CHARLIE ALICE RAYA



book 4, building, part 1.1, breathe, days 39-9

CAMPAIGNS FOR OUR FUTURE

easy town books

ripples publishing
for people & planet

day 36

|| Fri, 24 February

THE FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE

The town project broke its silence at seven o'clock in the morning with the first ripples news live coverages of the day: interviews with and reports from the Building Site Team and from the Business Expansion Team.

Meanwhile the Campaigns & Negotiations Team were busy getting ready for the press conference.

Isabel (head of campaigns), John (business) and Robin (education) got styled by Hachiro and his team.

Dennie (security) giggled because Eliza, the team's doctor, removed his cast.

Skye (care) checked 'all your sanities to make sure you're okay for the press conference.'

Tilly finished a stress-release workout with Andy (campaign simulations), Heather (press), Hayley (tech), and Troy (illustrations).

Jack (film) did a voice warm-up with Alice, Emine (law), Dana (ecology) and Navarro (society).

And Calum did a breathing session with Rohana (coordination), Raiden (town simulation), Constance (crafts), and Marita (economics).

Yes, there was nervousness in the air, but overall the team were ready to step into the spotlight. And they did. At eight.

The press conference took place in the Jellybridge Room of the town museum, a larger, square room with a stage at the wall, opposite the entrance. Twenty-eight chairs stood in front of the stage, in four rows, another sixteen between the exhibits.

Dana, Emine, Jack, John, Navarro, and Robin took their seats at the back of the stage, and Alice approached the wooden podium, letting her gaze drift across the audience. All seats were taken and nearly twenty journalists were standing.

When Alice reached the podium, she smiled and said: 'Good morning everyone! And welcome to our town museum here in the Front House. This is the new Jellybridge Exhibition Room where the estate and our plans for the town are presented. And also welcome to our first press conference, after the extraordinary turn of events for our project.'

Some journalists clapped, some smiled a little, most had blank faces, offering something like a brick wall to talk at.

A brick wall. Great.

Pushing another smile onto her face and fixing her eyes on one of the blank faces, the hint of a challenge appeared in Alice's eyes, and she said: 'Yesterday, I had a fruit fly in my glass of lemon water. It frantically paddled for its life. At first I was annoyed. But then I decided to rescue the little pesky thing. I put my index finger into the water, and as soon as the fly found purchase, it scrambled up my finger with an astonishing speed — and then it collapsed. I breathed on it to dry it, but the fly didn't move. *Well*, I thought, *maybe it needs to rest.* So I let it

slip onto a piece of paper and watched it. Nothing. I went about my work, returned, watched it — still nothing. In fact, it never moved again. I could get philosophical about how scrambling to safety had been in vain for the fruit fly. But what intrigued me more was that the fruit fly did everything it could to survive — without hesitation, without arguing, without justifying why it had to stay in the lemon water. It got a chance to escape certain death, and it took it with every bit of strength it still had.' Alice inhaled. 'How come that a tiny fruit fly is so determined to survive — while we seem determined to keep paddling in the sticky water? — You could reply: "What's the use of fighting? We'll die anyway. Just like the fruit fly." I admit, sometimes it is tempting to give up on ourselves, on humanity, on the planet. But we don't have to. I decided not to. I decided to find out whether we really have to harm ourselves, each other and our planet. That's why my central question is whether it's possible to create an environment where humans can thrive. I don't mean some sort of education scheme to make people better, or squeeze them all into the same corset, or manipulate them into compliance. For me the question is whether changed dynamics, changed approaches, changed narratives and stories, changed foci and practices would allow us to be less destructive, to find our curiosity, our connection to nature, our creativity, our imagination and a radiating joy about being alive and about being part of the living world. One of the old narratives tells us that a world without villains, exploiters, fraudsters, profiteers, speculators or the so-called powerful is impossible, and that we ourselves need a degree of ruthlessness to succeed. These

narratives say that we need to bite to avoid being bitten. But with our project businesses we have already been disproving these narratives for months. With our town we might be able to prove that no one has to exploit, dominate, compete, hold down, enslave or pollute. Here is the thing: Our Business Expansion Team has been accused of building a ubiquitous powerhouse. But we are not about dominance or empire building. We want to figure out the opposite of empire building. We want to figure out How to live and let live. How to ravel in the abundance of nature without depleting it. How to empower and be empowered. How to create and be alive. Instead of building an empire, we want to contribute to a world which is shaped into a breathing, living, interwoven whole. At the Jellybridge Estate, we would have a chance to let our town experiment become reality, and we could do the research and explorations needed — not for profit, not for renown, not for power but for humanity and the planet.' Alice paused, smiling at the one journalist who clapped.

'Last Saturday,' Alice continued, 'I asked the British prime minister for an appointment to discuss the town project and the queen's offer. So far, the British government hasn't responded. I guess we'll need the support of the British public to nudge their government into negotiating with us. That is why we decided to launch a series of campaigns to make our work more widely known and to contribute to a number of urgent discussions for the future of our societies and our planet.' Alice inhaled. 'I have the great privilege of working with an amazing international, diverse team. Every day I learn something new. Every day we

add more questions, perspectives, findings to our project. But one thing hasn't changed so far. Every day I grasp a little more how devastating the situation on our planet has become only because many are still convinced that making everything about money is natural, a must, the one and only way to live. Our planet is dying because we still believe in the fairytale of hoarding riches. Our societies are drowning in crises because we have been taught What is What instead of being encouraged to say: "Hey, this doesn't work for me. This doesn't work for my fellow humans. This destroys, poisons, pollutes the basis of all life. Let's stop this nonsense and let's rethink our world." With our project we hope to contribute to rethinking and restoring our planet. Thank you. Thank you for your attention. Thank you for joining us this morning. You're welcome to take a look around our museum where every team present their specific perspectives regarding our project. Me and my team are happy to answer your questions now. Some hands are already up. I'll ask you in the green jumper to make a start. Thank you.'

There was some applause, Alice stepped away from the podium and took her seat between Emine and Jack.

The quality of the following questions was incredibly varied, from fake-news dumbness to highly sophisticated and pretty much everything in between, including some celebrity bashing — and fawning — aimed at Jack.

'Jack Harris! You're fantastic! When will we see you on screen again. Your fans miss you so much.'

Jack could never quite hide his annoyance about questions like this, but his answer came with a friendly smile nonetheless. ‘I honestly don’t know. One of our upcoming campaigns is called PRESS PAUSE, press pause to think and to shape new narratives and stories. You could say that’s what I’m doing. Very likely I’ll do movies again once we’ve carved ways out of our messes. Moreover, I’d love to play in new stories, stories which can inspire us to shape a world that works for people and planet.’

‘Aren’t you worried about your career?’ another reporter called.

‘No. I’m worried about the future of our societies and the future of our planet.’

‘What are you doing for the UK?’

‘Our project’s work is for every country because we guess that everything is connected. And in order to address the crises of our times we need to look at the whole picture and take the entire planet into account.’

‘What’s your next movie?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why did the queen involve you?’

‘The queen asked me to vouch for Alice Adler, and I did and do so.’

‘Will you get a knighthood?’

‘If I was offered one, I would politely refuse to accept it.’

At this point the reporters seemed to lose interest in Jack, and one of them pointed at Alice, sneering: ‘Your team already moved into Jellybridge House. You have no right to be there!’

‘You should have nosed around a bit more by questioning the staff about us,’ Emine (lawyer) responded with her big smile.

‘I did question them!’ the reporter retorted. ‘They wouldn’t tell me a thing!’

‘Oh, well,’ Alice returned with a smile. ‘They are cool people.’

Emine chuckled and said: ‘In that case, let me enlighten you. On the day Alice Adler accepted Queen Lusana’s offer we submitted a formal request to rent Jellybridge House and to restore the train station, with no costs to the queen or to the taxpayer. Furthermore we asked the queen to clarify what exactly our team is allowed to do on the site as a renter. After the signing ceremony at Waterbridge Castle, the queen’s secretary presented us with a proposed contract for renting Jellybridge House. Alice Adler, the queen, the queen’s lawyers and myself took pains to add further paragraphs to clarify what we can and what we can’t do on the estate. This includes, for example, that the site is off limits for most changes, and may only be entered for planning, presenting and documenting purposes. The one change we agreed on is to add elevated wooden walkways to protect the ground. As a renter of Jellybridge House, everything in and around the house is at our disposal and can be used to get ready for the building phase of our project. The queen also accepted our offer of restoring the train station, with the added benefit that we can use the area around the train station, for example, for storing building materials. If the queen’s offer hasn’t come into force by the thirty-first of March, we will leave the estate within two weeks

and restore everything to its original state — except the train station.'

'Where is this contract?'

'In your extensive press pack.'

'The queen mentioned that you, Alice Adler, aren't happy with the conditions attached to the queen's offer. What are you unhappy about? And why did you agree to the offer?'

'I don't like that the conditions put so much focus on me. Our project is a team effort. I agreed to the conditions because they don't interfere with our experiments.'

'You're very old and with no credits to your name. Why should anyone listen to you?'

'Good whiskey needs a lot of time to mature and to develop a full and unique flavour. So did I. Besides, if you consider me old, you're in for some surprises. The older I get the more I have to laugh about just how young I used to be in my twenties and thirties. And when the time comes, I'll probably laugh about my forties, too. It's quite an experience.'

'Have you studied?'

Alice smiled. 'I have. But my thoughts are mostly shaped by thinking, by testing ideas and playing through scenarios. I have little expertise in parroting, and I have outgrown quoting and name-dropping.'

'Do you believe in science?'

'I take that one,' Dana (ecology) intervened and straightened in her seat. 'Science is not a religion you believe in. At best scientific research helps us to expose gaps in our understanding or it provides the foundations for inventions.

At worst scientists make assumptions, create theories or invent devices without sufficient care for the consequences of their outpour. I am a scientist. The toughest lesson I learned came from a child, my niece, who told me that scientists ruined the world because they published all the uses for crude oil: plastic, fertilisers and gas, to name just a few, and it was scientists who lay the foundations for mass production, factory farming, concentration camps and weapons of mass destruction. “And for what?” my niece asked. “To get a prize, an award, a title, to feel important, to beat other scientists to it, to be self-righteous and rich?” My niece is right. Being a scientist doesn’t mean we are good, devoid of pride and superiority complexes, resist high incomes, don’t compete, or that everything we find is harmless, valid, useful, untouchable, sustainable. The town project is about rethinking, and that includes reflecting on the damages scientists have inflicted on this planet. Research is needed. Thinking is needed. Honesty is needed. Inclusiveness is needed. Understanding is needed. Collaborations and empowerment are needed. Digging Deeper is needed. Rethinking the words we use is needed. Fighting for our planet is needed. Believing isn’t. The scientific world, too, needs to rethink — a lot. And we, all of us, need to understand that the future of our planet is not in the heads or hands of a few. The changes we need require all of us. Besides, any good scientist knows that there is always a good chance that what we know today might be disproven tomorrow. I would never ask anyone to believe me. I always encourage people to question my findings. And with our town project, we invite everyone to join us

on our exploration, an exploration to entangle the mess we, the people of this planet, are in. And tragically my niece is right: scientists have contributed to a lot of our mess. Reflective, open-minded, curious, inclusive, clear-headed, good-trouble scientists, that's what we need.'

'My question is for Alice Adler. How did you start with this town idea?'

I will never get used to these abrupt changes of subject, Alice thought, inhaled and replied: 'I was tired of people theorising. I wanted something real where we can test ideas, where we can question everything that makes us and our planet sick, and where we can shape a town that works for us and nature.'

'Mr Jack Harris. Are you really single?'

Alice swallowed, glad that she wasn't blushing, but not daring to look at Jack.

There was a tiny delay before Jack answered. But when he did, he sounded casual, the acting kind of casual, and he returned: 'My private life is not relevant for this press conference. Ask me again when we build our town. I might answer your question then.'

A hubbub of questions were thrown at Jack, and Alice, who decided that smiling a bit couldn't do any harm, randomly pointed at a journalist in a blue costume who looked— yes, who looked bored by the fuss about Jack.

'Thank you. Chao Lin, host of the podcast SCREAM,' the journalist called loudly, and the hubbub subsided. 'Will you reveal something about the upcoming campaigns?'

Isabel (campaigns) nodded, stood up and went to the podium. And for the next six or seven minutes, Isabel introduced the seven main campaigns and gave some hints about what to expect.

Surprisingly, the questions that followed were good and for a while it seemed like the general mood had turned to exchanging questions and information, rather than attacking, even when the questions turned back to the town — and the queen.

'Why don't you just build the town, Alice Adler? Our queen gave you the land.'

'The offer of the estate will only come into force if and when the government approves of the town and grants us the autonomy we need for our experiments.'

'You're known to be critical of property. Why?'

'For me property is one of the big puzzles, and I'm glad I don't yet need an answer on how to deal with property because according to the Jellybridge contract it won't be possible to sell any part of the land.'

'Aren't you worried that people will be put off by not being able to buy their homes?'

'No. Testing alternatives to buying homes will be an interesting part of the experiment. And not buying gives people a lot more freedom and independence from banks.'

'As if landlords are any better,' one journalist called from the back.

'They are worse,' another chipped in. 'You pay and pay and don't get anything back when you move out. At least a house you can sell.'

John (business) nodded. ‘Replacing the dependence on a bank with a dependence on a landlord doesn’t make sense so long as rents are for profit. But buying a house isn’t as positive as we are told, especially when you take into account that selling property today might yield a higher price but that, at the same time, prices for property have risen elsewhere, too, and you are lucky if you don’t make a loss when moving.’

Dana (ecology) nodded. ‘There are also ecological problems with the idea that everyone should buy a home. If that’s the narrative we believe, we end up with roads full of similar looking houses, not with communities embedded in nature. Our project’s starting point is nature: How many of people can a natural space stomach? And how can we coexist with nature? The next layer of questions concerns the community. What makes a community? How can a community thrive in concert with nature? And only then will we ask questions about who owns what.’

Navarro (society) held up his mic, indicating that he would speak next. ‘There are also societal problems with property. It divides us into people who have more or less than others. There is an inbuilt class system that is detrimental to building a thriving, connected community.’

John (business) nodded. ‘Buying property is part of an economic system that only knows profit-maximisation and isn’t interested in creating communities and even less interested in coexisting with nature.’

‘Who do you think you are?’ a journalist in the front row spit, pointing at Alice. ‘Town planning is the responsibility of the government, not of a group of vigilantes.’

Alice could feel Jack stir next to her and maybe that allowed her to react a bit more calmly than her thoughts wanted to, and she returned: ‘And governments tend to do a great job, don’t they? Say again who grants permissions to build those pretty shiny teeth that screw the sky? Who thinks housing is what makes a community, and housing developments should be in the hands of profiteers? Who prioritises car traffic and parking instead of cycling and parks? And who privatises water, energy and transport to cater to yet more money-makers?’

‘You have no right to own the Jellybridge Estate!’

Alice and Emine exchanged a glance and Emine returned: ‘At the core of the contract with the queen isn't ownership but guardianship for the estate.’

Alice nodded. ‘Hopefully we’ll find an approach to property which is nowhere near speculations and property hoarding, nowhere near the failures to create communities, not even close to the pitfalls of inheritance or the lack of taste and imagination, and as far as possible removed from the failures to integrate all human settlements into nature.’

‘Will your town be vegan?’

Dana signalled that she would respond to this question. ‘Our town is not about telling people what to do and what not. Our town is about exploring what the human needs to thrive—’

‘—That’s bloody human arrogance,’ a journalist called. ‘Always superior to nonhumans!’

Dana smiled, but it was an annoyed smiled. ‘Humans can only thrive if they are connected to nature and if they are a part of nature. The world humans created doesn’t just kill the flora, funga and fauna, it also kills and harms us. And not just that, presently we are responsible for much of our planet’s misery. So, yes. We focus on the human because finding out what helps us to heal and reconnect to our origins, and shaping the narratives, stories and towns that will allow us to thrive will always mean thriving for nature, too, because these two go hand in hand, just like the destruction of nature goes hand in hand with our own destruction.’

A dark-haired journalist said: ‘Paul Woods, independent journalist. Wouldn’t you agree that much of the disconnections between nature and humans originate in human arrogance, in a human superiority complex?’

Navarro twitched the corner of his mouth. ‘I’d say, in part that is very likely. But where does the superiority complex come from? And was it the illusion of superiority that severed the connection to nature? Or is the superiority complex a result of the loss of connection to nature? Because if you think about it, someone who is connected to nature has a deep understanding of being a living part of something likewise alive and enormous. A connected person doesn’t have a need for superiority because they recognise all the wonders around them. So maybe a superiority complex developed whenever humans lost the connection to nature. And maybe the superiority complex is also a result of unprocessed fears, traumata, lack of understanding, anxiety — and ultimately the consequence of an

inferiority complex? I noticed that humans, like many animals, go on the defensive when they feel attacked. And in this defensiveness they tend to puff out their chests and tell us that they are much stronger, wiser, better and, of course, right — in fact, that they are superior to us. If that sort of reflex goes without reflection, then you have fertile soil for a superiority complex — as a defence mechanism. And if that is true, then telling a human what an arrogant ape they are, isn't going to help. What might help is to address the loss of connection to nature, the anxieties, fears, traumata, inferiority complexes, and the defence reflex — in fact, it might help to dig deeper and find the roots of the individual superiority complexes — and address those. And that brings us back to stories and narratives, many of which are also roots of superiority complexes. But they are stories and we can write new stories, stories where we successfully deal with our fears and anxieties, and on that basis we can come together as humans and find ways to reconnect to each other and to the natural world.'

Dana nodded. 'I studied ecology because I was horrified that humanity doesn't seem to understand that there is no planet B, that there is no life without bacteria, fungi, invertebrates, mosses, algae, grasses, ferns, wildflowers, tress, waters, fish, mammals and all other living beings — and that in intact ecosystems. But it was only when I spent days on end watching bugs, snails and fungi that I began to grasp the enormity, beauty, strength and potentials of the world we destroy — apparently because we don't know better.'

Robin nodded. ‘I had a similar experience. I was already a teacher when a friend of mine fell terminally ill, and I took a year off to make it possible for her to spend her last months surrounded by nature. It was in those amazing nine months that I realised that nature is something we need to explore in person, and that our education falls way short of opening us to nature’s enormous abundance, mysterious, and ways. Even worse, when we talk about nature, we often superimpose the flawed narratives that have shaped our world on nature, assuming that nature is about competition. What I learned in those nine months is that nature is about living, and that every single creature adds to the whole. Can we in the town find out how to breathe freely in the chorus of nature? That’s one of the things, we want to find out.’

‘So, will your town be vegan?’

Dana answered. ‘No. What kinds of foods we require is part of our experiments. Our focus, if you can call it a focus, is on everything concerning basic provisions. How much can or should be grown in town? How much can nature share with us? Can we farm in a way that enriches biodiversity? What about seasons? What can be exchanged with other farmers and towns? What do we actually need? The food industry is about selling as much as possible. Can we create a different food system, re-prioritise what we eat? As for life stock. Every kind of factory farming is a no-go for us. There is talk about keeping chickens, even though they are actually Asian birds, and it might be time to rethink keeping them. And then there is hunting. Hunting for sports is another no-go. Hunting to regulate

population is a vital function within every ecosystem. Can we re-introduce hunters like wolfs or lynx? Can humans take the role as a hunter who is part of the ecosystem? As for eating meat. There are some who say that the human is a herbivore. We don't know whether that is true, but since eating meat is part of our planet's metabolism, we presently have no qualms with that. And there are talks of rituals to remind us that everything in nature is alive and that eating plants, fungi or animals is both a gift of life and a function within the planet's amazing digestive system. However, hunting will not be about meeting a demand. That means, meat will only be available when hunting is required by the ecosystem.'

'It's murder!'

'No,' Dana returned. 'It's part of the natural processes. Our ecosystems couldn't function without earthworms, dung beetles, fungi or the big hunters who all make sure that what lived is digested and returned to the soil. That's one of the interesting parts of our experiment. How do we return the digested to the soil? And also, what do we leave to our neighbours in nature to digest. In other words, not every carcass will be brought into town. We are lucky that we can work with simulations which will over time give us a pretty good idea of what our town and the surrounding ecosystems need.'

'And you think, people will just obey?'

Emine lifted her mic. 'If we need a law, then we have failed to make a convincing case for coexisting with nature. However until then, there will be rules in town and fines so heavy that anyone who dares challenging them will wish to never have

come across us.' Emine spoke with such a force that no one countered.

'OK. But how will you protect nature?'

Navarro (society) replied. 'That's one of the tricky questions in our experiment. Ideally we won't have to protect nature because we will have learned how to coexist with it. We only have to protect nature if we use an economic system that feeds on draining planet and people in order to accumulate profits. We only have to protect nature if people have no active connection to it and don't understand how much damage their actions cause. Can we, as a project, find a way to reconnect to nature and coexist with it? These are some of the many questions we want to explore.'

John (business) nodded. 'To protect nature is like dealing with consequences instead of asking: When, why and how did a majority of humanity lose their connections to nature? And how can we forge mutually beneficial connections with nature?'

Navarro nodded. 'We can also ask: What causes harm to nature and how can we replace harmful practices so that nature can thrives unhindered? Unfortunately, part of the answer is that the way we do business, what we value, what we aspire to causes harm. And the trouble is that so long as we focus on protecting nature, we will tolerate narratives, practices, systems, products and habits which cause harm. The step forward is to rethink what brought us to this point.'

Robin (education) nodded. 'The best way to protect nature is to make protection obsolete. One way of doing this is to understand that everything is connected. Everything that is alive

has an underlying system, every human, every insect, every lion, every crab. And each of these systems works best as part of an ecosystem. And all ecosystems work best if each of them is functional. Everything is connected, and everything on this planet, us included, depends on intact, resilient, evolving systems. In our town we hope to explore all connections, and we hope to learn how to be part of the planet's connectivity.'

There were some murmurs, but no one commented and the next question featured the queen again. 'You say you want to rethink everything. Does this mean that the queen should leave?'

'That's not for me to say,' Alice replied. 'I've met Queen Lusana. I like her. But generally speaking, I think monarchies are a thing of the past, and democracies need a rethink.'

'So you're a socialist?'

'No. I'm an open-minded person. We don't have to toy around with ideas which have already failed us. Contrary to what is happening in present democracies, our town will not aim at a system where populism, big promises and self-serving laws steer the course in favour of a few profiteers, where governments seem to have forgotten that they are supposed to serve and instead hasten to widen the gaps between the few who accumulate riches and those who are exploited and that in the name of the internalised fairytale of growth. And those governments seem to have no qualms to destroy the basis of life: clean water, air, soil, a functioning natural world, and they don't seem to have an inkling of imagination when it comes to building communities not just houses, when it comes to

rethinking towns and cities, to reshaping public transport, to creating the sort of environment that would drastically reduce healthcare costs and, and, and.'

'So you are a socialist?'

'No. The socialism I experienced as a kid was the work of a few stuffy old man full of lies who thought that keeping people behind walls, keeping them from making their own choices is the right thing to do. Any system where a few take the decisions for the many is a system bound to fail.'

'What kind of political system would you establish in your town?'

'I don't know,' Alice returned. 'But a president like the one in the US couldn't happen in whichever system we might develop, nor any of the European clowns. The destruction of our ecosystems, the destructive goals of economic growth, competing and seeking dominance, bowing to financial interests, waging wars, voter pleasing, exploitation, elitism, discrimination, oppression, corruption, manipulation, I hope that none of these common elements will be part of our political system. We'll take it slowly, test, adjust, test again, involve the towners, involve experts, and work with proofs not with empty promises.'

'How dare you question democracy?'

'By being an explorer who has not given up on humanity, by being someone who believes that we can do better. We don't have all cards on the table. There are more potential systems out there than those humanity has suffered so far. If I wanted an experiment to find out which lobbyists are the most successful

in pushing the agenda of a small interest group, I wouldn't bother with building a town. I would set up rooms in a nice conference hotel and initiate a lot of secret meetings. That should be fun, but it wouldn't be of interest to me. Do I believe that democracy should be more than a word? Yes. Do I think that the reality of democracies should get bone, flesh, heart and blood? By all means. Would I suggest a debate on what we want democracy to be? Definitely. Have I lost trust in what still calls itself democracy? Sadly, yes. Do I propose to upend everything that has grown over the last centuries? No. I propose that we evolve, that we have the courage to call dysfunctional dysfunctional, and that we use our minds to rethink and reshape our world.'

'So you wouldn't abide by our laws?'

Emine answered. 'How could we test alternatives if we were restricted by the rules we're questioning?'

'Do you know what you are, Alice Adler? You're a loose canon! You don't know what you're talking about. You hit random marks, not because you know or understand, only because you keep rolling, determined to destroy. You'll destroy decades of work which kept our people safe and prosperous.'

Alice needed to take a deeper breath to remind herself that she was not here to fight, and luckily Any knew her well enough to whisper into her ear: 'You can do this.'

With a half-nod, Alice said: 'We can only regain some safety and prosperity if we face up to the mess we have created. That mess manifests in the way we govern, in the way we do

business, in the way we deal with each other, build, live, work, educate, and, and, and.'

'What you and your project fail to see is that people are evil. They want to control. They want to destroy.'

'You can do this!' Any repeated.

Alice twitched the corner of her mouth. 'I don't believe in good and evil. As far as I know both are simplifications and not even useful in fairytales. When I say that we are in a mess, I include us personally. We have been hurt, misled, betrayed, brutalised, traumatised. We're not OK. And we get an awful lot wrong. And we cause an awful lot of harm. I want to do this town experiment because I speculate that much of our behaviour is a consequence of the harmful economic, political and societal systems we suffer, and of the damaging narratives we have internalised and with that normalised. Is it possible to break free off those narratives and systems, and create new ones? I don't know. But I refuse to believe in the fairytale of good and evil. I want to find out what the human needs to heal, to be empowered, to unearth their potentials and to thrive.'

'You're wrong, Adler! Those in power want to destroy us all! It's all by design. We're meant to be divided and afraid. We are to be objects who serve the rich.'

Alice nodded. 'If that's the story a person in power believes, then that might be the case. But it's still a story, a story which tells such a person that they will be important and respected if they treat everyone else as their inferior and push them around. But it's still a story. And stories can be changed. Moreover, an attractive story, can be made unattractive. The story of the

glorious powerful can be turned into the story of the laughable powerful. The story of the affluent powerful can be turned into the story of everything the powerful miss out on. The story of the clever powerful can be turned into the story of destructive powerful — which is in fact the height of stupidity. And there could be millions of stories about what true power is. Spoiler alert. True power is not in running a corrupt government or a vampire corporation. True power is in bringing the planet alive. True power is in shaping a world that uses all its billions of potentials. True power is in ending all wars.' Alice paused briefly. 'And here's another thought: My guess is that we ourselves reinforce these stories about some great, powerful evil. We chant it. We paralyse ourselves with it. We remake it in thousands of stories. And with that we turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy — instead of standing up and saying: "I'm not having it! No power, imagined or real, will chain me! What can I do to change the story, the narrative? What can I do to shape and spread stories of a future we shape together?'

'Then whose side are you on?'

'I don't do sides. We can't afford sides. We don't need sides. We need to come together as the people of this planet, and we have a lot of rethinking to do. That doesn't mean I won't call out everything that is damaging to nature and humans. I'm not neutral. But I refuse to be dragged into a fight for some self-righteous side. We have no time for such fights. We need to restore, rethink and heal, whether we like it or not. If you need me to be on a side, then I take this one: I am on the side of humanity and the planet.'

‘Unsubstantiated idealism! That’s what this is! You put people in great danger with it. I’ll read your philosophical treatise, but there isn’t a chance in the world that you could convince me!’

The hint of a smile appeared on Alice’s face, and she returned: ‘I admit I’ve been hoping for a comment like this because I’d like to make it very clear that our project has nothing to do with idealism or utopias — and little with philosophy. We actually looked up the terms in preparation for this press conference. So here it is. According to the Oxford Dictionary: “Idealism is the unrealistic belief in or pursuit of perfection.” I can assure you that our town project is not about believes. We want to run experiments to gather data and to explore what is possible. As for the pursuit of perfection: not my thing. I love imperfection, diversity and mistakes because that’s where life happens, that’s where we make discoveries, that’s where we expand our understanding.’ Alice smiled and continued: ‘Next philosophy. According to the Oxford Dictionary: “philosophy is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence.” As a project we are mostly interested in how we can shape our knowledge, reality and existence which might contradict the core of the philosophical idea that there is something like a fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence. Truth be told, we had a discussion about this. In the end we agreed that first and foremost, we are explorers for the future, we want to disentangle the messes we are in, and we want to do our bit to shape a future where we and the planet thrive. As far as I am personally concerned neither idealism nor philosophy are part

of my work. But since there are plenty of definitions for both terms, some members of our team have other views.'

'Do you really want to rethink everything?'

Alice and Navarro (society) exchanged a glance and Navarro replied: 'Every system that is in place today played a role in getting us into this mess, into our self-destruction. Many narratives aided those systems. At the conclusion of our experiment we might not have rethought everything, but we'll attempt to be thorough.'

Alice nodded. 'Rethinking is not about destroying what is. If something humans invented holds, even under scrutiny, if something we've been using for decades or centuries can make a case for itself, can face the damages it caused, or can prove that it's actually useful, that it still has a place in our world, then all the better. In the process of rethinking, we'll have gained a deeper insight into what makes our world. We'll have tested every narrative, every idea, every story, and we'll have thought about it and questioned it, always asking: does this or that serve us and the planet? Anything that survives that kind of scrutiny is worthwhile keeping — until the next round of rethinking.'

'What are the goals of your town project?'

Robin (education) answered. 'Our education is about making the human fit into the world and succeed in it. We, in our town, take the opposite approach. We want to build a town that fits the human. We want to create an environment that allows the human to thrive. So far our work suggests that we'll find a

number of viable and adjustable approaches rather than having one ultimate result.'

'It says on your website that you want to build a town for neurological patients. What does that mean?'

Navarro (society) answered. 'There are two main answers to this question. One is that we want to build a town which supports neurological patients in their recovery processes. That means everything in our town will take into account what might stimulate the brain positively. The other is that we want bring people together who share a common interest — in our town's case that's the common interest in the study and practice of neurology and related fields. We're curious how a common interest influences the town's communities.'

Some twenty minutes later, when Alice left the press conference followed by Jazz and Jordie, she felt a mix of unease, embarrassment and a sense of— well, that she could have done better — that she should have done better. There was also a nagging voice that implied that they had all sounded too much alike, too much as if they all sang the same tune, too many— '—Alice Adler?'

Alice turned sharply and stopped. A journalist, around her age, mid-forties, caught up with her while Jazz and Jordie kept some distance.

'I'm sorry I startled you,' he said with a pleasant smile.

Alice shrugged, frowning. 'I was miles away.'

'Scrutinising your performance, wishing you had done better?'

‘How do you know?’

‘I watched you. You are a powerful speaker. But Jack Harris was the only person on stage who is used to spotlight. You’ll get there. If you’ll take my advice, enjoy the imperfections.’

‘Who are you?’

‘A friend — and an admirer. Potentially also a critic. But not today. Today I raise my glass to imperfections.’

Alice smiled a little and returned: ‘I have a good supply of those. Unfortunately I’m short of time.’

‘I apologise. Of course you’re busy. I just wanted you to know that you have allies.’

Alice smiled. ‘Thank you! That means a lot.’

With a little bow the journalist said goodbye and left, walking towards the courtyard where members of project team and the media mingled at a bar and around a buffet.

‘Who is he?’ Alice asked Jazz as they walked on towards the Central Building.

‘Paul Woods. Independent journalist. Writes for British papers and independent publications, some of the latter in Europe and Canada. He hasn’t written about the town project, but he published some good analyses about the Hub, Any says.’

‘Hm,’ Alice mumbled. *Imperfections. Yes! Yes, there is a large supply of those, always at the ready.*

Next on Alice’s schedule was a meeting with the Business Expansion Team in the atrium of the Central Building. It was a lively, energising meeting, one which restored much of Alice’s

confidence and fighting spirit. There were enough cases of imperfection here, but overall the seventy-seven businesses were like spring flowers who couldn't wait to burst into hundreds of blossoms, all buzzing with ideas.

Some twenty minutes into the meeting, Alice stood on the small stage near the Oceans Bar and said: 'I'd like us to pursue one main goal: inspire enthusiasm for the people of this planet and for the planet itself, an enthusiasm that catches on and has people say: "You know what, I'm done with making everything about money. I want to make everything about life, living, joy — not about rubbish, not about exploitation, not about growth, and absolutely not about war. I want to be part of creating balances in every possible respect within complex economic systems and as part of the planet's ecosystems. And I'll measure business success in terms of how many ripple effects a business creates for people and planet."'

Applause followed, some team members added thoughts, others dug deeper into how the overall network could become a living and breathing organism.

It was about ninety minutes later, the dot.team were speaking about the new dot.headquarters near Tunis, when Alice got called away.

'Where are we going?' Alice asked Jazz, following her to the Security office.

'The British prime minister wants to see you.'

'Oh!'

‘Two government observers were at the press conference. Apparently the invitation is a reaction to their report.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘Jack will be joining you in the Security car — unless you’ve changed your mind.’

‘No,’ Alice said, and Jazz opened the door to the office which had a slide to the underground tunnels. ‘I’m uncertain about Jack coming. But I’m curious what effect his charm and fame will have in an official meeting.’

About an hour later, Alice and Jack shook hands with the British prime minister and with some MPs. It was hard to read their expressions, but after a minimum of small talk, one of the MPs dropped all pretence and stated matter-of-factly: ‘Politeness and the involvement of our queen requires that we tell you in person: We have no interest in your town. We are considering measures to remove you and your businesses from our country because we are a democratic nation and not a playground for deranged fantasies.’

Alice nodded, certain she had turned pale, but her voice was surprisingly steady when she returned: ‘Next time you have cheerful news for us, please, don’t bother with an invite. A letter will do. My assistant will send you the details for my primary lawyer so that you can discuss all legal issues directly with her. I, on the other hand, am busy finalising the campaigns for our town project. And I am strangely confident that your people are a lot more interested in their future than you seem to be. Should

you change your mind and wish to talk about the enormous benefits of our town experiment for your people, yourself and the planet, please, don't hesitate to get in touch.'

'Dear Alice Adler,' said an elderly MP, with a terribly patronising voice. 'We know that English is not your native tongue, therefore I will speak very slowly and use very simple words: Please, leave our country! We don't want any of your nonsense here.'

Alice smiled. 'Allow me to repay your courtesy in likewise simple words: Good day to you.'

Back in the car, Any, the head of THE, appeared on the small screen at the back of the passenger seat. 'I'm proud—' Any started but Alice interrupted him. '—Any, I'm too angry for flattery. Why did you call?'

Any nodded. 'OK. I'll save the honey for later. Actually, I have good news. My team found an ideal place for a Hub Station in the Jellybridge region. Devery and some of his Hub coordination team could take a look at the town and talk to the mayor about hosting a Hub Station there. All Devery needs is your go-ahead.'

Alice nodded grimly. 'Go ahead! Let's do everything to pop up on the MPs' radars as often as possible until they can't ignore us any more. Let's haunt them with our ideas. Let's give them sleepless nights with our ubiquity. Let's make our campaigns into the nightmare they can't escape no matter where they are, what they do, what they try. Why isn't Jack with us?'

‘He’s off to a family birthday party. It’s his son’s Davie and his father’s birthdays.’

‘Oh, I forgot.’

‘How was Jack? I didn’t hear him via the coms.’

‘I don’t know. I was too transfixed by these stuffy, patronising people. I didn’t look at him, and when I turned to leave, he turned with me and led the way.’

Around this time, Paul Woods published his thoughts on the press conference. He had heard about the meeting with the prime ministers from a friend, but he decided not to vent his anger about this missed opportunity. Though in his mind, he underlined the headline of his article several times.

ARE WE READY FOR THE BIG RETHINK?

This morning, I found myself in a museum, like sixty-three other journalists, curious what we would learn about Queen Lusana’s extraordinary and somewhat confusing offer of an estate to a group of strangers.

Of course, anyone who has gladly fled the tech giants’ platforms to find a new and much more satisfying home on the Hub will be vaguely aware of these strangers. Though, often enough users seem unconcerned with who gets their stories, their data and their money.

As we waited for the appearance of the speakers, I flicked through the press pack and came across the speech Queen Lusana gave at the signing ceremony. One passage struck me in particular.

'I chose Waterbridge Castle as location for a reason. Water symbolises movement and nourishment. The bridge symbolises openness and a readiness to connect rather than to oppose or to wall oneself in. And this castle is not a boasting place. It was always a practical, down to earth place. I hope that all of these characteristics will be part of the town project, too.'

I admit I am conflicted when it come to the royals, but I feel rather proud that someone in our country has the courage to give the town project a chance.

The question is, are we ready for the big rethink? Or are we more comfortable with complaining, pointing the finger, feeling miserable and protesting?

And if we are not ready, are we at least prepared to grant a group of strangers the autonomy to do the big rethink in the relatively small setting of a single town? While we watch them warily from a safe distance?

Going by the questions of my colleagues, it seems that the greater part of the press is

determined to stick to business as usual: find the angle that promises the highest rate of reader engagement. Going by them, I would say: No, we are not ready. We are too deeply stuck in our own way of thinking and more importantly in our way of doing business.

I can’t help wondering WHAT FOR? Why is it so hard for many to comprehend that rethinking everything is a chance for all of us — not least because it lets no one off the hook. We all have internalised narratives which keep us from questioning our ways — and from finding more promising narratives. And rethinking could start with something as simple and difficult as: ‘Making mistakes can help us to figure out how to do better,’ as Navarro Duarte, a sociologist and philosopher at the town project, pointed out, and he added: ‘However, it might take more courage to acknowledge the mistakes of the past. It seems that we have built our world on flawed ideas for at least three or four millennia. And worse, we have called flawed ideas wisdom instead of questioning them, instead of identifying them as mistakes, instead of learning from them and shaping ideas that work for people and planet.’

My first reaction to that statement was protest. But as I scanned through every bit of history stored in my mind, I swallowed. Just take the idea of kings and queens, or the

uniquely human invention of wars. There is no doubt in my mind that these are flawed ideas at best. And they have been around for millennia. ‘But doesn’t that prove that these flaws are an inevitable part of who we are?’ a colleague asked. Jack Harris flashed one of his famous smiles and returned: ‘Some things improve with age, like a good wine, other things don’t. Some things grow richer with age, like an apple tree, other things don’t. Some things are rotten from the start. They can survive because we normalise them, don’t call them out and don’t find out which alternatives might serve us better.’

Another related point kept surfacing. Humans tend to establish an idea, apparently regardless of the idea’s flaws, proclaim it as the one and only solution/way/fact/answer and then demand that other humans adapt to said idea. In fact, education has often served to prepare people to function in the flawed world, instead of enabling them to shape a world that actually functions. Or as Robin Hussan, the renowned education expert from Cairo, put it: ‘Instead of telling people what they should think, how they should act, what they should believe in order to serve a nation, an employer, a family, we want to understand what is good for humans. What allows a human to heal, to thrive, to unearth their individual

potentials? What allows a human to find its connection to nature again? What allows a human to end all wars against themselves, against others, against nature?'

Maybe the town project can ask all of these questions convincingly because their starting point is the injured brain: healing it, stimulating it, expanding it. As Alice Adler, the head of the project, puts it: 'A town which supports the healing processes of an injured brain will most likely be good for all brains.'

I doubt that we are ready for the big rethink. But today's press conference makes me a little hopeful that the upcoming campaigns might inspire and maybe even encourage us to press pause and start thinking.

Back at the Compound and after a quick detour to her flat to refresh herself, Alice joined the Q & A in the Front House theatre, a stool waiting for her on stage where Dana (ecology), Emine (law), Hayley (tech), Raiden (town simulation), Marita (economics), and Navarro (society) were answering questions.

The theatre's three hundred red velvet seats were mostly filled, and Rohana's people made sure that anyone who wanted to ask a question got a microphone.

'How do you prevent small town fatigue?' a young man asked.

Navarro replied. 'We don't know, yet. But we're eyeing our international business networks as an potential prevention or

cure. If things go as as planned, towners could work in our businesses around the world, for a change of scenery, for new inspirations and even for a coming-back-home experience. We also contemplate a network of towns, each with its own focus and purpose, and exchanges between these towns. This way the world would become every towner's oyster.'

This reply was followed by a succession of dismissive questions, and Alice, still a bit on edge, countered at one point: 'So you think the world is what it is and nothing can be done about it? Think again! Who made the world? Some higher power? The devil? I don't know. I don't know what happened at the beginning. But we can be relatively certain about the previous millennia. And in those thousands of years, it was humans who made the world. It was those who popularised ideas and those who adopted the ideas. That's who shaped the world. It was us humans. To this day, we shape the world by what we say, do, not say and don't do. And that means we can question what is and we can shape a world that doesn't drive us crazy. But as long as we tell ourselves that nothing can be done, nothing will be done.'

Around half past eight Jack (film), his sons Davie and Kyle, his daughter Rose, and his father Henry joined the Q & A and caused a bit of a stir, several people pointing at Jack. But soon the next question was posed by a grey-haired woman. 'You seem to seek global dominance with your businesses. How is that better than what other corporations do?'

Marita (economics) took this question. 'We don't seek dominance. We seek the empowerment of creators, producers

and customers. We connect all players in our networks and offer the framework to support everyone involved. That's a long shot from companies who seek to satisfy shareholders and practise modern slavery, resource exploitation, waste production and the destruction of the planet to maximise profits. We have nothing in common with these people.'

'What's the schedule for your town?'

Raiden answered. 'We hope to build the town within a year and would like to open it on the first of April—'

'—Fools day!' someone shouted. 'And you want to be taken seriously. Laughable!'

'Fools day,' Alice echoed, 'and that on purpose. It's a reminder not to take ourselves too seriously and to keep our feet on the ground.'

Raiden nodded. 'We want to run the experiment for twelve years because we believe—'

'—not the socialist's five-years plan then? Alice Adler was born in East-Germany, weren't you? Five-years plans, isn't that your heritage?'

Alice pushed a half-smile into place and returned: 'We believe that twelve years is the minimum time needed to gain reliable results. As for a five-years plan. I see no reason to test a concept which has already failed in enough countries and seems to have succeeded in one. If you're interested in that concept, there's plenty of data.'

Raiden continued. 'After the twelve years, the town will transition into a UK town.'

‘The town will never be ready next April,’ someone called and Dana replied: ‘You haven't seen the number of people who want to help. We’ll be enough to build twenty-four seven. Our greatest problem is to figure out how many people the construction site can stomach, how to cater for everyone, and how many tent towers we’ll have to set up. But we’ll work it out.’

At midnight Alice closed the Q & A and announced that there would be Q & As at the theatre and at Jellybridge House every Friday in the coming weeks, in addition to the twenty-four/seven online Q & As on the Hub’s Campaigns Square.

While the theatre emptied, Alice briefly talked with Jack’s kids: Davie, Kyle and Rose, and with Jack’s father: Henry, whom Alice hadn’t met before, but she had heard about the repair works in the theatre, Henry and Jack did in January. Thanks to Rohana, Alice had presents for Davie and Henry, a voucher for a new dot.overall for Henry, and for Davie a pair of rubber boots and an overall he could wear when he would visit Jack at the building site.

Davie, now nine, was over the moon. And he had a gift for Alice: a small roaring lion crafted by Roger, the head of Crafts.

‘Dad bought it months ago. But he said I can have it so I can give it to you. It can protect you. I just wish I could help more. But we’re talking about the town in class next week. And me and some friends, we’ll set up Q & As to get more kids on board.’

Alice smiled. ‘Davie, I’m not a hugger, but can I hug you?’

Happily Davie swung himself into Alice's arms — and Alice carried his hug with her as she hurried back to her flat, through her dreams and way into the next day when she and Rohana inspected the team's new base on the seventh floor of the Central Building, and still when the Campaigns & Negotiations Team met the newly appointed heads of the seven campaign teams.

SPECIAL EDITION

book 4

building

part 1.1, CAMPAIGNS FOR OUR FUTURE
day 36, press conference

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