

Rembrandt

Author: Ian Sutherland

In a twisted sense it was fitting that Rodney Huntington-Down discovered the evidence on Valentine's Night, that high feast of the greeting card industry and his wedding anniversary. Most fathers of a teenage son would consider it confirmation that their worst nightmare had materialised. The fact that his first born son wasn't dead or missing was small comfort. He was as good as gone.

He stood in the darkened hallway staring at the message on the phone with a sense of foreboding. Something was wrong.

"Rodney..." His wife Shirley was waiting in the Mercedes. From twenty feet, her alto soprano pierced him. "We're late. Again. You know what they're like. Don't do this to me."

She was right, of course. Last year they'd arrived at Aubergine twenty minutes late to find that the *maître d'* had given their table to an Enrique Iglesias lookalike in black denims whose date had a strapless dress, bare shoulders and a honey bee tattoo at the base of her neck. She was of the age when the lack of make-up only enhanced her beauty. If only...

Rodney waited for the smart phone's touchscreen to swim into focus, feeling both guilt and fear. If James discovered him prying on his correspondence he'd explode. The boy still hadn't forgiven him for calling him a lost cause. All Rodney had managed to extract from him since was a drip feed of grunts and scowls between silences. Why couldn't a sixteen-year-old listen to reason? What, after all, was the point of taking Art and Drama to Matric? No, he was doing the right thing. Why squander the opportunity in his finding the boy's cell phone without password protection? It might prove to be the long-sought window to his soul.

Crrr Lower Main & Station. At first he took the opening line at face value. It spelt the epicentre of Observatory's hip zone. Familiar territory. At forty-nine he still indulged in the occasional night out with the boys when Shirley consented. The pool lounge routine was a favourite: sucking a Carling Black Label while chalking a cue, the drawl, an unhurried shot.

Tonite @9. On the surface it appeared to be one of those 'get-togethers' that the twenty first century teenager seemed to prefer to parties. But wait a minute: it didn't make sense: he'd overheard Shirley making lift arrangements for a rave in Upper Claremont. Which meant fetching the child past midnight. And worse, no drinking. Taxi driver and ATM: the

suburban parent's fate. Shirley was always quick to volunteer, as long as it meant not lifting a finger.

The blast of the Mercedes' horn almost caused him to drop the phone.

Silence.

"Rodney..."

He knew he had sixty seconds. Her tempers were a precise science. He glanced at his watch, then up the stairway at the closed door. The boy was showering. Rodney lifted the phone. There was no time for scruples. Anyway, wasn't it a father's responsibility to check? He tried to stay hopeful. The message could be old. He scrolled down the Whatsapp time line. No luck. The damnation was on in bits and bytes. *What u driving?* A message sent ten minutes earlier. His mood plunged.

Bzzz. The vibration of the phone in his palm was a live wire. The screen lit up. New message. Rodney swallowed, not sure he could follow through. What the hell. The first thing that he noticed was the sender's icon. It was the portrait of a bloodhound. Post-modern scheme, or comic? *Faizel*. Strange name: why was James mixing with one of them?

Crunch. His wife's footsteps on the gravel. The dragon was approaching. He recoiled from the door. Had he really once loved her?

White Sentra. Rodney's shoulders tensed. A cheap car in a dodgy neighbourhood. His dread had grown horns.

Creak. Rodney spun round and looked up the stairs. The phone dropped on the table.

Silence. James must have finished his shower. There were only seconds left to find out what he needed.

Bzzz. Another message. Two words like an ice pick to his heart. *Deal's on*.

The boy appeared on the landing with a curious expression.

"James!" For once Rodney was relieved to hear his wife's voice. "What are you still doing in your underwear?" She glanced at her Cartier. "Isn't Charles' fetching you now? Come Rodney."

He leaned back in the driver's seat clenching the steering wheel. He was bracing himself for the inevitable fight. Then he said, "James is doing drugs."

"Rodney Down—" Shirley used his last name in those rare moments when she was angry but struggled for words. "That's preposterous."

He removed a hand from the steering wheel and turned the radio down. "At least hear me out."

"What? You expect me to sit here and let you pronounce that James is one of those...those..."

"My dear...please."

"Don't patronise me. If I really was your dear I wouldn't need to cajole you into taking me to a restaurant on the one night of the year that isn't all about you. What happened to those days when you bought me flowers?"

"They ended when you ticked me off for getting carnations instead of roses."

"We've been married twenty years, Rodney, you should know these things."

Rodney looked out the window at the row of roses lining the driveway. He noticed a dead flower head and wondered if Shirley had seen it. Happiness, their Malawian gardener, was risking his Christmas bonus. "I read his cell phone messages." He depressed the cigarette lighter. "It's there in black and white."

Shirley yanked at the door handle. "Shit. Why do you have to lock the doors before we even leave?"

"Because you used to insist on it." He placed a hand on her thigh.

"Don't touch me."

"You're my wife." The cigarette lighter popped. "Married couples are supposed to touch." He withdrew his hand. "Hear me out. Just this once."

"I'm through with listening to your conspiracy theories. Just because he'd rather paint than watch Super 15... Get over it. He's not a rigger bugger like you."

“That’s got nothing to do with it. I’ve watched every one of his hockey games this season. Which is more than can be said of you.”

Shirley’s scream rang in Rodney’s ears long after she’d slammed the front door behind her. Must be pissed, he reflected, to sacrifice Aubergine’s degustation menu. He pressed his gate remote and waited for the rumble of metal. The skeleton of a plan formed. He tapped the accelerator. Relief. He was almost looking forward to learning the truth.

Rodney’s view from the balcony of the pool hall was perfect. Though it was dusk, he could see all four corners of the intersection of Lower Main and Station Roads. He sank into his chair and reached for his Black Label. He was almost happy.

The white Nissan Sentra arrived at nine sharp. It double parked at the far corner of the intersection. Rodney sipped at his second beer. He had time.

As a father, he should have recognised his son by his uniform – ripped black jeans, imprinted T-shirt and beret. Instead it was the swagger. He felt a familiar loathing. He’d given the kid everything: a stable home, the best school. And all he got in return was attitude and trouble.

James rapped on the Nissan’s roof and climbed in. Rodney downed his last inch of Black Label. The beer had taken the edge off his earlier anxiety, but now a bolt of panic struck his gut. Things were happening too fast. He edged out of his chair and backed inside the hall.

Rodney followed the Nissan left onto Malta Road and on to the Salt River Circle. Within half a mile the neighbourhood had changed completely. Gone was the shabby chic grunge of Observatory. It was a land of hard industrial menace. When the Nissan disappeared into the gloom of London Road, Rodney thought of calling the police. But what was the point? The one time he’d dialled the emergency number it had rung for two minutes. They were useless, anyway. The lot of them.

Rodney decided to walk the last block. If there were gangs involved, he would rather be anonymous. Something caught his eye. He ducked behind a post. Scant cover, but it would have to do. He peeked around. The Nissan stood in the centre of a factory loading zone. The ground was littered with weeds and broken bottles. At the far end was a two storey wall formed by the neighbouring warehouse.

Rodney almost didn't notice the lightless Toyota Corolla rolling down London Road. The only sound was a whirring of gears in neutral. The car's momentum was enough for it to cross the grating and pull up alongside the Nissan.

For an age, nothing happened. Was he imagining things? Could James and a mate just be looking for a spot to make out with their girlfriends? But there was no turning back now. He'd have to wait it out.

A wiry figure with a bandana stepped out of the Toyota. He sidled to the back of the car and opened the boot.

Two figures emerged from either side of the Nissan. One had dreadlocks to his waist. The other a beret. Rodney cupped his cell phone in his hand and typed 10111. He wasn't going to stand and watch his own flesh and blood get hurt in a drug deal gone wrong.

James peeled a wad of notes from his wallet and handed them over. After pocketing them, the figure with the bandana pulled out a coffin-like case from the Toyota's boot, placed it on the ground and flipped the lid.

Rodney's fingers flirted with his phone's call button, then waited. The glint of metal should have been enough. So why hadn't he called? Any half-decent father would have intervened by now. Even knowing his son was a delinquent.

James reached into the case, drew something out and placed it on the ground. The driver of the Nissan got out the car and joined the others. From their body language it was clear that the other two figures were deferring to James. Rodney realised with growing horror that his son was in charge. The stakes had just got higher.

He lifted his finger from his phone. Calling the police, on second thoughts, was lunacy. Though a minor, James' future would be as good as ruined if he was caught pushing tik.

Rodney felt his pulse throb in his ear. He saw his family life, already brittle, fracture: his standing in the community, his business, ruined.

As if on cue, the three figures each grabbed one of the objects. In silhouette they looked like fire extinguishers. Rodney's pulse slowed for the first time since he'd downed his last beer. Could there be another explanation?

The three figures made a dash for the wall, stopped and conferred. James pressed his wrist watch. A light glowed. He signalled the other two to start.

Splotches of red, white and blue criss-crossed the surface, seemingly at random. Finally the puzzle was solved. The fire extinguishers were canisters of spray paint. They were defacing the wall.

Later, Rodney would often wonder why he hadn't just left. Perhaps it was the macabre fascination of seeing a public building being vandalised first-hand. He'd never paused to observe the graffiti he passed on his rare visits to the urban edge. The work of scum, riff-raff, the faceless other.

It was over in ten minutes. High fives, low fives, a whooping. One of the boys pulled out a digital camera. They took turns posing in front of the flash-lighted wall. And then they were gone.

As Rodney stood before the wall he'd never felt more alone. A train rumbled by. A siren in the distance. Before him was an image that shredded his heart. It was a Rembrandt in perfect rendition. He wanted to run but couldn't. So he stared at a loving father, his likeness, and repentant son.