

Free chapters of *The Ministry for Ignoring Climate Change* by David Millar

Part 1: Famine

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‘The new Minister? Well ... he’s what you might call pale green,’ said Jay Lynn quietly, wrinkling his nose and tipping his head slightly towards the man at the end of the room.

His younger colleague Adam Winter looked puzzled.

‘Environmentally aware but also a political realist,’ murmured Lynn, nodding in approval. With his waistcoat and greying sideburns he was the image of the calm and confident senior public servant.

‘Last month, for example, he attended a rally for polar bears, posed for the cameras, said all the right things, even name-checked Greta Thunberg a couple of times – and then quietly voted in support of relaxing vehicle emission standards the same afternoon. He’s very ... pragmatic.’ He nodded approvingly.

Winter blinked. ‘Polar bears? At a rally?’ Was this was a Canadian thing he didn’t know about?

Lynn stared at him. ‘Not *at* the rally, no,’ he hissed. ‘It was a rally in *support* of polar bears. To raise awareness of the fact that the sea ice they hunt on is disappearing.’

‘Oh ...’ It was Monday morning, he was a bit slow.

The two men were standing at the back of a staff meeting at the Ministry for Climate Change in Ottawa, convened to announce the appointment of its new Minister, the Honourable Max North, a dynamic fortysomething MP getting his first

cabinet position, their new boss. Well, Lynn's boss. Winter was further down the pecking order.

'He wants to meet with us after this. Three o'clock over at East Block'.

'Me?' Winter was surprised. He'd only joined the Ministry a few months before and unlike career professionals such as Lynn was in a technical role. Usually the politicians didn't want to talk with the geeks.

Lynn chuckled. 'He asked me to bring our 'windfarm specialist',' making air quotes with his fingers. 'I reckon you must be that guy since you're the only person in the building who's even seen one.' He smiled and leaned closer so that he wouldn't have to speak loudly. 'Actually it's broader than that. He's keen to bring a fresh approach and learn from other countries. The PM feels our department hasn't been open enough to new ideas so as our resident alien I proposed you be involved in a range of the new discussions to help us see things in a different light. That's why you're here, right?' Despite his professional demeanour, Winter noticed that Lynn winced slightly when he said this.

Resident alien? That was an interesting way of describing his role. Winter was a self-confessed climate nerd who had been working at the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London as part of a team tasked with coming up with ways to reduce carbon emissions when this overseas posting had come up, a two-year secondment to Canada as part of a UN scheme. Motivated as much by Monty Python's Lumberjack Song as by a dislike of the Northern Line he'd decided to apply and been surprised but happy to get it. It had been slow so far but now it sounded as though he'd actually get to do what he was supposed to be there for.

Further discussion was cut short as the newly-anointed Minister stepped smartly onto a small stage at the end of the room to applause. He was smiling broadly, a slightly short man with thinning but wind-blown hair which somehow gave him the air of a stand-up comedian trying to warm up his audience. He had taken off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves in that slightly absurd way that politicians do when they want to look as though

they are working, and began to speak enthusiastically about what he hoped to accomplish in his new role – why it was *fantastic* to be joining such a *great* department at such an *exciting* time.

Overwhelmed by superlatives, Winter found himself struggling to avoid tuning out. Nonetheless he was still optimistic that North would be an improvement on his predecessor, an older man who had appeared to regard climate change as more of a personal inconvenience to his political career than a crisis for the planet. In Canadian government circles ‘MinCC’ was apparently regarded as a poisoned chalice, unpopular with most of the electorate and near-impossible to show positive results – more than one career had foundered in its offices. But North was younger and more energetic than his predecessors and had actually lobbied for the position, so Winter was optimistic that he would bring fresh ideas or at least more enthusiasm to the department. Indeed he was banking on it.

If North was pale green, Winter himself was bright green. For starters he’d only been in the department six months and wasn’t even Canadian. He saw himself as part of a generation for whom working to save the planet was a calling, something he could actually do to make a difference rather than just recycling his empties and feeling guilty whenever he took the plane on his holidays.

When he had started at the DECC in London he’d been disappointed by the bureaucracy but had come to appreciate that fighting climate change from within government was a lot different than outside as an individual. Government was a big lumbering machine that could achieve a lot if you got it moving in the right direction, but to do so everyone had to be singing from the same hymn sheet, as his previous boss used to say.

These days, while he definitely empathized with the outrage of many of his generation, he felt that more could be achieved by helping implement the internationally-agreed targets than just waving banners. Was there even anyone left who was not aware of the mess the planet was in, that still needed to be told? The Ottawa posting was a big opportunity for him. And Canada! What was not to like? He knew there were issues with the carbon emissions from their oil sands but overall his impression was very

positive – snow capped Rockies, broad flowing rivers, deep forests, wide-open spaces, the outdoor life, a new world which still had a chance not to mess things up.

But things were not going well.

In principle it had all made sense. For all its wholesome image he had quickly learned that Canada had one of the worst records on the planet when it came to tackling climate change – sixty-first out of the world's sixty-four most carbon-emitting countries at last count, whereas the UK ranked fourth, just a few places below saintly Sweden. So the idea was that he could give them some pointers on how it was done, share best practices, tell them what other countries were doing – assuming of course that they wanted to listen.

The problem was that he was increasingly convinced they didn't. He was coming to the conclusion that the role of the Ministry in Ottawa was not to take action on climate change at all but to provide a smoke-screen for inaction, to generate a steady stream of nice-sounding initiatives and comforting soundbites that gave the impression the government was doing something, whilst actually doing nothing at all. In other words, to obfuscate – to ignore climate change rather than to fix it. For this he had mainly blamed the outgoing Minister and it was only the rumours that he was about to be moved that had stopped him from chucking in the job in frustration. Perhaps that was what had discouraged his predecessor, whose abrupt departure six months previously had, he'd recently learned, created the vacancy in the first place. He knew of plenty of other places, countries without oil and gas, where they were genuinely keen to build up renewable energy industries, to be self-sufficient and ahead of the game. So he hoped that the rumours were true and that the new Minister was going to be a new broom.

Winter would therefore have been disappointed if he'd known that North himself didn't really identify as an environmentalist at all but more as a manager and problem-solver. Of course he understood that climate change was a serious problem and he had a better grip of the issues than most, but at the end of the day he saw it as just another problem to be solved through good planning and the appropriate application of resources. Before

moving into government he'd been a management consultant and was hoping that he could bring some out-of-the-box thinking to the challenges of climate change and reducing CO2 emissions, then leverage that to demonstrate his skills for bigger jobs – defence, foreign affairs, maybe even finance. Max North was ambitious and full of ideas. His critics just felt that he should sometimes focus more on their substance and not just the quantity.

Above all Max North had realized that if he was smart he could translate the recent upsurge in voter enthusiasm for addressing climate change into raising his personal profile. He wanted to be the people's hero, the man with a plan who solved the country's biggest problem that had defeated everyone else.

And in politics if you were not in the news you were nobody.

Unlike North, Lynn was not a politician but as Ministerial Permanent Secretary was in effect the Minister's deputy, and the most senior civil servant in the department. He was the one who could get things done, the man with the finely-tuned political antennae who knew the right moment to pitch an idea to his Minister to get it accepted, or to discretely introduce doubts that would sink an undesirable one. He was careful to avoid expressing personal opinions on anything and to always appear impartial, but deep down he was a bit of a closet climate sceptic.

By his own admission he did not fully understand the science but didn't see this as a problem. Surely in an arctic country like Canada being a few degrees warmer wasn't entirely bad? Higher crop yields, lower gas bills, that sort of thing? On his own colour scale he would probably have called himself muddy green. 'Pragmatic' green maybe, if such a shade existed.

At fifty-two he was also aware that he'd progressed as far in the civil service as he was ever likely to. Not limited by ability of course, one of Jay Lynn's frustrations with his job was that he often felt better-equipped to make decisions than his bosses, but just the lack of more senior positions available. He felt lucky to get the MPS position and it had been at the price of moving to a smaller ministry – he missed his old department, Defense, felt that he'd been at the centre of government there, the sense of privilege of knowing things that the general public were unaware

of. But it was more money and more pension and at his age you couldn't turn your nose up at that.

Another couple of years and he'd start sounding out his buddies at the golf club for a few directorships, that would be a nice way to end up his career, in the private sector. He was already planning it, spending more time there, getting to know the right people. Most of them were smarter than your average civil servant which he found stimulating, and quite financially rewarding too. A couple were happy to share their inside tips on shares and he'd done well from that. He needed to, his wife had cleaned him out when she'd left – he'd been lucky to be able to keep the big house in Rockcliffe Park although he'd had to take on a new mortgage to do so, something he wasn't too happy about, but the way he saw it it was essential to maintain his social status. For Jay Lynn, optics were important, professionally and privately.

'Ever been inside the East Block before?' asked Lynn as they drove across the Alexandra Bridge that separated Ottawa from Gatineau, effectively the north half of the city but in French-speaking Quebec not Ontario. Parliament was in Ottawa, the Ministry was in Gatineau, two floors in an anonymous brown high rise without even a government sign at the entrance.

They were on their way to North's office on Parliament Hill in the historic East Block building, Victorian High Gothic architecture at its best, all spires and green copper roofs. Like Disneyland but without the giant Mickey Mouse suits.

'Nope,' replied Winter. Of course he hadn't been there, Lynn knew that – to date he'd barely left his cubicle on the fifth floor.

'Heart of government, you really feel at the centre of things. All the Ministers have their offices there just across the street from the Prime Minister's Office, and the MP's are over in the West Block. All the *decision-makers* in one place.'

Winter couldn't decide if the emphasis was sarcasm or a hint of jealousy. Even though they'd been in meetings together he really didn't know Lynn that well, partly because Lynn never expressed any strong views, just nodded thoughtfully. He

couldn't decide if this was because he agreed with everything that was being said or simply had no views on the topics, but given his seniority no one had ever asked.

Winter had been preparing to cycle across to the meeting, it was only a couple of kilometres after all, but Lynn had insisted on driving his big SUV, mainly so he could use his parliamentary pass and drive past the crowds of tourists and park on Parliament Hill. After holding up the pass to a heavily-armed policeman they parked and walked across the courtyard to the Minister's building where they went through the full procedure of signing-in and X-raying their bags.

'Don't you just love this architecture?' Lynn whispered as they climbed the wide staircase. 'Built eighteen-sixty something, years behind schedule and four hundred percent over budget. But fifteen-foot ceilings and a fireplace in every room and they served tea every afternoon at four o'clock.' He sounded envious, although whether for the office or for not being born in Victorian times was unclear.

'Gentlemen! Do come in! Good to see you again, Jay!'

North was as jovial as he had been in the morning staff meeting and gestured them towards a large circular table. He was only fifteen years older than Adam but on closer inspection a good ten kilos heavier and ten centimetres shorter, the victim of too many parliamentary lunches. A receding hairline and a bit flabby around the waist but an infectious smile.

'Winter! That's rather appropriate, eh?' he grinned. Adam gave a forced smile. 'I was going to say you've brought the weather with you but you've probably heard that one. Anyway, I hear you're from London – they've certainly got their act together on climate change. Remarkable progress on reducing emissions, down forty percent in thirty years thanks to lots of windfarms, which is one of the reasons I asked Jay to bring you along this afternoon.'

Without waiting for a response he swivelled towards Lynn: 'Now, *as* you will be aware the reason the PM asked me to take over the department is to show a fresh approach, *visible* progress. The public perception on climate change is that not much is happening – we need genuine progress in reducing CO2

emissions, not just talk. Most importantly, people need to see that the carbon tax is delivering. It's our signature policy and it's vital that it be perceived as a success before the next election.'

He beamed at them. 'And of course we need to boost our profile now that the younger generation are starting to become politically aware on the issue.'

Lynn nodded cautiously. 'For sure, we all need to be thoughtful about the next generation, Minister,' he said noncommittally.

'Absolutely! Absolutely!' North grinned mischievously and paused. 'After all, they get the vote at eighteen, eh! Don't want to alienate them from the get-go,' he laughed at his own joke. 'So, you're probably wondering why I asked the two of you along, the old and the new as it were? I want more outside the box thinking so the three of us are going to form a sort of brainstorming team with Jay providing the continuity with what the department's done before, you Adam bringing best practice from other countries, and myself the fresh blood and hopefully ideas.'

He beamed at the two of them almost manically and for a moment Winter wondered if the rumours about half the cabinet being on cocaine were true. 'Let's get the facts on the table, give me the inside scoop, hash out some ideas together! I've some thoughts of my own that I want to run past you later but I want to hear yours first.'

He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. 'How about we start with the national emissions target? We don't seem to be making much progress on meeting it so what can we do to fix it? Jay? Thoughts?' He raised his eyebrows and jutted his chin forward.

Lynn paused while he carefully placed the pen he'd been holding on the table in front of him. Winter had noticed that Lynn often did little things like that for effect, forcing his audience to pay attention.

'Well, Minister, the biggest issue is the target number itself. At the Paris Agreement your predecessors committed this country to reducing greenhouse gas emissions thirty percent by 2030, just five years from now. In my opinion he got in over his head, it became a stupid macho thing, and he committed us all to

something that's virtually impossible to achieve.'

North seemed taken aback by Lynn's bluntness. 'I know it's traditional to blame your predecessor but that's a bit below the belt isn't it? It doesn't sound macho to me, just trying to set high standards. It's ... admirable, isn't it?'

Lynn pulled a face. 'Well, that's one way of looking at it, Minister. But this is a numbers game. You've inherited a tough target. If there were a way of lowering that target, you'd have a better chance of meeting it. It could be the difference between being seen as a success rather than as a failure.'

'But surely the target was based on the science?'

'You would think so, but no. It was just a negotiation, a number. Think about it: Canada accounts for barely one percent of global emissions. Whatever we do won't make any difference in the big picture. But if our target was, say, twenty percent less, it's much more likely we would achieve it, and that would in turn give a big moral encouragement to people to try harder. Less would be, in fact, more.'

'I guess that's one way of looking at it.' North seemed unconvinced.

Lynn leaned forward. 'The thing is, Minister, your predecessor got into, well, a bit of a pissing match with the Danish delegation. He was trying to impress a particular woman on their team. We'd all agreed internally to twenty percent but the EU was going for forty and she more or less said she'd go to bed with him if he could get Canada to match it. She was daring him that he didn't have the authority. There was no scientific logic to the target, only a ... well, a psychological one if you want to call it that.'

'You are not serious?!' laughed North, incredulous. 'He changed the target just to, you know ...?'

'Except he didn't. He thought she'd be satisfied with thirty, but she wasn't and by then he'd committed publicly so he couldn't, er, withdraw.'

'Unbelievable,' smirked North, shaking his head in amazement.

The two of them laughed and Winter felt relaxed enough to add his own anecdote.

'Oh, the Nordic countries are just brutal at these climate

negotiations, they'll do anything – I remember there was this Norwegian girl at the Doha meeting ...' he began, then thought better of it.

'So you're saying our scientists all thought twenty percent was the right number but because of this we have thirty?'

Lynn nodded. 'Consider this. We're an arctic country, covered in snow five months of the year, temperatures in the minus twenties and thirties for months at a time. Even with good insulation it takes a lot of energy to keep homes warm. More to the point eighty percent of our electricity already comes from renewables or nuclear – we simply don't have that much scope for burning less gas or coal. Thirty percent just never made sense and still doesn't.'

North shrugged. 'Okay, it might be a stretch but it's still good for the planet though isn't it? I mean, ideally we'd have a one hundred percent cut in human CO2 emissions, wouldn't we?'

Winter frowned. 'Ah, not really Minister ... a complete ban on man-made emissions might suit the rainforests and plant life but it would be pretty detrimental for humans, obviously.'

'Oh?'

'We breathe out carbon dioxide, Minister. A *complete* ban would mean we would have to stop breathing.'

'Serious?'

Was North pulling his leg, or had he somehow skipped biology at school? He really wasn't sure. 'Plants absorb CO2 and emit oxygen, animals – including us humans – breathe in oxygen and breathe out CO2.'

North nodded sombrely as if Winter had just imparted some deep scientific secret to him.

'Actually it's cattle that are more of the problem. The average cow emits around a hundred kilos of methane per year, but methane is twenty times more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO2. So eating beef is actually really bad for the environment, not just the methane they produce but the fact that in order to make cattle ranches they cut down carbon-absorbing forests. It's a sort of double whammy.'

'Cows emit methane? Really? How?'

Evidently biology really was not the Minister's strong suit.

‘They, er, fart it, Minister.’

‘Oh yes, of course ... maybe we could reach our emissions target simply by banning cattle?’ He tapped the table thoughtfully with his pen. ‘Or ... how about if we replace all those cattle farms in Alberta with solar panel farms? Still farms, right? The farmers would still be farmers but solar panels instead of cattle.’ He looked pleased with himself at the idea. ‘What do you think of that?’

Lynn nodded thoughtfully, as if giving the suggestion serious consideration. ‘Well, Minister, it might take a while to persuade the whole country to go vegetarian ... you know how people love their steaks, not to mention cream in their coffee.’

‘And I suspect it takes a lot fewer people to look after a field of solar panels than of cattle, if you include the whole field-to-table food-chain,’ added Winter. ‘You might be unwittingly creating an unemployment problem.’ He was starting to feel a little uneasy about North’s approach, it felt like he was trying to solve a numbers game rather than actually address a real-life problem.

North nodded thoughtfully and then scribbled ‘Cattle farms → Solar farms’ on a Post-it and stuck it on the whiteboard behind him. ‘Let’s park that one for the moment. The main thing I’m concerned about right now is that our emissions are still going up not down. How do we solve that? Adam?’

This was his moment. He could quote the figures in his sleep. ‘Seventy-five percent of Canada’s emissions come from two places: burning fossil fuels – for power generation, manufacturing and industrial processes – and road transport. So if you can persuade industry to switch from oil and gas to electricity from renewable sources, and get drivers to buy electric, then you’ve cracked it.’

‘Great! So how do we do that?’

‘Ramp up the carbon tax. Make it too expensive for industry to keep burning gas and offer incentives for people to buy electric vehicles – EVs – make them cheaper than petrol cars.’

North pulled a face. ‘But haven’t we been doing all that? For *years*? I’m not hearing anything new.’

‘Not really! Previous governments have only made it slightly

more expensive for industry, there simply isn't enough motivation to switch. And EV's are still more expensive than petrol vehicles, they need to be cheaper, to be the no-brainer choice.'

North looked thoughtful. 'Surely we're looking at this arse backwards? We should be lowering the cost of renewable energy, not clobbering people with higher energy costs. We need to make renewable electricity so cheap that industry and car drivers find it irresistible.'

Lynn smirked as if about to explain the cruel realities of life to a child. 'Admirable sentiments, Minister, but it all takes time. Everything to do with climate change takes time. Even climate change takes time. We have policies and plans to replace coal-fired power stations with hydro and solar but it takes years to get approval to flood a valley to construct a new hydro dam – decades in some cases, no one wants them in their back yard. It might not look like it but believe me we are on track to have one hundred percent zero-carbon power by 2050. And as Adam says, the carbon tax is the key.'

'But that's twenty-five years away,' said North, incredulously. 'We can't work to those sort of timescales!'

Quite right, thought Winter, nodding. Thank God he sees the urgency.

North sighed and scratched his head. 'Okay, so let's look at this another way. Are we persuading people to live low-carbon lifestyles? Are the carbon tax and all the other things we've been doing actually having an impact?'

'Oh I think so,' said Lynn. 'There's been a dramatic increase in sales of low-energy lightbulbs, roof insulation and double-glazing.'

'But that's only because the old thermoluminescent bulbs were banned! And we practically pay people to buy loft insulation it's so heavily subsidized.'

'Hmm. And electric vehicles?'

'Sales are doubling every year, but still early days – still fewer than half of one percent of all new cars sold are electric. And they're mostly in Vancouver of course.'

'Which might not sound a lot, but at that rate they'll account

for more than half of all new vehicles sold within ten years,' chipped in Winter. 'In Vancouver that is. It's slower in the prairie provinces, obviously.'

'Obviously,' agreed North gloomily, 'bunch of rednecks if you ask me,' and then immediately corrected himself. 'Okay I didn't say that of course, but they do seem *particularly* slow on climate. In Alberta and Saskatchewan they don't even have ministries looking at climate change.' He shook his head. 'Anyway, the revenue raised? Can we point to some good things it's being spent on?'

'It generates about ten billion dollars a year – although of course it's not intended as a *source* of revenue, its function is simply to deter people from burning fossil fuels,' said Lynn cautiously.

North persisted. 'But all the same ...'

Lynn looked evasive. Winter was learning that when Lynn wanted to avoid saying something he used longer and more convoluted sentences.

'Well, parliament took a multi-faceted approach to determining the metrics by which provincial governments decide how carbon tax funds are deployed. In principle it could be lots of things ... developing carbon-capture technology, improved public transportation, education about carbon tax objectives, initiatives to motivate carbon-light lifestyles, and so on.'

North looked bewildered. 'So what's it *actually* been spent on?'

'Er, well, the main deployment avenue so far has been to return it to taxpayers in the form of rebates.'

'We're raising taxes simply to give it back? How does that help solve climate change?'

'The refunds are remitted to different socio-economic groups within the contributor spectrum.'

'Sorry?'

'We take from the rich and give to the poor,' interjected Winter, becoming equally frustrated by Lynn's evasiveness. 'Which sounds a bit odd I admit, but work with focus groups has shown that offering rebates makes the carbon tax far more acceptable to the public – even though most people have no idea how much they're getting back. It creates a sort of feel-good

factor.’

North rolled his eyes. ‘Okay, okay ... but what else is it spent on? Are there any projects that actually reduce emissions? Isn’t that the whole point of it?’

‘Green infrastructure and energy-efficiency initiatives,’ replied Lynn smoothly.

North glanced at Winter.

‘More buses and LED streetlights,’ he translated.

‘So the carbon tax is just a convoluted way to encourage people to take the bus?’

‘Oh that would be an over-simplification, Minister’ winced Lynn, disappointed by this dumbing down of his elaborate explanation. ‘But you could see it that way, yes.’

‘Isn’t there something a bit more *visible* we could fund, something a bit higher profile that people would really notice?’ said North, clearly disappointed.

‘More visible? You mean like giant space shades or something?’ grinned Winter.

‘Space shades?’

‘Some crazy Russian engineer suggested it once. You make a giant shade of lightweight shiny fabric and place it between the Sun and the Earth and it cools the earth by blocking the sunlight.’

North sat up in his seat. ‘Now you’re talking!’

Winter realized to his alarm that he was actually serious.

‘Oh, it won’t work,’ he said quickly. ‘It’s just one of those nutty ideas, you’d need a shade thousands of kilometres across. And keeping it in the right orbit would be a nightmare. Completely impracticable.’

‘Oh.’ He looked disappointed.

‘The internet’s full of these things. Giant space shades, genetically-engineered cattle that fart oxygen instead of methane, spraying white paint on the sea ice, seeding the oceans with iron filings to make them more productive – there’s no end to the bonkers ideas some people have come up with. Non-starters all of them.’

The Minister looked at him thoughtfully and stood up and walked around the table and stared out of the window, thinking.

‘Okay. I take your earlier point about the emissions target

being somewhat arbitrary, and in an ideal world we'd push to have it lowered, but what's done is done. We need to focus on policies that we can deliver within the lifetime of the current parliament.'

'The current parliament?,' interjected Lynn in alarm. 'You mean within the next two years? Results?'

'Absolutely! All due respect but we won't get there fast enough by increasing EV sales by a couple of percent per year. This is a 'climate emergency', right? We need something bold that is a true game-changer.'

Winter glanced at Lynn who, ever the professional civil servant, had quickly recovered his composure but still appeared to be clenching his teeth.

North walked over to the white-board and drew a rough outline of Canada.

'Let me run something past you guys that I've been thinking about for a while and see what you think. It's ambitious, but climate is a Big Problem and I think we need a Big Idea to solve it, so here goes. The arctic coastline is the part of Canada most affected by climate change, right? Rising sea levels are flooding Inuit villages, shrinking sea ice means polar bears are starving, and thawing permafrost threatens to release gigatons of methane into the atmosphere.' The other two nodded. 'So why not turn all that to our advantage and build a massive combined solar-wind energy farm up there? In the summer you have twenty-four hour daylight so it's ideal for solar and in the winter it's windy so ideal for turbines. And it'll be dark so no one'll notice they're there. As you said no one wants these things in their back yard but up there there isn't anyone.'

He drew what looked like a line of daisies stretching across the top of the board. 'We put them all along *here* – no one around to complain – although for those that are it'll create jobs so they should be sympathetic. A hundred thousand wind turbines all along the arctic coast built in one massive five year effort, then we shut down all the oil and gas power stations and we're one hundred percent renewable. Mission accomplished!' He put the marker pen down with a flourish. 'Adam, what do you think? They've done a lot of this in Europe haven't they?'

For a moment there was silence.

‘Well yes, but on a *much* smaller scale. The key thing is they put them close to the consumers. That far north, well, you’d have massive transmission losses. I mean, I’m all for more windfarms, but up ... *there?*’ he stammered.

North looked at his shoes. ‘Jay?’

‘It’s certainly ambitious, Minister. It would be a huge engineering project of course. You’d be talking tens of billions of dollars but in principle, if it could be done, it would be a tremendous achievement. A bold and career-defining initiative for sure,’ he hesitated and smiled. ‘You should give it an equally bold name: how about Northern Array? Northern Line?’

Winter groaned. ‘Really bad connotations where I come from. Lots of delays.’

‘I don’t know, they’re both a bit ... unexciting?’ scowled North.

‘Northern Star?’ offered Lynn. ‘Polaris? Polar Star?’

‘North Star?’ offered Winter.

North grinned and clapped his hands. ‘North Star Max!’

‘Very appropriate, Minister, maximum output and all that but you don’t want people thinking it’s a vanity project, do you?’ replied Lynn.

‘Okay, just North Star then. As a working title anyway. Adam, I want you to run the numbers on how much our carbon emissions would be reduced if we built a hundred combination wind and solar farms along the coast, a thousand turbines each. If my gut is right that should just about supply the country’s energy needs, in which case the problem is solved, right?’

‘Wait, what? Solved?’ It was Winter’s turn to be alarmed.

‘Of course! If we can actually make it government policy to switch from coal and gas to arctic wind and solar in the next five years then CO2 levels will reduce and climate change will be a thing of the past.’

‘Well, maybe, eventually, but *five years ...?*’

North gave him a slightly condescending smile. ‘That’s the great thing about our government system, Adam. Once something is policy you can pretty much guarantee it will happen.’

‘But there’s no guarantee that even if we build all this that it will actually *work*, is there?’ replied Winter, feeling a little panic-stricken at the prospect. ‘I mean that by switching our energy generation one hundred percent to this ...’ he waved at the board, ‘northern power project, that it will actually reduce CO2 levels!’

North cocked his head on one side, that slightly condescending smile again. ‘*North Star* power project,’ he corrected. ‘Don’t you have faith in the models Adam? Are you telling me the science is wrong? Don’t wind turbines generate less carbon dioxide than gas plants?’

‘Well yes of course they do, but ...’

‘So if the models are correct and we build the things then carbon levels will drop, won’t they? It’s commonsense.’

Winter thought it was far from commonsense, but he didn’t like to say so.

‘Look, we’re reducing an uncontrollable problem – the climate – to a controllable one, government policy,’ continued the Minister. ‘If it’s policy it *will* happen.’ He sighed, clearly a little exasperated that his staff didn’t see his point. ‘In effect, by creating a policy which the science and the models say will reduce CO2 emissions, we will control the climate. No if’s or but’s.’

He looked at the two of them and smiled. ‘You know what? We need a slogan! Something to inspire people, let them know change is coming.’

‘You mean *climate* change is coming?’ replied Winter cynically.

‘No, a *change* from climate change. Something that says we’re going to fix this!’

‘Hmm,’ said Lynn.

‘Make Canada Green Again?’ murmured Winter, just wanting the meeting to end.

North held up a hand. ‘I have it. ‘Let’s Get Climate Change Done!’ Simple, inspiring, motivating, and tells people this will end soon.’

‘Good,’ said Lynn.

Adam shrugged. ‘To be honest, where I come from that doesn’t really have a good precedent.’

‘Well, I think this has been very productive,’ North concluded,

ignoring Winter's last comment and rising from his chair. 'I'm having lunch with the PM next week so I shall float some of these ideas.'

'Excellent,' said Lynn, without enthusiasm.

'Oh, I almost forgot. Jay, can you get me a Tesla?'

'A Tesla?'

'As my Ministerial car. Optics are important and I don't want some snarky journo finding out that I drive an SUV, wouldn't look good.'

'I shall look into it, Minister'.

'Excellent! Now if you'll excuse me ...' As they reached the doorway he raised a triumphant fist: 'Lets Get Climate Change Done, gentlemen!'

As they got back into Lynn's vehicle a few minutes later Winter pressed his palm against his forehead. How could he have been so wrong about the new Minister? He certainly made up for his predecessor's lack of enthusiasm but his wind farm idea was crazy, unworkable. Of course more renewable energy was good but where North wanted to put them they would be next to useless. Thousands of kilometres from consumers and huge maintenance issues in a severe arctic climate, if they ever worked at all. It would be a massive white elephant, not something he wanted to be associated with at all.

Winter looked at Lynn. 'He's like a child! This is just going to be a massive distraction that goes nowhere, you can see that can't you? He's convinced he's got a magic bullet that will fix climate change in one electoral cycle. Wind in the arctic is a non-starter for a hundred reasons; we at least need to persuade him to put them near the cities.'

'And spend years fighting for planning permission and alienate half the electorate? That's why we've focused on hydro – still takes forever but you get a lot more gigawatts and it's almost impossible to reverse when built.'

Winter groaned.

Lynn grinned sympathetically and started the engine. 'You're being too hard on yourself Adam. I think we should give him all the encouragement he needs. This country needs politicians with a bold vision, big ideas, *balls*.'

He paused and winked mischievously. ‘Besides, it’ll distract him from the real agenda, eh?’

Winter covered his head with his hands and wondered what his chances of getting his old job back were.

2

‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m not in *denial*. Not at all. I just don’t believe it.’

The two figures walking along the beach appeared engrossed in conversation, although it was the woman who was doing all the talking. ‘Not the fact that it exists of course, I’m not questioning *that* – just whether it’s too late to do anything about it. Am I living on borrowed time? That is the question.’

Although the topic of conversation appeared morbid, their surroundings were unquestionably uplifting. The beach at Balancing Stone Bay was five kilometres long, a great arc of white sand with a rocky foreshore sheltered by tall pine trees on the landward side and the sparkling waters of the channel on the other. Across the other side the hazy outlines of mountains were silhouetted as if in a Chinese painting. It was an early September afternoon, blustery but bright.

The perfectly balanced mass of the Balancing Stone itself, the objective of their walk, was still some distance in front of them – a huge boulder left on the beach by a retreating glacier thousands of years before, looking as though a good shove would send it slowly rolling into the surf. Other than the sound of the wind in the pines and the lap of the water all was silent, and not a single person in sight. Later the sun would set into the sea, orange and gold. The islands of the Echelon Quartet group off Canada’s magnificent western coast were a magical and ancient place.

The woman was in her seventies and in good shape judging from her brisk pace, tallish with long dark hair which swirled around her in the breeze, and a long raincoat which flapped about her legs. She took long purposeful strides across the sand and shook her head slowly in frustration.

‘The whole thing is like some mad riddle. Our salmon have disappeared because of climate change which according to our government is caused by people on the other side of the planet – Chinese factories, cowboys in Texas driving big trucks and

Brazilian cows – and they say the solution is for *me* to eat less beef, put a solar panel on my roof and buy a Tesla – except that I’m practically vegetarian, it rains endlessly here and I’ve never owned a car in my life. How are those things going to make any difference, eh?’

Her companion looked at her sympathetically but said nothing.

‘I tell you Duncan, it all sounds a bit far-fetched to me.’

At the mention of his name her companion finally gave up the pretence of following the conversation, barked, and tore up the beach towards the balancing rock, where he barked some more and started jumping up and down next to a dark object that he’d found, tail wagging proudly.

Aurora Jones marched on in silence, worrying about the world and her community like the school teacher she was, or had been until she’d retired four years before. It was in her nature to care about the community, almost all of them were ex-pupils. She looked up and saw she was only fifty metres from the rock. What had Duncan found now? A sack of garbage? Probably something unmentionable.

When she was only a few metres away a small wave lifted the black mass and what looked like a long pale arm floated out. A pulse of adrenaline flooded her chest – in front of her a body lay face down in the water at the base of the rock, its hair moving back and forth like a clump of seaweed as the tide washed gently over it, the single outstretched arm beckoning her attention. Dead yet still moving.

They were a long way from help. Echelon was one of the most remote places along the sparsely inhabited Pacific west coast, four elongated islands like the fingers of a hand a hundred kilometres off British Columbia, the edge of the world. It was a cold but bright day and the sandy beach she had walked along stretched back unbroken towards Edenshaw, the island’s main settlement, now hidden behind the trees and the curve of the headland.

As dead as the body appeared, she decided that her first responsibility was to check that it wasn’t actually alive. Maybe they’d just fallen out of a boat and swam ashore, exhausted. Perhaps it

was even someone she knew. She could see the figure more clearly now. It looked like one of the local lads, late teens, long bedraggled hair, jeans and a denim jacket, black leather boots. His face was mostly obscured and she thought transiently about rolling him over, but decided against it.

Then a crab crawled out of the corner of his mouth and she knew for sure that he was dead.

Realizing that the water was washing over her boots she cursed and stepped back, then pulled out her cellphone. Surprisingly she had a signal, one bar. She dialed 911 and got through almost immediately although the connection kept blanking momentarily.

‘Hello? Can you hear me? Is that the RCMP? Hello? I need to report a dead body.’

After reassuring the operator that, no, she was not herself in any danger and, no, she hadn’t killed the person she was calling about, she explained where she was.

‘Okay hold on, I’m going to put you through to the RCMP station there.’ There was a ten-second pause before the voice of Officer John Smith came on the line, the senior officer who’d transferred to Edenshaw from the prairies the year before, a commonsense, no-nonsense Yorkshireman who liked to introduce himself as ‘John Smith, like the beer’ even though no one in Canada had heard of it. He had assured her it was a big thing back in the UK and had even presented her with a bottle of it last Christmas, which was admittedly not bad.

Nonetheless Aurora had always found Smith a slightly prickly character. He was courteous enough but always gave the impression that she had interrupted him from some important task and, perhaps more worryingly for a police officer, he had a tendency for coming up with complex explanations when a simpler one would have done equally well. She remembered a conversation they had had about the assassination of JFK and his complicated reasons why Lee Harvey Oswald had to have had at least two accomplices to account for all the shots. But despite this, and to give him his due, he was pretty good at keeping order in Edenshaw. And had decent taste in beer.

‘Hello John, this is Aurora. Listen, I’m out walking my dog on Balancing Stone beach and I’ve found a dead body. A young lad

right next to the big rock. Face down in the water.'

There was a pause before Smith answered. 'Serious? This isn't some joke to get me to drive out there just so you can get a lift back is it? Cos I'm not falling for that one again.'

Aurora sighed. 'As I said before, that wasn't me John. Unlike some folks around here I can tell the difference between a Japanese sex doll and a real person, believe me!' She rolled her eyes.

'It's not a sack of rubbish or something? They can look awful deceptive sometimes.'

Aurora assured him it wasn't and described the crumpled heap, the hands, feet, hair. 'I can send you a photo if you like but honest to God this is a real dead person. And the tide's coming in.'

'Okay, okay, we're on our way. Stay until we get there, I'll need a statement from you anyway.' Then in a moment of compassion: 'You are okay, right? I mean it's not upsetting you, staying there?'

'No, no, I'm fine.' She looked at the incoming water and then at her watch. 'But then you really will need to give us a ride back otherwise we'll get caught by the tide. Another half hour and this lad's gonna be heading out to sea all by himself.'

She hung up and looked at the body, then took a couple of photos just in case it really did float away. Calling Duncan, she walked up the beach a little way to where a bleached tree trunk provided shelter yet still gave her sight of the body, then took her shoes off to let her socks dry. This part of the beach was littered with the bones of massive trees a metre or two in diameter, piled up chaotically as though someone had emptied a giant box of matches. Most were decades old, refugees from the logging barges as they hauled their harvest south to the sawmills, their bark stripped by the waves and salt water.

Aurora leaned back and made herself comfortable against the tree and tried to forget about the corpse on the shoreline. The idea that Officer Smith clearly thought she was just some crazy old lady who didn't know what a sex doll looked like made her smile. She closed her eyes and listened to the lap of the water against the rocks.

This was not the first time she'd seen a dead body. You didn't live in a place as wild as Echelon for as long as Aurora had and

not see a few bad things. In recent years in particular alcohol had taken its toll on the fishermen, struggling with the loss of their annual salmon catch, and every year one or two of them drank themselves into a stupor late at night and fell off the harbour wall, either by accident or design. The harsh side of living close to nature that the city-dwellers never saw.

Aurora had been born on Echelon – Esh to the locals – and had lived there more or less her whole life, but unlike most locals was unusual in having seen something of the world outside. Her own parents had moved to Esh from Montreal to run the church and the village school immediately after World War II, shocked by the war and wanting to hide themselves away, but had nonetheless sent Aurora back there to university at eighteen.

Afterwards, unsure what to do, she'd returned to Esh, not intending to stay long but lost on what her vocation should be. She started helping her parents as a teaching assistant which went so well that her father decided that he and her mother could afford to leave the school in her hands and take a week away for their wedding anniversary, something they had never done before. They took the overnight ferry to Vancouver and planned on being tourists. At some point, with what seemed in retrospect to be out-of-character exuberance, her father insisted they join a helicopter trip around the bay, despite warnings of the weather closing in. This was the sixties, years before health and safety regulations and rules about flying in poor visibility. As the cloud base came down the pilot had cut the trip short and taken a different route back to base, clipped a power cable and killed everyone on board. It was big news in BC for an entire week.

Numb from losing both parents simultaneously, Aurora immediately had to run the school on her own – but by the end of the term the question of her vocation had answered itself. After that she'd been the principal, and for many years only, schoolteacher on Esh, until she'd retired four years ago. It was a career and a lifestyle that she'd never regretted for a moment.

In the summer holidays she'd started to travel. Places like Europe, Morocco, India and Japan were *de rigeur* for the more bohemian students in those days. It had become a habit and the highlight of her year – every summer without fail she went away

for six weeks. On those trips she made enduring friendships and afterwards those friends often visited. Aurora's more observant neighbours had noticed that they were often artists and often male. In some societies this might not have gone down well, but Echelon was moderately liberal by the seventies and Aurora was held in such good regard that no one questioned her personal life. She'd never felt the desire to marry or to move to a larger community.

The sound of a vehicle driving fast along the sand beach intruded into her thoughts and she opened her eyes. She got up and started walking back down to the big rock as the RCMP truck slowed to a halt a few metres away and Duncan started barking furiously, defending his find from intruders. Smith jumped out, frowning as he always seemed to. Late-fifties, lean, wiry hair, slightly below average height, his eyes were already looking beyond Aurora towards the dark mass at the base of the large stone.

He indicated his younger colleague climbing out of the passenger seat. 'Constable Harrison. He just joined me a few weeks back but he's from here originally, so I'm guessing you probably know one another?'

Aurora nodded. 'Of course, George was one of my pupils. Haven't seen you for a while. You been away?'

George stepped forward with a big smile to give her a bear hug. 'Police college! Great to see you again Miss Jones.' He was a well-built lad, tall, more muscular than the wiry Smith and had a ponytail instead of Smith's short cut. He glanced at the corpse and Aurora wondered transiently if this was his first dead body. The RCMP was probably a good career choice for him; she remembered him as often being the one who would break up fights and stand up for the smaller kids. He had respect around the village and that was important.

Smith took a few steps closer to the body. 'Tide's coming in. George, stretcher.'

It only took a minute to retrieve the corpse and carry it up to the back of the truck where Smith began to examine it more closely. Aurora could see that apart from being completely sodden it was relatively unmarked, but that the limbs were stiff.

'Rigor mortis fully established so dead between four and forty-eight hours.' Smith used a pen to move the hair back from the man's mouth and lower face. 'Smooth skin for a guy,' he remarked. 'Full lips too.'

Everyone peered more closely at the face. The body had broad shoulders and a narrow waist giving it a superficially masculine appearance, but now that they could see the face and her chest clearly there was no doubt that he was in fact a she. The woman had an almost Asiatic face with high cheek bones, perhaps First Nation, feminine lips and eyes, and a smooth skin.

'It's a girl,' stated Harrison factually.

Smith cocked his head and then nodded sheepishly in agreement. 'Either of you recognize her?'

Harrison shook his head. 'She's not from around here. I know everyone my age.'

'She does look vaguely familiar,' replied Aurora slowly. 'She's not from Esh, but I have seen her before.' She hesitated. 'Maybe in the Co-op? A few days ago?'

Smith took a towel and swept her hair clear of her face. As he did so he revealed a large circular wound about an inch in diameter, high on her forehead at the hairline.

'Bloody hell! She's been shot!' he said, visible shaken.

Blood was matted into her hair and small fragments of bone protruded from around the wound. Harrison leaned forward and looked thoughtful.

'Looks like this was no accident,' said Smith grimly. 'Bullet to the head, this poor lass's been whacked all right! Classic drug gang execution.' He stood up and put his pen back in his pocket as though the matter was solved. 'We used to see this all the time back East.'

'Except that Esh doesn't have a drug or gang problem,' remarked Aurora slowly, wondering if Smith really had to do all this here on the beach with the tide coming in. 'Tragic though it was, the girl was dead now. She was starting to get cold.'

'We don't have any dealers, that's for sure. A few weed smokers but they get it by mail order,' commented Harrison. 'So I hear.'

Smith glanced at him. 'Let's see if she's got any ID.'

He unzipped the jacket and slipped his hand into the sodden inside pocket before trying the other one and then the trouser pockets, pulling a cellphone out of one and a plastic wallet with some cards in it out of the other, fishing out a driving license.

‘Judith Altmann. So not First Nation then. Twenty-five, Saskatchewan address. Long way from home.’ He handed the wallet to Harrison. ‘There’s some of her business cards there, describes herself as a Photo-journalist and Climate Change Activist – she’s even got a website.’ He rolled his eyes as though this indicated some kind of artistic affectation.

Aurora nodded thoughtfully. ‘You say she can’t be First Nation, but she certainly looks it and with a first name like that she might well be from around here originally.’

Smith looked puzzled. ‘How?’

‘Hadn’t you noticed? We have a *lot* of biblical first names.’

‘I thought that was just because you were a law-abiding lot. Church on Sunday and all that.’

Aurora snorted. ‘You can blame my father,’ she explained. ‘He was the village rector here until the mid sixties and pretty full-on with his faith; he believed that all children should have biblical names and could be quite pushy with first-time parents, so a lot of children from the forties through to the sixties had biblical names. He went through the alphabet twenty-four times.’

‘But she’s too young.’

‘Ah, but folk here also keep names in the family, naming their kids after parents and grandparents.’

‘I see.’ Smith stood up. ‘So how come you escaped, eh? Aurora, that’s not biblical.’

‘Apparently the night I was born there was a spectacular display of the northern lights and my mother thought it was a sign from God. They were always telling me things were ‘a sign’. I think she also found the family surname a bit dull and wanted to add some colour. It was a bit unusual when I was a child but of course later on, in the sixties, it was quite cool. People thought it was hip.’

‘Huh,’ grunted George, looking up from his phone. ‘At least you didn’t have a Beatles fanatic for a dad. I was going to be plain Billy Harrison until he stuck his oar in.’

Aurora laughed and George gave a rueful smile. ‘Anyway, if she died last night and ended up here then she must have gone into the water somewhere around the village or a bit further over,’ he continued. ‘The distance is about right.’

Smith shook his head firmly. ‘We know she was shot, we can see the wound, and we know she wasn’t from around here, so she was most likely killed elsewhere and dumped at sea.’

‘Assuming it *is* a gunshot wound . . . it looks too big to me, and if it was then she was shot almost from above. Maybe she just fell and hit her head?’

Smith gave him a withering look. ‘They’re not all neat little bullet holes like you see on TV, son. They’re big and messy believe me. That’s a gunshot wound alright.’

George frowned and looked like he was going to argue about it, but then shrugged and continued looking at one of the girl’s cards and then started fiddling with his phone.

Smith knelt down and tried to straighten the girl’s clothes so that she didn’t look so bedraggled, a task made difficult by them being so wet. Then he noticed something on one of her arms and pulled up the right-hand jacket sleeve again. There was a red and black tattoo on her forearm – a leaping salmon with the words ‘Sea Warriors’ below it in a Gothic font.

‘Any idea what Sea Warriors means? Some kind of environmental group maybe?’

Not getting a response from either of them he shrugged and pushed the sleeve down again and stepped back. ‘We had quite a few Altmanns in Saskatoon when I was there, German immigrants, didn’t look much like this girl though. She really looks indigenous, doesn’t she? I reckon she was adopted.’

He continued to stare at the body before shaking his head. ‘There’s virtually no way we’ll ever know for sure how she got here though, let alone why she was here.’

‘She was here to investigate the link between climate change and the salmon,’ replied Harrison.

His boss sighed heavily. ‘Well you *say* that because she’s a journalist, but you’re just guessing.’

Harrison held up his phone. ‘No sir, I’m quoting her own words. Her last blog entry is about her coming to Esh. ‘Off to

the west coast to investigate why their salmon are disappearing! New research suggests there might just be a solution. Hope to get a chance to check out my own history too.”

‘Give me that!’ Smith grabbed his colleague’s phone and read for a moment before tossing it back to him. ‘Fair enough, we’ll look into that but I’m not sure how much we should rely on it. It could have been faked after her death for all we know, and it doesn’t help us with *how* she was killed.’ He scratched his head.

Hope to get a chance to check out my own history too. As Aurora looked at the young girl lying on the stretcher between them an awful possibility occurred to her.

Aurora Jones had carried a secret for over fifty years. Many years before she had given up a baby daughter for adoption. She was only eighteen at the time, first year at university, completely out of her depth, couldn’t bring up the child on her own, couldn’t tell her puritanical parents – so had reluctantly done what she felt was best for the girl. She still believed it had been the right decision, but that had never stopped it from being an extremely painful one.

This girl was too young to be her daughter but she was exactly the right age to be her grand-daughter. Perhaps she or her mother had managed to find out where she had come from? She had left her a clue after all. It was a long shot but as she looked down at the girl who might be her own flesh and blood she knew it wasn’t something she could ignore. Was that her nose? The slender hands were like her own for sure. And the long dark hair. She looked closer. But everyone around here had dark hair. The comment about her checking out her history couldn’t be ignored though.

George had been trying to remove a piece of wet card from the wallet without tearing it and was now studying it. She saw his eyebrows lift in surprise.

‘Sir, you should look at this.’ He handed him a torn half of a beer mat with some writing on it. Smith looked at it and also raised his eyebrows before turning awkwardly to Aurora.

‘You’re absolutely sure you don’t know her?’

Aurora nodded. ‘Know her? No, of course not. Like I said she looks vaguely familiar, but only like someone who passed me in

the street maybe. And I'm also sure she didn't grow up here – anyone her age I would have taught.'

'So how do you explain this?'

He handed her the scrap of card. Written in ballpoint pen was something that even in the bizarre world of Smith's elaborate explanations simply should not be there.

It was her own name and address.

3

In the small flat above their shop on Edenshaw's main street Gaia and Wolf were having an argument. Or as Gaia preferred to call it, a constructive sharing of opinions in a mutually respectful environment.

As the island's resident environmental activist Gaia Thompson dressed rather differently than anyone else on Esh, a sort of backwoods-meets-Boho-chic with a bit of latter-day hippie thrown in, all rough fabrics and earth-tones and beads in her hair. She had shoulder-length rich wavy mahogany hair and striking brown eyes. Initially treated with some suspicion by the locals, they had nonetheless been quickly accepted as part of the community, who although they often didn't agree with their views recognized and respected their love of the islands.

University-educated middle-class white kids in their late twenties, they had arrived two summers previously and taken over an empty shop near the harbour from which they sold an eclectic mix of 'zero carbon' native art and crafts, homemade soap, and wooden furniture that Zebedee Moongazer – their landlord and the village Mr Fixit – had assured them were Indian antiques. He hadn't said specifically which Indians though so Gaia still blissfully tried to peddle them to tourists as locally made, although perhaps the fact that Esh didn't appear to have any furniture makers should have raised her suspicions by now. That and the Hindi lettering on the underside of the tables.

Unfortunately the shop didn't have many customers, targeting as it did a tourist market that barely existed anymore. Until fairly recently there had been a moderate number coming every summer for sport fishing, basing themselves in the Edenshaw Hotel and consuming plenty, but with the collapse of the annual salmon run that had dried up.

To try and offset the lack of shop traffic Wolf had started to offer 'back-to-nature' tours from a website called Echelon Escapes, mostly mountain-biking and horse-riding with a couple

of nights camping under the stars. They didn't actually possess bikes or horses but as Wolf had breezily explained to Aurora one day, as though she wouldn't understand, they had outsourced those aspects of the business and would procure them as required. He said it was called 'just-in-time' management, although she had privately thought 'in-your-dreams' management would have been more appropriate. They had yet to secure their first booking.

Of course it wasn't totally dead, a few tourists did still come to Esh, mostly in July and August on sailing holidays from which they only stepped ashore for a few hours, not requiring accommodation or meals. Or soap. Or Indian furniture. In the meantime Gaia happily filled her days exploring the island and blogging about her zero-carbon lifestyle, the latter consuming an increasing part of her day. Wolf on the other hand had become increasingly concerned about their dwindling finances. Today things had come to a head.

'All my life I've just been a bystander, watching helplessly as our planet is ravaged by mankind's rampant consumerism and pollution, with factories belching out more and more suffocating carbon dioxide. I've never been able to do anything actively against it, but living here I actually play a part in getting out the message and showing people how it can be done. I've *got* to do this Wolf! It's my calling.'

'Sure hon, but we have to eat too! I know living here is cheap but we have almost no money coming in. We can afford another three month's rent but after that we'll need to do something desperate – and I *really* don't want to have to borrow from your father again.'

But the truth was that Gaia had never felt more alive. When they'd lived in Toronto they'd gone to environmental debates and meetings every week, hung out with people who shared their views – she'd felt part of the scene. Then she'd discovered that all the stuff they told people to do – recycling their plastic, switching to LED lights and not flying – wasn't going to be enough, that all those economies combined, even if everyone on the planet actually did them, would contribute barely one percent to the reduction in CO2 emissions required to keep global

warming under control. The solution was to live a completely zero-carbon lifestyle.

Before they knew it they'd talked themselves into a situation where living the life, true dedication to the cause, was unavoidable. Gaia had first suggested Echelon as a joke, somewhere so far off the map they literally could go no further, but after they'd visited on a whim they were hooked and moved within a month. To symbolize the commitment she had changed her name from Gail to Gaia when she stepped off the ferry. Gaia, from the theory that the planet is a self-regulating organism that heals itself, the Greek name for Mother Earth. She liked it.

Moving to Esh had given her a new perspective. Since they'd left the Toronto 'green scene' and got some perspective she'd started to feel that the whole climate change movement wasn't really going anywhere. Most of the organizations she'd been involved with didn't actually do much other than point out how little progress was being made, as though it was enough to simply raise the issue and hope that someone else would somehow fix it.

At first she'd started a blog about their new life for the benefit of her friends back in Toronto. To begin with it had been fairly honest, describing their new home, how they'd found their shop, the efforts they went to to ensure everything was locally sourced and, of course, zero-carbon. But as time went on island life was, well, quiet, and she had less to talk about. She'd started embellishing their exploits in order to keep her viewers engaged. A hike on which they'd seen a sea eagle became an adventure in which they'd found it with a broken wing and nursed it back to health. A visit to Zebedee's garage to pay their rent became an episode where she'd explained the evils of the internal combustion engine to him and persuaded him to buy a Nissan Leaf instead of the new truck he was planning on, thus saving the island from yet another polluting vehicle. And their own house, in reality heated with firewood like all their neighbours, suddenly had solar panels and a heat pump. Her page-views grew and the blog became a reason in itself to be on Echelon, posting photos and stories of her increasingly fictional exploits. In her more optimistic moments she even hoped she might become sort of

eco-influencer and be able to give up the shop altogether.

Wolf saw himself as the pragmatic one in the relationship. He was sceptical that mankind was capable of reversing the damage it had already caused. In his view relentless population growth meant that the planet would inevitably consume more resources and generate more waste and pollution, people couldn't help themselves. So while he went along with Gaia's passion and felt that a cleaner planet was a good thing, he no longer believed that mankind had the will or the time to change the outcome.

His main interest now was more practical. He wanted to see if he could make a go of the tour business, something which he found intellectually stimulating in a life that was otherwise largely unchallenging. Once he'd figured out how to do it profitably he was going to suggest they move somewhere less isolated and run it on a more commercial scale. Nova Scotia maybe.

But for the time being he kept those thoughts to himself because he knew she wouldn't move anywhere yet, and he also knew who wore the trousers in their relationship. Even his name was her idea; she'd never warmed to Walter, his birth name, and had started calling him Wolf on a camping trip as a sort of joke. When they moved and she'd started calling herself Gaia he just decided to tell people that was his name. It was kind of cool and it went with his new ponytail – his natural progression from the trendy man-bun that he'd sported in Toronto. He liked the way it made him look ambiguously indigenous.

'Look, we both know there aren't enough tourists coming here right now to support us, but the answer isn't to give up and leave. The answer is to publicize the place and attract a new kind of tourist – not sports fishermen but people who are going to value it and respect like we do. People who are going to want to hike into the back-country and buy stuff to remember it by.'

She put a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. 'Have faith, Wolf. We're doing all the right things, I get lots of interest on the web, people saying they want to visit, we just need to stick with it.' Sensing his despondency she continued. 'Okay, I'll admit that maybe we need to fine tune things a bit. Maybe the furniture was a mistake, maybe we need more stuff that people can take away. Maybe focus more on online sales of things made here.'

Our website is a bit basic I'll admit.'

They were interrupted by the tinkle of the shop bell below them. Gaia stood up to go downstairs, then turned back to face him. 'I'm not giving up now Wolf.' As usual in their mutually respectful sharing of opinions, hers was final.

Their first and only customer of the day was Aurora Jones.

'Aurora! I heard the news about you finding that girl on the beach. It must have been awful!' To Aurora's surprise Gaia gave her an impromptu hug.

'Oh! Well, it wasn't that bad. It wasn't me that was dead after all, or anyone that I knew. Some poor girl from Saskatoon.'

'But all the same, it can't have been nice. Was she, you know, cut up or anything?' Gaia gave an exaggerated squirm. 'I heard they found a body with its whole face cut off by a boat propeller a couple of years ago. It's brain was hanging out where it's eyes were supposed to be.'

Why was it that people always wanted the gory details?

'No, it wasn't like that at all. All in one piece, just very wet, hair all down over her face. I was mainly concerned that I was going to get stuck by the tide, actually, what with waiting for the RCMP. But Smith thinks she was murdered – there was a hole in her head he claims is a bullet hole, although it looked too big for that to me.'

'Seriously? Murdered? What was her name?'

'Judith Altmann. She was an environmental journalist.'

Gaia looked thoughtful. 'Wasn't she the one who did an exposé of the pipeline companies a while back? Or am I getting her mixed up?'

'I'm not sure but it sounds like her sort of thing. She had a tattoo of a leaping salmon and the words 'Sea Warriors' on her arm. Smith was wondering whether it's an environmental group or something. Have you heard of them?'

Gaia laughed. 'The Sea Warriors? Wow, it's been a while! Yes, I remember them from Toronto, a pretty hardcore bunch. They blame big business for the pollution of the seas and damage to fisheries and used to organize actions like dumping rotting fish

in company foyers. A lot of them were out of work actors or worked in media. Nice people.'

'So maybe she was here because of them? Planning some action of some kind?'

'Nah, they only did stuff in Toronto and Ottawa. Anyway I haven't heard of them doing anything for ages, I think they've disbanded to be honest. Like I say, their thing was mainly disrupting investor meetings, they never left the big cities much and always did things with TV coverage.'

Aurora shrugged. 'Maybe that was something old then. She has a blog where she said she was coming to Esh to investigate what happened to our salmon.'

'Not much to investigate about that, it's common knowledge where they went,' replied Gaia slightly indignantly. 'Thanks to climate change warmer waters drove them further north.'

'Yeah, I'd heard that.'

Aurora saw a display of soap and moved towards it. 'Anyway, I came in for some soap. I've run out and thought I'd try one of your fancy ones. Buy local and all that.'

Gaia started to explain the relative benefits of seaweed soap and soap with ground pine needles for exfoliating the skin, both homemade products. 'Ground pine needles are so much better for the planet than the plastic microbeads most soap manufacturers use. And they're Esh pine needles too.'

Aurora hesitantly started to smell the different soaps, but the image of the girl and the question of what had brought her to Esh remained in her head. 'So you think anything can be done about it – the salmon I mean? Doesn't the government do anything?'

'There is a department called the Ministry for Climate Change that thinks about these things, but thinking is about as far as they go. They represent Canada at international meetings and that sort of thing, but it's all very high level. I don't think they tackle local issues like ours.'

'So no one is going to fix this for us?'

Gaia shrugged. 'The salmon might come back of their own accord but I wouldn't count on it. Most likely it's going to stay that way, although some people have suggested man-made

solutions.’ She reached over and picked up a magazine from the desk behind her, a mess of paperwork and half-wrapped soap packets. ‘This article I was reading by some prof in Montreal argues that you might be able to boost fish stocks by creating an artificial plankton bloom through spraying iron sulphate onto the ocean.’ She was flipping through to find it. ‘Oh, here it is – it’s called iron fertilization. Dr Langara Renouf, ‘Saving Our Salmon from Climate Change’.’

Aurora froze. ‘Could I see that?’ she asked abruptly, and almost snatched the magazine from Gaia’s hand without waiting for an answer.

‘It’s a surprisingly simple idea actually,’ continued Gaia as Aurora stared at the magazine. ‘You dump a few hundred tons of the stuff in the ocean way offshore, it boosts the plankton population and that attracts the fish. It’s a quick one-season fix, sort of like sprinkling fertilizer on your lawn to make it green. You’re not reversing climate change but you’re reversing its effects. Assuming it works...’

Aurora was squinting at a small photo of the author on a boat. ‘If it works?’

‘Well, it’s only a theory at the moment but it has some credibility because it actually happens naturally sometimes. There have been several cases where volcanic eruptions deposited iron-rich dust on the ocean surface and what they call ‘blooms’ of plankton formed, and in a couple of cases there were good fishing years afterwards.’

‘That sounds interesting. Can I borrow this?’

Gaia nodded. ‘Sure, but don’t get your hopes up about it happening here. I think you’d need millions to do it on a large scale – you’d need a proper research vessel, a few hundred tons of iron sulphate, satellite data to tell you where to put it, oceanographers to interpret it all.’ She scowled. ‘But nobody will do it because it’ll be much cheaper to keep paying the islanders to stay unemployed.’

Aurora nodded thoughtfully. She wasn’t so keen on the soaps, they were too strongly scented for her liking, but having been in the shop ten minutes she felt obliged to buy something. ‘This purple one’s lavender?’

‘Yes, and all completely natural ingredients.’

‘I’ll take it then.’

Outside it was a beautiful autumn day so she stopped by the harbour wall and watched two boys working on a boat – Eddie and Jack Ravenclaw, both had been her pupils in her final year at the school a few years back. She regarded them as successes because despite coming from a family whose parents had become too dependent on social security to be motivated to do much, both the boys had jobs ... usually. That wasn’t to say they hadn’t had a few run-ins with the law though. Eddie waved to her and she returned the greeting.

She sat down on a bench and took out the magazine and started to read the article properly. As a deliberate procedure the big uncertainty seemed to be getting the iron to where the fish were, but Renouf claimed that satellite imagery would help with that. So all you needed to do was deliver a hundred tons or so of iron sulphate powder to the right place.

She looked again at the trawler that the Ravenclaw brothers were working on. Eddie had told her once they could carry twenty-five tons of fish in the hold, and there were four fishing boats based in Edenshaw. That was a hundred tons right there. Although Gaia had been pessimistic, the more Aurora thought about it, it seemed that the solution to the island’s problems was staring her in the face. They already had the boats, iron sulphate didn’t sound like it was expensive, so all they needed was for this Professor Renouf to tell them where to put it. Surely she’d love a chance to prove her theory? She had a good feeling about this.

She stood up stiffly and moved to the harbour wall and, quickly looking around, discretely dropped the lavender soap into the water. It was just too smelly, but the good thing about Gaia’s stuff was that it was good for the environment, right?

Well worth the money though. She had only wanted to check the Sea Warriors angle out of casual curiosity, but this Langara Renouf discovery changed everything.

Keep reading at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ministry-Ignoring-Climate-Change/dp/0993832121>