Preface

In the course of researching this book, I came across the story of James Fallon, a neuroscientist who underwent personal genetic testing as part of his research. His test results showed that he had the Low MAOA gene, which is the subject of much of the discussion in this book. His story made me wonder how I would feel knowing this and it made me realize that for me, at least, the less known the better. When it comes to genetics, I don’t want to know and I don’t want anyone else to know, either. I completely understood when James Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA, allowed his genome to be sequenced as part of the Human Genome Project – all but the area that coded for hereditary Alzheimer’s Disease. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

Fallon commented that the results of his own genetic test had made his research personal to him. I had my own moment of personal connection in the course of this research. I was re-reading a longitudinal study of MAOA and childhood maltreatment in Christchurch, New Zealand (also known as my birthplace) when the sample data leapt off the page at me: ‘a birth cohort of 1265 children born … in mid-1977.’ Now, being born in mid-late 1977, this raised an important question: Had I been reading about myself? Had other people? I would have remembered being interviewed growing up, but my family had moved away from Christchurch for several years, so I could have been one of the dropouts. A quick email to my mother (‘do you remember when I was born? Could you possibly have …’) suggested that I wasn’t part of the birth cohort, and a subsequent article based on the study showed that I had, in fact, been born a month outside the cohort dates. But, many of my childhood friends clearly were part of it. This data suddenly became very real to me, and the statistics very frightening. Reading the statistics began to change the way I thought about my childhood friends and the various events of our youth.

I am beyond grateful to so many people who have contributed in some way to this project. Much of this book was written while on sabbatical at Georgetown University, where I was based at the Centre for Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Studies in the Edmund A Walsh School of Foreign Service. The Head of the Centre, Alan Tidwell, was the perfect
host and was always willing to act as an intelligent sounding board, despite the increasingly bizarre nature of the conversations and my frequent requests for meetings over lunch at a specific restaurant. Claire Sullivan, a fellow visiting academic at the Centre, was just as willing to accommodate my lunch meeting requests, and to debate genetics with me. Both made this book better than it would otherwise have been.

I was very fortunate to be at Georgetown as a Fulbright New Zealand Visiting Scholar, and so I must thank Fulbright New Zealand from the bottom of my heart for selecting me as a reward recipient. The experience was, without a doubt, life-changing on so many levels.

My friends and colleagues at the University of Canterbury Law School were also supportive and willing to engage in debates on the issues raised in this book, or just to encourage me in the final proofreading stages. Whether it is fair or not, I’ve come to expect no less from them. The School of Law also provided financial support, allowing me the use of my excellent research assistant, Aileen Odgers. I should probably apologise to my students (both at Canterbury and at Georgetown) for being guinea pigs in lectures when I threw ideas from this book at them. But I won’t. I’ll just thank them for letting me learn from them during those lectures, as much as they learnt from me in other lectures.

Finally, to my parents. It doesn’t matter that I don’t know (and will hopefully never know) which form of the MAOA gene they passed on to me, because, either way, the positive childhood environment in which they raised me, places me squarely in the ‘low risk of antisocial behavior’ end of Caspi’s graph.

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