Nanny Estate

By Karen Traviss

"I can grow you a housing estate," said the architect.
"Grow?" asked the Director of Planning. "Is that the the latest buzz-word?"
"I do mean grow, Mrs. James," he repeated. "Just take a look at this."
He placed the plans on her neatly-arranged desk and swivelled them so she could read them the right way up. But there were no straight lines and elevations for her to recognise: the images were all snap-together molecular models, like simple construction toys. He watched for a flicker of interest on her face.
"It's a smart house," he prompted. "And I mean smart. Not just automated. More like autonomic."
"We don't need more houses," she said. "And we haven't got any green-field sites to build on. What we could do with is someone prepared to refurbish some of the run-down housing stock we're stuck with. Not as profitable, maybe, but that's what we need."
It was a cue from heaven. "I know," he said." That's why I'm here. Regenerating brown-field sites and contaminated land—it's my special interest."
He laid an old-fashioned business card on the desk: Hedley Barton, Consulting Nano-architect, Sustainable Technologies, Novel Constructs. "Just suppose that I could rebuild your most run-down area, fill it with environmentally-neutral housing, and remove the soil contaminants at the same time."
"Is this before or after you transmute base metal into gold?" She was studying the card. "You're not a qualified architect. Not according to this, anyway."
"I'm a scientist who can build things."
"So why should we take a risk on you?"
"Your old defence establishment land is riddled with heavy metals and asbestos and you can’t sell it. How long has it been sitting derelict? Twenty years?"
Barton knew it was the sort of site you couldn't give away free with breakfast cereal. He also knew the prospect of releasing capital for the city coffers was a temptation on a Faustian scale. Like most city councils, this one had sold off the civic silver and was close to auctioning sports fields to make ends meet.
"So how do you intend to do this?" she asked.
"Nano-tech," said Barton. "A project I've been working on with the university. You don't need huge teams to deliver it. I can give you estates that not only build themselves, but also cleanse the site of contaminants. It's not just smart housing- it could be the whole future of construction. Just give me a chance to show you."
"I’ve seen nanotech on the TV, I think, but it’s pretty radical stuff for us."
Barton knew the seductive nature of professional vanity. "Wouldn’t you like

to
be the first to demonstrate its potential?"
She hesitated. "I’m all for innovation."
He’d hooked her. "Just trust me," he said. "This will change the architectural
world."

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A small, plot-sized square of soil on the campus lawn had been marked out with
tape like a murder scene. It indicated where a cocktail of contaminants had
been mixed with the earth. Mrs. James arrived with a colleague from
Environmental Health, Andy Martin, who took a soil sample to confirm that it
did indeed contain heavy metals and other detritus of an industrial past. Then
technicians laid heaps of what looked like finely powdered minerals on the
square, and stepped back.
Barton had rehearsed his pitch to just the right degree of controlled
enthusiasm. Now was his moment.
"In an hour, the house will begin to emerge," he said. "I want you to watch it
carefully, because you’ll actually see the building grow. You can come back
any time over the next few days while it develops and check on it.
"We've developed classes of nanites, some handling organic material, some
handling inorganics, that can exchange information and co-operate to build
anything we programme them to. Not only will the structure build itself from
the ground up, it'll also put down foundations—roots, if you like—that'll
process the contaminants from the soil and render them harmless."
"Well, there are plants that can do that," Martin said. "And we don't have to
do any development deals with them."
"Yes, " said Barton. "But will they also create a structure that people can
live in comfortably? Can they make a reactive, intelligent system that
protects the environment?"
"And this can?" The health officer was eyeing the square of soil as if he were
looking over a precipice. Barton knew he would be the hardest to convince.
"Yes."
Martin showed neither acceptance nor disbelief. "I'm not sure how you're using
the term intelligence. This isn't some sort of AI, is it?"
"No, not at all. It doesn't actually think—we're not that advanced, not yet.
This material could be described as able to learn, but it has a limited
capacity. The nanites only operate within their own speciality and work with
the others. They're not about to write the works of Shakespeare."
Barton nodded in the direction of the featureless ground. "Just a small
demonstration. And stick these badges on, please." He marked both officers
with an adhesive grey disc. "This will take a little time."
Fortified from time to time by coffee and sandwiches in the February chill,
they watched while a definite shape began to emerge on the ground before them,
like a low wall being erected by invisible hands. At first it was grey like a
wasps' nest: the next day it became suffused with green.

"Chlorophyll," explained Barton. He wasn’t surprised the two officers came back to the site every day. "To generate its own energy."

Walls flowed upwards: transparent irising windows formed. Doors appeared, as if by an artist’s hand. Mrs. James and Martin stared in silence, hugging their coats to them. Before them now was a small green shed, with curved walls and a gently domed roof."Let's look inside," said Barton. As they moved forward, the doors parted.

"How'd they do that?" asked Mrs. James.

"That grey badge is an external key," Barton explained. "Like you have on a cat collar to open the cat-flap."

"Do I get a litter-tray as well?"

"It can cope with that, too, don't worry," Barton said. "Now, what do you think of this?"

There was no room for Martin, who stood outside and waited his turn. Mrs. James and Barton squeezed within the structure, and the roof blossomed with transparent patches. The space was quiet and filled with light, a world away from the dull day beyond. Barton looked up at the ceiling with the awe of a worshipper.

"You're really into this, aren't you?" Mrs. James whispered. It seemed to have struck her as a church, too. "You really believe in it."

"You might say it's my baby," he said. "I hate all this earth-flattening and stacking up high-rises. It's time for something kinder. Fortunately the university here has a bit of vision - it was the only organisation prepared to build the nanites I designed." He took an exaggerated deep breath. "Notice anything?"

She inhaled obediently. "It smells odd," she said. "Actually, it smells absolutely clean. And warm."

He’d proved his point: the walls really had filtered and warmed the air like a respiratory system would. "You can’t even smell that the tide’s out."

"Impressive," she conceded. "But it's still just a shed, not a home. What about plumbing and power?"

"You still need to pipe in conventional utilities, but the house uses far less of them."

"Sanitary arrangements?"

"Install a standard toilet and shower, and the house processes the waste."

"A septic tank can do that."

"I can see I'm going to have a tough time convincing you," Barton said. "That's good. I like people who are thorough. See the light levels?" It was definitely brighter than the day outside. "The nanites can generate bioluminescent light, or they can use stored energy to power conventional illumination. The central heating system is like our circulation—it moves energy around in the walls. It pumps, it recycles. No effort or decision needed on our part."

He was especially proud of the last point. Mrs. James put her hand against a wall, and flinched back. "God, it's warm!" she said, finally abandoning her apparent detachment. "It feels like living tissue. I’m not sure residents would be comfortable with that."

"Think of the energy savings," he said. "It recycles building materials—no hassle with conservationists over gravel extraction. It'll even eat your

household waste. No more land-fill sites. Think about it."
"I am," she said. "And if it's all true, then you're a council's dream." She jabbed a forefinger towards his feet. "One final point," she said. "What's underneath here now? Mind if Andy checks?"
"Be my guest," said Barton. "You can drill a core straight through the floor."
Martin squatted and inserted the hollow tube into the slightly textured floor.
As he withdrew the core, the hole healed like a wound only much faster.
They waited while tests were carried out in Martin's van.. A few minutes later the analysis showed soil down to at least a metre was now as sweet and clean as the finest organic farmland.
"Well, I'll be damned," said Martin.

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When councils wanted, they could move fast, Barton learned. Within six months the planning committee had approved a pilot project estate with the blessing of the environmental agencies.
Demolition day was a media event. The green-stuff crept smoothly up the grim buildings like rising water, and began reshaping their components. The time-lapse video footage that went out on the news that day was nothing short of breath-taking, and even Barton—who'd seen it many times in trials – still felt a sense of wonder.
Up to that point the city had been a pretty ordinary one. But now it was becoming headline news. Its economy was boosted by the influx of reporters and urban management professionals who arrived to watch the growth of the first thinking, breathing, truly green neighbourhood. Barton revelled in the interviews and chat shows which followed.
There were protests, of course: from people who had grown up in the area and liked the buildings and knew they wouldn't be living in the new upmarket ones.
But Barton had done enough to convince the decision-makers that it would solve far more pressing problems than it might cause.
The estate grew, and it was beautiful, a Gaudi cityscape come to life in jade, sinuous as art nouveau. It began to feature on postcards. Barton bought one and kept it in his wallet.

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Firm in faith in his creation, Barton moved into one of the homes. He kept open house so interested parties could be entertained and educated. He was confident that his girlfriend Lin wouldn't mind. At least he had more time to spend with her now: she had stopped complaining she'd only recognise him by the back of his head framed in a halo of VDU light.

"It's quiet, isn't it?" a guest said.
"The walls don't just regulate temperature, humidity and pollution," he replied, slipping unconsciously into proselytisation mode. "They buffer external noise, too."
In the kitchen a large transparent patch grew in the wall where a more conventional home might have had patio doors. Barton emptied a carton of juice into a jug and tossed the box into the corner of the room, where the flooring ate it.
"Is that safe?" the guest asked, taking a step back.
"It's a discrete area," Barton assured him. "Don't worry about it. Plenty of fail-safes in the system, I promise. The waste-eating nanites are confined in that corner and in the soil stack, and they stay put. They're programmed not to react to human or animal tissues, so they wouldn't eat your dog, but they'd certainly stop the kids leaving their shoes lying around."
"I'll stick to a waste bin, thanks."
"Oh, you don't have that option," Barton said. "It's the way this structure builds itself. It manages its own waste. If we gave people too many override choices, they'd be back to clogging up landfill sites in no time. No, the main point of this is that it does the green thinking for you."
"What a good idea," the guest said.
When everyone had left, Barton looked out over the gardens and smooth nanite-built roads that separated the houses on the new estate. Electric vehicles and the occasional low-pollution conventional car stood shining in drives: bicycles with panniers stood propped against soft, leaf-like walls. It was a very green community in every sense.
"It's great, isn't it?" he said to Lin. The words sighed out of him: he truly loved what he saw. "Isn’t it worth all the time and sweat to prove it can be done? "
"I expect it is, love," she said, and wandered off. He knew she had never shared his evangelism on green matters, but at least she had stood by him. He reached for his beer can, and missed.
It had gone.
He thought Lin might have picked it up in a moment of tidiness until he saw the last gleam of a metal rim sinking into the floor.
"Bugger," he said. It had never done that before. He made a mental note to check the nanites’ boundary programming.

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Later that week the last resident moved in to the estate. He introduced himself as Harry and said he that now he'd retired, he was looking forward to having a house that maintained itself.
"You’ll certainly get that," Barton said.
Harry drove up in an elderly German performance car, the sort that required a punitive tax to be kept on the road. Barton and the rest of the residents tut-tutted about the pollution: but the smart houses could filter out the

exhaust emissions, so it was no big deal. Not really.
At least Harry had the decency to leave it parked in the drive most of the time.

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A couple of mornings later Barton was woken early by a hammering on the door that produced a drumming resonance on the slightly flexible material. Barton grabbed a bathrobe, and as he reached the door the opening instantly understood his intention from his position and parted for him.
"You!" It was Harry. "Come and have a look at my poor bloody car!"
Barton pulled a coat on over his robe and followed Harry back to his driveway.
Then he stared.
It was a poor bloody car indeed. The rakish lines and immaculately-maintained paintwork were disappearing, slowly but perceptibly, under a tangle of peridot green fibres. And it wasn't just being enveloped. From the collapsing shape it was clear the car was being dismantled, molecule by molecule.
The house was eating it.
It had run long filaments across the lawn as casually as if it were uncoiling a mass of hoses to water the flower-beds. To either side, the vehicles of other neighbours stood unmolested in their drives. The house definitely had a specific grudge against the German car and Barton decided in a moment of insight that he knew what it was.
"Emissions," he said.
It had a logic to it. The car had belched carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide and all manner of noxious trace elements all its pampered life. Now the house-material seemed to have decided it was a hazard to be neutralised. For the merest fraction of a second, Barton almost smiled: it was what he would have done, if he'd been able. Then he had an adrenal rush of panic.
Court case. Technology running amok. Bad publicity. End of green dream. He didn’t know which threat to tackle first.
"What am I going to say to the insurance company?" Harry wailed. "That my house ate it?"

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At first it was a joke. Most of the residents on the green estate expressed no sympathy for Harry with his big German car – or without his big German car—and were glad to see it go.
But the house had taken the law into its own hands. The damn thing just wasn't supposed to do that: the nanites had their built-in orders, and they had never deviated from them before. Barton lay flat out on his sofa, staring up through the ever-changing sky-lights in the roof, worrying more about the

unpredictability of his creation than the certainty of the impending court action.

His child was embarrassing him. Teething problems were not something he had allowed himself, and his whole personal strategy for saving the planet was in peril. His racing imagination pictured townspeople rounding on him, brandishing burning torches, the fate of all scientists misunderstood by an ignorant populace.

The university had promised, absolutely promised, that the fail-safes on the recycling process were in place.

A hundred people were now witnesses to the fact that they might have misjudged things just a little.

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Barton read his mail. His lawyers told him were preparing to argue that it was the house-stuff's in-built priority to protect life that drove it to deconstruct Harry’s car in the first place.

"Settle out of court," Lin advised. She was spending more time at her mother’s lately. "The last thing you need is a row that’s going to shut down the pilot."

"Later. I’ll call them." Barton didn’t look up from the pile of paper. When he noticed the outside world again, Lin had gone. There had been no slamming of the door to help him judge if he’d offended her. The house-stuff created doors which closed quietly behind even the most angry lover.

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Next morning the university took an ominously long time to put his call through to the site project manager. She hadn't returned his earlier calls. While he listened to music designed to soothe the impatient caller, he fretted. Eventually Lilian McKay answered.

"Can we get on with re-evaluation?" he asked.

"No," she said. "We're in enough trouble as it is."

"We can't just stop like that. This works. It might be inconvenient, but it works."

"It hasn't killed anyone yet, no."

"It's just protecting us. "

"Well, I could do with some protection right now because the word lawyers got mentioned and the chancellor has gone into melt-down. I'm under orders to seal the lab and shut down the project until further notice, and I'm not supposed to have contact with you except via our solicitors ."

"We need to deal with this now. Think of the benefits—"

"I'm thinking of my pension, actually."

"You know we carried out the trials properly. Nothing showed up."

"We built to your spec."

"I'm not interested in apportioning blame. I just want to find out what happened. It may have stopped moving for a while, so we've got time to

investigate things."
"As I said, it’s more than my job's worth. Good-bye, Hedley. Please don't call
me again. Nothing personal."
He was left with a dialling tone, and a knot of frustration in his throat.
Always the same, he thought: everyone wanted a clean environment but nobody saw it as their responsibility to make a few small sacrifices to achieve it.
That was where he'd got the idea in the first place, after all. He had dreamed
of a building that would take the decisions for you, and carry them out, because it was the right thing to do.
He needed to make people see that. The question was how.

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The stream of visitors from housing associations, councils and developers continued to flow to the estate. Barton still held court and extolled the virtues of his process. But he had taken to ignoring the letters which bore the logos of legal firms, and he counted cars nervously each morning.
They were all still intact. Maybe, just maybe, it really had been a one-off.
It was Lin who noticed the next change. She opened the fridge door and bent over to look for something: he could hear the sounds of containers being scraped back and forth across shelves as she rummaged.
"Have you had my cheesecake?" she demanded, voice distorted by the cavern of
the fridge.
"Never touched it, love" said Barton. "Hate the stuff."
"It's gone."
"Bet it's at the back."
"It isn't, I tell you."
"Oh, come on, Lin..."
But it was gone. He joined the search. The chocolate and praline cheesecake and its perfectly biodegradable carton were missing. A check of the grocery receipts showed a number of other items consigned to the fridge had disappeared too: a slab of marbled, fatty pancetta and a bottle of hundred proof vodka.
"Are you sure you bought it all?"
"I didn't invent the receipts," she snapped.
"Never mind," he said, doubting her. "All that stuff's bad for you anyway."
Indeed it was. And as soon as the words were out of his mouth he felt a tingle
of fear chill his gut, and tried to ignore it. Things that were bad for you.
Things that you had to avoid if you wanted to be healthy—just like car emissions.
Please God, no, thought Barton. Not that. Not before I've got some answers, please.

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The disappearance of the indulgences was just the first incident in the house-stuff's new catalogue of sensible, healthy decisions. Others began reaching Barton thick and fast, on the angry voices of neighbours, who had put
two and two together with educated efficiency and come to the same conclusion.

Their houses were neutralising their cigarettes, shutting windows when they wanted the sun streaming into their rooms and steepening stairs for the unfit.

It was sensible. He had to admit that. The house-stuff apparently knew that too. Its material had been designed to make decisions to keep humans in the best of health and to preserve the environment, so he shouldn't have been surprised at its relentless, matronly efficiency. It was just the fact that it seemed to have... well, learned so much. He still couldn't work out where the design had started to change itself, or how.

The whole estate was talking about legal action: and the media had got wind of the events. The last thing Barton wanted was to give eco-sceptics more ammunition to shoot holes in environmentalists. He sat at his terminal late into the night, modelling and remodelling, while the nanites obligingly kept the lights at just the right level.

At 1.00 am the house decided he had worked enough. It dimmed the lamps into darkness.

#

"On South Now tonight—a driver cheats death by inches in a freak crash—can a donor be found in time to save this three-year-old’s life?—and the housing estate where your home isn’t your castle anymore—join us at six."

Barton stared at the TV screen. "Oh shit," he said. He had been avoiding reporters all week. The constant calls had upset Lin and she was packing for a longer stay at her mother’s.

He now charted the house-stuff’s progress via the news: nobody at the council was taking his calls any more. The nanites’ larger collective works were gradually emerging as householders and traders called the media with their stories. Fractured sewers had been wrapped and sealed—no doubt with recycled material from the German car , Barton thought—and the green fibres were making their way across the city.

They had advanced on a beach-front hotel that was leaking raw effluent into the sea, blocking its waste sewer and forcing the management to replace the pipes. The benign invasion had given an elderly woman guest a nasty turn while she was sitting peacefully on the toilet, the TV news reported.

"I have to admire its efficiency," Andy Martin was telling the reporter. He had spent a great deal of taxpayers' money trying to find the source of the beach pollution. "It's a clever bugger. It can have a job here any time."

It was the defining moment. Barton had never actually noticed having one before. But the revelation was upon him, and it was on a text-book Pauline scale.

This was the way he could achieve his clean green dream, planned or not.

Don’t fight it.

Let it put things right.

You can’t stop it now.

"Lin!" he called. "Lin! It’s all right! It’s going to work."

But Lin had already left.

#

The green stuff had its critics, but it was also winning allies beyond Barton.

While he watched the kitchen sink doing its new trick of nano-licking the plates clean, he listened to the radio.

The media were busy making the house-stuff a collective hero. The mid-morning radio show was now running a special daily phone-in to chart its creep across the city.

If it hadn't been for the impact the nanites were having on the less ecologically enlightened sectors of the business community, the city was doing quite well out of the situation. Journalists and researchers and sight-seers flowed in. They spent. They were creating a thriving industry. The council’s economic development chief admitted on the mid-morning TV news that 600 extra jobs had sprung up to service the phenomenon.

Later Barton sat cross-legged in front of his TV, leaving the radio chattering away in the kitchen. The floor piled up behind his back to support his spine while he ate the last of the pizzas Lin had left for him.

Lin.

He called her mother’s number, keeping half his attention on the news. "She’s out," said the mother-in-law not-to-be. "I’ll tell her you called."

"I’d really like her to call me back, please," he said. "I’m really sorry about all this nonsense. I know it’s not been easy on her."

"I don’t think it’s been easy on her for the past two years. She’ll be surprised you’ve called."

The call cut off. Barton stared at the keypad in his hand. If he’d been a normal human being, he thought, he’d have got in the car and turned up on the doorstep to talk her round. But he didn’t have that luxury, not just yet.

He turned back to the TV.

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A tree surgeon removing a row of beech trees to make way for a car park returned from lunch to find his van, chain saw and ladder neatly shrink-wrapped in a green filmy coating, said the evening bulletin. Barton stared at the video clip with a mixture of impotent amazement and satisfaction.

"I had a proper contract from the council to fell them, too," the man was telling the reporter. "But they’re nice old trees, really."

The shot cut to Evelyn James, Director of Planning, who was fidgeting before the backdrop of beeches with the air of a woman who had recently done a great deal of explaining.

"It’s good for the city's image," she said. "And it’s actually achieved clean-up targets we’ve struggled to meet for years. But enough is enough. People have to be able to live and work in this city without waking up to find

a piece of green goo is checking up on their habits. We hope to have a solution soon."

"You're too late," Barton said, brandishing a beer can for emphasis. He'd taken to talking to the TV in Lin's absence. "You can't take a vote on this any more."

It was a delightfully comforting thought. No more decisions. He'd done what he had set out to do, in a roundabout way. Now he could take a fresh look at his life.

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Barton had given up worrying about every writ that came in from householders, insurance companies and corporations. Bankrupt was bankrupt. Whether it was five million or fifty million, it didn't really matter.

He sat on the porch of his smart house, drinking the low-alcohol beer the nanites allowed him. Even in the centre of the city, he could now enjoy the peace of a pollution-free, quiet summer evening: no constant tyre noise hummed from the motorway. As the sky darkened, he could actually see stars. Only essential street lights had been spared by the house-stuff, and they had been canopied with impenetrably thick green hoods to direct the light down to exactly where it was needed.

It was a shame, he thought, that Lin was away: she would have enjoyed this evening. Then he thought of the writ from the local electricity generating company, suing for loss of business because the energy-producing house-stuff was functioning so very well, and he smiled. You had to make sacrifices.

So he was making his. It hadn't quite been the way he had planned, which had centred mainly on refusing carrier bags and giving up his car: but, oh, this had worked. It had worked better than he could ever have expected, now that he accepted the unpredictability. It was worth it.

Footsteps sounded from a distance away. He could hear those things for hundreds of metres now: voices, the whirr of cycle wheels, whispers of breeze, hedgehogs snuffling in the gardens. He looked up to see Mrs. James, files and papers clutched under one arm."Hedley, let's talk," she said.

"I did call you a few times. I gave up."

"Okay, I'm sorry about that. Can you stop this? Is it possible?"

"Not now," said Barton. "It'll be everywhere. You'll never be able to track all the material. Ever tried getting rid of ground elder?"

"I've just come from the town hall," she said. "The material's reached the airport and there's nothing flying. I don't need to say the word lawyers to you, do I?"

"If you do," he said, draining his biodegradable beer-can, "it won't make any difference. Sue me. Sue the university. Sue us all. It's done now."

"Come on. What point are you making? What will it take to get you to – reverse it, neutralise it, whatever?"

"I've told you, I can't stop it," he said. "I actually don't know how. I may

have nailed down the design but I’ve still no firm idea how the nanites develop their decision-making. And I wouldn’t dream of touching them, anyway.

The material has achieved more by stealth than you have by years of asking people nicely."

"The university say they're working on it."

"Well, they know even less than I do, so don't get your hopes up." He didn't intend to sound so damning: he wanted her to see the positive side of the gentler alternative future. "Don't you like things better this way? A lot of people do. You’ve only got to watch the news to see that"

"All right, so asthmatics are breathing easier and hypertensives have lower blood pressure. But a lot of people don't like it. It's destroying the infrastructure."

"No, it's removing the worst risks to us." Barton had plenty of time to read and browse these days, and he could quote the stock price of firms dealing in air scrubbers, filters and electric vehicles. "Nobody said sustainability would be easy. I expect the Clean Air Act hurt the coal trade. But we go on, don't we? We adapt."

"You're a bloody eco-terrorist." Mrs. James was one of those people who got quieter as she got angrier. She was a whisper now. "You're going to screw the British economy. We'll be locked in some stupid pastoral idyll while the rest of the planet leaves us behind. We won't even qualify for the Third World."

"Nature has a way of evening the score," Barton said. He had an idea in his head that he thought best kept from Mrs. James right then. "I think you might be—well, comforted if not surprised"

The anger on Mrs. James's face slackened into consideration for a few moments, as if something had occurred to her that was not good but oddly reassuring.

"Just one question," she said. If it hadn't been so quiet he would hardly have heard her. "Can it cross water?"

Barton paused and put his can down on the step. The house-stuff ate it obediently as he opened another one. At last. She’d seen the beautiful balance of it all.

"It coped with the sewers," he said. "It's very adaptable. I think it'll learn to do what's best for us. All of us." He stood up and stretched. "I don’t suppose you’d like a drink, would you?"

"It’s going to be a long time before we have a social drink," she said, and walked away.

Barton pulled out his wallet and found the postcard he’d bought just a few months back when the estate had been new. The coating was separating from the paper: it was crazed with fine creases where he’d sat on his wallet and moulded its contents to the curve of his backside. The estate still looked wonderful, though. He began mentally composing a message to Lin.

Then he thought better of it. He took out his phone. With the city this quiet, the neighbours would hear him, and he didn’t mind one bit.

"Hello… no, I’ll wait, if you don’t mind….no, I can hang on ‘til she finishes

her bath." He’d never been a man who was easily dissuaded, after all. "In fact, I’ll wait until the phone company cuts me off."

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On the sea-front, now cleared of effluent, used condoms and patches of oil, the visitors and residents enjoyed the early sun. Children played in the sea, squealing and dredging up handfuls of seaweed.

"Green, mummy!" The shrill voices carried across the beach. "I want to take it home!"

"Put it in the sandwich bag, then, love," said the woman. She took the hanks of green thread from outstretched hands and popped them into the clear plastic. The children stared intently at it while she held it aloft, as if it might house a goldfish or some other fascinating thing.

"Why’s it different greens?’ the smaller child asked.

"No idea, love. Different plants probably. Let’s clean you up, shall we?"

In the shallows, filaments of pale green house-stuff mingled with the darker green seaweed as if learning to turn the trick of negotiating salt water. They needed to learn. The growing strands had work to do: there was contamination from a power station on the French coast that beckoned to them.

And now they knew how to reach it.

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