

*The Award Ceremony* by D. A. Baden

She heard the words as if in a dream. 'The prize for best original screenwriter goes to Mei Lin, for her series, *Sun Ying takes Manhattan*.'

Then she was walking up to the stage, self-conscious in her new dress, nodding at the smiling faces. She took her place in the spotlight in front of the microphone and looked out at the sea of clapping hands and waving friends and colleagues. It felt wonderful. She'd love to stand there forever just soaking it up, but she had things she needed to say.

'This means everything to me and I want to tell you why,' she began. 'I was the second child during China's one-child policy. And worse still, a girl.' The smiling faces in the audience turned serious, a few nodding their support. 'Some people called it environmental responsibility, others a violation of human rights, but I can only tell you what it meant to me. I...' She swallowed, finding her pre-prepared speech harder to say than she'd anticipated. 'I felt guilty. That just by existing I was making things worse for the people I care about.'

She hung her head, feeling the force of the words, spoken for the first time. Shame was built into the architecture of her existence, driving her on and on to prove herself. To atone. Her fists tightened by her side. She'd done nothing wrong, nothing to apologise for. She raised her chin defiantly.

'But empowering women can do more to solve over-population than any amount of regulation or financial punishment. In developing countries, women who aren't educated have twice as many children as those who are. Also, women leaders and diverse boards show better, more sustainable decision making. I am proud to be a Chinese woman writing empowered heroines, in charge of their destiny, proud of their gender and the colour of their skin.'

The audience exploded into applause. She tried to thank her cast and crew, but couldn't make herself heard over the catcalls and whoops. She gave up and stood there and glowed, wiping her eyes, basking in the love and empathy coming from the crowd. The host returned to the stage and waited a moment in deference to clapping that showed no sign of abating. Then he headed towards her purposefully, ready to usher her off. Her moment in the spotlight was over.

But it wasn't. She heard shouts, a rhythmic chanting growing louder. They were chanting her name, and something else she couldn't catch. People were looking around to see the source, but in her position, stepping down from the stage, she was the first to see the banner being unrolled.

MEI LIN. CLIMATE VILLAIN.

Villain! She shook her head. Someone mis-wrote, they'll realise it's a mistake. But no, they were chanting clearly now, heading steadily down the aisle.

'Mei Lin. Climate villain.'

There were a dozen at least carrying the banner.

It didn't even rhyme, not well anyway.

'Mei Lin. Climate villain.' The cameras swivelled to follow their progress down the aisle, the open-mouthed audience. Mei Lin's horrified face.

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Ping. Another talk show date cancelled. Ping. Meeting with producer cancelled. Ping. Interview cancelled.

Mei turned her phone off and slumped back on the sofa, reaching blindly for the remote control.

'...can't help feeling sorry for her though,' the daytime TV host was saying. 'Top of her game. Producers clamouring to sign her up for their next project. She was gold dust.'

'See if you still feel sorry for her after this,' said the co-host.

Mei Lin jumped when she saw her earnest face fill the screen, and scratched at the rash that had appeared overnight.

'Everyone thinks that it's governments or banks who have the power, but it's culture and writers and stories that affect how we think, who we want to be, what we aspire to.'

She'd been too full of herself. That must be it. Committed the unforgiveable sin of taking herself too seriously. Oh no, there she was again, in another talk show. She cringed at how sanctimonious she sounded. 'I suffer from eco-anxiety like most young people, but I want to help people feel empowered to make a difference, not just guilty for existing.'

Now they were showing an extract from *Sun Ying in Manhattan* - a close-up of Grady, her heroine's handsome African American love interest, opening his gourmet burger stand. The camera paused on the image of a customer sinking his teeth into the beef, then cut abruptly to facts and figures and images of cows burping methane, warming up the atmosphere.

'I'm a vegan! Are you going to mention that?' she shouted at the television when the programme returned to show the co-hosts tutting at the film.

Mei picked at the ugly bumps on her skin, shaking her head helplessly as the narrator reeled off a series of facts about the contribution of beef and dairy to climate change. She'd sensed it was risky. She knew beef was a climate no-no, but it was an American staple. The producers had wanted a down-to-earth guy to balance the heroine's kookiness. She'd thought she was playing safe when she went along with them.

The image cut to a busy shopping centre and a mic being thrust into a young woman's face.

'Do you watch *Sun Ying in Manhattan*?'

'Doesn't everybody?'

‘What do you like about it?’

‘She’s so cool. So in charge of her life. I love her clothes.’ A medley of shots of Sun Ying wearing a different outfit each time, with matching hat, bag and shoes ran over her words. ‘I just want to be her basically.’

Mei watched, along with the daytime TV hosts, a medley of shots of Sun Ying and her friends shopping, walking home, bags swishing against their thighs.

‘They may be fancy, but they’re still single-use plastic bags,’ the host nudged his co-host. She shrugged her shoulders, not yet convinced.

‘We worked out what all these clothes would look like in the averaged sized apartment.’ The image changed to a pile of clothes filling every space, bursting out of wardrobes, piled up on chairs, on the bed, under the bed. The shot focused in on one cotton t-shirt, then cut jarringly to a huge-eyed African child, tears forming crusts on her cheeks. ‘Two point seven billion people experience water scarcity.’ The narrator sounded harsh and accusing.

‘This is the inland sea twenty years ago that supported the growing of cotton.’ A large blue sea filled the screen, then faded into an image of a desert. ‘Today, only camels roam across the barren wilderness.’ God, her skin was on fire. She sat on her hands to stop herself from compulsively scratching.

‘This is the water cost of just this one cotton t-shirt,’ the narrator continued over an image of a giant water tank labelled 2700 litres. ‘Enough drinking water for one person for nearly three years.’

A Bangladeshi woman held up hands covered with sores and blisters to the camera. ‘Twenty percent of water pollution comes from the treatment and dyeing of textiles, poisoning the surrounding area, creating health issues for communities,’ the narrator’s voice was relentless. ‘Rates of death from cancer in these communities are nine times higher than the national average.’ Mei could hardly breathe. An unfortunate side effect of China’s rapid economic growth had been pollution. She’d grown up in one of China’s so-called cancer villages, and was haunted by the fear that the disease that had taken her parents would take her.

‘Fast fashion contributes ten percent of global carbon emissions – more than all international flights and shipping combined.’

She found herself scratching at the rash, reminding herself what her therapist had repeatedly told her. ‘It’s not your fault Mei.’

An academic looking woman appeared on the screen, the banner underneath her face announcing her as Drew Sneely, Professor of Psychology at Southampton University.

‘There are two ways in which we learn how to behave. One is conscious learning through the rational elaboration model, where we are presented with information, in school, from our parents, etc. But more powerful is the unconscious social learning we pick up subliminally by absorbing the behaviours and cultural values around us. Fictional role

models are especially influential. Through a process that we call narrative transportation, viewers who identify with a character will absorb their values uncritically and subliminally, affecting their behaviour and aspirations without them even being aware of it.'

Then it was back to the shopping centre, and the mic thrust under another girl's nose.

'What do you see when you see Sun Ying's walk-in wardrobe?'

Her face lit up. 'I see goals,' she said at once.

'That's why I'm so proud to be a writer, creating positive role models for young women.' Mei watched her own face again on screen. Her mouth opened in shock as her image of her face was rapidly distorted, then appearing on a 'wanted' poster with Climate Villain stamped across it. The shot widened, showing her image on a wall wedged between a fossil fuel lobbyist and purveyor of misinformation about climate change and the toxic male entrepreneur who'd bragged once too often about his private jet. What had tipped them over the edge, Mei belatedly realised, was when he'd boasted that he was so rich he wore underwear once then threw it away. She remembered the outrage as the facts and figures about the impacts of such wastage on the environment were presented.

Mei took in the final shot of the girl walking out of the shopping centre, numerous branded bags filled with fast fashion swinging jauntily against her thigh.

She tried to say the words 'it's not my fault,' but the prickling of her skin, the squirming sensation in the pit of her stomach gave them the lie. Shame. How had she not joined the dots?

She switched on her laptop and started writing.

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Five years on, and no one was more surprised than Mei Lin when she got the call. But everybody likes a comeback story, and as many said, if Bob Dylan can get it, then why not a scriptwriter? Even so, she was more terrified than honoured. This event was much more formal, the men identical in black suits, white shirts and white silk bow ties, the women in stiff ball gowns. She sat in the front row, waiting, dry-mouthed, trying not to hyper-ventilate while the host spoke in Swedish, then in English. Being in the spotlight was reigniting the trauma she'd experienced five years ago, when they'd built her up just to knock her down. Her breathing calmed under the monotone of the presentation, and she was able to listen.

'In season two of *Sun Ying in Manhattan*. Sun Ying's boyfriend, Grady was now running a trendy new bug burger stand. Sun had converted her walk-in wardrobe into a fashion library, and created a fashion swap app that was taking the world by storm.

'Reality mirrored fiction with new fashion apps emerging every month. Women were switching to pre-loved clothes, swapping, sharing, repairing and upcycling all over the globe. The most popular Christmas present that year was a year's membership to the fashion libraries of Macy's, Harrods, David Jones and even Galeries Lafayette in Paris.

‘Season three, and Sun Ying broadened her range to menswear. You could wear a different outfit every day with no need for vast amounts of wardrobe space. Ownership was increasingly portrayed as a burden, not a benefit. Stores caught on, converting their toys, games and sports departments into libraries. Sun Ying had a fictional baby and MotherCare reinvented itself as MotherShare.

‘In season four, the characters moved to the suburbs with their partners and children. Grady sold his bug burger stand to a franchise who were taking insect snacks into the rest of the world. Missing his New York community and struggling with DIY, he joined the local Shared Shed where men got together to pool their tools and knowledge. *Friends* and *Frasier* popularised the coffee bar as the place to meet in the nineties. Three decades later, *Sun Ying (no longer) in Manhattan*, made the Shared Shed a thing.

‘The series helped established the Sharing Economy for good. Borrowing has become the new buying. Clothes, tools, toys, appliances are increasingly designed for long life and easy maintenance. Twenty years ago, most households had their own toolset, with typical items being used an average of five minutes a year. Now tools are shared within communities, saving billions of tons of embedded carbon and unnecessary mining.

‘Your Royal Highnesses, ladies and gentlemen, great literature changes the reader, changes the world, and there can be no doubt that Mei Lin’s writing has changed our world.’

The audience clapped politely and it was Mei’s turn. Almost in a whisper, she gasped out thanks to the presenter and Swedish Royal Family. The host had been careful to avoid mention of the protest at her last award ceremony, but it had led to this moment. She took a deep breath and addressed the elephant in the room.

‘The last time I gave an acceptance speech, I was flying high, excited by the brave and long overdue movements – Me Too, Black Lives Matter. As an Asian woman, I thought I was leading the way, allowing my Asian and African characters to have all that I had been denied growing up. I was proud to use my writing and characters to empower women, to encourage them to aspire. Well, they say pride goes before a fall, and my goodness did I fall.

‘I did and do care about climate change and thought women in charge would have a more nurturing approach to our precious planet. Yet here were my heroines shopping as if there were no consequences to their behaviour, mindlessly complicit in planetary destruction. I can’t believe I didn’t see the contradiction. Once I did, I saw it everywhere. Around me everyone was changing. People weren’t flying; they were giving up meat; guys who thought driving a sports car had pulling power were learning their lesson. I suddenly realised that for people terrified by the climate crisis, watching my characters’ excessive consumption was as jarring as racism and sexism was in seventies sitcoms. Far from being a progressive, I was behind the times. I wanted to be a platform for something good. That meant ditching the past and facing the future.

‘Recent history has been about owning up and saying sorry for colonialism, racism, sexism, and now consumerism. I can’t take credit for the way the sharing economy has taken off. The fashion swap apps, car sharing, and Libraries of Things were already out there, but I’m

pleased to have helped spread the word. And, please don't cancel me because the Shared Shed is just men. I'm on it in season six.' The audience laughed, giving Mei the confidence to continue.

'It's not nice to feel cancelled, to feel judged, but we have to call out it out - the stakes are too high not to. We need to be told when we're getting it wrong. Shame is a horrible thing to feel, but maybe it's a process we have to go through to get to the other side and start putting things right.

'I'm still about empowering women. The link between education and birth control is strong and evidence shows women make more sustainable decisions. But as gender roles equalise and men play a greater part in child rearing, I see those differences dissolving. Men are growing and changing and learning to care. We're all growing at a phenomenal rate, and it's a wonderful thing to see.

'If the last decade was about saying sorry, then we're entering a decade of atonement and positive action. When I was pregnant with my first child, I was terrified what kind of world I was bringing her into, but with this one,' Mei patted her stomach gently, 'I'm excited. Maybe the Chinese curse, 'may you be born in interesting times' isn't a curse at all but an opportunity. Thank you for giving me the chance to say sorry and the opportunity to atone.'

The applause triggered a memory rush of fear. Mei heard a faint chanting. It was in her head. It must be. The host waited politely for her to step down, but her legs had turned to jelly. He came to her side and took her arm. The chanting was getting louder. Why did no one else notice? The host tugged at her arm to no avail. She was paralyzed.

'Next we turn to the Nobel Prize for Economic Science,' he declared at last.

The economics professor, a man in his sixties, half stood, uncertain, waiting for Mei to leave the stage. She was oblivious, gazing over his head towards the back of the room, seeing the protestors enter, their numbers overwhelming the security guards at the back. The banner unfurling.

Then everyone's heads turned towards the chanting that was now impossible to ignore. Relief that she wasn't mad competed horribly with gut-churning realisation that history was repeating itself. In they came, marching towards the stage, the banners unfurling.

#### GDP RIP

Her mouth widened in a smile of glorious, shameful, schadenfreude. She recognised the professor now. He'd spoken out against switching from the GDP to a Happy Planet Index, entrenching economic growth and consumption as the ultimate measure of success.

'Economic growth equals planetary death!'

'GDP RIP!'

The cameras swivelled to take in the protestors, the banners, and the horrified face of the economics professor.