

My phone rang. I got it out and tried to focus on the screen to see who it was. Lori. I jabbed frantically at the screen trying to answer it before she rang off. In my haste it nearly slipped into the water and I lurched for a precarious moment over the rail to grab it.

‘Yes?’

‘Sorry is it too late?’

My insides melted at the warmth of her voice. ‘No, No. Good to hear from you.’

‘I saw on the news. You’re in court tomorrow?’

‘Er...’

‘You weren’t there today, Dawn and I took half a day off to go along.’

‘Really?’

‘It was amazing, we loved the protest with the eco-fashion.’

‘Did you?’

‘I didn’t know how many alternatives there were. Dawn says she’s only going to knit with eco-fibres now, and I never realised how bad cotton was for the environment. I think it will really change people’s fashion habits.’

‘You do?’

‘Totally. So what are you going to say tomorrow?’

‘Depends what they ask?’

‘Haven’t you thought about it?’

‘I’ve tried not to.’

‘I reckon that the more reasons you can give for them burying her in their garden, other than murder that is, the less suspicious it will look.’

‘Maybe I could talk about the habitat implications of home burials?’

‘Good idea. Go on, practice on me.’

I gulped, and took a deep breath. Then a deeper breath, feeling it fill my chest. I am Habitat Man, I told myself. Do your work. Tim Redfern, you are up on the stand as digger up of body and expert ecologist to tell the court about the habitat implications of natural burial. I finally allowed myself to exhale and began to pace to and fro.

‘Are you OK?’ asked Lori, ‘you’ve gone quiet.’

‘It is important for habitats, biodiversity, and indeed life on this planet to have a biologically active soil.’ I began.

‘Yes,’ agreed Lori.

‘Conventional burials use embalming fluid which is a mix of toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde. The reason they do their job well is the same reason they are toxic – they kill life. So adding such chemicals to the soil would kill off many micro-organisms. Also typical coffins made of hard wood are a wasteful use of a precious resource.’

‘Good, perfect,’ Lori’s voice infused me with a new sense of confidence. I found some left over edamame beans in my pocket and crammed them into my mouth.

‘It’s good to have as many micro-organisms in the soil as possible.’

‘What are you eating?’

‘Edamame beans, they’re lovely.’

‘I’ll have to try them, go on.’

‘They do the work of breaking down organic matter and provide food for other micro-organisms. You have for example tiny ciliates that swim around in the soil, and eat the bacteria and provide food for nematodes and worms...’

‘You probably don’t need that much detail.’ Lori’s voice sounded muffled.

‘Are you eating too?’

‘Toast and butter. Go on.’

‘Okay, well the point is that allowing the body to return to the earth in as natural a way as possible with fewest chemicals is better for habitats, biodiversity and the environment. It is the most natural thing in the world for the nutrients in a corpse to be recycled, broken down into the soil, and absorbed by the roots of growing plants. Many families, mine included, have trees planted in the garden where they buried a family pet, because the decaying body nourishes growth. That is the cycle of life.’

‘That’s lovely. That’s really good Tim.’