

## The Waste Ground

The meeting had only just begun, but Vanessa was already bored. She had joined the Town Council six months ago, hoping to make big decisions that affected lives, but all they seemed to talk about were planning applications, potholes, and how frequently the dog bins should be emptied. She had half made up her mind to quit.

“Item 21/74,” announced Arthur. “To consider planning application 17/5116E, single storey porch, rear side extension to provide living accommodation...”

Vanessa fought to keep her eyes open. It wasn't just the warm room and comfy chair that put her to sleep, but the way that none of this really *mattered*.

The application was approved on the condition that the walls would be painted white instead of yellow, and they moved onto the next item, which was about someone's right to remove a garden hedge. Vanessa zoned out, uninterested.

Raoul was speaking. “It's a messy, overgrown hedge,” he said. “I can understand why they want to get rid of it. My place in Cape Town has a metal fence. Much more attractive.”

Raoul was always flying back and forth between his summer and winter home, only pausing when the travel bans forced him to. Vanessa couldn't understand it. She hated travelling, even before Covid, and couldn't imagine doing it now, when it felt dangerous just to leave your house let alone get on a plane.

At last, they got to an interesting item on the agenda.

“Item 23/74,” said Arthur, “To discuss the waste ground opposite the community centre. The Meadow Close development comes with a pot of money to spend on community improvements and I suggest we use it to finally do something with that area.”



Vanessa sat up. It wasn't the Paris Climate Agreement, but it was a start. At least the area in question was larger than a garden.

“Opposite the community centre?” asked Raoul. “That’s a housing estate, isn’t it?”

“It’s between the back of that housing estate and the old railway line, opposite the North Road Community Centre. The one with the pond next to it.”

Deb nodded. “I know exactly where you mean. I sometimes walk through there to get to the shop. We could do with some lighting. It’s not safe walking there in the dark, especially when you’re on your own.”

“I’d also like lighting,” Leonard said. “And a proper surface. That muddy path isn’t suitable for some of our residents.”

“Who uses it, apart from Deb?” asked Raoul.

“No one, currently,” said Arthur. “I went there last week and it was empty. I’ve seen teenagers in there with their bikes, but I can’t imagine they could cycle around it at this time of year, when the grass is so high.”

“We should give them proper facilities,” said Deb. “Like a skate park.”

“Or a sports field,” said Raoul. “That way, it’s for everyone, not just skaters.”

Vanessa shook her head, frustrated. They finally had some money to spend and they wanted to waste it on another boring sports field. What about something bolder, more innovative? What about the bigger picture?

“We could plant trees on it,” she said, loudly. “Create a new woodland there and make it into a nature reserve. The trees will absorb carbon dioxide and help us fight climate change and they will be good for biodiversity.”

Some of the others nodded in approval, but Raoul shook his head. “We already have a nature reserve on the other side of town: a good quality habitat. That patch is just an overgrown mess with nothing to recommend it. Better to turn it into something for the community.”

“If we clear it up and plant some trees it won’t be a mess anymore,” she said, trying to keep her voice level. “It’s better than making *another* sports field.”

Raoul was about to retort when Arthur cut him off. “We’re short on time, and this is only a preliminary discussion. Perhaps we could get some input from the members of the public, who are watching the livestream. A vote, on some of the options, to gauge interest?”

The poll appeared on the audience's screens and everyone made their selection.

"Let's see," continued Arthur, "9% voted for turning the site into a skate park for teenagers, 0% for a sports field, 73% for a woodland, and 18% for leaving the site as it is and spending the money elsewhere. So, the members of the public present at this meeting have indicated a preference for a woodland. We will bear that in mind."

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Vanessa left the meeting frustrated. Although the poll voters had strongly supported her woodland idea, she knew that Raoul and some of the others would continue to argue for a sports field, regardless.

It was still light when they filtered out of the hall, although the sunset was quickly turning the clouds orange and purple. She felt too fired up to go back to her flat, and decided to visit the place they had just argued about to see it for herself before it got too dark.

She surveyed it in the fading light. A long grassy rectangle, flanked on one side by thick bushes and the backs of people's gardens, and on the other by the old railway embankment. At the far end, the lights of North Road glimmered above a distant fence. It was bigger than she thought it would be, but it was hard to know the exact size as so much of it was overgrown, especially at the edges where the grass and bushes grew tallest. Arthur had been right; it *did* seem to be a waste ground.

By now the sun had dipped below the line of houses and the birds were preparing for nightfall. A green woodpecker took off from the grass and flew past her into the trees behind,

making a sound like laughter as they went. A chiffchaff tweeted in the bushes to her right, then fell quiet.

She followed the path, thistles scraping against her jeans. When she reached the middle of the space, she spotted a dark circle on the ground over near the garden fences, where a fire had been lit. She waded towards it, curious to see how this place was being used. The area around the fire was flattened, as if people came here regularly. It was a quiet, peaceful spot, far away from the bustle of town: she could understand why people had been drawn here. The grass rippled in the fading light and she saw how there was more variety to it than she had noticed from the path. She could dimly make out frothy white flowers in among the grass, and it looked as if something – rabbits? – had grazed the grass shorter in places, revealing mounds that looked like ant hills.

It was too dark to make out anything else; the sky had turned from orange to sapphire to black. A twig snapped behind her. She span around, heart thumping. Was someone there? No, she was alone. But something *was* rustling in the bushes. She crept closer, using the light on her phone to peer through the foliage, and glimpsed a hedgehog scurrying through a rotted hole in the fence, disappearing into someone's garden.

Her elation at seeing a hedgehog up close did not last long, however. A dark shape caught her eye, moving through the shadows on the other side of the path, near the old railway embankment. There really was another person nearby. She regretted using her phone as a light, as it would have drawn attention to her.

What to do now – go back the way she came in, or exit the waste ground through the other side? If she went back, she would have to walk around the estate before she got back to the road that led to her flat. But if she went out the other exit, she would walk close to where this person lurked.

The figure was walking slowly. They kept stopping and bending down low and seemed to be peering into the grass. They turned, and Vanessa glimpsed their face, reflecting the starlight. An old woman with white hair.

Vanessa walked towards her, now feeling curious. The woman looked up, hearing her approach.

“Excuse me, can I ask what you’re doing?”

“Just, er...looking for something.” Her eyes scanned the dark grassy slope.

“Can I help?” asked Vanessa, although she thought the woman would be better of coming back in the day to look for whatever she’d lost.

“Depends. Can you keep a secret?”

She was intrigued. “Of course.”

“I’m looking for glow-worms, counting them. I don’t like to advertise it, in case others come and disturb them.”

Vanessa took a couple of steps closer. “Glow-worms? Here? Can I see one?”

“Yes, if you’re patient and look carefully.”

She peered into the dark but could only see the faint outline of grass, swaying in the breeze.

“Look more over there...” the woman pointed.

She kept looking, until: “I see it! A tiny green light! It’s so bright!” She beamed. A hedgehog and a glow-worm, both in the same night. “They’re amazing. I had no idea they could be found in an area like this. And you count them?”

“Yes, to check they’re still doing okay. I got numbers going back ten years.”

She thought about the council meeting and the changes being proposed for this place. “I was thinking we could create a nature reserve here,” she said, gesturing towards the open space. “We could plant some more trees—”

“The glow-worms won’t like that,” she said, gruffly. “They need the open grass, to light up and find each other in. Trees are good for some, not for others. Balance is best, something for everyone.”

“Hmm. Raoul probably wants everywhere to have short, manicured grass. He’s on the council with me. He was arguing for a sports field.”

“I know Raoul, and he does have a very neat front lawn, but his back garden has nice patches of long grass. He does it for the bugs, to help feed his swifts. He had two pairs nesting in his roof this year. He’s coming around tomorrow to help me put up my own swift box – see if we can expand the colony.”

“Oh really?” That wasn’t how she’d imagined Raoul would spend his free time.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you from your work. Nice to meet you.”

She left her to counting, walking back to the path and following it out between the fences, onto North Road. She stood under the streetlights and looked across at the community centre with its untidy pond. A bus rushed past, rattling loudly.

She looked back the way she had come: at the waste ground with its distant huddle of trees at the far end, silhouetted against the stars. They would have to come up with a better name for it; it wasn't a waste of ground at all. Still, the council were set on changing it, one way or another. She wished she could ask all the animals what *they* would like, but she was getting the feeling they might have as many different opinions as the people did. Was it even possible to find a solution that suited everybody?

Something fluttered past. She looked up to see a bat snatch a moth from round the street lamp and head off into the waste ground, following the scrubby hedge that topped the old railway embankment. A second bat zipped across the road from the community centre and followed it. "What would you do?" she asked them, but there was no answer.

She turned and headed for home. "What *should* we do with the waste ground?" she asked herself. "What should we do to suit everyone?"

#

It is October. The waste ground has turned from green to brown. The chiffchaff has returned to sunnier climes. The last of the adult glow-worms have died, but their larvae live on under rocks and deep within tussocks of grass. A woodpecker prods the area where the grass has been nibbled and flattened, looking for ants. Vanessa passes through, on her way to the next council meeting, leaving a trail of footprints in the sodden earth.

She has been thinking: about the animals in the waste ground, and all around her, in the gardens, the trees, and the sky; about the needs of animals and humans, to move freely and safely; about this patch of land and its place in this town.

The meeting begins with more planning applications, but this time Vanessa does not zone out. She insists that someone should only be able to replace their fence if the new one contains a gap big enough for a hedgehogs to pass through.

They reach the agenda item to discuss the waste ground. Vanessa stands up.

“We all remember what it was like during the lockdowns,” she says. “How it felt to have our movement restricted, and how relieved we were when we could finally meet in person again, or go on holiday, or just into town. Even now, some of us still do not feel safe enough to move around as freely as we used to.”

She glances around. Everyone looks back at her.

“But we’re not the only ones finding it difficult or frightening to get around. Let’s make that space work for everyone – people and animals – so we are all free to move around safely. I had some ideas for what to do with the waste ground. We could make a new pond so amphibians don’t have to cross the road. We could have a mini-pitch at the North Road end where the grass is already short, but leave the bushes for the chiffchaffs and the long grass for insects. We could spend some of the money on a bench for people to sit on and a proper surface for the path, so the area is accessible for people, and some lighting so people feel safe – but we can choose them carefully and turn them off when it’s glow-worm season. A small activity centre could be built: a place to help kids and teenagers connect with nature, and improve mental health. Information boards could tell people about all the different animals that use this space, and bird and bat boxes could be added to some of the existing trees. This way, we find a balance. We really use the land for the community: the *whole* community.”

She sits back down and waits for the arguments against her proposal.

Raoul speaks first, and she braces herself. “What about your woodland plan? You said we should plant trees to save the world.”

“I was wrong. There are animals living there who won’t be able to live there any more if we plant trees. I talked to people and looked at the map, and that land behind the school would be a much better place for a community woodland. If we spend some of the money on restoring the hedge along the old railway embankment, that will help animals travel to that area from the little wood on the waste ground and from the big wood on the nature reserve on the other side of town.”

Silence. She looks at Raoul and sees him nod.

“Sounds good to me,” says Deb.

Arthur says, “I propose Vanessa draws up a nature strategy for the town, in consultation with local residents and experts, and next meeting we can begin allocating funds.”

The others agree. Vanessa blinks in surprise. Maybe she will stay in the council. They can only make little decisions, but that’s okay. The little decisions add up to make the big picture.

It is dark when she goes back outside. A blast of wind buffets Vanessa’s face and hair, bringing cold air from the north. It feels exhilarating. A fox slips out of the car park and into the shadows of a garden. She watches it and takes note. As she turns for home, ideas buzzing in her head, she can’t wait to get started.