

# **On Rathbone Road**

**A short story by M T Mathieson**

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It seems a long time ago now. In truth, it has been less than a year — eleven months to be precise. It was mid-August, Results Day. We had planned to go out that evening to celebrate, the old crowd together for what might turn out to be the last time for months, or even years. At the end of the summer we would be going to university, each of us moving to different parts of the country. I was to go to Cambridge to study Natural Sciences and had already received a conditional offer on the basis of my predicted 'A' Level<sup>1</sup> results. I needed one A\*<sup>2</sup> and two As. It was in the bag; I was expecting three A\*s.

I'd like to say that I was both excited and nervous by the prospect of branching out on my own, but that would be to misrepresent the Stacey that I was back then. I was just plain excited. Excited by the prospect of getting out of the uncultured and stifling small town that I called home. Excited by the future I could see for myself. The world was my oyster and I was in no doubt that it would contain a great fat pearl. That was all before Results Day.

We met outside the school at 10.30 that morning. Alisha, my best friend for as long as I could remember, was already waiting, anxiously twirling her long black hair around her fingers and chewing her bottom lip. In typical style, she had arrived early to allow herself more time to stress. As we walked towards the main entrance, we passed other students who, like us, had arranged to meet with friends to discover their fate in pairs or posses and were congregating in the shadow of the two storey building. Alisha and I walked arm in arm, fighting our way through the crowd, all of whom seemed to be a good three inches taller than either of us. Some joined us as we passed them and others simply said hello and wished us luck.

Actually, it was Alisha that most of them spoke to. Although I didn't really mind, I could never work out why she was more popular than me. I couldn't deny that, of the two of us, she was the prettier. My boyish figure and pinched cheeks, too ruddy to show my clear green eyes to their best advantage, bore no comparison with Alisha's feminine curves, perfect brown skin and delicate features. However, where brains were concerned I reigned supreme and any disadvantage I had in terms of looks should have been compensated for by my academic superiority — in my view anyway. It wasn't the case and the only explanation I could think of was that people in this town valued good looks over intelligence. It didn't surprise me.

In all other respects Alisha and I were very similar, we were both well dressed, well spoken and well educated. We lived in modern houses in sought after parts of town. Alisha's father came here from India as a child and worked his way through medical school to become a consultant oncologist. My own father built a successful business after starting out as an apprentice plumber, a working class boy with an estuary accent that made me cringe with embarrassment but which he absolutely refused to shake off.

Nevertheless, despite all that we had in common, where Alisha attracted friends and admirers like a flower attracts bees, I lived in her shadow still waiting to blossom while enjoying the buzz of activity around her. Looking back, I suppose the reason I wasn't jealous was because deep down I understood — even I preferred her.

As we reached the main entrance to the school, where a chair propped open the security door, another small group of girls approached from the opposite direction. Alisha stepped back to let them pass.

"Thanks." Crystal Parker smiled at Alisha as she passed us and walked into the building.

"What did you do that for?" I complained.

"What?"

"Let them go first."

Alisha rolled her eyes and shook her head at me. She knew my opinion of Crystal Parker and her friends. I didn't like the way they talked. I didn't like their chipped, red nail polish. I didn't like the way they kept their hair scraped back off their faces and dressed in sportswear, even though the most exercise they ever got was lifting their mobile phones to their ears. Trivial things to dislike someone for I know but, at the time, they seemed like perfectly good reasons indeed.

"She's really quite nice if you bother to talk to her you know?"

I raised my pencil thin eyebrows.

"Your trouble is that you see good in everybody," I told her, not for the first time.

She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the school.

"And your trouble is that you don't see people at all," she laughed.

Alisha's attempts at wisdom always sounded more like riddles to me. It was one of the sweet things about her that I liked.

In the wide corridor outside the school dining hall where we collected our results, my friend was engulfed by an excited, squealing mob, leaving me alone with the plain white envelope that bore my name. Using a french-polished fingernail to rip it open, I removed the single sheet of thin, white paper and scanned the page, searching through the superfluous text and figures to find the all important grades that would affirm my value as a human being.

When I found them, the very foundation of my future was ripped from under me. The innocuous looking sheet of paper that I held in my hand told me that I had been awarded two As and a B. My ego came crashing down and landed on its backside with an almighty thump. As the shock of my grades gave way to the realisation of their significance, I struggled to fight back the tears and stared blindly at the scuffed, magnolia-painted wall as if it might provide more welcome news, only vaguely aware of the chattering of others around me.

"Stace?"

Absorbed in my own thoughts, I hadn't been aware of Alisha talking to me. I looked up.

"Sorry. I didn't hear you."

She laughed her beautiful, carefree laugh that made her eyes scrunch almost closed and her wide mouth stretch open to expose perfect white teeth.

"I said, come on then Brainbox, show us what three A\*s looks like."

It hadn't been only me who had expected that I would get top grades across the board. My friends and family had taken it for granted as well. How was I going to face them all and admit that I had failed to deliver?

Alisha's smile faltered as she realised that something was wrong.

"Stace?"

In answer, I handed her the sheet of paper and watched the concern on her face morph into mild surprise and then disappear.

"That's not so bad." She looked from the paper to me.

"It's not good enough for Cambridge."

Alisha bit her bottom lip during the momentary silence between us. Concern once more controlled her features as she stared at the sheet of paper, probably willing it to change before her eyes.

"Go on, say it. 'I told you so'."

She turned her head abruptly towards me. "I would never say that."

"But you thought it. I didn't want to apply to anywhere else. I don't want to go anywhere else."

"Oh Stace."

As I watched the warmth of her sympathy spread across her face, the tears began to roll freely down my own.

"What am I going to do?"

"It's not the end of the world you know? It's not too late."

"Oh God, no. I can't do that. [Clearing?](#)<sup>3</sup>"

"It's not so bad."

"It's what no-hopers do. It's just a way of filling the empty places with the dregs that are left after all the good unis have taken what they want. Any course that's still got places to offer is going to be crap. I'm not sinking that low. I'd rather not go at all."

Her warm, brown eyes opened wide in horror.

"You can't not go to uni. That's ridiculous. You were made for it. You're the smartest person I've ever known. You were born for it."

"That's what I thought too but it seems we were wrong."

I became aware of other people around us watching. I knew I'd have to face it in the end but the last thing I wanted right then was to confront the humiliation of others knowing I was a failure. There were too many people in that place just hoping that I would fall flat on my face. I didn't want to give them the pleasure of witnessing it first hand.

"Let's go outside."

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I spent the afternoon alone in my room. I had promised Alisha that I would still go out with them as planned that evening. Sitting in front of the dressing table mirror, I stared at the red blotches that surrounded my puffy eyes. I looked a mess. After plugging in my hair straighteners, I trudged into the bathroom to splash water on my face. If I waited a while I might be able to cover the blotches with make up.

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We were to meet at 8.30 at 'The Rose'. I arrived just after 9 o'clock. The place was already heaving.

Alisha ran over to meet me, her greeting a little too enthusiastic, I thought, and her smile a little too wide, even for her.

"Stace! You're here. I was beginning to think you were going to stand us up."

"Why would I do that?"

My tone was deadpan, the challenge obvious and I felt a pang of guilt as I watched that overly large smile slip away.

Alisha looked down for a second then back to me with a smaller, more tentative smile.

"Everybody else is already here," she said, glancing towards the large table that extended along the length of the floor-to-ceiling window. "We've hooked up with Jack and his mates."

I felt guilty and selfish.

"Sarah's idea I assume," I replied, forcing a knowing smile.

Alisha's expression relaxed into something a little less strained.

"Of course." She continued to talk to me over her shoulder as she walked. "She says she didn't know they were going to be here but you and I both know that Jack can't even blow his nose without Sarah finding out about it."

I smiled again. I was going to miss Alisha when she went off to Manchester.

Leaving her at the table, I went to get a drink and watched my friends from the bar as I waited. I was going to miss them all. Separated from them across the room, their laughter aroused a melancholy like nothing I had ever known before. The ten feet distance felt like it might as well have been miles. A chasm had opened between us. I was on the outside looking in.

I paid the barman, took a deep breath and carried my bacardi and coke across the room to the people who had been such a huge part of my life for the past seven years or more. Sitting next to Alisha, I tried to relax. After a while, the topic of conversation inevitably turned to things that I couldn't or didn't want to talk about so I gazed around the crowded bar. Everywhere I looked people were smiling and laughing like they didn't have a care in the world. The lights on the slot machines by the door flashed and blinked, the symbols and pound signs doing a joyful dance across the surface. A cheer went up from an unseen group of men on the far side of the bar. Somebody had obviously done something right. Lucky him.

I had to leave.

"Lish, I'm going to go home and leave you to it."

Alisha's head turned sharply to face me.

"Why? You've not been here long." She looked distraught. "Hey, we can change the subject. I'm sorry, we didn't mean to leave you out. We just weren't thinking."

"No. It's ok." I tried to smile. "It's supposed to be a celebration. I shouldn't have come. It's not fair on the rest of you."

"Don't be silly. You're our friend and that's not going to change."

"Really, I mean it. If I stay, I'll just bring everybody down one way or another and I really don't want to do that."

"But you're supposed to be staying at my place."

"I know but I just don't think I'm up to it tonight. I'll head home."

"Are you sure?" She tilted her head to one side so that she could look into my downturned eyes, questioning them for confirmation of my words.

I lifted my gaze slightly, mustered a weak smile and nodded. My eyes must have backed me up because Alisha gave me a hug and agreed to let me go.

"Ok. I'll speak to you tomorrow."

I nodded as I stood up.

"Have a great evening. You've earned it."

I walked out into the humid evening air, sighed and checked my watch. Not quite ten o'clock. No point in going home. My mother and father had gone out and I knew that my younger sister had invited her boyfriend over. I didn't think I'd be very welcome at home so early. I turned right towards the river on the edge of town.

Standing on the footpath and resting my arms on the concrete balustrade, I gazed out across the calm, dark water. By this time, the sun had completely set and, without a breeze to drive it, the river seemed motionless, caught in a freeze frame of suspended animation, going nowhere.

I reflected on the conversation I had had with my parents earlier in the evening. Yes, they were disappointed — they had said — but they were disappointed **for** me, not **in** me. It didn't change how they felt about me one bit — so they said. I didn't believe them. I thought about everything my father had done over the years, all the sacrifices and hard work, and I remembered all the years when I was very young, when he worked seven days a week, fifty-one weeks of the year, all to give my sister and me a better future. Whatever they said, I knew I had let them down. I could see through their protestations. They couldn't fool me.

The disingenuousness of their claims had been confirmed to me by their determination that I should still go to university. My mother in particular had insisted that 'it could be worse'. How could things be any worse? My entire future had been snatched away. I knew what she had meant. She was trying to say that I still had grades that could get me into some other, lesser university. They too had tried to persuade me to stoop to the level of Clearing.

I spent a long time that night feeling sorry for myself. When I next checked the time it was almost 11 o'clock. Ella's boyfriend would have left and I could go home. I headed back towards the town.

As I walked along the edge of the river towards the High Street, I passed a group of boys, maybe two or three years older than me. They were laughing loudly and trying to walk along the low thin rail that bordered the flower gardens, one shoving another to make him fall. One of them, the one with a scruffy mass of blond curly hair was wearing a large baggy vest, exposing far more of his skinny torso than I wanted to see. His taller, dark haired friend was only barely wearing a pair of baggy jeans, the waistband slung low to reveal most of his underwear. They were not even a brand worth showing off. The skinny one turned towards me and gave me a cocky grin as I walked past.

"Cheer up. Might never happen."

I bristled. What did he know about what had happened or what might happen? I didn't know him. He had no right to speak to me. But I didn't reply.

Feigning deafness, I dropped my head and hid behind my mousey brown hair, which fell like a curtain around my face.

I turned away from them into Rathbone Road.