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## Finalist - The Algorithm

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Garman studied the bird through the rain-streaked window, watching it move from side to side through the manicured grass. Periodically it paused, its beak darting down into the damp green mass beneath its feet. Once, it cocked its head inquisitively, exposing a throat of brightly colored feathers puffed up against the storm. Then a car swept by, and the scene was doused in muddy spray.

Julia laid a hand on his arm, a pale flash against his dark skin, drawing his attention back to their surroundings. He scowled inwardly. The waiting area of the county demographorium was painted with varying shades of beige and taupe, a drearily ordinary tableau punctuated only by mass-consumption art prints. “You definitely have the supporting files, right? Didn’t leave them on the armoire?”

He nodded and pulled the envelope from behind his chair. “Of course.” His voice sounded too loud in the stillness of the waiting room.

Julia’s asymmetrical mouth twisted up in a half-smile. “Good.” Her eyes – green with flecks of brown – were alive with intensity, even excitement.

Garman felt a momentary spike of frustration with her, but reminded himself it was only a reaction, simply a visceral response to where they were and what stakes were involved.

Goddamn bureaucrats, he thought savagely, irrationally.

“I just don’t want there to be any issues,” Julia said to no one in particular. They were alone in the waiting area, Garman realized. All the other couples had already gone, and evening was approaching quickly.

He wondered about what things would be like on the drive home, once they knew. “We’ve done everything we can,” he said. It was a poor, clichéd attempt at reassurance, but he had no idea what else to say. He didn’t really feel like talking.

She drew a long breath and exhaled slowly, her narrow shoulders shuddering with a mixture of exhilaration and abject dread. To Garman’s great relief, she said nothing more, but simply leaned back into him, pressing her body into his own. He could feel her heart palpitating, a relentless staccato throb against his chest.

There was nothing he could say to her. Nothing more was within their control.

“Mr. and Mrs. Garman?” The demographer’s assistant, her face lined from years of stress, stepped into the waiting room. “Dr. Sander will see you in just a few moments.”

“Thanks,” Julia jerked up from where she had been resting against him, blurting the word out too quickly.

The DA smiled thinly and disappeared behind her desk.

Time dragged on. He watched Julia’s eyes dart around the room, desperate for anything that could distract her from the impending encounter. In a way it was emasculating, Garman thought vaguely... the realization that there was nothing, nothing, nothing he could do.

“All right. You’re the last ones. Go on in.” The DA’s voice sounded very distant.

Garman rose to his feet. “All right.” In his peripheral vision, he could see Julia’s lip trembling involuntarily. He stooped to retrieve the envelope before following Julia into the demographer’s office.

\* \* \*

Dr. Sander was a handsome, well-built figure, clad in an expensive suit tailored closely to his frame. His blue-gray eyes fixed Garman with a penetrating, laser-like gaze. Pristinely framed diplomas from Dartmouth and Cambridge adorned the wall behind him.

Was he appraising them? Scoring them on some hidden metric? Garman had no way of knowing. He seated himself on a hard wooden chair, facing Dr. Sander across the massive expanse of the demographer's desk. Julia joined him moments later, moving stiffly, as if coerced.

Dr. Sander smiled, exposing a mouthful of all-too-perfect, all-too-white teeth. "Before we begin, let me make sure I have your basic information right. For HIPAA reasons, you understand."

Garman nodded once, a brusque dip of the head. He was afraid to speak.

"Allan and Julia Garman?"

Garman found his tongue. "That's correct. Allan with two L's, if you don't already have that."

"And you live together at 54 Evanman Place?"

"Correct."

"Mr. Garman, you are currently employed as a...?"

"Sales manager at the Ford dealership on 17<sup>th</sup>," said Garman. "I work as a docent at the art museum on weekends," he added as an afterthought. Perhaps that would count for something.

"And Mrs. Garman?"

"Teacher," said Julia, unconsciously twining a strand of hair around her finger. "Elementary school, special education." Damn it, Garman thought, she looked intimidated. They couldn't afford any negative responses.

"That matches what we have on file already. Sorry about the ID check – you understand why we need it, though. You'd be surprised what some people try."

Garman momentarily wondered what that level of desperation felt like, then decided he had no desire to know.

Reaching behind his desk, Dr. Sander withdrew a graphene flex-screen, unrolling it onto the desk between them. "Let's go through the algorithm together." The screen shimmered and came to life, booting up in a burst of hyper-vivid HD colors.

Charts, graphs, and numbers blurred into a hazy swirl of data. "I just want to remind you both," said Dr. Sander, "that this process is in no way a reflection of your aptitude for parenting, the total social utility of your son or daughter, or the intrinsic dignity and worth of any members of your family. This process is solely about demography, and the need to use our limited public resources effectively."

Garman knew Dr. Sander was simply regurgitating a script. Beside him, Julia's face was stony.

"As you can see," Dr. Sander droned, "we've incorporated as much information as possible into our calculations. Our algorithm takes into account the genetic samples you've both provided, the genetic sample we took from your fetus, income levels in both absolute and relative senses, the socio-cultural dynamics of your particular community, anticipated intra-household dynamics stemming from the interviews we previously conducted with each of you, availability of alternative educational pathways, anticipated human-capital requirements in light of evolving economic trends, and countless other

factors. We've employed the most advanced tools we have in making our recommendation."

Garman's vision had narrowed to a single point, a black tunnel through which Dr. Sander's voice echoed on and on.

The screen shimmered and changed to display an image of a bell curve with a blinking dot. Dr. Sander's face bore the plastic look of someone accustomed to feigning sympathy after delivering bad news. "Based on all the data we have, we can't recommend that the child you're carrying be placed on the academic track. The probability of school and professional success is about a standard deviation below our minimum threshold for academic track admission."

"Oh, *God!*" said Julia, her voice cracking.

Garman couldn't breathe. Oh Christ oh Christ oh Christ, he thought.

"You can't control for everything," said Julia, desperately. She grabbed the envelope that sat beside Garman's chair and pushed it across Dr. Sander's desk. "These are tests and assignments we found from our time in school. We didn't have them at first. Please, just take a look. Maybe it will change something?"

The demographer would not relent, Garman knew. The truth hadn't hit Julia yet. He wondered when it would.

Dr. Sander's face remained utterly impassive, and a dull faint part of Garman's mind wondered how often the demographer had heard such an excuse. "Data – specifically, the inputs we've already evaluated – is all we can use to produce a consistent weighting mechanism. These predictive outcomes have been tested in thousands of cases and shown to hold up. Else, we wouldn't be doing it in the first place."

Garman knew he should have reacted to that, *should be reacting* to that, for Julia's sake if nothing else. We'll try again, we'll have another, he told himself, already imagining the perversely long car ride home.

The demographer grimaced, betraying a trace of humanity for the first time. "You do understand why we have to do this? We can't keep pouring our resources into everyone. There's just not enough to go around anymore, not with our planet as fucked as it is." The profanity sounded strange coming from the immaculately kept scientist.

"This is your answer?" said Garman. A great shadowy pit had opened inside his chest, crushing the air from his lungs. He tried to think of Julia, to think of the days ahead and how she would need him. He thought of their child. *Their child* – a squalling amorphous system input, a bundle of probabilities wrapped in swaddling clothes.

"Demography is destiny," said Dr. Sander, spewing an old slogan all of them had long ago come to loathe. "A hard truth, isn't it?" His expression hardened. "I think we're probably done here."

Julia was crying silently, rocking back and forth, dead to the world. Garman rose to his feet and took her by the arm. "Let's go."

"Oh, and by the way," said Dr. Sander, "it's a boy. Congratulations."