

# **XQ-28**

*The Story of a Gene*

**Chapters 13&14**

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**Adrian Challis**



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*To all the friends and family who encouraged it, to all the great minds that inspired it. But mostly, to Adrian & Anthony, who lived it.*

## Chapter 13 She's Leaving Home

I wake with a shudder, and suck in spit. Dribbling again. Such a charmer. I'm aware that there is something in my hand, and as I open weary eyes and flinch at the suffused light coming in lines through the slats in my Venetian blinds, a relic of a previous fashion, I am slowly aware that I am laying, on my sofa, on Martin's chest, a half-full glass of flat champagne in my clammy hand, resting at a precarious angle to his groin. I shut my eyes, hoping the world will go away along with vision, and the pain above my right eye ensures I do not open them again until I can identify the sickly smell. Stale alcohol. Skunk smoke. Cum.

Nice. Not.

What the fuck did we do last night? I pick my way back to my last clear memory. The window of the Maelstrom, the hedges beyond it a verdant blur. Waking to Martin's soft kisses. His suggestion that alcohol would help. This is his fault then. My suggestion that seeing as it was his birthday... oh yeah, it was his birthday... then champagne was the only option. A blame shared is a blame... doubled. A flash of my bedside drawer, retrieving one hundred English pounds, practically a fortnight's subsistence. Where did he get the champagne? Oh yeah, that's right, he knew someone. Martin always seemed to know someone. My eyes open timorously and see a bottle on the floor before me, its sideways orange label staring me out. Then another, resting awkwardly

against the wall. Oh God there's two of them. Hopelessly outnumbered.

There's got to be more. I strain to think, and the effort hurts. I think instead of the warm patch tickling my cheek. I've leaked all over Martin. Bless him he'll forgive me. His smell. Mmmm, his smell. Then I remember smoking an enormous spliff, and watching my walls undulate with blind-embossed worms that crawled beneath the paper, and shiver - where the fuck did they come from? Eyes open to make sure they're gone. Check. Then another memory - Martin standing on the breakfast bar, his jeans around his ankles, a glass of champagne raised in defiance as I lap at his thrusting cock, his hand on the back of my head suffocating me. I swallow to wipe the memory, and feel an angry coarseness in my throat. Oh my God I wish I was dead, and an electric toxicity scours my nerves and I remember Martin's advice from some unfocussed past: -Be careful what you wish for...

My brain sends a confused message to my hand to put the glass down, but it ignores it, my wrist happy resting on Martin's soft warm cock. I try my other arm, but that is completely paralysed, squashed numb by Martin's sleeping form. Fuck it, if the world is conspiring to make me its prisoner, what can I do about it? Please make the day go away... My breathing shallow, like my thoughts. Saliva catches in my throat, and a cough makes Martin stir slightly, and I raise a cotton wool head and sneak a look at him. His mouth is open in a dislocated gape, his tongue lolling beyond his bottom lip, a line of dribble running down his chin. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you, The Couple of the Year. Distant applause accompanies my head's return to my warm patch of spit, and I smile, as this much consciousness loses its appeal.

-Ian wake up.

I look into Martin's face but his gaze is averted, looking down at a plate of eggs and some pinky red meat, what looks and smells like freshly baked bread rolls either side. My face sours and my stomach convulses.

-God I can't face a thing.

-You've got to I've made it for you.

I sit up but my brain stays on the sofa, Martin pushes the plate towards me impatiently, and again I look at him, and again he ignores my glance.

-Take it. There is no softness in his voice, and I wonder if he is feeling as bad as me, and in the seconds it takes to collect my thoughts he bangs the plate down on the sofa in the space my body has just vacated, and walks back over to the kitchen.

-I feel dead.

His back to me, his voice low and brooding.

-You fuckin' look it...

Suddenly I'm in the bathroom, and standing in front of the mirror, but I can't see anything. I'm looking down at the basin, convinced I *did* look in the mirror, and dully aware that what my eyes saw, my brain wouldn't allow me to comprehend. I'm back in the living room, its name ironic to my present state of mind. Martin is eating and still refuses to look at me. I sit down between him and my plate of breakfast.

-You alright?

-I am. You're not.

-Why won't you look at me.

He swallows and sits forward, his gaze fixed in the middle distance.

-Because you look like a fucking corpse. You've gotta eat something.

His voice was adamant, and I realised his speech was barely figurative. I *was* a corpse, and tried to remember the last time I'd eaten anything more substantial than a pastry. Tuesday. It was now... Saturday. I forgot any squeamishness and placed the plate on my lap and, despite retching, ate. And ate.

-Where did the bread come from? my own face likewise fixed forward.

-It was in your freezer. There were some croissant there too - they're for afters.

-My freezer? I couldn't remember buying anything for months.

-Uh-huh. When was the last time *you* looked in your fridge?

His voice was bitter, and I contemplated asking him why he was being so horrible, but thought better of it.

-Don't think I want anything else. My stomach's like a walnut.

-I wasn't asking. You're eating.

It was dusk before I felt even moderately human. Physically at least. My mind had been dark all day, questions and self-criticism vying for prominence. Something kept repeating itself - Saul's comments from a few days before. It was like he'd made a premonition that kept insinuating itself on our future, the succinctness of its delivery giving it the aura of truth. Martin had barely spoken, his own mind obviously deep in thought, and as we went downstairs for an early night and into the cold damp basement, a suffocating sense of hopelessness subsumed me, and I stared at the stained, still-damp sheets and tried very hard not to cry. It was as I pulled a clean set out of the drawer, noting that we couldn't have changed the sheets in our whole three months together, and felt the dampness only moderately less intense than the ones I'd pulled off the bed, that the wave of sorrow broke, and I sobbed quietly. Martin ignored me. I couldn't bear it anymore.

-Martin I hate this place. It's like we're living in a coffin.

-Quite appropriate for the way you're looking...

-Stop it! It's not my fault. It's been one hell of a week, and if I've overdone it you're just as much responsible for that as I am. Why are you being so horrible to me? It's like you hate me.

He was silent then, and helped me fit the cover on the quilt.

-I'm feeling it too. You're right, it has been a mental week.

Guess it's catching up with both of us.

There was something else, but it was only when we were laying in the cold bed, allowing our bodies to warm the damp, that I could find the words to express it.

-Martin, there's something about what Saul was saying that doesn't add up.

-When?

-The other day when you nearly fainted. He said you'd been donating since we met.

-Yeah. I was gonna tell you but it seemed to involve explaining too much.

I thought about it, and the knowledge helped dispel some of my doubts.

-That's what I thought. But there's something else. If you were donating, why did we have to wait? You'd have to have been tested before, and...

-What?

Suddenly I was unsure of everything. Suddenly, I wondered if Saul's words hadn't been a premonition, but a statement of accepted fact, their tense twisting in my mind from future to past.

-Well, you haven't shagged anyone else have you?

-Course not! You've been quite enough for me!

I relaxed slightly.

-So then, if you've been donating, why did you need a test? Saul wouldn't impregnate anyone with untested sperm would he?

-No way. That's one thing he *is* principled about.

I was confused, and Martin saw it, and encouraged me to go on, a slight smile on his lips like he was waiting for me to make connections I couldn't yet make.

-Okay. When was the last time you made a baby?

-Can't be sure, Saul doesn't always tell me, but I reckon well over a year ago.

-And until you met me you were... active, but let the question slide - knowing this *was* the past and I wanted to leave it there, details still a little too much to take.

-Hence the test.

-Yeah, hence the test. But Saul said you were still donating. I don't get it.

-It's a private arrangement we've got, said Martin smiling, turning his attention to a blue packet of cigarette papers, licking three of them and sticking them together.

I was so totally confused. What the fuck did Saul want with Martin's sperm? Then I thought, what did *I* want with it, what did I *do* with it...? My eyes widened.

-NO!!!

Martin just laughed.

-Eureka!

-NO!!! He can't...

-He does!

-Oh my God! He drinks it?!

Martin just smiled at me, giggling silently.

-That whole place is full of vampires! I exclaimed. Does he think it prolongs his life or something?

-It does. He's a hundred and sixty-three years old...

My face must have recanted to corpse mode, because Martin's face dropped and his eyes went back to the papers.

-Only buzzin'. No idea how old he is. Sixty-something I guess. I reckon he just gets off on it. I've tried not to think too hard about it, he pays me well, and he's been a good friend to me at some very low moments.

-But even so, that's disgusting!

-Oh come on Ian, I haven't heard you complaining...

-Yeah, but that's in the heat of the moment - fired in anger n all that...

-All's fair in love and war - isn't that what they say?

-I'm prepared to admit it was an inappropriate metaphor if you admit what Saul does is vile.

-I'll admit nothing of the sort. Each to their own. You won't catch me criticising anyone else's... peccadilloes I think is the correct term?

I thought further.

-And if he's not testing you, then there was always a risk...

-Statistical at least. I think that's part of the excitement.

I could only shake my head, and wonder what else there was about this world that made so little sense to me, and wondered if I really wanted to know. I suddenly felt very boring, had come to think of myself as an outsider, my sexuality alone precluding me from 'normal' life. The more I saw of Martin's world, the less unusual I felt, and instead of reassuring me, it chilled me.

-Am I too ordinary for you Martin?

-Yeah ya tedious fucker, he said, holding his breath and passing me the spliff, get ya quotidian laughing gear around that and take a revivifying transaction...

I drew in the sweet smoke, and willed each phillum to transform me into a shiny, sexy beast, one worthy of his attention, a befitting accomplice in his quest towards legend, and, passing the spliff back to his waiting fingers, closed my eyes, and

prayed the morning find me, coated in the clothes of heaven.

Fat chance. The morning *did* find me, despite my best attempts to hide. I lay wrapped in the twisting duvet, soft light straining through, its pale imposition convincing me my mood had barely improved. I wondered where Martin was, and as the midday call to prayer rang out from the nearby mosque, I found myself actually wondering if he'd converted to Islam in the night. Could this really still be the effects of the drugs we'd taken, what, three days ago? If so, could they really be worth it? A kaleidoscope of images swirled before my eyes, and for the first time in ages I found myself smiling - oh yes, it was worth it. Everything was worth it...

I heard the door bang shut above, and heavy urgent footsteps on the stairs. Martin threw the door open and slammed a paper on the bed.

-Well, they've done it.

-Done what? I said, looking at the headline on the Sunday rag.

NO TO SCROUNGERS - AT LAST! Below it a sub-header in a whimsical serifed font: Mr Shirker - You've GOT to work!

-What's it mean? I asked, the jargon practically code to my morning eyes.

-In a word - Workfare.

I groaned. -I don't understand...

-Minister for Social Insecurity announced it Friday they reckon - if you ain't got a job they're gonna find you one, if they can't find you one - which let's face it they won't around here - you're on your own mate.

-But that's insane - there'll be total anarchy.

-Ya not kidding. Your mate at the cornershop reckons so anyway - you should see it, it's like Fort Knox down there. He's put in bulletproof plastic already.

I could only groan and fall back into the bed, and pull the covers over my head. Then something occurred to me, and re-emerged, the duvet wrapped around my face.

-What about rent?

-They reckon the council'll pay it for six weeks, then even they're being rate capped.

I looked around the room. This place was bad enough for free - if I had to pay for it... and besides, where would the money come from? I thought to the bedside drawer - there was about £600 there, barely enough for two month's rent.

-I'll have to get a job.

-Doing what? Washing up in some soup kitchen? I guess that *will* be one growth area, give it a few weeks and they'll be plenty of them...

Then his face softened, and he looked straight at me.

-Besides, no wife of mine is working for a living... and we smiled together. It seemed like the first time in months, and I kissed him, our lips soft and warm.

-Am I your wife now then?

-Is right. Now shut it bitch and get me some coffee, I've got some thinking to do...

I poured the thick black liquid from the stainless-steel espresso machine into two wide bowls and followed it with milk heated on the stove. It was the first time I'd used my kitchen for a lifetime - I hadn't realised it, but the kitchen had become Martin's domain. What a lazy little shit I'd become. I walked the coffees over to the sofa, where Martin was laying staring up at the ceiling, lost in thought, and as I placed his on the floor, he neither acknowledged it nor moved to make space for me. I'm sitting on the floor then.

-I should've seen this coming. It's been brewing for time. Most of our exports are blocked, except to the middle- and far-east, and even there the exchange rates are exorbitant. It's amazing we've survived this long. The government's so weak they'll take whatever allies they can find, and if that means getting into bed with religious fanatics then so be it.

-But that's like cutting their noses off to spite their... arses, I said, trying to avoid the obvious. *I was learning.* Martin was still lost in thought.

-Appeasing the right. Fuckin idiots. Hasn't anything taught them that you don't appease rabid dogs - you have them put down. Chriss may well be delighted this week - this is their first entry in from the wilderness. But pretty soon they'll be issuing more demands on the government, and before anyone knows it

they'll *be* the government, without any of the troublesome hassle of having to get elected. Power without responsibility, and let's face it they don't come much more irresponsible than that lot. They were handing out leaflets outside the mosque, loads of stuff about the idle man and insults to Allah. Irony is, I seem to remember *The Koran* says if you are starving you even have the right to steal...

-Oh God we definitely have to move...

-You're right. There's no way we can stay around here. Even if we put bars on the windows and install hi-tech security systems, the cops aint gonna do nothing.

-And anyway I hate it here. I was slightly shocked at the intensity of feeling I had for this flat. It had seen some good times, mostly with Martin featuring heavily in them, but now I just wanted to get out. It almost didn't matter where - just somewhere *else*.

-Got any ideas?

-A few. I've seen one place. You'd love it. By the river. Expensive, but really smart.

I thought about what he was saying - if it was where I was thinking, hoping actually, I wondered how we'd pay, and realised I still had no idea what Martin did for money. Saul's little fetish wouldn't keep us in skunk, never mind some flash apartment. The memory of their arrangement made my stomach pirouette, and I drank some coffee, washing away the taste.

-Martin, can we really afford somewhere stush? I'm not going to be able to contribute much, and in any case, won't they ask questions? I was trying to avoid asking any of my own.

-Landlords are all the same, they couldn't care less where the money comes from as long as the rent gets paid. Once you're in those realms everyone's got something to hide, if only from the taxman. We've got time on our side at least. There won't be many people taking that particular trajectory from round here. If we're quick, we can get in before the rents rocket.

There was a squirt of excitement in my belly, and I couldn't wait to find out.

-You thinking where I'm thinking?

Martin looked over at me lazily, a smile on his face.

-Maybe...

-Sugar Factory?

-Maybe...

-Is it?! I was like a child, suddenly euphoric.

-We'll see. They may not have anything available for immediate occupation.

-How immediate?

-Well, tomorrow, I guess.

-No!! Really? I was practically pissing.

-Don't see why not...

I could bear it no more, and jumped on him, kissing his face, which he scrunched up like I was some over-excited dog. I was laughing and wriggling, a ball of expectation, and I tickled him to try and induce a similar feeling in him, which worked until he told me to get off him, his voice avuncular and mildly disapproving.

-I'm gonna pack, I said, and ran downstairs.

It didn't take long. The hardest choices were what to keep, not what to throw away. I toyed with junking everything, and starting all over again, but realised this meant relying too heavily on Martin, and wondered if we were really doing the right thing. It was a big step - although we'd lived for the last few months as if we'd moved in together, we'd never actually acknowledged the fact. This was something new. What if we ended up hating each other? What then? More to the point, what if Martin ended up hating *me*, and kicked me out? Listen to yourself - you haven't even found a place yet and you're already anticipating the worst. It *had* been Martin's suggestion after all...

I packed the few clothes I wanted to keep in a black suitcase, on top of the spare bedding, bundling all the rest into a black bin liner, leaving the duvet and pillows on the bed for what I hoped was our last ever night here. I emptied the bedside drawer, stuffing the money into my pocket - it felt good, a fat roll of tenners like an impressive packet, and wished my pockets were always so full, so I could give Martin whatever he wanted, like he always seemed capable of giving me.

I looked around the room, my home for, what... five years? Practically. I'd 'lived' here since arriving in the city to go to

college, until the realisation that my course meant a career, meant marriage, and a family, and a mortgage, and a living death. I had often wondered if I'd done the right thing by leaving - I had been a star pupil, the best they'd ever had they told me - *after* I'd signed all the withdrawal papers. Thanks for telling me. Money wouldn't have been a problem, that's for sure. But being... queer just didn't sit right with being a lawyer. I'd looked into a future, and seen a wife I hated, children who hated me, a few moments of stolen freedom in some public toilet my only relief from self-hatred. Okay I'd been poor, crushingly so sometimes, and there were also times when I'd been totally lost, not knowing what the fuck I was doing, but I'd been free, as free as this society allowed, and now I'd met Martin, who defined what that meant.

No regrets.

I looked at the wall above the bed, and saw numerous stains reflecting the light differently from my bedside lamp, and realised they were cum from our tempestuous sessions together, and felt a small twinge of loss, like we *were* leaving something behind - good memories. Then the thought that there'd be more where they came from, more opportunities to bedeck new walls with our genetic traces, and the thought excited me, and, buoyed by a sense of the unknown, I returned to the living room, and found Martin still lost in thought, and kissed him.

-I reckon you should write a letter to your landlord. Something without too much detail, just implying you've lost the plot and can't live here anymore, that way you get to keep next month's rent.

-I thought you said they'd carry on paying it for another six weeks?

-Not if you don't sign on on Thursday, and I reckon it's best if you don't. That way the last record they've got of you is the week before last. If I pay the rent on the new place, you're kinda invisible from now on.

-Is that such a good thing?

-Could be. We'll see. It sounded like he had another agenda, but I ignored the temptation to ask - he was doing some more thinking.

-Mmm. Not sure not sure. It may be a good thing to keep this



place for a while, may come in handy...

-Oh Martin let's just bin it. Close the chapter.

-You packed?

-Everything I want to take.

-What about up here?

I looked over at the stereo, and realised that that and my records were the only things I cared about.

-All that.

-You're not taking all those are you? They're fossils!

I felt a little hurt, and embarrassed that I cared so much about them, but realised I did.

-Look, there's something I haven't told you. I said they were mostly my uncle's? Well my uncle was... queer. He lived through the last wave of hatred, when things were really bad. My mum told me of a time when the cops would call round and beat him up just because they had nothing better to do. She said one morning my gran had run round to tell her they were at the door, and my mum had gone over and kept them waiting, demanding to see a warrant whilst my uncle flushed all his love letters down the toilet. He was the only person I knew who was totally out, and although he was less than a great example, I loved him very much. Those records are his legacy to me, and there's no way I'm leaving them behind.

Martin's face softened.

-Sorry mate, I didn't know.

-And besides, there's some priceless delights in there. I'll play you some stuff some time.

Something occurred to me, and I shot over to the pile of records, and, flicking through a small box of seven inch singles, found the one, fitting an adapter into its empty centre and placing it on the turntable. A flurry of hiss and crackle - as familiar to me as the impending music - fluttered out of the speakers.

-He was in the navy. Got this one in Jamaica.

A staccato guitar and beat insisted itself in plangent rhythm, until a deep bass and drum doubled the pace, and I flipped the front of the amp down and turned the bass and treble to max. The sound suddenly filled out, shaking anything loose in the room. The same phrases repeated. Then with a snare hit, close and beautiful harmonies began, and I swayed, my heart

dissolving, as a falsetto voice began to sing.

*Queen Majesty*

*May I ask of thee?*

*So much I have longed*

*To speak to you alone...*

*I not a king, just a minstrel*

*With a song to you I'll sing...*

Martin was watching me, a smile on his face, as I mouthed the words to him.

*Isn't this really true?*

*These things I ask of you*

*Oh oh Majesty*

*Would you really care for me?*

*As long as you love me*

*And it won't be so hard*

*As long as I see love in your heart*

*I love you true...*

-Never knew you liked reggae. Who is it?

-Techniques. But most importantly it's Lee Perry - Da Upsettah!! What he couldn't do with a mixing desk... I let the impending cliché hang, and just swayed and sang to Martin, as he giggled and watched, nodding his head approvingly, and as the song faded I looked at him and said

-It's what I think of my uncle - Queen Majesty!

-From now on it's what I'll think of you. It's beautiful. Okay the records come. But the stereo...

-I'm keeping the deck. I was adamant.

-Why?

-It's a Linn Son, from Sweden. Impossible to get now. Another relic I know, but my uncle knew his hi-fi - they've never made anything better. You've got to take the turntable off to change the speed...

-No way!

-Yes way. And it's coming with me...

## Chapter 14 White Goods

The buzzer kicked me awake. I was alone again. I lay wondering if I'd really heard it, and it repeated, its unsubtle rasp obscene, an old man breaking wind. I crawled to my feet and, pulling on a pair of knee length shorts and my red t-shirt, clammy and worse for wear, ran up to the door.

-It's me. You ready?

-Ready for what?

-Moving out. It's sorted...

I couldn't push the button fast enough. I swung open the door to see Martin coming through the front one, closely followed by a small balding man in his thirties carrying empty boxes. I felt a little too embarrassed to be meeting someone new in this state, but Martin's smile dispelled any doubt as he introduced us.

-This is Tom, he's helping us move.

We said hello and shook hands, the man's eyes sparkly and instantly friendly, and I had the feeling I'd seen him somewhere before. Wherever it was didn't seem to have any bad connotation, and I had no qualms about inviting him in.

-What time is it? I asked, yawning absent-mindedly.

-Half one. You were still asleep, weren't you.

I nodded, sleepy head not yet clear from a long rest - was last week still catching up with me?

-Do you want coffee? I asked.

-No time. We can have some at the new place. Bring that, said Martin, motioning to the coffee maker already in my hand. Tom held out the boxes, and I put it inside, together with the airtight container for the coffee.

-That's sorted then, said Tom, a high little giggle taking me off guard. What else do you need?

I nodded my head at the piles of records, and he walked over and immediately started stacking them in the boxes.

-I reckon I've seen you around, he said, his legs spread wide as he lifted, arms full of discs. I used to visit the guy who lived upstairs. He was my dealer actually... Another little giggle.

-I must have seen you coming in sometime then, thought you looked familiar. The thought that there was once a drug dealer living upstairs made me marvel, and acknowledge that, before I'd met Martin, I would have said all druggies should be avoided like terminal diseases. How times changed...

I was coming round, and looked at Martin. We hadn't even kissed good morning, and wondered if Tom would mind. Martin guessed the question and gave me a peck on the lips, shaking his head to let me know Tom was cool.

-You didn't waste any time, I said. It's really sorted?

-Went to the office first thing. He held up a set of keys, with a black box attached to them.

A squirt of excitement lit my stomach, and I stamped my feet.

-Oh my God! I exclaimed, and ran downstairs to fetch the suitcase.

The back of the enormous van still looked bare with all the things I was bringing pushed against one side of it, a suitcase and bag Martin's only contribution. We sat upfront, all three of us fitting comfortably along a bench, the old Commer van eventually bursting into life after several attempts at starting. As we turned into the wide road that took us towards the river, I noted Tom was making a meal of negotiating corners, as if trying to give the impression that this was a beast only an expert driver could tame, and I smiled to myself - I think I like him. He was friendly and cheery, and he'd bundled my meagre possessions together without hesitation or complaint, making packing very light work for all of us.

On the dock road, it became concrete to me that this was really happening, that we were heading towards a new home, and I wrapped myself around Martin and rocked him.

-What's your problem? he asked, a smile in his voice.

-Nothing, I just can't believe you've sorted it so soon. I'm really excited!

I sneaked a peak at Tom as Martin kissed the top of my head, and saw him smiling warmly at us, no hint of anything other than a shared humour on his face. Yeah, like Martin said, he was cool.

We turned into a narrow cobbled street, the Commer's wheels catching on both pavements, the high building ahead of us. I looked up and read the words Sugar Factory spelled out in white bricks, the 'g' awkward, looking like the letters of an old computer game - an early example of bitmapping I thought. Martin pointed to a door at the far end of the building, and Tom pulled up beside it. It was heavy and huge, its midtone contrasting nicely with the red brick of the Victorian warehouse. There was a panel of buttons to the side of it, topped with a black plastic square embedded in the matt metal.

-Posh, I commented, nodding at the door.

-That's the video phone, said Martin, wait til you see inside, and climbed out of the van. I moved to follow him but he told me stay, said he'd see us on the other side. Tom fought to put the Commer into gear, and we rolled down the remainder of the hill towards the river and turned right, driving around two sides of the building and came to rest in front of a huge shutter made of metal mesh, its bore too fine to see through. We waited, Tom looking at me and giggling again, my excitement hard to conceal.

Suddenly there was a loud noise of ratchets cranking, and the shutter started to move. We waited, and as I watched I saw Martin's legs appear below the shutter like some industrial striptease, stamping, part impatience, part excitement. Finally the shutters opened far enough to drive in, and checking there was enough clearance in the bay, Tom wrestled with the van and followed Martin as he pointed to where we should park. My door was open before we stopped moving, and I jumped out and grabbed Martin.

-This place is amazing, I said, shooting a glance at the rows of

expensive cars that filled the underground garage. We grabbed a box each from the back of the van, and moved in the direction of more wooden doors, this time inlaid with smooth frosted glass, long brushed steel handles vertically adorning them. Martin held one open and we stepped up to matt steel lift doors.

-It's got a lift?

-Of course! You don't think we have to climb stairs now do you? We've arrived...

He pushed a button and an insinuating female voice intoned -Lift descending - even Tom was impressed with that. Inside the lift, a wall of tinted mirror greeted us, and I chanced a look at myself, the skeletal impression from the weekend still in evidence.

-I look like shit - you sure you want me here, bringing the tone down...?

We ascended in silence, leaving the commentary to the disembodied voice. After announcing the second floor, the lift slowed smoothly, and the doors opened, to reveal a long wide landing, made up of gantries which lead to the numerous apartment doors. Tom suddenly stopped dead, his face taking on a grey palour, all humour evaporating.

-You alright? I asked, and he nodded, another little giggle, this time uncertain, and I looked at Martin to ask what was wrong, but he shook his head, leave-it written on his face, and led us to the first door on the right.

-Shouldn't be too difficult to find when you're worse for wear, he said, fitting a thick brass key into the security lock, turned it, and swung the door open.

A corridor with a mirror at the end, three doors leading off one wall, one on the other.

-Where d'ya wanna start? he asked, placing the box he was carrying on the dark wooden floorboards, their original condition the only indication of the age of the building.

-I don't care I said, my face a picture of enchantment, I love it all already!

-Here, he said, opening the first door on the left, we have a spare room. I looked inside, a wall of opaque glass bricks facing out on to the gantry.

-We got a spare room? I asked, my voice rising.

-Give me it, said Tom, another little giggle indicating that whatever had been wrong with him was passed.

We moved to the next, a long bathroom with white ceramic furniture.

-At last! I exclaimed, no more fucking avocado! Everything was very tasteful.

-And here, said Martin, holding his hand on the final door on the left, is the master bedroom, swinging the door open. A large room with a simple wooden bed against one wall, beside it a huge window with silver blinds, through which I could see the river. I gasped and moved inside, and considered throwing Martin on the bed and fucking him instantly, but realised it wasn't quite such a good idea. Tom was cool - not hypothermic...

Around the corner was another door.

-What's in there?

-Open it.

I did. Inside, a toilet and free-standing power shower encased in frosted glass. Another gasp.

-My God Martin this is like the best hotel I've never stayed in!

-Wait til you see the living room...

I'd forgotten there must be another room, the ones I'd seen so far better than anywhere I'd ever been, and I followed him over the corridor with a certain trepidation, unsure what to expect. Again a pause before he threw open the door with a little -Voila!

A huge room with a high ceiling greeted me, as long as all the other rooms put together, with two white sofas and a simple white table in a bay at the end. One entire wall of windows, light playing through the silver blinds. I walked in and turned round, to see a stainless steel kitchen divided off from the rest of the room by a marble bar, its black top continuing around the kitchen making work surfaces. I could only stand and marvel, and stare at Martin open-mouthed.

-Well, what ya think?

-Martin it's beautiful. It's the most amazing place I've ever seen. It must cost a fortune...

-You never mind about that. The important thing is, do you like it?

-Like it? It's incredible! You sure you want me here? Aren't

there more attractive people you could get to share it with?

-Come here ya ugly bastard and give us a kiss!

I did, and could only mouth gaumless thank-yous at him as Tom made himself scarce, and when we joined him in the basement, there was a certain distance between us, and I realised he was a little jealous, and made a mental note not to go too over the top about the place until he was gone.

-Thank you so much for the help Tom, I said, as we were drinking coffee in the lounge, the comfortable sofas enveloping us.

-No problem. I wasn't too sure about it when I came in... another little giggle, then he looked at Martin, as if checking something before he went on, and Martin furrowed his brow and nodded a quick assurance. I looked puzzled.

-Thing is... it reminded me of Brixton! The gantries... As the lift opened I was suddenly back inside... another little giggle. Stupid init, but it takes a lot to shake that, everyday, slopping out, etc etc. You've never been to prison, right?

-Me? No, and I tried not to look too shocked, before something occurred to me and I looked at Martin, a little shake of the head dismissing my question without me asking.

-You don't want to, you really don't... He was thinking of something, but blinked and shook his head and didn't carry on.

-You hungry? I asked, a grumble in my stomach neatly provoking a change of conversation.

-No thanks I've gotta get on, and, swallowing the last of his coffee, shot to his feet.

-Nice to meet you Ian, he said, a smile lighting up his face, and we stood with him as he looked around the room, giggling again. -And... his head circling the room... Enjoy!

I watched as Martin walked him to the door, and hugged him and said thanks as he moved out of the door, popping something in the breast pocket of Tom's shirt, before something stopped him, and he turned back and whispered conspiratorially to Martin, who nodded and whispered in return, and they shook hands again, and he was gone. I stretched out on the sofa and shook my head at Martin as he walked over to me smiling.

-What?

-What, I said, indicating his question should've been rhetorical. What do y'think what? Uh-huh, this place, this incredible place, you, this incredible you... Can we really live here?

-Mmmm, let me think... Yep! he said and kissed me.

Well... We had to Christen the flat somehow.

After we'd finished, we found ourselves in the firm, dry bed, the crisp white covers playing loosely around our naked bodies, as Martin rolled a fat one, and I thought about all the ways I loved him, as satisfied tingles ran over my skin, and a deep happiness warmed me. It was so quiet - we hadn't seen anyone, and I wondered how many of the apartments were actually occupied. This place must cost grands, over one at least, and I wanted to ask Martin how much, if only to let him know that I cared, but let it slide, the question seeming impertinent. I looked at him as he licked the papers, and could still only shake my head and smile.

-You're off again...

-I know. I'm just so amazed. You are *such* a star.

-Lighting your way, beacon in your darkness...

-Yep. You know then?

-Had my suspicions.

-Martin, what can I do? To help with the rent and stuff?

-I told you, leave that to me...

-I know, but I want to help.

-Well, wait and see, I've got a few ideas...

Next morning, I awoke to find the bed empty, unsure for how long, and remembered there was a shower, and stood under its abrasive jets, and felt clean for the first time in years. I was going to put on clean clothes, then smelt the ones I'd brought with me, and realised they were far from so - a cloying dampness inhabited them. My God, how long have I smelt like that? Five years... I wondered if there was a washing machine, and walked into the living room, staggered to see it even bigger than I had remembered it, and found Martin on the sofa, reading from a small booklet and playing with a grey remote control unit.

-Morning mate, I didn't realise you were in.

He was engrossed in the booklet, and nodded and grunted.

-What's that? I asked, nodding at his hands.

-New stereo. D'ya like it? and he looked over to the corner, to a pine shelving unit, home to a shiny new music system, green lights shining out from its front.

-Oh my God... Martin, you're mental!

-You love it! It seems relatively straight forward... And before you ask yes it has a phono stage, so you can plug your deck into it and it'll work. And it's got an optical out so I can use my MusQ direct...

-How can we afford all this?

-If you ask that question one more time I'm gonna bitch slap ya...

-Promise?

-Anyway, this is just a toy. Wait til you see what else I got you...

-Got *me*?

-Okay, got *us*. He nodded his head over to beyond the sofa. A two-tone blue box, which shimmered and changed colour as I moved towards it, the letters PSV on the side.

-What the fuck's a PSV?

-PS-Five. As in Playstation. Sony Playstation. Only came out last week. You should be honoured, there's not many in the shops...

I looked at my watch. Five past nine.

-You been shopping already? Where d'ya find anywhere open? but he ignored my question, grunting instead and hitting a button on the remote control. Enormous noise came out of the tiny speakers placed against the end wall, and as Martin hit the remote and turned down the volume to merely a scream, he nodded at me, agreeing with my unspoken question - how the fuck did that much sound come out of things so tiny? He winked at me.

-Welcome to the twenty-first century, he said.

I'd helped him remove the enormous plasma screen from its box and push it against the wall, where it stayed, defying gravity - another purchase. Then we'd taken the moulded plastic pebble

that constituted the PS-V from its anastatic container and placed it on the floor below, where it sat, looking like a cartoon pool of friendly oil, a slot on the front like a flat mouth.

-Where's it plug in? I asked, uncertainly.

-Doesn't. Wireless protocol, like the handsets. He handed me one, the warm squidgy vinyl moulding to my hand.

-Eee, it feels like a pervert's handshake!

-Nice. It responds to your mood. Semi-sentient they call it.

-Does that mean I'm a pervert?

-You said it not me!

-You mean this thing knows what I'm thinking?

-Not really. Just takes data from your skin and uses it in a game context. They reckon it encourages one-mind-pointedness... Fucking Japanese!

Where had I been, whilst the world was changing? Where had all these things come from? I'd only got a digital TV two years ago, and then only because a friend gave it to me - I'd hardly ever turned it on, except to watch old movies on the free channels. I looked around the room and felt like I'd walked into an electronics shop.

-Do we really need all these things, Martin?

-Nope. But they're great fun!

He squeezed his handset, and the screen faded in, an insinuating polyphonic note rising in time with a Sony logo.

-Well, at least some things don't change, I said, its simple, subtly serifed typeface glowing familiar on the screen, below it the legend 'no disc' pulsing in blue letters. Martin moving to beyond the sofa and retrieving a flat box from which he removed a disc, placing it in the slot, which sucked the disc in smoothly, *and smiled* - I swear to God the slot smiled!

-Whoa, I shuddered. That's spooky!

Martin giggled and nodded. -Pretty cute though...

A splash screen ignited with the words GRAND LARCENY III, the sound of impacts as each word landed coursing through the speakers of the new stereo. I looked at Martin, my question unnecessary. He nodded, almost apologetically.

-'Fraid so. Sony knows, ya know. SIS they call it - Seamless Integration Systems. The stereo knows there's a PS-V in the room,

the PS-V knows there's a TV. They're talking to each other while we watch...

I left them to it - they seemed happy enough without me - and went into the kitchen and remembered I was looking for a washing machine, before Captain Fantastic landed and brought tidings of a new planet. The kitchen was gorgeous, but there was no sign of a washing machine. I opened brushed steel doors, until I found another door with a window in it, its bevelled glass reminiscent of a washer... sort of. I looked at its face. Nothing. Walking back into the lounge, I found Martin already engrossed in the game.

-I think I've found a washing machine, I said, uncertain, but there doesn't appear to be any buttons...

-Oh God you're so last century! Talk to it!

-What?

-Tell it to open, he said, exasperated.

I was unsure if he was making fun of me, and it was only when he looked away from the screen and his eyes followed me, that I walked back into the kitchen, and stood in front of what I still only presumed was the washing machine. I looked back at Martin, but he nodded.

-Go on, talk to it.

I felt so stupid, but finally said -Open the door...

The door opened with a hiss.

-Oh my God, I said without emotion. It's *Terminator*. We're living in *Terminator* world.

Dead again. Would I ever get the hang of this? I stared at my corpse, my representative in this virtual world, as cops kicked me, causing spurts of blood to splatter the screen, the all-too familiar legend 'Game Over' resolving as the camera craned up to reveal the scene of mayhem I'd been partly responsible for creating. A burnt out casino, the charred remains of a tank poking out from its walls, cops like brainless ants milling around in front, one or two of them deliberately going out of their digitally imposed way to kick my prone outline, bleeding on the pavement.

-I have to accept I'm shit at this.

-Don't give up, you're getting better.

I threw the handset on the table in disgust, and watched as it contracted, like it too had just died.

-Oh what's the fucking point?

-The point is you're learning. Isn't that enough?

-But learning what? I don't see why I should learn how to get killed by cops, it has no real world applications I want to partake in...

-You're not learning to die, you're learning *not* to die.

-Hardly. Where's this game come from anyway... Don't tell me, America.

-Yeah, and under the counter too. There's only a few places who've got it, and it's one title they don't advertise.

I could see why. Its blend of anti-social violence and general air of unwholesomeness left me feeling a little ill, and I didn't consider myself that shockable. Less every day in fact...

-Its real value lies in the fact that it's so accurate.

-Come on Martin, that's not the real world. Despite what the tabloids say, we're a long way from that.

-Not the scenarios I admit, but the details.

He flicked through screens, deactivating various settings on the handset and accessing a list of the cars you could 'jack inside the game.

-Look at this. Every car has the exact layout of its real-world counterpart. If you turn off sentience, you can drive them just how you would if you were sitting in one. And you can steal them just the same way. It's the real reason it's an illicit game. They've thought of everything...

I watched as he flicked through the screens, until he came to the Maelstrom. Highlighting it, he squeezed a part of the handset, and we're suddenly sitting inside the same car we had gone to the solstice party in a few weeks before. Well, virtually.

-You're right, it *is* accurate.

-And look at this, he said, squeezing again. A list of the various systems within the car lit up the picture, with lines drawing themselves towards the various parts of the interior. It was practically a how-to guide. How-to... steal.

-Where *is* the Maelstrom by the way, I asked, slightly blushing at the use of the impersonal article. *The* Maelstrom, not *your*

Maelstrom.

-That's long gone. Don't worry, we'll get another. I want you to try this...

He squeezed a few more times, then held the handset out in front of him, shifting his weight over to the side of the sofa, his arms staying in position holding the handset.

-Here, take it.

I took the handset. It was inert, none of the cloyingness it had had before evident.

-Try and keep it where it is, just turn it in its orbit...

As I held it, it seemed to be locked in some sort of field, like when you place the same ends of magnets together, or try and move a gyroscope. Odd energy.

-Whoa, it feels weird.

-It's not a steering wheel but you get used to it. Squeeze right top.

I did, and heard a pretty accurate representation of the Maelstrom's deep throb as the car started.

-You accelerate with top left, break with bottom. Gears top and bottom right, like the real thing. You steer by... steering!

I gingerly pressed the top left area of the handset, and the virtual world started passing in front of my eyes. I laughed, and turned the handset to the right. The world spun in front of me, the sound of screeching rubber on tarmac. I instinctively let go of the left button, sending the car into a controlled skid.

-Nice! You've got to remember with the Maelstrom, it's designed on a Formula One archetype - very small movements of the wheel lead to big movements on the road. Took *me* a while to get used to it.

-Where's reverse? I asked.

-Same as the real one, hit the top right until you see 'R' on the dash.

My eyes scanned the fascia.

-Got it. Is that accurate too?

-Like I say, it all is.

I threw the car into reverse and tried again. This time I had more luck controlling the car, and shot a look at the dash to see I was doing 120mph. It felt really good, the car responding

instantly to each tiny tweak I made to the steering.

-Shall I stop asking if this is an accurate depiction now?

-I think you should. Just take it for granted, it's as real as it could be.

I hit the accelerator, and imagined my neck snapping as the car responded. 160, 180, 190... 195mph. The landscape bitmapped as we sped through it.

-Can it really go that fast?

-Now do you understand what I meant when I said I was taking it easy for you?

I let go of the accelerator and let the car cruise to a stop. This was really exciting.

-Can you drive? asked Martin as I put down the handset, fighting with it for a moment until it passed out of some invisible beam.

-Sort of. Never passed my test. Only tried a few times, when I was a kid. Uncle's car.

-Well this is the best way I know of learning. We'll have you racing before you know it...

It's a few weeks later and we're lying in bed, my breath coming in short gasps as he mounts me, his heavy body on top of me, a warm aura of musk enveloping us, our eyes open and staring deep through each other, our mouths pressed together, breathing through gritted teeth as his cock pushes into me, my legs around him. My heart is pounding and I can feel his mirrored through his chest, punching me. I roll over and I'm on top of him, his cock slipping from my hole as I climb on top of him, hitching up his legs and forcing myself inside. And then it happens, a feeling so strong it exposes me, tears open my viscera and leaves me gasping - I want to be inside him, not just six inches of me but all of me, want our skin to dissolve and merge into one essence. I'm breathing so hard I'm hyperventilating, but there is something unsatisfied, something that just refuses to be satiated. I want to... *be* him, to wear him, to walk around inside him, to merge myself completely until I do not exist, and him neither, no longer two separate entities but one single *entirety*. I want to cry because I know it's impossible, but this desire, like none I've ever known, it



paralyses me, makes me numb with too much feeling. I grip his hair and stare into his eyes - is he feeling it too? and without knowing how he nods, his breath so hard, his eyes shining, and we clutch each other, a violence not far from the surface, a beautiful dissatisfaction, an energising frustration that eats into us, until I shoot deep inside him, through him, and he grips me in unyielding hands and fucks my stomach until he too is spent, and it is only long after, that either of us loosens our angry grip, and we fall apart, sobbing.

-Martin, I say, shattering a long silence.

He looks over at me, his eyes still shining, and nods, breath still coming through gritted teeth.

-Is this how people feel when they decide to have babies?

He looks back at the ceiling, holding his breath, then nods repeatedly and moans.

-Do *you* want babies?

He looks back at me, again holding his breath, again his eyes outshining the darkness, nods again and smiles, moaning.

-Do you want... *my* baby?

Again a pause. Again an emphatic series of nods.

I look up at the ceiling.

-Because I want yours. More than anything else in the world.

It couldn't last. Nothing that intense can, has no right to expect to. There was something dangerous about it, something akin to sickness perpetually ungraspable. It expanded and divided, became gargantuan and suffocating, a burden that words could not fathom, that action couldn't quench. I was in danger of going supernova, glossolalial, of burning out in a white-hot litany of I-Love-Yous. Every time I looked at him, I ached to tell him, to go further than I had before, to express something which forever eluded expression. It was far from healthy. I wanted nothing but this, as close to satisfied for the first time in my life, a domestic idyll complete. But something gnawed at me, questions I couldn't answer. Is this it now? Is this really all you want? Have you found your final partner, forsaking all others for the rest of time? Won't we end up hating each other...?

We would rise, play games - I was becoming a proper driver,

shunning the game as such and spending my time stealing cars and evading arrest, throwing whatever roadster I could half-inch around tight city streets, always a few blocks ahead of the forces of law and order. Martin was impressed, and I'd pepper my getaways with handbrake turns and stunt tricks to encourage another outburst of praise, the best encouragement I could have. Each day would end with some perfect delicacy that Martin prepared, accompanied by a delicious European wine he had found God knows where. We had become quite the bourgeois couple, inured in our penthouse apartment, oblivious to the world at large, refusing to watch the news, preferring instead the autonomy of a virtual gangland, over which we wreaked our vengeance, an ethereal Bonnie and Clyde.

Then one day, as the summer sun set over the river, lighting the room with a pink splendour, a vision we had gotten so used to that even this failed to raise a comment, Martin asked what day it was.

-Tuesday I think... yeah Tuesday.

-Date?

-Dunno... Twenty-something? Oh hang on, it's the thirty-first.

-Thought so. Got an appointment tomorrow. There's some people I want you to meet...

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