

Rattle

• Rudy Neeser •

TROY PACKHAM sits in his parents' cold, porcelain bathtub. If you listen you can hear his breathing — harsh and rapid, faster than a runner's. This is hyperventilation. Hyperventilation occurs when an individual (like Troy) breathes in more than 20 litres of air a minute. In comparison, the average individual breathes in less than five litres of air in the same time. This rapid breathing removes excessive amounts of carbon dioxide from one's blood, causing weakness, light-headedness, dizziness, muscle spasms, and tingling around the mouth and fingers. Troy only notices some of these symptoms — his mind is elsewhere.

Many things may cause hyperventilation, including massive blood loss. Thankfully, death by exsanguination is not a common occurrence, except in soldiers on the battlefield. And suicides, of course.

While the colour of red blood on white porcelain is easy to notice, a more interesting curiosity is the rhythmic flow of blood from Troy's wrists. This is a sign that he has severed his arteries rather than merely his veins. The rhythm is in time with his weakening heart. Harder to see is the cardiac arrhythmia and shock, but the smell of iron is pungent and hangs heavy in the air. Shock is followed by cardiovascular collapse, cardiac arrest and death. These can often be easily noticed, even if you're not paying much attention to the scene.

Troy has not filled the bathtub with water. Even if he had, it would make little difference: he only grows colder until his last breath leaves him in a shallow, shuddering rattle.