

And Some Were Built On Stony Ground

Speaker-to-Ancestors looked towards the skies.

It was not strictly true to say that he could hear the approaching shuttle; it was more that he could sense its presence. He looked towards the eastern horizon, seeking out the first signs of the vessel. He cut an impressive figure, standing alone in the middle of the field. Tall slim and elegant, he wore a simple red robe and carried the ornate staff of his office. Although his skin was dark, it was not the rich black of other members of the tribe, more a dark coffee than dark chocolate. He stood immobile, his gaze never wavering.

Eventually, a small dark speck appeared on the horizon. He stared as the speck became an insect and the insect became a bird. Finally, when he could make out the detail of the approaching craft, Speaker-to-Ancestors turned and moved towards the village.

They had come before and Speaker-to-Ancestors thought back to their last visit.

It had been interesting.

A thick white smile broke across his face.

The tribe gathered for the landing of the shuttle.

Towards the edge of the village was a large open area that was used by the tribe for games and dancing and the shuttle chose to land there. For a short while, it hovered directly above the open area and then slowly descended. Feet extended from the base of the shuttle and although it threw up a lot of dust, it touched down gently.

On the whole, the tribe were unimpressed by the technology on display.

Birds flew, they knew, insects flew, even the furry fox-bat flew, so why shouldn't the strange grey box fly?

They were, however, impressed by the noise.

The flying box made more noise than anything they had ever encountered. Nothing in nature made this amount of noise for this length of time. Thunder was louder, but short lived and if the entire tribe was to drum and shout at the same time, it would not be one tenth of the noise made by the shuttle.

They were also impressed by its size.

The largest structures built by the tribe were the eating hut and the gathering hut and neither of those could be a tenth the size of the shuttle.

It took some time for the dust to settle, but once it had, a large hatch opened in the side of the ship and a steep ramp extrude from the gap.

And Father Joseph stepped out.

He was a tall middle aged man who wore a neatly tailored black suit with a dog collar. His jet black hair was neatly cropped and his face clean shaven. He had big thick eyebrows that almost joined in the middle but these too were neatly cropped. His general appearance was starched. His one concession to the fact that he was standing in the middle of a jungle was that his feet were covered in neat black sandals.

He walked calmly down the ramp, making sure of every step.

He was followed down the ramp by Father Raphael.

If Father Joseph had the sartorial elegance of an Italian puntball player, then Father Raph had the elegance of one of his fans. For a start, he was a young man and he was short and relatively chubby. His thick honey blond hair stuck out at all kinds of random angles. He was not clean shaven and had a big bushy beard of the same honey blond hair. His coiffure made him look like a bad explosion in a small candy floss factory. Raphael had chosen to wear more traditional robes, but these were loose fitting and looked ragged and worn and his thick legs poked out from the bottom. He had made some concessions to the fact that he was visiting the bush. He wore thick hiking boots and as well as having the obligatory crucifix round his neck, he also had a large ornate compass. Even from their first glimpse, the men of the tribe could see that he possessed boundless enthusiasm. He hurried

down the ramp and then tripped and fell. He rolled and managed to get himself entangled in his robes and compass. He ended up at Speaker-to-Ancestors feet.

Father Joseph walked over his stricken comrade and held out his hand.

Speaker-to-Ancestors stepped forwards. He remembered the last visit of these people and clearly they remembered him. He also remembered that these people held much store in the touching of hands, so he extended his own. Father Joseph looked down at Father Raphael and shrugged. He took hold of Speaker-to-Ancestors' hand and shook it firmly.

"I'm Father Joseph," he said simply.

"And I'm Speaker-to-Ancestors."

Once released, Speaker-to-Ancestors moved to help Father Raph to his feet. He offered the priest his hand.

Father Raphael took it willingly and shook it with enthusiasm.

"I'm Father Raphael," he said simply picking himself up. "You can call me Raph."

A third figure appeared at the hatch. He was a tall fat man with the kind of sunken features only the truly obese possess. He wore bright red vestments and a heavy gold chain.

"I am Prelate Kent," he proclaimed from the open hatch.

He began to waddle down the ramp and then thought better of it.

"I am looking for Father Lopez," he proclaimed from his perch on top of the ramp.

The tribe looked confused. There was no Father Lopez here.

"No? Then I am looking for Speaker-to-Ancestors," he continued. "I am told he speaks our language."

Speaker-to-Ancestors nodded and moved forwards, extending his hand. Prelate Kent refused to move forward and declined to shake.

"These men," he said gesturing towards Father Joseph and Father Raphael. "Are here to bring you the word of God."

"Thank you," said Speaker-to-Ancestors, non-plussed.

"They will be with you for one week after which I shall return to adjudge their progress."

A small crane appeared from the back of the shuttle and began unloading two large white cubes from the back of the shuttle.

"Oh good," said Father Joseph. The tone of his voice said that there was nothing good in the delivery.

"Fantastic," said Father Raphael with slightly more enthusiasm.

Once the cubes were placed on the ground, the crane retracted into the shuttle. Prelate Kent took two steps backwards and the hatchway closed around him. The shuttle began making the almighty din it had made on arrival.

It turned out that the white cubes were CADs or Complete Accommodation Devices. The idea was that the small cubes could meet all a person's accommodation needs. Father Raphael had obviously seen one of these things before and chose the one on the left. He was pleased to see that it had his name on it.

Father Joseph checked that his name was on the other. He found it labelled "Josehp" and shaking his head, entered. He looked around his new accommodation.

It consisted of a cube approximately three metres on a side.

Much of the room was taken up by basic furniture. Against one wall was a desk and a comfortable chair. A long thin bed rested against another wall and Father Joseph realised it was a Vibromassage™ special. These were a new type of bed approved by the church. When the sleeper laid on the bed, it began to vibrate.

They had two settings.

The first was Innocent. When set to innocent, the Vibromassage™ bed produced a gentle vibration that rocked the user gently to sleep.

The second setting was Penitent. This turned the bed into an electrical hair shirt. Instead of the bed providing a gentle massage it produced a series of jerking movements which made it almost impossible for the penitent to sleep.

Father Joseph noticed that his bed was already set to Penitent.

He moved over to the bed and tried to turn the knob to Innocent.

It came off in his hand.

"Terrific," he said to the empty room.

Above head height were a series of lockers. He opened one of them and found that someone had packed his personal belongings. Unfortunately, the lockers were designed in such a way that when they were opened, everything fell out of them.

"Terrific," he said again to the empty room which again declined to answer. He shoved his clothes back in.

In one corner was a Reproducer. This was a device for producing food and drink. It created an endless supply of water and something called a Ship's Biscuit. The Ship's Biscuit contained all the nutrition needed by the human body, but had the taste and consistency of expanded polystyrene.

The Reproducer also reproduced communion wine, wafers and holy water.

Behind a flimsy privacy screen was a shower and a toilet. He knew that everything was recycled and he hoped that it wasn't into food.

He sighed.

It had been a long day and he decided to go to bed.

Outside the CADs sat Speaker-to-Ancestors, talking to Diver-for-Fish.

"Who are they?" asked Diver-for-Fish.

"They are The Church," said Speaker-to-Ancestors..

"Why are they here?"

"To spread the Word of God."

"What does that mean?"

"I do not know."

It was a measure of how tired Father Joseph was that he managed to sleep on a Vibromassage™ bed set to penitent. He awoke early the following morning and stepped off the violently shaking bed.

From the general direction of Father Raphael's CAD, Father Joseph could hear the sound of showering. The sound of running water was punctuated by the sound of Father Raph making strange "Oooh" and "Aaah" noises and for a while Father Joseph wondered what he was doing.

Thinking it was a good idea to get rid of some of the stench of the bush, Father Joe decided he too would take a shower. Stepping behind the privacy screen, he switched on the shower.

And was treated to a burst of super-heated steam.

"Oooh," said Father Joe.

The hot water suddenly switched to freezing cold.

"Aaah," said Father Joe.

Then back to boiling hot.

"Oooh," said Father Joe.

The temperature of the water continued to flip flop and Father Joe continued to make "Oooh" and "Aaah" noises, aping those coming from Father Raph's CAD.

Father Joe decided that he'd had enough of the shower and dried himself off. He reached into the lockers and found himself a fresh suit, then he spent the next ten minutes pushing his belongings back into the locker. While doing this, he found some bottled water and took a couple of swigs.

Unfortunately, no-one had packed any food. He declined to eat a ship's biscuit, deciding that he wasn't that hungry yet.

He left the CAD and stepped into the bright, hot sun.

He decided to spend the morning exploring the area around the village. He ventured to the lake and watched the villagers fishing. He walked into the bush and found the villagers harvesting fruit from different trees. He began to follow the hunters, but decided his clumsy movements through the bush would frighten off any potential prey.

As the morning progressed, the village became deserted as the Tribe went about its duties elsewhere. He saw two people meeting by a large hut on the far side of the green, obviously taking a break.

He walked over and was suddenly hit by an unusual odour. He shook his head to clear it of the smell, then introduced himself.

"I'm Father Joseph," he said.

"I'm Son-Of-Digger," said the younger of the two men.

They shook hands.

"And I'm Digger-of-Latrines," said the elder.

They shook hands slightly more gingerly.

"It's lunchtime," said Digger. "Will you join us?"

Father Joseph looked at Digger and wondered for a moment what it might be that the Tribe actually ate. He thought for the time being he would stick to the food he had brought with him and decided he was hungry enough to eat a ship's biscuit. He returned to the CAD.

He moved towards the Reproducer and drew off half a litre of water. The water was slightly discoloured and had an unpleasant smell and Father Joe wondered whether the recycling plant had managed any purification at all. He took a sip and found it tasted vaguely of metal. He put the water to one side and called up a ship's biscuit.

It smelled of Digger-of-Latrines.