

XQ-28

The Story of a Gene

Chapter 22

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Adrian Challis



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Chapter 22 Endurance

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.

Well, I guess that brings us pretty much up to date. You already know the rest. By the way, I'm not talking to her anymore. This is between you and me now. I hope you like the attention. Sometimes, she just gets to be too much; my only option left is silence. I haven't spoken to her for weeks. To be honest, I think she's given up on me. I half-suspect she was grateful for the break, I reckon Ramadan really took it out of her. There's not that much left to tell anyway.

And besides, unlike you, she can't keep a secret.

I'll let you in on one right now. Not so much a secret, as a piece of advice. You should watch the news occasionally. Little did I anticipate it, but Martin saw it coming. Do you remember him saying that, before long, ChrisIs would *be* the government, without any of the troublesome formalities of having to get elected? Well, he was right. By all accounts, Diana's Christmas speech caused quite a stir. Not that I watched it. If you remember, I turned the TV off straight after the movie.

Whoops.

I noticed the moon last night. It looked full, a ghostly white eye peering down at me as I lay on my bed, the sky clear for the first time in weeks. I felt him stronger than ever, a warm haze of scent enveloping me as I lay naked in the blue moonlight, and, for the

first time all month, desire wracked my body, as I imagined him covering me, and I rolled over and pushed myself into the bed until I shot all over the rough starched sheets. It's something I try to avoid - there's no real privacy in here - but I needed it; this week was always going to be tough. It's nearly a year now since... well. Best not go there.

Breakfast was excrescent, as always. As I drained the plastic beaker of filthy coffee, I heard the key turn in the lock, and looked up to see Holly walking through the door. For once, she wasn't alone.

-Morning, Ian, she said. I've brought someone to see you.

A faint smile played upon her lips, something in her demeanour less than attractive, and as I placed the cup on the bedside cabinet and turned to look at her, a familiar face stepped out from behind her white-coated frame.

-Hello, Ian, said Kurt, a similar half-smile blemishing his face.

For a second, I was genuinely pleased to see him, and rose and almost got as far as shaking his hand. But the looks on both of their faces banished that urge immediately.

They were playing their Kafka card.

They moved over to the low seats that flanked the wall opposite my bed, and waited until I settled back onto the mattress before sitting down.

-So, I said, breaking a long silence. To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?

-We were just talking in the canteen, said Kurt, the same stupid, supercilious smile playing on his lips. Holly was saying how you'd become withdrawn and might need a little... jolly along.

-A charming image, I said. You shouldn't have bothered.

-Oh, it's no bother. I wanted to see you anyway.

I had never wanted to slap a face more forcefully in all my life, but I let the instinct pass. I looked at Holly, my gaze impassive.

-Is this what you call a punchline?

-Not at all, Ian. We thought we owed you an explanation.

-I'm all ears.

-As you know, since you arrived here I've been urging you to tell your story with as much honesty as either of us can bear. For

the past few weeks you've said nothing. It is of the utmost importance that you complete your story. You are a very special individual, and what you have to say will be of lasting importance.

-How touching, Holly, I never knew you cared.

-We both know that's not true, Ian...

Silence. I looked at Kurt.

-So, where do you come into all of this? Oh, of course, how stupid of me. It's thanks to you I'm here in the first place...

-No, Ian, you're here because you committed a murder. A particularly brutal murder. The reason you are *still* here, the reason you are still *anywhere*, is because of your story. As you know, you are classic XQ-28 material. It's thanks to Dr Hopkins, and her immediate superior Dr Benway, that you have had a chance to...

-Confess? I interrupted.

-...to *chronicle* your experiences. You should be grateful to Holly that she was professional enough to rise above her personal feelings about your perversions to listen objectively. Not many people could.

-It hasn't been easy, Ian.

-You're telling me, I said, a little too bitterly.

-I'll leave you two to talk. If you need me, just call the nurse.

As the door closed behind her, I looked back at Kurt, his face suddenly serious.

-So why, Kurt?

-Like I said, not many people have the patience of Dr Hopkins. She's a doctor, she sees you as a patient. I don't have that... affliction.

-So what *do* you see me as?

He fixed me with a narrow-eyed stare.

-A disease. A sickness. An abomination.

-Oh, please, do me a favour.

-Leviticus. Chapter 18. Verse 22. 'Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind. It is an abomination.'

-Oh, get over it, Kurt! You're quoting three thousand year old dogma at me...

-Not dogma, Ian. It is the word of God. Morality doesn't change with fashion. It is eternal.

-You fucking hypocrite! I sat in Tom's kitchen and watched you take hit after hit on a crack pipe. Where was your universal morality then?

-Have you read The Bible, Ian? I have. From cover to cover, coast to coast. It doesn't say anything about drugs in there.

-Wake up, Kurt! It's the twenty-first century! Think for yourself! You are a very, very bright man. Find your own answers...

-This *is* my own answer, Ian. You're right, this isn't just about The Bible. This is personal too. My sister was a sweet, beautiful and intelligent woman before HIV reduced her to a gibbering skeleton. She was immune to every drug they threw into her. She died thanks to one of your kind...

-My kind? What the fuck are you talking about, my kind?

-She met a man she fell hopelessly in love with. Unfortunately, he wasn't worthy of her love. He spent his weekends fornicating with disease-ridden rent boys, then brought it home to her.

-Kurt, I'm sorry about your sister, but you saw what we did. We cured that fucking disease! You watched us shatter that virus so easily that no-one would ever have to worry again...

-Precisely, Ian. So no-one would have to behave themselves. So everyone could fuck anyone, and fuck anyone over, until the whole world was dragged down into your cesspit.

I could only stare at him.

-You're fucking insane...

-No, Ian. I'm righteous.

-But Kurt, a genuine desire to convince him in my voice, we *cured* AIDS! We destroyed that fucked up little virus...

A sudden flash from the party. Kurt's face as I looked round from the dancefloor after Tony had been cured.

-You. It was you who called the cops in...

-I had to, Ian. You're right, you did destroy the virus. I couldn't allow that. It was just too important to be tampered with before we completed our research.

My head was spinning. The entire world had been turned upside down. Nothing, *nothing*, made sense anymore...

-Research? Is that all this is to you? What about people? What about death?

-What about it indeed. We've done it now. Thanks to ChrisIs, we got the funding. After thirty years of getting nowhere, we've finally managed to isolate the transcriptase from the viral DNA. At last we can use the incredible gift that HIV has given us. Without the viral DNA, we can repair any congenital abnormality we want. We've found the magic bullet, Ian! There's no need for anyone to live like you anymore. The XQ-28 gene - the *gay* gene - is history. *You're* history. We have your history. We don't need you anymore...

Martin helped explain it to me. Thank God for his reading. It was just like the Nazis, he said. They were obsessed with cataloguing everything they did too. Everything must be recorded. I'd always wondered about that, how when the Nuremburg judges looked into the files. they found a neat record of every single atrocity, all accounted for. Talk about self-incrimination. Every movement of mass numbers, recorded like head of cattle. Every gram of Zyklon B administered, logged. Every bullet, indexed. Every gold tooth extracted, extant in the records. Every experiment meticulously documented and memorialised. I would say 'typical Germans', but it's true it seems to be a symptom of any kind of psychopathic behaviour. The need to chronicle almost as compulsive as the crime itself.

A sobering way to think about it - an entire way of life reduced to a bureaucrat's ledger...

Just when I threatened to sink without trace, Martin came to my rescue, as usual. He had another way of looking at it. In the 'thirties, the Nazis put together a touring programme called 'The Exhibition of Decadent Art'. All of the defining images of Modernism were there. They took it around all the provinces of Germany, and encouraged everyone to come and see quite how depraved these Jews and Bolsheviks and avant-garde degenerates really were. Ironically, thanks to this, a whole nation of good German *Volk* were exposed to some of the greatest ideas of the century.

The artists were given the perfect opportunity to make the most exquisite nooses for their own necks. Cubist nooses to further dislocate already disjointed vertebrae. Vorticist scaffolds stretching to an angular vanishing point. Dadaist sound poems of

creaking rope and sinew. Constructivist paeans to a perfected techno-Tyburn. Expressionist explosions of strangled pigment, splashing Fauvist ligatures with what it *felt* like to be throttled. Verist garottes dangling from self-erected lampposts, stretch-necked spirits rising above Surrealist gibbets; Paul Klee taking a line for a walk, around his own Adam's apple. An entire generation reduced to a Suprematist canvas of oily negation, simply entitled *Halter*.

The Nazis described it as 'a morgue of suicides, fools, freaks and imbeciles in their coffins.' But 40,000 people turned up to pay their last respects, three times the number who attended the Nazi-backed 'Great Exhibition of German Art', despite standing before doors that only opened every three minutes, to allow another few people in, feigning abhorred disinterest...

His voice clear and cool-headed. 'Look on the bright side mate. The Nazis were left with no alternative but to send twelve million to the gas chambers. This has got to be better. What is it ChrisIs say? Love the pervert, hate the perversion? Gene-cleaning saviour, change my behaviour! Surely this is an improvement on mass slaughter? Where there's life, there's hope.'

We'll see.

Bless him for trying. I can't say I saw much positivity in the situation. Call me a pessimist. See if I give a shit.

It was a few days later, and I was laying on my bed, wrapped in a tight foetal ball, my stomach a good few floors below me, when I heard the key in the lock again. Who is it this time? Go on, surprise me... Don't tell me, Saul's here, to reveal he's really my father, and he lied about our test results just to teach me a lesson. DJ Swain's come back, dressed in jackboots and Hugo Boss uniform - it was him who gave Kurt the idea of calling the cops in the first place. Or Lee perhaps. Lee, who's always been a fag-hating breeder, whose day job is printing 'Kill a Queer for Christ' stickers for charity...

I look over at the opened door, inuring myself to further pain. It's one of the nurses.

-You've got a visitor, he says.

Inside the huge hall there were scores of tables, each installed with 'patients' and their loved ones. Guards hovered around the edges, hawk-eyed uniformed gorillas, patrolling for signs of contraband and forbidden contact, their fingers paused on the handles of electric-shock tazers. Their desire for someone to make a wrong move was palpable - you could tell they couldn't wait to try out their gadgets.

It was the first time I'd ever been in here; not one single visitor for nine months. I was led towards the centre of the room, the nurse's hand resting softly on my shoulder, my feet shuffling in short steps; the hard plastic manacles that bound my ankles made walking difficult, and I kept my eyes on the floor to ensure I didn't trip. The nurse's grip suddenly tightened, and I looked up to see I was in front of a table, my visitor already seated on the other side.

It was Pandora.

She stood up and leaned across the table, and kissed me full on the lips. As my eyes closed, I caught a glimpse of a guard moving towards us, but resisted the sensible option - her kiss reminded me of happier times, and for once, I embraced the memory with every fibre of my being, a sudden intake of breath rocketing a wave of emotion through my body.

-Hello, I said.

She silently sat down, and I noticed the guard relax and back off. Better luck next time, mate...

I took the seat and stared at her, matching her cool, enquiring gaze. If it was possible, she was even more beautiful than I remembered her, her hair short, and styled like I had once seen Mia Farrow wear in a 'sixties movie, her eyes two clear blue moons, shining from her face.

-How did you find me? Obviously not by name, I thought.

-Of course, you probably have no idea what's gone on outside, have you. Well, suffice it to say, for a while back there you *were* the front page! I wanted to bring Eve, but she couldn't face it. She said she couldn't bear to see you caged. She wanted to remember you free.

I smiled.

-Me too, I said.

-Have you seen Martin? she asked, no hint of emotion on her face.

-Oh Pandora, I said, leaning on the table and reaching out my hand to hold hers.

-No touching, barked a guard, his face impassive. I took my hand away and covered my eyes, running my hands to my mouth, willing myself to have the strength to tell her.

-He's dead. In every sense that anyone would understand, at least. We organised a rave that got raided - they beat the Martin out of him. He never really came back.

I couldn't say anymore about it. Her eyes dropped to the table.

-We thought something must have happened. We knew we would have heard from you otherwise. We've really missed you, you know.

I nodded, and sniffed back the tears. Her eyes were shining through me; everything about her was radiating life. I chose to change the subject.

-Pandora, you look fantastic! At least something seems to have been doing *you* some good!

-It's these two, she said, nodding to her side.

I stood up slightly to see what she was looking at. On the other side of the table, a navy push-chair I hadn't noticed held two babies. A huge intake of breath knocked me back into my seat, as Pandora manoeuvred the pushchair into a position I could see them from.

-They're *ours*...?

-Of course, she said matter-of-factly. Who else's would they be?

-It worked!

-Naturally! I always knew it would. I knew it the moment we did it. I told you you both had excellent wetware!

I looked at the two beautiful children, sitting calmly in their buggy. On the right, a chubby little boy with dark brown hair and eyes to match, his fingers in his mouth, his head bouncing against the back of his seat, his legs kicking playfully in the air. To his left, another boy with almost white hair, crystal blue eyes impassively scanning the room, one hand resting lightly on his brother's leg.

-Pandora, they are so beautiful ...

-Well, what did you expect?

-And they work?

-Perfectly! We were a little worried about this one, she said, delicately stroking his dark brown hair, we thought his finger nails weren't growing for a bit. But it just turned out he was biting them! They're both very advanced. They got their first teeth at eleven weeks!

I was genuinely speechless.

-This one's called Anthony, her hand still resting on his head. He was the picture of his father...

-Hello, Anthony, I said, resisting the urge to touch him. He just looked at me, his fingers still in his mouth, a hint of a smile hiding behind them. I winked, his smile broadening, his hand shooting to his brother's, a yelp escaping his down-turned mouth.

-He says hello, explained Pandora. And this is Adrian, he's the eldest, she said, her hand stroking his cheek, his eyes elsewhere.

How did she know?

-Hello, Adrian, I said.

The boy's head suddenly turned to fix me with a piercing gaze, an intelligence behind them taking my breath away. A snapshot I recalled seeing, of me at about the same age, come to life. A circuit of energy passing between us, a sudden recognition shared. My mouth open and gaumless.

-It's a wise child who knows his own father, I hear myself saying.

-Yep, she said. You can tell they're not identical. Two eggs. They didn't really want to come out! They were nearly two weeks late. Eve and I believe it's because they liked it too much in there, wrapped around each other.

The image nearly broke my heart. I wanted to scoop them up and run with them, and her too, whisk them to a place of safety, a long long way from here... I looked back at Pandora, tears no longer held in check.

-When were they born?

-On the solstice! A year exactly after we met!

Martin's birthday.

-Pandora, I'm sorry... I'm so so sorry... the tears hot against my cheeks.

-For what? For giving us the chance of not one but two

gorgeous little bundles to care for?

The tears making the table shiny. Anthony looking a little unsure, Adrian regarding me with silent curiosity, their hands entwined.

My hands covering my face now, my head shaking...

-Oh, Pandora! I'm sorry I'm no help to you. I'm sorry I can't be a father to them, I'm sorry I'm...

-Shhh, come on, it's fine. You don't see me crying, do you? Women have been left holding the babies since the dawn of time! And these two are perfect. We'll be fine. Come on, tell me about you. What have they said?

I stemmed my tears, shaking my head until I could find words to share.

-It's worse than I thought. I don't know where to begin. Christs have got some plan to... I couldn't even find the words... to *cure* homosexuality...

-We gathered that. It's been brewing for months. They're quite upfront about it.

So. I was the last to know, then.

-I've been telling this psychologist my story. I thought I was getting right up her hostile little nose by telling her as much detail as I could. It turns out that's just what she wanted all along!

I looked at her in a pure moment of calm.

-Well. Imagine *my* embarrassment...

Her eyes stared deep into mine, a humane gaze almost too intense to match.

-It's gonna be okay, you know. They're gonna know who their fathers were, *and* what they meant to each other. None of us will ever forget you...

Back in my room, I sat on the bed and stared at the floor. Something had become resolved within me. I rose and looked out of the window, icy crystals glistening in the late-evening air. The moon low in the sky, moving inexorably into its final phase.

I pressed the button that called the nurse. I told him I wanted to see Dr Hopkins. She arrived a few minutes later, her face drawn, her eyes unwilling to fully meet mine. I told her that I had more to tell her. I wasn't ready now, but tomorrow, I would be. I

reminded her it was the solstice, a year since Martin's death. If she gave me twenty-four hours to prepare, I promised I would tell her everything.

I knew what I had to do.

This PDF is the final part of the novel
XQ-28: The Story of a Gene.
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