

Mirror Girl

by

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Enter Here

Another bleak, uninviting January evening. Outside, the wind howls and snow threatens while inside the heating system has all but lost its battle against the merciless cold. Ensnared within the confines of my sterile box-like igloo, or ‘luxury apartment’ to quote the local estate agent’s blurb, I sit, solitary, isolated and without a trace of humour. Cursed at birth with the name Crosston Orion Gathercole, perhaps my circumstances are not that surprising. Yet I have to concede that my present state of mind can’t be blamed solely on the words uttered over me by a member of the clergy some 30 years ago. No, it’s more likely that my tendency to emit anti-social vibes, lack of interest in football and a touch of tongue lock-cum-dyslexia are the main contributing factors. Oh yes, and one other thing. The content of the papers lying crumpled at my feet. Not for me a love letter, encouraging news or good cheer. No, my pleasure this seemingly endless winter’s evening is to comment on yet another disappointing personal performance appraisal.

The condescending bastards! Time for an act of defiance. If I have to produce some form of coherent and expletive-free response I might as well treat myself to a modicum of comfort – my secret and illegal electric fire. Sure, like me it’s looking a bit worn around the edges, but at least the old girl hasn’t let me down yet.

Actually I should just get off my backside and buy a place. It’s the third flat I’ve inflicted on myself and my truckload of belongings in as many years, and to be honest the whole free-as-a-bird, no-commitment gig is wearing a little thin. On balance, though, my billet isn’t that bad. Apart from lousy central heating, more rules than chess and a landlord directly descended from a clan of witch-finder generals, it’s a fair enough set-up.

The custom-built block of four self-contained units was commissioned about 10 years back by the current owner, one Basil Cracknell: gentleman farmer, staunch Yorkshireman and even more of a miserable bugger than me, who lives with subservient wife, Regina, in a sprawling eighteenth-century farmhouse just across the way. From there, he’s ideally placed to scrutinise his tenants’ comings and goings, thus ensuring that the slightest suggestion of impropriety or unseemly behaviour can be stamped on before it takes root. Nevertheless, on the outskirts of Harlow, Sheering isn’t an unattractive place, and it takes my ageing and pleurisy-stricken Honda-250 only 20 minutes to transport me to my hallowed workplace, Barton Natural Sciences: a company specialising in assay work on all manner of biological fluids and specimens. I’m retained there as installer, maintainer and operator of the many sophisticated instruments which form the business’s very core. Whether it’s Nuclear Magnetic Resonance, Liquid Chromatography, Mass Spectroscopy or convoluted combinations thereof; when it comes to keeping machines happy and interpreting the reams of junk they spew out, I’m ‘the man’ – or so Rodney, my long-suffering assistant, often extols. Toil and labour apart, though, I’m not a big fan of modern urban development, so it’s always a welcome relief to escape the uniformity and deliberateness which pervades the soul on entering the Harlow boundary.

Well, no use in putting it off any longer. Tomorrow heralds the deadline for comments and, ‘We mustn’t be late like last year.’ Six months nursing the effects of a bollocking second-to-none savagely delivered by Human Resources and repeated by my boss – it just isn’t worth the aggro. So, with hot water bottle replenished and electric fire singeing my

trousers, Gathercole, Crosston O., employee number Z10371, succumbs once again to convention.

I'd just about straightened out the crumpled pages of my draft when I caught the sound of tapping echoing in the access stairwell. What forlorn creature could possibly want to call at this time? I glanced at the old cuckoo clock – my one and only souvenir from a week's holiday in Geneva. Eight o'clock. Hmm, not as late as I'd thought.

Less than happy at having to abandon my carefully prepared heating arrangements, I plodded down the narrow staircase and unlocked the door.

'Good evening, Mr Gathercole,' chattered a frozen and worried looking Mrs Cracknell.

Although the dingy light from the hall failed to illuminate her face completely, 'worried' was an understatement.

'Is there a problem?' I asked, somewhat defensively.

Mrs Cracknell took a step backwards as if preparing to flee should I suddenly produce a dagger or chainsaw.

'Sorry to bother you, but there's a phone call. It's urgent. Someone from work, I think.'

I wanted to reply with a curt, 'Tell them I'm out,' then slam the door, but the poor woman was distressed enough, so I dredged up a premier performance of insincere politeness.

'Thanks for bothering to come over. You shouldn't have, though: not in weather like this. I can't imagine who'd be calling at this hour.'

Since my messenger was in no position to solve the riddle, I reached for my old leather jacket and wellies then traipsed along after her. Mrs Cracknell was halfway along the path to the farmhouse by the time I caught up with her. She paused.

'Sorry to mention it, Mr Gathercole,' she began sheepishly, 'but you do remember my husband's rule about phone calls to the house? I'm afraid he's not well pleased.'

What could I say? I was in clear breach of commandment 169: *thou shalt not let acquaintances call the main residence except in extraordinary circumstances*. Fair enough, I suppose, especially since the apartments are fitted with telephone sockets and a landline would be cheaper than running a mobile. The problem was, the old skinflint didn't provide a phone and I still hadn't got round to buying one. Bollocks!

By way of punishment for my 'misdemeanour' I wasn't allowed into the main house itself to take the call but was relegated to use the extension just inside the entrance. And to emphasise my disgrace I was left to stumble about alone, guided only by the faint hue of an external night light in the porch.

To my annoyance the message was neither critical nor extraordinary: just a reminder from the pillock of a Site Administrator about a fire practice the next day. Since I'd left work early he'd been unable to contact me and thought it best to make sure.

'Early start! Won't do to keep the trainer waiting.'

Pompous bastard! He was right, of course, but that changed nothing.

As I replaced the receiver Mrs Cracknell appeared from the shadows.

'I hope there's no trouble,' she said with concern.

'No,' I smiled weakly. 'Just a confirmation. Please apologise to Mr C. I'll make buying a phone top priority this weekend.'

Still smiling like an idiot, I made to leave but Mrs Cracknell touched my arm.

'I almost forgot,' she said apologetically. 'I found this down the side of your settee the other day. Another of my husband's rules, you understand... The routine check, that is. Looks like a tiepin – emerald-and-gold, four-leaf clover. It's quite unusual.'

A quick mental review confirmed her explanation. Ah yes, rule 74.

'Thanks,' I muttered. 'I was wondering where the little bug—, rascal had got to.'

Mrs Cracknell looked at me quizzically.

‘If you don’t mind my saying, I can’t say I’ve ever seen you wearing one.’

‘Very observant,’ I confirmed. ‘I collect them. This one’s my favourite. It’s Irish, as you’ve probably guessed, and quite old. Supposed to be lucky and all that.’

Mrs Cracknell continued to examine the tie clip and when she finally handed it over I got the impression that she’d have liked to chat more. Our eyes met and for the first time, as we stood in the subdued light, it struck me that for a woman of perhaps 50 she was still quite a beauty. A little over average height, she had a good figure: trim, bordering on slim, and her short black hair framed an angular face with large dark eyes. I don’t generally like making comparisons, but she could definitely have put in a good performance as a Joan Collins look-alike. The chiselled lines of her features, melodic, slightly accented voice and alluring smile, which I felt she constantly struggled to conceal, served only to enhance the similarity. As my present assessment mingled with memories of our previous encounters, it occurred to me that her make-up was always very restrained, and that the colours, like the roll-necked sweaters and heavy ankle-length skirts she favoured, were dull and faded, almost possessing a second-hand quality.

Then, with the same suddenness with which our momentary captivation began, it evaporated. Mrs Cracknell gave an embarrassed smile, held open the door and bade me goodnight. Strange... Very strange.

Back in my cell, electric fire and hot water bottle supplemented by a mug of Drambuie-laced coffee, my dreaded task glared up at me.

‘Okay, let’s see if they know who I am,’ I groaned.

Name – spelt correctly; age – accurate; single – yes; employment term – five years. No! Six, you dummies! And so, on to the embarrassing stuff.

Relevant qualifications – none. Degree course in electrical engineering attended; examination not taken due to visual/vocal dysfunction.

Ha! That’s a good one. At least in the old days they called a spade a spade. What was it they’d said back then?

Uncomfortable taking formal examinations due to mild dyslexia and a verbal communication impediment.

At least that was straightforward and to the point. But that was before they rebranded Personnel staff as HR professionals and they began writing and talking like American Marketing execs. All this new crap was down to Mathew, ‘Call me Mat,’ McPherson. Ever since he was put in charge it’s been like having Adolf Hitler’s brother on the team.

‘Only zos who are perfect specimens vill be tolerated in zis company. Now zen, who do vee ‘ave ‘ere? Gathercole, Crosston: six feet, fit; does not pick his nose, born in Oxford – *zehr gut, zehr gut*. But vhat is zis? Auburn hair... Over ears! Jimmy Durante schnozzle, dyslexic (pronounced Black Death). *Donna und blitzen!* A deviant! Shoot zee vermin, or at zee very least sentence it to a lifelong ban on promotion.’

Hmm, probably time to consider seeking professional help.

Young man, alone, doing crap German impressions while swilling back Drambuie with a few drops of coffee.

Oh, stuff it! How the hell do they expect me to comment on gems like, *doesn’t mix especially well, poor man manager*, and, just because I told the head of Analytical Services she had the interpretive mind of a constipated dung beetle, *inappropriate attitude toward management?* Tomorrow, tomorrow: I’ll think of some sparkling prose tomorrow – the day that never comes.

Right then, since I’m way beyond passing a breathalyser test, rendering a ‘motorised’ excursion out of the question, it’s high time I took my new and rather expensive new

computer for another walk on the wild side. Yes, every time I think of it, that sales rep definitely saw me coming, or more likely the neon sign above my head ablaze with the words, *no girlfriend/frustrated/lonely*. And the theme of his well-practised opening pitch? What else but human isolation.

‘Good evening, sir,’ he’d begun, a tone of deep understanding wrapped around his every word. ‘Loneliness: it’s a terrible thing. But these days, regrettably, everyone suffers it. No cure, of course, but at least we’ve the Internet to treat a fair chunk of its symptoms.’ And with that he had me by the plums. Up until then ‘the Net’ had just been there to send and receive e-mails. Ten minutes later and I’d been introduced to the Information Superhighway. Games, newsgroups, chat rooms, on-line purchasing: the lot. How could I resist? It was better than having Pamela Anderson as a girlfriend – well, pretty close. The real clincher was the way he described its advantages in terms of personal contacts and relationships. He’d given me a knowing grin and a gentle nudge.

‘If it’s friends you’d like then you can have as many as you want. Hassle-free. You like ‘em; you keep ‘em. You’ve a problem; just click ‘em away. It’s anonymous: no scenes, no recriminations, no guilt. Clean, trouble-free, and of course you’re in no danger of catching anything nasty. Computer viruses can only fry your hard drive, not your hard— Well, sir knows, I’m sure.’

Risky approach maybe, but he’d obviously sized me up about right and, come to think of it, the bloke – well into middle age – did look like an ex-gentleman’s tailor... ‘Something for the weekend, sir?’ A classic stereotype if ever there was one.

So, instead of buying the 20 quid phone I’d gone in for, I’d come home with £1,000 worth of computer gear, courtesy of a rectangular piece of plastic.

It’s funny, though; since I’ve become an internet addict – God save me from modern clichés – none of my so-called workmates will come clean and admit to visiting any sex related sites. And this I find more than a little disturbing since, in my experience, it’s damn near impossible to navigate clear of them.

Let’s see what we have today. First e-mails. No messages – good. Daily news – no interest. I wonder if I should look at job vacancies...

I’d just about resolved to give the ‘Situations Vacant’ idea a whirl when my e-mail icon started flashing, announcing the arrival of new mail. I fully intended to ignore it, but as usual curiosity got the better of me. And quite an intriguing message it turned out to be.

Greetings from Mirror Girl: entertainment for the intellectual, the discerning. Why not enter here to enter me.

Who could refuse? And so in I went.

Unfortunately, the next screen was a lot less user-friendly with the ubiquitous, *if you have a password, enter it here* instruction barring further progress.

Since I didn’t have one and had no desire to part with any cash, it was time to leave.

But again a snippet of flashing text overturned my decision. This time the belated appearance of a message at the bottom of the screen announced, *limited free passes now available*, and a smidgeon of page scrolling revealed a tantalising challenge.

Click on the flashing message to download a word. You will then have 60 seconds to produce a three-word anagram: minimum letters per word three; coherent phrases only.

For a few seconds I mulled over the fundamental question – could I really be bothered to trouble my addled brain for a chance to enter Mirror Girl? Let’s face it; sooner or later they’d want some credit card details and all for the chance to visit another tacky porno site. On the other hand, a challenge is a challenge and I hadn’t come across this type of password quiz before. In reality I’d already decided to have a go. For years I’ve used anagrams as a means

of baiting my dyslexia. All part of my vague fancy to become the first dyslexic to complete *The Times* crossword puzzle in less than 10 minutes.

An avid subscriber to the, 'leap before you look' brigade, I clicked on the 'start' button, and within seconds my word appeared:

PORNOGRAPHIC

What else?

The only advantage I've found of having a dyslexic noggin is the natural 'talent' of writing and reading some words backwards. For example, instead of 'saw', read 'was'. Generally this questionable ability lacks any real advantage in everyday life, but for some puzzles it can be a powerful secret weapon. The case in question, although a bit obvious, was a smart choice. There were a few score if not several hundred possibilities which satisfied the first rule. The problem lay in making an intelligible phrase.

Roach pin pro; Ranch rig poop; Parch goon rip.

Nope: no cigar for any of those. I could think of plenty nonsensical three-word solutions, but with only 15 seconds to go a winner still eluded me. Then a passing Muse whispered a clue into my 'shell-like'. I'm poor, living on a farm owned by a pig.

Poor pig ranch.

Jackpot! And with half a heartbeat to spare, I typed in my answer.

I imagined my response zooming around the planet, ricocheting from server to server until it finally reached home. Bang! Straight into some slumbering computer, confident up till then that no one would ever come up with an answer.

To be fair confirmation of my success reached me after only a few grumbles of the hard disk, as a huge, *Congratulations!* banner surrounded by a host of remarkably elaborate firework animations lit up the screen. Another flicker and the images faded only to reform into yet another bloody conundrum: in fact, sketches of six different doors and underneath them the question, *which pleasure do you wish to experience?*

I was too far along to back down. I'd won my free pass and since I never win anything, I was damned if I was going to pack up without receiving some kind of prize. Overwhelmed by my unexpected success I might have been, but I wasn't that drunk or excited to realise that my winnings would probably be no more than an out-of-focus photo of some granny in suspenders with a parrot on her head. So, with that grim spectacle in mind, I plumped for door number five. Another screen change confirmed my selection but also displayed a rather sinister caution:

Warning: Proceed beyond this point and your decision is irrevocable.

A great come-on. Nothing like a threat or two to keep the punters interested. I hit the 'agree' button, metaphorically speaking, and waited to behold my fate, but disappointingly nothing happened. It was as if the system had been caught off-guard, not expecting that anyone would be crazy enough to continue. I cursed, and in response the monitor went blank. I cursed again and, continuing our unlikely rapport, it came back on, presenting me with two further queries.

When and where would you like your experience to take place?

Bugger it, I moaned. Still no granny – and no sign of a parrot. Temper and patience fraying a tad, I thumped in, *Harlow, tomorrow, 8 p.m.*

As my finger hit the 'Enter' key, something told me I'd live to regret it, but I was tired and it all seemed such meaningless bollocks. As it happened, though, I was given another chance to change my mind. The action of pressing 'Enter' brought up two further choices: *Confirm or Cancel.*

This had gone far enough. Time to call it a draw, get an early night and be up at the crack of dawn to have another shot at my appraisal. Unfortunately, the powers-that-be mustn't have appreciated my negative attitude, for no sooner had I resolved to choose the *Cancel* option than the room lights faltered – a power cut.

‘Marvellous!’

Mumbling to myself, I slouched over to the window and looked across to the farmhouse. Yep, the whole area was out. Justifiable cause for another Drambuie if I could find the bottle, then sidle off to bed with as many blankets as I could muster. It was at times like this, if given the choice between accessing the Internet or Pamela Anderson that Pamela wins hands down.

I awoke to discover that the Earth must have stopped rotating. It was still dark and windy, and snowflakes were being blasted about like soapflakes in a washing machine – so no change from the previous night. My head felt like mushed-up prunes, with a group of Japanese Taiko drummers whooping up a storm. I checked the time – six thirty. No doubt about it, the world had stopped. At least the power was back on so I indulged in a series of experiments to see just how much instant coffee could be dissolved in a mug of boiling water before it began to crystallise out. Actually quite a bit, I found to my surprise.

Morning rituals complete, I scooped up the crumpled appraisal form and tossed it in the bin. Tell them I got mugged, I mused. My briefcase containing half-a-dozen pencils, two Mars bars, a draft manuscript of my *Moron's Guide to Dyslexia* and the appraisal all nicked. Naturally I'd be quick to point out that as far as recovery of the appraisal was concerned, all may not be lost. Once the thieves recognised its true value they'd probably try to fence it off at one of the local hostelries. With some persuasion and, of course, company funding, I might be prepared to hang out at a few selected pubs until it turned up for sale then put in a bid. Nonsense, I know, but at least it was *my* nonsense and it amused me at the time.

Since I was definitely still the worse for wear and no reprieve for the weather was forecast, I elected to give my Honda a well-earned rest and blow my wages on a taxi.

Once at work it wasn't difficult to avoid the HR patrols. The fire practice had been postponed due to the bad weather, but luckily I had some work to do on an old mass spectrometer which had been relegated to the basement. Rumour had it that the spiders down there were so big it was odds-on you'd suffer a fractured skull if one dumped on your head. No self-respecting administrator valuing their smart suit and shoes would consider venturing anywhere near the place.

By lunchtime I reckoned the coast would be sufficiently clear to risk returning to my desk for an hour or so, and, as expected, I found several notes thereabouts concerning calls from HR – but nothing really threatening. Idly I switched on my computer while chewing on a moderately disgusting cheese and strawberry-jam sandwich which I didn't even remember making. All routine stuff as far as I could see, except—

Jesus Christ! How the hell did that get there?

The offending e-mail and source of my sudden severe indigestion was entitled:

Your experience. Author: Mirror Girl

Gingerly I opened the message, which as it happened was mercifully short, to the point, and contained no obvious porno material. Sure, staff e-mail accounts are supposed to be private, but if you believe that you're probably one of those people who thought mobile phones were a passing phase.

The words seemed to jump out at me, burning into the back of my brain.

Your order will be delivered to the A414 underpass connecting Brays Grove and Potter Street schools at eight o'clock tonight. Be punctual and, of course, enjoy.

‘Holy shit!’ I swore under my breath. ‘What the hell's going on?’

Like a vampire confronted with dawn I scuttled back to my basement lair as quickly as my quaking legs could carry me. I'd heard about all sorts of weird internet services but this was bizarre. I just couldn't fathom out what was happening. True, I'd been a mite three sheets to the wind, but I'd definitely have remembered if I'd used my credit card. Besides, the spending limit is so low it wouldn't cover the cost of a photo never mind the services of a 'lady of the night' or the like.

The remainder of the afternoon was just one long nightmare. Unable to concentrate, all I could do was conjure up an endless stream of fantastic scenarios about my forthcoming 'experience'. Time dragged by at an excruciatingly slow pace, and I was convinced that one of the fabled mutant spiders must be knocking the hands of the wall clock back every now and again just for laughs. By five o'clock I was a mental and physical Jelly Bean. My ever-mounting catalogue of grotesque fantasies was still piling up in the background, but now only one thing dominated my mind. Did I have the balls to go? To risk everything from ridicule at the hands of some teenage jokers to a horrendous encounter with an ugly, back-street dominatrix: doubtless a thousand-smacker experience, payment to be extracted by some gargantuan pimp-cum-gorilla. But what was the alternative? Bottle out, go home and huddle over a cup of drinking chocolate, waiting for a knock on the door.

Six thirty came and went. At seven o'clock I phoned Security to say I'd stayed behind to finish off some work. In my enthusiasm I'd forgotten to advise them as per company rules – sorry and all that. Steeped in confusion, I'd overlooked the fact that that was my standard M.O. and it had been many a year since the Security team had bothered to report me. To them, I was just some nutty professor type and the subject matter for a bucket load of derisory anecdotes.

It was just shy of seven thirty when I walked off site. I don't know what I thought I was doing but one thing was certain – I couldn't cower in my cubby-hole any longer. Fortunately the night was clear: bitterly cold, but the wind had dropped, having very kindly blown the snow clouds further inland.

Barton's is located on The Pinnacles industrial estate, skirting the western boundary of Harlow. From there, I picked my way along Third Avenue then turned right into Katherine's Way, finally reaching the roundabout leading off into Southern Way. At its end, just over two miles ahead, lay the A414, the two schools and the dreaded underpass. I hesitated then turned left into it. My decision was made.

Although my pace gradually quickened as I moved towards my goal it was well past eight o'clock as I descended the path leading to the A414. As I approached, all seemed quiet, and I began to think I'd been the victim of a prank after all. At the mouth of the underpass, however, all that changed. From out of nowhere, a huge figure dressed in a long, black trench coat and ski mask blocked my path.

'You Bastion?' a man's voice growled. His gruff blend of East London and some unrecognisable northern accent seemed to crush my e-mail persona as he spat it out.

Suddenly I couldn't breathe. I'd made the wrong decision but my legs had transformed into sticks of liquorice, so escape was out of the question. I was paralysed, helpless. I must have nodded, which elicited an immediate and unexpected change in the man's attitude.

'Bleedin' brass monkeys, guv,' he rattled. 'Ya wanna wait till it's warma if ya wanna carry on this kinda caper. No matta, though; me and the lads are all set up. Gotta real nice peach, fresh off the tree.'

Still unable to respond, I allowed myself to be guided into the tunnel. It was pitch black: the electric lighting temporarily disabled for the occasion, I presumed. A few metres in I could make out two other figures dressed in the same getup. Lookouts, I guessed.

Then suddenly two sets of brilliant lights seared the darkness.

‘Ere mate, betta clap this on,’ the man advised, handing me a latex ‘Bill Clinton’ mask. ‘Can’t ‘ave no one clockin’ ya. Late and no disguise. Guess ya’re a new ‘un. Never mind, I’ll see ya right. Oh, and for startas, call me Arry. The others ya don’t need ta know.’

If circumstances weren’t so dire, I’d have been touched by his concern. The situation, however, was dire and seemed likely to get a whole lot worse.

A few more steps and Arry drew me to a halt about midway along the tunnel. Both sets of lights were constantly panning the area, but I couldn’t make out their source. Each time their beams surprised my path of vision their intensity sent my retinas into a spasm.

Acting solely on autopilot, I slipped on the mask.

Then suddenly, as if cued by my action, the lights dimmed, and as my eyes adjusted to the subdued lighting I realised that their light source formed part of convoluted headsets worn by two shadowy figures just up ahead. I could also make out three other men leaning against the underpass wall, puffing on cigarettes as if biding their time. As a scene from a sci-fi horror show it would have all been strikingly convincing, but since it was reality it was terrifying.

I still hadn’t said a word. Adrenalin had muscled its way into the driving seat and with its foot pumping the accelerator, my heart and pulse rate were edging inexorably upwards. I thought I’d forgotten how to breathe, but then realised I could see short bursts of exhaled air highlighted by the gyrating lights. An odd thing to catch my attention, but at least it was something normal for me to cling on to.

‘Right then, Mr Bastion,’ Arry announced. ‘Time ta pluck yer cherry, if I might make so bold. I expect ya know the drill, but since ya seem a tad nervous I’ll give ya a quick run-through. When ya’re ready, me lads ‘ill do the business. If ya wanna join in, just give us the nod. The Watchers ‘ill record everythin’ so ya can ogle it later. Any questions?’

I had about 300, but place a dyslexic, however well trained, under stress and there’s no prize for guessing what happens – especially me with my propensity for becoming tongue-tied. I turned towards Arry but my anaesthetised tongue was out for the count. As in most social situations, however, silence implies consent, so the nightmare ground on.

‘Okay lads, ya’re up,’ Arry bellowed.

The three smokers responded with almost military precision, their cigarettes instantly extinguished as they lined up for action.

My head felt about to explode as my blood pressure rocketed into the danger zone. What in God’s name was happening? What had I selected? Silence bore down on me like a machine press. It seemed interminable. Then gradually I detected footsteps: footsteps approaching from the opposite end of the tunnel. The figures Arry had dubbed Watchers turned in that direction, their helmet lamps simultaneously exploding to full intensity, and there, no more than metres away, stood my order: a girl, semi-conscious, supported in the arms of yet another masked figure – clearly a woman. The girl, apparently in her late teens, had suffered several blows to her face, sufficient in force to account for her dazed condition. Her dyed-blond hair was long and straggly, her clumsily applied make-up badly smudged, and although I’m no expert on female fashion, even at my most charitable it was a struggle to circumnavigate the word ‘tarty’. A knee-length, bright-red plastic coat partially covered her overly tight T-shirt, gold micro-mini-skirt and torn patterned tights, and the one shoe she still wore was of an open-toed platform design – impossible to walk in never mind run in, which on tonight of all nights was her only hope of escape.

I gasped and instinctively moved forward to help her.

‘Not yet, me old son,’ Arry instructed, pulling me back. ‘Let the boys get started first.’

As Arry held onto me two of the men propped the girl upright and rotated her to face the third member of the group who then ripped away her top and bra. Her exposed breasts were small, hardly formed, but this did little to deter the Watchers from moving in for a more detailed recording. Then it hit me like a length of lead pipe. It was all down to me. I’d actually ordered a gang rape: a ringside seat and a souvenir video to take home. Unbelievable, incredible, impossible – yes all of those: except none applied. This was real: unfolding before my very eyes. The sound of shrieking in my head scrambled my reason. I was sweating, nauseous, my legs were about to buckle. Speech still eluded me, but I had to do something or be damned for eternity. Again I lurched forward but again Arry restrained me. This time he didn’t let go. Clearly I couldn’t be trusted to wait my turn and must be prevented from ruining the artistry of the Watchers’ home movie.

The third man pulled the girl’s skirt up around her waist and directed the others to lower her to her knees. Satisfied that everyone was in position, he gestured to the Watchers, who obediently resumed their close up positions, then unzipped his pants and urinated in her face. She spluttered, coughed then finally came round. It was only seconds before she realised the extent of her plight, and as she did so I could see the scream rising in her throat. Before it could escape, though, a length of packing tape was slapped over her mouth.

I doubled up and threw up. I was powerless, useless. All I could do was pray. I couldn’t expect much, but at that point I’d have willingly joined a monastery in exchange for some kind of intervention, divine or otherwise.

Mr A hauled me to my feet and made a half-hearted attempt to tidy me up. As he was completing his task, however, I had an odd sense of someone else’s presence and turned just in time to see a fist streak past me to catch him squarely on the jaw. Totally bewildered and knocked half senseless, he crumpled against the tunnel wall. I winced, expecting to suffer the same fate, but instead a hand gripped my arm and a woman’s voice said calmly,

‘Time you weren’t here, Mr Gathercole. Best you come along with me. And don’t worry; the girl will be quite safe now.’