

# XQ-28

*The Story of a Gene*

## Chapter 16

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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.*

SC04: 03:21:00 15/08/12

South-west facing view. Shutters flank electronics section of store. Shutters buckle with impact from outside. Pause. Second impact; shutters buckle further and give way at bottom. Third impact; shutters break free of runners, rear of vehicle visible through broken shutter. Vehicle exits. Reemerges at high speed taking shutters with it. Rear of black Range Rover enters store demolishing security shutters and comes to rest knocking over display tower of television sets. Far-side door of Range Rover opens; youth dressed in dark tracksuit and balaclava jumps out.

Through now demolished shutters bonnet of silver Porsche 986 enters store. Far-side car door opens; similarly dressed youth emerges. Both youths grab boxes of electronic goods from shelves and ferry them to rear seat of Porsche. Youths exit both sides of screen, return with more boxes which they deposit in rear of car. Second youth smashes display case of portable hi-fi devices with blunt instrument. Scoops up contents and walks them to car. First youth enters frame left dragging large box. Attempts to lift into car but abandons it. Second youth exits frame right. Re-enters carrying stack of boxes; deposits in car. Exits frame right. First youth enters frame, looks around; stops, motions to second youth then climbs into far-side of vehicle. Second youth runs to near-side door, enters vehicle and closes door as vehicle reverses at speed. Vehicle exits shutters.

Calm.

## Chapter 16 In Business

**M**y heart's beating so fast I can hardly pull enough air into my lungs through the slit in the rough woolen balaclava to keep up. I pull the mask from my face and throw it through the open window of the Porsche. I can hear Martin breathing hard too, in the moments between my breaths. The sirens are blaring behind us, the inside of the car lit by distant blue strobes, getting more distant as Martin floors the accelerator, pushing me back into the racing seats that hug me reassuringly, the night road that stretches out before us guzzled by the sleek silver bonnet, hungrily munching tarmac. My whole body is coursing with electricity - I have never felt a rush like this, unsure if it is the excitement of the raid or the possibility of impending arrest that is responsible. I thought I had discovered a new peak of exhilaration, sickeningly mixed with fear and transgression, as I had followed Martin's instructions to bypass the security systems of the Porsche we had found in the car park of the medieval castle overlooking my own home town, deep in the English countryside. Martin's face had cracked open into a smile of such pride as I gunned the engine I thought nothing would ever make me happier, but each moment of the last hour had set a new standard of excitement my normally sedentary heart had difficulty coping with.

-Oh my God what a fuckin rush! I screamed as Martin

swerved the car from side to side of the dual carriageway that ringed the city, flashing an ecstatic face at him as he smiled back at me.

-Keep it together adrenaline boy we aint free yet, and shot a look into the rear view mirror, whatever he saw there making him floor the accelerator even harder.

I looked over my shoulder, and through the practically ornamental back window, to see the bonnet of a Daimler police car closing in on us, the blue lights of at least three other vehicles hazing the air around it. Martin dropped a gear and revved the engine noisily, putting shiny black road between us and our pursuers. I turned in my seat and watched the road in front snake alarmingly to the left, a blind corner that I knew was followed by a T-junction, and instinctively grabbed the dashboard, and - I hate to admit it - screamed like a girl...

-Shut the fuck up Ian! Martin shouted as he flipped the gears down, I know what I'm doing, and swung the wheel locking the steering and negotiating a right angle in full skid before gunning the engine and returning us to the straight and narrow. I bit my lip and contemplated flinging my arms around him and kissing his face, but knew he wouldn't appreciate it, turning in my seat instead to see the Daimler spin out of control and smash sideways into a low wall over which it flipped and disappeared from view.

-Whoops! said Martin bathetically, a little laugh creasing his face as he shot a sideways glance at me. God was I enjoying this...

We flew down the wide road at tear-inducing speed, and I sunk low in my seat, watching the remaining police cars recede in the wing mirror as Martin worked up the gears, increasing the revs just enough to enable access to the next one. I looked over at the speedo to see us doing 160, the cars behind us getting smaller all the time.

-That's probably the only fast car they had, Martin is saying, I bet they really fuckin hate us now...

-There's a roundabout coming up, I warned, but something about the way the road was narrowing before us made him anticipate it, and, dropping a gear to slow the engine, swung wildly over to the wrong side of the road, keeping the car going straight on as we practically ignored the mini roundabout and

kept a straight course through bollards and back onto our own side. I made a mental note to calm my reactions to each twist of the road, vocal accompaniment superfluous - Martin knew how amazing his driving was, there was no need for me to tell him.

-Nice night for a cruise, he said, the roads are completely empty...

A giggle nestled in my belly, but I let it lay there, warming me. This amount of fun should be illegal... Looking again in the wing mirror, I was satisfied to see it clear of any pursuers, and with every white line that blurred past us we seemed closer to total freedom.

-Crossroads ahead with traffic lights, look like they're red, and Martin seemed to remember something, and pulled a small grey box from his pocket and dropped it into my lap.

-From now on when you know there's lights push that middle button.

I pointed the box through the windscreen and hit the button, and marvelled as I saw the approaching light change to amber and then green as we were still a few hundred yards from the junction. I looked at Martin open mouthed. He smiled and raised his eyebrows.

-Courtesy of the emergency services, all ambulances have them...

I wondered if he'd ever robbed one, and discounted the question, not really wanting to know. We shot through the lights at increasing speed and into a wide road flanked on one side by houses, with fields on the other.

-That's my old school, I said, pointing at an outcrop of pre-fabricated buildings as they flashed past me, all memories a blur.

-Shame we haven't got time to stop and say hello, just give 'em a wave for old time's sake...

*If they could see me now, that little gang of mine...*

-Now if the cops are smart, Martin was saying, they're gonna have roadblocks set up soon, the more back roads we take the less likely they are to get us in time.

-Okay take a right at the next roundabout, waving with my hand, and Martin slowed quickly and shot the wrong way round the roundabout onto another ring road and back towards the city.

-Do you reckon it's wise to head back this way?

-It's okay I've done this bit before. Did I tell you this is one of me favourite cities? Every time I come here I double the crime figures...

We shot along the ring road, our headlights slicing open the rich country darkness before us, lines of conifers glowing black against the orange glow of the city to our right. Martin slowed the Porsche in anticipation of another roundabout.

-Do a left, Martin, I know a shortcut, and he pulled the wheel hard, the Porsche gripping the tarmac with customary control swinging the car left into a narrower road, pitch black without street lights.

-I used to go this way on the school bus! There's a village up ahead with three roads leading out of it - they can't possibly block all the routes back to the main road...

-This is good, you're thinking well.

-Thanks, I said, genuinely proud of his praise. Hard left hairpin coming up...

He shot down three gears and swung the car firmly round the corner. I gripped the handle above my head to stop me from falling onto Martin's side of the car. Boxes toppled in the rear of the car, and I looked round to see familiar logos scoot across the poor excuse for a back seat.

-Was there really any point stealing these, Martin? They can't be worth that much, especially compared to the car?

-It's not always about money you know - tonight's about entertainment! And besides, they may come in handy later...

Again an agenda I couldn't anticipate. Luckily there was another tight curve that I could.

-Right hairpin, I said, just in time, and again Martin dropped a gear and swung us round it, a little too fast for comfort.

-Come on Ian *concentrate!* We do NOT want to end up in a ditch...

I focussed. I could picture the whole village in my mind, despite not having seen it in over five years. The manor in whose grounds I had watched medieval reenactments, and behind which we had bought our live Christmas trees. A different life...

-Okay, straight run to the end of the village, then narrow

lanes til we're back on the main road.

-How far?

-Bout three miles I reckon. There's some blind corners you gotta be careful of, but at this time of the morning I think we'll be fine...

-Anything else I should know?

I tried to think. We were out of the village now and into deep country. I knew there was something...

As we hit the bridge, I remembered - just too late...

-Oh fuck a hump back bri...

We're doing over eighty. As we hit the brow of the bridge we take off - sudden silence and the engine roaring appallingly. Neither of us says a thing - we're both waiting for the impact, knowing it will come, but when? I want to tell Martin to slow down, but know we have no air brakes - we're literally out of control. I look over at Martin, expecting to see the surprise I'm feeling mirrored on his face, but see only stoic concentration, his arms relaxed, intently waiting...

My head flies forward as we hit the road, a white flash filling my vision and a screech in my ears as the wheels intermittently grip the tarmac as we bounce along the road. I whip my head round and see the hedge slide past us as Martin struggles for control, wrestling with the wheel to navigate the curve that follows the bridge, the Porsche careening around the bend, wildly swerving from one side of the road to the other. The swerves become less and less sickening as the road levels out, and dropping a gear Martin accelerates, restoring the car to order. I am speechless, 'sorry's' superfluous. Martin merely flashes a look. I refuse to articulate what it means. All I can think is - he's an artist...

We continue in silence. My navigation has already proved inadequate. I want to scream apologies, beg him to forgive, and start to say something but he stops me with a movement of his hand. I feel beyond stupid. If Martin was any less than the greatest driver in the world, we would be dead now - I know this with a greater certainty than anything I have ever known. There is nothing to say.

I remember there's a junction coming up - a three-way trident

that reconnects us to different points in the main road. I am unsure whether I should say anything, but before I can decide, we pass a triangular sign that schematicises the approaching choices.

-Pick a number, says Martin, his voice calm and devoid of either bitterness or judgment.

-Two, I say without thinking, and Martin nods and accelerates, a sudden determination overtaking him. We shoot over the junction without slowing, and in a second I realise this is his true meter, his chosen form - to drive like there is no fear, no restriction, defying all danger and oblivious to everything but destination. The shame I felt just seconds before dissolves and is replaced by a realisation that, in a sense, I had given him a gift, an opportunity to test his skills, a worthy challenge he had more than risen to, and, rather than be angry with me, he was in some way... *grateful*.

I loved him more than life itself.

The fields stretched flat either side of the road, the moonlight glinting off its oily surface, a thin black snake slithering through mud. Ahead of us we could see the main road looming, and the flat fields still devoid of crops gave us a clear view of its length - empty.

-There's a tight left curve back onto the main road, I said, my voice now solid and unapologetic.

-Thanks, he said, genuinely. I was right. He didn't hate me.

As we approached the road a distant blue light attracted my attention, perhaps a mile and a half away, coming from the city.

-Cops! I said, coming this way.

-They took their time... how many?

-Only one car I reckon.

-Good. They must've thought we were going south. They haven't got a chance...

We took the corner and shot round the next bend.

-Left here, I said, my confidence restored, and we sped around the smooth turn, speeding up and into the middle of the road straddling the camber. Again conifers flanked the road, its smooth surface now resembling a race track.

-Mmmm, nice cologne dear, joked Martin, as a sickly smell filled the car.

-Euch, chicken shit, I said, there's a battery farm the other side of the woods.

-Well, that's one thing they can't say we are after tonight, said Martin, flashing me a cheeky grin that proved whatever grudge he may have harboured was long gone.

We passed a sign welcoming us to the adjoining county, and my body relaxed, realising that the car following us had no jurisdiction here. Martin noticed it but resisted my calm.

-I know what you're thinking Ian, but it's not over yet. This county's got more money, and they certainly know we're coming... Know any more shortcuts?

I thought ahead, and realised that there were many obstacles to navigate before we would hit the motorway. My face dropped - where to begin?

-Tell me everything.

-Okay. Clear road for about five miles. Then a village, windy and dangerous. After that there's more clear road, then a bridge over the river - toll booth.

-Uh-oh, said Martin. Any way to avoid it?

I thought hard, and realised I'd never bothered bypassing it before.

-If there is, I don't know it.

-Shit! If they've thought that far ahead they'll get us there, he said, and floored the accelerator, shooting us up to nearly 180mph.

I was sweating. If Martin was worried, this was definitely the time for me to panic, and I swallowed hard to keep the contents of my stomach from rising. We'd had such a lovely dinner, it'd be a shame to lose it now.

The silence was disquieting. Of all the cars we'd stolen in the last fortnight, this was by far and away the most insulated. It felt like we were doing little more than 100mph, when in reality we were doing nearly twice that. Even now I had time to contemplate how luxurious the ride was - it was always at times like these that the most quotidian observations seemed to insinuate themselves upon one's consciousness...

-The more clear road we can put between us and anything behind us the better chance we got.

I felt useless. What could I do but sit there, a silent observer to the passage of tall trees and empty road?

-Tell you what you can do, said Martin, as if reading my mind. You can roll a fat one and stop worrying!

-You serious? You really think it's a good idea to get stoned at a time like this?

-Fuck it, if we gonna go down we may as well be stoned off us faces - there'll be no time later if they do get us!

I pushed my hand into Martin's trouser pocket, and felt the packet of papers and reseal bag of weed, nestling warmly next to his firm cock, and pushed them further down into his pocket and massaged him through his trousers, smiling as something else occurred to me.

-Now that's definitely not a good idea, he said.

I wasn't so sure. If we were gonna go down as he put it, there'd be no opportunity to go down in its more obvious sense - they'd be sure to separate us on arrest.

-But what if we are arrested? When will we get another chance?

-Okay mate that swings it - we're definitely going free tonight, and he floored the accelerator and kept it there, the car hitting its maximum speed of 190mph. I pulled the papers and weed from his pocket, and despite the speed making me feel like I should keep my eyes on the road - for what reason I knew not - I turned my attention to preparing a spliff.

As I lit the joint, I looked up to see the village approaching, and removed it from my mouth.

-Okay this is the first village. Remember what I said, it's pretty dangerous through this bit... Right hand curve, bout eighty degrees... cool! Drop and left forty... zig-zag followed by left thirty... you fucking star!

The first few drags on the spliff took the edge off my nerves, and I passed it to Martin as the road straightened out again.

-That was the village that the last battle of the War of the Roses was fought in, I said, we're just inside Yorkshire now.

All this, and history too...

We passed signs warning of the number of fatalities on this part of the road, and I was shocked to see them already well into

triple figures. Martin saw it too, and raised his eyebrows as if to say 'don't worry, they're not me.'

Let's face it, nobody else was.

-The toll bridge is about two miles away, it's a blind curve before it, there'll be no way of knowing if they've blocked it off before we hit the bridge.

-Ian, I reckon it'll be there if it's anywhere, y'know?

Yet we still drove on, the next mile flying by in twenty seconds. Then we slowed, so quickly the contrast was alarming, until we were doing a leisurely 50mph. I looked at him and smiled, something resigned and very calm within me.

We turned the corner and saw the bridge, saw the toll barrier down and the lights from the cabin. Nothing else. It was like the wind had gone out of our sails - we were prepared for the obvious, for the expectedly unexpected. Nothing. We looked at each other, both bemused. We pulled up to the booth. Martin pushed a button and his window slid down.

-Evening.

The boy in the cabin looked up from his book and unthinkingly put his hand out.

-Shit, you got any change? asked Martin, looking sheepishly at me.

-Haven't got a penny!

-Nice car, said the boy.

-Thanks. How much is it?

-Fifty pence, said the boy, his face unemotional.

-Sorry lad, we've got nothing on us.

The youth was looking alluringly at the steering wheel, and I suddenly realised what he was coveting.

-Martin, give him the spliff.

Martin had obviously forgotten he was holding it. He looked at it and jumped, and passed the spliff to the boy, who took it with a little smile.

-'Ere mate has there been any news flashes on the radio?

-Haven't heard anything. Why?

-No reason, said Martin. Are we okay to go through?

-Certainly are, he said, inhaling deeply. Really nice pot!

The barrier raised, and we drove through, waving to the boy



as we went.

-Sorry, but that was fucking weird, I said. Are we just really stoned and dreaming this?

-Not sure, said Martin, as we cruised over the bridge at fifty.

The village that followed necessitated caution - even the adhesive road-holding of the Porsche couldn't negotiate the tight curves at anything above fifty, and I was grateful for the calmer pace. The sun was coming up, bathing the village in pale summer light, and it occurred to me that we resembled an old married couple out for a leisurely Sunday drive. The image made me smile, until we left the village and the road widened, and Martin floored the accelerator and took us up to a speed befitting seriousness.

-Okay we got about another five miles of this kind of road, then there's a steep drop to rejoin the motorway.

-That'll be the next place they'll try and stop us if I know cops. Do we just drop onto the main road?

-Big roundabout. We want the fourth exit I think - basically, we go right.

The road was disappearing in front of us, eaten rapaciously by Martin's appetite for speed. In less than a minute and a half we were approaching the hill.

-At the bottom the road bends round to the left - you will have to slow down...

Dark trees ushered us into the bend before the hill. I could hear something cutting the air, but didn't make the connection, until we turned the corner. A black helicopter sat like vengeance in the sky above us; below we could see the roundabout, swarming with cops, all exits blocked by police cars, looking for all the world like a scene from GL3.

-Oh fuck! They called out the cavalry!

Martin didn't say a word, just dropped a gear to impede our pace down the one-in-eight gradient. I had no idea what we were going to do once we hit the roundabout, but Martin showed no sign of retreat. Our route onto the roundabout was clear - every other road off it barricaded. The helicopter had swooped down and was sitting just feet above us, following us intently, the noise from its blades filling our ears as if forcing us to make a mistake.

-Dickheads! Right you say?

-Yes but...

There was no point in arguing. Martin had seen a gap and was heading for it with calm determination. Before I had time to say any more we were shooting round the roundabout the wrong way and skidded on loose pebbles before the car caught traction and flew forwards, down the wrong side of the dual carriageway. We got so close to the cops I could actually see their amazement at what we'd done. Martin was laughing.

-Nnnn, he uttered, sticking his tongue in his bottom lip and gurning gaumlessly, how stupid??

I looked out the front window, and saw the headlights of approaching lorries, and wondered for a second who were the stupid ones, them or us? Martin flicked the headlights onto full beam, sounded the horn and kept it there, sitting in what was the outside lane to the approaching traffic, and took the car up to full speed. I looked over my shoulder, saw the helicopter still following us but already losing ground, and saw too the police cars that had made a barrier set off to follow us down the adjoining carriageway.

I looked back to see the lorry ahead pull over, its horn jammed on too, and I waved a 'sorry' to the irate driver staring open mouthed at us as we shot past him.

-Nothing wrong with manners is there?

-Quite right too - everyone says how polite you are...

-Martin, just incidentally, what the fuck are we gonna do?

-Drive til we can't drive no more was my plan. Why, you got a better one?

I didn't. We had the best part of a hundred miles ahead of us, there would be plenty of opportunities for the cops to stop us in any one of them. The cars behind us would be radioing ahead to alert other divisions that we were extremely dangerous and capable of anything. Unlike this lot, they would be prepared for every eventuality. We no longer had surprise on our side. Our only advantage was speed and manoeuvrability.

The rotors of the helicopter began to recede, and another quick glance behind us confirmed that we were putting clear road between us and our pursuers.

-Well, we appear to be losing the chopper...

-Of course we are, it can only do about 150 - as long as we're going in a straight line we'll beat it. The only advantage it's got is on windy roads. They must like us though - costs grands to scramble that one!

We took a blind corner, and passed a huge lorry, luckily in its inside lane. It was past us before it even sounded its horn.

-I don't mean to be a wuss, but do you think we could get on the right side of the road soon...?

-Spoilsport, said Martin disappointedly. We'll have to wait for a break in the central reservation, unless...

He had thought of something, I had no idea what. He was looking at the other carriageway, scanning ahead. I looked in the wing mirror and could see no sign of anything following us.

-Seems a shame to lose this much of an advantage until we need to. What's up ahead?

-There's a fifty-mile-an-hour zone, safety conscious...

-Nice. Then what?

-Big roundabout. You thinking what I'm thinking?

-Bound to have. We're staying on this side for now.

We drove over a lighter patch of road, an upside-down '50' in a circle. We could see speed cameras ahead, that on cue fired off bright strobes on both sides of the road.

-They'd make nice little snapshots, shame we'll never see them.

We could see dark trees ahead that surrounded the approaching roundabout. In seconds we were on it, and again sped around it the wrong way and back onto the wrong side of the motorway. Again the police cars that had acted as a barrier began to chase us on the right side of the road. Martin began to slow the car.

-What ya doing?

-Little cat and mouse, trust me.

I looked to my left. A big BMW in police livery began to catch up with us, the central reservation between us.

-Can you see if the other police cars are on the motorway yet?

I turned in my seat to see numerous cars heading down the road towards us, all on the right side.

-Looks like they're catching up.

-Good, just give it a few more miles...

They flew past in minutes. The BMW was beside us, I could see the cop in the passenger seat shouting something, his face a mask of hatred.

-Well he's saying something, I don't know what, but I don't reckon it's 'nice driving mate'...

Martin leant forward in his seat and gave the cops a little wave, before suddenly slamming on the brakes. I jerked forward, the seat belt retarding my passage through the windscreen, as Martin pulled on the handbrake and spun the wheel to glide us through 180 degrees, the car barely resting before we hurtled back down the road, this time facing the right direction. The BMW was nowhere to be seen, the cars that were following trying hard to brake as we sped past them and back towards the roundabout.

-Well they weren't expecting that one...

-Neither was I, I said, rubbing my neck where the seatbelt had cut into it. Could you tell me if you're gonna do that again?

-Sorry, it only just occurred to me. There's a back road off this roundabout isn't there?

I thought ahead, and remembered where he meant, past a country park I used to go to as a child. Then I remembered where that road led.

-Oh fuck Martin no... We're not going over the Snake are we?

-Was planning to, why?

-No reason.

But there was a reason. The Snakepass was aptly named, a serpentine road barely two cars wide that cut around hills on one side, and sheer drop on the other. I had always hated that road since I had seen the aftermath of an accident there years before - skidmarks, a missing barrier, two suitcases neatly placed on the roadside, a mangled teddy bear sprawled on top. Martin sensed my fear.

-Is it really wise to take an A-road. Won't the 'copter catch up with us?

-Could do I guess, if it's still following. You really don't want to risk it do you.

-I hate that road. And it'll slow us down. We've still got an advantage whilst we're on main roads. Like you said, they aint got nothing as fast as this.

We were approaching the roundabout, and had passed numerous police cars that had each slammed on their brakes as we passed them. I looked in the wing mirror, but could see nothing following us, noted instead that a number of articulated lorries had begun to filter off from the approaching roundabout.

-That should slow 'em down a bit, said Martin, give 'em a taste of what we had to swallow...

We heard sirens behind us, but distant enough to cause us little panic, and checking that the roundabout was now clear, Martin pulled the car right and down a long straight road framed by tall trees.

-This isn't good - if they see our tail lights they'll know for sure which way we've gone.

Martin turned off the head lights, plunging the road ahead of us into gloom lit dimly by the morning sky, shaded by trees.

-There's a park coming up I used to go to when I was a kid, entrance on the right.

-That's better, we can hang out in there for a bit 'til the noise dies down, the trees should give us a good covering if the 'copter comes back.

We entered the park, and a glance back down the road confirmed that nothing was following us... yet. A long straight pathway ran ahead of us, and Martin seemed to be scanning it for something. He spotted whatever it was and accelerated towards it, heaps of grass piled up in a clearing. He swung the car between two of the mounds, each about six feet high, and reversed back so that we could no longer see the park entrance.

-This'll help us stay hidden - the 'copter's bound to have heat cameras. The trees'll shield us, but not much. There's enough heat at the centre of these heaps to throw the cameras off.

He was thinking of everything. How often had he been in this situation before? How many amazing escapes had he made in his life so far? I noted with some embarrassment that I was shaking, the sudden calm an uncanny contrast to the havoc we had just been responsible for, but Martin wasn't even breathing hard, his

face a picture of composure. I leant over and kissed his cheek, and he dropped his eyes and smiled, and looked over at me and winked.

-You okay?

A huge sigh escaped my lips, and another followed, accompanied with a little shake of my head which turned into a nod, a confusing amalgam of emotion. It was only now that any of the preceding... what, forty minutes?... could register as having happened. My arms began to convulse, and I tried to stop them by wrapping them around Martin, and I put my head on his chest, and let his smell warm me.

-Mmmm, I'm getting better, I said as he rested his arm around my shoulders.

-Well, we're not out of the woods yet, he said, literally... a little look around the forest underlining the irony.

He stroked my head, and something suddenly welled up inside me, an unbearable rush of emotion, and before I could stop them, words I'd never shared popped out of my mouth.

-I love you Martin. I'm so in love with you it's suffocating. I've never known anyone like you, never felt anything like this. All the danger, all the risk, all the sheer insanity of everything we're doing - none of it scares me as much as the love I feel for you. It feels limitless, seems connected to a force I just can't comprehend, and all I know is, I never want it to stop.

There were tears falling down my face, but no sobs accompanied them. Instead, a feeling of relief, a tension that had been building for months suddenly found its release valve, and I stopped shaking, and just looked at him, and as he kissed me - softly, tenderly - I heard a siren doppler past the park gates, followed by another, and we sat holding each other until the sirens died into the distance, and silence embraced us.

The drive back was uneventful. An early morning caravan of haulage lorries peppered our journey. Martin rarely dropped to below 150mph, the rising summer sun creating excellent visibility, so each time we saw a lorry up ahead, Martin pulled the Porsche over into the outside lane and cruised past the obstacle, a smooth three mile parabola of ease. We travelled due north,

until an epic cloud of condensation issuing from a power plant called us west, and we switched motorways, climbing hard up and over the Pennines. There was something settling about being a passenger, an existential question momentarily calmed; for now, at least, I knew where I was going, knew too where I had been, and for once was almost sure of who I was. Martin was beside me, we had a new car for Mr Calyx, albeit one a little worse for wear. We had a backseat full of gadgets, we'd fought off the law, and we were going home.

-Do you know the story about this place? Martin asked, as we turned a wide bend and began to drop, the two carriageways splitting either side of what looked like a farmhouse.

I gazed at him expectantly.

-This guy refused to move when a compulsory order on his farm came in. Said his family had been farming here for centuries - there was no way *he* was moving! So they had to build the motorway around him. Typical Yorkshire bastard! Different times eh? Now they'd just bulldoze his house.

We climbed again, past a sign declaring this to be the highest motorway in England, until the road dropped, and a huge city spread out below us. The sun behind us burned brightly, casting golden light over the valley, windows far below reflecting phosphorescent pixels like pinpricks in an industrial tapestry, and we were silenced by its beauty for a moment, pulling out to pass a juggernaut crawling in the inside lane.

Martin saw it first, and jammed his foot on the accelerator, jerking me back into my seat as the long sleek police car sped up too and kept alongside us. I was still blinking at the city, dazed by the sudden presence of danger just a few inches from my window, electric shocks pulsing along my arms and into my neck, strangely rendering me inert.

-What the fuck has he got beneath that bonnet? Martin was saying, as he fought to get in front of the police car, swinging the Porsche over into the outside lane.

I shook myself into motion, and turned to see them follow, a car's length between us. Martin was concentrating hard, his head bowed as he focussed on the road ahead.

-Hold on! he said as he swung the wheel, closing off the road

behind us and forcing the cops to brake, a momentary advantage that was soon lost. We were already doing 185mph, the cop car seemed capable of more.

-Okay there's nothing else for it. Grab the boxes and empty them...

I began to do as he said, polystyrene and manuals falling into the well of the car as I removed cameras and portable stereos from their packaging. Martin hit a button and my window slid down, the sudden rush of air forcing tears from my eyes, the blast deafening after the constant whine of merely rubber on tarmac.

-Take your belt off and turn round in your seat - don't worry I'll be careful! When I say now, throw the biggest ones first - aim for the windscreen.

I released the belt and turned round, kneeling in my seat and steadying myself against the back with one hand. I grabbed a camcorder by its handle and waited for Martin's word. He pulled the Porsche over between the two inside lanes, the cop car following hard left.

-Do it in one smooth movement or they'll see it coming... Now!

I pushed my arm through the window, the rush of air forcing my arm against the side of the car, and swung up and let go. The camcorder spun in the air, hit the bonnet of the police car and bounced into the top of the screen, a long split slicing it in two. The car braked and swerved right, out of my view.

-Good shot! Didn't totally shatter it but it'll slow him down. They'll be wise to it now. Next time aim for the tyres... Use a big box!

I leant over the seat and retrieved another camcorder, a rather smart looking Panasonic still in its box, and fumbled it over the back of the seat. Martin swung the car smoothly over two lanes, as I knelt imagining myself as a bronco rider in reverse, the seat back the neck of a truculent stallion, suddenly calmed by its master. The box was too big for me to hold in one hand, and I twisted and leant against the seat and pushed the box out of the window, sitting up to see the box spin on the tarmac and smash against the bumper of the police car, the box splitting, spilling its contents in all directions and shattering a headlight.

-This is good - keep chucking stuff! They must think we're fucking lunatics now!

-What do you mean Martin, I think we're fucking lunatics, and I know us!!

-Got any better ideas? he asked, as a sleek silver digital deck flew out of the window and shattered on the tarmac behind, the cop car swerving but failing to avoid it.

-Bullseye! You're good at this - remind me to take you bowling some time...

There were still a good number of desirable consumer objects on the back seat, and I picked up a solid looking black RVM writer for my next projectile, thinking what a strange inversion this was - choosing expensive products to throw away, that most people coveted with greedy awe. It almost felt more subversive than throwing them at the cops...

-Give him time to catch up, said Martin, and aim at the windscreen again...

The miles sped past as I waited for the car to get closer, and weighed the product in my hand, getting a feel for its dimensions, trying to work out how much force I would need to throw it with accuracy. The police car was gaining fast - Martin was right to be amazed by its acceleration - even with us doing in excess of 180mph it was still capable of gaining ground on us.

-How fast d'y'reckon that thing can go?

-Fuck knows but it's gotta be well over 200. You better make this one stick mate, I don't know how long I can keep us in front...

I let his words inspire me, and closed my eyes and imagined the heavy black box making direct contact with the car's windscreen, and, flashing my eyes open to make sure I had its coordinates correct, I breathed in and let my mind empty, willed my brain to know what to do, pushed my arm out of the window and let go. Long seconds of silence...

-You fucking star! Martin whooped, and I opened my eyes to see the cop car swinging across the lanes behind us, its windscreen a mosaic of opaque shattered glass, the driver obviously blinded. I sheepishly looked over at Martin, my success almost too complete, and spun round in my seat to face the road ahead.

The miles hurtled past, the early morning roads still relatively empty, and as we took the ring road and returned to the motorway that signaled the final stretch before home, I began to believe we would make it. Sour adrenaline sat in my veins, making me feel like my skin was not my own, and I tried to clear my mind of images of further chases lest my imagination made them real enough to manifest before us. Despite the speed, there was an eerie inertia surrounding us, and I looked over at Martin to see if he was feeling it too, and sensed it there beneath his concentration. But questions began to gnaw at me. Surely the whole North-West Constabulary were mobilising against us - our crimes were now so much greater than mere car theft and ram-raiding - we had not only evaded capture, but had humiliated our pursuers, had damaged not just the metal of vehicles but the *mettle* of an entire profession. Any single copper would feel it a point of pride to capture us, to have our names on their charge sheets, and as if this were not enough, we were now passing into another county, to add regional competition to the mix. I tried to stop myself from feeling totally hopeless, to swallow what was bordering on anger at Martin's arrogance to think we could still go free, to attempt to ignore the resentment I was feeling, that he chose to commit an audacious crime one hundred and forty miles from home, without considering how the fuck we were supposed to get back in one piece. We were still risking everything, and for what? A handful of electronic trinkets, an admittedly beautiful car, but one which we certainly wouldn't get to keep, and which Mr Calyx would value less if he found out what we'd put it through.

We passed an industrial estate, the road widening to four lanes, and as we flew past the exit of a service station the familiar white and red bonnet of a police Jaguar began to track us.

-I knew it was too good to be true...

-How's your bowling arm?

-Sufficiently rested I think.

I turned wearily round in my seat and picked through the remaining commodities. Most were boxless and pocket sized, hard-disk recorders and digital cameras. There was one Sony camcorder still in its box, a VX3500, from what I'd heard the

digital equivalent of a film camera.

-Well, that one should make an impact, I said.

Martin flashed a look over his shoulder at the box.

-No leave that one - that's a present for you. S'about time you left film behind.

-But Martin, I *love* film - it's so much more beautiful than video. Video's too real - it renders every subject obscene.

The police car was gaining, and I tossed a chunky stills camera almost nonchalantly out of the window, only half-heartedly checking behind to see it shatter on the road, the near-side front wheel of the Jag colliding directly with it and causing the car to swerve before regaining control.

-So use your Nizo to capture stuff then transfer it onto video to edit it. I've done me research you know - that camera can be used to edit with. And from what I've read they reckon once you use different shutter speeds it starts to look much more like film.

-I've heard that too, I said, throwing another camera directly at the cops, my lack of concentration resulting in it glancing off the bonnet without any major damage. Thanks for thinking about me, I added, kissing him lightly on the cheek, and smiled as he sped up, a little smile brightening his face.

We were now only a few miles from the city, and I continued to lob goods at our pursuers, but, I noted, only casually caring if they made contact. The Jaguar had fallen back, obviously scared off by our seemingly sociopathic behaviour. It was difficult to get excited, there simply wasn't any adrenaline left in me.

We took a wide sweeping corner, and I threw one last RVM machine at the Jag, and saw it deflect off the radiator grill and slow the car further, then turned round in my seat to face the road. A chilling disinterest had overtaken me - this was like a bad movie I just couldn't be bothered to watch. Then I saw them - four police cars driving ahead, straddling the entire width of the road, even the hard shoulder blocked.

-I was expecting this, said Martin, a sigh confirming that he too had become bored by the whole proceedings.

-Got any ideas? A little squirt of adrenaline very nearly shaking my boredom, which I decided to resist, choosing to smile instead, my own flippancy a new entertainment.

-Oh yes... hold on.

Martin suddenly pulled the car left and over the hard shoulder, onto the sloping grassy bank of an exit we had just passed, and fighting hard to retain control on the slippery surface, ramped up and onto the sliproad. At the junction he went right and over the motorway, then left and back down onto the wrong side of the road. We saw the police cars braking ahead, each skidding in different directions, and I noted with some respect that they managed to avoid colliding with each other.

-They seem to train 'em well these days.

-Yeah, not bad...

One of the cars started off again in the same direction, the other three clumsily turning round and heading up the other side of the exit we had just taken. We stuck to the hard shoulder of the motorway and off, down the wrong side of another exit that led to a roundabout, around which we scooted at ridiculous speed, the tyres screeching deafeningly, and off into a residential area.

-There's warehouses at the end of here - I reckon there'll be somewhere we can ditch the car...

-We not taking this for Mr Calyx?

-Not worth risking it. The last thing we want to do is lead the cops straight to him. Grab the camera and get ready to run.

-Martin, did you start this whole exercise just in order to get me a camera? Couldn't we have just bought one - we're earning enough now surely?

-Where's the fun in that? And stop calling me Shirley...

I groaned at the weak joke, and turned round in my seat to retrieve the camera. But something silvery caught my eye, poking out from beneath Martin's seat. I pulled the Sony box back over with me and placed it between my feet in the front well, then leant over to fish under Martin's seat.

-What you doing?

-There's something under there, I'm just pushing it back.

Martin took a tight corner around a warehouse, and I was forced out and against his legs, my fingers sliding a smooth angular shape from under his seat. I could no longer see through the windscreen, and asked him if it was safe to sit up. When it

was, I turned round and saw a matt silver rectangle in the well behind Martin. Reaching round, I pulled it over and onto my lap.

-Fuckin ell it's a computer, isn't it?

-Nice one! Well we just made tonight very much worthwhile! They're like gold dust.

-Can we sell it?

-We'll keep it! That's a real computer, not some glorified calculator for data entry clerks. Whoever owned this car must've been important...

I pushed in a shiny button on the box's edge, and the lid popped up, a little polyphonic note announcing the machine was on. I opened the lid out, and saw an opalescent screen with little shapes on it - it was like opening a brand new toybox.

-Come on, Ian, we can check it out later, get ready to run.

-They still following us? I asked, closing the lid and looking in the wing mirror, suddenly a little embarrassed by my lack of interest in our escape.

-I've lost them by the looks of things, but best be on the safe side.

We rounded another corner - a dead end. Martin braked and swung the car into a long skid, mounted the pavement and drove on, down the side of a low industrial unit, and stopped the car.

-You bring that, I'll grab the camera.

We were running then, beside a high fence through which we could see railway tracks thirty feet below. We followed the fence until trees ahead marked the end of the estate. Martin stopped and grabbed the fence at its bottom, and holding the laptop in one arm, hugging it close to my chest, I helped him tug at the fence with the other, until the wire began to give, allowing enough space for us to crawl under.

We scrambled down the embankment, over the tracks and up the other side, following a low wall and a line of trees. We could hear distant sirens behind us, and I pictured the mayhem that must be ensuing as they scoured industrial dead ends for some sign of us. The railway tracks meant they'd have to follow us on foot, unless they knew where we were heading, which I suddenly noted even I did not.

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*XQ-28: The Story of a Gene.*  
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