

## How Does it Feel to be Followed

by Rosalyn Hurst

Hazel sat in the cafe looking out at the early evening rain. The water falling from the sky was so different to the rain at home. At home, the rain landed unnoticed, fair and square, on the trees, on the cattle and sheep in the fields and the people walked without deviation in rain or sun along the lanes.

But here in London, the rain fell indirectly, distracted by roofs and gutters, by drains. Often the rain was thrown back to the skies by passing traffic, and all this sent these people into panic, they ran for shelter, they put cases on their heads, as if the water would cause them harm.

Hazel looked at the chaotic scene outside and remembered the words of her Polish friend.

“When I left Poland,” she had said, “it was almost impossible to judge if anyone was rich or poor. In the winter everyone wears black, black jackets, black sweaters, black jeans and black caps. Everyone looked the same, except for one item. Guess.”

Hazel tried, hair, make-up, jewellery, and her friend had laughed,

“No, you English never guess. Its shoes! Shoes tell you everything, are they falling to bits, dirty, smart, bright, no shoes ever tell lies, though the head so far away can be very untruthful. Only rich people walk though the wet snow, the sodden streets, but poor people have to be so careful of their thin fragile plastic shoes.”

The scene outside the cafe confirmed this observation, as people leapt over puddles, looked in despair at some shiny new pair being totally wrecked. But then she noticed a pair of very smart trainers walking confidently along the street, no avoiding of puddles, no swerving out of the way of rain pouring off shop awnings. Above this footwear a handsome face, a face she thought she knew, but could not think where she had seen it before. She shrugged off this idea, London was huge and she still looked at people full in the face as county people do.

Walking into the café his trainers squealed and squelched.

“Chai latte to go,” he said in a confident voice, not loud, but a distinctive accent Hazel could not place.

His phone rang, the tune, her favourite, ‘Another one bites the dust’ and he left, taking with him the smell of rain, damp clothes and musky scent, a bit of pot perhaps. An unusual combination she thought.

But it was time to go, the evening rush hour was slowing down, the streets around were beginning to return to their nocturnal solitude. She looked up at the night sky for some familiar stars, even the old moon, but a carpet lay over the night sky, so there were only the street lights to guide her home. She turned off the busy roads down through the lonely alleyways of the city.

As the silence surrounded her, noises of traffic fading, the showers speeding on their way to another city and maybe even her own village, she recognised the squealing and squelching, and she imagined his confident stride. She realised she had in fact seen him before on the bus; on the underground; waiting by the cafe last week. Was he stalking her?

First a burst of ‘Another one bites the dust,’ was she to be a the next victim? Next a touch, a push a hand on her back and warm liquid running down her neck. Oh god had she been stabbed? She leapt away, silent, a scream would not come, she staggered against a wall, rough, nails torn as she fought to stay upright, her feet in a large puddle water seeping into her toes up her ankles.

“Sorry miss, bit unsteady, I sure the chai will wash out, just reaching for the bloody phone. Live just here, you too, seen you around...” his voice tailed off, “didn’t mean to give you a fright,” he added.

“OK,” she tried to sound confident, “no problem,” so she continued onwards and considered her next purchase of shoes.