

## Jeering and the Maiden

In the story I'm about to tell.  
Throw a coin into a wishing well.  
Where its going we can never tell  
we all ran towards the ringing bell

Sand. That's all Jeering could see, in all directions. Grinded coral really.

"It's just Lamu. Not the Sahara desert," said the Maiden.

"Where the hell is the ocean?" asked Jeering in confusion, out of breath.

"5 minutes that way," she said pointing north.

"I thought we were going to experience exotic pleasures back here, but it's a bit of a slog isn't it?" said Jeering plodding onwards through the sand.

"There's always tonight," said the Maiden flirtatiously.

"Once I wash the sand out of my butt crack," said Jeering wistfully.

Jeering had met the Maiden in Nairobi. At the Thorn tree, a watering hole for travellers.

She was German, her name was Elsie.

Jeering had taken a women's studies course back at Williams, the ivy league school in the U.S. he'd just graduated from. That's why he was calling her 'The Maiden,' not 'the Conquest' as was his habit back in the dorms.

Jeering was a dog. Proud of it too.

The Maiden didn't care. She'd flown down from Nairobi to an exotic island off the coast of Africa with a rich yank. He had some teenage boy baggage but underneath he was really sweet. She was working in Kenya, on her 2 weeks off. He was travelling for a year before heading home to the rat race.

They both were trying to have fun fast.

To a cafe at the edge of town. Goat curry, and for the tourists a bottle of wine.

They stared into each others eyes politely, but this wasn't love, this was wild human abandon.

Then drunken, back in town, giggling their way down the narrow streets. Back to their hotel room.

"Lamu is a car free city," said Jeering deadpan.

"I noticed," said the Maiden smiling.

"Hitchiking is poor," he went on seriously.

"Tough to catch a ride with no cars," agreed the Maiden.

"Dhows are your best bet," Jeering pointed out. Sailboats with triangular sails.

"I saw a lot of Donkeys too," said the Maiden.

"Mule injected," said Jeering.

Then naked, lying on the roof of their lodge, behind bamboo curtains on one side and with the ocean on the other, Jeering was ranting.

"This place is fucking romantic," he said.

"No cars, just sailboats," said Elsie.

"Old men in fezes playing dominoes in front of the mosque..." said Jeering.

"Children learning to fly kites from a traveller with a backpack," said Elsie.

"Spices, they are the clove kings," said Jeering.

"Cinnamon. I think I smelled that," said Elsie.

"I liked getting lost with you at the beech today," said Jeering.

"We should get lost together again soon," said Elsie.

And they snuggled and looked up at the stars.

Next day they went out to the beech again.

They ignored the world class snorkeling on Lamu and built a sand castle on dry land.

"I am interested in digging a hole to China," said Jeering shoveling madly.

"I dig holes" said the Maiden, and they embarked on a large excavation.

We're talking a 2 meter circle rapidly becoming 2 meters deep. Jeering sat in the cool moist sand at the bottom of the hole and happily shoveled loads into a bucket to be handed up.

"It's kind of an anti castle," said Jeering.

"The opposite of a pile of sand," agreed Elsie.

Elsie joined Jeering at the bottom of the hole, and they were flirting towards concave congress.

Then they fell through.

"It's quite amazing that you never found this," said a voice.

They were in an underground cavern with brick lined walls.

A cloud of dust obscured most of the details.

There was a strange looking man sitting on a chair, reading a magazine.

"Scientific American, July 2013." He held up what he was reading. The cover read: 'To Seek Out New Life.'

"I read that on the plane over," lied Jeering.

"Who the hell are you, where are we?" interjected Elsie.

"My name is Mr. Smith. I am from one of the M class planets that I am reading about here," said Mr. Smith.

"An alien," said Jeering.

"If you can see my planet with primitive telescopes it's kind of just across the street, not so alien," he said.

"Your English is excellent too. No trace of an M-class accent at all," Jeering said doubtfully.

"I learned from old Beatles songs. After that it was easy," Mr. Smith replied.

"So you guys get our radio signals?" asked Elsie.

"And your awful TV. I wish we got cable," said Mr. Smith.

"Need a dish," said Jeering. He walked around, surveying the complex.

A while later Jeering was scraping the sand off some sculpture he'd found in a corner of the cave, and Mr Smith was sitting down again reading 'Scientific American'.

"They're collecting information on Gasses on the new planets across space. It's only a matter of time before they find oxygen." he said.

"And that's a problem?" asked Jeering.

"Oxygen points to life. It's created by plants," said Mr. Smith

"And you don't want us to seek out new life," wondered Jeering.

"We just want to control the timing," said Mr. Smith.

"The timing for.." asked Jeering.

"Interspecies contact," said Mr. Smith.

"Oh. that," mumbled Jeering.

"First thing we found with oxygen was a rock with lichen," said Mr. Smith. "Still, that was verifiable life on another planet," he added.

"We found some water I think," said Jeering.

"Water's a good start," said Mr. Smith. "It has oxygen in it."

"So we're just about to find you guys?" asked Jeering.

"Well we hope it will take a while, but it's probably a matter of years not decades," said Mr. Smith.

"Awesome," said Jeering.

"That's why we selected you," said Mr. Smith.

"I've been selected?" Jeering replied.

"Yes six humans are being asked to visit our planet," said Mr. Smith.

"Ambassadors," said Jeering.

Elsie got to come along on the transport ship to Mr. Smith's planet.

"What's your home planet called?" she asked Mr. Smith.

"XCVFWS4G32" he answered.

"I think I'll just call it planet XC for short," said Elsie.

And so it came to be known.

There were 5 other ambassadors along, some of them with their large families. The rich guy was from Africa. The poor guy from America. Someone was playing against stereotypes. The other 3 were Asians: designers and artists, a poet too.

Jeering was non-comital. He sat in a padded lounge and read the XC literature.-

"So much like us and yet really different," said Jeering.

"The biology seems to be the same," said Mr. Smith.

"Except different," said Jeering.

"Different sun to adapt to," said Mr. Smith.

"Different gravity," said Jeering.

"I mean even on Lamu I wouldn't have walked down the street," said Mr. Smith.

"You have a blue tinge, but nobody would really notice," said Jeering.

"And we are kind of squished," said Mr. Smith.

"Different gravity, like flounders.." said Jeering. "I'm surprised your voice works the same."

"It's an implant. Our native audio is sub audibly low or above what you can hear, like whales."

A month into the two month long journey Mr. Smith got talking one day in the common room.

"Of course we want to start formal relations with the Earth just not too soon," he said.

"We still show signs of immaturity," said Jeering.

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith.

"So why the ambassadors?" asked Elsie.

"We want the relations to begin," said Mr. Smith.

"Glad to meet you," said Li Fong, the sarcastic architect from Beijing.

"Have you eaten rice?" asked Mr. Smith in polite Chinese.

"Got some grub an hour ago," Li Fong answered.

"The ship is well stocked..." he added.

"So the timeline: August 2013, today you're reading an article about astronomy on Earth." said Jeering to Mr. Smith.

"How us humans are sampling gases on dozens of new planets we've found," said Elsie.

"3 to 5 year. That's my prediction on how long it will take to find a simple oxygen atmosphere." said Mr. Smith.

"But that's just moss and such," said Jeering.

"Then another 5 years to find a more complex atmosphere" said Mr. Smith.

"Then what, a meeting you're trying to avoid?" asked Elsie.

"Postpone," said Mr. Smith.

They didn't talk about it for a few weeks..

In a back eddy moment Jeering found Elsie in the dining space on the ship and they ate together.

"I never really asked you the smalltalk questions like what do you do for a living?" he said.

"That's why I liked you," said Elsie.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked rudely.

"I'm an agricultural extension worker. We're looking at rice farming on the Tana River delta." said Elsie.

"Not far from Lamu," said Jeering.

"Rice farming with hippos," said Elsie.

"They found artifacts from as far away as China in the great Zimbabwe ruins." said Jeering.

"I wonder if someone followed the coastline from India and brought rice with them too," said Elsie.

"I wonder how the aliens learned to make macaroni and cheese," said Jeering eating from his plate.

"Not too bad," said Elsie joining in.

"So you are an expert on farming rice with hippos?" said Jeering with his mouth full.

"Pulling hippo ploughs," agreed Elsie with a straight face, drinking a glass of water.

Then they were there. Planet XC.

No parades or news conferences just an under the radar visit. The woman in charge was called Miss Jones.

She was the one who had selected the ambassadors for this mission.

"If we all look squished to you, then you look stretched to us," she said as she walked into their first meeting.

"Our footprints are stretch marks," volunteered Jeering.

"I don't think you should try walking down the street," said Miss Jones.

"Mr Smith almost tried walking down our streets in Lamu," said Elsie.

"Looks too squished," said Miss Jones.

"And then there's the fact that nobody can hear your speech up here," said Miss Jones.

"The only reason you can talk to us is that you have implants," said Jeering.

She moved her lips silently.

"That's what we sound like to you, a dog whistle," said Miss Jones.

"So you're squished and you talk in dog whistles, aren't you at least way ahead of us in technology?" said Jeering.

"About ten years," said Miss Jones.

"That ship we got here on was decades ahead of our technology," said Jeering.

"We didn't build that, we bought it," said Miss Jones.

"So you're in contact with other, more advanced species?" asked Jeering.

"Right now we have official contact with twelve planets, but we've heard of lots more," said Miss Jones.

"And now us," said Elsie.

"Slowly but surely," said Miss Jones.

The ambassadors were left in the complex to acclimatize. A couple of days later Miss Jones came back.

"I have a stalling mechanism." she said.

"I hope it can keep us humans busy for 10 years." said Jeering.

"Fear. Essentially it's fear," she said.

"Go on," said Elsie.

"10 years from now the humans are going to find planet Jaron 4, which will have the most advanced biology they've come upon yet. Around about then we're hoping that long distance imaging will really leap forward for the humans. To the point that microscope scale images can be gathered from mosses and lichen growing there."

"Maybe you will have to teach us how to do that by backchannels," said Jeering.

"Perhaps," said Miss Jones. "The microscope images reveal that some of this moss has been genetically engineered,"

"Nice," said Jeering. "Our first proof of aliens."

"And this wouldn't be the genetic engineering from planet XC, which is only a little better than humans, but some stuff we purchase and plant from a planet very far away," said Miss Jones.

"So not just the aliens in the hood but truly intimidating ones." said Jeering.

"That will shut us up and cause us to think for at least 10 years," said Elsie.

Li Fong, the sarcastic architect from Beijing was ranting back at the complex.

"I think this whole need to stall is about the Chinese," he said.

"This point in human history is about the Chinese," said Jeering. "We're becoming super powerful, and they don't trust how it's going to go down," said Li Fong.

"One bad future would be the new Chinese superpowers overthrowing the world and turning us all into robots," said Jeering.

"Or the war that breaks out when the West feels too dominated," said Li Fong.

"Things to avoid," said Elsie.

"Ur at least stall until they're resolved," said Li Fong.

And then with little ceremony they were returned to Earth.

"We weren't even told to be quiet about our journey," said Li Fong.

"Because nobody will believe us," said Jeering.

And so it would go.

That is not to say that a strong anecdotal whisper of the stories didn't exist.

The word was out, Jeering and Li Fong were cult heroes if not big media heroes.

Elsie was back at work in Kenya when Jeering showed up in a Land Rover.

"I got a job doing archeology on Lamu," he said.

"Discover the underground," she said.

"Exactly," he said and they ate some rice Elsie had grown on the Tana river delta and drank Tusker beer, Kenya's finest.

5 years later Jeering and Elsie were in London for a reunion with Li Fong and Branford Rice the wealthy Black ambassador from Cambridge.

They were pleasantly surprised when Mr. Smith and Miss Jones were at the table next to them.

"I guess you got the communications we were sending about this reunion," said Jeering.

"We had to be here," said Mr. Smith.

"Things proceeding on schedule I trust?" said Li Fong.

Mr. Smith had the latest issue of Scientific American from July 2018. 'Finding new life'.

"They found some oxygen planets just like we predicted," said Mr. Smith.

"We'll have to meet again in another 5 years," said Jeering.

2023 and they met again, this time in a noodle shop in Beijing. All of the 6 ambassadors were there. Jeering and Li Fong, Brandford Rice, and the three asian women.

Mr. Smith and Miss Jones showed up a little late and squeezed into the table with a large crowd all around.

"Not the most private place for a meeting." said Miss Jones.

"Pretty anonymous though," said Jeering.

"The stalling mechanism is in place. From latest reports, planet Jaron 4 will be discovered any day now," said Mr. Smith.

"And then, thanks to the tech you bought, we'll be too intimidated to meet anybody," said Jeering.

"We'll see how it plays out," said Miss Jones.

"The 6 of us are a leak, we know the ruse," said Li Fong.

"We want the problem to be solved," said Miss Jones.

"And yet you're fairly sure that we won't be heard," said Jeering.

"Yes," said Mr. Smith.

The news broke that alien intelligence had been discovered.

The details about Jaron 4 and the genetically engineered moss were being kept secret. It would take years for the super advanced modifications to be studied before average people could gain access.

China and NATO were about to go to war. They said it was over Taiwan, but it was really about China's ascendancy to power. They were getting 'too big for their britches' the Americans said and 'needed to be taken down a notch'.

"It's just like the XCers predicted," said Jeering, reading the paper.

Jeering was at law school, following the path of many ivy league liberal arts school grads to the bar. He was still with Elsie, they had been bonded forever by their star trip. This was kind of too bad for Elsie. as Jeering was pretty incompatible with everyone.

Then Jeering was on 'The Feed', a popular interview show at that time.

"Sources say that you predicted findings on planet Jaron 4 exactly." said the interviewer.

"That's because I knew exactly what was going to happen," said Jeering.

"Because you and a group of 5 others were transported to a planet near Jaron 4," said the interviewer respectfully.

"Yes, Planet XC and we were given information that the whole gambit on planet Jaron 4 was a stalling tactic, implemented by the Xcers to gain 10 years of time while Sino-Euro relations are resolved ," said Jeering.

"Stalling for what?" asked the interviewer.

"Before Interspecies contact," said Jeering.

"Of course," said the Interviewer.

"They want to meet us, but they want us to get our house in order first," said Jeering.

"The whole China vs Nato thing." said the Interviewer.

"Exactly," said Jeering.

"So how did they set up Jaron 4 to stall?" asked the interviewer.

"They introduced some genetically engineered moss," said Jeering.

"That would be the secret that authorities are keeping from us," said the interviewer.

"Yes but it isn't genetic engineering from planet XC. They're only about 10 years ahead of us, they used some technology they bought on the open market from a distant advanced race called the Sith." said Jeering.

"So they're in contact with other races?" asked the interviewer.

"15 now but they know about several others," said Jeering.

"Is there a way that we can reach these beings?" asked the interviewer.

"They're monitoring this signal even as we speak, I think if we arranged a meeting in a couple of months they would come down," said Jeering.

"No frigging way," said the interviewer.

"This will be interesting," said Jeering.

Two months later Jeering was on THE FEED again. Mr Smith and Miss Jones were out in the studio audience although only Jeering knew.

"Welcome back to our show Mr. Jeering," the interviewer began.

"Glad to be here," answered Jeering.

"Didn't you say that citizens of planet XC look squished to us?" asked the announcer.

"Just flattened from the top down, not like flounders," answered Jeering.

"So if I put a salmon's head in a vice and squished it would that look about right?" the interviewer went over to a how-to set that was part of the set and graphically used the tools.

Mr. Smith and Miss Jones were seen to be leaving the audience.

"Well, diplomacy zero, hot headed ignorance 1, I can see why humans won't be ready for another decade or so," said Jeering.

"And stay out!" said the interviewer to nobody. Signifying nothing.

Time went by and it was revealed that Mr. Smith and Miss Jones had come down this last time uncloaked. There were pictures. Simulations had reconstructed a pressure wave when they came down cloaked to the last ambassssdor's reunion. This time it was broad daylight. They'd walked like Gandhi into the human fire with peaceful intentions.

The announcer had scared them away.

"That guy is an asshole," said Jeering to the anchorwoman on the tv interview.

"People are either open to the aliens or they become assholes," said the interviewer.

"It would seem," said Jeering.

"Elsie's pregnant!" said Jeering to the screen.

"Congratulations," said Mr. Smith in reply.

In a weird press conference the president of the United States had talked to Mr. Smith and Miss Jones on Skype.

The technology to make the signal go fast enough came from XC if earth based stuff went that far there would be a huge lag.

Now Jeering talked every day, keeping in touch.

"Do you think the baby was conceived on XC?" asked Miss Jones.

"Are you asking if we got sexy on XC?" laughed Jeering.

"The gravity is different, this person may look..." said Miss Jones.

"Squished," Jeering finished the sentence.

"Yes," agreed Miss Smith.

"Wear it with pride I say," said Jeering.

"We'll see..." said Mr. Smith.

And then, one month later Jeering was on THE FEED again. The interviewer had Miss Jones on a live video feed from CX, and was apologizing profusely.

"I don't know what came over me. It was something about arriving unannounced," said the Interviewer.

"Protocol. We are sort of the team in charge of starting things off informally," said Miss Jones.

"Get things started with anecdotal power," said Jeering.

"I'm thinking official recognition will happen soon," said Miss Jones.

Official relations between Earth and planet XC took about a year to get underway. Treaties between China and Nato had to be signed as a condition. In the meantime Mr. Smith and Miss Jones introduces a friend Mr. Salmon, who was in charge of pushing the boundaries on race relations.

"I want to see if I can cause anger that might become dangerous," he said.

"Weird," said Jeering.

It turned out that Mr. Salmon was more like a subversive comedian than a dangerous stranger.

"Don't tell us the truth so much," Jeering would say in fits of laughter, "it hurts too bad."

Miss Jones began long conversations with Jeering as Elsie's pregnancy went on.

"I chose you because you were a poor American, I wanted to play you off against the rich African," said Miss Jones.

"I went to an Ivy League school," protested Jeering.

"But you got there on scholarship. You write award winning essays but you grew up in a trailer park," said Miss Jones.

"You know too much," said Jeering.

"I do my homework," said Miss Jones.

"What's with the three Asian women?" Jeering asked Miss Jones.

"Most humans are Asian women," said Miss Jones.

"Statistically yes, but with Li Fong doesn't that make it a bit too many?" asked Jeering.

"About 70% should be Asian if it was a good representation. But Sita Maba is from South America, living in Kerela," said Miss Jones.

"I guess you covered most places but Europe," said Jeering.

"You are from Europe too," said Miss Jones.

And slowly we caught a glimpse of everyday life on Planet XC. Mr Smith lived in a cave built into a mountain, Miss Jones in an apartment near the centre.

"The centre for Alien Studies, that's where we stayed," said Jeering.

"Near where I live," said Miss Jones.

Official relations between Earth and planet XC were stalled for years. It was going to take the decade that had been predicted to bring relations between Asia and NATO to a resolution. Then XC could gain the attention it deserved. Until then it was informal learning. The best kind.

Elsie's baby arrived in May. Jaron Smith Jones Lancaster. Jeering was the proud father. The godparents were on a planet far away.

"His head is only a little squished," said Jeering.

"A sign of character," said Elsie.

And Jaron would grow up the first of many trans-planetary babies. Miss Jones would have a child too, Quez, fathered by a man on XC, with Jeering as a middle name, he'd grow up talking to Jaron on Earth, and they didn't think it was very alien at all.

Miss Jones' husband, Tomag, was a recluse spending most of his time far from the city at a fly fishing lake where there was an ancestral cabin. When he was in town he was a professor at the university.

"Jeering we have to talk," he said one day over the video phone.

"I'm glad you said that. Your wife and I talk so much," said Jeering at home at their apartment.

"We need to, uh, broaden your perspective on the universe," said Tomag.

"Just meeting another species will probably take a hundred years to integrate," said Jeering.

"Yes it's good to learn in baby steps," said Tomag.

"So what have you got?" asked Jeering tired of delay.

"Those underground caves on Lamu, where you met Mr. Smith, do you think that he got there with a ship?" asked Tomag.

"I always assumed so," said Jeering.

Tomag stood up and the image became his point of view.

"I want to show you something," he said.

"I always wanted to look around your cottage," said Jeering enthusiastically.

Tomag went down a path away from the lake to a dusty mountainside. Beneath some tarps he revealed a door.

"This is our cave entrance," he opened it and walked in.

"Most cabins on earth don't have that," said Jeering with curiosity.

The image proceeded down a hallway. Some rooms were finished like the inside of a house, some were stone cavern walls.

"You've been told about The Sith, now it's time to learn about their ancestors from thousands of years ago, The Old Ones," said Tomag.

"So this is an ancient culture that exists on The Sith Planet," said Jeering.

"Only in ruins and ancient scriptures," corrected Tomag.

"And.."encouraged Jeering.

"The old ones travelled all over the star system, further even than the Sith have managed to go,"Tomag went on.

"So we're talking about ancestors more advanced than their children?" queried Jeering.

"Mystically so," agreed Tomag. "But the Sith may not even be the children of the Old Ones. Kind of like how a modern Egyptian doesn't have much to do with the people who built the pyramids."

"So much lost learning," Jeering said.

'Anyways this is all leading up to this," he opened a door to a dazzling cavern. Sapphires and Rubies encrusted the walls. Diamonds marked a central circle.

"Was this place built by the old ones?" asked Jeering.

"Exactly. It's a portal room and they're all over the place, even on earth," Tomag said.

"A Portal room, does that mean it connects to other planets?" asked Jeering.

"The old ones walked the universe with a freedom that's hard to comprehend," Tomag answered.

"Even to earth," marvelled Jeering.

"Even to earth," agreed Tomag.

Elsie and Jaron were at the restaurant already when Jeering sat down to join them.

"Where have you been?" asked Elsie.

"Oh just in an ancient cavern on a far off star's planet," Jeering said distracted.

"Every day stuff," Elsie agreed seriously.

"Mm" said Jeering playing with the baby.

But the portals were real. Jeering's entire model of the universe had rearranged.

Quite a day.

"So we're talking about a universe that's like a Swiss cheese full of holes,"Jeering and Elsie were lying in bed talking astrophysics.

"And these 'Old Ones' found the natural tunnels and built shrines?" asked Elsie.

"We're not sure of their religious significance but each portal seems like a ceremonial, holy, place," said Jeering ignoring the pun. "And they were hidden so the natives couldn't find them?" asked Elsie.

"Ours are deep under the Sahara Desert," answered Jeering.

"Tough to find," guessed Elsie.

"Get this, There are 12 species the XCers know. Humans are the only ones that haven't found their holes in the cheese," laughed Jeering.

"Us Earth-folk are not great on underground imaging. My uncle was looking for water on his ranch. a good place to dig a well. The experts didn't have high tech gadgets but they used 'witching' where you walk over the land with a triangular stick, in the 21st century!" protested Elsie.

"They wait for a watery feeling?" wondered Jeering.

"I guess," shrugged Elsie.

"No wonder we didn't find the Portal," concluded Jeering.

"We need Google Earth underground," suggested Elsie.

"x-ray vision like Superman," agreed Jeering.

Tomag was in the tunnel again when Jeering called.

"On earth I would be called a professor of archaeology," he told Jeering, taking some notes.

"How about weird squished headed alien guy?" suggested Jeering.

Tomag laughed. "That too," he agreed.

"Are we going back to the portal today?" asked Jeering.

"We're there right now, in fact I wanted to show you this," the video went dark although you could tell Tomag was moving.

"What is it?" asked Jeering.

"I've gone down the tunnel that leads to earth," Tomag answered.

"So you could give me a phone call?" Jeering was amazed.

"I'm deep under the Sahara, but if I had a phone..." Tomag was in a place with a little light from an odd glowing source.

"Still you got here so fast!" Jeering enthused.

"The ancients walked the universe like a stroll in the park," Tomag agreed.

"So what are we going to do next?" Jeering loved this.

Tomag was at a series of cavern entrances that Jeering guessed lead to places all over the earth.

"We make a phone call," said Tomag choosing a tunnel and setting off.

Elsie and Jaron were at the restaurant already when Jeering sat down to join them.

"What's this?" Elsie was looking at some papers that Jeering had placed in front of her.

"It's a crossroads," answered Jeering coyly.

"Huh?" puzzled Elsie.

"On one path we stay in the city, I stay in Law School," began Jeering.

"And the other?" Elsie asked although she knew the answer.

"We fly to Africa and walk through a doorway to the universe," enthused Jeering.

Tomag will be waiting under Lamu won't he?" Elsie reasoned.

"We can walk with him to the stars," Jeering answered.

"You already quit school didn't you?" Elsie guessed.

"Those plane tickets leave in a week," confirmed Jeering.

"I like getting lost with you," Elsie said.

"Let's get lost together" Jeering agreed and baby Jaron burped in confirmation.