food, ambrosia, and lovely garments. When hateful old age oppressed him completely and he could not move or raise his limbs, the following plan seemed best to her. She laid him in a room and closed the shining doors. From within his voice flows faintly...*<sup>9</sup>

Just because fables are about magic and fantasy doesn't mean the morals are fantastic. *Do it for love!* is a much more fantastic moral.

It is remarkable that when one reads a Grimm story to a child, she will never ask why you chose a story about such perverse and repulsive villains. Children like to hear about trolls, witches, giants and evil dwarves. One reason why children love the stories of Roald Dahl is that they are peopled with nefarious, selfish and cruel characters. The children in his stories are able to escape the influence of those characters, usually by exercising magical powers. Kids love the stories because this makes sense to them: *There can be justice in the end but it is a special gift and not to be taken for granted.* Now that is a sound heuristic.

### CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING

There are good heuristics, then, and bad ones. Intuition and bias are necessary but not sufficient to guide all of our decisions. Heuristics are an important part of natural psychology, but a good natural psychologist doesn't rely on cognitive short-cuts. She will also use critical thinking, and that has to be learned. Good judgment is learned from experience but it is more efficient to learn it from the experiences of other people. That, or course, is one of the advantages of having a large family. Otherwise, it is the arduous process of training your mind, proper study and reading the right kind of books. Books like this one, for instance. If the stories I have to tell hit home, they may improve your natural psychology. But if you can put up with the science I am about to inflict on you, it will elevate your critical thinking. I aim to endow your colloquial with erudition. For example:

*What happened to so-and-so, your friend asks. Oh, he was a jerk.* (Alternatively, he was a control freak, a loser, a dope-head, a little boy, a mess, a project, a wreck, an asshole, a douche.) The bioenergetic saving that accrues from understanding what those heuristics mean is considerable. There is no need to ask a following question, *Why was he a jerk?* A jerk is someone who is just not worth another thought.

Now let's elevate the colloquial. You definitely don't want to marry a jerk or a control freak or a predator or a parasite, but many women find themselves married and then un-married to just such types. After all, the man you discard because he is a jerk has a 90% probability of marrying someone.<sup>10</sup> By the law of complementarity, it is fair to assume that the man you marry is 90% likely to have been deemed a jerk at some point by some other woman. Carrying the idea a bit further, 90% of husbands are jerks. That may be true, but speaking on behalf of my fellow-husbands, I think the percentage is no higher than 80%.

So, what is a jerk?<sup>11</sup> To most young women, he is a man who behaves in a deceptive and exploitative manner. He comes on as if he really likes you and then you discover he has a girlfriend. Most such men are immature boys who behave in a self-centered and impetuous way. Or, like my uncle Damie, someone who is happier spending time in a Parisian whorehouse than perishing in the trenches. Ironically, the most deceptive and exploitative men are psychopaths, a particularly dangerous breed. The reason they are dangerous is because you won't appreciate what jerks they really are until they have done considerable damage.

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<sup>9</sup> Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite (5. 218-38)

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<sup>11</sup> *Jerk* is an old vaudeville word

A man is most likely to behave like a jerk during the rough-and-tumble of the singles scene; deception, as we shall see, is a central element of courtship in human beings just as it is in the little animals. Ferrando and Guglielmo, the two lovers in *Così fan tutte*, certainly behaved like jerks to their fiancées. But everything turned out OK in the end. Contrast their innocent farrago with the demonic Don Giovanni, a jerk to be sure, but a psychopathic kind of jerk.<sup>12</sup> Most of us can appreciate the moral distance between Ferrando and Guglielmo on the one hand and Don Giovanni on the other, but it will take a bit of science before you can articulate the difference between good and bad jerks.

A “control-freak” is usually a person with an obsessive-compulsive personality. There are a lot of good reasons why women wind up married with such men. They are reliable. They work hard, they tend to be smart and they have good hygiene. They are really into coffee. A young woman, resisting the controlling ways of a controlling man, tries break it off. But she underestimates his staying power. She finds herself in the hospital with a particularly nasty flu, and he comes by every day. He’s looking after her cat and he’s even neatened her apartment and picked up her clothes from the cleaner’s. When she’s discharged, he’s there to take her home. There’s something endearing about being looked after so assiduously, isn’t there? What she should remember is this: *They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.*<sup>13</sup>

Obsessive-compulsive traits are remarkably prevalent in the population at large. They contribute to desirable characteristics, like conscientiousness. Perfectionism, an O-C trait, is a pain to live with, but it is usually tolerable. A controlling disposition is a particularly noxious attribute of the O-C personality and makes for an unhappy, oppressive marriage. Carla’s husband was a control-freak and he was certainly obsessive but technically he was a pathological narcissist.

I warned you that the neuropsychiatric perspective will color my explanations. The difference between natural psychology and scientific psychology are fine distinctions like these: the difference between a jerk and a psychopath. Heuristics are inarticulate or, at best, colloquial, but psychologists are good not only at creating fine distinctions but also the vocabularies to express them.

Ethologists, for example, are men and women who study the psychology of animals.<sup>14</sup> They have their own vocabulary and we shall use it to illuminate our understanding. Some bad men are predators and some behave as if they were parasites. An ethologist would say that my uncle was a man who had good fitness with respect to mating but low propensity for parental investment. Suppose you want to convince your best friend that the guy she thinks she is in love with is really a jerk. You can put it to her in those words if you must – *Can’t you see what a jerk he is* -- but probably to little effect. How much more effective your advice would be, how much more likely to be followed, if you told her simply that *His agility at extravagant courtship display is only exceeded by his deceptive reproductive strategy.*

Science, you see, should be in the service of mankind, and the vocabulary of science is just too useful to be left to scientists. Consider, therefore, the “asshole.” “Asshole” is a vulgar word that used to refer to people whose negative attributes were so transcendent they were hardly worth enumerating. In my part of the country, however, the current term for such a fellow is “douche.” “Asshole” is increasingly applied to individuals who make aggressive display of their singular lack of social competence. They have no idea how their attitudes and behavior affect other people but they care less. Someone who had learned the lingo of modern psychiatry might say that

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<sup>12</sup> The three operas of Mozart, *Così*, *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* are essential reading, or listening, rather, to anyone who wants to be a serious student of love and marriage. There are no better examples of how an introduction to critical thinking can be intensely pleasurable and rewarding. The several characters in those stories will pop up now and again in these pages. A download from iTunes will cost a tenth as much as a ticket to the Metropolitan Opera in New York, but if you buy the CDs, you will get a libretto

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Franklin, 1775.

<sup>14</sup> Ethology (from Greek: ἦθος, ethos, "character"; and -λογία, -logia, "the study of") is the scientific study of animal behavior.

such people have a form of Asperger's syndrome, thus elevating her discourse from the vulgar to the recondite. But at least she would be on the right track, as we shall see.

A "mess," "loser" or "wreck" is a man who is hopelessly inadequate and likely to remain so. Such men are parasitic types who are looking for a free ride. There must be a lot of them out there: if you Google, *My husband is a loser* you will get no fewer than 6,850,000 hits; *My boyfriend is a loser* gets 4,390,000. Maybe there are only a few losers out there who generate a lot of commentary; I doubt it, but who knows? I am sure, though, that around those 11,240,000 losers there is ample confusion, and we shall deal with that in a chapter called Indolent Men. This vernacular taxon, mess-loser-wreck, is represented by a number of different psychiatric categories, and a few the psychiatrists haven't even thought up yet. In the relevant chapter, I shall introduce you to the process physicians use to evaluate the basis for a symptom – say, "loserness." It is the process of differential diagnosis: considering all the disorders that are (a) probably or (b) possibly the cause of the patient's symptoms and signs.<sup>15</sup>

It is easier to describe the taxa of women who are drawn to ineffectual men. Shiftless men appeal to women who like to be in control, to women with indiscriminate parental instincts or to women whose self-confidence is so low they don't believe they deserve any better. A "project" is an ineffectual man married to a woman who thinks she can turn the frog into a prince. There are some women who are natural-born therapists. One hopes they are more successful with their patients than they are with their husbands.

Psychology can explain why some women are attracted to shiftless men, but where do shiftless men come from? I shall try to answer that question, too, later on, but here is the problem: it is the fashion these days to relate the psychology of 21<sup>st</sup> century men and women to the evolutionary careers of bipedal hominids living in small bands in the African savannah. It is said that "nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution"<sup>16</sup>), and that maxim has been taken to heart by modern psychologists. It has virtually taken over from the Freudian view – "nothing in psychology makes sense except in the light of early childhood experience" – from behaviorism – "nothing makes sense except in light of stimulus and response" – and from Marxism "...except in light of the class struggle." Psychologists, like all scientists, like to couch their theories in the context of an overriding world-view, and Darwinism is their current favorite in that regard. However, the science of evolutionary biology has difficulty explaining why lazy, parasitic individuals are still with us. How could a small hunter-gatherer band, living on the edge of survival, support members who couldn't or wouldn't contribute to the welfare of the group? How can genes for laziness and inadequacy survive the Darwinian struggle?

Women who are connected to a loser are probably more interested in how to get rid of him than his evolutionary underpinnings. They may be surprised to learn that the reason it is hard to get rid of such a fellow is the same reason why losers exist in the first place.

## LOVE SCIENCE

When I started out, I thought this book should be a self-help book about love and marriage. I would talk to my readers as I talk to my patients and explain to them how I think relationships go bad, how people sometimes go bad and how to get out a horrible fix. I was going to write, for example, about "the curse of the ex-husband," a child who has the same difficult temperament and abusive behaviors that his father had. I was going to explain why the mate you chose because he was different from your controlling, angry father turned into just the kind of man you were trying to get away from. The man who seemed to be the one you were always looking for became, over the years, the man you always wanted to avoid.

<sup>15</sup> There is more than one reason why you ought to learn what a differential diagnosis is.

<sup>16</sup> Theodosius Dobzhansky, 1978

Don't worry, I haven't thrown those cases out. The problem though was how to fill the in-between. More sordid cases? Possibly, but remember, unhappy lovers are unhappy in only a limited number of ways. No, I realized that a proper address to the problems of love marriage involves more than just recounting the mean things B did to A. Such an approach might appeal to people who are real mad at B, I suppose, but it wouldn't give them the understanding they need to avoid future B's. It might be entertaining, even titillating, to catalog all the mean things that B has done but it isn't very deep. It goes no deeper than a child's story, where the villains are trolls and witches. I don't aim just to gratify your prejudices: *Oh, you think you had it bad? Let me tell you what happened to A...* That is intellectual comfort-food. I want to feed you beets.

I promised to tell you all the things I talk to my patients about but I shall give you a bit more, too. There is more than intuition in the things I tell my patients, but I don't always have time to tell them about the science behind it. The ideas behind that science have an interesting history, too, and I hardly ever get to talk about it. So I decided that maybe science could fill in the long pauses between cases. So, if one of my patients were to read this, she would find a lot that she has heard before but a good deal that is new.

Science starts with beets but if it's good science it turns into borsht and nothing is more delicious than a nice cold bowl of borsht. Of course you have to cultivate a taste for it, science and borsht. First, you have to disabuse yourself of the idea that science is remote and inaccessible. It is, actually, but we shall pretend that it's not, just for now. We shall deal with science in the same way we think of natural psychology. It's in our nature to wonder how things work, how they happen to come together and how they fall apart. Substitute "relationships" for "things" and you have the topic of the book. What makes science different from casual reflection, though, is the same thing that makes scientific psychology different from natural psychology. The vocabulary is bigger and more concise. Small distinctions and inconsistencies are meaningful. Intuitions are unraveled and subjected to critical thinking.

We shall be talking about things that ordinarily make people feel angry, sad, fearful, surprised or disgusted. But we are going to deal with it all as if we were cold-blooded rationalists. We shall pretend that the behavior of the human beings in love and marriage is simply an experiment that the gods have decided to perform on their favorite new kind of ape-men. This, of course, is precisely what it is going on.

Science is a good filler because there is just so much of it. You have already been touched by decision theory, neuropsychiatry and ethology. We shall be talking a lot about our animal friends. After all, they too have problems with love and marriage. Or attachment and parental investment, rather, which is how ethologists refer to love and marriage. I shall give you salacious details about the genetics of the righteous prairie vole and his ne'er-do-well cousin the meadow vole; the wild abandon of the sage grouse; and what bonobos really think about sex.

I shall expand your vocabulary. Your conversations will be enriched by phrases like animal magnetism, atavistic throwback, exaggerated positivity

All of which can be conveniently abbreviated for texting.

Neuroscience will raise its head from time to time. No discussion of love and marriage is sufficient, these days, without a PET scan of a brain in love. Then there are the people who have too much dopamine and not nearly enough serotonin. If you don't want to get burned, you will stay away from them. I will even tell you everything you need to know about love-potions and how to genetically-engineer the perfect mate.

Finally, a book about marriage, even if it's just ex-marriage, should make at least a passing mention of the problem of love. Love is very much in the realm of natural psychology. That is why it is successfully dealt with by poets and novelists, mystics and religious teachers, but not so well by scientists and philosophers. Love, as we

know, is an irrational event; it is not readily given to scientific analysis. But I shall give one to it. But which science should we choose? Chemistry, as in *The two of them, they have chemistry*? Pharmacology, as in *Why don't we get drunk and screw*? Evolutionary biology, as in:

*Birds do it, bees do it  
Even educated fleas do it  
Let's do it, let's fall in love.*<sup>17</sup>

All of the above, if you can't wait to find out, but ultimately this one: Physics! That's right, physics, the queen of the sciences, and in particular the gravitational attraction of the heavenly bodies (Newton) the space-time continuum (Einstein) and the music of the spheres (Pythagoras).

Read on, and your cognitive short-cuts will be expanded beyond recognition. Your instincts will be edified by erudition. So when your friend asks, what became of so-and-so, you can say, with considered good judgment: *Let's talk about it. He was a real jerk...*

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<sup>17</sup> Cole Porter, 1928.