

# PUFF ADDER

We're proud to publish an exclusive short story by novelist **Henrietta Rose-Innes**, whose third novel, **Nineveh**, has just been published

I'm curious about people in cars. In traffic, I watch them through back windscreens or in my rear-view mirror, doing what people do when they think they're unobserved: singing, picking noses, gazing at the world. I like to see a driver and passenger, laughing across the space between them. It's an intimate view, a conversation framed. The travellers are focused on each other or on the road ahead: they don't feel my eyes sneaking up from behind to touch the backs of their necks.

This dorp is too small to have a rush hour, but I still get held up behind a green car at the town's single stop sign. The driver is a woman, with a mass of curly hair filling the space above the headrest. She pushes back a strand with her pinkie, a delicate motion for a heavily turned arm. The hair rebounds and she does it again, revealing the rim of an ear. The man next to her has twisted sideways to address her: a boyishly limber pose for a grown man. But there are pouches under his eyes and lines around his mouth. I can tell from here that he's bitching, jaw jutting forward with every clause of some righteous argument. Again she lifts her hand from the gear lever, revealing her ear to the onslaught. Again the hair springs back.

I'm so absorbed that my car rolls forward and taps theirs – just a nudge, but the man immediately torques in his seat to glare. It's alarming, like someone on TV dropping out of character to accuse me from the screen. I fix my eyes on my steering wheel, embarrassed, until they move on.

Beyond the town, I follow an unpaved road through semi-desert for many kilometres. For my job – marketing rural craft projects – I drive this way quite often, picking up samples. I'm used to the empty stretches now, but when I first came out here I was terrified of breaking down. It's wild. Once, I saw a puff adder sleeping in the middle of the road. I slowed the car to edge around it, rolling down my window to get a good look. Only later did I realise that the snake could've reared up and struck me in the face. But it just raised its head slightly off the ground, licking the air. It might have been drowsing there all day. That's how few vehicles come past.

So I notice the car far ahead of me, kicking up dust – and it's even more of a surprise, when I get closer, to recognise the green sedan. They've stopped at a farm gate. It's that kind of road: not a building in sight, just one boundary fence after another. I hang back. I can't see through their dust-clouded windscreen, but I imagine they're arguing about who's on gate duty. Eventually the man gets out and stalks to the fence. A lean figure, black shirt tucked into tight black jeans. He glances at me before bending to fiddle with the latch. It can be tricky: each farmer rigs it a different way. At last he wheels the gate open, lets the green car through – then closes the gate behind him, jogging to catch his ride.

Bastard! It's the same at the second, third, fourth, fifth gate. Each time he declines to leave it open, doubling the number of times I must stop, get out, walk to the gate, walk back. Each time

I fumble twice with chain or soldered metal pin or loop of wire. Each time he's cockier: prancing to the gate, slamming the car door.

But at the sixth gate, things change. As I approach, the man is still standing there, eating the green car's dust as it heads for the horizon. His clothes dusted pale. Gate wide open.

I idle the car thirty metres from the situation. We wait. She doesn't return. Eventually, awkwardly, the man lifts his hand in greeting and I inch forward. The wave becomes a stop signal. I keep my window rolled up tight. He comes to a decision, strides towards me.

Pure instinct: I lift my foot off the clutch, the car bounds past him. I don't look back. It's fifty kilometres to the next town. Sixty kilometres from the last.

It's evening when I get to the down-at-heel hotel where I overnights. I carry my suitcase through the lobby, past the bar door. It's the kind of place where women don't drink alone, but she's there, sitting apart from the locals. Her hair, unconstrained by the car roof, has gained height and volume. In the mirror behind the bar, her face is broad and sweet. I watch her push her hair, a little tiredly, behind one ear. As if she's just waiting for the next conversation to begin. □



Henrietta Rose-Innes is the award-winning author of *Shark's Egg*, *The Rock Alphabet* and the short story collection, *Homing*. Her latest novel, *Nineveh* (Random House Struik, R180), described by Ivan Vladislavić, as a 'totally absorbing tragicomedy' is set in Cape Town and details the extraordinary experiences of an ethical relocater of vermin.