



NO TIME TO FEAR REFLECT

REALISATION IS STARING YOU RIGHT IN THE FACE

— **ADRIAN DAWSON** —

NO TIME TO REFLECT

© ADRIAN DAWSON

It's not just about whether or not your tie might be straight or crooked; whether or not you combed your hair quite as well as you thought you had; or even whether or not you really do look quite as bad as you feel. Mirrors tell us so much more. They show us the world as it really is; not as we have been conditioned to perceive it. As an art student, one of the first things I learned was that if you painted any scene (especially a portrait), one of the first things you must do on completion is study your final work not with the bias of the eye, but by the truth of a mirror. So often images that look perfectly acceptable 'the right way round' look somehow unfamiliar when seen in reverse and, whilst familiarity might not exactly breed contempt, it certainly holds enough bacteria to breed an unhealthy degree of complacency; a complete inability to accurately discern what might be right or wrong. Look at an object in a mirror and you are looking at that object for the very first time. You are seeing the reflected truth of what does and does not belong.

Imagine if you will walking into your home - the home you claim to know inside out and, more importantly, back to front - and finding that everything - and I do mean everything - has been flipped horizontally. You used to turn right into your kitchen, now it is left; your sink used to be over there, but no longer - now it is over there. It is strange, weird and uncomfortable, certainly, but believe me... suddenly all the errors of layout will come glaringly into view.

Today was by no means the first time I had looked into that cold, hard, reflected truth and not liked what I had seen; it was simply the first time I had done so and been prepared to admit as much to myself. My eyes looked worse than tired, they looked badly drawn, scared and perhaps even a little guilty. No, not a little; a lot. They looked like the eyes of a man who had killed a man. As though one of the last things they had seen reflected in their own curved sheen had been a plea for mercy and the drain of another life. In the mirror the truth was written all over my face. I could only pray that the real world would continue to hide it under a few impenetrable layers of good old fashioned complacency.

I ran the cold tap for a few moments, clearing the stale water from the pipes, then cupped my hands in the flow and leaned forward with my eyes tight closed. When it hit my face it felt like melting snow and it bled into my tear ducts, freezing any dilatory sentiments that might have been contemplating release. I repeated the process four times, at least three more than usual, as though I was trying desperately to wash away my sin; to cleanse my soul. Perhaps I was just trying to wake myself up to the seriousness of what I had done? To think of a cold hard way to get myself the hell out of my situation and whatever less than pleasurable consequences it chose to drag along for the ride.

No matter what evidence they might think they had, I could never confess. That would be crazy. Shit, there was no point in ruining two lives. At least, that's what I kept telling myself, though I doubt I ever truly believed it. So, one way or another I would have to create a new face for myself - a cold one - and wear it like a mask until the heat which surrounded it subsided. Which would, of course, mean staring longingly as the old, guilty face - the one I'd grown up with and steadily become friends with - swirled away down the hole.

I looked up again, cursing as I noticed that the collar of my lilac shirt seemed to have caught almost as much water as my face. I should have picked a lighter colour. Christ, I should have done a whole host of things, but worse - far worse - there were a whole host of other things that I should never have even considered.

Too late now.

Behind me in the empty washroom, in life and in my reflection, was a row of five neat little cubicles; all modern in design and all cleaned twice daily, their doors angled at ninety degrees to my line of sight. Stall three was mine; not exclusively you understand, but it was the one I always selected when I came in here. I'd never been denied it yet and nor had I ever so much as lifted the seat for it was never a place to relieve my bowels, only my stresses (and there had been an increasing number of those these past few weeks, I can tell you). It was my place to think. To consider.

To... you know... reflect.

And yet in the mirror, this supposed truth, something about the image I was now viewing was wrong. The polished white doors on each of the stalls were all very slightly spring loaded, ensuring that they remained open when the think tank was unoccupied. There was nobody in cubicle three now - I knew that because I had vacated that very patch not five minutes earlier, and yet the door was closed. I looked to my left, to the entrance of the washroom proper, though I don't really know why. Instinct. Makes you do crazy things. The door was tight closed as indeed it had been tight closed throughout. Unlike the cubicles, the spring mechanism fitted to the main door could never have been described as 'light'. It closed slowly to a point but then, in its final few inches, snapped as swiftly as a hunter's trap. It possessed the kind of force that had been the bane of many an unwary fingertip, mine included, and I was certain I would have heard somebody enter from the loud thud of contact, even if I had not actually seen them.

But then I would have seen them, wouldn't I? Hell, I was standing in front of almost an entire wall of expensive truth, the rack of cubicles and the urinals which faced them clearly visible behind me. Even if somebody had indeed managed to enter the toilets silently, which was as close to impossible as anything in this world can actually be, then they would have been firmly within my line of vision all the way along the tiled floor, feet clicking or squeaking or both. I would have seen them enter cube three even if I had not heard the lock slide or a belt being unbuckled. I would have heard or seen something.

I had seen nothing.

And even that was more than I had heard.

So why was the door closed? Who the hell was in cube three?

I turned around, looking at my conventional perception of the scene and yes, the door was indeed closed. Tight enough to discount even the handiwork of a faulty spring. I took a step forward, meaning to investigate. I guess there was even a part of me that was annoyed that somebody had chosen my stall above the other four. My place. Today of all days. As I took my second step I stopped suddenly.

A voice, though not from the direction of the stall.

From behind me.

I turned back again, my shocked expression staring hard back when I saw it in the mirror. Except, it was not alone. Not any more. There was another expression, though this usurper was by no means shocked. Far from it. This was cool, relaxed, casual.

MacKenzie Gould - 'Mac' - was standing next to stall three, large as life. Leaning indifferently against the frame in trade mark Armani suit, smoking a cigarette and blowing a silver cloud around the silver lining. This was the same Armani he had been wearing the night before last and was back to being immaculately pressed; just the way he liked it. His tanned features were curled into a

gentle smile, causing his small black goatee to angle ominously up his right cheek. He looked surprisingly pleased with himself.

Worse still, he looked - somewhat disconcertingly for me - surprisingly alive.

Which bothered me a little, considering I had stuck him with a six inch blade not two nights ago and had spent the better part of last night speaking both to his grieving widow and to his boss - soon to be my boss, given that Gould's sudden and unfortunate death - at the hands of an unidentified mugger, it would seem - had left a sudden and even more unfortunate vacancy.

'Didn't win the pitch, did you Buddy?' he said, looking at everything but me as though shooting the breeze.

He knew I hadn't.

Winning the pitch had been the whole point. In essence, and though it even seems ridiculous to me in hindsight, it had become my life - and ultimately cost him his. I had been on desperately shaky ground within this agency for way too long already and one more failure like the one's for which I was gaining a name would undoubtedly have seen me falling through the cracks. No more balcony-enriched bachelor pad in The Wharf. Not any more. No more 72" backlit LCD with WiFi air and under-floor heating. No more Virgin Media with Pay-to-Play Movies and no more pseudo-virgins with Pay-to-Play morals. No more five-series convertible, five-hundred-a-pop suits and certainly no more expensive Friday and Saturday nights with even more expensive Friday and Saturday ladies (and I use the word 'lady' with a pinch of something I would normally be sprinkling over my fries).

Three weeks and two days ago K.G. Wilson, the 'W' of KWG, had called me into the sprawling opulence of his penthouse office and told me in no uncertain terms that the number of chances I had left was now a prime number and that is was less than three. 'Like all Premiership Matches the pitch has to be perfect' he had added, before continuing to inform me in slow, measured tones that even if he had chosen to rate my success on the average of my last five pitches I would still be getting re-acquainted with my P45 and that any references he wrote on my behalf would not be acting as night-lights for any of the nation's children.

The truth of the matter was... my creative spark had gone and I had no idea where. It seemed that I had just woken up one morning without an ounce of inspiration left in my head and not so much as a farewell note or a forwarding address. Every idea I had pitched for the past three months had been belted out of the stadium by the respective client and I was way past Strike Three.

Gould's pitches, on the other hand, had all come good. Every damn one of them. They might not all have been classed as 'right first time' but there was always enough of an idea nestling quietly within the lines, shapes, colours and typography of every printout to provoke discussion and set the money ball a-rolling.

Which was why Wilson had suggested that Gould work up some reserve scamps on my pitch. Just in case.

Nobody told me this, of course. I was not aware that Gould was even mildly involved until I just happened to nip into his studio office (the 'Gould fishbowl' as we called it, given that it had three glass walls) on my way out, to leave a Post-It on his chair. I knew it would never get seen if I patched it among the creative scribbblings that littered his desk. And there it was - peering out at me from behind his Amerson Gas visuals; the Turner & Harman logo on the bottom right of the galley sheet. Flashing its subtle message as effectively as a neon pizza sign.

Turner & Harman were one of the leading animation houses in the country. They had a great crew of conventional (cell) animators, cutting edge digital effects technology and some of the best 3D modelers, texture-mappers and lighting gurus in the world. Some of their animations were so realistic as to be almost indistinguishable from live action movies. In fact, it was widely believed that if the role of actors in movies ever came to an end, then it would probably be Turner & Harman's fault at least somewhere down the line. They had already produced a full-length CGI cartoon entitled 'Tinseltown' featuring the likenesses of many long-dead leading men and Hollywood starlets whose image rights had been negotiated from a bevy of far less talented (and much lesser earning) offspring.

What Turner & Harman lacked in-house, however, was real creative talent. Ideas men. They had all the tools, the software and the technical expertise and they even had some damn good writers, but what they could never seem to find at the regular quarterly intervals their shareholders demanded were the mind-blowing 'next big things'. So, like any burgeoning corporation for whom money was rapidly becoming of little consequence, they came knocking on a few doors; one of which was twelve feet high, made of blue-smoked glass and belonged to KWG – our agency.

They needed a new adventure character; one the kids could get enthused by. Especially the teenage kids. It would feature in a series of cartoons, of course, but then it would probably lead to an almost unimaginable array of merchandising and spin-offs. Computer games, websites, duvets, lunch boxes and clothing. KWG would obviously have to hand over all rights to such characters on acceptance of the designs, but the payoff would be more than worthwhile in the long term. Zero-point-seven percent of gross on all visible usage for ninety-nine years.

When translated into layman's terms (ie. non ad-speak) that meant just one thing – hundreds and hundreds of thousands of steady pounds.

If we came up with the idea.

Not an idea, you understand. The idea.

I suppose you need to know a little of the internal layout of KWG to understand why I, despite my recent failings, was even in the running for the Turner & Harman pitch (and there would be another three agencies throwing designs into the pot as well, we were told). Kelley (the 'K' of KWG) was sixty-three and long gone. Save for the occasional board meeting at which he acted as Non-Executive Director, counted his share dividends and folded the production notes into a dazzling array of winged creatures, he spent his time encouraging salmon to find feathers and hooks edibly attractive. Gregson, meanwhile, whilst still firmly in place on the second floor, was merely the 'business' side of the firm. A sharp operator with an even sharper eye, certainly, but one whose creative talents were only ever put to use when it came to calculating staff bonuses or auditing the company accounts.

The real inventive genius within KWG had always been the balding, cigar-smoking and somewhat lecherous Wilson. At fifty-eight, however, he was only ever 'hands on' when it came to the steady stream of female receptionists. The only two strengths he put to use in the studio were the ability to delegate effectively and a genius for throwing visuals to one side whilst repeating the word 'shite' ad nauseum. It wasn't exactly a pat-your-head-and-rub-your-tummy kind of binary talent, but it seemed to suit his needs.

Gould, meanwhile, was Wilson's Studio Head and I, for my sins, had somehow worked my way up the greasy pole to become his Mac-totin' deputy.

Gould already had five gold-embossed awards adorning his wall and three fresh pitches cluttering his desk: Amerson Gas, Radiolog and Screema Games, all of whom were multi-nationals and all of

whom had been KWG clients for in excess of five years. They all had annual budgets, every penny of which needed to be frittered away on at least something if their respective Marketing Departments were to be allocated anything like the same sum the following year. Intrinsicly Amerson, Radiolog and Screema were bread and butter to the agency and, whilst the chance at some jam might be nice, Wilson was acutely aware that one should never bite the hand that feeds. Certainly not the one which doles out the most basic foodstuffs of life.

So I got thrown the Turner & Harman biscuit.

Reluctantly, I'm guessing.

But, just on the off-chance that I fucked up, Gould was also asked to throw his hat into the ring in any of the spare time he might manage to find.

Looking at the proofs on his desk I could see only one thing with true clarity: his designs were superb. No, they were better than superb, they were bordering on fantastic. Mine were... well, mine were the best I had been able to manage given extraneous circumstances I had yet to invent by way of a feeble excuse.

The night before last, the night that I first saw Gould's scamps, he and some of the junior artists had skulked off to sink a few pool balls and pints at Ruby's. They'd invited me along of course but I knew that I had to work over. I knew I had to get something that had at least met a good idea in the street, and I had to do it at some point prior to the meeting I had scheduled with Wilson the following morning. I sat at my station for over an hour and a half. Nothing came. Actually, less than nothing came. It was as though I had somehow been asked to produce the worst possible ideas and had suddenly and unexpectedly found my niche. In the end I decided to finish my less than creative thinking at home. I went into Gould's office to leave a note to that effect, just in case he came in early the following morning. Without explanation he would undoubtedly get to screaming about why my workstation was desperately devoid of three-dimensional characters; good ones, you understand, that would get Msrs. Turner & Harman begging us to scrawl our John Hancock onto one or two exclusivity contracts.

I pulled out Gould's sheets; three in total and I could hear Wilson's voice cluttering my head straight away - 'Don't worry yourself, fellas, because we kept a little something in reserve. Mac, why don't you show us what you've put together?' And all the while my scamps and my career would be billowing gently from the wastepaper basket somewhere stage left.

Not one character, you understand but five. 'Jack Wylde and the Wylde Ones'. Jack was a huge guy with a snarling face, a cool mean kiss curl and an ankle-length black leather coat. In one of the images he was pointing directly at the viewer with a black-gloved hand whilst the other held a gun - a big silly cool gun - with restrained threat alongside his hip. His sidekicks seemed like ordinary teenage kids. Two girls - a redhead and a blonde, and two guys - one with spiky black hair and the other with an orange crew cut. Ordinary kids, sure, but by night (according to the images on sheet two)... the girls became Wylde Cat and Wylde Heart the guys; Wylde Guess and Wylde Fire. All wore desperately funky street clothes; cut down combats and leather jewellery, and all had sleeveless jet black t-shirts with their respective symbol emblazoned in bright colours on the front. Cat's symbol was a stylised orange tiger face, Heart's was a tearing day-glo pink heart, Guess had a neon green question mark and Fire's was a red flame. Cool stuff.

Had Gould stopped there, you ask? Oh hell no, not the almighty Gould. He was measuring the diameter of his own head with a view to wearing Wilson for a hat. Sheet three showed the marketing campaign for T&H itself. The pre-launch stuff. It included an image of Wylde Cat, leaping at the viewer with her claws razor sharp, along with the strapline 'She'll ScraT&H... your

eyes out'. Another showed Wylde Heart squeezing the last drops of blood from a heart (the traditional valentine shape not the gross you out ventricle kind) and bore the line 'Hold On To Your Heart, BaT&Helor Boys'.

And sexy? Christ, if there was any way I could have handed over my phone number to even one of those two-dimensional ladies I would have done it there and then. I doubted any of them would call, though. I mean, who would want to go out with a designer who was currently 'between jobs'?

That's when I got the idea. The bad idea.

The most painfully stupid and most badly thought out idea of my entire life, and I've kicked out some stinkers.

'You stole my designs, little man,' Gould said in the reflection, looking inquisitively at the end of his cigarette as though he'd never seen fire before. Deliberately not looking at me.

'You knew I would,' I said. To myself. Not to him, you understand, because he wasn't really there.

But he heard me and he smiled. The kind of knowing smile I had seen creasing Gould's lips far too many times already in this life. Usually when a pitch of mine was going excruciatingly badly. Gould never liked me and I never liked Gould. What I did like, however, was the sixty-k a year and the expense account. I didn't have to like my boss. I didn't even have to smile at him if I could avoid it, which most days I managed to achieve with sour-faced vigour.

I turned one-eighty and looked back at cube three. The real cube three. Gould was not there. Then again, why should he have been? Like I say he did not exist, did he? He did not exist because I killed him and his blood was as cold as he had always seemed to make mine run. The only place he resided was in the dark depths of my truth - the place that mirrors show us all.

As I turned back he stubbed his cigarette on the floor and looked up with a cold, venomous sneer in his eyes.

'My guess is you rolled up those designs of mine and scurried off home like a rat with a slice of ham.' He paused and gave me a nod. 'You might want to thank me for signing them so low down that you could easily trim it off, by the way.'

I cast him a glance in the mirror. Why had it not occurred to me that this simple act had been deliberate? Hell, Gould nearly always signed his stuff with the ink bleeding into the images, just in case somebody tried to scan them and rip him off. It could always be retouched out, of course, but it would not be easy. Certainly not as easy as trimming it away with a studio scalpel, as I had done. I had been so hyped this time around that I hadn't even noticed.

Or perhaps I just hadn't wanted to.

'You went home and typed up a little Applescript,' he continued. 'Set it so that your Mac would connect to your favourite website at 8:23pm and idly browse through many more site for a total of one hour and thirteen minutes. That way, if anyone checked your computer usage for the time of my untimely you would be seen to be frantically searching for inspiration in amongst a torrent of cheap porn and pirated movies.'

At first it worried me that he knew all this; that he knew my thoughts and actions as clearly as he did, but then I realised that what I was doing was having a conversation with one of two very distinct things. Either this was a ghost, capable of following me everywhere I went without any of the geographic or visibility restrictions we mortals seem to be encumbered by or - more likely, I have to say - this was simply a figment of my imagination, brought to life by my own guilty

conscience to haunt me from within. If the latter was the case then I was simply talking through my own fears. Hardly surprising then that they knew everything I knew.

‘You knew I’d leave Ruby’s as close to half-past eight as would make little difference - I always do,’ he continued idly. ‘And you knew the route I’d take. Hell, you’ve walked that route with me a few times yourself. Which is how we came to meet for the final time, as I recall...?’

Indeed it was. Even now I don’t know if I had actually meant to kill him, though I’m at a loss to guess what else I might have been thinking. Although that was the thing, wasn’t it? I wasn’t thinking. At all. I was a man facing a harsh meeting with Wilson at which the only thing I might be delivering of worth would be my farewell speech. I was desperate. I was frightened, perhaps not for my life but certainly for my livelihood. I was...

[crazy?]

Gould, or at least my reversed image of him, took a few steps forward to the urinals and unzipped himself loudly. Instead of whistling to cover the sound of the flow, though (as so many do), he simply continued his transcendental evaluation of the truth as he, or indeed I, saw it.

‘Then, yesterday morning, whilst everyone was still under the assumption that I’d either slept through my alarm or come down with the first stay-at-home illness I’ve suffered from in my entire working life, you pitched those same designs - complete with your own still-wet signature - over to Wilson.’ He stroked his short beard thoughtfully; musing.

‘Bet he liked them, didn’t he?’

Yeah, he liked them. Because he didn’t know any better. But I should have. See, I was paid good money to know better.

I was supposed to research the market - thoroughly it seemed - before I submitted any ideas.

I couldn’t respond. Not audibly. I don’t know whether fear had stolen words from my mouth or whether I was just afraid of looking foolish by passing the time of day with an apparition. Foolish? Shit, how foolish could I sound when one compared the situation to the T&H meeting not yet one cold hour ago. I nodded lamely. The tears had fought against the icy water and were starting to break through in my reflection, my eyes reddening swiftly.

‘Didn’t do your research, did you?’ he said, zipping himself up and exhaling loudly. ‘Or rather, you didn’t do ANY research. At all. And me...? Well, I did just the right kind. I got myself on the ’net and found out what Turner and Harman’s U.S. competitors had been up to of late. Found out all about their new creation... ‘Jack Wylde and the Wylde Ones’. Of course, Animatics didn’t call them that on their site. They called them ‘Wylde’s Chyldes’, but it was close enough to suit my purposes. Then I just... redesigned them a little. Just enough. The T&H references in the strap-lines were entirely my idea, by the way. Because that’s what I do, Jimmy... I have ideas. Bloody good ideas. You, on the other hand... don’t. You have far too much desire to climb the greasy pole and far too little talent to grip it with both hands. Which is why I knew that if I left them lying around you would ultimately load up Wylde’s damned fine looking laser-blaster and shoot yourself right in the fucking foot.’ He smiled lamely, disappointed. ‘Never thought you’d stab me in the heart while you were at it, though.’

With that he pulled open his shirt to reveal the wound, festering. Streaks of dried blood ran down already-greying stomach muscles, accenting ribs ready to burst through. It gathered in a flaking red pool by his waistband. I’m guessing he was showing it me just to hammer home how real - or unreal - or perhaps even surreal - this had all become.

'I didn't know what else to do,' I said. I was almost sobbing now, desperately trying to explain myself to a man who wasn't actually there.

'Sorry I couldn't make the T&H meeting,' he said, completely disregarding the lameness of my excuse, 'but I had a telephone call to make. Long distance, you might say.'

That was it. Shit, Jesus, that was it. That was how the boys in blue had known and why, just as Wilson had been leading his extremely disappointed almost-clients down to the foyer, my mobile had rung. By this time Gould's unfortunate accident - his mugging - had become common knowledge and a cause for shared grief within the agency - mine included, although my tears seemed to possess a long snout, sharp snapping teeth and a habit of being made into very expensive cowboy boots. The inspector said that they had searched my apartment; that they had done so with a full warrant based on 'information received' and that they had 'found an interesting new lead on my computer'. They said they had wanted to talk to me about it.

Now.

Somehow, standing in that empty boardroom with my designs cast aside like the cheap imitations they were, I had known that, even though I had binned the Applescript when I got home, and held Command to securely empty the trash, somebody - or something - had put that same Applescript back in my WIP - my Work in Progress folder. I didn't know how I knew, only that I did. I was guessing that a further check of the apartment would have yielded enough suspicious evidence to send me down for fifteen to life.

Like the now pinkish cream slacks that had tinged the water red in my washing machine.

I didn't know how I knew, I just did...

It had been as though somebody had been whispering in my ear.

There were no mirrors in the boardroom; even the immense table was a trendy matt black in keeping with KWG's corporate image. I'm guessing that if there had been a mirror, though - or at least something even mildly reflective - then I would have seen the source of those voices. I would have seen it as clearly, if not more so, as I saw him standing before me now.

'So you ran in here...,' he continued. He was back to leaning against the frame and indicating cube three with a sideways nod of his head. 'Came to get your head together but.... whew...' he thumped his foot backwards, kicking the door open with a bang that echoed like autumn thunder around the cold tiles of the walls. Then he turned, slowly, and looked inside, genuinely surprised, '... it seems to me like you made a pretty poor job of it.' He pursed his lips as though this were no great surprise.

I could feel my jaw dropping, pulling my eyes wide with it. I turned and looked at the real cube three, the door still closed and no Gould in sight.

'Go on,' he said pressingly from behind me. His voice held the kind of calm authority that only death and the knowledge that things cannot possibly get any worse, can bring. 'Take a look for yourself.'

I walked cautiously along the tiles, past cubes one and two until I arrived directly outside the laminated barrier of three. I turned and looked back to the mirror, my own horrified reflection almost obscuring Gould smoking yet another cigarette and looking at the ceiling as though it had become a haven for some rather interesting birdlife.

I pushed the door, gently, but it didn't move. So I pushed it harder. Locked.

So I kicked it. Damned hard.

And there I was, in all my former glory. Slumped awkwardly on the pan. The seat was down, as it always was, and so was my head. Behind the cistern, three of the tiles had been shattered and were now streaked with a fresh, rich red. I looked down, past the blood-sodden shirt (now I actually wished I'd selected a darker colour) and saw my hand; the same hand that I had told Wilson had been working on the T&H pitch all night. The same hand that had stuck and twisted the knife into Gould - no longer in a merely corporate sense. In that hand now, or at least dangling from limply splayed fingers, was a revolver; gentle wisps of smoke sneaking away from the barrel like naughty schoolchildren.

I really hate it when people use the word 'literally' when it's simply not true. I literally laughed my head off. They literally blew the roof off the gig. With that in mind, you'll understand the following: when I say that a few minutes after taking my seat in cube three my head was literally in bits, I damn well mean it.

I don't know how I came by the gun. All I recall is that I never possessed one. Not personally. My reasoning at this point was that it had been sitting in cube three all along. Perhaps somebody had placed it there in readiness. Somebody with a score to settle.

I reeled backward, stunned and retching whilst almost falling ass-first into one of the urinals; the same one that Gould's reflection had relieved himself into a few moments ago. For a short while I placed my hand to my mouth to hold back a breakfast I no longer recalled eating. Then I looked back to the mirror - back to him. He cast me a gentle sideways glance and nodded. He was trying (and failing) to hide a very satisfied smile. A smile of reflective truth.

A few moments of staring at myself on the pot, or what was left of me I suppose, and I walked slowly back to the mirror, dragging my feet like a chain-gang convict. Gould lifted himself confidently away from the frame and walked back toward me. By the time I reached the hand-basin his reflection was no more than a few feet behind that of my right shoulder.

I raised my hand to the cold glass; reaching out to touch it with tears rolling the full length of my face, then watched as the reflection of my palm was pushed white against its smooth surface.

The reflection of my palm.

Which was all I could see. No palm, just a reflection.

Because my own palm was no longer there.

It never had been.

Before I had doused my face with water and tried to wash away the reality of my situation, I had chosen to close my eyes. Not any longer. Now my eyes were open far wider than they had ever been in my pitifully short life. The irony that I had to almost fall into a urinal to accept how adequately I had pissed that life away was not lost on me for an instant. I looked away from my reflection, up and down something that I still believed to be my body and saw nothing but the repetitive chess-board tiles on which I had always assumed I was standing.

It was only then that the truth of mirrors, despite my early musings, really sank home. This had never been my reflection; it had only been me. The real me, complete with all the insidious faults so long concealed from the other side. The side where Wilson, Turner, Harman and, until recently, Gould himself resided. Somewhere within that fake me, the reflection of the reflection, had been all the ammunition needed for a night like the last and a day like today. It had been there, embedded in my profile, for those who took the time to see it with a fresh set of eyes. The easiest way, as ever, would be to take a long, hard look in the mirror. In doing so, all the subtle details that had long been that little bit askew would suddenly begin to glare like sunlight from the glass.

I had inherent design faults and yes, I see the irony in that also. Probably because I, like Gould, now felt ‘the kind of calm authority that only death and the knowledge that things cannot possibly get any worse, can bring.’

The truth was... I no longer existed. The even darker truth, if there could be such a thing, was that I never really had.

Not in your world.

As though he could somehow read my thoughts, Gould said quietly, ‘That’s right Jimmy... you’re in my world now.’

I looked up at my reversed image, saw glistening streaks of saline coursing the length of my reddened face and his stark shape looming behind me. His face curled, first into a sneer and then into a menacing snarl; the kind you might only see if you were unfortunate enough to come face to face with a rabid wolf.

‘My world...’

I watched as he leaned forward, eyes alight and glowing with the kind of deep fire I had never seen in mortal man. Then, suddenly, I was no longer in the world to which I had become accustomed. Suddenly everything was wrong. My house had been flipped, so to speak. What was back had become front and what had been left was now right...

Except that... nothing was right, was it? Not any more. In the blink of an eye I had finally flipped - crossed fully to the dark side if you will - and was left to stare helplessly from my glass prison like some second-rate museum exhibit. And what was I looking at? A desperately sterile... and, dare I say it, totally empty washroom.

Gould’s voice was echoing in one long, rumbling flow of electricity from right behind my right ear...

‘And what you don’t yet fully realize, little man, is that I have designs on you...’