

XQ-28

The Story of a Gene

Chapter 21

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Adrian Challis



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

Chapter 21 Bereft

Christmas Day. Is there anything sadder than a Christmas Day spent alone? And yet, for the first time in three days, I do not cry. The silence is abject, like the planet has died. A stifled voice has followed me for days, like my lips have been sewn shut. The muscles in my neck straining to contain this prisoner, an inarticulate ventriloquist of grief. Suddenly, they are relieved of duty.

Have I finally cried myself dry? Or is it just I've reached my destination? The zenith and nadir of sorrow - its pinnacle and trough. Meaning has been inverted, irrevocably. The saddest possible moment is the only one in which I'm calm. No tears on Christmas Day, for each day now will be the saddest day.

I laugh at myself. Someone has to. Can anything justify this, this well of self-pity I now bewail from? There you go kid, all those years crying wolf; you *thought* you knew what sadness was. Now who's gonna listen?

Another laugh, vaguely - *troublingly* - hysterical.
Now you know what grief is.

For each man kills the thing he loves. That's Oscar Wilde, that is. I've never read Oscar Wilde. Like the base indian, who threw away a pearl, richer than all his tribe... I know this is from *Othello*, although I've likewise never read *Othello*. Know too a book by Steinbeck called *The Pearl*. I've never read them, but

now I know what they *mean*.

I see it then on the tree, amidst all the fake presents. Something real. A red wrapped box. Inside it, a watch. A black-faced Gucci, concentric lines etched into it like the grooves in a record. What's this, my retirement present? Italian. Beautiful. And *if* he'd paid money for it, it would be almost priceless. Cynical, so soon.

I turn it over. In elegant letters, devoid of capital or serif, eight words.

**all my love for all of time
martin**

Below them. Three little kisses.

Now I'm crying. How could I not be productive for a spell that... simple? All the most powerful spells *are* that simple. It takes a powerful spell to wring such precious sap from as arid a husk as this. He must have bought it. It's not the money that matters. What matters is that he must have walked into one of the exorbitant import shops, handed over meaningless money but meaning-drenched words, and stared out the salesman as he regarded what was obviously a man's watch, and asked him to repeat his requested inscription.

Just when you think you can't get any lower, you fall even deeper in love.

I find his jumper, a claret red v-neck, every fibre of its modal fabric suffused with his smell. I put it on, despite it being nearly two sizes too big, and walk back into the living room, flicking on the enormous TV. A black and white title in blunt and angular 3D letters bursts across the screen: 'Liberty Films'. How ironic, but really, how appropriate. It *is* Christmas after all. *It's a Wonderful Life*. Why couldn't this have been on four days ago? Where were these three distant constellations when I needed them? Lines leap out at me... 'I don't see a thing...' 'Oh I forgot, you haven't got your wings yet.' Death and loss seem to permeate every frame, my moistened eyes dripping tears echoing each line dripping with meaning. 'Oh you mean the kid who had his ears slapped back by

the druggist?' Martin's return from Mr Calyx, the look on his face like a chastised youth. The constant desire to escape, an echo of my compulsion to be many miles away with Martin. The re-occurring theme of falling in water, with its obvious point of departure - George saves *his* brother... An almost unbearable urge to vomit, as James Stewart kicks open the gate of his destiny and the image of the rusting fence by the river leaps into my mind...

So much desire welling inside me, burying my nose in the jumper as the couple finally declare their love, breathing in his smell as Bailey obviously intoxicates himself with Mary's. The fear of commitment, the equally strong pull towards freedom - I hear Martin's voice replace James Stewart's on the line 'Now you listen to me, I don't wanna get married ever to anyone, you understand? I wanna do what I wanna do...' Finally, they kiss.

It is soon after this that the film becomes unbearable. I miss some of it because the tears won't let me focus, a strange but increasingly familiar stifled voice obscuring the dialogue. A moment of silence emphasises a killer line - 'I want my baby to look like you...' and I am lost in a miasma of wailing that only abates as the images become so redolent of our recent past I am left gasping at their relevance. The film an idealised black and white icon of Martin's sudden withdrawal. Bailey's refusal to soften, despite all the attempts to touch him from everyone he's ever loved. The all-too familiar face of someone who doesn't - or doesn't want to - know you anymore. It is the scene in which George finally decides to kill himself, the look of stoic desperation a direct reference to the face I watched disappear for weeks, that stops me dead. The camera cutting to behind him, the name of the bar in neon. Martin's.

How are you spelling that? Martin, and i.

Where was Clarence Oddbody when I needed him? If Martin had been given a chance to see what the world would be like without him, would he have still done it? A question best left unasked. I'm on safer ground with statements. Try this one: 'Strange, isn't it. Each man's life touches so many other lives, when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he.' The joys of alternative histories...

I am impervious to the film's mawkish happy ending. I hear

no bells. I try instead to take solace in its only possible lesson; that despite whatever future chasms of despair may open, I know one thing. They *must* be worth it, for all the things that wouldn't have been, had I never met him.

She was on next. I flicked off the TV before she started. I had no interest in what she had to say.

It is three days later that anger finally hits. A wall of deafening distortion, twisting everything I hitherto accepted into unrecognisable shapes, so that even history is disfigured. The realisation of his utter selfishness. Something akin to hatred breaking across my face, the days of stomach-churning desire curdling into inexpressible bile. Despite what I said to him, about love having nothing to do with hate, I *do* hate him now. Not him, but what he has done, what cannot now be undone. I never thought it possible, but he can inspire nothing but rancour in me, every cell of my body and consciousness exploding in frustration. I want to beat my fists against his chest, claw his face, sink my teeth into his neck, wrestle him to the ground and punch him until he makes me understand why he didn't think *us* worth living for. As my rage of Caliban subsides, it is only guilt that settles into my flesh and stems my sobs.

A suffocating acceptance that it was me who killed him... Martin's voice, asking a question. 'Does wisdom perhaps descend, as a raven, beckoned by the smell of carrion...?' In answer I hear my own voice whisper, 'If suffering brings wisdom, I would wish to be less wise...'

A New Year. Thirteen. Unlucky for some. How can I face another day of this, never mind another year, a whole life without his smile to light my way? In a waking dream, a parallel timetrack, I am toasting his beauty, drinking to our best year yet. In this one, I have never been so alone. Beside him, anything was possible, without him; nothing.

Everything reminds me of him. I clean my teeth with the electric toothbrush he most likely stole for me, before climbing into bed to dream of Martin. I wake each morning hugging my pillow, a

desire to make it him so strong I feel my neck may snap, my chest collapse. Every pore of my body hungry for his touch. A sickly understanding of the meaning of a broken heart; the fear that my heart may really break, may just stop, could at any moment just explode with longing.

Weeks counted in and doused with tears, until my eyes can only marvel that there can be more to shed. Some days I wake and it takes long minutes, hours even, before they fall, but as sure as there is an 'a' in the day at some time between dawn and dusk I know that fall they must. Everywhere I look, a memory. I stand before our windows and look out over the river, his final resting place, and feel his hot arms pass around me, his stomach and chest hot against my back, his growing and perfect tumescence indenting my buttocks, and open my eyes, and see everywhere desolation, barrenness, despair. I know I must eat, but crushing garlic with a little sea salt - since Martin, the prologue to every meal - is enough to send me crazy. I can't be bothered to make anything too complex, and opt for risotto, but now I can only ever make risotto the way he made it; all the stock at once. A few weeks later I make a lasagna - his favourite of all my recipes - and drop the dish as I'm getting it out of the oven, and slump on the kitchen floor, and wail again, the shattered porcelain a metaphor for something irreparable.

I hear his voice quote Dante: 'There is no greater sorrow, than to recall a time of happiness in misery.'

He is the last thing I think of at night, the first face that rises with morning. The constant and unshakable desire to kiss him, to wrap myself around an imaginary Martin, always just beside me. The very thought of kissing his perfect lips enrages me. The thought of fucking him makes me cum. The thought that I will never hold him in my arms again makes me want to die. Perhaps to be reunited with him in death...

But I know there is no heaven.

Where are all these words coming from? I have become a mill of quotations, grinding out one portentous line after another. 'For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.' Yeah, but I suspect in my heart that that one

cuts both ways, doesn't it? Maybe. But then what use is wisdom, when it brings no profit to the wise? Who said that? I know almost praeternaturally they are Milton's words, but they sound in my head in Martin's voice...

Bills started arriving. All in different names. One week an electricity bill addressed to Mr Bradshawe. The next, water, to a Mr M Perabo. Council Tax: M Beavis. Telephone: M Taylor. All paid for by Direct Debit, all from different bank accounts, complete with sort codes and account numbers. How many identities did he have? And I thought *I* was lying... But I lied for no good reason. He did it because he cared.

Early March. In the seconds before consciousness, a line from Shakespeare. 'What's gone and what's past help, Should be past grief...' My eyes opening moments later, the words 'Well done kid, you've made it! This is real progress: you're not thinking of Martin at all... Doh!'

And still it rises. No-one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. The fear that love itself is gone forever. The feeling that even the thought of another is still a kind of infidelity. The infinity that stretches before me without Martin.

It pauses. It is his voice that shocks me to my senses, speaking words I know are Nietzsche's. 'Why fear the infinity that comes after me, any more than you feared the infinity that came before me?'

And then it stops. The realisation I could not grasp 'til now makes me shake with a terrifying certainty. *I* have never read Nietzsche. *I* have never read Dante. Nor Milton. Nor Marlowe. Nor Yeats.

I close my eyes, and open Martin's, *and the world comes back to life.*

It is dark when I leave the apartment. For once I know what day it is. The vernal equinox. Exactly one year since I met him. Our anniversary. I stride across the grass and down onto the promenade, and turn away from the city, my collar raised against

the wind, more than a hint of spring carried on its unfamiliar breath. For once no tears are falling; something has shifted, has settled, in my, *our*, belly.

I watch the lights shimmy on the water, the river pond-like and still. I look up into the sky, and see it unmarred by cloud, the stars shining clear as crystal, lighting my way. I raise my hands and pause, imagine I am juggling the stars, and with them my destiny, and feel a future possible again. I walk on, pulling my jacket tight against the mild air, winter gone for one more year. And smile at last.

After some time walking with no destination in mind, I see two silhouettes coming towards me. I have seen no-one but shop assistants all year. We pass beneath a street lamp; I smile again, the novelty feels good. Something in my entrails pulses; they pay me a moment's more attention than I expect. I walk on, but wonder; they were both quite attractive. After a few yards, I look over my shoulder - they have stopped and are looking back at me. Keep walking. Ten paces. Look again. They are still looking, this time they have turned fully round and are gazing openly at me. I stop. Come on then, if you're coming... They begin to follow.

Game on.

I walk and follow the curve of the river, regularly checking to see them gaining ground. For the first time all year there is a familiar growl in my belly; apprehensive excitement. I feel my cock becoming a little turgid, and look again to see them gone. Noooo! I turn full circle, and they are beside me. They overtake me, and lead me into an alcove in the path. We face each other.

One is quite small but very goodlooking, the other a lanky streak of piss, his face marked by what look like barely post-adolescent pimples. They look like rent, or rather, opportunistic kids *looking* for rent.

-Hi, I say.

-Hi, they say in return.

I cut to the chase.

-What you looking for?

They look at each other, then back at me, and smile. Something occurs to me.

-Me too. But I take it you're after money right?

They look again at each other, then back at me, and nod, uncertainly.

-Why for money? Why not for fun?

They look again at each other, then back at me. It is the attractive one who speaks.

-Okay, for fun. His face is quite serious.

I think about leading them back to the apartment, but discount this quickly; I'm still too sore to violate our space, and besides, we would never sustain a conversation that long!

-You got somewhere to go?

-We know somewhere. Count to fifty and follow.

They set off along the river, then turn up a path. I can easily see them as they climb the embankment. I look back over the river, silently counting in my head. Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two - oh fuck it, fifty, coming, ready or not...

As I scurry up the path, I am happily surprised by how excited I feel. I really have spent too long mortified by grief - it's time to live, a little at least. I see their backs cross the main road, and up another concrete path that runs under a pedestrian bridge I've never seen before. I swallow the suspicion that I am doing something extremely stupid by following them, and wonder for a second if they are leading me into a trap, and close my eyes and see no masked gang of gaybashers waiting for me. I am certainly no muscle mary, but these two are hardly a match for me. There are bushes to my left; I hear a whistle and look to see a dark figure standing in a clearing, his hand noticeably working his exposed length. My God, it never rains but it pours! This must be a cruising ground I never knew existed. I feel oddly more conspicuous and yet strangely reassured.

At the top of the path, I follow the boys over the brow of a hill. On the other side, a row of white concrete low-rise buildings, no lights in any windows. They surely can't live here? I notice a sign: Centre for Energy. Appropriate. I walk up a set of concrete steps and see the tall one standing by a gantry. I approach him and nod. He turns his head in the direction of the cute one who is leaning against a wall, holding his packet. Nice one. I didn't fancy the tall one anyway.

I reach him, and instantly we're kissing. He pushes me against

the wall and begins fumbling with my belt. I run my hands over his chest - it is surprisingly muscled. I grab at his crotch which is solid, and full enough. As I open his trousers mine are already falling down my knees; I look down at myself, and am pleased to see my cock standing solidly to attention. No worries. I pull the kid's underwear down around his balls, and bob my head to his cock.

A decent size. Very clean. Cut.

Well, two out of three aint bad...

I suck him into my mouth, and hear him gasp. I try and forget the differences between what I feel and what - whom - I am used to, and instead propel myself down his length, working him with my tongue. Fresh musk springs from his short tight pubes, his hand resting on the back of my head. I squat and start to work myself, flashing a look over at the other boy, his hands in his pockets. I am surprised to feel my head beckon him over, but he turns his away, keeping look-out. Please yourself. I notice he *is* doing, before my eyes switch back to my suckee, whose head is resting against the wall, his eyes closed tight, obviously enjoying himself.

Suddenly, he looks down at me and tugs on my head, his other arm pulling me to my feet. I disengage from his cock and he spins me round, and begins pushing his length between my cheeks. Something is suddenly very confident in me, and I nonchalantly reach behind me into the back pocket of my jeans, resting around my calves, and take out my wallet. Inside I know there are two condoms and a small packet of lube; they have been there for over a year, but discount the urge to check their use-by date; there is certainly not enough light, and anyway, I'm sure they're fine. I fumble with the wrapper, clenching my buttocks to stop him from entering me until I can roll a condom down his length, and move my hands behind me to start the procedure, but he pushes me away and points down another set of steps to our right.

Pulling my trousers up enough to make shuffling possible, I follow him down the steps. At the bottom he turns me round and faces me, then looks over in the direction of his mate. Sure that he can't be seen, he suddenly drops to his haunches and sucks my cock into his mouth and works me hard and frenzied. I gasp as quietly as I can - it is obvious he doesn't want his mate to know quite how much he wants this, and am impressed by the skill with

which he works me. Until now, the whole proceedings had held for me an almost mechanical banality; his tongue, expertly pressurising my frenum, was coaxing an unexpected depth of excitement from my long neutered solitude, and as he stares up into my face and withdraws, it is with a renewed vigour that I pull him to his feet and smoothly roll the condom down his manhood.

I turn round, tearing off the end of the packet of lube and squeezing out a generous glob onto my fingers, before covering my hole with its silkiness and grabbing him by the hips. His head barely reaches my shoulder blades as I move one hand between my legs and, aiming his cock with the heel of my palm, use my fingers to pull his perineum close into me. He is obviously very excited as I grab his right hand and fit it over my cock, shooting my hands back to his hips to pull him angrily into me with anxious, sharp thrusts, spreading my legs as wide as my trousers will allow to make us similar heights. He is breathing hard as I pull him ever deeper inside me, my own excitement surprising even me, a conscience-less urgency to be filled as deep as he can manage. His breathing is getting faster, and I can tell he is getting close, and, despite him releasing my cock to let it spring against my stomach, I continue to grip his hips and slam him hard into my accepting flesh. I feel him lean back and thrust harder, and help him get as deep as he can by pulling my hands closer together and pumping him into me, as I feel white spots begin to boil before my eyes, momentarily lost in a rising cloud of orgasm. An unusual coldness passes around my wrists as I drop my head and let my cock spontaneously erupt white jets onto the concrete in front of me, feel him disengage, and try to drop my arms and shoot my hand to my cock to finish myself off, but cannot bring my hands in front of me - a long bar of cold metal colliding with my buttocks.

Lips by my ear and a voice, much deeper than I remembered...

-You're under arrest, motherfucker, it said.

A whistle brought the tall boy running, already barking directions into a small walkie-talkie.

It's just like they say. You can tell you're getting older, when the cops start looking younger.

I choose to ride in silence. What kind of defence did I have to 'later rely on' anyway? Well, your honour, please try and understand I was under a lot of duress. You see, three months before, I had killed my boyfriend - the love of my life - and dumped his body in the river, and after long months of chronic grieving, I thought it was about time I went searching for a good deep dicking...

At the station I was led down long corridors, to a room at the centre of the building, past wolf-whistling cops, a disturbing number of whom placing their hands on their hips and pouting noticeably. Hilarious. Must be basic training. I broke my silence when a desk sergeant shouted to my cute assailant 'Like your boyfriend, Gary', and managed to say loud enough so most of the station could hear

-Well, I didn't hear him complaining, but then my cock *was* wedged so far down his throat at the time he'd have needed ventriloquist lessons...

and took the expected punch, with *some* dignity I thought.

It was only later, when the results from my new DNA swab hit the interrogation room like a tornado, that anyone began to take me seriously. 'Gary' wasted no time opening the door and announcing to the entire headquarters

-Fuckin ell lads, we got us a fuckin cop killer...

and I just had time to close my eyes, and see *our* sperm hit a public toilet seat a year ago to the day, before cop after cop stepped up to have their rightful turn, at punching, and kicking, and smashing me to unconsciousness.

I hear Martin's voice quote a line from Raymond Chandler, before that old black pool opened up, and I dived in...

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