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Birds that Fly



a short science fiction story

by

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As the silent limousine slid along through the torrential rains, Professor Victor Trelawney reclined in the back, lazily, feeling mightily pleased with himself. He was about to embark on the greatest mission of his career. It was to be a triumph of such historical importance that it brought a smirk to his lips whenever he thought of it. It was almost as if he, Trelawney, had been given the divine power to say, in the words of the Book of Genesis: "*Let the waters bring forth abundantly fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.*"

He took a deep breath. It was almost too much, even for him. He dozed off and was jostled awake by the car stopping suddenly. The driver turned round.

"This is the place, mister."

Slightly dazed Trelawney tried to look out of the window. They were misted on the inside and dappled with rain on the outside so there was little to see. He gave an impatient shrug. What the hell did it matter, anyway. He groped for his umbrella and shifted his body to the door.

"I trust you'll see to my luggage," he said to the driver, who gave him a brooding look in return.

Trelawney struggled out of the car, with some difficulty, for he was a very fat man. His fame had brought both the boon and the bane of being able to indulge in his passion for food. And he had indulged. He considered it his only weakness.

Opening his broly he looked up the monumental steps of the Dutch National Museum of Natural History. He had expected hordes of eager biologists and students to welcome him. Instead

there were only bars of rain driven into the stone with such force that the shattering drops rebounded almost kneehigh. Anger filled him, quick as always. What kind of treatment was this for a man of his stature? Damn these provincials. Behind him he heard the driver swear as he lifted his colossal, metal trunk from the back of the car.

Inspired by his anger Trelawney started to drag his heavy frame up the steps. When he was halfway, he heard the engine of the limousine being started. With a gasp of dismay he turned, just in time to see the black coffin drive off in veils of spray. His shiny trunk stood at the bottom of the steps, pelted by the rain.

Trelawney's face became crimson. He almost shook his broolly at the departing car.

"May your drowning be slow," he muttered. "Very slow."

He cast another look at his trunk, scowling. He'd never get that thing up the stairs alone. Someone would have to get it for him. He resumed his ascent, puffing and wheezing, growing more incensed with every step he took. By the time he had reached the perron he was ready for mass murder. He banged on the door. Sweat was poring down his face and running in ticklish rivulets down his back. Someone was going to pay for this. Who the hell did these yokels think he was?

After several, infuriating, minutes the door was finally opened. An old, decrepit doorkeeper gazed at him with blinking eyes. Trelawney almost pushed him over in his haste to get indoors.

"Easy, easy," said the old man. "What's the hurry?"

Trelawney closed his umbrella. He trembled with rage.

"I AM PROFESSOR VICTOR TRELAWNEY!" he shouted, causing such booming echoes in the great hall, that he was startled into lowering his voice. "I'm here on a mission of global importance," he said softly but menacingly. "The ecology of the world depends on what I have to do in a matter of weeks. That's the hurry. So why is there no goddamn body here to welcome me? Infernal idiots!"

The old man chuckled.

"There's nobody here but me and young Otto over there," he said, pointing at a figure that had appeared in the doorway of an office beside the entrance.

Trelawney's anger evaporated. This was too much. In speechless amazement he gazed at the old man, who continued to chuckle and began nodding his head.

"That's right," he said. "Just us. All the others have been drafted. It's the war, you know."

Trelawney heaved a sigh. Of course. That damned farce. He should have guessed. He looked at the other man, Otto wasn't it? Trelawney almost burst into laughter at the sight of him. The figure in the doorway could easily pass as a twin of the Monster of Frankenstein. About seven feet tall, with a muscular body and a drooping head. His face betrayed the mind of a simpleton. Small, drowsy eyes, a drooling mouth, and an expression of vacant friendliness.

"Hello, p-p-professor," he said, with a deep, dragging voice. "I'm Otto. I've been told to help you."

"O my God," said Trelawney, turning to the old man. "You don't mean to say that this moron is to be my assistant?"

"That's right," said the doorkeeper. "There's only us,"

"O, no. This won't do," said Trelawney. "Where's the phone?"

"It's in the office but it don't work."

"Doesn't work?"

"Nope. Happens all the time. The rains, you know."

For a moment Trelawney was overcome by frustration. Then he clenched his teeth. What the hell. He'd do it alone. That had always been best anyway. Then he remembered his trunk. He turned to the monster.

"Perhaps you can make yourself useful by getting my trunk. It's still outside."

The friendly smile on Otto's face expanded into a gleeful grin.

"Sure, p-p-professor," he grunted. "I'll get it for you." And he ambled to the door. His head bobbed like the head of a lame horse, but he moved with amazing swiftness.

"Perhaps you'd like a cuppa tea, professor?" said the old man. "I've got the kettle on."

Trelawney was about to annihilate the old fool with a scathing reply, but realized it would do little good.

"Why not," he said. As he turned to follow the man, the big door was flung open and Otto reappeared, carrying the sixty-pound trunk under one arm as if it were a loaf of bread. The boy's display of strength annoyed Trelawney.

They drank tea in the office. Nobody spoke. The old man fell asleep, Otto just gazed at Trelawney in mute admiration.

The department of avian specimens of the Dutch National Museum of Natural History was - without a doubt - the finest in the world. There were few species of birds that did not have several representatives here, if only in the form of empty skins, each encased in a box and stored in one of the mahogany cabinets that lined the walls of a hall big enough to house a church. It was four stories high, with a narrow gallery on each floor. A tall, gothic window adorned the far wall, framing a beautiful glass-in-lead scene of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

Out of the gloom that obscured the arched ceiling there loomed a chandelier like a gigantic christmas tree adorned with icicles. An oak conference table stood in the middle of the marble floor, bearing four large table lamps with computer terminals. High-backed chairs stood around it. A scent of beeswax pervaded the atmosphere.

With Otto at his heels Trelawney waddled across the floor.

"Ah, this is more like it," he said, rubbing his hands as he looked around. "Good. Very good. And now to work."

He activated one of the terminals and sat down in front of it. A few keystrokes brought him into the catalog. His mouth watered at the sight of the wealth of specimens.

"Right. Let's begin with the Anatidae." he struck a key.

A long list of latin names appeared, each followed by an identification number and a place code indicating where the

specimen was to be found. A glance at the first two place codes made Trelawney very uncomfortable. They read (I) A-26-G7 and (III) G-18-X3. If that meant what he feared it meant, he was in dire trouble.

He turned round to Otto. To his disgust the dumb brute had not moved. He had not even put down the trunk. He just stood there, looking happily dazed, holding the trunk under his arm as if he had forgotten about it.

"You can put that thing down now, Otto," said Trelawney, "And be careful."

Otto grinned.

"Sure, p-p-professor." He said and placed the trunk on the floor with amazing gentleness.

"Come over here." said Trelawney. Otto came, his head abob. Trelawney pointed at the first place code on the screen.

"What does this refer to?"

Otto looked startled.

"River two, p-p-professor?" he asked.

"No. Refer to. REFER to! What does it stand for?"

Fearfully the young man gazed at the screen.

"Stand for?" he mumbled to himself.

Trelawney pursed his lips in anger. The boy was a complete idiot. Jesus!

"What's it USED for?" asked Trelawney.

"O," said Otto with a grin "It's the p-p-place c-c-code, p-p-professor. It tells me where I c-c-can find the birds."

"Well? Where do you find this one." Trelawney pointed.

Otto grinned.

"First floor, section A, c-c-cabinet 26, row G, box 7." he droned.

"And this one?"

"Third floor, section G, c-c-cabinet 18, row X, box 3."

Trelawney groaned. As he had feared the birds were scattered all over the place. If he had to get them himself, he'd be exhausted before the hour was out and he shuddered to think how long it would take his imbecile assistant to gather them. O well, he'd just have to try. He got out his stuff. Microscanner, cell probe and the ledgers, filled with little plastic envelopes like stamps. Each envelope bore the name of the specimen to be collected. Trelawney installed himself at the table.

He printed a list of the first sixty birds he needed and handed it to Otto.

"Get me the anserinae first."

Otto gaped.

"Anseriwhat, p-p-professor?"

Trelawney closed his eyes in exasperation. He was about to suffocate. He had to swallow several times before he could speak again.

"You can read, can't you?"

The tall boy blushed.

"Letters are hard, p-p-professor," he said. "I mix them up."

Trelawney felt the first twinge of despair. This must be some sick joke, he thought.

"But I'm good at figures, p-p-professor." said the boy. "I really am."

"Are you now?" sneered Trelawney. "Well, get me the first twenty numbers on this list."

The boy cast a casual glance at the list, put it back on the table and ambled off.

Trelawney leaped from his chair.

"Hey! Numbskull. You've forgotten the list!"

"No need, p-p-professor," mumbled the boy and broke into a trot.

Trelawney slumped back into his chair, shaking his head. He'd have to get another assistant. This was madness. And he only had a few weeks, if that. The violence of the rains was becoming ominous. His triumph was turning into a disaster. Feeling a bit sick he watched Otto run to the wall, open doors, grab boxes, run on, leap up stairs and race along the galleries stopping only briefly to grab other boxes. In five minutes he was back, balancing two stacks of ten boxes on his outstretched arms.

Trelawney sighed. That imbecile must just have grabbed boxes at random. They could not possibly be the right ones. To his boundless astonishment they were. All twenty.

The boy stood grinning at him like a big ape.

"Any more, p-p-professor?" he asked.

Trelawney could not bear the childish glee on the boy's face. The brute seemed to be mocking him. He apparently was one of

these specialized idiots who are marvels at arithmetic but cannot spell their own name.

"Yes," Trelawney said sullenly. "Get the rest."

Without a second glance at the list, Otto was off again.

Trelawney should have been delighted at having his first problem so easily solved. Yet he was not. It irked him that this imbecile could do something he could not even contemplate doing.

He opened the first box. It contained the skin of a female Anser Albifrons. Carefully he took it out, placed it in the compartment under his microscanner and began to test it for signs of disease. When he had run all the tests, he clipped a small fragment from the tailfeathers and dropped it into the first envelope. When he looked up, Otto stood beside him, with another twenty boxes. His face was flushed. He emitted a faint though penetrating smell of perspiration.

"Where shall I put them, p-p-professor?" he panted.

"On the table. And stop calling me p-p-professor."

The boy blushed.

"I'm sorry, p-p-psir,"

Trelawney worked as fast as he could. Still, it took him well over five minutes for each bird. He needed at least one male and one female. His list contained well over two thousand birds, multiplied by two made four thousand times five was twenty thousand minutes. More than 300 hours. Even if he only slept six hours a night he would need three weeks of

uninterrupted labor. And he wondered whether he had the time. The incessant clatter of raindrops on the gothic window made him doubt it.

He worked feverishly. Each time he had finished with a bird, Otto would rush up, place it tenderly in its box and hurry off to return it to its cabinet. Maliciously, Trelawney refrained from suggesting that the boy should wait until he had say ten birds so as to save himself the trouble of nine unnecessary trips. Served him right for being so cocky about his menial ability.

The hours fled. At first Trelawney enjoyed the work. It had been long since he had done basic research but he was still a wizard at it. The depth of his know-how flattered him. With playful ease he ran the tests, never faltering, never doubting. When he came across the first diseased specimen, he had to call Otto, point out the identification number and wait till the boy had brought a second specimen.

As he sat waiting, he gazed at the window. Daylight was beginning to fail, turning the phoenix into a harbinger of darkness and doom. As if it knew. In a matter of weeks it would be shattered, washed away by the conquering waters. Trelawney sighed. It all seemed so unreal, no matter how tangible the hammering drops on the glass were. He could still remember the first time he had heard about the asteroids. Over a year ago at the December convention in Chicago. During the NFL playoffs. Old Timmy Gascoigne had taken him along to a game and confided in him afterwards.

"Have I got news for you." he had said.

"You're in love again," Trelawney had replied.

Timmy had collapsed into one of his roaring bellylaughs.

"Yeah, that too. But we've got an honest-to-god, end-of-the-world situation on our hands."

"Aw, come on."

"It's true. I'm not supposed to tell you yet but you'll hear tomorrow anyway. You're in on the Noah Project."

And there, in the snow-swept parking lot of Soldier Field stadium Trelawney was told about the asteroids. A large previously unknown swarm had entered the solar system the year before. Nobody had taken any notice at first. Resources were slim and asteroids had little to offer anyway. Mere vermin of the skies, as they had always been known in the profession. Then Amadeus Semmelweis, a semi-retired astronomer from Vienna published a paper in the German Journal of the Skies. He had studied the asteroid swarm and predicted that their course was likely to bring them in collision with earth. Still nobody took any notice. In despair old Amadeus turned to the tabloids. This led to a few sensational articles on the impending end of the world, but nothing else. Amadeus Semmelweis died and the whole matter was forgotten. Trelawney himself had not even heard of the asteroids till that December day, when he learned from his old roommate that both the USA and the USSR had commissioned a few lowly assistants to check Semmelweis' findings only to discover that he had been absolutely right. There could be no doubt that earth was indeed

going to collide with the greater part of the asteroid swarm. Panic in high places. An unprecedented agreement was concluded between the two superpowers. To avoid worldwide anarchy all knowledge of the asteroids was to be suppressed. Politics were forgotten. Spies and terrorists went scot-free while amateur astronomers were hunted down and butchered like rabid dogs.

When it was found that the asteroids consisted almost entirely of ice, there was some relief, but it was short-lived when calculations proved that the swarm contained enough water to swamp the planet to the peaks of the Andes. To put it simply: if all the asteroids landed on earth, mankind was to experience another flood.

An elaborate ploy of impending war between the East and the West was devised, enabling both powers to start building domed cities that would be able to exist under water. All able men were drafted for so-called defensive construction work. Once they entered the building sites, they were cut off from the outside world. And even inside they were kept under the illusion that they were working on military projects. Meanwhile a global census was conducted to select those who qualified for survival. Young families mostly but also men and women of exceptional talent.

Of course it had been impossible to prevent all leaks, but the secret services had a field day. Anyone spreading the slightest rumor was certain to contract a swiftly lethal disease.

All in all the ploy had worked. Another year had passed. Now the vanguard of the swarm was penetrating the atmosphere, bringing these interminable rains. Most domed cities were operational, if far from perfect, and the first evacuations were in full swing. According to the last estimates Trelawney had heard, lowland countries were expected to become uninhabitable in five weeks' time. Just his luck to be in one of the lowest countries in the world.

He was startled from his thoughts by Otto's return.

"Here's the bird, sir," he said.

With a grunt Trelawney took it and set to work again. For two more hours he worked without pause, quickly and efficiently, almost entranced, hardly aware of Otto's presence. But he could not help hearing the sound of the rain. That deep, droning noise, like a monstrous humming, rising and falling in volume. Twice it died away completely, leaving a silence of sorts, wonderfully soothing, although filled with all kinds of wet splashes, drips and gurgles as the water sought its way down along the building. But neither of the dry spells lasted for more than fifteen minutes.

After two hours, Trelawney decided to take a ten-minute break. He drew back from the terminal and rubbed his eyes. Otto sat in another chair, some three yards away, gazing at him. Trelawney realized that he must have been sitting there the whole time, like a trusty dog.

Trelawney managed a reluctant grin, which was returned by a beaming smile.

"Need anything, p-p-p ...sir?" said Otto, jumping up eagerly. Trelawney shook his head.

"You're not finished?" said Otto, with a wail of disappointment.

"No, I've only just begun. This will take weeks."

"O, good," said Otto.

He cast a quizzical look at the microscanner.

"What are you doing, sir?"

Trelawney was tempted to say he was running a simple integrated multiprobe interdisciplinary status test, but relented.

"I'm taking samples, Otto. That's all."

"What for?"

Trelawney sighed.

"To make new birds." He said, grudgingly.

Otto's drooping nether lip dropped even further. Suspicion knitted his brow. He looked at the microscanner and the little envelopes. Then a hesitant smile brightened his face.

"Ah, that's a joke, is it, sir?" he asked.

"No, Otto, it is not a joke. It's an invention of mine. But it's too difficult to explain. And I'm hungry. Could you get me something to eat?"

"You c-c-can have my sandwiches, sir."

Trelawney shook his head.

"No, Otto, that won't do. I need proper nourishment. This is hard work. Surely you can send out for something? A big juicy steak would be fine. Some french fries. A bottle of Burgundy."

The boy began to shake his head, but stopped himself. For once he closed his mouth in a determined expression.

"I c-c-can try, sir. I c-c-can try," he said and shuffled away.

Trelawney could not help but smile. Despite his loathing for the boy's subhuman intelligence, he was beginning to soften slightly to the brute. At any rate the lad was eager to help. Perhaps it had been unfair to assume ulterior motives in his glee. He seemed too stupid for those.

Trelawney looked at the darkness beyond the table, which was flooded by yellow lamplight. The rain lashed at the window, relentlessly. He sure hoped the predictions hadn't been too optimistic. It would be a momentous tragedy if he and his work were to be lost for posterity.

For two weeks Trelawney worked like a mad mole. Two hours in full concentration, followed by his ten-minute break. But as time wore on, those ten minutes were not enough. He would feel so drained of energy that it took fifteen to twenty sometimes even thirty minutes for him to recuperate. Those were the times he cursed Otto most for his imbecility. If only he had been a competent assistant. Together they would have completed the job in a fortnight. The worst part was that Otto believed himself to be a great help. He started to use first person plural.

"How are we doing, sir?" he would ask, to Trelawney's utter disgust. It made him malicious. He would look into the blank, grinning face and mentally insult him. You impertinent cretin, he would think, a well-trained chimpanzee could do what you

do. And better. Thank god I won't have to put with the likes of you in the dome. There's a comforting thought. All the misfits and incompetents are to be washed away. Good riddance, too. At last mankind will be cleansed of its genetic blunders.

Otto himself was totally unaware of Trelawney's dislike. Happily he continued to run off with each bird that Trelawney had tested. Nothing was too much for him. He made coffee, went out to get amazingly good food, swept the floor, waxed the woodwork, prepared a bed for his professor every night and woke him when his six hours' sleep had passed. As a manservant he had no peers.

There was one thing about him that Trelawney did not understand. Despite his glaring imbecility Otto seemed desperate to know what he, Trelawney, was doing. The boy kept pestering him with questions. One day Trelawney could stand it no longer.

"Otto," he said, "I'm perfectly willing to explain, but I don't think you would understand."

"I c-c-can try," said Otto.

"O, all right then. Do you know what a cell is?"

Otto nodded.

"That's where they put bad people."

"No Otto. A cell is like a brick. You do know what a brick is?"

Otto guffawed.

"Of course," he said. "I'm not that stupid."

"Right," said Trelawney. "Houses are made of bricks. The bodies of all living things are also made of bricklike parts. They are called cells."

Otto looked at him open-mouthed, raised a hand to his eyes.

"Bricks?" he asked. "In here?"

"Yes Otto. Very, very small bricks. So small that they cannot be seen."

"That's true," said Otto, "I don't see any."

"Well," said Trelawney feeling quite a fool. "Each of these bricks contains a plan of the whole house. If you know what one brick looks like, you know what the whole house looks like."

"Like a photograph?" asked Otto, spellbound.

"Yes, like a photograph. And I am the man who has discovered how to bring that photograph to life." He took the specimen he had just tested from the microscanner, a stuffed rook - grotesquely lifelike with its beak half open - and held it aloft. "I have taken some cells from this bird. They are dead, of course. But by means of very complicated machinery I can copy its so-called photograph into a blank, living cell. And that cell will grow into a new bird."

Otto gasped.

"Really? One that flies?"

"Yes, Otto. This dead bird will fly again. This very same bird."

"That's marvelous, p-p-professor ... oops ... sir. Marvelous."

"Yes, isn't it?" said Trelawney, pleased with the response.

Otto nodded.

"I like working here." he said softly "It's nice and q-q-quiet and warm and I don't get scolded so much. But I always feel sorry for the birds. They weren't made to be put in boxes, were they, sir? They must fly."

"Yes Otto, they must."

Another week had passed when one late afternoon Otto came running into the hall, drooling with excitement.

"P-p-professor!" he shouted. "The telephone works again. And there's a c-c-call for you."

Trelawney leapt to his feet. As fast as his weight would allow he ran to the doorkeeper's office. The old man was chuckling into the receiver. Trelawney snatched it from him.

"Trelawney here."

"Professor Trelawney?"

"Yeah. Who else? Who are you?"

"Angelsby, sir. Scientific liaison officer. You're to come in immediately. The ice cap of Greenland has destabilized. There's fear of a collapse and a tidal wave that will swamp half of Europe."

"I need one more day."

"I would advise against it, sir. I'd..."

Silence.

"Hello? Hello!?" Trelawney shouted. Nothing. He flung the receiver back in its cradle. A tidal wave. Jesus! Hastily he returned to the hall. Otto was just coming down the stairs, toting thirty boxes. He looked at Trelawney expectantly.

"What's new, doc," he said, breaking into a hiccupy laugh.

"O, shut up, you damned moron!" snapped Trelawney, running up to the table. A tidal wave. He had to get out. Fast. Run Trelawney, run. Then his eye fell on the monitor. Only forty species to go. No. Damn it. He wasn't going to run, he was going to finish this.

He sat down, grabbed a box, and flung the little ball of feathers into the scanner. It was a Golden-crowned Kinglet. The tiny carcass brought a sudden rush of memories. The winter of 49. Just after his operation, paid for by his foster father, after the needless agony of sixteen years with a harelip. How proud he had been. The joy of being inconspicuous. That winter surely ranked as the happiest time of his life. Girls no longer froze at the sight of his ugly mouth. Not only was he ignored, which would have been grand enough, but girls even expressed a friendly interest in him. He had known his first love. In snowbound Minnesota woods he had walked out with Millicent, a strapping farmer's daughter. At a fallen Tamarac he had felt the caress of tender lips on his mouth for the very first time, to the titters of a flock of Kinglets in the tree. Ah, yes. Those Kinglets. Tears came to his eyes as he scanned the tiny body. Damn the tidal wave. This creature was to fly again, so it might one day titter in the ears of one so much in love as he had been, that winter's day in 49.

His eyepiece misted over. He had to draw his head back.

"What's wrong, p-p-professor?" asked Otto .

"Nothing," snapped Trelawney. "Get me some coffee."

Done! With a violent curse Trelawney slammed the ledger shut on the final envelope.

"Right, Otto. Let's move. Pack my trunk and get a car. We've got to get the hell out of here."

"We, sir?" asked Otto, spluttering with excitement. "C-c-can I c-c-come with you?"

"Of course. I need you to carry my trunk."

"Oh, great!" cried the boy and began to bustle about like a fussy old hen.

Trelawney felt a sudden qualm. The poor brute had no idea. There was no place for him inside the dome. Trelawney shrugged his shoulders. Let's not get sentimental here, he thought. This was an emergency if ever there was one. The last thing mankind needed now was the likes of Otto. Besides, the imbecile would not understand what was happening anyway. When they reached the dome, he would be quite content to return, unaware of the fate awaiting him. Still, Trelawney ached a little as he watched the loving care with which Otto packed the trunk and returned all the boxes to their proper places. Trelawney did not have the heart to tell him he might just as well fling them into the garbage can. He was glad when the boy left the hall to get a car.

While he waited, Trelawney wandered about the hall and came to a small room at the back. Otto's apparently. It only contained a table with chair, a locker and a clipboard with newspaper clippings and photographs. Trelawney looked at the

board without much interest till his attention was drawn by a large, color photograph of a muscular youth in football attire. "Heissman bound?" read the caption. Trelawney looked closer. The boy bore a striking resemblance to Otto, minus the moronic expression and the drooping lower lip. Surely it couldn't be? Trelawney read one of the newspaper clippings. "College football star survives horrendous crash. Tragic end to promising career."

With growing nausea Trelawney read the article. It featured Otto all right. A brilliant student and masterful quarterback who had driven his car into a tree to avoid a pair of swans, leaving him with irreparable brain damage. Trelawney almost gagged. He sank down into the chair.

"Jesus!" he muttered.

When Otto returned, gibbering with glee that he had found an automobile, Trelawney dared not look at him. He felt smaller than he had ever felt, even with his harelip. The prospect of becoming the savior of palearctic birdlife seemed utterly worthless now. He hardly dared think of Otto's true identity. It was too painful.

Otto had come up with a brilliant find. A 4WD with a devilish driver. When they took off Trelawney sat slumped in the back, feeling sick, while Otto sat up front, gazing about with glistening eyes.

"Wow," he shouted again and again. "This is exciting, p-p-psir."

Trelawney was too dejected to respond.

Evacuation was in full swing. The roads were crammed with honking vehicles, but miraculously their driver managed to keep his jeep going, veering from the road, racing across shoulders, even bumping other cars out of his way. He got them within five miles of the coast. Then the pile-up became solid. There was no escape. The road ran on an embankment, bordered on both sides by flooded farmlands.

They had to walk. Otto took the trunk under his arm and followed Trelawney as he plodded ahead. It was late afternoon. The dripping sky was like solid, dark gray cement. Three miles from their goal the embankment had caved in. A back abyss, filled with swirling water, barred their way. Frantic evacuees were pacing the shore. Occasionally someone would try to wade across but was swept away by the raging waters.

Trelawney looked at Otto in despair.

"We must get across," he said.

"No problem," said Otto, and jumped into the water. It was waisthigh, swirling and bubbling but the boy stood like a tree.

"Come on, p-p-psir...." he shouted.

Trelawney jumped. Instantly the water swept him off his feet but Otto grabbed his coat, dragged him up. Slowly, the boy started to move. Trelawney clung to him like a frightened child. Again and again his feet swept from under him, but each time Otto pulled him back.

They reached the other side.

"I'm strong, ain't I, p-p-psir...." said Otto, beaming with glee.

"Yes, Otto, very strong."

They walked on, slowly, Trelawney leaning on Otto's arm.

When they reached the entrance to the dome, Trelawney was in agony. His VIP-pass to the dome burned in his pocket. A life of fame and leisure beckoned from the brightly lit reception hall. Cruel death loomed on the outside. He looked at Otto, who stood grinning at him, insensitive to the rain that was soaking him to the skin. Trelawney clenched his fists in impotent anger. He was an old man. Otto was young. His brain might be damaged but his genes could still produce wonderful offspring. A mind equal, perhaps even superior to his own, but ornamented by a gentle disposition, infinitely above his warped self that was the legacy of his miserable youth. What to do?

"Shouldn't we go inside, sir?" asked Otto.

Trelawney choked.

"Only one of us can go, Otto," he said feebly.

"Oh?" said Otto. "Well, that's easy. You go. I must go back to look after the birds anyway."

Trelawney could not bear it. He had to fight back his tears.

"You don't understand!" he shouted. "There's going to be a flood. The water will cover the land. You'll be drowned."

Dumbly Otto gazed at him.

"You'll die," said Trelawney.

Otto blinked.

"Die?" he said.

"Yes," said Trelawney. "You'll be drowned."

Otto smiled, with infinite sadness.

"Just as well," he said, softly.

"Don't say that!" screamed Trelawney. "You're a fine boy. You deserve to live. Here!" he dragged the pass from his pocket.

"Take it. Go inside."

Otto drew back.

"And what about you?"

Trelawney shrugged.

"I've done enough. Go. Take the birds. See them fly. Hear the Kinglets titter."

Otto drew back even further, face aghast.

"No professor. I'm a moron. You said so yourself. You're important. I'm nothing."

"Oh, Otto ..." wailed Trelawney.

The boy placed the trunk gently on the ground.

Trelawney pounced on him, grabbed him by the hair, but the young boy was too strong for him. He janked himself free, leaving Trelawney with a handful of curls. Otto ran out of reach.

"Make new birds, p-p-professor," he shouted. "Make them fly. I'll be all right. I swim very good. I'm like a fish in water. I'm not afraid of no flood."

"Otto!" screamed Trelawney "Come back. For god's sake."

But Otto trotted away into the rain. From afar his voice rang out one more time.

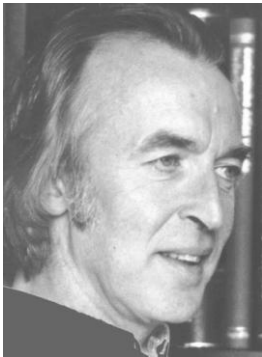
"Make them fly p-p-professor. Make them fly."

Then he was gone. Trelawney sank to his knees and wept. He wept for a very long time. When he had no more tears to weep,

he rose. His right hand still clutched a handful of Otto's hair. His breath faltered. Otto's hair. Otto's cells. Unimpaired. Trelawney broke into a smile, wry and melancholy yet infinitely glad. Carefully he wrapped the tuft of hair into a handkerchief. Then he grasped one of the handles of the trunk and started to drag the thing toward the entrance of the dome.

About the author:

Jan Bee Landman was born in Middelburg, the



Netherlands, on January 13, 1948, from a French/Scottish mother and a Dutch father. He studied English, became a teacher and translator, wrote many short stories and retired from the big city to the countryside in 1997 to

devote himself mainly to horses and to researching and writing a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative fiction.