

THE ASSASSIN 16750

by D.A. Baden

This is an stand-alone story that draws on two characters from the novel [Habitat Man](#)

SARAH

Sarah had been working towards this moment her entire working life. Her PhD had been on citizens' assemblies in Europe, she'd spent two years researching citizen's juries in North America, lectured on democratic institutions to politics undergraduates and had even travelled to Cuba to research their revolutionary councils, where citizens fed back their views on proposed policies. Finally, citizen's juries had been granted legislative authority and today she'd been on the news, explaining how this was a game changer for the climate crisis. The response on social media had been immediate. People were desperate for hope. Could this – the way people make decisions – be the silver bullet? Her answer was yes.

But like everything, there was a sting in the tail.

'Congratulations,' said her partner – ex partner's - voice on the phone. The tone belied the sentiment.

'Thanks,' said Sarah. 'This will make the difference. Citizen's juries now have real power.'

'Let's hope they work. You've sacrificed so much to get this far.'

'I sacrificed us, you mean?'

'Yes.'

The words hurt. She wanted to blurt out a stream of lies just to get her back. Lies like, I'll be around more, there will be time for a family after all. But she'd be spending even more time away, immersed in closed rooms, shepherding groups towards climate solutions that might just save humanity.

'It's not just about ambition. I'm trying to—'

'Save the world, I know. This is what I couldn't cope with. Any demand I made on you, it's my selfish demands getting in the way of you saving the bloody world.'

'That's not how I feel, please...' she pleaded, not even sure what she was asking for.

'Just make it work. That will be our consolation.' There was a click and nothing.

Sarah put her head in her hands and slumped in her chair. She snapped back upright when her colleague appeared at the door, beaming.

‘You must be so excited. This is your big chance,’ he said.

‘Totally.’

‘Have you sent out all the summons?’

‘Yup,’ said Sarah.

‘I got you an auditor who can keep track of the costs and benefits of each decision.’

‘Have you sourced a knitter?’

‘No, I got you a meditation specialist.’

‘I put in for the knitter,’ she protested.

A research team had funds to compare different formats of juries to hone the process, but Sarah hadn’t been convinced of the meditation one.

‘You want to be on the winning team, Sarah. Mindfulness, meditation, that’s where it’s at.’

‘The conservative types, who we most need to convince, will see a guy in an orange robe and dismiss it as a ‘woke’ thing.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, they’d dress normally. And everyone’s into it these days.’

‘My mother calls the Buddhist refill shop ‘that religious hippy place’.

‘She’s not typical.’

‘You only need one like that on the jury to sabotage it. I can’t risk it. Crafts have a track record in creating a calm, conversational environment.’

‘Yes, in mental institutions. But I guess it could get quite mental in there.’ He nodded as he left. ‘I’ll sort you a knitter.’

Sarah put her head back in her hands and made a vow. Whatever it took, she’d make this work. She’d sent out twenty invitations to a carefully chosen sample – a mix of age, gender, ethnicity and social class, but she’d take the first five who responded. She wanted the keen ones.

STEVE

Steve barely glanced at the summons. He was trying to stop his wife from leaving.

‘Ste-efff,’ He lingered over the name. Steve and Stef. He’d played on her delight at the alliteration when they’d first started out. He’d not been in the market for an English Major – he was foremost a practical man, but he’d spotted a softness

in her. He'd gone with his gut instinct and it had paid off. She was an asset. 'Don't leave.' His voice was beseeching but gave no ground.

'You only think about yourself.' She unfolded the crumpled jury summons. 'Look, you wouldn't dream of attending, would you? Not unless there's something in it for you.'

He was about to protest when his son entered the kitchen, his brother hovering close behind. 'Can we have a lift?'

'For the last time, no!' roared Steve.

They retreated rapidly into the hall.

Steve saw the emotion leave Stef's eyes and knew he'd just blown it. He'd thought the organic farm thing had been the tipping point, but it was the bloody kids.

'I don't want to lose you,' he begged.

'Course you don't. You do very well out of me.'

'Look, I'll go to the citizen jury thing. I wanted to anyway, but you said I don't spend enough time with you.' He grabbed the summons and signed it.

'Good.' Stef put the form in the Freepost envelope. 'I'll post it on my way out. It might provide distraction for you when we've gone.'

Steve glared at his sons as they followed their mother out. It was their fault. He'd worked his way up the hard way, but they hung around, doing nothing, always wanting something. Can I have this? Can I have that? Take me here, take us there. Bloody scroungers, the pair of them, and now he'd committed to the citizen's jury. She was right about one thing, though. He'd find a way to get something out of it.

DEVANIKA

Devanika scrolled through her phone frantically as her husband drove them back from the hospital. The nurse's words still rang in her ears. 'It's not your fault,' she'd said. 'We're seeing more fertility issues each year. It's the build-up of toxins in the environment, I'm sure.'

Her husband was talking about trying again, about whether they could afford it, but she tuned him out. First she needed to know if the nurse was just being kind.

She typed in environmental toxins and infertility, and clicked on the article¹² that came up.

¹² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6396757/>

‘The nurse was right,’ Devanika cut her husband off mid-sentence. ‘This is what it says: *metals and chemicals in air, water, food, and health-and-beauty aids are damaging fertility in many ways. These toxicants are causing men to experience relentlessly decreasing sperm count and function while women are suffering progressively worse anovulation, impaired implantation, and loss of fetal viability.*’

When they arrived home, she waved away offers of food and turned on her PC. She needed a bigger screen. The take-home message was clear. While each chemical on its own passed safety tests, the little research that existed on the likely combined effects was alarming. Car exhaust, pesticides in food, toxins in cleaning products, endocrine disruptors in beauty products, chemicals used in water-proofing and fire-retardant materials, and contamination of water supplies by agricultural run-off. Together, the effects were synergistic, producing a combined effect much greater than the sum of their parts. Her grief turned to fury and then to action. She wrote to the local council demanding they follow the example of numerous other local authorities to become pesticide-free, emailed each company whose products contained toxins, harassed her MP asking for greater regulation, but it wasn’t enough. When the invitation to the citizen’s jury came, she accepted it immediately. Finally, some real power.

BARRY

It had been another frantic day. He’d not even had time for a shit. It was a human right, for God’s sake! He should probably visit the bathroom before he set off for work as there were precious few opportunities for delivery drivers. But after so many frustrated attempts with one kid or other demanding attention every time he sat down, it had gone back in. Barry checked the clock. He had ten minutes to sign the anniversary card with something loving, put all the toys away, and get ready for work.

‘Millie, do you have my pen, love?’

‘Nope.’ She waved a tiny paintbrush at him.

‘Put that away now before mummy gets home.’

‘Wanna finish my picture.’

He knew he should look at her efforts and say something nice but he didn’t want the precious moments between his wife coming home and him leaving to be

spent clearing up. Just for once, he'd like the house to be tidy, to hand over the card telling her how much he loved her and for her to see just him and the card, not the sorry mess the house was in. He gazed at a photo of the two of them laughing into the camera, remembering back to the days when she'd come home, he'd remove her nurse's uniform and they'd go giggling straight to bed.

The baby was asleep in the bouncy chair. Perhaps he could get the kids to clear up and stay out of their hair while they just grabbed ten minutes. It was their anniversary after all.

'Tom!' he shouted at the ceiling. 'Clear up your mess, now!'

There was a thudding of small feet, then the projectile that was his son skidded into the room knocking the baby's drink over the card and Millie's picture.

Millie shrieked, setting off the baby who joined in.

Barry shoved a dummy in the baby's mouth and frantically mopped up the water, but it was too late. The card was ruined. He chucked it in the bin along with Millie's sodden painting, ignoring her cries.

'Come on, who can put their stuff away fastest?'

It worked. Millie forgot her picture and grabbed her paints and paper and sparkly glitter and shoved it in the cupboard. Tom threw in his football and Lego star ship. Barry picked up the baby walker and hesitated – the cupboard already looked precariously full. He heard a car pull up and rammed it in on top of the scooter and shut the door.

'Hiya lovelies. I'm home.'

The baby was peaceful again, dummy in mouth, rocking herself back to sleep with one little foot in the bouncy chair. There was still a chance.

'Kids,' Barry hissed. They drew close, intrigued by his air of secrecy. 'Quick, let's play hide and seek. If you hide really well, I bet we can fool Mummy for at least ten minutes. I'll go upstairs and you hide down here. Let's see who can stay hidden for the longest.'

They nodded, and Barry ran into the hall and shut the door behind him.

'We have ten minutes,' he whispered in her ear.

'We can't!'

'It's our anniversary.'

He watched her, his heart full of love as she considered, then a dimple appeared in her left cheek, and she giggled. 'Come on then.'

As Barry mounted the stairs, he had a horrible thought.

‘Don’t open the cupboard door!’ he shouted suddenly.

Crash!

They ran into the sitting room to find it strewn with a cupboard full of stuff, and Millie crying, rubbing her head where the baby walker had landed.

It took every ounce of self-control to bite back the barrage of swear words. All he wanted was a moment with his bloody wife, for God’s sake. He forced a smile and allowed Millie to sob on his shoulder while he shushed her. He loved them more than he could say, but he didn’t know how much longer he could go on like this.

The summons arrived as he was rushing out the door for work. He thrust it in his pocket and read it later while waiting in a traffic jam. He read only as far ‘free childcare provided’ before he ticked yes.

NAOMI

Naomi heard the door go and rushed down, wireless earbuds in place, to pick up her parcels.

‘It’s just some storage boxes and a couple of decluttering books.’

She nodded at the delivery man without seeing him and grabbed the large package with the smaller package on top.

‘Is it mad that I have three books on minimalism?’ she laughed and shut the door.

‘I know, but I needed to cheer myself up.’

Naomi lugged the parcels into a living room, still talking.

‘No, it’s not just the breakup. Well, it is obviously, but the good thing is I have more space now.’ She looked round for somewhere to put the boxes.

‘Well, someone complained to my company about misleading blurb on our skin care products... I know!... It’s not fair. Bloody customers.’ She laughed. ‘I suppose it’s not the attitude for a marketing exec!’

Naomi gave up and lugged the parcels upstairs.

‘I’d love you to come down and cheer me up, but...’ She opened a bedroom door and shoved the parcel on the bed along with all the others. ‘It’s just I haven’t sorted out the spare room yet... Okay... yes... look forget it, you’re not telling me anything I don’t know. Bye.’

Naomi ended the call. With her job in jeopardy, she didn't need grief from her sister, however well-meaning. Maybe the new storage boxes would do the trick. She pulled them out of the box. They were fine, if not as great as they'd looked on screen. She could pack away some of her stuff in them, but there remained the problem of where they'd fit. Her phone rang, and she answered.

'...It's fine, love. I'm sorry too. I'm just worried about my job...'

Naomi wondered into her kitchen and poured herself a gin and tonic, adding ice cubes from an ice dispenser in the fridge door.

'... Yes that's my new ice-dispenser you're hearing... I was glad when a shelf split so I could get a new fridge... No the old one came with the flat, it was six years old... Trouble is, the platinum finish doesn't match my appliances, so I'll have to replace them too... At least I don't have to put up with any more nagging about spending.' Naomi noticed a brown envelope partially hidden under a pile of brochures and opened it. 'No, I am upset. It's such a pain having to find someone new... No, I'm done with dating apps.' Naomi paused as she took in what she was reading.

'You'll never guess what... I've been invited to be on a citizen's jury... You think I should?... I guess one would meet some interesting people... And my job would be obliged to give me time off... You're right, a chance to lie low for a bit.'

Naomi grabbed a ballpoint from a deluxe leather desk pen holder and signed it.

JASON

Jason enjoyed his weekly outing at the refill shop. He rarely went out these days, but the Rice Up cooperative run by the local Buddhist group was cheap and had a friendly, non-judgemental feel. He filled up his containers with a week's worth of red lentils and brown rice.

He hung back when he heard an angry-sounding lady berate the staff for running out of organic wheat bran. The excuse that they'd just lost their supplier wasn't cutting any ice. He felt his anxiety mount and wished she'd shut up and go. She was spoiling the vibe. Eventually she went, and it was safe to pay and leave.

Jason detoured home via the house that left home-grown produce out when there was a glut. Today there was a box of onions and peppers, and a note saying

please eat these before they go to waste. He packed a few in his backpack. It almost made him feel like a hero for making use of them.

When he got to his bedsit, he rinsed the lentils, then put them onto boil. He added water to a pan full of brown rice. He made loads so he could reheat during the week. He chopped the peppers and onions and fried them. He sprinkled in garam masala and turmeric from large bags bought cheaply from the international grocer down the road. He drained the lentils and stirred them into the onions and peppers.

He was dishing up when he heard the letterbox. A brown envelope. He scanned it in a panic, then rang his mum.

‘I’ve got to go to a citizen’s jury. I’ve been summoned.’

‘Do you have to attend?’

‘I dunno.’ Jason studied the form. ‘There’s a lot to read.’

‘Maybe you should go. Get out a bit. See the doc get some more meds,’ she said.

‘Shall I sign it then?’

‘Yes, do you good.’

He obediently signed the form.

There was a pause.

‘You know my bedsit’s really small?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Now you’ve some more space, can I store—?’

‘No.’ Her voice was sad.

There was a moment’s silence.

Jason ended the call, sat on his bed and wept.

Thirty minutes later, he filled his bong with grass, and got himself high. He ate a bowl of lentils and rice, turned on his gaming PC and played Call of Duty for six hours solid.

NEEDLES

Needles knitted in the passenger seat as her daughter-in-law drove back from the supermarket.

‘Do you have to keep doing that?’

‘The guerrilla knitters are working on covers for the benches in the

underground to make it more cosy. We're an underground movement,' Needles cackled at her own joke, but got no response from the driving seat.

As they pulled up in the drive, Needles turned to her grandson in the back. 'In my day, after each journey, we'd have to scrape the windscreen clean of all the insects.'

'Yuck!'

'No it's a good thing.'

Her grandson jumped out of the car and helped her out of the passenger seat. He was a lovely boy.

'What do you see on this hedge, darlin'?' she asked him.

'Nothing.'

'Exactly! This hawthorn should be alive with bees. The insect world is what holds us all together. It's like the stitches in me knitting. They go, and it all unravels. It's where your food comes from, sweetie.'

He laughed, humouring her and swung a Sainsbury's shopping bag. 'It comes from the supermarket, Grandma.'

'I fear for you young people. I really do. What do they teach you nowadays?'

'Maths, English, Drama, I'll be doing business studies for my GCSEs.'

'Well, you'd better get on with it then,' said his mum. She turned to Needles. 'The struggles I have getting him to do his homework.'

'It's a waste of time,' declared Needles. 'With what's coming up, you need to learn how to survive, my son. With the world heating up and pesticides killin' off all life, you need to be ready.'

He looked back at her, wide eyed with fear.

'Shut it now,' snapped her daughter-in-law, furious. 'Don't go giving him that eco-anxiety.'

'But if he's got the knowledge and skills, he don't need to be scared. That's the point I'm making, love,' said Needles.

'He needs good exam results, a good job. I don't need you butting in, telling him it's all a waste of time.'

'I just want to prepare him for the future.'

'Oh yeah, by telling him to chuck in his education?'

'But love—'

'No forget it, I've had enough. I'm not having you fill his head with fear and

nonsense. You got no idea how hard I work trying to get him to do his homework and you undermine it in a minute. He don't need no encouragement to skive off.'

Needles watched her grandson escape quickly into the house with the shopping. He hated conflict. He was such a sweet-natured lad. Not like his mum. Needles was desperate to protect him from the future. She'd do all she could to help him learn the skills he'd need.

It took a moment for her to take in what her daughter-in-law was telling her.

'It's best you don't see him anymore.'

'What? No!'

'You're a bad influence.'

Needles leant against the car in shock. 'I'd do anything to protect that darling boy,' she said in a quavering voice.

Her daughter-in-law's pursed mouth left no room for argument.

'I'd do anything for that darling boy,' Needles repeated. 'Anything.'

DAY 1. WELCOME

The group was already traumatised. The previous day had been preparation and reading and today a representative from the IPCC had presented graphs, projections, statistics, and images. He'd done his job well. All were scared, even terrified, some were angry, many felt helpless, even the smart-suited man looked shaken. The final film, 'Breaking Boundaries' left no doubt that humanity had already passed some key tipping points and was heading towards global climate crisis at a rapid rate.

Now it was Sarah's turn. She allowed the group a quick break to process what they'd heard, but they were still shouting at each other as they entered the small room and took their places at the oval table. Somehow, she had to turn this alarm into effective policy making. But first she had to get a word in.

'Why aren't we doing anything?'

'I didn't know.'

'What do you think Greta meant when she said our house was on fire?'

'But we haven't acted like our house is on fire.'

'That's the point.'

'What about my children?'

'My grandson. He won't cope.'

'Bloody leaders, they'll just run off to their country houses.'

‘Why haven’t they done anything?’

‘It falls outside the electoral cycle, that’s why.’

This was her chance. ‘You’re right.’ Sarah smiled at the South Asian lady. ‘The shortcoming of our current system is that it tends towards short-term decision-making, meaning existential risks such as climate change are unaddressed. That’s why you have been invited to be part of this citizens’ jury. This is your chance to direct policy – you the people who will be affected by it in the long term.’

The group nodded, settling down, and Sarah continued. ‘We have two aims. The most important is to enable participation in decision-making and agenda-setting by the very people who will be living with the consequences. The second is to explore the relative effectiveness of different styles and sizes of citizen juries. For this one, we drew upon research indicating that craft-making induces an atmosphere conducive to peaceful and productive conversations.’ Sarah ignored the dismissive snort from the smart-suited man and introduced the knitter who was sitting beside her. ‘This is—’

‘They call me Needles,’ said the old lady, bringing out knitting needles and a ball of wool. ‘I’ll be knitting a jumper for my grandson with recycled wool.’ She began to knit and the rhythmic click-clack of the needles immediately imparted a cosy atmosphere into the room.

‘To my left is Andrew,’ Sarah indicated a tall, smooth-faced man who sat in front of a whiteboard.

He nodded around the table. ‘I audit carbon offset projects and my role is to assess the social, environmental and economic implications of various policies discussed, with particular emphasis on carbon savings.’

Sarah picked up her spiel. ‘Over the next few days, various experts will present policies to address the climate crisis, supplemented by data from research studies. Your job is to sift through these and decide which to progress.’

Sarah paused as a scruffily dressed young man sloped in, smelling strongly of weed.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he muttered, sliding into the chair by the window.

‘I want you to take this seriously.’ She fixed her gaze on the young man. ‘You don’t just advise, what you decide will be acted upon.’ Her gaze swept around the room. ‘There is real power here.’ She noticed the smart-suited man sit up and pay attention.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked him.

‘We already did this,’ he said impatiently. ‘I’m Steve. This lovely lady to my right is Naomi and the Indian lady next to her is Dekanovi.’

‘South Asian is the term. I’m not from India and my name is Devanika.’

Steve smiled and licked his lips. He’d enjoy taking that one down. Naomi was quite attractive underneath the makeup. Lots of jewellery but no wedding ring. He could have her, he decided. The guys looked to be no challenge, either. Barry, the nice-looking chap at the end who kept going on about his kids, was probably a seething mass of resentment underneath. Nice guys usually were, and he’d keep that stoked. The last guy was clearly a stoner. This jury was his for the taking.

‘Well Steve, what do you do?’ Sarah asked.

‘I’m a farmer.’

‘You should have been at the last one. We covered sustainable agriculture,’ said Sarah.

‘I’d have told you there’s no point unless you make it worthwhile. Farmers want to turn a profit like everyone else.’ The rest of the group glared at Steve, who shrugged. ‘I took over an organic farm, and it just didn’t pay, so I returned to traditional methods.’

‘Hedgerows for biodiversity and crop rotation to regenerate the soil?’ asked Sarah.

‘Pesticides and artificial fertilizer.’

‘For God’s sake,’ burst out Devanika. ‘We’re looking for climate solutions and this joker actively shuts down a working organic farm?’

Steve smiled, pleased to have rattled her.

‘I suppose you use the no-dig method, though?’ Sarah asked, hoping to smooth things over. ‘It’s more environmentally friendly, and it saves money as you’re not dragging a plough across the ground.’

‘No, I stick to the plough.’

‘Why would you do that?’ asked Devanika, outraged.

How could he explain? There was something about the huge blades cutting into the earth and churning up the ground that gave him a thrill. Dopamine buzz, they’d probably call it. The same feeling he got when he put his foot down on the gas and felt his car’s huge engine surge underneath him. It was the sense of domination, of control.

‘Basically, organic farming is gay,’ he declared. He flicked a glance at the auditor to see if there’d be a reaction. He reckoned he’d got the measure of everyone except him, but Andrew’s blank expression gave nothing away. Sarah’s face had hardened though. He stored the observation away for future use.

‘And you?’ Sarah addressed the tired-looking man at the far end of the table.

‘I’m Barry. I have three kids, me and my wife both work shifts, so mostly I’m looking after kids or delivering parcels. It’s them I worry for.’

‘I worry about my grandson,’ said Needles, as she knitted. ‘He won’t cope when it all goes tits up, that’s fer sure. Don’t you care about your kids?’ She pointed her needles at Steve.

‘They do all right out of me. What about you ladies?’

Naomi shrugged, uneasily aware the clock was ticking. She’d better get on with it, but there were so many other pressing things first.

Devanika shook her head curtly.

‘I bet you’re one of those birth strike women, refusing to breed because of the climate breakdown,’ said Steve.

‘None of your business why I don’t have children,’ Devanika snapped at him.

‘Well, this citizen’s jury is my baby,’ said Sarah. ‘And it’s a climate solution in itself. If anything is going to change our world, it’s going to be who makes the decisions and on what basis. So I’ll be making sure it grows up smoothly.’ She flashed a smile round the group, which had a hint of steel in it when she got to Steve. She turned to the well-groomed lady next to him. ‘Naomi, what do you do?’

‘I’m in skin and cosmetics marketing, and actually seventy-eight percent of our customers reported they’d pay more for a sustainable product.’

‘My mother said her skin and hair was never as lovely as when she had to stop using products during the war,’ Needles contributed as she knitted. ‘Nature knows best.’

‘She’s right,’ said Devanika. ‘Some chemicals in these products are basically hormone disruptors.’

‘I don’t use a thing on my skin and look at me,’ said Needles.

Her skin was lined as hell, thought Naomi, but then again, she looked to be at least seventy.

‘I’m eighty five,’ Needles added, as if reading her thoughts.

‘And can you introduce yourself?’ Sarah addressed the latecomer, who was

avoiding her gaze. 'Jason isn't it?'

'Er yeah, that's me.'

'And what do you do?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'How do you live?' Barry asked.

'On taxpayer's money,' said Steve.

'I suffer from mental health problems. That's why I can't work,' said Jason. He regretted coming already. He knew they'd be judgmental.

'So they let you off work, but not this?' inquired Naomi.

'The doctor said I'd be fine as long as I took my meds,' he mumbled.

'Here, love, have some knitting.' Needles pulled out some needles and wool from her bag and offered them to him. He shook his head. 'It will calm you,' she insisted.

Sarah sighed. The knitting was supposed to provide a relaxed atmosphere, not take over. Thankfully, Steve chipped in.

'I know you all think I don't give a damn, but I'm not one of those climate deniers, for God's sake. I'm a realist, not an idiot. Can we get started so we can get out of here alive?'

The assassin hid a smile.

DAY 2. CARBON OFFSETS

Lincoln, Gandhi, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, John Lennon.

'Countries and businesses are using carbon offsets to meet their net zero targets,' the expert was explaining.

Steve had closed down the proposal for personal carbon allowances yesterday without a hitch, but today's carbon offsetting proposal was voluntary, so no threat. He eyed up Naomi instead and allowed his mind to wander.

Jason slid his phone out from his pocket and loaded up Candy Crush.

Naomi wondered if it would be appropriate to ask Andrew about his skincare regime. His face was unlined but his eyes seemed old. Maybe his skin was so smooth

due to his lack of facial expressions, although he didn't look like a guy who'd Botox. Steve caught her eye and winked. She gave a half smile and looked away. Unlike Andrew, he was easy to read.

Barry also wasn't listening. He was seething. 'How come he gets to keep his phone?' he burst out suddenly.

'I've got special needs,' said Jason.

'I've got kids, and I wasn't allowed.'

'Jason, please,' Sarah shook her head at him, 'and Barry, if there are any problems, the front desk have instructions to let you know. But if you feel you really need it?'

'No, it's a relief to get away from them to be honest,' said Barry, happy once Jason put his phone away.

Sarah nodded at carbon offset man and he continued his spiel. 'Cutting down on emissions on its own won't be enough. We must also take carbon out of the atmosphere. Business and governments have money that we can harness towards carbon sequestration projects.'

Devanika put her hand up. 'So they chop down an irreplaceable old-growth forest to mine a ton of stuff, then plant a mono-culture in some remote area just to tick a carbon offset box?'

'We don't deny some of that goes on, but this app is much more rigorous. This is where our auditors are crucial,' he nodded towards Andrew. 'We only include carbon offset projects with triple A accreditation based on key criteria. That is, they don't solve one problem by causing another, have been checked for unintended consequences, and are genuine carbon removal, not just cutting down on emissions.'

Devanika nodded, satisfied.

'It also applies at the individual, consumer level,' he continued. 'This app brings together those who want to offset their carbon footprint with carbon removal projects that require investment. Your offset money may reforest an area or contribute to direct air carbon capture and storage.'

He passed iPads round the group. 'The app is preloaded, so have a play.'

Needles shook her head when he got to her. 'Don't worry, love, I'm knitting. I'll just listen.'

Carbon offset man looked around with satisfaction as the group scrolled down. Jason wondered if he'd get away with returning to his game, but Sarah was

looking at him, seeming to read his mind.

‘Each carbon credit removes one tonne of carbon from the atmosphere. You can also set up a profile, and type in what you buy and consume and it will let you know how far over your allowable carbon footprint you are.’

‘Didn’t we do this on the first day?’ Barry asked.

‘No, that was personal carbon allowances,’ said Andrew.

‘This is different. These carbon credits and the app operate in the voluntary carbon market,’ the man explained. ‘This allows you to estimate the carbon footprint of what you consume so you can see how much to offset. We hope to partner with all major supermarkets, retailers, energy providers, etc. So you can do this at the point of each purchase automatically.’

‘Can you offset travel?’ asked Devanika.

‘Yes, that’s one of the most popular things to offset. Click on the offset calculator and type in flights.’

Devanika tapped in a flight from London to Dhaka. It was nearly three tonnes. She clicked on the offset button and was faced with a list of different projects of varying costs, ranging from twenty to eighty pounds. ‘How do I know which project is best?’

‘You can choose based on your values. Many have additional benefits. We have a peatland restoration project in Indonesia that not only prevents carbon loss, but improves biodiversity and also the quality of life for indigenous people.’

‘Cool, it would make me feel less guilty when I visit my family.’

‘I like this menu tab,’ said Steve. ‘Say I was on a date with someone like you who’d want me to eat lentils,’ he nodded over at Devanika, ‘I could still have a steak, plant some trees in Kenya with a quick swipe and be done.’

‘I wouldn’t go on a date with you,’ retorted Devanika.

‘Steady on love, I wasn’t asking. You’re not my type.’ Steve smirked round the room.

‘Anyway, you can’t offset the animal’s suffering,’ Devanika bit back.

‘I can if I’m having a good time. But then I’d have to go with Naomi.’ Steve laughed, and nudged Naomi. ‘What do you think?’

Naomi thought he was being a dick. Although she couldn’t help feeling a little flattered at his attention. He was handsome and clearly well-off. Shame he was so slimy.

‘Won’t people just do more of this stuff if they offset it?’ said Needles. ‘All these folk giving up flying and going vegan, maybe if they could just offset, they’d stop cutting down.’

Andrew stepped in before the carbon offset man could speak. ‘We have studies here on the extent of rebound effect. We’ll factor that in when we assess the impact potential.’

Naomi put her hand up. ‘I don’t want to sound selfish or anything, but would people offset if they didn’t have to?’

The carbon offset man responded quickly, ‘we’re hoping to create an expectation, a kind of social pressure, like a service charge at a restaurant. You’d look pretty bad if you didn’t tip.’

Naomi was unconvinced. For all her high salary, her credit cards were maxed to the limit. She wouldn’t pay more than she had to. Not unless someone was watching.

Barry nodded. ‘It’s all right for those with money, but we can only afford to go on holiday once every few years. Why should I pay extra if people who don’t give a damn do nothing?’ He glanced at Jason.

‘Don’t look at me, look at the guy who gave up his organic farm!’ cried Jason. ‘My carbon footprint is tiny compared to you lot. I can’t afford most of this stuff anyway.’

Jason was right, but he still pissed Barry off. At least Steve worked for a living.

‘If I’d have got some offset money, then I might have stuck with the organic farm,’ Steve declared.

He had a point, thought Sarah. The last citizen jury had discovered that some farmers weren’t keen to take on extra costs, such as adding supplements to cow feed to reduce methane or planting hedgerows for biodiversity. She looked at her watch. Time to wrap up.

‘Let’s get to the figures, now,’ she nodded at Andrew.

Before he could stand, carbon offset man bounded up and wrote 300,000,000 on the whiteboard under tonnes saved.

Andrew raised his eyebrows. ‘That’s a lot.’

‘I know,’ carbon offset man agreed, pleased.

‘Based on what assumptions?’

‘That we all sign up to the app and offset any carbon emissions over our

personalised allowable carbon footprint.'

'All sign up? To the voluntary scheme?' Andrew said.

'We hope as a social norm emerges...' he sounded more hesitant.

'How many here are likely to do this?' Andrew looked round the group.

Devanika and Jason put their hands up. Needles waved her knitting in the air.

Naomi raised a finger.

'Offset everything or just steak?' Steve inquired.

'Well, erm everything,' carbon offset man said.

Steve shook his head. Barry folded his arms.

'Now, who would really use it, even when not observed?' Andrew asked.

The carbon offset man gazed imploringly round the room. Naomi lowered her finger. Jason shrugged and shook his head. His lifestyle was pretty basic, so he'd doubt he'd have to pay, but he probably wouldn't bother to get the app. Needles carried on knitting, which was hard to interpret. Only Devanika's hand remained up, but it wavered under Steve's disbelieving smile.

'Please don't write them off,' carbon offset man pleaded. 'You saw the figures. The Greenland ice cap is losing ten thousand cubic meters of water per second. It won't stop now, even if we stop all emissions. It's past its tipping point - we need to actively remove carbon. It's now going to warm faster and faster, so we need to cool faster and faster.'

'But it's such a nice day outside,' said Naomi, 'it just doesn't seem real.'

'California, Australia, half of Southern Europe is literally on fire as we speak. Even the bloody Arctic is on fire!' he cried.

The rest of the room avoided his eyes as he spoke, uncomfortable at his emotion. He was right, but they were all thinking the same. Naomi was the one to finally say it.

'The thing is I do care, but why should I give up what I like, or pay extra for it, unless everyone else does? It will make almost no difference to the planet but make a lot to me.'

Carbon offset man shrugged helplessly.

Andrew got the eraser and rubbed out four of the eight zeros.

The click-clack of needles accompanied the sad shuffling of papers and click of the door as carbon offset man left the room.

The world is as it is because the nice guys get assassinated.

DAY 3. THE SHARING ECONOMY

I owe it to the next generation

The lady's introduction was lost on Barry. His mind was elsewhere, worrying if the child minder was coping.

'Hi there! Do you have kids?' Oh no, she was looking at him.

'Erm, yes. Three.'

'I bet you have tons of stuff everywhere?'

'God yes! You take your life in your hands opening the cupboard,' Barry said.

'Really! What's in there?'

She looked genuinely interested, so he answered. 'Well, there's the kid's toys. Sports stuff, the tent, some tools right at the back we can't get to. An easel from Millie's painting craze. A bread maker we never use, but my wife wants to keep in case she gets time to get back into it. Her sewing machine, ditto. Bike rack - actually I've no idea where that went. We looked for it the other day and couldn't find it.'

The library of things lady nodded her head sympathetically. 'I'm sure we all have cupboards like that.'

'You don't know the half of it,' Naomi thought to herself.

'Imagine,' said the lady, 'if you could clear out everything in your attic, sheds and cupboards that you only use now and then, but get access to it anytime you wanted?'

'I'd love that,' said Barry, hooked.

'Well, that's the principle behind the library of things. The most popular items are the ones you talked about - toys and items that are rarely used. We find gardening tools such as strimmers are popular, carpet cleaners, kitchen items. Fun stuff too, like party gear, golf clubs, instruments, games.'

'Do you have old consoles?' Jason asked.

'Yes, they're very popular, Nintendo, Atari—'

'And games? Like do you have Super Mario brothers?'

'Yes we do.'

‘Sick.’ Jason was in ecstasy. How totally brilliant would that be? He’d had to chuck all his old consoles out when he moved to his tiny bedsit, and his mum had flatly refused to store them.

‘So how does it work? Can you just like borrow what you want for free like a library?’ Barry asked.

‘There are several models. Some have a small per item fee, but ultimately we’d like to go for a subscription model with a monthly fee.’

‘A Spotify of stuff?’ suggested Jason.

‘Exactly. Our aim is to have libraries of things in every neighbourhood, within five minutes of most homes, kind of like your local shop. Different membership options would allow different levels of borrowing.’

‘How much?’ asked Jason.

‘It depends on economies of scale. If it takes off, then we can operate more cheaply, so basic membership, borrowing up to three items a month for up to a week each, for around £10. For silver you can reserve and borrow for longer.’

Barry was more excited than he’d been for a long time, but one thing worried him. ‘What if you borrowed something and broke it? Stuff gets broken all the time in our house.’

‘We’d be delighted,’ said the library lady.

‘Huh?’ He couldn’t believe his ears.

‘No, I mean it. We want to avoid waste – so much is hardly used before it’s thrown away. If you used it enough to wear it out, that’s brilliant.’

‘This might be a good time to share some of research.’ Andrew walked round the table, handing out fact sheets. ‘This study reports that drills are typically used only 18 minutes a year and emissions from their use are just two percent of the total emissions, the rest coming from their manufacture, distribution and disposal.’

Devanika looked up at him as he dropped the fact sheet in front of her. He looked away quickly when she met his eye.

She was sure she’d seen him somewhere before, but in a different context. She didn’t trust his studied neutrality. Never mind, it would come to her.

I need to think about my target.

‘Trust me, we don’t have trouble with getting items – we have too much – just

like you,' library lady continued. 'We often get entire households of stuff donated to us when someone's parents die or move to a care home and have no use for it. Our issue is the time taken to sift through it all. We keep what's in good condition, other items we may repair.'

Barry imagined his house with no clutter. No more clambering over boxes or hunting for things. They could borrow a guitar, Tom was dying to learn but they couldn't afford it and it was almost certain he'd get bored after a few days. Same with a tennis racket for Millie. Once all the shite was gone and they could actually see the floor, they could even borrow a carpet cleaner. This had got his vote.

Naomi raised a hand. 'Won't it all be kind of dirty and smelly?'

Barry and Jason glared at her.

Could I manage two?

Needles chimed in, knitting away. 'Dirt, my dear, is good for you. All this hygiene business, it's more of your marketing, my love, creating fear of germs to sell cleaning products. No one had allergies in my day when we bathed once a week.'

'It's true,' Barry spoke rapidly, fearful she'd vote against it. 'To start, we put Millie on antibiotics every time she had a cold, but now they say that's why she's allergic to everything. Now, we let them play in the dirt for a bit. We don't have time to clean much now anyway. I mean, you don't want to be sneezing and coughing in people's faces, but all this antibacterial cleaning – you're killing the good bacteria they say.'

Steve nodded. 'Yep, I'm a farmer and I never get sick. Come and visit,' he nudged Naomi, who looked unconvinced.

'Obviously we clean items,' continued the library lady, 'but our aspiration is to extend the idea of borrowing over buying to everything and for everybody. We want to create a gold card option too that allows trusted borrowers to access luxury items.'

'What like' asked Naomi and Steve in unison.

'Art, expensive jewellery, boats even. Yachts, for example, are typically unused for all but a few weeks a year. This way, you'd be relieved of the upkeep, the insurance and repair costs, and yet could access the boat when you wanted to.'

'Where do I sign?' asked Steve, nudging Naomi, who nodded in agreement.

'We don't have such options currently, this is just to fire your imaginations of

how far the library of things model could extend if properly funded.'

'Oh,' Naomi felt deflated.

Andrew returned to the whiteboard. 'Your last report indicates that £150,000 was saved collectively by borrowers?'

'Yes, this is a much more equitable way to allocate resources,' said the lady.

Andrew added a tick by the social justice column. 'And you saved 88 tonnes of emissions.' His marker hovered under the environmental benefit column.

'The manufacture and transport of goods also gives rise to environmental issues such as deforestation, loss of habitat, loss of biodiversity, pollution, congestion and toxic waste,' she added.

'Indeed. But we need to save millions of tonnes.'

Sarah sat up. This was where they got down to the nitty gritty. She reminded herself that she mustn't interfere. Observation only.

'No, but this is just as it is. If we got more resources, well, look.' The library lady thrust a sheet at him. 'We reckon we can save seventy million tonnes.'

Andrew scanned the figures in front of him, shaking his head. 'These figures are very high. What kind of uptake were you assuming?'

'If everyone was a member, and we all switched from buying to borrowing. We could do an app too.'

Andrew got out his calculator. 'You currently have five thousand borrowers in the Greater London area with a population of ten million. That's a fraction of a percent.'

'No, but the point is, if it got supported and promoted.'

'Your library already has free space from the local authority, a grant, and relies on volunteers. What more were you hoping for?'

Barry wasn't going to let his dream die. 'What if there was a law that every area had to have one?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Steve scoffed.

'Many neighbourhoods have libraries run by the government as a public service,' said Needles. 'Just for books, though.'

'Yes exactly, a public service,' echoed the lady, grateful for the support.

'And it's about resilience, isn't it?' commented Needles. 'You can't always rely on the infrastructure. Supply chains break down – local stuff for local people.'

'Even if everyone had a library of things nearby doesn't mean they'd use it,'

said Naomi.

‘It’s a point,’ contributed Devanika. ‘I buy books all the time. Never occurs to me to check the library.’

‘Let’s take a poll,’ suggested Andrew. ‘How many here would use a library of things if it were nearby?’

Barry had his hand up straightaway, as did Jason.

Two so far out of six. It was a shame she couldn’t vote, thought Sarah. The sample was very small, but now she thought about it, she wasn’t sure. She loved the idea, but the fact was that there had been one where she lived last year and she’d never made use of it. Barely even noticed it as she walked past.

Devanika was similarly conflicted. She’d decided to vote for it on the social justice angle, but would she use it? Habits were hard to break.

Needles didn’t pause knitting but nodded her head vigorously. ‘I’d use it every time my grandson came to visit. Before it would have been for the toys, now he’d be wanting to try out a guitar or computer game.’

‘Jason would have nabbed the guitar,’ said Steve.

‘I’d want the guitar for my son,’ said Barry immediately. He’d be bugged if layabout Jason took the guitar when his son wanted it.

‘Our research shows that eighty percent of household items get used less than once a month. With broad membership, there’d be plenty for everyone,’ the lady insisted.

‘That’s the thing though, isn’t it,’ said Steve. ‘On a sunny day, everyone would want the barbecue.’

‘You can reserve items,’ assured the lady.

‘But then you have to think ahead,’ said Naomi. ‘This is why it’s not going to work. You got your own stuff, you know it’s there, you don’t have to worry.’

‘But I can’t even find things half the time among the clutter,’ said Barry.

Naomi shook her head, but a part of her knew he was right. How many times had she bought something new she already had, just couldn’t be bothered to look for?

Andrew added a column marked ‘take-up’ to the whiteboard.

Look at him hovering over the board like a God, our fate in his hands.

He wrote ‘assume one percent take up’ and wrote the figure on the board.

Andrew remained impassive, his back to the group, as everyone spoke at once.

‘But we had three out of six. That’s fifty percent!’

‘That’s harsh.’

‘You had 0.05 percent take-up in a real life sample. One percent is generous.’

‘What about my games?’

‘You’re making a big mistake young man.’

‘Sorry, but I just wouldn’t use it.’

Sarah willed her mouth shut and waited until the din subsided and only the steady click-clack of needles remained.

DAY 4. ON-DEMAND BUSES

Everyone dismisses me, but I’ll show them.

Sarah marvelled at the man’s patience as he tried to explain the principle of demand-led transport to Needles.

‘On-demand buses come when you call them,’ he explained again.

‘How can they?’ Needles repeated.

‘Forget checking out the bus timetable and waiting at a bus stop for a bus that always goes to the same place. With demand-led transport, you say where you are and where you want to go.’

‘But how?’

‘You download the app.’

‘What’s an app?’

‘It’s an application, like a piece of software.’ He leaned over and showed Needles his phone.

Needles waved him away with her needles. ‘Forget it sweetie, I don’t have me glasses.’

‘I don’t get it either,’ said Jason. ‘Say I want to go to a doctor’s appointment in Bitterne, but the people on the bus want to go in the other direction?’

‘There will be lots of buses and they’ll learn typical patterns and the algorithm will—’

‘What’s an algorithm?’ interrupted Needles.

‘It’s a way of determining the routes in response to bookings using advanced computation. The algorithm matches demand in real time to what buses are where. The system tells the person when the next bus will be and where to meet it. It doesn’t even have to be an actual bus stop. It could be by a corner shop near you. It will show you on the screen where to go.’

‘What screen?’

Barry caught Devanika’s eye, and they both grinned.

‘You can ring in, if you don’t have the app,’ bus man continued. ‘Say where you want to go and someone will tell you where to stand so it can pick you up.’

Needles shook her head, confused.

Sarah took pity on him. ‘What does everyone else think?’

‘I couldn’t manage my kids on a bus. It’s enough hassle just getting them all in the car,’ said Barry.

‘Demand-led buses are especially useful in rural areas, where you get just one or two buses a day, if that,’ said the man.

‘You can say that again,’ said Steve. ‘This would be good for my business. I can never get enough workers for harvest time. The youngsters up for that kind of summer work can’t get to the farm, and cabs are too expensive.’

‘Probably below minimum wage,’ muttered Devanika.

Steve ignored her. If this took off in his area, he might even get his family back.

Bus man lit up, glad to have found an ally. ‘And the algorithm would quickly learn the pattern of commuting and adjust the frequency and routes as needed.’

‘I can see it’s good for people with no car, especially in rural areas, but it won’t replace car ownership,’ said Barry.

‘Might be handy though for when you want a drink,’ Devanika said.

Steve nodded. ‘Then you don’t have to choose between having a few whiskeys after work or carting your kids from place to place, because there’s no public transport.’

‘I’m guessing you chose whiskey,’ commented Devanika.

Steve controlled the surge of anger that coursed through his blood. Obviously he’d chosen whiskey. After working all day, it was his right. But they’d had no right to leave. They were his kids.

‘I couldn’t give up my car, though,’ said Devanika.

‘So much for our climate champion,’ said Steve.

‘Actually, I have a car share app, so when I’m not using it, others can borrow it,’ said Devanika.

‘Do you make a lot of money?’ asked Naomi.

‘Let’s not get off topic,’ Steve glared at Devanika.

‘I made three hundred last month.’

Naomi made a note to follow up. She might have to consider something like that.

‘That would be good for me too,’ added Jason. ‘I’d borrow one when I need to go out of town.’

‘The on-demand bus app will do that,’ bus man told Jason.

‘But this car share app exists now, and your bus thingy doesn’t exist yet here,’ said Jason.

‘It will if you all support it and see its potential,’ he insisted. ‘The goal is to switch from private transport and everyone having their own car to demand-led buses.’

‘But will people go for it?’ asked Naomi. ‘No offense, but buses are a bit grubby.’

‘You and your dirt!’ said Needles. ‘Too good to travel with us plebs is that it?’

‘No,’ she lied. ‘It’s just having your own car is more convenient, especially if you’ve got a lot of stuff, and like your own space. I’m going to get an electric soon anyway, soon as I can afford it.’

‘I’ve got an EV and an SUV,’ said Steve.

‘That just won’t do,’ protested bus man. ‘Just making an EV incurs environmental costs, and these don’t pay back until you’ve driven 25,000 miles. Cars have huge embedded carbon and use limited resources. The solution isn’t to get an additional EV or even swap, it’s to give up private transport and have an extensive, high-frequency, efficient, clean,’ he looked at Naomi, ‘demand-led public transport system.’ He turned to Steve. ‘In rural areas like yours especially, can you imagine what a difference it would make?’

‘No point asking him,’ spat Devanika. ‘This is the guy whose agricultural runoff pollutes our rivers, causing a public health hazard.’

Steve was startled by her vindictive tone.

‘Don’t take any notice of ‘Dev’, I like this idea.’

‘Dev’s a boy’s name. It’s Devanika... Stef!’

‘Don’t call me Stef,’ he snapped.

‘Why not Stef! Don’t you like being called Stef?’

‘Stop it!’

‘Stop what? Stef!’

‘That’s my wife’s name!’ he shouted, enraged.

Naomi looked at him, surprised. ‘Wife?’

‘Ex then. She ran off with the organic farmer.’

‘Was that before or after you changed the farm?’ Devanika asked.

‘None of your business,’ he snarled, furious at having lost his cool.

‘No really, we’re all interested. Did you overturn the organic farm as revenge for him running off with your wife, or did she run off with the organic farmer because she was so disgusted by you?’

The click-clack of knitting was a metronome, breaking the silence as all eyes turned to Steve. His charming manner had disappeared, and his eyes were ice cold as he regarded Devanika.

Sarah stood up and clapped her hand to break the tension. ‘Shall we assess the impacts now, Andrew?’

Andrew took his place by the board.

‘Transportation accounts for more greenhouse gas emissions than any other industry, with personal cars being the primary culprit,’ bus man said as he handed Andrew a report. ‘So for the UK, replacing individual cars with on-demand buses would save forty million tonnes of carbon emissions.’

Andrew sighed. ‘But in the areas where it has been trialled, how many have made use of it?’

‘Oh, you can’t go by that, because it hasn’t been going long enough. People start out thinking like this lady here,’ he nodded at Naomi, ‘but then when people have caught on, then more use it, and then the more people use it, the better it works.’

‘Based on the figures so far, what are your projections for the next five years?’ Andrew asked.

‘Well,’ he blustered, ‘they love it in the rural areas, of course they do, it’s so much better than what they had before.’

Needles knitted steadily, watching the bus man squirm under Andrew’s

questioning.

‘We can calculate savings from using public transport rather than individual vehicles,’ said Andrew, ‘but to get to millions of tonnes of savings, people need to give up their private car. Is there any evidence of this happening?’

‘Not yet, but, if we can get uptake of even ten percent rather than just one percent, the service gets exponentially more convenient as more buses run. At that point, it really wouldn’t make much sense running your own car, and the cost of the app also gets cheaper as more sign up. Few Londoners run their own car, for example, due to the convenience of public transport.’

‘Are there any areas where take-up has gone over one percent?’

‘For God’s sake, give the man a break,’ interrupted Steve. ‘It’s a good scheme.’

‘Yes,’ agreed bus man. ‘Imagine everybody. Imagine a world where roads aren’t narrowed by endless parked cars. No having to worry about parking, or drinking and driving, or having to concentrate. No more being stuck in traffic jams, no more road rage. Goodbye to all those exhaust fumes. No car tax or car insurance or worrying about MOTs or the next hike in fuel prices. And think of the carbon savings. It would make such a difference to all our lives and our beautiful planet if we all ditched our cars and signed up to the app.’

‘If...’ said Andrew and turned to the board.

Bus man’s evangelical glow disappeared as Andrew wrote a number on the whiteboard.

I have chosen.

DAY 5. RIGHT TO REPAIR

Andrew.

‘Back in the seventies, appliances were expensive, and most people rented them. We repaired televisions rather than throw them away. A fridge from the sixties was built to last sixty plus years, whereas today not more than twenty. We’re not shown how to properly use, maintain, or even clean appliances to extend their life.’

Naomi wished the repair man would shut up. Let’s face it, no one was

interested in mending stuff. Nothing could replace the thrill of buying new. She gazed round the room.

Needles was knitting and nodding. Devanika was paying attention. Barry looked sleepy. Jason was staring at Andrew, seemingly in a trance. She avoided looking at Steve, who kept trying to catch her eye.

Jason was trying to work out how old Andrew was. His calm air reminded him of his dad. A wave of emotion rose in him, stopping his breath for a moment. Stay calm. Ride it out. It's just the hash cookie kicking in.

'Extending the lifetime of smart phones from 3 to 10 years would save 6.2 million tonnes annually by 2030 – a 42% reduction on the overall footprint of the products.'

As the repair man spoke, Andrew jotted down the numbers, uncomfortably aware of Jason's eyes upon him. Had he guessed that Andrew wasn't all he seemed?

'Producing a smart phone requires 12000 liters of water. It contains 75 grams of metal, which means drilling through 6 kg of ore, and emits 7 kg of emissions while it's being produced, 300 times the weight of the phone itself. So it's not just the water, it's all the resources and energy going into making them.'

A ray of light shone a spotlight on the brand new iPhone peeking out Naomi's bag. 'I always recycle my old phones,' she said defensively, looking round.

'Recycling isn't the issue,' the man explained. 'You can't get back all the materials in a product. Repairing means we don't have to keep making products and causing these environmental impacts. Recycling is the last resort after being repaired and used and reused and worn out.'

'This is sounding a lot like the library of things proposal,' said Naomi.

'Very perceptive,' agreed the repair man. 'Most libraries of things have an associated repair café as the principles are the same. Avoiding waste, extending the life of a product.'

'You modern folk, you just chuck stuff away without a second thought,' said Needles.

'The thing is Granny, that stuff is cheap and time is precious,' said Steve. 'I'd rather be playing a round of golf than huddled over some workbench with a screwdriver.'

'I took the kids to a repair café once, as we had so much broken stuff, but the kids got bored waiting. I just don't have time to be honest,' Barry said.

Needles gazed at him sternly. 'You say you love your kids, young man. You keep going on about them and how scared you are for their future.'

'I am scared. I'm bloody terrified. I saw the film too.'

'It's too late now to stop climate change. We're buggered, so we've got to help our young people prepare. My grandson don't even know food comes from the ground. He couldn't tell a screwdriver from a piece of string.' Needles knitted furiously, shaking her head. 'I told him, forget about your exams sweetie, they ain't going to help yer. His mum won't let me see him now cos she don't like what I have to say. But he's so vulnerable, he wouldn't have a clue, the sweet babe. He needs to be taught don't he?'

Barry jumped as a needle was pointed at his face.

'As their father, you should know how to repair things and show your children.'

'My dad used to show me how to repair stuff,' said Jason.

'I also need to fix the fence, sort the tap, help Millie more with her homework, and sell everything we don't need on eBay so I can pay the water bill,' snapped Barry.

'It's easier just to buy new, isn't it?' Naomi appealed to the group. 'You get the latest thing with instructions and guarantee. All nicely wrapped and shiny.'

'Colonialism rules supreme,' said Devanika. 'We enjoy our latest smart phone and let the developing countries deal with the toxic waste.'

'When was the last time you repaired your phone, Dev?' Steve asked. Naomi shot him a grateful look.

'It's Devanika!'

'You didn't answer the question.' Steve smirked at Naomi, pleased with himself. Now Naomi saw him as her protector. And he'd put down the snooty cow. Two birds with one stone.

The repair man jumped in. 'You made a good point, Devanika. E-waste is increasing rapidly all over the globe and poses significant hazards. The toxic materials, heavy metals and acids leak into the soil and contaminate water supplies. You see increased prevalence of cancer and birth defects in surrounding communities. Children are especially vulnerable, affecting brain function and development.'

'It's capitalism. The manufacturers design products not to last because that's the most profitable business model,' said Devanika.

‘Again, you have hit the nail on the head. Planned obsolescence is what they call it.’

‘What are you going to do? You can’t exactly pass a law about it?’ scoffed Steve.

‘You can actually,’ he countered. ‘The EU have proposed a ban on it, and many countries have implemented a right to repair policy. France, for example, requires manufacturers to display the repairability of a product for consumers and make parts available.’

‘I took my radio alarm back and they wouldn’t repair it,’ said Needles.

‘We advocate removing VAT on repair,’ repair man said. ‘It’s one of the few things manufacturers and the right to repair movement agree on.’

‘Said it would be easier to buy new,’ Needles continued. “‘Young man,” I said to him, “this isn’t even twenty-five years old, and you want me to chuck it away?””

Naomi snorted involuntarily. Steve laughed, Devanika shared a sideways smile at Barry, and Jason collapsed into giggles.

‘Yes, just like you, young man. He just laughed in my face,’ said Needles.

You’ve got no idea what’s coming.

‘Well, it isn’t so funny,’ the repair man insisted. ‘Sorry to get heavy, but we all saw the same video. These figures matter. Over 200 million smart phones are sold every year in Europe. That’s nearly 7 every second. Each time one of these phones is made, it creates between 40 and 80 kilograms of CO₂.’

The anxiety of his tone and the increasing speed of the knitting needles created a panicked hush as everyone remembered day one and the video.

‘It’s urgent guys. Repair and reuse are the key. Recycling is a copout. The future of our planet depends upon it.’

Jason looked up, red-eyed. ‘This is getting heavy. I gotta watch my mental health.’

‘That’s cos you’re off your face, mate,’ Barry remarked.

Sarah looked over, surprised. She’d have expected such a comment from Steve rather than Barry.

Barry was also surprised at himself, but the idea that Jason had time to loll about smoking dope, playing guitar and computer games while he didn’t have time to

teach his kids was too much.

‘I’d vote for a repair café alongside those Libraries of Things,’ he conceded.

‘The thing is, even if there are repair cafés, doesn’t mean we’d use them,’ said Naomi.

‘It’s true. Although we all should repair, most of us don’t know how, or have the time to learn,’ added Devanika.

‘That’s why crafts are so important,’ said Needles waving her knitting in the air.

‘I’m good with my hands.’ Steve leered at Naomi, who looked away.

‘YouTube videos show you how to repair things,’ said Jason.

‘And what if the internet goes down and you don’t have Google?’ Needles stared at each of them in turn. ‘You’ll rue the day. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

‘Needles is right,’ said the repair guy. ‘Back in the day, the three R’s meant reading, reckoning and repair. It should be taught in schools.’

‘I loved design and technology,’ said Jason wistfully. ‘It was the only thing I was any good at, but then they stopped running it.’

‘People report immense satisfaction and empowerment when they learn how to do something for themselves,’ said repair man.

‘We were without Google last year,’ said Naomi, suddenly coming to life. ‘For five days. I was up in Scotland with my sister during the blackout. We couldn’t get television, and everything had run out of charge, so we worked out how to repair the torch and then managed to repair the old transistor radio. It was actually amazing.’

Repair man lit up encouraged. ‘Exactly! Yes! Now just imagine if our culture changed. What if, instead of having the marketing and money people calling the shots, getting us to buy, buy, buy, how about we value what we have? If we consider everything as precious as gold and throw nothing away, but repair and re-use? Preserve our precious world instead of trashing it? The repairers would be the new elite, valued as they should be.’

Jason beamed, the dream of a world where he felt useful hovering like a mirage on the horizon.

Steve tutted. ‘You just lost Naomi, mate. She’s in marketing.’

Repair man looked at Naomi, gutted. It was true. She was now shaking her head. She was marketing’s purveyor, but also its victim, and it wouldn’t release its hold on her without a fight.

Sarah also felt an unexpected jolt of disappointment. She reminded herself of her training: be aware of your own biases. Don't let hidden emotions and assumptions hi-jack the process. She forced herself to examine why tears were pricking the back of her eyes. Naomi reminded her of her ex. That was it. The time her ex had admitted that she shared Sarah's concerns about climate change and Sarah had felt a resurgence of hope that they could work. But then she'd spoiled it all.

Why is it all down to you? Do you know how grandiose you sound when you go on about saving the world? You've got a saviour complex.

Her girlfriend had medicalised her concerns. Treating a behavioural response that was absolutely necessary for the survival of all humanity as if it were a disease. It was the ultimate fucking gaslighting. Sarah had known then in her heart that she had to jettison her, but she hadn't acknowledged until now how angry that had made her.

Sarah looked around for solace and found it in Jason. He'd come out of his shell and was chatting to Andrew about how his dad had taught him to work with his hands, not just fixing stuff, but DIY and cooking. She was pleased and surprised. She'd assumed he'd be the ready meal type. Maybe there was more to him that met the eye.

'Are we ready to get some figures on the board?' asked Andrew. 'Although I suspect we may have the same issue as with the library of things.' Andrew tried not to show his alarm when he saw Jason's smile abruptly replaced by a suspicious glare. The click-clack of knitting needles seemed to quicken, then quieten back down.

Not yet.

DAY 6. PERSONAL CARBON ALLOWANCES

Remember why you're doing this.

Sarah tried not to show how nervous she was. It was the final session of the citizens' jury and things were heating up, both metaphorically and literally. The room was hot, Naomi looked stressed, and Steve was challenging everything she said. Jason was breathing hard and wiping his brow. Even the ever-calm Andrew looked on edge.

‘First, we need to go back to personal carbon allowances, then we’ll make our final decision,’ Sarah insisted again.

‘PCAs are bureaucratic and bad for business,’ said Steve. ‘You said that you want a solution that doesn’t have unintended consequences, right? Or solves one problem by causing another? If people reduce their consumption to stay under some kind of carbon ration, there will be a recession. The economy will nosedive.’

Naomi nodded. Her job depended on sales. The thought of losing it was terrifying.

Steve squeezed her hand. ‘PCAs are out. Carbon offsets are just an extra business cost. On-demand buses will actually be good for business. Workers can get to my farm for a start.’ He sat back, his point made.

‘You’re not going to let him get away with this, are you?’ demanded Devanika.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Sarah. ‘We’ll cover personal carbon allowances before we take a vote.’

‘They’re an infringement of basic liberty. I’m a businessman, not a hypocrite. Unlike you lot, I’m not pretending to be something I’m not.’ Steve looked meaningfully around the group.

Hold your nerve, Andrew told himself. Don’t sabotage everything now by telling them who you really are.

Needles was worried too. Did Steve mean her? She’d got away so far without giving her real name.

I must do it now, before I’m unveiled.

The sound of knitting paused, creating an ominous silence.

Andrew saw Needles staring at him and panicked. He pulled Sarah aside and muttered urgently in her ear.

‘What?’ Sarah gazed at him in shock. She was prepared for everything, but not this.

‘I thought you were doing the meditation one, but then you introduced the knitter, so I kept quiet,’ he whispered.

The group shifted, sensing something was being kept from them.

‘You can’t say anything now. It’s too risky,’ Sarah hissed back.

‘I thought these proceedings were supposed to be a hundred percent

transparent,' commented Steve.

Sarah sighed. She nodded at Andrew.

He stood up. 'My name isn't Andrew, although I am an auditor. I'm a Buddhist and my given name is Samudrapati. I am sworn to a life of compassion for all living things. I reverted to my original name for fear you'd make assumptions about my independence in this process. But as Steve has already questioned this independence, I judged it was better to speak up.'

The click-click of needles resumed.

Ah! I need a new target.

He sat down and looked hopefully round the group. 'I hope this hasn't prejudiced you against me.'

They shook their heads uncertainly, but Sarah didn't like the smirk on Steve's face. Andrew had just handed him a gift and she had no doubt he'd use it.

'Well, thanks for that, Andrew, or should I call you your other name?' Sarah shook her head slightly.

'Er no, Andrew's fine.' Best not push his luck.

'Let's get back to where we were, then. Naomi, you look worried. Any thoughts?'

'You liked the library of things idea a bit, didn't you?' asked Barry.

She looked doubtful.

'You fancied the gold card option, didn't you love, where you could borrow yachts and such?' Steve suggested. Naomi let the endearment pass and gave a small nod. She didn't have it in her to resist.

'We see alike on these matters,' Steve declared to the group.

Naomi sighed. 'Yes, but realistically, it would never get to that level, would it? As Andrew said, even the biggest one with local authority support, grants and volunteers only engaged about 0.1% of the local population.'

'I like the repair cafés,' said Jason.

'Me too,' said Needles.

'Aren't you supposed to just knit?' asked Steve.

You all think I don't count.

‘Didn’t you like the repair one?’ Jason asked Naomi. ‘You lit up when you talked about repairing the radio during the blackout.’ Jason saw her smile as she remembered. ‘I know what you mean, it’s really satisfying fixing stuff, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was,’ Naomi agreed, ‘but I know that I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t have to. I’d just buy something new.’

‘If demand-led buses get proper support and take off, the private sector will get involved and do smart buses, they won’t all be grubby,’ said Steve.

‘They’ll only get high demand if people give up their cars and no one’s going to do that,’ said Naomi.

‘Naomi doesn’t like anything,’ said Needles.

‘Why does everyone make me have to be the bad guy? I only say what you all think. It’s not fair.’ Naomi was out of sorts, and it wasn’t just the jury. She’d gone overboard on the shopping channel and now she had to pay for it. She could send it all back, but it was such an effort to parcel everything up again. It was all such a struggle.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Steve, ‘I’ll take care of you, love.’ He put his arm round her and she was enveloped in his aftershave. It smelled reassuringly expensive. To her shame, Naomi couldn’t help thinking how nice it would be to be taken care of for a while.

Steve noticed that she didn’t pull away. He’d have her tonight, he decided. But she was wrong if she thought he’d take care of her. She’d be a one-nighter.

‘I don’t want to always feel guilty,’ she said.

‘No one’s trying to make you feel bad,’ soothed Devanika. ‘I feel guilty all the time, too.’

‘And me,’ added Barry.

‘But it’s as you say. You have said no to everything,’ said Needles, knitting briskly.

Naomi looked over. Had the needles always been that sharp? They looked like they’d been honed to a point. She told herself not to be paranoid and tried a shaky smile. The smile she got in return was malicious rather than reassuring.

‘We haven’t fully discussed personal carbon allowances,’ said Sarah. ‘We do this properly or not at all.’

‘Not at all then.’ Steve didn’t try to hide his irritation. He’d shut that down on

day one. He wasn't expecting it to come back and bite him on the arse.

'This is not your jury!' Sarah glared at him through narrowed eyes. 'This is my baby, and we'll discuss PCAs.'

He threw himself back in the chair, hands up. 'Whoa. Steady on lady, keep your hair on.'

'Let me recap.' Sarah nodded at Andrew, who stood up and wrote PCA on the whiteboard. 'We need to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and this requires immediate and extensive reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. There are several versions of this idea, but the key aspect is that Government sets a personal and equal cap on emissions so everyone would receive the same carbon allowance.'

The click-clack of knitting seemed to echo each statement. Steve tapped his fingers on the table impatiently.

'People with low-carbon lifestyles would use up their account more slowly than those with high carbon lifestyles. Once their allowance runs out, consumption would become much more expensive. Those who don't use up their allowance can sell their remainder on the personal carbon market. This benefits less well off or greener people and encourages people to reduce their carbon footprint. For example, by insulating their homes or using more energy-efficient transportation.'

Barry put his hand up. 'How would it affect medium to low-income households?'

'Good question. It's been calculated that 71% of low-income households would be better off under PCAs.'

'Yay!' Jason went to high five Barry, who ignored him.

'And high-income households?' asked Steve.

'It's likely that you'd need to pay more than you usually would, depending on how much you went over your allowance. It acts as a very progressive form of taxation.'

Andrew ticked the social justice column.

'That's not social justice!' cried Devanika. 'The poor won't be paid off with a bit of money while the rich buy up all the carbon credits and continue to trash the planet.'

'I'll take the dosh. I'm not proud,' said Barry.

'Have a ration, like during the war,' said Needles.

Devanika nodded.

‘The strict version does indeed act like a ration on consumption,’ said Sarah.

‘That’s an infringement of our liberty. There’s no point my having money if I can’t spend it,’ protested Steve.

‘No,’ agreed Devanika, satisfied.

‘I worked hard for my money,’ said Steve.

‘I bet you inherited it,’ said Barry.

‘I worked my way up from nothing.’

‘Oh God, they’re the worst. I did so anyone can.’

‘Don’t worry, the rich will have to pay for their excess consumption,’ Sarah reassured Devanika. ‘Some versions add a premium that goes towards carbon removal projects, in addition to paying lower consumers for their carbon credits.’

‘Who pays for all the bureaucracy?’ demanded Steve.

‘It will cost about £30 a year per adult to run, which can come from taxpayers or be part of the premium paid by over-consumers.’

‘What if you have special needs?’ Jason asked.

‘And kids?’ asked Barry.

‘Just like money, you can apply for extra, like you do with child benefit and the disability allowance. If you vote for PCAs, a follow-up citizens’ jury will decide the details.’

‘It’s total lunacy,’ Steve adopted his most authoritative tone. ‘There will be a black market instantly, fraud and all the rest.’

‘It’s the same with money. Just because people evade tax and engage in financial fraud, we don’t not have money,’ said Devanika.

Sarah nodded. ‘Their success will depend on how rigorous we are in enforcing the rules, and we’ll be rigorous.’

Barry looked worried. ‘The thing is my kids, they won’t eat vegetables. Millie won’t eat anything but beefburgers. The kids are too stressy to get on a bus.’

‘Stop moaning about your children. You’re lucky to have them,’ said Devanika.

‘I love my kids. I’d do anything for them,’ protested Barry.

‘Well, it doesn’t sound like it. You’ve not gone for anything that hasn’t suited you.’

‘Don’t make me feel bad. I don’t ever stop, and it’s still not enough. This time away has been bliss. They paid my employer, sorted a child-minder. It’s the first break I’ve had since they were born. You just swan around saying ‘I’ll pay my carbon

offset' or 'I might jump on a bus' as if it's not a ton of hassle. And there's Jason,' he mimicked Jason's slow drawl, 'I'll just take time out from strumming my guitar to have a little tinker and repair something.' Why the hell should I? There's enough on my plate already. You like kids so much. You babysit and I'll take some of that carbon offset money to take my missus out for dinner cos that's not something we've done since the kids arrived.'

'Okay,' said Devanika.

'What?'

'I'll look after your kids while you go out.'

'That shut you up,' said Steve. 'Thank God.'

'Oh! Well, thanks! I'll take the bus to the vegan restaurant, just to show willing like. I heard it's pretty good, actually.'

The steady sound of knitting filled the brief pause.

'Anyway,' continued Barry, 'I just wanted to ask how life would change, like how drastic it would be?'

'A lot of changes you'd hardly notice,' said Sarah. 'A quick win is to use less hot water as that uses most energy, so launder and shower less and at lower temperatures. If you've got a dog or cat, you can switch to insect-based pet food which has a lower carbon footprint. Buy clothes second hand, do fashion swaps. None of this should affect your quality of life. In fact, you'd save time and money.'

'Could you still fly?' Naomi asked.

'I bet you could if planes switched to hydrogen?' said Devanika.

'I'm afraid that's a pipe dream. Our last citizens' jury on energy showed hydrogen won't be the silver bullet we'd hoped. It has issues with cost, safety and performance, and requires lots of energy in the first place to get it off the ground.'

'What about sustainable biofuel, or electric planes?' inquired Naomi.

'Electric is out except for very short flights, as batteries are heavy. The term sustainable biofuel is misleading. It raises land use issues such as deforestation, water supply, pesticides. Also, biofuel uses vast tracts of land which we need for food. It's not a solution. If you want to go on your summer holiday, you just have to cut right back on your other areas or pay a lot more for the privilege than you do currently.'

Steve had decided to say nothing and let the others argue for him, but Naomi just shrugged.

She wasn't as upset as she'd expected. Holidays weren't what they were. What with seas full of plastic, queues at airports, worries about Covid. Plus, that feeling of being judged. It wasn't worth the effort anymore.

'Wake up, people,' he said. 'They'll start the PCA low at first and then tighten it like a screw.'

Needles paused her knitting almost like a stenographer taking proceedings, watching Sarah intently as if for a cue. The knitting resumed as Sarah spoke.

'That's the plan, yes. As Churchill said, it's not enough to do our best. We have to do what is necessary.'

Andrew turned to the white board and wrote in capitals: WE MUST DO WHAT IS NECESSARY.

Sarah gazed at the group and spoke softly. 'Remember day one and the film we all saw?'

She looked at Needles, who'd slowed her knitting down to a sorrowful clicking. No, she wasn't imagining it. It was like the soundtrack in a nature documentary. It had been especially 'clicky' during Steve's outbursts, brisk and almost accusing with Naomi earlier, soft when Barry accepted Devanika's offer of childcare.

'We'll start easy to give the market and business time to adjust, and then we will set the PCA at the level determined by climate scientists. It won't be enough to do what is politically palatable. We must do what's needed. In stage one, PCAs will apply to personal transport and energy use only, then broaden to increase material goods. Andrew, can you show us the figures for all the ideas we discussed so far?'

He nodded and wrote emissions savings at the top and listed the solutions down the side.

- Carbon offsetting
- Sharing economy/libraries of things
- On-demand buses
- Repair

He consulted his notes and created several columns: uptake at 1%, uptake at 10%, uptake at 50%. Under the first column he listed the figures arrived at previously, numbers that had left each presenter disheartened.

'You can see,' he explained, 'none of these solutions obtained even one percent

take up, so each fell far short of the carbon savings required. In fact, between them, they struggled to reach one million tonnes. We expect that with the PCAs, even at the relatively high initial level, what with the financial incentive to stay below your allowance, we'd easily reach ten percent take up for libraries of things, repair cafes and demand-led buses. Emissions savings would go up exponentially. Remember that it's not enough just to reduce our emissions, we've left it too late for that, tipping points have been passed. So, like the carbon offset project, it funnels money into carbon removal projects.'

He consulted his report and wrote new figures up on the board. Everyone gasped as they all increased by several zeroes.

'Now, once the PCAs are reduced to the level required in the second phase, we anticipate few people would run their own car.' The number next to demand-led buses increased to forty million tonnes.

'In the second stage, embedded carbon would be included in the calculations, increasing the advantages of borrowing and repair over buying new.' The pen made a slight squeak as the numbers went up to sixty million for the repair cafes and libraries of things respectively.

'Surely not that many people would go to musty libraries?' asked Naomi.

'It's not just libraries. As buying new goods uses up carbon allowances, your fancy department stores would swap their toy, fashion and games departments for subscription services. You'd be more likely to buy your dad a year's membership to the sports department than a new set of golf clubs,' he said. 'There would be apps developing and expanding, like there are already, to swap fashion and games. You'd borrow and return.'

'An Amazon of borrowing?' suggested Jason.

'Probably,' said Andrew.

Naomi nodded, mouth open, trying to process what she was hearing.

He turned again to the whiteboard. 'We can add an estimated extra sixty million tonnes for the spillover effects as there'd be increased incentives towards home insulation, businesses would invest in low-carbon technology and so on.' He nodded at Steve. 'For example, adopting sustainable farming methods would lower the carbon footprint of your produce, enabling you to reach a wider market.'

Steve maintained a stony expression.

Jason whistled through his teeth as the number increased to 220 million

tonnes.

‘What about the carbon offsets?’ asked Devanika.

‘If we use the version that allows people to pay the full carbon offset cost to fund carbon removal projects rather than purchase carbon from those who haven’t spent their allowance, then we can add another 300 million tonnes of CO₂ saved.’

‘Oh my God! It’s the only thing that will get us there,’ breathed Barry.

Sarah observed their expressions - inquiring, concerned, hopeful, calculating. The knitting sounded almost jaunty. If they got this through, her sacrifices would have been worth it.

Steve thought quickly. They’d be expecting him to play the personal liberty card, but even he could see it didn’t stack up against the survival of humanity. The one who kept their cool would win.

‘The trouble is,’ said Steve smoothly, ‘that as the economy nosedives due to the drop in consumption, business won’t have money to invest in anything. Something mister Darly Llama here wouldn’t understand, being against material values and all that. There’ll be a huge recession, people will protest and we’ll be rushing back to normal as fast as we can.’

Naomi nodded.

Andrew responded in the same reasonable tone. ‘That’s because a recession is defined as a drop in the gross domestic product - that is, retail sales and manufacturing go down. Let’s do a thought experiment. Imagine everyone could get access to what they want without having to buy anything new, so they didn’t need to work so hard.’ He was pleased to see that they all looked thoughtful, except for Steve. ‘Well-being has gone up, but GDP - gross domestic product has gone down. Recession is just a word. Does it actually matter if consumption has gone down if well-being has gone up?’

‘Then why is everyone chasing economic growth?’ asked Barry.

‘Habit.’

‘But what about jobs?’ parried Steve.

‘You said yourself, PCAs generate bureaucracy - there’ll be no shortage of work, and repairing stuff takes time,’ said Andrew.

‘I’d volunteer at a repair cafe,’ said Jason.

Andrew smiled at him, the first time a proper expression had crossed his face. ‘They’d be doing very well under PCAs. They could afford to pay you.’

‘Nah, too much pressure if I’m employed. Anyway, I’d get lots of dosh from selling my spare carbon credits.’

‘You might be interested to know that our last citizens’ jury decided that switching from the GDP as our key metric of success to a well-being index was a crucial climate solution,’ Sarah added. ‘Then we could change the conversation from what’s good for the economy to what’s good for us. The assumption that they are the same thing no longer holds up.’

Steve was down to his last card. He leaned forward on the table. ‘Wake up everybody! This is a brainwashing exercise. Do we want a religious nut guiding our thoughts?’ He nodded towards Andrew.

Steve had pipped Jason as the one most likely to fall for conspiracy theories, but it was Devanika who bit.

‘He did lie about who he was,’ she said slowly. ‘In fact, I know where I’ve seen you before. At the refill shop, in your orange robes.’

Sarah was dismayed. This is what she’d been afraid of.

‘They’ve kept us in this room, away from outside influences, parted from our phones, like some kind of cult,’ said Steve.

Buddhism was hardly a cult, but to argue the case was to play into his hands.

The room suddenly felt hot and oppressive. Sarah kicked herself. She’d known there was more to Andrew than met the eye. His unnatural calmness for a start. She had chosen not to probe. This was her fault. The planet’s future... no the planet would be just fine - humanity’s future was in the balance and she’d failed it due to lack of due diligence.

‘Don’t you care?’ she asked Steve suddenly.

Steve donned the expected expression. It amazed him why everyone played this game.

‘Yes I do. I care a lot.’

They both knew that if she challenged his statement, she’d just look cynical and aggressive.

The click-clack of knitting had taken on an edgy note. Jason was beathing heavily. Naomi, for all her smart clothes and makeup, looked strangely vulnerable.

Sarah noticed the sun was now shining into Jason’s eyes. ‘Can you close the blinds, please Andrew?’ She couldn’t help her clipped tone. There was so much at stake and his confession had given Steve a way in.

‘It’s Samudrapati,’ he said suddenly. They had nothing to lose now. Time to stop hiding who he was and use it. ‘Can we use the courtyard garden out the back?’ he asked Sarah.

She looked at him in surprise. His face had lost that deadpan look and come alive with wisdom and a certain authority. The sun’s rays blazing in through the window lit up his head like a halo. A change of scene might just save them.

‘Great idea!’

‘We’ll head outside now for a mindfulness exercise.’

Steve snorted. ‘Here we go.’

‘This is a process used by EU officials working on climate change policy. They’ve found it improves consensus building,’ Samudrapati responded calmly.

Steve remained sat, his arms folded. Sarah nodded towards Jason, who was now hyperventilating.

‘Come on,’ she said firmly. ‘Leave everything here.’

‘What about my knitting?’ said Needles.

Samudrapati shook his head and opened the door.

Steve reluctantly joined the group as they shuffled out. Needles quickly shoved her knitting in a pocket. Sarah closed the door after them and locked it. Samudrapati led the group round the corner and out a back door into a walled courtyard garden. It had a tiny lawn and benches surrounding a central oak tree.

Jason collapsed on a bench, breathing hard. Everyone stood around staring at him, concerned.

‘Don’t crowd him,’ said Samudrapati. ‘Find a bench and give him some space.’

‘Sorry, when it gets hot, I get anxious. My—’ he gulped, ‘my dad. He had a heart attack on holiday. They said it was the heat. Sorry.’

‘No need to apologize.’ Samudrapati’s warm eyes were compassionate. ‘We’ll sit quietly for a while. You too, Sarah.’

Sarah decided to trust him and relaxed into the bench.

‘You can close your eyes if you wish, or look around you. Let your mind be still. It might help to count your breaths, in... one... out... two.’

Gradually, Jason’s breathing slowed.

‘Thoughts will come,’ intoned Samudrapati, ‘but just imagine them like puffs of white clouds across a clear blue sky.’

Jason gazed up into the tree. Glimpses of sky were visible through the foliage.

Sunlight sparkled through the leaves.

‘You’ve all had a lot to process, so I’ll stop talking and we’ll just sit for five minutes.’

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. The sound of birdsong had replaced the click-clack of knitting and the peace of the garden was working its magic.

Steve’s thoughts were less peaceful. One thing stood out for him. If they adopted PCAs, the organic farmer would win. His jaw tightened.

Devanika closed her eyes and counted her breaths as suggested.

Naomi gazed at the oak. It was magnificent in its raw beauty. Strong, rooted, branching out in glorious symmetry. Its leaves shimmering green against the vivid blue sky. She thought of all the cardboard boxes piling up in her spare room.

Barry was feeling guilty. He’d been irritated at the pride in Jason’s voice when he’d talked about his dad showing him how to repair things. He’d thought Jason was having a pop at him for not teaching his kids. He’d got it so wrong.

‘That’s five minutes,’ Samudrapati’s voice was like liquid honey, ‘would anyone like to share their experience?’

‘Hearing nature all around, well it reminded me what we have to lose,’ said Devanika.

‘Rubbish,’ scoffed Steve, ‘it made me realize that the world is just fine!’

‘Listen,’ said Sarah. ‘What do you hear?’

The soft coo of a wood pigeon, a silence, then the tuneful melody of the garden robin, looking at them sideways from the wall.

‘A few years ago, you’d also hear the hum of bees on the honeysuckle,’ said Sarah.

The robin drew its song to a close, and the silence seemed loud all of a sudden.

‘There’s one!’ Jason pointed in excitement at a lone bee and everyone breathed out in relief.

‘I like the idea of a world where we take care of stuff,’ Barry murmured.

‘It shouldn’t be such an alien concept, I suppose,’ Devanika agreed.

‘We don’t want you to take care of stuff,’ said Naomi. ‘We just want you to buy. We don’t care what happens to it after that.’

‘It’s called business, it’s the economy. It’s a good thing,’ Steve said, putting his hand on hers.

‘Do you think it’s a good thing?’ Needles demanded, peering at Naomi.

Naomi reeled a little under her gaze. The old lady seemed suddenly intense without the knitting.

‘It’s just marketing.’ Naomi thought of the video they’d seen. The horrifying picture of humans marching towards their own destruction like automatons. The image hadn’t left her all week. It was too close to home. The unpaid bills, cupboards full of things, boxes everywhere. She’d splashed out on an extra bedroom so her friends could stay, but she could barely squeeze in there now herself. She knew the party was over and it was time to pay the bill. It was almost a relief to admit it. But she didn’t know if she could pay.

She shook her head slowly.

Steve saw it all slipping away from him. He was losing his key ally. ‘But didn’t you say your customers prefer sustainable products?’ he asked desperately.

‘We take the same product, put it in a brown cardboard container instead of a shiny plastic box and charge twice as much for half the quantity.’

‘That’s greenwash!’ cried Devanika.

Naomi nodded. ‘And all those statistics for skin care, saying ninety percent say this or that. I’m pretty sure they’re not true. I’ve made up test results for some blurb and no one ever challenged them or told me to check any data, until recently.

Although, it’s strange, even though I was inventing them, I still kind of believed it.’

‘I’d do anything for my grandson,’ said Needles, seemingly apropos of nothing.

‘If we vote for this, will it really happen?’ Naomi asked.

‘Yes,’ said Sarah.

Naomi started to weep.

Tears won’t help you, love.

Needles put her hand in her pocket, pulling the knitting away.

‘It won’t be that bad, reassured Sarah. ‘With everyone on board, it won’t be long before you get your Gold Card membership for the library of things. You might even get to borrow a yacht! You can gad about by bus wherever and whenever at hardly any cost and rural economies will be transformed. Life will be cheaper. You’ll gain in confidence as you learn to value your stuff, learn how to maintain it, and how to sew and repair. You’ll have space in your homes. Picture the roads with no parked cars, no traffic jams. You’ll have more time to take slow transport, you’ll still have

holidays. And you won't need to be resentful of others who aren't doing their bit, or guilty for wanting a beefburger because you will have your own allotted carbon allowance that is yours to do as you like with. Be green and richer or high-consuming and pay the full cost and a bit more for luck.'

Naomi gazed up at her through red-rimmed eyes. 'What's the catch?' she whispered.

Oh, she's in. I nearly made another mistake.

'We all have to agree. It has to be unanimous,' said Sarah.

Everyone looked at Steve.

He shook his head. 'Like I said, it's bureaucratic and costly.'

'So what, if it's necessary?' hissed Needles.

The others nodded in agreement.

'That's what Churchill said, weren't it? You gotta do what's necessary.' She fingered the sharp tip of the needles.

Maybe I shouldn't...

'It's always the same,' said Barry. 'The loud-mouthed rich bastards and vested interests kick up a stink the moment anything hits their pockets.'

'Global warming, that's more heatwaves, that's what they said, isn't it?' Jason cried suddenly. He rounded on Steve. 'A heatwave killed my dad,' he shouted. 'He was only 45. He was a really good bloke.'

Steve was 46. 'Look around you, we're fine,' he blustered, suddenly feeling hot. Then Devanika was in his face.

'My baby died,' she hissed. 'Probably due to nitrates from excessive use of fertilizers. Like from farms like yours.'

Before he could protest the ridiculousness of the statement, Sarah was staring intently into his eyes.

'This citizens' jury is my baby,' she said in an ominously quiet tone.

'Our baby,' Devanika was back in his face.

'And I'll protect it as viciously as any mother would protect her cub,' Sarah said quietly.

‘In the rest of the world, rich white power-hungry leaders might make the decisions,’ Devanika jabbed a finger at Steve.

‘But in this citizens’ jury, with expert input, and a calm, reflective environment, people will choose what’s best for them,’ Sarah said with an air of finality.

Naomi wrenched her hand from under Steve’s grip. She wanted this. She wanted it desperately and right now.

‘Make me,’ said Steve.

Oh yes!

‘Aiye!’ cried Steve as the needles penetrated his flesh.

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Back inside, the police had finished taking witness statements. They were uncertain what to arrest the old lady for. She insisted her needles had just ‘slipped.’ Everyone else had stated that it had all happened so fast that no one could be sure what had happened. Hard to believe, bearing in mind she was 85.

The only thing there was full agreement on was that at the moment the needles penetrated his flesh she had cried, ‘this is for my Grandson.’ However, the old lady insisted she’d meant the jumper she was knitting and was nothing to do with that fact that the victim had failed to vote for something called Personal Carbon Allowances which would save humanity from extinction.

The victim was finally carried out on the stretcher, two knitting needles still protruding from his torso. The police officers heard that the knitter had been recruited to provide a peaceful atmosphere to negotiations¹³.

¹³ This story includes two characters who first appear in the novel [Habitat Man](#) published in 2021