

Mark's house was in the Inner Avenue, close to the city centre, walking distance to the station, handy for an extinction rebellion protestor. He opened the door before I had time to knock and hurried me into the house, looking up and down the street as he did so. The cloak and dagger wasn't necessary, I'd been on the alert the whole way, for fear of being pursued by reporters.

'No one saw me, it's okay.'

'Come in.'

Mark looked about thirty, dressed in old jeans and a woolly jumper. He led me through a narrow hall into a shabby but spacious kitchen and sat me down at a solid old wooden table.

'We have a window of opportunity here. We want to draw attention to the climate emergency and bring together art, nature, the environment, guerrilla knitters and habitat, you're the man of the hour. What can we do?' He put the kettle on and looked at me hopefully.

I thought hard. A plate of green things on the table was distracting me. I couldn't work out if they were ornamental or edible.

'What are these?'

'Edamame beans. Try them.'

I tried a few, they were salty and lovely. One for the random recipe generator.

'Tea? I've got mint, camomile, fennel.'

I started to ask for my usual milk and no sugar and then remembered I was supposed to be vegan. 'Mint?'

'This inquest is going to be mental. There's news all over it. Not just local. We want to make a statement. It's not just about London. The guerrilla knitter is our hero and she's female so we're thinking something along the lines of Mother Nature but with a Southampton twist.'

'Right, yes.'

He placed the mint tea in front of me. I munched on a few beans while I considered.

'Imagine you – Habitat Man, or Guerrilla Gardener...?'

'I prefer Habitat Man,' I spluttered through a mouthful of beans.

'So imagine you – Habitat Man - are in charge of Southampton Council. The city is your oyster. What would you do?'

'I'd stop mowing all the grass verges, let them grow.'

'No, that's no good.'

'I'd stop using pesticide.'

'Don't think what we won't do, think what we can do.'

‘It’s tricky, habitats tend to work best when we stop doing stuff, leave Mother Nature alone.’

Frustrated Mark took my undrunk cup of mint tea and poured it away and poured me a glass of red wine.’

‘It’s a bit early.’

‘It’s vegan wine and Fairtrade, don’t worry. You’re thinking too small. Think dramatic.’

‘I’ll need to line my stomach.’

Mark sped around the kitchen laying snacks before me. ‘Olives. Vegan ciabatta drizzled with virgin olive oil.’

‘Ah, what are these?’ I eyed some brown things on a plate.

‘Falafels, drink up and think big.’

I drank obediently and made a decent dent in the snacks.

‘The Yarn Bombers are working on a giant knitted statue of Mother Nature if that helps?’

It didn’t really. I munched and mused.

‘Anything?’

‘Maybe if I look at your garden it would help, I think better outside.’

‘Okay, follow me.’ He led me through a back door into a small courtyard garden.

‘It’s a bit of mess, but we don’t get a lot of time.’

I surveyed the area, a few dandelions poked up through the paving, empty wine bottles and discarded banners, at the back it was fabulously unkempt, dominated by nettles and brambles. I paced around the perimeter, it was enclosed by a wall on three sides and a fence on the left. The nettles made it hard to check, but I’d definitely want to recommend creating a gap for a hedgehog.

‘Well?’ said Mark.

‘You have a lot of nettles. That patch you have at the back will be a haven for all kinds of insects, and small birds. Butterflies, especially - the caterpillars of small tortoiseshell and red admirals depend upon nettles for example.’

‘How’s that relevant?’

‘Erm. Well, I’d teach people to see long grass and plants such as dandelions and nettles as valuable habitats and food source for wildlife, not as weeds. Have information boards in parks or verges telling people how such plants provide natural resistance against disease by mining the soil for minerals. Get rid of the old fashioned idea that it should look neat.’

Mark sighed. 'But that's hardly a protest. We need something more visible, something big.'

'Okay. Let the grass grow in large parts of the parks,' I said, thinking of the house in Upper Shirley. 'And we can have a raised boardwalk so it looks nice. So the parks that are now tightly mowed would have areas like meadows. We can do the whole circular economy thing by re-using old decking that people have dumped and support it with logs from chopped down trees that are set into the ground providing a food source for wood boring larvae – we may even get stag beetles, they're fantastic beasts.' I was encouraged by seeing Mark nodding slowly as he visualised it. 'You could get teenagers on work experience to do the work, supervised obviously, so it wouldn't cost much.'

'It's not quite what I was looking for, but it's something. How long would it take?'

'Several months.'

'We need something in two weeks,' Mark sounded exasperated. I was too.

'Nature takes time to grow.'

'But we want a habitat statement for the inquest, that's the whole point. In two weeks.'

A faint tinkle of a bike bell was heard. 'Look, others are arriving now, maybe they'll give you some ideas.' He sped off to answer the door.

I sank down onto the step, feeling put out. He'd asked what I'd do if I was in charge, and I'd told him. The absolute best thing, and Jo would like this, was nothing. Stop with the pesticides that were killing the building blocks of life that everything else depended on, and let stuff grow.

I'd assumed it would just be me and Mark, but the hubbub coming from the kitchen indicated otherwise. I didn't feel able to go back in just yet and drained the rest of my wine, desperate to quiet the butterflies in my stomach at the thought that in two weeks' time I'd be back on the stand. I reminded myself that this time I'd be the witness, rather than the accused. It didn't help.

'Where is Habitat Man?' A thickset man with a beard and knitted jumper appeared in the garden and hailed me. 'There you are, the man of the moment. Very pleased to meet you sir,' he boomed down at me.

I struggled unsteadily to my feet to accept the proffered hand, 'Hi, erm, Tim.'

'I'm Tri from the South Yorkshire Yarn Bombers.'

'You've come a long way.'

'Solidarity. The whole group will be down for the inquest. Can't wait. Come on.'

I followed Tri back inside. The kitchen was transformed with women knitting.

I stood uncertainly. My seat was now occupied by a trim lady who'd already got her knitting out and was clacking away. Mark brought in a seat from another room and

everyone shifted up to make room. ‘Everybody this is Tim, he’s going to help us decide what our statement will be for the inquest.’

‘Hi Tim,’ said the trim lady. ‘I’m from the Ninja Knitters – Isle of Wight Division.’

‘They call her Fingers,’ said a plump girl with multi-coloured hair who I found myself next to. ‘I’m Ashley from Deadly Knitshade.’ She nodded at Tri who had sat down next to Fingers and pulled out his knitting. ‘Why are you called Tri?’

‘Because I only knit triangles.’

Fingers watched him knit critically. ‘You’re dropping a stitch when you change needles, that’s why.’ She held up her needles and showed him how she transferred the yarn from one needle to the next, ‘so when you get to the end of the row...’

‘I like knitting triangles.’

Mark went round the table distributing drinks and snacks, and poured me another large glass of wine. ‘Right, we’re all here, and we only have two weeks. We need decisions. This is bigger than just knitting, this is about Mother Nature herself.’

‘Just knitting!’ cried Tri. ‘It’s this kind of dismissive attitudes towards women’s crafts that we’re trying to challenge. As a feminist...’

‘Aren’t we knitting a statue of Mother Nature?’ interrupted a lady who looked to be at least seventy, and was clicking away with her knitting needles. ‘I’m from the Graffiti Grannies,’ she said to me. ‘They call me Needles.’

I nodded, bemused.

‘No, we should honour the original guerrilla knitter, we should knit shrouds for all statues of racists and colonialists. Like she did of Lord Palmerston in Palmerston Park,’ said Ashley.

‘Palmerston was actually a vocal opponent of slave labour dear,’ said the trim lady whose fingers moved so fast I could barely see them. Ashley looked disappointed. Fingers nodded to me. ‘We’re interested to hear what you have to say. You were the one who dug her up after all.’

They gazed at me expectantly but I had nothing.

‘She was my hero,’ said Needles, after a pause. ‘I met her once when she came along to the first Urban Nitta event.’

‘What was she like?’ asked Tri.

‘Just bones.’ I said.

‘So cool, an inspiration,’ said Needles.

I flushed, realising the question hadn’t been aimed at me. I buried my face in my wine and munched the snacks.

Another woman came into the kitchen with a baby in a baby carrier slung round her neck. Mark introduced her as his wife Claire, and brought in a chair for her to sit

down at the table with us. I wondered what XR protestors would call their babies. Hope or Acorn. Or after a threatened species maybe. I sniggered to myself when my imagination came up with Hedgehog and realised I was quite drunk.

‘What’s she called?’ asked Needles.

‘Greta.’

‘Good name,’ I ventured.

I let the conversation swim around me as I guzzled the snacks and drank. Thoughts zigzagged from gut churning fear at the thought of the inquest ahead, to my sense of failure at not having a solution to Mark’s request. The knitters had taken over and he kept looking at me hopefully and then looking disappointed.

I tuned into the raging debate over where the knitted statue of Mother Nature should be sited. Tri favoured a bank as the root of all evil. Mark favoured the court where the cameras would be. I tuned back out and pulled faces at the babe trying to make her laugh. After a while, I got what I thought was a smile, but it could have been wind. Meanwhile the debate had moved on to whether the knitted statue should look sexy or motherly.

‘Habitat Man,’ cried Tri, ‘what do you think? Surely Mother Nature should be buxom at least, representing both maternal and sexual aspects?’

‘It’s not really a habitat issue.’

‘Well it should be,’ Mark asserted himself. ‘We need to bring this back to what Extinction Rebellion stands for.’

‘The trouble is,’ I said, ‘is that wool isn’t especially environmentally friendly.’

‘Rubbish,’ shouted Needles, waving her needles in the air. ‘Wool is renewable and recyclable.’

‘But most of it is acrylic, which isn’t especially green.’

‘No it’s basically a plastic that would take decades to break down, and it uses fossil fuels. Also sheep contribute a huge amount to greenhouse gas emissions. Tim is right, we have to abandon the whole knitting thing,’ said Mark.

The rest of the table glared at me. The steady click of knitting needles sounded menacing in the brief silence that followed Mark’s pronouncement.

‘This is the guerrilla knitter who’s been dug up may I remind you,’ Needles’ voice was ominously quiet.

‘I came down from Yorkshire for this.’

‘Any ideas Tim?’ pressed Mark. ‘Did you think of anything when you were outside?’

‘It’s just you seem to want a big art installation, but the fact is that leaving nature alone is the best thing for habitat. Like your garden, it may not look pretty but that thatch of nettles is great for wildlife.’

‘You can make yarn from nettle fibre,’ said Fingers casually.

Ashley googled it. ‘Yes you can! Cut down the nettles near the base, remove the leaves.’

‘You could use them as mulch, or make soup out of them,’ I said, thinking of the random recipe generator.

‘Then you soak the stalks for a bit, dry them and squeeze the stalk flat and comb it out and it goes soft and silky,’ finished Ashley.

‘Well then, that’s perfect,’ said Mark, ‘you can knit the statue out of nettles. How long would they take to prepare Tim?’

‘You’d want to harvest them from August onwards when the stalks are woody.’ Mark’s face fell.

‘You can buy nettle yarn online,’ said Ashley. ‘It’s not locally sourced, but it highlights the issue with acrylic fibres.’ She looked up from scanning her phone. ‘It says here that fashion designers would love to use nettle twine as it’s so soft but even though our climate is perfect for it, so far no UK farmers have taken it up.’

‘Let’s focus on fashion then.’ Claire took the baby out of the sling and turned it round to face her.

‘This is why I married you!’ cried Mark excited. ‘Forget your statue of Mother Nature, instead we surround the court building with cardboard cut-out people and dress them. We alternate green fabrics with non-green fabrics and show the environmental impacts. So we know non-organic cotton is bad due to the pesticides and large water footprint, so next to the cotton outfit we can have a dustbin full of water with dead fish...’

The click clack of needles paused.

‘Not real fish obviously,’ added Mark hastily, ‘and next to nettles, a small cup of water.’

‘You can get kids to colour in paper cut-outs of all the wildlife that thrives in nettle patches,’ I suggested, thinking of Matteo and Christian. ‘So by the nettle outfit, you’d have a bucket overflowing with butterflies.’

Mark nodded enthusiastically and I basked in the feeling of having finally contributed something useful.

‘It doesn’t have to be nettles, there are all kinds of eco fabrics like flax and hemp,’ said Mark.

‘And bamboo,’ I added on a roll now.

‘Yes and we can alternate these with non-organic cotton, leather and acrylics, all of which would contribute to pollution, global warming and extinction. We could have a thermometer which shows what our predicted temperatures would be if all clothing were made from green or non-green materials.’

‘The trouble is that nature likes diversity, any monoculture will give rise to habitat issues if done on a large scale.’ I said.

‘Totally,’ agreed Mark ‘The trick is to mix it up and move away from large-scale mass farming.’

‘I’m happy to experiment with different yarns,’ said Needles.

Mark looked much more cheerful. ‘Cheers Habitat Man, this is perfect. You did good,’ he poured me another generous glass of wine and refreshed the snacks in front of me.

I sank back into my chair relieved, slightly hypnotised by the sound of clacking needles and hum of conversation. While the knitters debated who’d knit what, Mark made a series of short phone calls and texts to various people organising activities. Every now and then one of the knitters would congratulate me for the work I was doing or quiz me about the guerrilla knitter’s family. Even Claire, who’d said little, leant over and we had a lovely chat about habitat benefits of shallow graves and willow coffins. For the first time I began to feel that maybe digging up the guerrilla knitter’s body hadn’t been such a disaster.

A slurping noise gave away that Claire was feeding the baby.

‘I’ve got no problem with you feeding the baby at the table,’ commented Tri. It didn’t look like she cared if he did anyway, but he had a point to make. ‘I’m an eco-crypto-feminist.’

‘A what?’ Ashley asked the question on my lips.

‘It’s the male drive for power and dominance that is destroying the planet. So eco-feminism isn’t about equal pay or any of that, it’s about running our institutions based on feminine values of nurture and care,’ Tri changed needles and dropped a stitch.

Fingers leant over, unable to stop herself, ‘look if you just...’

Tri pulled his knitting away from her and continued. ‘Crypto feminism is about money, which is power, and that’s in male hands. Cryptocurrencies, Bitcoin and Block chain, is totally male dominated. They’re calling it bloke chain. The crypto-conferences are held in strip clubs, women are yet again excluded.’

These bread sticks were lovely with virgin olive oil. Mark noticed my appreciation and passed over some more. Interesting conversation, red wine, bread sticks. A far cry from my days as a financial accountant, always in a rush for the train. I thought back to how worried I’d been about coming into people’s homes I knew nothing about, but this was turning out to be a perk of the job. A few weeks ago, I’d never sat on a composting toilet, or heard of crypto-feminism.

Claire and the baby had disappeared and another man had joined us at the table, with the XR logo on his t-shirt. He slapped me on the back and told me how great I was. The rhythmic sound of clicking needles created a tranquil atmosphere, conducive to conversation.

‘Why do you knit?’ new XR man asked Tri.

‘It calms me.’

‘Why triangles? Fingers looked critically at the heap of triangle pieces of wool amassed around him.

‘It symbolises my attempt to weave together the different aspects of my beliefs.’

‘He’s an eco-crypto-feminist,’ Ashley told new guy.

‘What like crypto currencies?’

Tri nodded. ‘Block chain technology can redistribute power, take it away from the man and share it among the people.’

‘The energy needed to process a bitcoin transaction is thousands of times more than the power needed to process a visa bill,’ commented new guy.

‘That’s right,’ I contributed. I knew this from the Costing for Nature software.

‘So give up the crypto bit, just be an ecofeminist.’

‘Then you can knit in a straight line,’ added Fingers.

‘Don’t you have to be a woman to be a feminist?’ commented Ashley.

‘Don’t you have to be black to attack racist statues?’ countered Tri.

‘Most of the Deadly Knitshade group are black actually but they don’t discriminate. Anyway I have a bit of Native Indian in me on my mother’s side.’

There was something restful about knitting that took the sting out of the exchanges. I mused that knitters should be a compulsory addition to all peace processes, or divorce negotiations.

Fingers noticed my fascination and leant over. ‘Shall I show you how?’

‘I’m a bit pissed...’

‘Doesn’t matter if you get it wrong, have a go.’ She rummaged in her bag and pulled out some knitting needles and a ball of wool and directed my hands to get me started. I was clumsy at first, but soon got the hang of it. After a while, I was able to tune back into the conversation while knitting. The new guy, Tri and Mark were competing to put the world to rights. It was amusing to watch, as each of them were clearly accustomed to an audience who disagreed with them.

‘Classical economics only values what is paid for,’ said Mark.

‘But the market and paid work depends upon everything that economics ignores as worthless, like caring for the old and the young,’ shouted new XR guy.

‘Roles mostly fulfilled by women,’ thundered Tri. ‘Women shouldn’t be kept down any longer, they are equal to men, in fact they’re better than men, they’re more ethical, more emotionally intelligent, more competent, more beautiful and I want to help them realise their power.’ He slammed his glass down firmly.



‘So kind,’ Ashley’s expression was inscrutable.

‘Without food, water, air and care no economic work would even be possible, yet these are all treated as non-existent by the GDP, which measures only consumption,’ roared new XR guy.

‘So we will be most successful when we have consumed our entire planet,’ bellowed Mark.

‘Where’s the loo?’ I asked.

I nodded uncomprehending at the instructions given and staggered into a cupboard, baby’s bedroom and eventually the bathroom. Too unsteady to stand, I sank down onto the toilet, head in my hands, trying to keep the room steady around me while I emptied my bladder of all the wine. It was a relief, but not like the composting toilet. All toilets should be composting toilets. Definitely got to make one for Lori. If she’d let me. What would Lori make of Tri, the eco-crypto-feminist and Yarn Bomber? I slumped back in the seat, and gazed at the toilet seat. It was made from wood. Bamboo perhaps? The bathroom was like the kitchen, solid, functional, old fixtures. Maybe Elena was right. Anti-consumption is the new aspiration. These properties weren’t cheap so they chose not to buy new stuff. They’d be proud of their battered but functional table. It wouldn’t occur to them to buy a new mahogany table when virgin forests were being cut down. Bamboo though, fast-growing, that might work.

Nettles. That was a brilliant idea, if I say so myself. Jo would like that too for her joker column. Nettles would be perfect. You could use them like spinach. It would be seasonal though as you’d want to pick them early spring before the flower heads appeared. No sod her. I’m not doing her any favours. The whole life coach thing for God’s sake. Why did she even tell me she got an A? Talk about kicking a man when he’s down.

There was a tentative a knock on the door. It was Claire. ‘Tim do you mind, we need to use the bathroom.’

I’d pulled myself upright from my position slumped over my knees, and stood up carefully.

‘Sorry. Okay, sorry.’ I washed my hands and splashed my face with cold water, shocked at the sight of my face. My eyes gazed back at me, red rimmed and unfocused.

I staggered back to find Needles, Ashley and Fingers had departed. I thought about leaving but I wasn’t in any hurry to get back to Jo, I was still pissed off at her. Tri, Mark and the XR guy were still putting the world to rights.

‘The issue is what we count as success. It’s totally cockeyed.’

I sat down. This was a subject I felt able to contribute to. I told them at great length about the injustice of Jo having received an A for her life coaching session, while I’d got a mere D.

‘Mine was much more transformational,’ I raged. ‘I’ve created habitats, put up water butts, allowed hedgehogs to roam, taken down some pretty dodgy bamboo and she just cooks disgusting food that people throw up. Yes it’s entertaining but it’s food waste.’

I scrabbled round in the now empty dish, searching blindly for more snacks. Claire reappeared in the kitchen without young Greta and set down some more vegan snacks in front of me.

‘Food waste is nearly ten percent of total emissions.’

‘I lost it in the supermarket last week – they had two for one offers on milk, who can drink all that before it goes off.’

‘No point shouting at staff, email via the website, then it goes to the right person.’

‘I’ve dug ponds, habitats for all kinds of creatures threatened with extinction, and she’s just a YouTube celebrity!’

‘I’m in complete agreement with you Tim. It’s all wrong.’

Satisfied, I drained my glass.

Clare placed a cup of coffee in front of me.

‘Milk?’

‘Yesh pleash.’

She poured in some soya milk. I absent-mindedly pulled the knitting off my needle and used it to stir the coffee.

‘Is it true what you said?’ asked Tri.

‘Wassat?’

‘That the guerrilla knitter had cancer.’

‘Yesh, what you gotta understand is that they did it out of love.’

‘They wanted to spare her any more suffering?’

‘Contentious,’ said Tri.

‘Contentious means publicity,’ said Mark.

‘It’s like on the composting toilet. We should have them Mark, put that in the plan. But you don’t always know what’s best, you just know if you act out of love, even if it is illegal. Like...’ I stopped mid-sentence. Without the gentle click clack of the women knitting, I felt less at ease. Tri was looking far too interested and Mark looked like he was tweeting. I glared at them suspiciously. ‘You’re trying to get me to say stuff cos I’ve had a few.’ I staggered to my feet, and lurched towards the door. I’d nearly told them everything, my criminal record, Danny.

‘Are you okay Tim?’ asked Mark.

‘I’m saying nothing else.’

I pocketed the knitting needles and wool, grabbed the last falafel and departed.