

The Pitch

This is an extract from chapter 2 of the eco-themed romcom *Habitat Man* written by D.A.Baden. It can be adapted as needed based on research into potential of triple bottom line accounting or switching from GDP to a more nature based metric of success. It can also be set in a business or governmental setting as appropriate.

I rehearsed my pitch on the train all the way to Waterloo, drawing strange looks from the couple sitting opposite, who were no doubt wondering why my mouth was moving silently and my eyebrows were wavering between imploring, glowering and deadly serious.

At Waterloo, I approached the usual mix of homeless, beggars and *Big Issue* sellers, rummaging in my pocket for change. The smart-suited man ahead of me made the mistake of giving a fiver to the bolshy guy at the end. I'd noticed the more money he was given, the longer his tirade would be.

'Fiver wouldn't even pay your dry-cleaning bill, you rich tosser,' Bolshy Guy hurled at him, deftly pocketing the note.

Smart-suited man shook his head, shuffling from polished black shoe to polished black shoe as the tirade continued.

'The world would be better off if you didn't exist. If you didn't bother with your dry-cleaned suit and stayed at home and did sweet fuck all. Smart-guy-city-tosspot,' he accused, peering up through overgrown eyebrows and shaggy hair.

He had a point. I'd calculated the environmental impacts of laundry using the Costing for Nature software and could have informed them about the high carbon footprint of washing clothes and the contribution of dry cleaners to air pollution. I decided not to interject and walked on past 'smart-guy-city-tosspot', who stood patiently accepting the abuse. The tirade might go on for a while and I couldn't afford to be late. Anyway, I didn't need my daily dose of psychic self-flagellation, because today I'd be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Instead, I gave a fiver to the friendly chap by Waterloo Bridge for a *Big Issue*. His cheery smile of thanks was mirrored by the wagging tail of his dog that I couldn't resist patting. I smiled at him reassuringly. 'It's all going to be okay,' I told him, 'lovely dog.'

I walked the familiar route over Waterloo Bridge and gulped in a lungful of the bracing wind, taking in the open vista of the Thames and the Houses of Parliament etched against the cold grey sky. A cormorant perched on an old barge, drying its wings. Gulls circled raucously above; crabs picked among the debris on the muddy banks where the tide had receded. Nature in the heart of the city.

Last week the bridge had been occupied by Extinction Rebellion protestors. Part of me had been thrilled to see them. Hordes of young bearded, pierced and tattooed protestors beating drums, chanting and waving banners: 'Save the Earth', 'Rebel for Life', 'Wise up, Rise up'. There had been families too, mothers with pushchairs, dads with toddlers on their shoulders. But no amount of smiles and thumbs up on my part could disguise my city suit and complicity. They'd chanted, 'This is the sixth mass extinction,' and in my paranoia and guilt I'd been sure it was aimed at me.

I got to work with twenty minutes to spare. I made a cup of tea and sat on the plush sofa. I ignored the pile of *Financial Times* and car magazines scattered over the low table and got out the *Big Issue*. With a shock, I took in the headline: 'Parakeet

Mystery still not solved'. Oh my days! It must be a sign. I read quickly. Parakeets may have beautiful plumage, but they were destroying habitats of garden birds. They'd taken over in Surrey and London and were now spreading across the UK. For years, Jimi Hendrix had been blamed for freeing a pair of parakeets in Carnaby Street in the sixties, but now it seemed that it wasn't his fault after all. The article concluded that there were several incidents across the years, but the tipping point seems to be the parakeets set free in Surrey in the mid-eighties. My stomach lurched and I ran for the toilet.

I hated our office toilets, the scent of the air freshener worse than what it disguised. And they were pretentious, with toilets that automatically flushed the moment you got off them, or, unnervingly, when you moved on the seat. I washed my hands quickly. It must be nearly time for my pitch. I hoped Simon, the financial director, wasn't going to be there, with his intimidating beard. I regarded my pale freckled face in the mirror and longed to be more hirsute. I didn't even want a beard necessarily, just the feeling that beneath my skin were follicles of thick, dark, bristly hair bursting to come forth. Then I'd feel equal to the task.

I headed to the conference room and sat amidst the pot plants in the waiting area. 'By valuing the ecosystem and everything that depends upon it, we will protect it,' I whispered earnestly to the Areca Fern and Rubber Plant. 'Unless we cost for nature...'

I stopped quickly as several suited men and a woman trailed out, leaving Martin and Simon at the table. Through the glass walls, I saw Simon open up his laptop and show something to Martin. They talked animatedly, probably working out how inputting the environmental and social impacts of each project would affect the overall costs. I stood and paced to relieve my nervous tension, muttering under my breath, trying to control my eyebrows. Just as I'd pushed them from an anxious forty-five degree tilt up, down into a menacing glower, Martin beckoned me in. I forced my brows horizontal and entered with the gait of a confident man who was bringing them the best thing since sliced bread.

'Hi there. Right, er...'

'That's us on the beach,' Simon was saying.

'Looks lovely,' murmured Martin.

'Four-star resort but we wouldn't go back.'

I sat at the table opposite them and placed my laptop on the top pointedly. Martin eventually looked over.

'What are we meeting about again, Tim? Remind me.'

Remind him!

'This is to talk about the Costing for Nature software that will transform the way we do business¹. For the better,' I added quickly.

'Okay, go ahead.'

'We need to cost for nature.' Simon was still swiping through his photos. I paused, but he showed no sign of looking up. 'For example, when we cost a project for time and money, we factor in the carbon cost too, and allow money to offset.'

Martin looked doubtful.

'It's not a perfect solution, but at least the environmental costs would form part of the cost-benefit analysis.'

No reaction.

¹ This is set in a financial company but can amend to be government committee if needed.

‘My degree was in biology, I don’t know if you knew that? So I’ve been able to feed the latest environmental data and predicted carbon costs into the algorithms.’

‘Sounds expensive,’ Simon finally looked up.

‘No, we developed some software that calculates it for us.’ I searched in vain for a sign they’d checked it out. ‘There was a link in my email?’

I waited while they murmured among themselves. It was a short conversation.

‘Thanks for your idea, but it’s not something we’ll be taking forward right now,’ said Martin.

‘Right.’

That seemed to be it.

I went to my desk, sat in my ergonomically designed chair among a sea of similar chairs and desks in the open-plan office and gazed at my screen. The screensaver showed endless forests against a startling blue sky. I tapped a key and up came accounts for a global IT company we were helping to make richer. Standard financial modelling indicated that designing products to fail with parts that couldn’t be replaced was the most profitable business model. I gazed blankly at the numbers as it sank in. They hadn’t even looked at my CFN analysis that costed in the e-waste, unnecessary carbon emissions, and health costs from sweatshop conditions and toxic ingredients that seeped into the water². A new screensaver sprung up. A tropical island with clear turquoise sea filled with colourful fish. I was suddenly furious. They hadn’t looked at any of the sample scenarios. I grabbed my laptop and marched back in.

They were still there exchanging holiday horror stories.

‘Bali was crap too. You couldn’t swim in the sea,’ Martin informed Simon.

‘It’s not more expensive,’ I declared loudly, striding in and banging the door behind me. Well I tried to, but it was a glass door on a hinge designed to shut gently. I opened my laptop and pointed to the example scenario.

‘See that,’ I pointed at a graph showing two lines comparing current costs with costs using the CFN.

‘What’s CFN?’ Simon deigned to glance over.

‘It’s Costing for Nature accounting software,’ I told him through gritted teeth.

‘Well it costs more, doesn’t it?’

‘Now look.’ I typed three years into the time box. The two lines for standard cost and CFN costs came together. ‘Now see.’ I typed five years into the box and the CFN line shifted below the standard cost line. ‘CFN saves them money. This scenario is for the construction companies we deal with that we walk past every day coming into work. Simply switching to green cement, for example, substantially lowers CFN construction costs due to its lower carbon footprint.’

‘I drive,’ Simon said.

‘What? Why would you drive?’

‘I’ve got a Ferrari.’

I looked at him in his perfectly cut suit, luxuriant beard, clipped to precision, shoes too polished and shiny for public transport and hated him.

‘Way overpriced for what you get. Now if it were a Porsche—’ began Martin.

‘But the point is,’ I shouted over him, ‘for every company we deal with, in the short term, yes it costs money to properly cost in environmental impacts, but in the medium to long term it costs way more not to.’

² I will amend example to foreshadow some of the solutions presented later in the anthology.

'I'll tell you what costs too much money,' Martin said.

'What?' Simon asked.

'A Ferrari,' said Martin.

'No, two-week holidays swimming in plastic,' Simon retorted.

'Ouch.'

I took a deep breath, determined to stay calm, to do justice to our CFN software that would save us from ourselves, restore the planet to perfection and enable me to saunter past XR protestors head held high. The daily commute, the hours sat at my desk gazing at the screen, the inane conversation in the coffee room about cars – all would be redeemed if I was working for something worthwhile. Simon clicked on his laptop and slowly an image of him with his perfect beard and smiling wife and young son came into view. I lost it.

'I don't care about your car or your two weeks' holiday on your tropical island.'

'The holiday was shit anyway,' consoled Simon. 'We had to return early, my son got asthma and the hospitals were full.'

'Don't you see we're the engines of all this?' I cried. 'Plastic didn't get in the sea by magic. The asthma didn't just happen. It was the pollution from clearing rainforests. The whole of bloody Indonesia has breathing difficulties. We crunch the numbers and depending on what goes in, out comes the decisions. If we added waste and air quality and climate change to our numbers you wouldn't get plastic in the sea and asthma. You must see that? It's us, it's all us! It's all our fault.'

They looked at me aghast as my voice hit soprano pitch. 'I know it hurts to admit it. I understand that. I tell you what... Okay... I've not told anyone this, I've never admitted it to a soul, but I'll tell you now.' My heart was pounding. Dare I say it? I must. I must set an example and own up. I tried to look them in the eyes as I made my confession, but looked away at the last minute. 'I set the parakeets free. It was me. There. I've owned up and you know it feels good. My bad. I did it. It wasn't Jimi Hendrix, it was me and now they're taking over. They're an invasive species. I'm not jealous of your Ferrari or your holiday, or your beard.' Simon looked up sharply and stroked his beard possessively.

'Well maybe the beard,' I admitted recklessly, still riding the confession wave.

Simon shot Martin a look. Was it guilt? I pressed the point home. 'Surely you must see it's our fault? But that's okay, because the Costing for Nature software can put it right. We crunch the numbers, what goes in is what comes out.' I knew I was repeating myself but was unable to stop. 'We're not just complicit, we're guilty, but we can make it right!'

'Mmmhmm,' soothed Martin. I petered out, finally deciphering their expression. It wasn't guilt. It was pity.

I fell silent and packed up my laptop and left the room.

I returned to my desk and fell into my chair. Twenty-five years. I'd been in this job for twenty-five years. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, but nothing happened. I couldn't type a word. I tried to close the file I'd been working on but fell at the first hurdle. 'Save', 'Don't Save'. I gazed at the simple question. Eventually I realised it wasn't that I couldn't decide, it was that I didn't care. I clicked on another tab and another screen of numbers popped up. I went to close it and was faced with the same query 'Save', 'Don't Save'. Over twenty windows were open. I pushed the power button hard until it gave up the red light and went home.

I walked back across Waterloo Bridge to Waterloo station where I handed the bolshy guy a twenty-pound note and gazed at my black polished shoes as he told me at great length how the world would be better off without me.