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*Here is a good story about Gene Barry, who could never make a decision and who, naturally enough, got into the business of making predictions and choices for others.*

## My Random Friend

by LARRY EISENBERG

Most people thought of him as normal, but I always felt there was something strange about Gene Berry's behavior. As kids we had lived on the same working-class block in the Bronx, played stickball together, even filched ice from the dripping horse-drawn wagon of irate Pasquale Bonzini. What was strange? That's not easy to answer because, to all appearances, Gene did what every other kid did.

Some boys are born leaders. They make decisions or they force others into making decisions. And then there are the boys that follow. Gene Berry was not just a follower — he was a wishy-washy, spineless bastard — and yet he was so god-damned bright. He knew more than any of us. There was a treasure trove of disparate facts in his head. And his reasoning powers were equally extraordinary. But if you asked him what ought to be done, his head would droop and

he'd sit there without opening his mouth until you decided what the next step should be.

He had no real parents as far as I could tell. He was a foster child living with a fireman and his bone-weary wife who had delivered five children of her own. I'd always thought they were his real family until one day, when we were lying exhausted in the humid heat of July in a shady back yard, Gene

confided the truth to me. He also told me that he had lived in four other foster homes, but that finally he felt he had settled permanently.

This revelation didn't sound very exciting to me. I'd always thought, secretly, that I was really a foster child myself.

I didn't really like Gene, then. We hung around together, but for me it was more of a relationship of convenience. I could always get him to do whatever I wanted him to do. When it came to choose a college,

Gene asked me where I intended to go.

"City College," I said.

He ran his fingers through his sandy hair and pursed his lips reflectively.

"Would you mind if I went there too?" he asked.

We went through the four years together, both majoring in mathematics. Once again Gene was simply following my choice. But now the situation took on unpleasant overtones for me. Although I was a first-rate mathematician, I just wasn't in Gene's league. His originality and creativity in getting to underlying concepts and then resynthesizing them was uncanny.

It was particularly evident when we came to study random process. The concepts of probability and statistics seemed to fire up this wishy-washy kid, and he began to devour everything in our texts, ransacking the libraries for deeper and deeper material. Within a few months, it became clear that Gene had arrived at insights that made him at least the equal of our professor, himself one of the leading authorities in the field.

Gene learned to program the department's computer very rapidly, and the algorithms he composed won him the coveted mathematics award for that year. I was envious

of his skills and of the lovely gift he received, a gold watch and chain with a tiny gold birdcage containing a pair of ivory dice.

Something happened to Gene thereafter that I never could understand. Normally we spent our weekends together touring the same dreary dances. I'd tell him romantic fantasies about my alleged sexual conquests, and he'd listen to my words with painful intensity. Once I came upon Gene telling another classmate, word for word, the lies I had told him. But one Saturday evening we bought tickets to a dance sponsored by the Sociology Club, and I spotted two girls sitting on cane-bottomed chairs near the far wall. One of the girls was quite pretty and the other was neat but drab. I had my heart set on the pretty one, and I anticipated that Gene would simply knuckle under to whatever I said.

"I'm taking the pretty one on the left," I whispered.

But a moment later, when we reached the girls, Gene asked the pretty one to dance and was soon waltzing with her on the glossy floor. I was stunned at first, then furious, but I tried to hide my feelings. I paid vigorous attention to the drab girl and treated her as if she were a beauty queen. But Gene seemed totally unaware of my actions. We went home separately that night, and it wasn't until the

following afternoon that we had our first and only argument. I really laced into him, denouncing him for stealing my girl.

"She wasn't *your* girl," he said softly. "It's true that you chose her and automatically assumed that I'd go for the other one."

"You never bucked me before," I said heatedly.

He smiled wistfully.

"I know," he said. "It was mighty convenient for you, wasn't it? You always made the decisions and I went along with them. At least up till now I did. But didn't you ever realize how it must have rankled inside me?"

I *had* wondered about that sometimes, but only briefly. Still, I didn't like allusions to my selfishness. So I lashed back at him.

"The only reason I ever went around with you was because you were easy to get along with," I said.

"Do you mean that our friendship was based on always getting your own way?"

"Don't twist my words," I said. "I just don't like a god-damned double-crosser."

From that time on, Gene and I spent very little time together. We spoke to one another, exchanged hellos and good-bys, but little else. And after we left college, I lost all contact with him. And then one day I saw him standing outside of a

Third Avenue bar in Manhattan. He seemed to be unable to make up his mind as to whether or not he was going inside. For a moment, it seemed like old times. But then he went inside.

I was going to pass on by without stopping but something nagged at me and I went in after him. He was sipping a rum and coke, and after suppressing a shudder at his taste in booze, I walked up to him, hand outstretched. He was shocked but he seemed genuinely pleased to see me. After I'd ordered a martini, I gave him a little postgraduation autobiography.

"I'm still in mathematics," I said. "I've done some computer programming, some teaching at a community college, and a couple of years ago I passed the last of the actuarial tests."

Gene smiled.

"Somehow I never visualized you working for an insurance firm."

I lowered my eyes. I had never visualized that role for myself, either.

"Are you married?" asked Gene.

"I was."

I called to the bartender for a refill of my glass. Gene seemed a little embarrassed at my response.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I. Now that you've

heard the dismal tales about my lack of success, tell me about yourself."

Gene shrugged.

"I'm married and I have two small kids. And I run my own business."

I couldn't picture Gene running anything, but I was polite.

"Really? I would have sworn you'd be somewhere in mathematics, too."

"I am," said Gene. "I'm very heavily in mathematics. I run a consulting firm and my income is considerable."

"I'm glad one of us made it," I said.

I'm afraid an undercurrent of jealousy came through.

"Naturally I make strong use of my mathematical training," said Gene. "I'm in the prediction business."

I laughed out loud and Gene smiled ruefully.

"It's not what you think," he said. "I don't have a conical hat with stars and crescents on it. Nor do I have a crystal ball. I analyze all the data relating to a problem and determine the parameters of any associated random processes. And then I pick out the optimum choice."

"So you're a random man. Is the stock market one of your areas of prediction?"

Gene nodded.

"I do have several clients in that field," he said. "And I've made them quite a bit of money."

"How about yourself?"

"I never gamble," said Gene. "At least, not in that way."

I wondered in *what* way he did gamble, this fellow who had never dared to make a decision on his own. And then he surprised me.

"If you're free tonight, I'd like you to come home with me and meet my family. Martha is a great cook. She's the pretty girl I danced with that night."

I was nettled by the allusion, and I didn't want to have his domestic successes rubbed into my hide, too, but I was awfully curious.

"I'd be delighted to come," I said.

Martha was still pretty although a little of the bloom had vanished with the years. And she had a warm outgoing personality that was just the opposite of Gene's. She seemed very pleased to have me join them for dinner.

The kids were four and six, both girls, and neither one resembled Gene very much except in rather remote features such as the shape of the earlobe. I'm not much good in making small talk with kids, and mercifully they were routed to their room right after dinner. They made a minimum of

fuss. I commented on this fact and Martha smiled.

"Gene is a stern disciplinarian," she said.

While I was recovering from that one, Martha placed a creme de menthe before me. As I sipped it reverently, she asked me how long it was since I had last seen Gene.

"A little over ten years."

"That's an awfully long time," said Martha. "Gene always tells me that you were the best friend he ever had."

That remark embarrassed me, particularly when I recalled the reason for our one and only argument.

"I was always fond of Gene," I said. "But you know how the force of outside events sometimes keeps us apart. I'm really delighted to see how well he's done in his business and marriage."

"Gene is a good man," said Martha. "He has his problems, but I feel lucky to have him."

At that point Gene came back into the room and we switched the subject to cooking. I commented enthusiastically on the magnificent flavor of the roast.

"Like anything else," said Gene, "cooking cannot be left to chance. It can be analyzed and broken down into a logical structure."

"Come on," I said. "You must be kidding. All the great chefs I

know are very well trained. But at the same time there's always some latitude in their measure of ingredients. I'm sure that Martha here doesn't follow an automatic schedule."

Martha smiled.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Gene has planned every bit of the menu for me."

"Planned your menu?"

"In a way. You see Gene wrote the computer program that chose this evening's meal for us. We have a terminal located in the kitchen."

"Really?"

This was something I had been totally unprepared for.

"Come now," said Gene. "There's nothing surprising about it. I do the same for my clients at work; so why shouldn't I help my wife at home? It was kind of an anniversary present to her. I spent a couple of years culling a thousand choice recipes and writing machine-language programs that could take into account the time of year, availability and quality of ingredients, prices. In fact I programmed in every factor I could think of."

"Including the preference of the guest," added Martha. "Still, there is *some* room for my efforts. I have to enter the prices and quality evaluation of the food."

"But in the last analysis, doesn't that take the freedom of choice out of cooking?" I asked.

Gene seemed agitated.

"Nonsense," he said. "Freedom of choice is an illusion. Anybody can botch up an indiscriminate mixture of randomly chosen elements and turn out some monstrous hodgepodge. In that sense, freedom of choice would mean the right to do a lousy job."

"That's awfully mechanistic, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," said Gene. "But there's usually an optimum way of doing any task, given all of the facts. Why not have the freedom to use that optimum way, even if it means getting a helping hand from a computer. That's the reason my business has been such a success, and that's the way we've always run our home."

I turned to Martha.

"And you agree with what Gene is saying?"

She hesitated for the barest moment.

"For the most part," she said.

A week later, Gene offered me a job with his consulting firm. He needed another mathematician to help him, he said. And he had to have somebody he could trust. Besides, he offered me fifty percent more than I was making at my current job. Even so, I wondered if I ought to take his offer.

When we were kids, I had always been the dominant member

of the pair. How would it work out with Gene calling the tune? I pictured his face. He was still the same gentle, basically decent chap he'd always been. I decided to risk it.

Before starting my first assignment, I had to read a monograph that Gene had written. He had worked out a detailed analysis of how to approach a job, any job. There were examples liberally sprinkled throughout the text, and when I had read it through, Gene quizzed me very carefully on the highly sophisticated mathematical ideas. To his great delight, I passed with flying colors.

He then set me to work on my first real job. After reading through the prospectus, I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I had to evaluate and implement a daring idea that Gene had evolved, a computer-directed device which could extract and reproduce all the information in a painting, whether oil, watercolor, or pastel.

The heart of the device was to be an unusual optical densitometer head, highly sensitive to wide ranges of light and color. As this densitometer head slowly scanned the painting, analog information relating to light intensity, color spectrum, pigment texture and brush strokes was relayed to a master computer. The computer then rapidly assigned an encoded

binary number to each "cell" of the painting and stored this number on a magnetic disk.

This information-gathering process was only the first of two highly critical steps. The second and undoubtedly the most difficult step was that of reproducing the painting on a surface identical to that of the original. In the case of an oil painting, the paints had to be deposited at each coordinate of the canvas under computer control based on the original data stored on the disk. Even dirt marks, age discolorations and varnish effects were to be reproduced.

I had never worked so god-damned hard in all my life, but when I finally pulled all of my ideas together, I wrote out and debugged the very complex program required. I spent months with the man who had devised the painting machine, insisting that he eliminate the minor defects in his automatic brush. When I was satisfied that his machine could follow any instructions given to it, I went in to talk to Gene. He listened sympathetically as I listed all of my achievements and revealed all of my anxieties.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "My basic principle is to rely heavily on the validity of our mathematical analysis. In the long run every process, no matter how random its properties, has to fall

into line. But the most crucial thing of all is our hard data. *That must be accurate.* I believe you've done the kind of job I expected you to do. Now prove to me that you've done it."

I walked out of his office, puzzled. How the hell could I prove the correctness of my analysis and program without reproducing a painting? And then the realization hit me. Obviously that was what he expected me to do.

I owned one original oil painting, a fine one by an American artist of the late nineteenth century. It depicted a small aging merchant, cheeks puffy and mottled, standing in the shadows before his small general store. The interplay of light and shadow was very complex, and the canvas had warped slightly with age. It was a difficult challenge but a fair one.

I carefully lifted my painting from the wall and brought it in to my office. After carefully aligning the canvas and making certain that the scanning head would not brush against the canvas at any point, I began the information-retrieval process. I ran it through several times, and, to my delight, a point-by-point comparison of the data in each run showed only insignificant differences.

Reproducing this data proved to be filled with many hazards.



First, the paint-ejector mechanism misfired and deposited a large glob of paint at a crucial spot. Then the computer erred and sent out instructions for one line that was intended for the following line. But finally we achieved our reproduction. I looked at it, appalled. The general aspect of the painting was correct in form and tone dynamics, but everything was too light by at least one order of magnitude.

I reexamined the scanning head and discovered that it had been improperly set. I fell into a chair, dismayed and exhausted, but, after a while, I pulled myself together, and we ran through the entire process all over again.

On the tenth try, we achieved a reproduction that I found uncannily good. It was almost too good to be true. I rang up an art expert of my acquaintance and asked him to be at Gene's office the following morning. I had said nothing to Gene, as yet. But, at that time, I unveiled both paintings and asked the expert to judge between them. Gene's eyes opened wide but he didn't say a word. After some forty minutes, the expert indicated which of the two paintings he considered to be the original. To my chagrin, he guessed correctly. But he hastened to add that the reproduction was amazingly like the original and that if he hadn't been able to compare the two

paintings, he could not have said with any assurance that the reproduction was not the original.

And then something strange happened. The room had grown silent and the art expert cleared his throat a couple of times before venturing to speak.

"As you gentlemen probably know," he said, "the world is full of scoundrels, particularly the art world. There are men around, very rich men, who covet the great works of the masters. The prices of the really good works continue to soar upward in an ever-widening spiral, and the pity is that the well is running dry. There just aren't that many good works around."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Gene, and his voice was as soft and subdued as ever.

The art expert laughed.

"I'm not suggesting anything," he said. "I just wondered if it has occurred to you that with a few minor changes in your technique, and with the assistance of an expert ...."

"Like yourself?" asked Gene.

"Perhaps. At any rate, there isn't a master work that couldn't be duplicated to the point that it would be virtually impossible to determine its spurious nature."

I looked at Gene. He was playing with the little gold birdcage that hung from his watch chain.

"Whenever we enter into a

project," said Gene, "I like to think through every aspect of it. I prefer, if possible, to anticipate all the twists and turns that may develop. And, curiously enough, the idea you raise was one of the first things I did anticipate. I thought to myself that one day some low, degenerate crook would come to me and say, 'the world is full of scoundrels.'"

The art expert took hold of his hat.

"You don't have to say any more. I'll bill you for my services."

After he had gone, I looked at Gene with mixed feelings. He had, I thought, shown great courage and honesty in dealing with this issue. He had also shown great foresight in anticipating it. I wondered if I, in the same situation, would have been as honest. I felt his hand on my shoulder. I looked at him and he was almost in tears.

"You see," he said vehemently. "When hard work is combined with creative mathematics, it *has* to work out. I knew I was doing the right thing when I took you aboard.

"And for personal reasons too," he said, "I'm glad to have you with me."

The following years were highly successful for me. The firm made a considerable sum out of the painting-reproduction process and other ideas that both Gene and I

evolved. I even found myself a second wife. Gene had written a selection program which, he assured me, would pick out the perfect wife for me. But I married my secretary, a bright, warm young woman with brown luminous eyes. The marriage seemed to work out beautifully, and I suspect Gene was both happy for me and a little chagrined that I had chosen my bride so unscientifically.

For the first time in many years, I began to feel a sense of realization and contentment. Even the second great power failure was something I could have taken in stride.

It happened at four in the afternoon, one June day. The temperature had climbed above the hundred-degree mark with humidity compounding the agony. The power demands throughout the city were enormous. Abruptly, as I was talking to Gene in his office, all of the overhead lights went out and stayed out. Gene went pale.

"The computer," he gasped and raced into the adjoining room. It had shut down.

"We'll have to wait for the power to be restored," I said.

"Nonsense," said Gene. "The minicomputer has an automatic cutout that switches it to the sun batteries on the roof."

I went to the minicomputer console and checked the battery-powered digital voltmeter. It

showed zeroes everywhere.

"The cutout doesn't seem to have operated," I said.

"Let me see," cried Gene.

He squeezed into the cramped space back of the cabinet and checked components with a pocket flashlight. When he emerged, his face was flushed.

"What will I do?" he asked hopelessly.

"Did you check the cutout?"

"It's defective," said Gene. "And I have no replacement on the premises."

"We can't get another one till the power comes back on," I said. "So we'll just have to be patient."

Gene looked at me.

"I guess so," he said.

We went back into his office, not too much bothered by the lack of artificial light since we threw up the blinds and western sunlight streamed in. But it was devilishly hot. Gene began to wilt and I thought he would pass out.

"Maybe we ought to head home," I said. "I listened to my transistor radio and the entire Northeastern power grid is out. They don't expect to turn back on before late this evening."

"You're probably right," said Gene.

And then it hit me. Gene had reverted to the Gene I knew as a boy. His confidence was gone. He was simply waiting for me to decide

what to do and then go along with my decision. It was embarrassing.

We went down to the garage and I climbed into my car. Gene hovered outside, just looking at me. I invited him into my car and he came, meekly. But at the garage exit, the attendant warned us of what lay ahead.

"Traffic is a shambles," he said. "The lights are off and there aren't any cops around. The bridges and highways are tied up. You're better off staying at a hotel in the city."

"Should we do that?" asked Gene.

"He's probably right," I said. "Unfortunately we won't be able to call our wives but I'm sure they'll understand."

"I hope they will," said Gene uncertainly.

He tagged along as I went to hotel after hotel, desperately cajoling and threatening until finally I found a desk clerk who would give us a room. We climbed up eight dusty floors and found ourselves in a seedy small room with twin beds. A faded print of a white Utrillo street hung on a side wall. Gene sat slumped in a chair near the single window, his eyes dulled.

"Snap out of it, Gene," I said. "It's hardly the end of the world. They'll restore the power and we'll slide back into our groove."

"Will we?" he asked.

I looked at him.

"I don't understand you," I said. "This natural calamity is important but hardly cataclysmic. You're behaving like a ten year old."

"I feel like one," said Gene. "The failure of that cutout to the roof supply was the one thing I didn't anticipate."

"All right. So ordinarily you analyze the hell out of everything until you foresee every contingency and narrow down the choices to one."

"But I don't have a computer to choose for me, *now*," said Gene.

"So the business will wait for a day or two."

"I'm not talking about the business. I'm talking about my life."

I didn't quite understand what he was driving at.

"What the hell has this power failure got to do with your life?" I asked.

He flushed.

"Everything," he said. "You know how my analyses have been worked into computer programs for every problem we deal with?"

"Including cooking," I said.

"Including cooking," he affirmed. "Well, it's more than business problems, more than cooking."

For the first time I began to get

an inkling of his meaning and it sent a cold chill up my spine. He looked at my eyes and it was evident that he knew that I knew.

"You're right," said Gene. "I never could make the smallest decision. Why it was, I can't say.

Perhaps a good psychiatrist could have resolved my difficulty, but I just couldn't face that kind of probing into my bitterest memories. So I always let my foster parents or my teachers or my friends make my decisions for me. When I was off by myself, I went through the torments of hell. Every decision I had to make, however tiny, was a monstrous barrier to overcome, even if it was only whether I should turn right or left.

Traffic lights were a blessing because they made the choice for me. That's the reason I hung around you so much. Not that I didn't enjoy your company, but you always unhesitatingly told me what to do."

"Up to a point," I said.

"Up to a point," he agreed.

"Then, when I came upon probability and statistics and unraveled all the intricacies of random processes, I knew that I had the solution in my hand. With the availability of a computer I could plan for all contingencies, assign weighting functions to each possibility and let the computer make the proper choice."



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“Do you mean to say that every one of your days is planned out for you ahead of time?”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s impossible. You can’t foresee *everything*. What did you do when an unexpected contingency came up, some kind of accident or the arrival of a totally unexpected visitor?”

“I used these,” he said.

He pointed to the tiny gold birdcage on his watch chain, the one with the two ivory dice.

“I let the dice make the decision for me whenever I come upon the unexpected.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

“Have you made *no* decisions in

your entire life that were your own?”

“They *were* all my own,” he said adamantly. “After all, just as you research the facts for the jobs you do, I research all the data for my living. *I* write the programs, *I* enter the data. In that sense, weren’t all the decisions fundamentally my own?”

“I won’t argue that point,” I said. “But what I don’t see yet is how you manage to get through each day.”

“I use the office computer to print out a detailed schedule of my day. As you know, my memory is exceptional, and it’s no trick for me to memorize what my next twenty-

four hours will be like.”

“But what if you got ill? What if you had a heart attack?”

He grimaced.

“In that case, someone else would have to make the decisions for me.”

And then the overhead lights came back on.

“The power has been restored,” I said.

I went to the window and looked down at the streets.

“The traffic lights are back on again. I guess we can go home, now.”

Gene played with the dice in his birdcage.

“I’m staying,” he said.

I shrugged and picked up my attache case. Gene looked at me and there was a terrible plea in his eyes. I went over to the small night table and pulled out the drawer. There, next to the Gideon Bible, was a piece of hotel stationery. I wrote swiftly in longhand on one side of the sheet and then on the other side. Then I looked it over and noted that I had to make an additional insert or two. As I left the room, I saw him scanning the lines anxiously. It was a scenario that would enable him to get

through the evening and then back to work in the morning.

It was several hours before I finally made it back home. My wife was relieved to see me, and the love in her eyes more than made up for the harrowing evening I’d spent. I wasn’t very hungry. We went to bed, where she comforted me until I had completely unwound.

In the morning I overslept. When my wife shook me awake, I told her I had the day off. It was a lie, but for the moment I didn’t know how to break the truth to her.

I never saw Gene again. I typed out my resignation and mailed it to him. I received a check the following week with a very generous bonus in it. There was no letter, no remonstrances, no asking for explanations. We both knew why I could not come back to work with him again.

**I had** once been callous and insensitive to the problems Gene had to deal with. I would never do that to him again. It was not simply because I now knew how he managed to get through his days. I also knew how he got through his nights, at home.