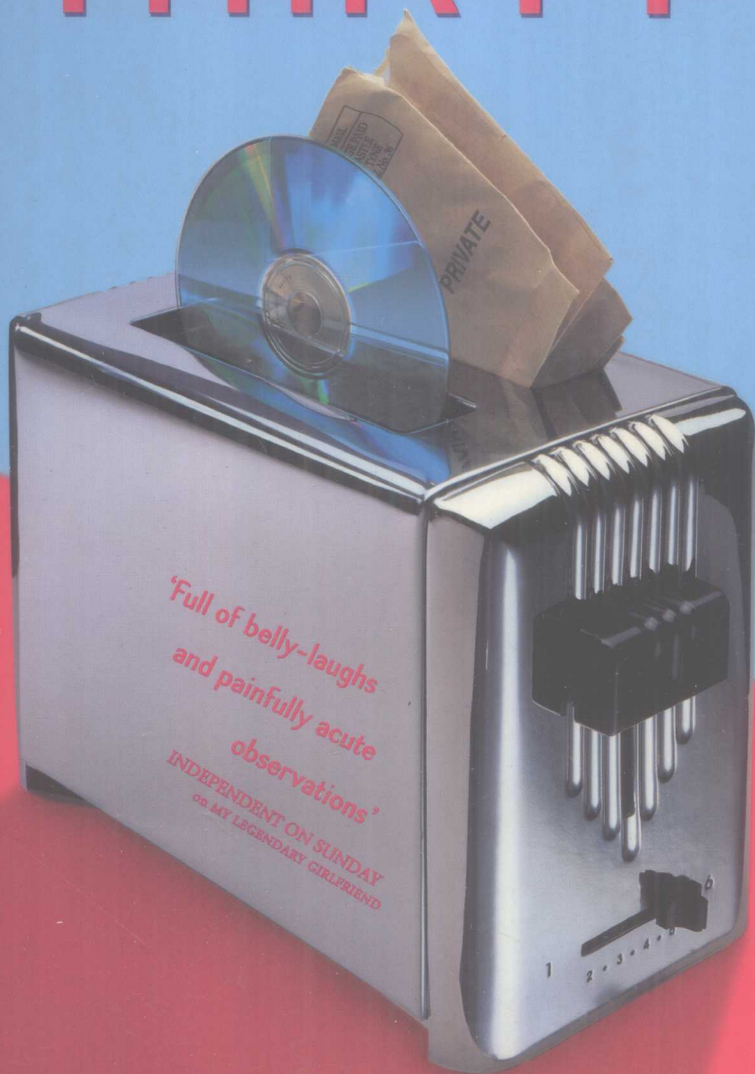


# TURNING THIRTY



## MIKE GAYLE

No. 1 bestselling author of MY LEGENDARY GIRLFRIEND and MR COMMITMENT

# TURNING THIRTY

MIKE GAYLE



flame

FLAME

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## TURNING THIRTY

*Also by Mike Gayle*

**My Legendary Girlfriend  
Mr Commitment**

For Jackie Behan and John O'Relly,  
two friends who, like me, are  
turning thirty.

Happy birthday to you both.

## **Acknowledgements**

A hearty thank you to all the usual suspects who have helped to get this particular show on the road. As ever a special mention must go to my wife, Claire, without whom you'd have handed over your hard-earned cash to read a couple of hundred pages of blank paper.

To all involved: Live long and prosper.

PEOPLE are suffering psychological damage because of society's obsession with 'perma-youth' says an expert . . . Many over-65s seek to prove they are 'young at heart' by rollerblading, taking up aerobics or visiting nightclubs . . . 'Perma-youth' has become the modern 'Holy Grail'. Youthful images in the media, the faces of young TV presenters and the fear of appearing 'past it' at work have all contributed to the trend.

**report in the *Birmingham Evening Mail***



'I remember as I turned 30 I said to myself, "I have no more excuses for myself. I've got to figure these things out."'

**Brad Pitt, 1999**

**nostalgia** *n.* **1.** a yearning for the return of past circumstances, events etc. **2.** the evocation of this emotion, as in book, film, etc. **3.** longing for home or family; homesickness. (Gk. *nostos*, return; *algos*, pain).

***Collins English Dictionary***

## **one**

Here's the thing: for a long time I, Matt Beckford, had been looking forward to turning thirty. I'd been looking forward to the day when, by the power of thirty, I'd own a wine rack that actually contained wine. Not much of an ambition you might think and you'd probably be right, but then again you're not me. You see, in my world, when a bottle of wine enters it's usually consumed in its entirety in anything from twenty minutes (on a rough day) to twenty-four hours (on a not-so-rough day). This is not because I'm an alcoholic (not quite yet) but is simply due to a liking for wine combined with the fact that I have no self-control whatsoever. So what's my point? Well, the point is this (stay with it): wine racks by their very nature are designed to hold more than one bottle of wine. Some can hold six. Some can hold twelve. It doesn't really matter. What does matter are the big questions raised by the existence and desire for ownership of wine racks:

- 1) Who can actually afford to buy twelve bottles of wine in one go?
- 2) Who (assuming that they can afford it) would have twelve bottles of wine in the house, come in from a hard day at work and resist the temptation to consume the lot?

3) Who thinks that wine racks are a good idea anyway?

The answer to 3 – and, for that matter, 2 and 1 – is, of course, thirty-people (as my girlfriend Elaine called them): the thirty-something; the thirty-nothing; the people who used to be twenty and are now . . . well, not so twenty. People like me. We who have scrimped, struggled and saved our way through our twenties precisely because one day in the future we wanted to be able to afford to buy multiple bottles of wine, store them in posh wine racks in our posh kitchens and . . . not drink them. Well, not all at once. We want to be able to show off the fact that finally, after all these years, we have self-control, a taste for the finer things in life, maturity even.

I wanted in. I was ready for it. Ready to embrace this brave new world! I had it all planned out. Right down to the last detail. That's the thing about turning thirty (other than wine racks): before you even get there you already think you know exactly what it will be like. Because it's the big milestone you've been looking forward to all your life that means you've arrived at adulthood. No other birthday has that same power. Thirteen? Pah! Acne and *angst*. Sixteen? More acne, more *angst*. Eighteen? Acne plus *angst* plus really horrible dress sense. Twenty-one? Acne, *angst*, plus a marginally improved dress sense. But thirty? Thirty really is the big one. Somewhere in your parents' house there is a list (or maybe just some random jottings) that you scribbled down when you were, oh . . . say, thirteen, about that near mythical date in the future when you would be turning thirty. In your own inimitable scrawl will be written things like: 'By the time I'm thirty . . . I want to be a (*insert name of flash job here*) and

I'd like to be married to (*insert name of whichever person you were obsessed with at the time*). What's clear from this exercise book is that even at the tender age of thirteen you've realised, like Freud once said, that when it comes to life, 'All that matters is love and work,' a statement that, if you're only thirteen, leads you to ponder two major questions:

**1) What am I going to do with my life?**

**2) Will I ever get a girlfriend?**

### **What am I going to do with my life?**

The answer to the 'What am I going to do with my life?' question was always pretty obvious to me even at thirteen. While my schoolmates wanted to be everything from journalists to actors and lorry drivers through to spacemen, all I ever wanted to do in life was be a computer programmer. And I did just that. I went to university, got a degree in computing and went to work for a company in London called C-Tec that manufactures specially designed software for financial institutions. Okay, so I didn't get to invent the next Space Invaders, Frogger or Pac Man, which definitely was my dream when I was thirteen, but I was at least in the right area. So that was that one ticked off.

### **Will I ever get a girlfriend?**

Of course, the answer to this question was yes (more of which later), but as I grew older it changed into the far deeper question: Is there a perfect woman out there for me, and if so who and where is she? Now, this was a little more difficult for me to answer, not least because, if I recall my more mature entries in the exercise-book correctly, I wrote down Madonna.

I didn't really start thinking about girls until quite late (very

late judging by the antics of some of the kids at school) so by the time I'd given the subject any deep consideration my testosterone levels were more or less off the top of the scale. That's where Madonna came in. I remember clearly the first time I saw her on TV. She was on *Top of the Pops* promoting 'Lucky Star', the UK follow-up to 'Holiday', and I was blown away. She wasn't very well known in England at the time, so to my parents she was a mad-looking girl who wore far too much makeup and jewellery, with a penchant for religious imagery. But to me she was gorgeous. Even though I was a teenage boy from Birmingham and she was a twentysomething girl from New York, I was genuinely convinced that one day she'd be my girlfriend. That's the optimism of youth for you. 'Someone's got to be Madonna's boyfriend,' I'd reasoned at the time, 'because if no one thought they could be Madonna's boyfriend then she wouldn't have anyone to snog and Madonna looks to me like someone who needs snogging on a regular basis.'

Thing is, within a few years I'd grown out of my Madonna phase and moved on to real people . . . like Linda Phillips, with the nice smile who sat next to me in Geography, or Bethany Mitchell, a girl in the year above me at school whose tight grey school jumper left little to the imagination. Later still, however, I even outgrew Linda and, rather sadly Bethany, only to move on to *real* real people, the regular ones that you don't have to worship, like Ginny Pascoe, my old on/off girlfriend.

I call Ginny my 'girlfriend' but she was more accurately a girl who was also a friend who I sometimes snogged. We never actually gave what we had a name. It was more of an arrangement between us from the ages of sixteen to twenty-four. At first it wasn't even an arrangement, merely a

bad habit. Fuelled by Thunderbird, a potent sweet wine that was then every teenage drinker's tippable of choice, we'd pair off together regularly at sixth-form discos, house parties, and occasionally even at our local, the Kings Arms. However, as soon as Monday morning at school arrived. Ginny and I would always, without fail, feign amnesia, dementia or just plain ignorance of such weekend couplings. This arrangement suited us both as, for a long time, I was in hot pursuit of Amanda Dixon, a girl with whom I had about as much chance of going out as Madonna during her 'Material Girl' phase. In turn, Ginny was in hot pursuit of Nathan Spence, who was not only equally beyond her pulling power but also had a 'reputation', which – in the most bizarre piece of feminine logic I'd come across at that tender age – served only to make him even more desirable. We were never weird about our arrangement (like a lot of odd situations the longer it was around the more normal it became) and, best of all, it never interfered with our friendship. We were friends. And we were sometimes more than friends. And that was that.

As time moved on, so did Ginny and I . . . sort of. She went off to university in Brighton and I departed to university in Hull. Over the next decade or so a steady stream of girls wandered in and out of my life. Each one, I thought, if only for a second, might be the one I'd turn thirty with. For the sake of brevity and embarrassment the list reads like this:

**Age:** Nineteen

**Girls that year:** *Ruth Morrell* (a couple of weeks),  
*Debbie Foley* (a couple of weeks), *Estelle Thompson*  
(a couple of weeks) and *Anne-Marie Shakir* (a couple  
of weeks)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 8

**Age:** Twenty

**Girls that year:** *Faye Hewitt* (eight months), *Vanessa Wright* (on and off for two months)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 5

**Age:** Twenty-one

**Girls that year:** *Nicky Rowlands* (under a month) and *Maxine Walsh* (nine months)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 3

**Age:** Twenty-two

**Girls that year:** *Jane Anderson* (two and a bit months) and *Chantelle Stephens* (three months)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 10 (a spectacularly bad year for self-control)

**Age:** Twenty-three

**Girls that year:** *Harriet 'Harry' Lane* (roughly ten months on and off)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 3

**Age:** Twenty-four

**Girls that year:** *Natalie Hadleigh* (two months), *Siobhan Mackey* (two months) and *Jennifer Long* (two months)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 1

**Age:** Twenty-five

**Girls that year:** *Jo Bruton* (a weekend), *Kathryn Fletcher* (nine months-ish), *Becca Caldicott* (one month)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:** 0 (lost contact)

**Age:** Twenty-six



*Turning Thirty*

**Girls that year:** *Anna O'Hagan* (ten months), *Liz Ward-Smith* (one day), *Dani Scott* (one day), *Eve Chadwick* (a day and a half)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:**

0 (contact still lost)

**Age:** Twenty-seven

**Girls that year:** *Monica Aspel* (nearly but not quite a year)

**Number of times got off with Ginny Pascoe:**

0 (contact all but forgotten)

Following the events I will refer to only as 'The Monica Aspel D  b  cle', and with no Ginny Pascoe around with whom to find comfort, I decided at the age of twenty-seven that enough was enough and put my name forward for a transfer from the London office of C-Tec to its New York base. After all, I told myself, a change is as good as a rest, and what I needed was a rest from women so that I could concentrate on getting my career to the level at which it should have been. After only two days in the Big Apple, however, I met Elaine Thomas, an attractive, intelligent, slightly 'out there' twenty-year-old student at NYU, who had a passion for bad food, long telephone conversations and Englishmen. We fell in love and following a ridiculously short courtship ended up living together. Finally I allowed myself to relax because, after all this time, after all these girls, I knew which one I would be with when I was thirty.

And it wasn't Madonna.

And it wasn't Ginny Pascoe either.

It was Elaine. My Elaine. And I was happy.

Until it all fell apart.