

XQ-28

The Story of a Gene

Chapter 20

XQ-28
The Story of a Gene

Adrian Challis



This work is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License.

For more information goto:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Electronic version 1.0 © September 2007

©1992-2007

this edition © 2007 Adrian Challis

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.

Chapter 20 Immolation

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.

I stared into the mirror, trying to recognise the swollen and bruised face that looked back at me as my own. The arch around my left eye was yellow and purple, the white of the eye itself blood red. My head was still aching, despite having slept for over twelve hours. Alone. My first night without Martin for nearly six months. Where can he be? I kept trying to stop myself from picturing his body lying twisted and broken in a ditch somewhere, swallowed hard every time the thought of him languishing in some cell reared up in my mind. He *isn't* dead. He *isn't* in a coma. He *isn't* on some life-support machine having had the life kicked out of him. No-one is torturing him. No paramilitary cop is right now smashing his face in with a pair of metal knuckles...

I picked up the hand mirror and tried to position myself between it and the one on the wall to see the damage to the back of my head. A shock of red lay under my close cropped hair, itself so much whiter than I pictured it. I ran a basin of water and dipped my head into it, then abandoned the enterprise and moved to the shower. My neck and shoulders ached, my feet were sore from wandering around the valley, discoloured and mendicant, begging for someone to take me home. The powerful jets of water allowed some relief, a watery oblivion in which to contemplate the night before. The chaos of the valley. The soft whimpers from

so many fractured people. Dazed shoeless bodies wandering aimlessly up and down the pathway. The rows of vehicles with their windows smashed. The flattened tyres on the camper van that brought me here, thinking 'the bastards even took *its* shoes off' before the dread-headed owner produced a foot pump and re-shod it. The journey back in silence, words unnecessary, incapable of expressing either the brutality or the pointlessness of the clampdown. The never-ending cycle of spliffs that passed around the van our only respite or response.

I stretched under the shower. Now the adrenaline had gone, more pain. My right kidney and the space between my shoulder blades throbbing. The soles of my feet red and angry, tiny grazes and cuts in the softer patches of skin between the new calluses. My jaw awkward and ill-fitting, a new click resounding as I worked my teeth together. I need a hug, need Martin to whisper that it will all be okay. I need to see him and know that he is fine. Not even fine - just *alive* would be enough. The image of the last time I saw him, his face obliterated by blood...

I lay on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. Still not hungry. Not even sure I could chew. My face doesn't fit anymore. Maybe I've got tetanus... Oh God where's Martin? I need him, never needed him more. I want to just hold him and whisper that I love him, and everything will be okay again. Tears fell then, soft hot tears that ran down my face and tickled my ears, the room falling dark around me. I suddenly realised that from outside there was no sign of life in here, and ran to the bedroom and picked up the bedside lamp, walking back into the living room and setting it up in the window. Isn't that what you were supposed to do, to bring the sailor home from sea, the prodigal son from purdah? Flock to the light, beloved. Keep aiming towards the light...

And still he didn't return. I cooked his favourite food in case he came in unexpected, set two places at the table and pretended he was out on a mission, that he'd just nipped out on a delivery, on a search for a new car, that he'd be back as soon as he found one. I thought about ringing around his friends but realised I knew nobody's number. Became indignant that there were surely still

laws of *habeas corpus*, that they had to release him soon, contemplated calling the police and demanding a visit, until the realisation that I didn't even know his surname hit me with a sickening thud. What if he has amnesia and doesn't even know it himself? What if he can't remember where he lives? What if - the colour draining from my face - what if he doesn't even remember who I am?

I would sleep each night on the sofa, as if sleeping in the bedroom was a kind of betrayal, kept me further away from him. The food was running low in the cupboards; I continued to cook for two, bagging up his uneaten portions and placing them in the freezer, as if it would bring him home sooner if he suspected I was cooking for him. After a few days, I began reheating them and ate them myself - I daren't leave the apartment in case he came back and found me gone. For what seemed like the first time in my life I prayed, to whom I knew not, that whatever state he was in, please just bring him home. I continued to turn on the lamp every night, keeping the blinds closed to allow me a kind of sleep.

Soft lips against mine.

-Martin, I gasped, my eyes flicking open.

He stayed kissing me, wrapping his arms around me as I tried to slide up the sofa, and flung myself around him.

-Thank God you're alive! I've been imagining all sorts of things...

He continued to kiss me, then held me close.

-Let me look at you.

Even in the gloom I could tell he'd been beaten, the flesh around his eyes puffy, his lips swollen and bruised.

-What have those fuckers been doing to you?! How come they kept you so long?

He spoke then, his voice rough, his speech slightly slurred.

-They found me in the cabin, didn't they. Kept me under the Terrorism Act, that way they didn't need to charge me.

-Terrorism? What the fuck...

-It's whatever they choose to define it as these days. They were seriously pissed off nothing showed up from my DNA. Just kept demanding to know what I was doing, who were the ringleaders, whatever that meant. How long did they keep you?

-They let me go as soon as they'd swabbed me. I told them I didn't know anything. They were just local cops I reckon.

-This lot weren't. Intelligence service I think - they didn't bother telling me. The guy in charge of the interrogation... I tell you, they had to re-calibrate the Cuntometer to fit him on the scale...

-Martin I love you so much! I was crying then, covering his face with kisses until he flinched and I pulled away.

-God I must smell really bad...

-Not bad, just strong!

-I should shower, he said, moving towards the bedroom.

-Do you want some food? There's loads of cooked stuff in the freezer.

-Can't face it. I'm fucked, I haven't slept since they started questioning me...

-But Martin that's six days! I said, following him into the bedroom as he pulled off his clothes.

-I bumped into Tony on the way here tonight, Martin said as he sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing himself dry as I massaged his shoulders.

-What happened to him?

-He missed the lot! Apparently he was shagging one of those women we saw him with, down by the waterfall! By the time they reemerged the whole thing was over. He hasn't seen anybody. They got Tom though.

-Is he okay?

-Sort of. They've already tried him. Special court. Ian, they gave him six years!

-For what?

-Intent to supply. He had about five hundred caps on him, plus loads of money. That's the other thing, I'm gonna have to explain myself to Mr Calyx, if he'll see me. I'm hardly the cleanest person right now...

I kissed his back, pushing my nose into his armpit and breathing in deeply.

-You smell pretty clean to me!

Something in my groin was stirring...

-Can we just go to sleep please? I'm totally fucked, mate.

-Yeah of course, I said, trying to turn off my horn before it became uncontrollable.

He'd slept wrapped up in a tight foetal ball, snoring loudly within minutes of laying down. I tried hard not to allow my desire to wake him, his smell cutting through the perfume of his body wash and making me swallow hard with a barely concealable lust. Eventually I had to move to the other side of the bed, a rush of pre-cum making me feel guilty. I woke mid-morning but he slept on, stroking him and kissing his swollen eyebrow, the bruises vivid in the morning light. I made myself coffee and instinctively looked for the laptop - my main source of entertainment for so long, and felt my stomach drop as I realised all our means of production were gone. I played on the PS-V, until this too held little interest for me - my heart just wasn't in it anymore. I listened to music, but this too bored me quickly; I would regularly check he was still sleeping soundly, secretly hoping the stereo had woken him, but he snored on. It was dark when he finally awoke. I brought him coffee and watched him dress; he was sluggish and failed to return my smiles. Then he said he should go and see Mr Calyx, that the sooner he got things sorted out the better for both of us.

He returned within the hour. Martin had been right; Mr Calyx didn't want to know him. He refused to take the six grand that Tom owed, saying he should see it as his golden handshake. Martin said it was obvious he was reluctant to see him go, but just couldn't risk using him anymore - at the first mention of the word 'terrorism' Calyx had kissed him, hugged him, and asked him to leave. Whilst having been prepared for voluntary retirement, this enforced unemployment even felt to me like exile.

Week after week passed, the sky the colour of porridge, not one single ray of sunshine beaming from Martin's face to make it bearable. I tried not to pressurise him, knowing he had a lot to deal with, but couldn't quite shake the suspicion that the beating he'd taken had left him with some kind of brain damage - *my* Martin seemed a million miles away. On the occasions we tried making love he would take forever - I would repeatedly hold off, despite his smell alone ensuring immediate arousal, and throw

everything I could at him whilst he lay there with his legs straightened, his teeth clenched tight shut, my face red and sweating, trying anything to speed him to release. There was so much I wanted to ask but never once dared, totally afraid of the only answer I knew made sense. I would catch him looking at me - my face would break into a smile which his lips would weakly mirror, his eyes remaining doleful and untouched. I wanted to grab him and shake him, demand to know what was wrong, to scream how much I loved him as if that alone would break him out of his trance, but instead just kept on smiling, willing nothing to be wrong.

One evening we walked along the river to the docks, and watched as a container ship was unloaded with coffee, three beautiful sailors waving to us from the deck, and a kind of life returned to his eyes as he told me how he had seen these ships as a child, even before its destination was the only country that would still trade coffee with us, and how he'd dreamed of stowing away on board for its return journey, and starting a new life in the land of pirates, and I stared into his beautiful eyes as they softened, and had to hold myself as tight as a ball not to fling myself around him and fuck him on the quay, had to force down the tears and screams of joy that he had finally come back to me, and as the flat door closed behind us we'd ripped each other's clothes off and fucked with an angry and almost unbearable passion until sleep drowned us.

But the next morning found us demagnetised again.

And then it was bonfire night, and to my amazement Martin suggested we go for a meal at a restaurant, and I ran excitedly to dress before worrying that this too was further indication that he just wasn't being himself, but swallowed my fears and tried to look my best for him. We ate in silence, the distant sounds of fireworks echoing around the empty restaurant like a low-level war. On walking through the door the waiter held open for us a sleek navy sports car swished past us and pulled up in the car park. I noticed it was an Aston Martin, a stunning and rare example of British engineering. Something strange passed over Martin's face, and, as the driver stepped out, Martin's hand disappeared into the pocket of his trousers, flashing me a tiny

look which I couldn't fathom and liked even less. The driver gave us a condescending look as he remotely and ostentatiously locked the car, and as we heard the restaurant door close behind us we turned the corner before Martin grabbed my arm and bid me stay.

-Come on, for old time's sake?

-Martin we can't - and what's the point? You said yourself Mr Calyx doesn't want to know us.

-He never would've with one of those. They're too hot - all the owners are on file, the dealerships pride themselves on their 'personal relationships' with every one they sell. This one's for us...

-It's too risky, mate.

-Ian, it's even got my name on it! Wait here...

Despite my better judgment it made me laugh, and I watched as he dropped to a crouch and ran over behind the car, disappearing on its blind side. The indicators flashed once - I saw the driver's door open and close and the engine almost silently fire. The car reversed; Martin was still squatting in the driver's seat, and I watched open-mouthed as the seemingly driver-less car somnambulantly cruised towards me. The passenger door opened and I climbed in; only then did Martin sit up and gun the engine, the wheels gripping on the tarmac and thrusting me back into my seat.

I was shaking with excitement as I fumbled with the seat belt. Martin hit the accelerator hard and the car instantly responded, shooting us along the empty dock road at a disturbing speed. Across the river, the sky exploded with fireworks - it seemed the whole city was attending the displays, and I suspected with some relief that the entire police force was likewise preoccupied. The ring road stretched before us like a deserted three-lane racetrack, urging us to break all limits.

As we hit the fly-over touching 140, I looked out over the city and felt a rush of understanding wash over my body. Every reductive, phallogocentric generalisation ever uttered about the automobile was true. Here, at this moment, we were an unshathed cock penetrating the flesh of the metropolis, and death was never closer. Waterfalls of coloured sparks illuminated the sky in arcs of astral semen, our seatbelts fluttering like

tattered condoms, more decoration than protection.

We careened into the barrier and I looked over at Martin. The smile on his face was not the one I had expected. Somehow in the moment the muscles jerked my head through 90° I had been sure that my eyes would fix on a maniacal grin and flashing eyes. Memory banks were firing, the images accessed entitled Hitler At Bayreuth, the glare of hallucinogenic destiny beaming out through history. But instead, in the place of tripped-out megalomania I saw satisfied resignation, eyebrows raised half-surprised, shouting 'Here we go just what I always wanted I hadn't even dared dream it would be this way...'

We scraped along the barrier for what seemed like eternity, and if I didn't completely wish it would end, it was only because I knew that when the sound of metal meeting metal at 120 mph stopped, worse things could only follow.

Silence - we're in the air.

The strain on my neck is so intense I force it back to stop it from snapping.

On impact with the tarmac my vision fills with white and my heart stops beating.

I remember nothing else until I wake up some time later and see Martin dead beside me.

Total silence. His chest resting against the ridiculous deflation of his airbag like a burst marshmallow. The rough red skin angry where the seat belt had cut into his neck. The absolute absence of his breath, his head lolling nightmarishly to one side.

I instinctively reached over and touched his crotch. He was harder than anything I'd ever felt. I had once held titanium in a physics class, but Martin's cock was harder. I pushed his limp body back in his seat and, without knowing why, leant close and undid his belt and fly. His cock shot up, out and into my mouth in one swift movement. For the first time in weeks, giving Martin a blow job was pure pleasure. Tears flowed down my face and dropped onto the base of his cock like salty pearls as I forced myself further and further down his length.

Suddenly with no warning warm jets of thick liquid hit the back of my throat. I gagged half from the spunk half from surprise and pulled myself off him my mouth wide open the cum

falling in strings around my chin, and looked up into Martin's post-orgasmic smile.

-Well who do you think's the most surprised? I doubted you'd be up to it. I misjudged you badly Ian - you passed with flying colours! Now let's get the fuck out of here before the pigs show up...

My turn to chop up lines. There was still so much left from what Mr Calyx had given us, we'd barely even touched it. I scooped out a large heap with a library card, the first time I'd used it in years. This is what we do instead of reading... Still so many questions. I'm such a coward. My back aches from the impact, days before, but nothing compared to the pain inside. Soul-ache. A cellular fear. Cold within, like a poisonous unthawed chicken. My shoulders hunched, an angry clump of clenched muscle. I stretch my arms out, attempt to unwind, and a solid bunch of sinew cramps and releases. I breathe in deeply and another knot announces itself. I close my eyes and I can picture it, a black claw gripping my right shoulder blade. I gasp and stretch and slide onto the floor and suddenly I'm shaking, a huge convulsion bouncing me on the floorboards. I'm trying to see what it is telling me, what words I need to utter to access its source. It's something to do with *love*. Have I ever loved anyone? A gallery of faces, a question raised by each. A long series of 'no's'. Then his face hangs in the air. A huge wave of tremors, my bones beating out a scatter rhythm on the floor. My eyes open laxly and I'm looking up at him. He looks unsure but I am not - if I have ever been certain of anything, it is that I love him more than anyone I've ever known. And know he loves me too...

His face uncertain.

-You okay?

-Phew. Yeah, I am now. That was weird. I feel like something dark just left the building.

-I was about to call an ambulance. You looked like you were having a fit.

-I'm not sure I wasn't. Help yourself to a line.

He steps up and takes the chair. I hear him clear the line as I get to my feet and shake myself down. A new ease inhabits my

back, something has departed, and as I move to the stereo and place a disc in the tray, I am suddenly strong enough to ask what I haven't yet dared utter.

-Martin, what's wrong?

He sniffs up the other line, holding his head back and gripping his nose. A moan.

-Nothing. I'm fine.

-You're not, mate. There's something wrong. There's been something wrong for weeks now. You can tell me anything, you know?

He fixes me with a piercing look, his mouth hanging loose and crooked.

-I don't know how to say it...

-Just say it. I can bear to hear anything, I added, and prayed inside I meant it.

He closed his eyes, shook his head and swallowed, breathed in then fixed me with a glassy gaze.

-I want to die, he said.

His face has become the blank space, where a beautiful mirror once hung. Nothing reflected back. Every day he sits there staring, adiabatic, impervious to every radiation I attempt. Slowly I become less radiant, a husk of gelid desperation that no amount of logic can defrost.

-Martin, I just don't understand.

-I don't want to do this anymore.

-It's me, isn't it. I've become too clingy, you're bored of me. I can change, I can be more dynamic...

-Why can't you get it into your head? This isn't about you, Ian. There's nothing left in *me*. I've had enough.

Another coke night. It worked for Freud. If I can just get him to talk, to explain himself, then maybe I can find the angle to convince him he is wrong.

-You see, Ian, what you don't seem to understand is, Martin says, God knows how many down the line, I like getting fucked *really* hard, and I like fucking, *really* hard...

A sudden convulsion of the stomach, a sickly disappointment

seeping into me, all my energy earthing in waves.

-What are you saying, Martin, that I've never satisfied you? After all the amazing times we've shared...?

-One or two, yes.

A sheer boreal blankness freezing me to the spot.

-I know what you're doing, Martin. You're trying to make me hate you. It's not gonna work. If I could hate you it means I never loved you.

Later, sliding my quivering body over his inert prone form, trying desperately not to shoot before he gets close...

-You're turning me on so much, he says, firmly.

The tears I cannot hold back any longer, rolling off his perfect body and burying my head in the pillow.

-You say it like it's the worst thing in the world...

The only words that make sense. The need to say them every thirty seconds as if this time they'd change everything. Such a palpable longing to utter a magic spell and make it all alright again. It makes no difference - he is callused, desensitised, the only words I want to say he has heard a thousand times and yet I still insanely expect them this time to have a different outcome. Here they come again, running through my mind as though scorched on magnetic loop...

-I love you with all my heart...

His blank stoic face impervious to reason. Like watching magic murdered before my eyes. The tears fall down my gargoyled face,

-I love you with all my heart...

A new argument would occur to me, a new position that he surely couldn't deny was valid. I'd run to wherever he was and try it out on him.

-You changed my life Martin. Every day we've spent together has been the best day of my life. I became a better person thanks to you. How can you just give up, after all the incredible times we've shared?

-Ian, don't you see that nothing we do now can change a single day we shared. They're history now.

Literally. In a lucid moment of calm between tears I say

-History isn't just what happened, Martin. History's the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of what happened. I'll never make sense of this.

Countless times I bounce to him like an excited dog, hit him with a new and exciting option, only to be sent off packing, my shrunken tail between my legs, my face scarred by tears.

-We could run away! We've got enough money, surely. We could bribe someone to let us on a ship and sail away together, start a new life on an island somewhere!

-What would be the point? Wherever we go, I'd be there.

And me, I added, silently. And *me*.

All the questions I've ever uttered, replaced by one. Why? Explain to me, *make* me understand. I've been asking questions since we began, and have always found the same answer every time - 'Yeah whatever, but I love him, that is all I know.' Until now, I always felt the same from him. Now he seems to have been hit in the face with all the questions in one enormous epiphanic flood, and he's drowning. I constantly throw him the one life-line I know, my umbilicus of love, to pluck him out of doubt, but he refuses to catch hold, preferring to drown. Now, I am in danger of being dragged down with him - his love has been my buoyancy for as long as I can recall. Pluckest me out... *Please?*

-You can't be reliant on someone else for all your happiness, Ian. It's just too great a burden to bear.

-I'm *not* reliant on you for my happiness! It's just I've been happier than I ever dared hope for *with* you. With you I was happy. There's a difference you know.

His face a granite edifice, no fires in the caves of his eyes.

-Bit too subtle for me...

-Oh fuck you! How the fuck did you become the most selfish man in the world?

-I would say the word selfish has a limited utility when it comes to describing one's life, wouldn't you?

Breath and tears join hands, and elope together. Beyond speechless, shunted into right-brain shock where language has no

purchase.

-You cannot tell me someone doesn't have the right to say they've had enough. It is the most basic human right there is, to decide when you want to die.

A pre-human growl reanimates my larynx through accelerated evolution.

-Martin, don't try and make this noble. This isn't suicide. It's murder! You're murdering *us*. Murdering *me*...

-Of course it's suicide. And I'm asking you to commit it...

My face an ocean of confusion. Is this what he really wants, has been too afraid to ask for?

-You want me to...

-Kill me. I can't do this alone. I want us to become one person, and then I want you to kill me.

It was already happening. I knew exactly what he was thinking without him ever having to say. I want to change tack and assault him with shame, to tell him that he promised me he was going to change the world, but his face rises and looks into mine and I hear his voice like my own autonomic language running through my head. I *did* change the world. *We* changed the world, and this changed world lasted ten minutes before the clampdown returned the world to death. Death is the only thing you cannot argue with, so stop arguing. It is hopeless. Kurt is gone. Saul is gone. Lee is gone. Swain is gone. The microscope, gone. The future, gone. This *is* the future. Two people having a futile argument about the day of the inevitable for the rest of time. Cut our losses. Get out now.

-But Martin, a contemptible weakness in my voice, I love you with all my heart...

-Then do this for me. If you love me, set me free.

The worst double bind in the world. If I don't love him, the proof is I will demand he shares my life forever. If I do, I'll let him go. And suddenly, I cannot fight any longer. I'm exhausted. I need a rest.

-Okay. I'll do it.

His face a sudden ray of sunshine, like every time I ever looked at him. Like the clouds have broken, and the sun beams

just on him. He moves over to me and kisses my forehead.

-How come you're so amazing?

-Because I have a seemingly limitless capacity for pain?

A fake plastic tree. It reminded me of a song my mother used to play when I was young. I watched him dress its bright green branches, his boyish excitement as he bedecked them with glitter, delicately pulling ornamental boxes along their length. Fake presents, on a fake tree, for an ersatz celebration. What have we got to celebrate? Everything changes, everyone leaves. My mother. Our friends. The father I never knew. Martin. Martin was all three rolled into one. My best friend. My soul mate. My lover. My mother and father. My teacher. My twin. The song returned, its lyrics making sense for what seemed like the first time.

It wears me out, it wears me out

It wears me out, it wears me out

If I could be who you wanted

If I could be who you wanted

All the time...

Then it was the solstice, and Martin announces we should make a special dinner. He arrives back with champagne, and rich wine, a free range chicken, a bag of groceries. I watch as he skins the chicken, rubbing garlic which he crushes with sea salt into its naked flesh, then cuts the ends off a lemon and stuffs it inside the carcass, and sip champagne, and hope that maybe he has forgotten, that maybe proper rest and some time to think has made him reconsider. It is as I am mixing up the eggs and flour and milk for the Yorkshire puddings, and remember they need salt and a little water too, and watch as my tears fall into the batter, that I realise this is to be our final meal, our last supper together. I contemplate throwing the mixture down the sink, as though without this meal nothing will be final, but know it would make no difference. My Martin has already gone.

We eat, we drink, we fail to be merry. He talks matter-of-factly about how he has paid the rent for the next year up front. He tells me where the bulk of the money is. I stare at the wreath

of holly on the table, *one more second and I can blurt out for him to stop this*, twiddle my glass, *I can smash it against the wall and break the moment*, wonder if the pudding's ready, *sweep my arm across the table pull him to me and love him back to life*, and accept the utter futility of everything. We drain another bottle with the crumble, and again I think if we drink enough he'll just wake up with a hangover and nothing more severe will befall us tonight. He clears the table and kisses me roughly, pulls my face to his and smudges his lips against mine, and it takes all my strength not to *scream*, at how truly heartless he can be.

We crawl into bed and I wrap myself around his back. Despite my sorrow I am lithic. My cock instantly finds the crease of his arse and he looks over his shoulder at me, like a final look, and nods, and forces himself around me, gasps as I enter him and pulls my arm around his throat. I grip it tight, his breathing getting harder as I tighten my grip and pump myself mercilessly into him, forcing him over onto his front and burying his face in the pillow, my arm pulling with all my strength. The energy falls out of me as I whisper 'I will always love you', but he forces himself harder against me and my arm again tightens. Towards the end, he starts to try and buck me, but I am in the throes of lust and nothing now can stop me. I feel him go limp as I shoot inside him.

I turn him over, his face serene, his cock standing perpendicular. The derivation of the words 'Well hung' spring into my mind as I mount him, forcing myself down him and riding him hard, until tears and semen meet on his prone body, and I kiss him, one last time.

After it was over, I set up the cine projector, and watched our movie on his cooling corpse.

This was the hardest time. Martin talked about this, said if you are planning to dispose of a body you have just killed, you had better be prepared to kill again. I dressed and checked the gantry. No-one. Not one light shining. I wrapped his body in the sheet from the bed and pulled him with it along the corridor. I called the lift, heard the disembodied voice call out the floors, then dragged... the body over as the lift door opened. Making a

conscious decision not to look in the mirror, I stood with my back to the doors. In the garage I pulled... the body out of the lift and over to the first of the concrete slopes, turning it round and rolling it down. It continued to roll a little way further. I was sweating hard by the time I reached the second one, leaving it at the top and running down to peer through the metal mesh into the street outside. Total silence. The sound of the heavy rollers shattering the air, I ran back to the top and pushed... the body down the slope. It continued to roll through the gap at the bottom of the shutters and into the street. I ducked and ran under them and checked the street. Again nothing. Then I pulled... the body along the pavement and onto the grass that led down to the river.

By the time I had dragged... the body the hundred yards or so to the steep embankment that led down onto the promenade I was exhausted. I looked back at the building, to see not a single window lit. People must have already left for the holidays, taking an unofficial long weekend before Christmas Day on Tuesday. A sudden sorrow rose up and threatened to choke me, but I swallowed it, kicking... the body down the slope and running on bent-kneed legs to join it at the bottom, then dragging it the few yards across the tow-path to the river.

I found the ideal place; a small indented part of the fence that led to a set of steps down into the water. The grating was held on by rusting bolts; it only took a few kicks for the fencing to spring loose. The tide was already going out, revealing a few steps covered in moss and weed, a corroded hand rail disappearing into the water. I sat on... the body, hearing a gruff hiss of air, and standing undid the sheet, closed my eyes and pulled one edge of it, rolling... the body down the steps. I heard the splash and opened my eyes, and saw Martin's beautiful face break the surface of the water, and a panic rose within me and I carefully picked my way down a few of the slippery steps and pushed him away from the wall. The full moonlight caught his face, and a cry escaped my lips - the memory of the first time I ever saw him rooting me to the spot, before he disappeared below the surface.

I stood watching the water for a few minutes, making sure he didn't bob back up. I looked out over the river; the sky was slowly growing less dark, and I could make out the spire of a

church on the opposite bank, its solid blackness darker than the navy sky. I leant against the fence, and felt a trickle of liquid escape my hole, and remembered how, in happier times, it had always made me proud, to be leaking Martin's essence.

I looked to my left and along the river in the direction of the current. I decided to walk along the bank for a while, to make sure he was definitely gone. Ahead, the river curved away, and as I walked, I was sure I could make out a figure on its bank. My stomach convulsed, and I wondered if whoever it was could have seen me, but looking back realised that I had already walked quite a distance, the curve of the river obscuring where I must have been even from my own gaze.

As I approached, I realised the man was fishing. He had a dog curled around the bottom of the stool he was sitting on, his rod resting on the fence in front of him. As I got close, he turned to look at me, and nodded, his long grey hair falling a little over his bearded face.

-Morning, I said, my voice devoid of emotion.

-It is indeed. His voice was croaky, and surprisingly well-spoken.

-A bit early to be out, isn't it? I asked, as I stopped beside him.

-I could say the same to you, he said, regarding me, a wry look on his deeply lined face. He was very old, but had obviously once been very handsome. The dog pricked up its ears and panted at me, pitching its head oddly to one side before returning it to its paws.

-Roy, said the man, holding out his hand.

-Ian, I lied, taking his spindly hand and matching his grip.

-Don't mind me dog. He's blind but a good judge of character. He can tell I'll be safe. It's a useful talent he has, what with me being crippled.

He slapped his leg, and I wondered how he'd gotten down here if he was, as he said, crippled. He flashed me a piercing look.

-Bayonet wound. First World War. Don't suppose you've ever heard of Ypres? Worse than Hell. I was taken for dead, crawled my way out of the trenches.

I had indeed heard of Ypres, and knew that the battle that had

made the town famous had happened almost a hundred years ago. That would make him... too old to live. I wondered then if he was not all there, and asked him nonchalantly where he had come from.

-From my house down the river. Can you see it?

He pointed back in the direction I had come from, but I saw only early morning mist coming in off the river, and was convinced then that the man was quite insane. His dog suddenly leapt into the air, and the man leant back in his seat and started pulling on the rod, the dog leaping up and barking excitedly. I was struck by the fact that he may have snagged... the body, and panicked - should I run? The man was pulling back his rod and reeling in the line with surprising dexterity, and I ran to the fence to see a wriggling fish break the surface. Roy lifted the rod and deposited the fish on the pathway a few yards from both of us.

-Please, could you, he said, grabbing his thigh. My leg you see...

I moved over to the fish, and waited until it thrashed itself to exhaustion, before bending down and attempting to pull the hook from its mouth. As I grabbed the line, a swift movement of its body made me misjudge the manoeuvre, and the hook ripped into my thumb, its barb sticking there. I let out a sharp cry and struggled to extract it with my other hand, shooting my now free thumb to my mouth to suck it better.

Running my tongue along the cut, I looked down at the fish as it lay on the bank. Its mouth was opening pathetically, trying to draw air into lungs it didn't have, and suddenly I felt it too, the most terrifying suffocation, all energy cascading down an abyss of grief. I wanted to scream, but no sound would come, the fish's squirming desperation matching my own internal despair as I tried to raise my chest, all air disappearing in a vacuum of desolation. A ringing in my ears, a dull unbearable weight upon my shoulders.

I stood there, hypnotised by sorrow, until long after the fish had stopped moving. When my reverie broke I was alone, the man and the dog long gone, a rod, a stool and a dead fish the only sign they had ever existed.

**This PDF is the fourteenth part of the novel
XQ-28: The Story of a Gene.
Further chapters will become available weekly from
14th March 2008 @
<http://www.non-sterile.co.uk/RX.html>
check back regularly...**

©2008 adex/non-sterile