

The Price of Pain

The ship from Toldar was first sighted from earth by a Kenyan University observatory. The news travelled fast and soon the ship was being tracked from everywhere. There was a world-wide boom in telescope sales, UFO garbage, and doomsday proselytes. The shuttle program suddenly had funding, as did the worlds' air forces, and weapons research centres. Even Russia kick-started their space program again, and goodness knows they could not afford it.

It took eight weeks before the ship arrived at earth's atmosphere, and without knocking, stepped inside. As it orbited the earth, shuttles buzzed it regularly. A few high-altitude planes drifted near. The expected but largely futile communication of snippets of earth's major languages, binary metaphors, human genetic coding and the like were bounced to the ship by satellite, as were every kind of sound wave. A shuttle even tried to signal by flashing lights.

Meanwhile on earth, almost all activity stopped. Everyone stayed welded to their TVs. War-zone cease-fires held without effort. The UN held meetings, and strategised, and generally masturbated about, as only they could. Nuclear shelter sales people went door-to-door and made a small fortune. The US president dove deep into his mountain, while Joey, Kristov, Din Huar, Tibeko, Jeeven, and Carlos, around the world, looked with awe through the telescopes their father's had bought them.

It took the Toldaran four days to learn the major languages of the world. On the fifth day, as they listened, they understood most of the various communications on earth. They understood the uncertainty, fear, and awe. They also understood diplomacy.

At 8:00am Greenwich Mean Time, they sent a message to earth. It appeared in written and verbal form on every TV, and in verbal form on every radio. It spoke in different languages all over the world but said the same thing:

"We in the spaceship are the Toldaran. We number 42. We come from a planet called Telden which is many light years from here. We have no weapons and we mean you no harm.

We have learned your languages by listening to your broadcasts and your communications. Our purpose here is to purchase items of value. We have much that will be valuable to you.

We will communicate with you again tomorrow."

Most of earth's people believed the Toldaran, but of course the UN jerked off in its corner, and the top politicians hemmed and hawed. NASA did another fly-by. Top engineers tried to figure out (unsuccessfully) how a remote source could tap everyone's TV and radio. Joey and his friends just looked up and smiled.

24 hours after the first one, another message arrived:

"Our purpose is to travel space to find intelligent life and to purchase items of value from sentient species. We are primarily collectors, curators perhaps. Our values are in many ways much different than yours. For example, your gold, diamonds and rare pieces of art, have no value for us. The closest concept in your language to what we seek is sentimental value. It is your feelings about an item which give it the value we cherish. We are able to accurately measure and record the sentimental value of your belongings.

We will talk to you again tomorrow.”

After the first announcement the wealthy and scheming had rubbed their hands and were getting ready to negotiate. The second message left them confused and uncertain. The hustlers and pawn-brokers suddenly had nothing to hustle and broke. The rich and asset-backed had no leverage on the poor and asset-stripped. The UN seemed to be visiting the sperm-bank (or was it the Whitehouse).

The next day 8:00am GMT:

“Tomorrow at this time, in every village, town, and city, will appear one or more bright green towers depending on population density. The towers will be five metres wide and one kilometre high. At the base of each tower will be a blue archway. Enter the archway and tell us about the item you value. While you do this, we will scan and record your feelings, to gauge the item’s value. The Toldar only purchase the most rare and valuable items.”

There was a general uproar at this message. People world-wide were warned about going near the towers. The UN issued a statement to the Toldaran that such “invasion” would be deemed hostile. Top negotiators and diplomats stood by, should there be an appearance by the Toldar. Some countries assembled police and guards for the towers to prevent entry, and some did nothing. Most Western and all Middle-Eastern countries worked on ways to forbid entry to the towers.

The next day at 8:00am GMT precisely, millions of towers appeared all over the world, over 2,000 in New York City, and nearly 3,000 in Mexico City. While China and India from satellites looked like brushes with bright green bristles. At the same time the towers appeared, the Toldaran embarked on a marketing campaign. From experience they knew that the most valuable items would not be readily, or ever, sold. On TVs and radios all over the world they described the treasures they had as collateral: complete health for life, long life, personal thought-controlled sea and space vehicles, a deep green crystal that could cut diamonds like butter, any amount of gold and precious gems, personal energy sources, anti-gravity devices, instantaneous personal transporters, and so on. Everything made to measure.

Everyone came out to look, and those in rural areas travelled to see. After a few tentative moments people began to enter the blue arches.

Than Doi was the first inside the arch in her part of the city of Chiang Rai, North Thailand. The deep blue seemed to envelop her as she stood inside. She was prompted in her language to describe the item and its value to her. As she spoke, her emotions and feeling were recorded, and analysed. She described a silver box held in her family for generations, her dearest possession. When she finished, she was thanked in gracious terms. A piece of gold leaf appeared in the air in front of her, with a catalogue number on it. If her item was wanted, her number would appear on the tower after all the people had been heard.

The same thing happened millions of times around the world that day, and again the next day, and the next. Some people just went for the gold leaf and received nothing. The Western countries slowly relented to the pressure from their voters. Some of the less democratic countries restricted access, so the Toldar simply quadrupled the number of towers and moved them every few hours.

Six weeks later all the towers disappeared. Two days after that, 1,974 towers re-appeared, throughout the earth. Most had only one large black number showing against the green background,

a few had two numbers, and none had more. Under each number was printed a time and date. The Toldaran sent a message across the world.

“Thank you to everyone who shared their precious feelings with us. We have found 1,974 items which are of significant value to us, for us to purchase and take away. All 42 of the Toldaran will come and meet with each of the 1,974 at the pillar they entered. The time and date we will meet with each of the 1,974 is shown on each pillar. We have experienced deep joy from your sentiments, and we will take your many stories with us.”

The date of the first meeting was set a week away. The place of the first meeting was Greytown, in the Wairarapa, New Zealand. The chosen few around the world were ready, except two who had changed their mind about giving up their possessions. Royals, politicians, armies, diplomats, anthropologists, and astronomers, did their special thing, whatever it was. There were huge preparations around the world to finally welcome the visitors.

A few days before the set dates, a force-field pushed outwards from each tower, a little over five metres in diameter. No-one and no-thing could get through.

At the appointed time, on the appointed day, the Wairarapa was full to overflowing with camera crews, spectators, heads of state, hawkers selling local wine, UN officials, specialists in a hundred “key” areas, and an international collection of well armed soldiers. Right on time, 42 tall, bright green figures appeared. They were each over three metres in height, and appeared to have no faces or limbs. They had a certain alive-ness about them which might have been their glistening skin, or the slight side to side movement each made. Only one looked different, and it had a metallic box strapped around its middle.

The local Mayor, and Prime Minister, the Queen of England, President of the United States, and the Secretary General of the United Nations stood up.

“Please sit down” said the Toldaran, its voice emanating from the box, “your words have no value to us. We are here to see Mrs Hardy.”

A sharp intake of breath and animated chatter from everyone who heard punctuated the red faces of the officials as they slowly and uncomfortably sat down, unaccustomed to being ordered to do anything.

A few minutes after the noise died down, old Mrs Hardy stood up with the aid of her walking stick, and walked down the dais with a UN guard on each side. In one hand she held an old brown envelope. At the five metre mark the guards stopped sharply, while Mrs Hardy walked through. As she reached the Toldaran, they bent like plasticine and lay down in front of her as a mark of respect. When they rose again, the Toldaran speaking through the box said, “Thank you for your priceless article. We will cherish it, and billions will experience reverence and awe from it.”

The Toldaran somehow produced a glass-like case from inside itself and Mrs Hardy placed the envelope in it. The envelope held the only photographs of, and letters from her two boys, who at 18 and 20 were killed in the Second World War. Thin tears of sorrow ran down Mrs Hardy’s old lined cheeks, and the Toldaran felt her sadness, and cried in their own way.

Name your price Mrs Hardy”, said the Toldaran.

“I would like enough money to get a monument made for my boys, and I would like good health for my last years please.”

Moments later, 10 one kilogram bars of gold, a small envelope with “Mrs Hardy - health” written on it, and a beautiful deep green Toldaran-emerald ring, appeared before her.

“You and your sons will never be forgotten Mrs Hardy” said the Toldaran. They bowed to her, and then all 42 of them and the tower disappeared.

The same thing happened 1,974 times around the world.

A young man in London had a watch his father had given him when he was eight. His father staggered home dying from a knife wound. “I love you little man” the dying father had said. The young man put the knife in the glass case, and turned away sobbing, not wanting anything in return. The Toldaran lay prostrate for an hour in respect, grieving, and feeling his loss.

In China, a woman’s most beloved possession was removed from her “for the good of the people”. However, the possession and her gold leaf were not enough to gain entry for the party official who tried to get through the barrier. Eventually the woman was brought forward. Before her lover was forced to commit suicide, he wrote her one love-letter. She placed the letter in the box, and fighting back the tears with her mouth held firm she asked for her and her family to be transported to England. She pointed them out in the crowd, and all eight found themselves in Hyde Park moments later with a bar of gold and a small bag of diamonds each.

The Toldaran returned to their ship deeply moved. In no other world had they found so much violent strife, which lead inevitably to the existence of items of such high emotional value. In all the other hundreds of worlds they had visited, the most items previously ever purchased from one planet was 26. Their last message was:

“We find you a beautiful yet tragic people. We value your gifts immensely but we sorrow that you have paid such a high price for them. We will return in future generations, and meanwhile we will pray to our God that peace will come to your planet.”