

THE FOLLY

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LOS ANGELES · HIGH WYCOMBE



Nieuwenhuizen stood on the verge, in the darkness, looking down the street. In one hand he held a brown imitation-leather portmanteau; in the other some small, cold coins given to him by a taxi-driver moments before. The tail-lights of the taxi flared up at the end of the street, and vanished.

Nieuwenhuizen turned to the plot. It was smaller than he'd been led to believe, no more than an acre, and overgrown with tall grass and weeds. The land was bounded on two sides by an unruly hedge, breaking against the night sky, and on a third by a prefabricated cement wall with panels in the shape of wagon-wheels. The fourth side, where he found himself, had once been fenced off from the street: the remains of this frontier – crumpled scrolls of barbed wire, a gate, some club-footed wooden posts in concrete boots – lay all around. He tightened his grip on his change with one hand and on the sponge-swaddled handle of his portmanteau with the other, high-stepped over a tangle of wire, and pushed through the grass, onwards.

Sour dust burst from the brittle stems he felled and crushed with his boots. Breathing the dust down, salivating, swallowing, he fixed his eyes on the horizon and forged ahead. After a while he stumbled over an anthill. It seemed

a pity to waste this discovery, so he stood on top of the hill and turned his face ceremoniously to the four corners of his inheritance. It was a big face, with a crack of a mouth and a stump of a nose, with unfathomable sockets, craggy brows and a bulging forehead dented in the middle, altogether suited to the play of moonlight and shade. His survey revealed a single tree in the elbow of the hedge, and he chose that spot for his camp.

Nieuwenhuizen hung his scarf on a thorn. Then he sat on his portmanteau under the tree and looked expectantly at the bloodshot windows of the house behind the wagon-wheel wall.

In the lounge of this house Mr and Mrs Malgas, the owners, were watching the eight o'clock news on television.

'Here we go again,' said Mr Malgas when the unrest report began, and he turned the sound off by remote control.

At that very moment there appeared on the screen a burning shanty made of split poles, cardboard boxes and off-cuts of chipboard, and patched with newspaper and plastic bags. It was hemmed in on all sides by a great many shanties just like it, except that, for one reason or another, none of these others were burning.

'This is nothing,' Mrs Malgas said gloomily. 'Just you wait. The worst is yet to come.'

Whereupon she darted out of her Gomma Gomma armchair, snatched Mr's plate from his TV tray, swept two vertebrae off it into a smudge of fat on her own plate, rattled two knives and smote them down ostentatiously, gnashed two forks with shreds of mutton and grains of rice caught between their teeth, dropped crumpled serviettes on top of the wreckage, slid the empty plate underneath the full one,



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set both down on the coffee-table and returned to her seat (in one florid motion).

‘Where is everybody?’ Mr asked.

The shack was still burning. Tattered curtains of flame blew out of the windows and columns of smoke rose from holes in the walls where the patches had burnt away. The smoke went straight up into the heavens. The image blurred and vibrated, then composed itself again. Next, the roof, which was made of corrugated iron and weighted with stones, brought the entire structure crashing down in a silent outburst of sparks and embers. Among the charred boards the camera disclosed an iron bedstead, the red-hot spirals of an inner-spring mattress, and a padlocked tin trunk. Then it pointed out a pair of smouldering boots.

Mrs Malgas stared at the boots.



Mr Malgas, who owned a hardware shop, focused on one of the corrugated sheets and remarked, ‘Beautiful piece of iron.’



‘Shhh!’

While he was trying to gather kindling in the dark, Nieuwenhuizen tripped over his anthill again and measured his length on the ground. As he was picking himself up his hand chanced to fall on an object concealed in the grass. He extricated it excitedly. It was an old oil drum, twenty-five litres approx., hacked open crudely at one end, somewhat distended at the other. He shook some sand and grass out of it, clamped it under one arm and thumped its bottom into shape with his fist. He tilted it in the moonlight. For all its blemishes, it seemed brim-full of potential – a smidgen of which he was pleased to realize immediately: he carried his paltry collection of twigs in it as he tramped back to camp.

It would be pleasant to sit on a stone, he thought, but he couldn't find one of the right shape or size, so he up-ended the drum and sat on that instead. He swept together a pile of dry leaves. Then he shuffled the twigs into a faggot and broke them in half.

The splintering of the wood made him suppose, for an instant, that he was breaking his own fingers into kindling, and the idea made him queasy. He flourished his hands to see whether they were still in working order. Reassured, he raked the scattered metacarpi and phalanges into a nest and dropped a match on them.

The frog squatted in a milky pool at the bottom of the mug, staring up with one glassy eye. Mr Malgas spooned instant-coffee granules over it and scalded it with boiling water. It didn't bat an eyelid.

The frog-mug had been bought at a sale of factory rejects, and for that reason it was Mrs Malgas's favourite, warts and all. Mr Malgas thought it was in bad taste. He stirred the coffee, scraping the frog on the murky bottom maliciously with the spoon. He fished the tea-bag out of his own mug, which was chocolate-brown and had I ♥ DIY printed on it in biscuit. He thought this one was gimmicky too, but it had been a Father's Day present from his spouse and he used it out of a sense of duty. He squashed the bag flat against the spoon with his thumb to extract the essence of the flavour and dropped it in the bin next to the stove. He jammed one forefinger through the thick ears of both mugs, scooped up three buttermilk rusks – one for the Mrs and two for himself – and switched off the kitchen light with his elbow.

In the darkness, in the doorway, an unaccustomed smell



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prickled his nostrils. Drums boomed. A burning shack caved in, predictably, in the back of his mind. He sniffed, filtering the intruder from the haze of home cooking and pine-scented air-freshener.

Wood-smoke.

‘Sigh!’

He put everything down again and wiped a porthole in the misted glass of the window above the sink. Nieuwenhuizen’s fire waved its small hands in the far corner of the plot next door. An intimate relationship between the flames and his own palm circling on the glass came unbidden into Mr Malgas’s mind and caused a shameful pang in his chest.

‘Mrs!’

She recognized the tone: summonsing. It was the one he used when he wanted her to drop what she was doing and hasten into his presence, when he needed her to bear witness to one of his trivial observations. What could it be this time? A rusk with a human profile? Something beastly in the milk? A bubble on the end of the tap? A cobweb? A stick-insect on the outside of the glass?

‘Mrs!’

There was a note of urgency in his voice. Perhaps he’d snagged his pullover on something? But as usual she mumbled, ‘Ja.’

‘Come here a second.’

‘Coming.’ An actress Mrs had seen before playing a victim in a human drama looked at her through the bottom of a mixing-bowl and assured her that it was clean. Mrs rose resentfully and went to the kitchen.

Mr enlarged the porthole in the windowpane with a dish-cloth and she peered through it.

The flames wavered.

‘What did I tell you?’ she said knowingly. ‘It was an omen. Where there’s smoke there’s fire.’ Then, baffled by his apprehensive silence, she went on in a stage whimper, ‘Shall I call the fire brigade?’

‘There’s someone there, tending it,’ he answered. ‘A man, I think.’

At once a tall figure passed in front of the fire, casting a gigantic shadow over their house.

‘Shall I call the cops?’ she asked wistfully.

At that instant the fire vanished. Nieuwenhuizen, who was about to retire for the night, had turned his drum over the flames to snuff them.

Mr and Mrs Malgas looked into the night with the disquieting feeling that they had imagined something.

Nieuwenhuizen lay on his back, resting his head on a corner of the portmanteau and his feet on the drum, which radiated the deep inner warmth of the coals. He gazed up through the branches of his tree, and saw a wrinkled moon skewered on a thorn.

The ground shifted. He spread his arms, he unfurled the fingers of each hand and crooked them, he rootled them into the grass, massaging, until his fingertips touched the subsoil and, by the gentlest of pressures, steadied the lurching surface.

Then he allowed his head to topple so that his eyes fell once again on the house beyond the wagon-wheel wall. In a frosted oval, on curly vines of burglarproofing, two bruised, abashed faces hung ready to fall.

Burning rubber!

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Mr lay covered up like a dead pedestrian. Mrs traced the outlines of his sharp hip-bone, his rounded shoulder and his blunt skull under the blankets. She switched out the light, fumbled for the fading image of the bed and slipped into it with a shudder.

At least the body was warm. She attached herself to his flannelled back and kicked his heels to make room on the hot-water bottle. The warm air trapped under the bedclothes smelt of lemon-scented towelling, surgical gloves and Vicks Vaporub. She reached over his hip, slipped her hand under his pyjama jacket and pressed it into the unctuous, aromatic flesh of his belly.

‘Hands off!’ he commanded, sucking in his paunch and shivering. She clenched her fists obediently.



Nieuwenhuizen arose at dawn, shrugging off sheets of newspaper and blankets of grass. He scummed the ashes from his fire and scooped a hollow in the warm coals at its core. From the portmanteau he retrieved an aluminium-foil parcel containing his breakfast, and embedded it in the coals.



Only then did he lift his eyes to survey his new dominion.

He liked it. Its contours and dimensions were just right, and so too were its colour schemes and co-ordinates, not to mention its vistas and vantage-points. The sheer cliffs of the hedge towering at his back, dappled with gold and amber, tapering into the far-off haze on either side; the vast and empty sky, baby-blue on the horizon, and sky-blue in the middle distance, and navy-blue in the dome above; the veld rolling away before him in a long blond swell, reefed by the shadows of the hedge and stirred by a breath of wind, swirling now through thickets of shrubs and weeds, spilling now

over rocks, boiling into heathery foam, spending itself at last against the wagon-wheel wall in the distance – all these things pleased him enormously.

The house behind the wall pleased him less. It was of a pasty, pock-marked complexion, and there were rashes of pink shale around the windows, which were too close together and overhung by beetle-browed eaves. What thoughts were rattling in these unhappy headquarters?

In the cold light of day it was clear to Mr and Mrs Malgas that they had not been seeing things. The man they had glimpsed the night before was still there, as large as life – a little bit larger, in fact, as Mr Malgas remarked.

Mr was woken soon after dawn by the beating of drums. He lay still, listening fearfully to this wild music and the wilder counterpoint of his heartbeat. The drumming grew louder, closer, more frenzied – and then revealed itself to be hammering. He knew at once where it was coming from. He spilled out of bed and put on his dressing-gown.

Mrs watched through lowered lids as he punched his arms through the sleeves of his gown and crept noisily from the room. When he was gone she reached for the clock and brought its expressionless face close to her own. Then she pressed in the knob that switched off the alarm and pulled the blankets over her head. She was engulfed at once by the saline backwash of Mr's sleep and tumbled headlong into dream-land.

Meanwhile, Mr stole in his socks through the grey light, over a springy pasture of carpet, past the velvety humps of armchairs asleep on their feet, to a window that offered a good view of the terrain.

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The stranger was pitching a tent made of bright-red canvas in the corner under the tree. Mr was struck by his pitching method, which was unusual, to say the least. Unusual? Why, it was probably without precedent. Briefly: he pounded the tent-pegs into the ground with a stone, according to the dictates of a worksong that he piped out in a reedy voice, wheezing and clouding the air with his breath. Between each blow he paused in an attitude of intense expectation, with the stone held high above his head, waiting for a signal from his singsong melody. Then he allowed the stone to fall, so that his hand, rather than propelling it, seemed to be dragged down by it. The impact of the stone on the head of the peg caused him to fly into the air like a marionette, with all his limbs jangling.

Between pegs Nieuwenhuizen stood up to stretch his back and to watch out of the corner of his eye, and the impression Mr had gained the night before that he was unusually tall and thin was confirmed: it had not been a trick of the firelight. He was wearing a khaki safari suit a few sizes too big for him and a pair of home-made boots with tyre treads, which accentuated how long and stringy his legs were.

When Mrs resurfaced it was light in the room. She glanced at the clock and saw that she had been sleeping for an hour and ten minutes. The house was silent. She rose and went to fetch her gown from its hook behind the door. Through the doorway she saw Mr as a dark stain on the bright gauze of the lounge window.

Nieuwenhuizen ambled along in the shadow of the hedge. His boots smashed down frost-brittled forests of grass and branded crosses and arrows on the tender skin of the soil. He counted the paces under his breath. At the same time he

wondered what kind of hedge this was. It was shedding its leaves: what good was that? He paused to look at a dimpled berry resting in the fork of a branch. He had never seen anything like it. Perhaps this plant was a member of the berry family rather than the hedgerow as such? He pincerd the berry between horny nails and stepped off again. Stopped. He'd lost count. He shook a branch of the hedge petulantly, scattering a flock of feathery leaves, plucked one out of the air as it settled, crushed it to snuff between thumb and forefinger, and snorted it gingerly. Ah!

'I've pitched a few tents in my time,' Mr said to Mrs over breakfast a little later. 'I'm the adventurous type as you know, I've been in some out-of-the-way places – but I've never seen anything like this. Totally unorthodox. Come away from that window.'

Mrs didn't budge. She watched the stranger browsing, lifting his big feet and putting them down deliberately, staring at the ground. His long limbs and knobbly joints fascinated her. Clip-clop. He had the gait of a buck, lazy, double-jointed. 'What kind of a tent did you say it was?' she asked.

'A two-man tent.'

'Exactly. That's what's bothering me. There's only one of him. What does he want with a tent for two men?'

'He's quite tall.'

'Go on, defend him. But mark my words: He's bad news. I can smell it a mile off.' She tossed back the lank ear-flaps of her hair and turned up her nose, displaying to good effect two well-formed, flared nostrils, like inverted commas.

'Perhaps he likes to have a bit of space around him. Some people are like that.'

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'I still say we should call the cops. If it's the wide open spaces he wants, let them put him on a train to the platteland.'

Mr scalped his egg and stirred its soft-boiled insides with the point of his knife. Between a thick brown forefinger and thumb he took up a slim white finger of buttered bread (it was margarine, to tell the truth), dunked it in the egg, wiped it carefully on the rim of the shell and raised it dripping to his lips. He chewed and said, 'Now I don't want you doing anything foolish while I'm at work.'

'It's all very well for you. You don't have to sit here all day long putting up with him.'

'Sigh!'

'I wish you wouldn't say that!'

'Say what?'

'Sigh. It's irritating.'

He picked up the chopped-off lid of eggshell on the end of his thumb. It looked like a miniature skull-cap stuck to a fillet of white flesh.

Nieuwenhuizen extended his right hand, clasped a branch of the hedge and shook it warmly.

'What if he's a dangerous criminal?' she went on. 'Perhaps he's on the run.'

'If he was on the run he wouldn't be standing out there in broad daylight making a racket. Come away from the window.' She came away.

'You always think the worst of people. He could just as well be a professor, fallen on hard times. If I had to hazard a guess, that's what I'd say. Just look at the head he's got on him! When I behold that head I must say it gives me a good feeling about him, here, in the pit of my stomach.' He pointed out the spot with the yellow tip of his knife.