

Petard

If it hadn't been for the girl's legs, I would have missed him. She was a real looker, and the way that ultra-short skirt showed her off in a shaft of late autumn sunshine had all my attention. A moment later, the entrance to the station swallowed her and my spirits took a dip. Somewhere in a sprawling network of lines, those legs were being whisked away to a Cape Flats destination and that was that.

The little man standing just inside the tall rectangle of shadow hadn't even turned his head to watch her pass, and I wondered at that. Short-sighted or queer – whatever. I zoomed number 36 and panned to the other entrance, but she was gone, leaving me to my thoughts and the prospect of getting through a Saturday afternoon shift with my sanity intact.

The other CCTV screens in my bank went on reflecting the empty weekend streets of Cape Town, number 36 independent of their programmed traverses and tilts and recording processes. I worked the joystick back and forth between the two visible entrances. No harm in trying, I thought. She might have gone in to buy something or make a call.

The little man was still where I'd first seen him, indistinct in the bad light. Idly, I zoomed again, studying him. If you haven't seen state of the art surveillance cameras at work, it could be a shock to discover how close-up and personal they can get. A fortyish, thick-lipped face, remains of thin reddish fuzz exposing a pink, freckled scalp. His face was smooth, in that tender, abraded way some meticulous shavers have. He was an albino. He looked soft, in unremarkable, sensible clothing that his mother might have picked out.

While I was studying him, he glanced at his watch again, short-sighted, holding it very close to his face. Like his clothing, the watch was sensible. Analogue with a brown leather strap that matched the leather patches on the sleeves of his jacket. I glanced at the ops room clock. Four o'clock, on the dot. I wondered if he was waiting for someone. Another drab, sensibly dressed someone.

He had his right hand in his trouser pocket and without taking his eyes off his left wrist, he moved smartly out into the street, and disappeared – behind the shelter of the great pillars of the entrance - withdrawing as he went, what I thought was a cellphone. I'd have guessed that a prepaid phone card was high tech to him.

He raised it level with his watch and as I thought that it was more like a garage door remote, he depressed one of the two or three buttons and the gloomy interior of the station changed to daylight. Daylight crisscrossed by a million fragments of glass and other things that funneled out of the entrance, skittering along the street and bouncing off walls.

Something ricocheted off the polycarbonate housing of number 36, and although the blast was almost half a mile away, I shouted and ducked under the console. A second

later, the crump of the shock-wave hit the control room, rattling the windows and throwing the place into pandemonium. Operators were off their posts, torn between the drama on 36 and the need to scan their own sectors. Without my hand on the mouse, 36 filmed on. Impassive, it faithfully recorded the last of the debris catapulting out into the littered street. Somehow, as we discovered, the little man escaped its cold, all-seeing eye and by the time I took over again, he was nowhere to be seen.

Nobody mentioned overtime that evening, and it was after nine when I left, the words of my recorded statement indelibly etched on my mind as minutely as they had appeared in the copperplate script of the special branch interrogator. Outside in the street, it seemed very little had been done to clear up the mess, but against a background of quietly throbbing generators, a small army of crouching or kneeling figures cast, patient as hounds, in the shadowed debris for the slightest trace of their quarry.

The papers loved it. "DISASTER !- Blaster on Candid Camera" was the by-line some editor had settled on. Three frames from Camera 36 showed a hazy image of someone who could have been anybody's next door neighbour in successive stages of leaving the station entrance, left wrist raised close to the indistinct face and the right a blurred part of the picture. Belatedly, I regretted not having the cleaning crew attend to the polycarbonate bubble that protected Camera 36.

I slept badly that night. The small, red-headed man filled my vision, no matter on which side I lay, my eyes closed or wide open and staring at the wall. Sometimes he grinned at me. It was a relief when the alarm went off at 4.30 and I could prepare myself for work.

The Special Branch man was back again. This time he had a companion. Tall and lean like himself, in the jeans and leather jacket that seemed at one time to be the uniform of police detectives. A long, pale scar joined his right ear to his mouth accentuating the blackness of his skin and the smoky eyes regarding me were more unsettling than his white partner's level gaze. "Pepe" grunted Special Branch, with a sideways jerk of his head by way of introduction.

The black man did not offer to shake hands. He was hungrily scanning the banks of screens, devouring the passing images as the operators moved their joysticks. It was like a cheetah I once saw in a film, high on an antheap where the elevation gave it a wide range of vision in its search for prey. Pepes were fat and jolly; this one was not.

It was a long morning. Snyders had had me relieved at my console and let us into the viewing room. Grudgingly, as though it was his personal domain, but he'd downloaded the blast footage and set it up. He was ready to screen it when Special Branch said quietly " Thank you" and nodded at the door. The dismissal of the officious Snyders cheered me and the morning set off on a better footing.

Special Branch reached for the start button then paused and said “Can I trust you?” I held his steady look and nodded. This was my footage and I sensed that it was going to do what it was intended to do – in the hands of these two men. The screen lit up. Special Branch glanced at the count-down clock in the right hand corner and grunted approval. Snyders had lifted footage for an hour before the blast.

We must have watched the screening five times, Special Branch stopping it and asking questions. Pepe never spoke a word, but occasionally, he would urgently tap the screen with a long finger and Special Branch would stop the disc while they studied some aspect or other. At the very first appearance of the little man, Pepe breathed, almost reverently “Rooi Els”. It was the first sound he had made. Special Branch had seen the footage the night before, but he seemed pleased at Pepe’s confirmation. This time it was me that he nodded out of the room with a terse “Coffee?” and I took the hint. Control room coffee isn’t gourmet stuff, but I did the best I could. Even found a tray and lifted a couple of Snyders’ doughnuts as I passed his cubicle.

The viewing room doorhandle yielded silently to my hand and I was in before the rapid exchange in Portuguese trailed away. Special Branch seemed to make a decision and said. “Ex Flecha” with a wave of his hand at Pepe. “best anti-terror idea they ever had in Mocambique. Pepe’s speciality, this.....” he indicated the screen where Rooi Els was frozen in mid detonation mode. I nodded, impressed, and served the coffee.

It was early afternoon when they left. Special Branch shook my hand and Pepe looked the other way. I guessed that in his line of work, you didn’t make friends. Then they were gone. I ignored Snyders’ bustling curiosity and gave him some line about being sworn to confidentiality. To tell the truth, all I knew was that Rooi Els was albino, that he was a prize, and that Pepe had him in his sights. I never heard any more. The footage was wiped clean from our records and was certainly never shown in the collection of snippets that official visitors saw on their tours of the CCTV facility.

Time went on and I made it through some promotional testing. They moved me to the main facility as a sector supervisor. More cameras and screens, meant more supervision necessary. I had Khayelitsha residential and some of the main intersections. The ones where the smash and grabs took place.

If my operators were bored most of the time, lounging in their swivel chairs, idly manipulating the cameras, my life was worse, so sometimes I’d kick someone out and take over. That was how, that long dreary afternoon, I was scanning a dusty street between the shacks. A naked, dusty child was tottering from one slumbering dog to another, rousing them with fumbling hands, when a tall, lean figure emerged from one of the shacks. He turned, and with a sizeable bunch of keys re-locked the padlocked chain securing a sagging metal door. It seemed an unnecessarily large collection of keys.

I zoomed in and started in my chair. Pepe's was not a face you forget easily. He looked about him and despite the distance between us, I could have sworn he stared into my eyes. Then he simply melted away into the surroundings.

So this was where he lived.? Strange reward for a peacemaker. I handed over to the operator again.

It was coming up to evening handover and I was completing my log sheet, glancing at each screen as I did so, the shadows lengthening out there in the real world where Pepe's sad little home seemed even more forlorn. And then, I realised that the figure wrestling with the chain in the failing light wasn't Pepe. But it was someone else I would always remember.

Rooi Els mastered the padlock and disappeared inside. Minutes later he emerged with a small backpack of sorts and set off across the litter strewn wasteland that bordered the main railway line to the North. I scabbled in my wallet for Special Branch's dog-eared card and reached for the 'phone, changing from screen to screen to follow Rooi Els..

It was at the very furthest extent of the bank's range that an ant-sized Rooi Els squatted beside the rails and bent over his knapsack. It was hard to see what he was doing but a massive column of dust and debris arched skywards at about the same time that the burring stopped and a dry, taut voice in my ear said "Yes?"

I stumbled through my whispered report, one shaking hand pointing towards the screen as if Special Branch could see the billowing cloud still slowly descending to the distant earth and startled residents milling about in the foreground.

"You sure it was Rooi Els?" he was saying again in my ear.

"Positive" I croaked.

There was a silence, then a chuckle.

"Dodgy things, detonators. Never know when the timing's been tampered with".

"Pepe?" I whispered.

Another silence.

"I told you – best thing ever to come out of the Mozambique war" Then he rang off.

In the last of the daylight, the people were edging cautiously closer to what must have been a gaping hole. Like an open grave from which the occupant had been spirited away.