

XQ-28

The Story of a Gene

Chapter 17

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Adrian Challis



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Although he believes the concept of authorship to be dead, Adrian Challis asserts the contradictory and dubious moral right to be identified as the author of this work under the Copyright and Patents Act 1986.

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 17 Cookin'

We moved through trees, a small secluded wood that backed onto houses. Martin led the way, me following obediently, holding tight onto the heavy silver laptop, hugging it for comfort. There was absolute quiet in the woods, interrupted only by our steps on the well-worn path, a desire line running through the forest towards a regular destination. I wondered how often Martin had made this journey, and dismissed the thought that he and he alone may have been responsible for this pathway. Before long, the trees began to thin out, and we crossed a road to a passageway that ran behind a row of small terraced houses, and over a cobbled street, towards the back of a large Victorian house protected by black iron gates locked shut with a chain.

-How do we get in? I asked.

Martin didn't answer, merely took one end of the chain and began unwinding it through the bars of the gate, looking at me with raised eyebrows as if to say 'typical Tom, all front.' Through the gates I saw the back of his Commer van, and noticed it leaning awkwardly to one side. It was obviously not long for this world...

We closed the gates behind us, replacing the chain that at least looked convincing, and up a short set of steps to a simple white door. Martin stepped back down the steps and looked up, and

whistled three times. I leant back and followed his gaze, and saw a set of net curtains twitch. Martin came back up the steps and stood beside me, as the sound of heavy footsteps could be heard from inside. A key turning in a lock. Then the door swung open to reveal Tom's back moving away from us. I looked at Martin but he followed Tom without returning my glance. Friendly...

We followed, up a wide central staircase that ran through the heart of the building, and onto a first floor landing with two doors leading off. Tom disappeared into a room in the right corner and we followed, through a door hanging off its hinges. Tom still hadn't spoken, and I wondered what was wrong, but decided to let the question slide until we were face to face. There was a very strong smell of fresh skunk inside the flat, that got stronger as we passed along the narrow corridor, and I could hear low music from one of the rooms at the end. Tom walked straight past the room and into the back of the house, where he must have been when Martin's whistle summoned him to the door.

As Martin passed the room on our left he looked in, nodded to someone and stepped inside. I followed him into the large living room, gloomy with the blinds closed across large windows that ran from the floor to the ceiling of what must have been the front of the house. There were three people inside, a tall dishevelled man sitting in an armchair, and a young couple slumped on a sofa. Martin moved towards the man and shook his hand.

-Fuckin' ell, Tony! I thought you were dead.

-Well, said the man, leaning forward a little too quickly, may as well be! Feels like it sometimes, a little laugh barely breaking the gaunt pallor that haunted his thin drawn face.

I looked over at the couple on the sofa and nodded a hello, which they returned, both crossing their arms in unison and gripping themselves, shivering. I looked at Martin but he didn't seem interested in introducing me to Tony, so to cover my embarrassment I moved over to the sofa and sat down.

-I'm Ian, I lied, acknowledging the ease with which it had become my name.

-Kevin, said the man, this is Tracey.

I snorted as I shook their hands, clammy and cold, and wondered if they too were using aliases. Kevin and Tracey... as if!

-You alright? I asked, and noticed that the two of them were sweating, despite the coldness of the room.

-We will be when Filthy gets back with our gear, fucker's taking his time as usual.

Martin and Tony were involved in a low inaudible conversation, and I looked at the two people sharing the sofa. The man was about twenty-five, an open quite attractive face hiding behind heavy dark-rimmed glasses too big for his features. The woman was younger, again quite attractive, if a little overweight. They were both twitching occasionally, the same vacant look on their faces, as if they were unsure why they were there. I suddenly didn't know what to say, and let my eyes wander around until something occurred to me. I noticed a huge bruise on the woman's leg, a yellow and purple smudge that covered the whole of her left calve.

-Ouch! What happened to you?

She looked blankly at me, then down at her leg before registering what I meant.

-Oh that. *He* did it yesterday, motioning towards 'Kevin'.

I looked at the man, who was looking down at the bruise too. -Accident?

-No, said Kevin, without emotion. She was being a cunt.

The two of them looked into each other's eyes, and kissed, then held each other as they both stared at Tracey's leg. She looked up at me and smiled, almost proudly. Who the fuck were these people, and what exactly was their problem?

-Want some ice cream? asked Tracey, sitting forward and grabbing a large round tub from the table in front of her.

-No thanks, I said, I'm feeling a bit sick actually.

-Best thing for it, said Tracey. I feel sick all the time, ice cream's the only thing I can stomach.

Kevin was gripping himself tightly again, a sharp intake of breath suddenly animating him.

-Where the fuck is Filthy? When you don't want him you can't get rid of him, when you need him he's never around.

-Who's Filthy?

-You not met him? Thought everyone knew Silvers. Total cunt.

I looked over at Martin to try and attract his attention, hoping he would say something to get me away from these two sorry excuses for human beings, but he was still engrossed in conversation with Tony. I looked at him. His face was dark, a blackness around his eyes only slightly lighter than the thin goatee and crumpled jet black hair that bordered his face. His cheeks were sallow, looking like he was permanently sucking them in, and his skin seemed to hang off him, as if he was borrowing it from a larger brother. He too was sweating, and although his conversation with Martin seemed to be quite involved, I couldn't help thinking that he would rather be somewhere else. He was puffing on a cigarette that he never moved very far from his face. Martin was looking at him with a mixture of mild disinterest and something bordering on... pity.

Just then Tom appeared in the doorway, a sudden ball of wayward energy, and I took his arrival as an excuse to stand up.

-Oi you ignorant fuckers, I'm in the kitchen.

Martin too stood up, and nodding a farewell to Tony, and me one to the fuck-ups on the sofa, we followed Tom through the door. In the long narrow kitchen sat a young man of mixed race, his clothes smart and unassumingly expensive. He looked towards us as we walked in, a friendly face that cracked open into a sudden smile that disappeared almost as quickly as it had begun. As I got inside the room, an acrid smell filled my nostrils, and as my eyes stung I tried hard not to baulk.

-Tom, what the fuck is that smell?

-Ammonia. Yeah, sorry, his familiar little giggle escaping for the first time since we'd walked in, I'm cooking.

I looked at the work surface. A bag of coke lay open on the bench, a glass of water and a plastic bottle of clear liquid beside it. Tom had his back to us, was already stirring a milky liquid in a spoon with a pin. As I watched, the liquid began to thicken into a rubbery paste, the smell coming from it still stinging my eyes. I looked at Martin, but he just shot a glance at the ceiling.

I took a seat around the small kitchen table, next to the smartly-dressed man.

-Aye aye, what you got there? the man asked, looking at my chest. I suddenly remembered I still had the laptop pressed tightly

against me, where it must have been since I came in.

-Oh, I said, it's a laptop, I think.

-Never. I meant what model? he said, holding out a hand.

I passed it over.

-You tell me.

He cleared a space on the table in front of him, and placed the heavy device down and flipped the clasp. A deep polyphonic tone accompanied its opening, and the screen lit up, a rich opalescent blue. The man hit a few keys and pages sprang into life on the screen, a blue and white bar like seaside rock at their centre with the word 'Gathering...' above it.

-You know about these things? asked Martin.

Tom's little giggle again.

-You could say that! This is Kurt. He's a genius.

Kurt looked down at the floor.

-Not really, he said softly, and looked me in the eye, almost apologetically.

-Ian, I said, and shook his hand, this is Martin.

-We'd be waiting for ever for Tom to introduce us, rude bastard, said Martin taking Kurt's hand.

-Oh fuck off I'm busy, said Tom without humour, and picked up a small knife and scooped up the now putty-like substance from the spoon with the blade, washing it around in the glass of water in front of him. Martin was watching closely, feigning mild disinterest. I looked back at the computer.

-Wow, said Kurt, where'dya get this?

I wondered how much to say, and looked to Martin for guidance, but he was still watching Tom, so chanced the truth. Kurt must be pretty cool if Tom was fine doing... whatever it was he was doing in front of him.

-In a car we robbed. It was under the seat.

No-one bit my head off. I hadn't said too much.

-You struck lucky, mate. This is the top of the range. It's better than the one's I got at work.

-What you do? I asked. Kurt seemed nice. He was softly spoken and calmly elegant, with a pretty, boyish light brown face whose age it was difficult to judge.

-3D modelling. I work for a drug company...

-Appropriately, added Tom with another little giggle.

-...working on recombinant DNA strands. We're trying to find a cure for AIDS. We're not succeeding.

-Fuck. Interesting though.

-Fascinating actually. It's a clever little virus, if that isn't too anthropomorphic...

I shook my head but let the obvious question slide.

-The models are beautiful. It's difficult not to have respect for something so advanced. If it hadn't killed my sister, I'd admit I almost love it.

-Your sister? Sorry to hear that.

Kurt said nothing, just continued to scrutinise the screen, his fingers moving fast between the keys and a slightly sunken square below them. Pages flipped open and closed as quickly as they had appeared, too fast for me to register anything.

-It's a lovely OS this. Onyx. It was years in development. They really got it right. There's not many of these in the country. I reckon whoever owned this was involved in something impressive... Yeah, thought so.

He turned the screen towards me. The blue screen I had seen on first opening the computer was now obscured by a series of smaller screens. Kurt hit a long thin bar at the bottom of the keyboard. An image of a post-modernist building jutting out of a hillside suddenly burst into flame, in sync with a pulsing electronic soundtrack accompanied by a female voice that rang from tiny speakers either side of the keyboard. The sound was crystal clear, and of a volume that defied belief, coming from such innocent-looking speakers. I looked at Martin, and again he raised his eyebrows.

-Wow, I said.

-Good, isn't it. Whoever owned this was most probably in the video business. Looks like visuals for a band or something. They probably used this machine to edit the footage and then project them from it live.

-Can it do that?

-No problem. You'd need a projector, but it's easy, the images get beamed straight out the back of this to a receiver.

He picked up the laptop and pointed to a small black oval on

the machine's back.

-All the latest AV machines have SIS ports. You don't even need a separate power source these days.

-Like our TV, Martin?

Martin nodded.

-And mine probably, added Tom. I been shopping since I last saw you. Didn't you see the telly in the living room?

-Could I use this to edit stuff on? I asked.

-No problem, said Kurt. You got a camera?

-I got him one tonight, said Martin. It's in the other room.

-If you get it I'll show you how it works if you like, said Kurt.

Martin left and returned with the camera still in its box.

-Good choice, said Kurt, these are great cameras. They integrate seamlessly with SIS... hence the name I guess.

-How easy is it to learn the software? I asked, impressed with my use of the correct terminology.

-They're designed to be simple. Onyx sells itself on its ease of use.

Kurt was running through screens again, checking for something.

-Cool. Whoever owned this hasn't deleted the tutorial files. There's a guided tour to the OS and to the edit suite. If you click here...

He pointed to a friendly face on the right of the screen.

-...it takes you step by step through the software. It'll take a little time to get used to but you're a bright lad, you'll pick it up.

-Bright? Me?

Another little giggle from Tom. I looked over at him, and saw him pressing a chalky white powder onto the bench with the back of a spoon.

-What are you doing anyway, Tom?

-Like I said, cooking.

-Yeah but what?

-You'll see.

There was something dark about Tom's face. The boyish openness had gone, replaced by a roughness not merely explained by his unshaven chin. He'd lost weight too. The sparkle that had enhanced his eyes when we first met had all but disappeared, and

his accommodating air I had found so attractive was replaced by a shifty anxiety. I watched him as he fitted a sheet of silver foil over the glass of water he had washed the white putty in, and noted his hands were shaking as he slipped a rubber band around it to hold the foil in place, and wondered what had happened to him in so short a time. I looked at the clock on the wall: 5:48. Okay it was late and we were all tired, but could that really be the only explanation? He placed the glass on the work surface, picked up the pin he'd been using to mix the substance and began pricking holes in the foil. Then he moved over to the table with a speed I hadn't expected, looked in the ashtray on its top and shot his hands out to the side in a gesture of exasperation.

-Fucking lightweights, he said, with malice. None of you tossers smoke do you.

As he left the room with the glass I looked at Martin, a puzzled look that he met with a shake of his head. Tom came back in with the glass, a small pile of cigarette ash over the holes he'd poked in the foil. Picking up a small lump of the white powder he'd been mixing, he placed it on the pile of ashes, and holding the glass to his lips, lit the powder with a disposable lighter and breathed in. The water in the glass bubbled and went cloudy. The procedure finished, Tom stood with an expectant frown on his face. Silence. Then he breathed out. Nothing.

-Yes, he said.

Something suddenly occurred to Kurt, and he started tapping away on the keyboard of the computer. Windows flashed open on the screen.

-What are you doing? I asked. I wanted to ask the same thing of Tom, but resisted.

-I've just thought. If this is nicked, you'll wanna change the identification signature. That way you can cruise without detection.

The terminology sounded oddly out of place. I didn't need to go cruising - I had Martin!

Tom put the glass down next to Kurt, and placed another small amount of the white substance on the ash. Kurt looked at it then continued tapping the keys. I looked again at Martin - what was this weird new world we were witnessing? Martin's face

said nothing. He was blankly watching everything, forestalling judgment. Kurt had finished what he was doing, and leant back in his seat and took hold of the glass. Tom held a light out for him, and he too breathed in as the powder vapourised and disappeared into the ash. He held his breath before breathing out... nothing.

-Yes, he said.

-What is that you're smoking? I asked.

Tom had relaxed noticeably, the frown that had been permanently etched between his eyes since we had walked in evaporating.

-Free-base. Smokable coke. Want some? At last the familiar giggle freely expressed.

I shook my head, instinctively knowing I shouldn't. I looked at Martin. He was still dour.

-Crack, you mean, Tom. Is that what you're doing now? You a little crackhead, huh? Getting ourselves a little habit are we?

-Fuck off, said Tom, this time without malice. I haven't got a habit. It's just a nice thing to do at the end of an evening...

-And how many evenings you been doing it? For how long?

-Not many, he said, his eyes shooting off to the left, towards nothing in particular.

-Like, every one since last time we saw you?

-No, he said, without conviction.

I'd heard of crack. I'd heard it was revolting, heard the horror stories that went with it. Heard too that it was the most addictive substance in the world. I had no idea what it did, but imagined it must be some super-charged version of cocaine, pictured the rush as an accelerated rollercoaster, the disturbing fibrillations of a coke binge distilled into one small crystal sucked straight into your brain. What I pictured frightened me - coke itself was scary enough. But the two people I saw before me didn't seem to be the gibbering victims of some coca-express train, convulsing the night away like bodies cut free of conscience. If anything, Tom at least seemed calmer than before. Kurt seemed to have calm written naturally upon every cell.

-Have you tried it then, Mr Know-it-all? asked Tom, without goading.

Martin merely shook his head, keeping Tom's gaze without flinching. Tom just nodded, a little knowing smile thinning his lips.

Something suddenly occurred to Kurt, and he started opening other windows on the laptop, highlighting fields and tapping numbers. Then he pulled a silver rectangle from his pocket with a screen and buttons on it, and began intently playing with it.

-That's neat, what's that? I asked.

He looked at me, a look of mild surprise on his face.

-This? It's a mobile phone.

-Wow! I've never seen one of them before.

-You *must* be important, said Martin.

-Not really. It's a perk of the job. All government workers have them. My job's attached to the Department of Health. It's not much use, nobody else worth talking to's got one. But you can access the web with it, if you know the codes, which I do... Well some of them anyway...

He placed the phone on the table behind the laptop, and began tapping letters on the keyboard. The phone suddenly lit up, and a little animation of red radiating lines appeared in a window on the screen of the computer.

-There you go - they're having a conversation.

Tom picked up the glass and began putting more of the coke on the ashes. He looked at Martin.

-Want some?

Martin said nothing and looked at me. I held his stare for a few moments, then looked back at the screen. It seemed we had entered some alternative dimension, and for now at least I was no longer capable of interpreting what anything meant, was reduced to a passive spectator from whom judgment had been distilled and poured away... Kurt was opening programs and typing in access codes.

-I've shielded your IP address - no-one knows you're on here for now. If they're watching, they'll find you eventually, but meanwhile I'll get you a copy of Coochi-Coo. It's a self-sealing network that automatically evades detection. It's fucking clever. I swear whoever developed it knows more about viruses - real, deadly viruses as well as the computer ones - than I do! Then I'll take you back on the Web proper and you can have a copy of my

research. I'm only showing off really, read it if you're interested...

I could see out of the corner of my eye that Tom was holding out the glass to Martin. Maybe it was tiredness, but for now I had no opinion about whether or not he took it. I felt like I had been invited into some secret society, was being offered sacraments at an initiation ceremony, and was unsure who held the higher office, Tom or Kurt. I suspected it was Kurt, and therefore demoted Tom to the role of facilitator rather than corrupter.

As if to instantly dispel the charity with which I had viewed him, Tom handed the glass to Martin, and held out a light. Martin breathed in deeply, little wisps of smoke escaping from around his lips, then held his breath in an exact imitation of Tom's method. When he breathed again, no smoke came out.

-Yes, he said, and passed the glass to me.

-I gave Martin a little more than the rest of us, he's a bigger fella...

-Cheeky, said Martin, a smile on his face for the first time since we'd entered the kitchen.

Tom had replenished the coke, and held the lighter for me as I pulled on the makeshift pipe. I watched the white crystals melt without the flame touching them, saw a translucent glow sit in the air a few millimetres above the ash, and felt little sensation as what I presumed was smoke filled my lungs. As I loosened my lips from the foil, a sweet, slightly chemical flavour filled my mouth, but no sensation was very strong. I held my breath and put the glass on the table. I breathed out, and crossed my eyes to try and see if anything came out. Nothing. My mouth watered and I swallowed before saying

-Yes.

Kurt was smiling at me.

-Nice to meet you by the way...

-Yeah and you. Tom wasn't lying was he. You know a lot of stuff.

-You pick it up as you go along. I'm really proud of my research. I doubt it'll advance the fight much, but I've found out some new things, small things admittedly, but new for sure. It's the images I want you to see. I hesitate to use the word beautiful in this context, but it's difficult not to be impressed. The

bandwidth on this - he picked up the mobile phone - isn't good enough to show you them moving, but there's images of the stages in cellular iteration so you'll get the idea...

New words. New worlds. Warm shivers were moving down my body, making my skin tingle and a strange serenity settle over me. This was not what I was expecting at all - the feeling was akin to a low-level MDMA experience. The frenetic excitement I had anticipated was, in reality, a warm conviviality - this seemed more suited to a dinner party than some ghetto whorehouse...

Just then, a distant whistle could be heard, and Tom pricked up his ears.

-That'll be Filthy. Move into the other room if you want.

I watched Tom as he shot out of the kitchen, and absently turned my head back to look at Martin. He was smiling mildly, and I lazily winked at him.

-Shall we?

We walked into the living room, its occupants in the exact positions they had held when we left. This time, I noticed that a huge TV screen flanked the side wall - how I missed it before I couldn't imagine. I took a seat on the sofa next to Tracey and Kevin; Martin stayed standing. Tony gripped himself in the armchair and stared at the floor, his eyebrows raised as if in expectation. Voices in the corridor. Then I saw a small man in sportswear in the doorway, a wilting hollow face from which two piss-hole eyes sparked like electronic ignition.

-The brown-boy returns, says Tony.

Filthy enters with pockets full of silver befitting his name, directed on his mission by providence and protected by determination, a whirlwind that spurs everyone into frenetic activity as it sweeps by. Dishevelled order is shattered by business as hands dart out for implements. The room, only a few seconds before wilting under a cloud of torpor, explodes into action - Kevin produces a roll of two-ply toilet paper which he halves and twirls into long tapers, Tracey grabs at sheets of aluminium foil which are rolled out, folded and torn neatly into different-sized rectangles, Filthy opens wraps of chalky beige powder and lays them next to the rows of by now identical tapers lined up on the table. I move onto the arm of the sofa - the contrast in

atmosphere is disorientating, and I keep my distance, unsure of the consequences if I impede the procedure.

-One of these for me? asks Tony, an attempted cheeriness in his voice disguising an obvious embarrassment.

-Oh yeah, you're a fuckin needle monkey aint ya... says Filthy with disgust.

Silvers takes the seat I've just vacated, and, in shaking hands, grabs the foil and expertly folds and flattens, folds and flattens, barking orders that -That one'll burn too fast that's a piece of shit just leave it to me, and rolls the foil around a pen leaving one end to overlap so that later, much later, the two or three lines worth of heroin that have condensed on the inside of the tube the group will use to inhale through can be scraped up and smoked again in a ritual of ever diminishing returns. Tony reaches into an inside pocket of his long dark coat which he still hasn't removed, and retrieves a thin plastic pencil case containing a spoon with a handle bent back over on itself which he places on the low coffee table in front of him. He empties some of the beige powder into the bowl of the spoon, adds another white powder from a tube, then shoots to his feet in a surprisingly sprightly motion. I notice he is very tall, as he leaves the room and re-enters with a glass of water, and wonder where his sudden energy has come from.

Martin is leaning against a table with his arms crossed, a look of mild exasperation on his face. I look at him and we both shake our heads slightly. Silvers has already emptied one of the packets onto the foil, which he holds in shaking hands, the foil tube between his lips. Kevin is holding out a lighter, as Silvers grabs one of the toilet paper tapers, which, once lit, he holds beneath the foil. A soft smoke suddenly springs up from the foil, and Silvers expertly captures it with the tube, turning the foil to make the bubble of now liquid heroin flow along its surface in a smooth line. His lungs full, he removes the taper and holds it upright, mirroring the tube that issues from his now upturned face, before finally breathing out through the tube. Little smoke emerges. He swallows, drops the now extinguished taper and takes the tube from his mouth. Tracey quickly passes him her half-smoked cigarette; both she and Kevin are watching him with an interest bordering on devotion.

I turn my attention to Tony. He is sucking a brown, ugly-looking liquid into a syringe through a small wad of cotton wool that sits in the bowl of the spoon. The barrel of the syringe fills with something that reminds me of a public information film I once saw, of a jar of cigarette ends floating in water, horribly discoloured. Content that he has emptied the spoon, he turns the syringe into the air and depresses the plunger until a little squirt of liquid issues from the end of the needle and falls onto the hem of his shirt. He looks over at Martin who is watching him with mild disapproval, a slight sneer blemishing his lips.

-Never know when it might come in handy...

Tony then pulls up his shirt revealing a brown gaunt stomach, and with his left hand pulls down the band of his loose trousers. Holding his skin taught, he spots what he is looking for, and with his other hand pushes the needle through his skin and depresses the plunger, before removing the syringe and dumping it back in the pencil case, and slumps into his chair.

-Fucking wanker, says Silvers, distracting my attention back to the sofa just in time to see him punch Kevin in the face. I jump, but seem to have been more shocked by the incident than Kevin, who returns his face and the tube to the foil Silvers is holding, tracking the thin line of flowing heroin, sucking in smoke.

Tony is nodding, his eyes closed. He smiles, revealing yellowed teeth, the same colour as his face. A little laugh lacking humour.

-What a life. You wait all night for a hit, when it comes it just returns you to how you were before you needed another. Remembering to forget - another little humourless laugh - to remember that you shouldn't be doing this again.

His eyes snap open but lack focus.

-This'll be the death of me! It already is. I don't know which is more deadly - the virus or the need. They both co-habit this... wreck, happy tenants in a condemned...

His voice trails away and he looks up as if suddenly remembering there are other people in the room.

-Sorry. I'm getting sombre.

-Why not, asks Martin rhetorically.

-Yeah, says Tony, suddenly sitting forward in his chair, his

arms falling by his side. Why not indeed. It's hardly living is it. And what is life now anyway? I thought things couldn't get much worse years ago. Ten years ago it seemed the world was dying, reduced to a... pathetic... commercial. At least back then people still seemed to care enough to say it was dead. Now everything's been redefined in such a trivial way that no-one bothers enough to... bring flowers... to the wake...

His head suddenly bobbed up, a glimpse of anger animating his face.

-Y'know, I was once stupid enough to think things could change! I remember being younger than you lot and seeing a guy on TV so full of promise and... spunk... another little laugh... that I ripped off me trousers and wore them inside out, dyed me hair with food dye and went out into town thinking 'this is it - the revolution!' But it wasn't. You lot are the heirs to that gesture, and what's your inheritance? No history. No memory. No... spark. So here I sit. Call me the fireman, with me little extinguisher, damping down the flames...

-You're a poet Tony, said Martin flatly.

-S'been said before. The People's Poet. A poet without a people...

Kevin had slumped back into the sofa, and I wondered if it was the punch or the... smack that was responsible, then wondered too if that was where the street name for heroin came from, as Silvers held out the foil for Tracey. She kept missing the smoke, but Silvers didn't hit her for it. At least he's more of a gentleman than Kevin, I thought.

I was beginning to feel shivery, the benign friendliness I had been feeling only seconds before evaporating, and I noted with surprise that I felt strangely angry, at what I had no idea. The image of the foil-topped glass in the kitchen popped into my head, and I realised that was what I wanted. I looked at Martin to see if he was feeling it too, but he just looked at me, then at Filthy.

-Hello Silvers, long time no see.

-Alright, he said, not looking at Martin, what you been up to? Arse still intact?

I was taken aback by the question, and wondered for a second

if Martin... and Filthy? I looked at him and dismissed the question instantly - there's no way Martin would touch him with someone else's...

-Yes thanks. I don't make a habit of pissing off the wrong people. You still up to your old tricks?

-Oh yes! Which reminds me, I've got an RVM of the police evidence against me. You gotta see it - me brief reckons it's gonna be a piece of piss to get me off. Stupid fuckers left the soundtrack on it - you can hear 'em telling the cars to make me go faster - 'make him crash' they're screaming...

I saw my opportunity.

-I'll go ask Tom if he's got a player shall I? and nodded at Martin to follow me into the kitchen.

Kurt was still playing with the laptop, and Tom was cooking up another lump of freebase, the ammonia hitting me again and making my eyes water.

-That is fucking disgusting Tom, I said with an anger that surprised me.

-Suppose you won't be wanting any more then...

A snarl played on my lips, and I sat back down next to Kurt and tried to work out what he was doing.

-I've put my research on your desktop in a folder called 'Virology'. Look at it if you get a chance. I think you'll like the images. I've got full animations of the cells that you can navigate as 3D models. I'll drop an RVM off here for you next time I'm passing if you like...

-Yeah that'd be smart. Which reminds me, Tom, have you got one? An RVM player?

-There's one in here, says Kurt, tapping the laptop.

-Really? Cool...

-Like I say, you can just point it at the TV if it's SIS compliant, which it will be if you only got it last week, right Tom?

Tom was busy refilling the makeshift pipe, and didn't bother answering before raising the glass to his lips and lighting the small lump of crystals, inhaling deeply and returning the glass to the work surface, breathing out.

-Yes, he said.

We all took turns on the glass, and, by the time it reached me,

I was shocked by my own impatience to draw its strangely chemical smoke into my lungs. A mild buzzing in my ears was stilled as I breathed out again, and I calmly picked up the laptop and followed Martin back into the living room. Tony was curled up in a ball in his chair, Kevin and Tracey wrapped lazily around each other on the sofa. Only Silvers still seemed alive, depositing the contents of another silver wrap onto a fresh sheet of foil.

-You took yer time, I was getting ready for the next hit...

-Have you got your disc, I asked, suddenly more confident about talking to him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small shiny disc, and passed it to me. I found the slot on the front of the laptop and pushed it inside. Just before it disappeared a mechanism took hold of the disc and sucked it smoothly into the machine. A short pause, then a screen looking like one of the RVM machines I had last seen winging its way towards a police car windscreen appeared on the desktop. I awkwardly ran my finger over the sunken panel beneath the keyboard, and watched as a small spinning circle moved towards an arrow on the player, and pressed the pad. A set of numbers, timecode I presumed, began running on the screen.

-You'll have to find the right channel on the TV, said Martin, and moved over to the set and pushed a button on its facia until the letters AV appeared in the top right hand corner. A shot of a road, obviously taken from a helicopter, flashed on the screen. I took a seat on the sofa, still holding the laptop and pointing it at the TV. This was amazing.

-Can you see that light on the corner of the laptop? asked Kurt from the doorway. That means it's recharging - it's getting its power from the TV. If you've got one at home it'll do the same thing.

Silvers was staring at the screen with a look of child-like pride, the heroin before him no longer of any interest.

-There's some fucking great bits in this, you'll love it. I thought I was driving well but I tell you some of it's fuckin unbelievable!

The roof of a white sports car, what looked like a Mazda RX12, raced along a narrow city street, the camera fighting hard

to keep it in the centre of the frame as it erratically accelerated, shooting past cars on the wrong side of the road.

-Me heart was beating like a fucked clock, said Silvers, smiling proudly.

Behind the sports car, police squad cars with huge stencilled numbers on their roofs attempted to follow, their sirens barely audible beneath the sound of the 'copter's blades and the excited shouts from the officers inside. At the end of the street, two police cars could be seen creating a barrier. The voices on the disc became even more animated.

-They really thought they'd got me here, there's no way they were expecting this...

Suddenly the sports car went into a smooth skid that twisted it perpendicular to the road, next to a narrow alleyway that ran between two buildings. I was aware that my mouth was open, not believing what I knew I was about to see. The Mazda accelerated up the kerb of the street and with incredible precision fitted itself neatly between the two buildings - even from the height of the viewpoint it was possible to tell there were barely inches either side of the car as it sped along the alleyway. The police car following attempted the same manoeuvre but only succeeded in wedging itself in the opening, the car following it braking hard to stop from smashing into its boot. Silvers was giggling excitedly. I looked over at Martin, barely concealed awe on my face, but he ignored my gaze, looking down at the floor instead.

The voices inside the helicopter were a choir of distorted profanities, the camera shaking as the helicopter swung round to track the car. The street at the end of the alleyway was wider and full of traffic. Looking ahead, it seemed obvious that the sports car, if it continued on its course, was sure to collide with any one of about six cars on its exit.

-Keep watching, keep watching, said Silvers, and held his breath as the Mazda reached the end of the alley, braked hard, then shot forward between a car and a lorry, missing both by feet.

-Yes! exclaimed Silvers, punching the air.

Kevin stirred beside him, his head bobbing up then returning to Tracey's chest. Silvers punched his leg with practiced malice.

-Wake up ya lazy cunt, you should be watching this.

Kevin moaned but didn't move.

The sports car had turned left and was shooting along the city street, racing around cars that slowed as it passed them. The helicopter sped up and chased the car - no other pursuers could be seen tracking it. As the Mazda approached a junction, a police car with the number 023 on its roof entered frame left, about 500 yards from the junction. The Mazda braked, then accelerated across the junction; cars either side braked and skidded, creating an obstacle the police car awkwardly negotiated.

Something lights up my brain, a tingly effervescence that widens my eyes and makes me breathe in deeply. On the screen, the Mazda is already hurtling along a winding road taking it out of the city and onto narrower country lanes, the voices on the soundtrack calling out numbers and instructions, trying to marshal a response in the lanes ahead.

-This is where it gets nasty, says Silvers, this is why they can't touch me...

The helicopter suddenly climbs, the countryside filling out the frame. The Mazda is hurtling along a country road, the single police car gaining ground. As it catches up with the Mazda, the voices inside the helicopter get more aggressive, the words 'make him go faster, make the fucker crash' clearly audible. Silvers looks around the room, a smile on his face approaching vindication.

-Did ya hear it? Ya heard em dint ya...

From the high vantage point of the helicopter the long country road can be seen to bend. On the other side of the bend a police car has pulled up, blocking the road. The door opens and out steps a uniformed officer, and stands in front of the car. The Mazda is shooting along the road, the police car within a few yards of its boot. It's obvious what is about to happen. The Mazda takes the blind corner, the officer on foot steps forward, his arm outstretched. The Mazda brakes hard and skids, but it's too late, there's no way it can stop in time. The sports car slams into the cop who buckles over the bonnet before being sliced in two as the Mazda impales him against the stationary police car.

-Argh, giggles Silvers.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. No-one told me this was a snuff movie. The police car that had been pursuing the Mazda

skids but collides with its rear, spinning the sports car and revealing the body of the cop, now in two pieces, as it gushes blood onto the tarmac. Everyone, both in the room and on the RVM, is shocked into silence.

-Fuckin ell Silvers what the fuck did you show us that for?! Martin is genuinely disgusted. I can only stare at the screen, the whole horrorshow rooting me to the sofa, a sudden memory of the cop from the toilet scorching itself into my brain.

-Tasty, init?

-You fucking *psychopath!* How come you're still out? That's concrete evidence of a murder!

-Not murder, at worst manslaughter. Like I say, I got a good brief, got me bail didn't he.

Suddenly Tracey sits forward on the sofa, depositing Kevin off her lap. Her eyes open, and without warning, a five foot long streak of white vomit flies from her lips and across the room, narrowly missing Tony, still gauching in the armchair.

-Right, says Martin emphatically, I think that's our cue to leave.

-Where you going? asks Kurt, still leaning in the doorway. I'll give you a lift if you want.

I'm still blinking, unable to take in all the events that have exploded onto my consciousness in the space of thirty seconds. Martin is standing next to me, his hand on my shoulder.

-Give him his snuff back, Ian. Here, he says, reaching down and clicking on an arrow on the virtual RVM player. The image on the TV freezes, and the disc slides out of the slot. Martin grabs it and throws it clumsily on the table in front of Silvers.

-Ta. Ere ya not off so soon are ya? I wanted to chat to you some more.

-No time Silvers we gotta be off. See'ya again no doubt...

Martin is pulling me to my feet, and I close the lid of the laptop and follow him into the kitchen.

-We're going, says Martin, ya might want to clean up in there. Tracey's been sick.

-Oh fuck, not again. She's always doing that. Ice cream fuckin everywhere.

-You got some money for me? asks Martin.

-We'll wait outside, says Kurt, lightly taking my arm and leading me, still dazed, towards the flat door.

We found the car a few streets from Tom's, Kurt obviously being wise enough to leave it there in case anyone who knew him saw it parked. I was barely conscious, standing gaumlessly by the car until Martin opened the door for me and nodded me inside. I was still gripping the laptop, like it had become my new security blanket, as I leant back in the seat, trying to calm my anxious breath. Waves of electric shocks were coursing through my body, I felt exhausted, detached and yet still unreasonably angry. Martin sat up front giving directions to Kurt, himself a picture of composure.

-That was fucking horrible, I blurted out, shaking my head.

-What, Filthy's movie or the crack?

-Both. Why would anyone wanna do that shit? The hit's hardly worth the comedown.

-You get used to both, said Kurt.

-But why would you want to?

-I see it as a brain reward. I'm working on terminal diseases all day, without any real progress. By this time of the morning even a few minutes relief is worth it.

-I feel like shit, I said. I feel like I wanna take my skin off and wash it...

Martin was quietly directing Kurt towards home. The roads were still relatively empty, and it suddenly hit me that we must have been up for twenty-odd hours, had driven over 300 miles and expended more nervous energy than either of us had to spare.

-I hate to admit it but I still want another hit! It's the only thing that stops the anger.

-Not the *only* thing. I'll give you something to help you both sleep. You'll need it if you don't want to be climbing the walls all night. How far are we from yours now?

-Bout a mile, said Martin.

-Here, said Kurt, reaching into an inside pocket and fiddling with something. Share one of these between you. It'll take the edge off and shouldn't leave you groggy tomorrow.

Martin took something from Kurt, and rolled it in his hand.

-What is it?

-A rohy. I get 'em from abroad. They're the best things I know for letting you get some rest. They're soft, you can bite them in half.

Martin placed the pill between his teeth and bit down, then passed me the remainder. I looked at it - a little purple jelly bean.

-Just let it melt under your tongue. Works a treat, trust me.

We were getting close to home, and I began to relax for the first time in what seemed like days. We turned into the narrow cobbled street that ran past our block, and I saw with relief the familiar front of the Sugar Factory.

-Oh thank God! Home at last!

-Nice place, said Kurt. I'll have to come over sometime.

-You'd be more than welcome mate, said Martin.

-I'll drop that disc off at Tom's next time I'm passing, if you're still interested, said Kurt, as we pulled up outside the front door.

-Nice one, I said. I was starting to calm down at last.

We waved our goodbyes, and once inside the flat made straight for the bedroom, depositing our new gadgets on the floor with our clothes before crawling into bed. I wrapped myself around Martin's back, and breathed in deeply, his smell turning to little waves of relaxation that rippled along the length of me, as my eyes closed, and I kissed his neck without speaking, and a turbid blackness sucked me in...

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