

jan bee landman
Homeward Bound



a short science fiction story

by

Jan Bee Landman

Published by Jan Bee Landman, Veenhof 9, 9461 TG
Gieten, The Netherlands ©2010 Jan Bee Landman. All
rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
recording or otherwise, without the prior written
permission of Jan Bee Landman <http://www.jlandman.org>

Jeremiah, his teddy bear, was lying against his left cheek. Everything else was different when he woke up. He was not in his own crib, the lighting was strange and he heard nothing at all. He was lying naked on a mattress in a kind of bathtub covered with a glass plate. Weird. He did not remember sleeping over at a friend's. Actually, he could not remember anything at all. He began to feel a bit locked in and pushed against the lid. This caused a nasty hiss, which quickly made him pull back his hands. A soft voice whispered in his ear.

"Safety catch released. Please acknowledge."

"What?"

"Acknowledgement accepted. Reanimation procedure will start in five clicks. Remain as you are. "

To his shock the mattress started to move underneath him. He now also noticed that he had a slender tube in his left upper arm. A two-toned liquid – pale green and dark green – was spiralling through it. He dared not move, clutching teddy tightly to his chest, but did start to feel better, as if he was warming up from the inside out. After a few minutes the mattress stopped moving and the tube fell out of his arm.

"Reanimation complete," said the voice. "You may alight." The lid was raised.

He sat up, astonished. He was in a low, white space, filled with bathtubs like his. Only, the others were all broken. The lids were full of holes. Some had fallen over. The ceiling and a side wall were covered with large stains, as if someone had

been splashing gray paint about.

He looked around with big eyes. Where was he? Where were his parents?

"Dad?" he called, with a shaky voice. "Mom?"

No reply. He got to his feet and looked over the rim of the bathtub to the floor. Too far for a jump. He put teddy in a corner of the tub, clambered on the rim and carefully lowered himself. When his bare feet touched the floor, he yelped, because he landed on some kind of gravel. Chunks of stone and pieces of glass lay everywhere. He looked around. There was a small cupboard behind his tub. He went there. It contained clothes. Overalls of a soft, shiny fabric, metallic gray. When he tried one on, it was a perfect fit.

He did not understand why he could remember so little. His head still seemed asleep. He walked to a cracked mirror upon one of the walls. A small, fragmented boy approached him. That's me, he thought, but it looked unreal. He gazed at himself. A skinny lad with carrot hair and a white face full of freckles. He felt his cheeks. Everything seemed so different. He tried to recall what he had done yesterday, but could not. It was as if there had been no yesterday. His lower lip began to quiver. He bit it. Don't cry, he thought. All will be well in the end. His mom always said that. But where was she? What had happened? How did he get here? Where was here?

He looked round again. It was not entirely quiet. Something was humming softly.

What's my name anyway, he suddenly wondered, in fright. He did not know and almost panicked. Then his eye chanced on a name plate on his bathtub: Anthony van Woonsel, it said.

"I am Tony van Woonsel," he said out loud. "My father's name is Alexander, my mom's is Rachel. I live on Trellis, in neighborhood 107. I am six years' old. I am in the second form....."

He had blurted out the words quickly, afraid that he might otherwise forget them. Now he knew nothing more. This frightened him again. Why had they left him alone? He walked along the other tubs. They were all empty, containing only some stones, some dust.

"Dad?" he shouted. "Dad?!"

No answer. No movement anywhere. No sounds, apart from that buzzing. Only he seemed to be moving and making sounds. It was creepy. So he climbed back into his tub, grabbed Jeremiah and put his left thumb into his mouth for a long, hard suck, with the bear wedged between his tummy and his raised knees. What in space was he to do? Wait till they came to get him? But perhaps nobody knew that he was here. He looked around anxiously. Perhaps he was being kept prisoner. He cringed. What if he had been kidnapped by bad men? His lower lip started to tremble again. He tried to control himself but this time he failed miserably and burst into tears. For several minutes he wept copiously, forehead on his knees.

When he finally stopped, nothing had changed. He had to do something. But what? Investigate, he guessed. He pulled a determined face. He was on his own. Just like Dapper Dan, his favorite video hero. He snorted ashamedly. Dan wouldn't start bawling like a baby. He ought to be ashamed of himself. He rubbed a sleeve along his nose.

"C'mon Tony," he said. "Be brave. It's an adventure."

He felt better at once. This, at any rate, was a real adventure. He had fantasized about those often enough, bored silly in his little room. Hey, his room! He remembered. The domed room, at the top of the house where he lay every night under a ceiling sparkling with stars. Soft bedtime music and the cool and freshly perfumed air. He smiled. He had grumbled so often about the drabness of his days. Now, at long last, something exciting had happened and what did he do? He cried. He shook his head.

"Truly feeble," he muttered.

He climbed out of the tub again and took teddy along. On a Quest! The room had two ways out. An ordinary single door at the back, a double one in a side wall. This last one seemed right. He walked up to it. As he approached, he wondered what Dapper Dan would do. At any rate he would not just open an unknown door. Nope. That was wrong. Also, he was unarmed. Wrong again. He did not know what might lurk behind that door. Creepy monsters, perhaps. In that case he would have to be able to defend himself or he was doomed. He looked around.

The walls were smooth. No cupboards anywhere. Only a glass panel with a red rim. It seemed familiar. Letters had been burned into the glass: Break glass in an emergency. He stood on his toes to look through the glass. There was a space behind it, containing a light burner. He grinned. Great! That was something. With a piece of stone he smashed the glass and pulled the burner out. A black tube with yellow lettering. He looked at it with some trepidation. His father had strictly forbidden him ever to touch burners. But this was different. He took a deep breath and pressed the button. With a mosquito-like whine the lemon-colored light beam appeared, as a translucent sword. The tube shook so badly that he had trouble holding on to it. He quickly switched it off again and walked back to the door. When he was about one yard away, the panel began to slide aside. Sudden fright gripped him. He stepped back and the panel closed again. What if there really were monsters behind the door? He pursed his lips and went forward again. The sliding panel revealed a long, empty corridor, in a purplish twilight, much colder than the room with the tubs. The humming was a little louder but there was still no sign of life or movement. On tiptoes he walked into the corridor. He passed a door that would not open. After about fifty paces the corridor branched in two. The left branch disappeared into complete darkness, the right one led up in a wide curve. Tony chose the last. It took him to a wider corridor. The ceiling was lined with thick tubes in different colors: mouse gray, corn

blue, orange, moss green, hard yellow. The walls bore signs with difficult names that he did not know.

A space ship, he thought. It must be a space ship. And instantly he knew it was called The Alamo. Fragments of memories drifted through his head. His father's angry face, tears trickling down his mother's cheeks. "We must." his father said. "We have no choice. We should be thank the stars that it is possible at all."

His heart raced. What an adventure! But why had he been in that room with the bath tubs? And if this was a space ship, where were the people?

"Hello?" he called. "Hello? Anyone there?"

Nothing.

He pursed his lips. Onward. A little less nervous he walked on, but realized that Dapper Dan always remained on his guard. That was why he always triumphed in the end.

He entered a large hall. Dark, with huge screens along the walls above tables littered with buttons and sliders and little lights, green or red, and strips of moving colors. Large metal cabinets full of whirring and buzzing. In the middle of the hall a chair with a console hung suspended from a pole in the ceiling.

He roamed along the screens. Most of them displayed bits of the universe. He did not recognize a single constellation. That was strange. Constellations had been his hobby. Every night he had lain watching them in bed.

He climbed on a chair before a screen, teddy in his lap, hands on the rim of an enormous keyboard. He wondered what all those keys were for. Should he try one? He did not quite dare. Better not. He climbed out of the chair again. What to do now? Continue his search. He walked back into the big corridor. There he stood undecidedly. He did not feel like scouting anymore. There was nobody to find anyway. Besides, he was hungry. He looked at his wrist watch. It had stopped. Funny. It had never done that before. Onward again. He reached a shopping mall. That cheered him up. Stores filled with clothes, books, toys! He ran into the toy department. Now it was lucky that there were no grown-ups. All those goodies for him alone. Suits of armor, chromium swords, air cushion bikes in fluorescents colors, huge balls, a rocking horse, enormous fluffy animals, robots. He first selected a bike. Pale blue with a canary yellow luggage rack on the front. He put Jeremiah inside that, put a jousting helmet on his head and grabbed a sword.

"I'm Dapper Dan," he shouted and brandished his sword ominously at a large dragon. "Yield, monster."

The dragon, bright green with a black head and red horns did not move, but little lights sparkled in his shiny eyes.

"You don't frighten me," shouted Tony and stabbed. The effect was astounding. When the point of his sword struck the dragon, the animal burst into an enormous cloud of dust that slowly drifted to the floor.

In dismay Tony looked at the outcome of his attack. What was this? He lowered his sword. That was not what he wanted. Such a fine dragon. He walked to the other animals. Cautiously he touched a small monkey. It also turned to dust.

"Oh no," Tony groaned, and flung away his sword. How could this happen? He did not understand. This was no fun at all. And he was hungry to boot. He climbed on his bike and pedaled away, into the broad corridor, until he reached a food store. Cheerfully he cycled into it. Food, lovely. His tummy was rumbling. In the store he slammed on the brakes in surprise. It was a mess. The aisles were full of cartons and boxes. They all had holes in them. He got off his bike and checked the boxes for something to eat. They were all empty. Sometimes a little dust and grit fell out but nothing else. How strange this all was. A new bout of weeping was close but he managed to suppress it. Surely there had to be something to eat somewhere?

He came upon a row of freezers, big, white and rectangular, about his own height. He looked around for something to stand on. There was a kind of pyramid of big tins with faded labels. He pushed two of those against a freezer and climbed up. When he looked over the rim, he uttered a little squeal of shock. Right before his eyes lay a frozen mouse. And another one behind it. The contents of the display cabinet were covered with dead rodents. He quickly jumped from the tins and walked back to his bike. He grabbed teddy, sank to the floor and started to weep with dismay.

Gnaeus Pompeius had not moved in 800 years. That was a lot, even for a durable robot like him. When the ship was evacuated he was left behind to assist as a mechanic in the repair work. When the repair had been completed and the ship was in a parking cycle again, his functioning had become superfluous. He had connected himself to the main generator and put his systems in slumber mode. For eight centuries he had existed in the quiet twilight of minimum consciousness. But now an unmistakable stimulus came out of that darkness activating that consciousness. A human voice. Small and incoherent but forceful nevertheless. His sensors activated his brain. He slurped energy from the generator and tested his limbs. The tentacles of his feelers were still flexible enough but the wheels of his rollers were stuck tight. As were the hinges of his legs, but he managed to loosen those with some wrenching. Stiffly he walked to a maintenance cabinet and lubricated his stiff limbs. Then he went in search of the sound.

Gradually Tony stopped crying. He was so hungry, so alone. Why did nobody come? It was not fair. What could he do? He longed for his mom. He sat on the floor beside his corn-blue bike, Jeremiah in his arms, and sucked his thumb.

The sound came as a miracle. At last! He scrambled to his feet. There was someone about! He forgot all his fear. People!

Perhaps his mom. Joyfully he ran in the direction of the sound. His heart beating in his throat. Finally.

When he turned the corner, he almost bumped into a monster. The shock made him trip over his own legs and fall headlong to the floor. A big shiny dragon towered over him. He cringed and whimpered.

"Careful, little human," said a soft, kindly voice. "Falling is not good."

He looked up shyly. The monster was huge, bending over him.

"What?" mumbled Tony.

The thing stretched out creepily long fingers, but their touch was soft. Very carefully he was lifted up and set on his feet. Only now did he dare to take a longer look at the object. It vaguely resembled a metal lizard standing on its hind legs. A long neck with a kind of snake's head at the end.

"What are you doing here, little human?"

"I don't know," said Tony, slowly overcoming his fear. This was a friendly monster. And it was delightful to have someone to talk to. "I woke up in a bath tub and my dad and mom were not there and I've been looking for them all the time but I cannot find anyone and I am awfully hungry."

"Hungry? No need for that, little human. Food is abundant. Come." The monster extended a set of tentacles to him. Still a little wary, Tony gingerly placed his hand in them and let himself be led.

"I am Gnaeus Pompeius," said the monster. "I am a robot, mechanic."

"Pleased to meet you robotmechanic" said Tony. "I am Anthony van Woonsel. I'm seven and I'm at elementary school. I can read and write and this here is Jeremiah, my bear. He can move, but not just now. I think his battery is down."

"Battery is no problem." said the robot. "But a human needs food. What do you wish, sir?"

"I am no sir, silly." said Tony, with a chuckle. "I am only a kid and then you cannot be a sir."

The robot fell silent. On a small monitor built into his chest, green letters appears "Please wait, I am thinking," it said.

"Good," he finally said. "No sir, just Tony."

"Yup," said Tony, whose mood was improving all the time. "But I still want to see my mom."

"A human needs food. What do you wish, Tony?"

"I love french fries. And apple sauce. And a large ice-cream with chocolate sprinkles."

The robot took him to a dining room, full of tables and chairs. It was dark there but the robot made light, put him in a chair and left the room. Tony looked around. It was strange here. Some tables were covered with strange structures of transparent weavings. He climbed from the chair and went to the nearest one. It was a spider's web. He shuddered. Spiders were creepy. But he saw none, fortunately. He trotted back to his own table and thought about his parents, chin in hands.

Where could they be? He'd ask Gnaeus the moment he returned.

After a few minutes Gnaeus returned with a platter full of food. Fries with a chunk of meat and apple sauce. Ice-cream. On seeing all those goodies Tony forgot his parents for a moment. He attacked with gusto. While he was eating, the robot stood beside him, motionless. Tony ate with his hands, but Gnaeus said nothing of it. When he had finished he uttered a deep sigh of contentment.

"That was delicious, Gnaeus."

"Thank you, Tony."

"But now you must tell me where my parents are."

"All the humans have gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes. Since 3050. One thousand and ninety-four years ago."

Tony gulped. There was a very strange, wrenching sensation inside his chest.

"A th-th-thousand years?" he stammered.

"Yes," said Gnaeus, "and ninety-four."

"B-b-but th-th-that's impossible. I'm only seven. How can that be?"

"You were frozen."

"Frozen?"

Tears tingled in his eyes. He did not rightly understand what it all meant, but it was clear that his parents were far, very far away. He was alone. But he was not going to bawl again. He

was going to be brave, just like Dan.

That evening Gnaeus took him to the captain's cabin. A very nice room with a glass dome instead of a ceiling, offering a wide view of space. A bit like his bedroom at home. There was a big, soft bed. When Gnaeus had tucked him in, Tony had to cry again. He grabbed Jeremiah and pressed his face into the bear's tummy because he did not want Gnaeus to see what a baby he really was.

"Not good, Tony?" Gnaeus asked.

"I miss my mommy so terribly," he sobbed. "I'm so scared and I'm so alone."

"Not alone. I am here."

"Yes, but mom always gave me a night kiss."

"A night kiss?"

It remained quiet for a while.

"Night kiss not feasible," the robot finally said.

Tony started to cry even harder.

When he was in the corridor again, all kinds of dragons chased him. Large yellow dragons with black heads and red horns, and slavering teeth-filled maws. They hissed and wanted to eat him. He tried to run faster but his feet lost grip of the floor. He was floating, kicking air, calling for his mother and woke up with a start. Against a background of stars he saw the ominous silhouette outline of a dragon.

He screamed.

"Mom!"

"Not good, Tony?" sounded the unphased voice of Gnaeus. Tony heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh, Gnaeus. It was so scary."

"All is good, Tony. Go back to sleep. Sleep is good for a human."

Ten days went by. Tony was sick with grief. He just sat on his bed, languishing, while his eyes wandered through space. From star to star, as if he could somehow see where his parents might be. Without Gnaeus he would have neglected himself entirely. But the old robot looked after him like a devoted parent. He made him eat on time, wash, change clothes. But he was also strict. French fries every day were forbidden.

"A human has needs, Tony. Vitamins, proteins, fats and fibers. Good for growth."

On the eleventh day Gnaeus took him to the central computer room.

"Time to learn, Tony." he said.

"Learn? Like in school? Are you mad? O no, I won't, I won't." He stamped his feet.

"Learning is necessary, little human."

"All I want to be later is big and very strong and a pilot and go back to the planet where my parent live."

"Yes," said Gnaeus. "And that is why learning is good. The ship is out of control. So you must learn to control it. That takes time."

"Can't you do it?"

"No," said Gnaeus. "My memory is not big enough."

"Why not?"

"Because it is filled with a technical program. It cannot be deleted. Otherwise there would be nobody to repair the ship."

Tony did not quite understand this, but nodded wisely.

"All right," he said. "I'll do it, but only if I get french fries tonight."

"You will get what you need, little human."

Tony started. The ship's computer contained a complete world library, enabling him to study any subject imaginable. He imported his familiar text books and continued reading, writing and calculating as if nothing had happened.

To his surprise he liked it a lot more than he had thought and he worked with gusto. He felt very good about himself. How everyone would marvel at him when he came back.

It was no fun to watch a little screen all day long, but small as he was Tony realized how important it was that he did his best. He had to become very clever to be able to be a pilot.

Gnaeus helped him. He was very good at math, but not at language. The only thing he could do was put bits of books into his memory and read them out to Tony. This he did in the

evening, before bedtime, in the cabin where they had the wonderful view of the universe. That was nice, after a long day of studies behind the computer. Gnaeus was not the best of readers, it is true, rather flat, but after a while that stopped being a problem. It was lovely just to lie nice and snug in bed and listen to exciting adventure stories. First about brave rabbits, and even braver mice. Then about cabin boys on sailing ships, seeking hidden treasures on emerald green islands fringed with white sand and transparent waters, battling storms and doldrums and bloodthirsty pirates. They were followed by knights in shining armor, cowboys and indians, astronauts and space monsters.

Months went by, but every day was the same. Every morning he awoke with Jeremiah against his cheek. Every morning his glance drifted into space filled with unreachable lights. Every morning he missed waking up under the ever changing atmosphere of earth. He still remembered. Sometimes gray and boisterous, full of clouds like herds of fluffy animals chasing each other. Sometimes pale blue with seagulls like swirling flecks of snow. One moment burning yellow, the next icy pink. Always different. But not now. Now it was always the same. Always the same black, unchanging backdrop of blackness, with just a sprinkling of lights, distant, out of reach. He made up new constellations, which he gave the names of islands of earth: Skye, Hokkaido, Cozumel, Madagascar.

He planned his days carefully. Breakfast in his room, then on his bike to the computer. Studies till about noon. Then some food and games. Soccer with Gnaeus in the main corridor. Or hide and seek. He also cycled a lot. Gnaeus taught him how to play chess, but it soon became boring because the robot always won. Studies again in the afternoon. Bedtime immediately after supper, with Jeremiah, who had been given a behavior program by Gnaeus. The bear could now run after Tony and perform simple commands and, best of all, purr whenever he was stroked. Then it was just like having a real live pet.

His dreams grew less. Sometimes the dragons would return but whenever he awoke with a start, Gnaeus would always be beside him, with comforting words. He also had fine dreams, in which he could fly, through enormous masses of cloud that kept changing colors and forms. That was great.

He learned fast. After half a year he knew many times more about language than Gnaeus. This made it harder to interact with the robot, who was often unable to understand him. Gnaeus did have a dictionary in his memory but it simplified many words. To him concepts such as sad, deformed and bad were equal to "not good". This made their talks increasingly cumbersome. Often Gnaeus understood him so poorly that Tony ended up saying less and less to him.

He did not cry so much anymore either. The memories of his parents blurred, but the pain remained. He was so lonely.

He got enough of the reading by Gnaeus. It went too slow. So he started to read himself before sleeping, lying on bed while the lines moved steadily up the monitor at the foot end of the bed.

Stories for older boys. Adventure novels. He relished the growth of his vocabulary. After a year there was hardly a word that he did not know, but nevertheless he came across more and more things that he did not understand. That confused him. The people in the stories behaved weirdly, became unaccountably excited about matters such as hate, love, passion, infidelity, jealousy. All those things meant nothing to him and he could not stand this. He started to watch movies again. He had stopped watching them because afterwards the ship would seem so much emptier, so much bleaker. Besides, they did not teach him enough words. But now that he was having problems with the meanings behind those words he had no choice. As it turned out, his confusion only grew. What for instance could he make of love? What was that?

Gnaeus did not get beyond a good feeling. The huge dictionaries in the computer only sent him from pillar to post.

What is love? Warm affection.

What is affection? Love.

Things like that infuriated him. Names. Words. Nothing else. The meanings did not become clear to him. Warmth? Did he feel that? Yes, sometimes, when he cuddled with Jeremiah, when he thought back to his parents or earth. Even when he thought of Gnaeus, when he had made french fries. Was that love?

"Gnaeus?"

"Yes Tony."

" Do I feel love for you?"

Silence, that dumb "Please wait, I am thinking" message on the screen.

"Yes", the robot said, after a while. "You think I am good. That is the same."

Tony doubted it. In the stories people did the weirdest things because of love. They killed others, even themselves. If Gnaeus ever disappeared, Tony he would certainly miss him but kill himself? No way. He delved deeper into his books, came across Romeo and Juliet. He watched a movie of the same name and was astounded by the excitement that Julia caused Romeo. Incomprehensible. She was a nice lady, sure, but why all the fuss? His mom had also been a woman. If he understood well, he felt love for her, but nothing like the feelings that Juliet caused Romeo. Were there differences between women? He dug deeper into the problem and discovered that there was a lot more to it. Out of love men and women also did things with

each other's bodies. He watched other movies, came upon some kind of wrestling match between a naked man and a naked woman. The man had a big lump between his legs and pushed that inside the woman. It seemed to hurt because they both moaned loudly. He was also shocked by the size of the man's thing; his own was just a floppy little tendril. Was there something wrong with him? A quick study set him at ease. He still had a lot of growing to do. He would understand once he was older. For the time being he had better forget all those things. They only distracted. So he concentrated on the sciences again.

Years went by. He studied the manuals of the ship. Sometimes he came across problems that could only be solved by teaching himself some basic subject first. He labored through space navigation, communication technology, computer science, and lots of other things. It drained him but he persisted. Slowly he fathomed the ship. After three years he knew exactly what had happened to it. In 2109 a catastrophic natural disaster on earth forced it to leave for Antibes Caverna, with 1600 passengers and a crew of 140. In 3048 it was struck by a meteor, which destroyed the conservation space of the children so badly that there were no survivors (he was overlooked). In 3050 the ship suffered a second collision with a meteor that damaged the controls so severely that it would have taken years of repairs before it could be used safely again. The ship was evacuated

but programmed to return after self repair to Alpha Osseweii, the solar system of the evacuation.

It had never come to that. On the way back one of the main generators broke down, not only freezing the steering program but also depriving the conservation system of the children's room from enough energy, sending the only operational console into alarum revival. The rest was personal history.

Tony was well into his eleventh year when the big day came. The end of the last page of the ship's manual. He could fly the ship! Trembling with excitement he walked to the pilot's chair and retrieved the navigation program. For many minutes he sat typing intently. Then it was done. Ready! With a grin so wide that it hurt, he sank back into the chair. The ship growled and shuddered, the stars on the screens moved aside, new stars slid into view. A dizzying sensation. A new shudder and the ship was on the right course. Now it was just a matter of time. He queried voyage time: it was 6,742,982 hours. He gulped. Surely that could not be right? He repeated his query. 6,742,982 hours. He jammed his thumb into his mouth and sucked it as if he meant to swallow it. Almost 7 million hours. More than 700 years! He'd be long be dead by then!

All had been for naught. He jumped up and ran amuck, furiously kicking and hitting everything within reach. In the dining room he upset all the tables, smashed plates and dishes. Gnaeus followed him and kept repeating that he was not doing

well. But Tony did not care. Finally he sank to the floor and wept himself to exhaustion. Gnaeus picked him up and carried him to his cabin.

Next morning he awoke full of determination. No, he thought. There had to be way. With enough knowledge he would find it. He could, of course, let himself be conserved again, but the risk was too great. Too many things could go wrong while he was unconscious. No, he had to find a possibility of making the ship go faster.

Terrible times followed, filled with relentless compulsion. The moment he woke up he forced himself out of bed, wolfed down some food and pedalled quickly to the computer where he would spend the whole day in a fever of study and calculations, constantly tormented by the fear that he was not doing enough. He only allowed himself six hours' rest out of every 24. And even that rest was often disturbed by bad dreams. No more dragons, but monstrous calculations whose figures changed each time he had finished a sum. Or mazes, tightly spiralling staircases, long narrow corridors with doors at the end and behind them new corridors ending in new doors and corridors. Sometimes he woke up more exhausted than rested. Gnaeus warned him that he was not doing well, but he paid no attention. Every day he filled his screen with formulas, juggling with mass, energy, time, matter, antimatter, negative matter. Nothing got him anywhere. Doubts began to gnaw. What if it

really proved impossible? Doggedly he labored on.

More years went by. This body grew and became a bother. Vague sensations unsettled him. Sometimes he became so restless that he hardly knew what to do with himself. He ached for so many things: lapping water, grass, the scent of burning wood, caressing fingers, a warm kiss on his forehead, a vibrant voice, blue skies, sunswept clouds, rustling leaves, wind, rain. The ship suffocated him. In reality it was a cell, a dungeon. And no matter how wide the universe was, it might just as well have been concrete. He was walled in by it.

In those restless moods he could only wander through the ship, like a tortured soul, together with Jeremiah, who trotted after him no matter where he went. But those trips never lasted for long. Soon he realized that he was wasting time and he would run back to the computer to resume his studies.

During one of his rambles he wandered into the central refrigeration hold. It contained provisions for thousands of human lifetimes. He took a pack of desiccated whiskey to his cabin and drank some. That helped. As his body went limp and his thoughts slowed down, things seemed less terrible.

"Course it'll work," he muttered. "It's gotta. All it takes is just a little more speed. Just a teensy-weensy more speed. Vroom, vroom." He chuckled. "Nothing is impossible. Everything can be done. What d'ye say, Jeremiah?"

The bear was sitting at the foot end. His white fur was a bit grimy. His red eyes gleamed.

"Come to me," Tony said.

The bear came.

Tony stroked its head, making the animal purr.

"I feel very well, Jeremiah," he said. "This is good stuff, mind. It makes you drunk." He chuckled again. But half an hour later he was slumped, sobbing with misery, over the toilet bowl, vomiting his insides out. His throat was aflame. He had seldom felt so sick.

All the same he started to drink more and more. Whenever his research led him into another dead end, he sought comfort in whiskey. He would stagger through the ship in a drunken stupor, cursing the stars. Gnaeus sometimes came after him.

"This is not good for a human, Tony," he'd say.

"Ah, what the hell do you know?" Tony would reply and give him an assignment that kept him out of the way. He could hardly bear the robot anymore, only abused him, unreasonably, which confused the robot so badly, that it sometimes got stuck in think mode for an hour or so.

And still Tony plodded on. Slowly his doubts turned into the conviction that he would never succeed. He was doomed to spend the rest of his days in this floating dungeon, alone. He refused to accept it and kept on working but the holy deal was gone. More and more he fled from the reality of unshakable laws

of nature into daydreams about time machines, soul transmigration, reincarnation, eternal life.

He began to work shorter hours. Sometimes he would already stop after one hour and just mess about and get so terribly bored that suicide became alluring. That startled him. No, he was not going that way. He needed some kind of diversion, keep his mind off things. He had Gnaeus make little toy robots soldiers that he had do battle in the dining room. This amused him. He no longer read. All those human interactions had become a source of pain, now that he realized that he'd never be part of them.

Finally he stopped working altogether. After breakfast he went direct to the dining room to play with his armies. The battles became ever more lifelike. He kept inventing improvements, which Gnaeus carried out swiftly and skillfully. After a few months the soldiers looked exactly like miniature people, who could scream, bleed, convulse and die.

It became his only pastime. He lay in a chair behind a large keyboard and had his armies wreak their bloody havoc, while he looked on, Jeremiah in his lap, thumb in his mouth, and filled with grim Schadenfreude that almost made him forget his despair.

What exactly happened, he did not know. One moment he was

staggering through an outer corridor, singing bawdy songs, the next moment he was on the ground with a twitching left leg that stopped just below the knee. In amazement Tony grabbed his thigh in both hands. His lower leg had gone! Dark blood gurgled out of the stump. He looked left. In the outer wall gray sealant was bubbling. In the wall across the corridor a piece of irregular rock had buried itself into the metal, fringed with bits of bloody flesh. The remnants of his leg. He gulped.

"Jeremiah, quick, get Gnaeus!"

The bear trotted off. Tony himself began to crawl back. Strangely he felt no pain, although his leg shook violently. He tried to stem the blood with his hands, but the sight of sticky red fluid oozing through his fingers made him nauseous. He passed out.

When he came round, he was lying on a table in a strange, white room. Gnaeus stood beside him, busily engaged on wires, metal foil and sheets of bio rubber.

"Gnaeus?"

The robot turned.

"Yes, Tony. How are you?"

"Not too good."

"No, that was not good," said Gnaeus. "Piece of leg torn off by meteorite. But it can be repaired. Just rest. Rest is good."

Repair? Tony did not understand how that could be, but lost consciousness again before he could ask about it.

The next day he had a new leg. It felt odd, as if he was wearing a very tight boot, but he could do everything with it. Even move his toes. The biorubber felt like flesh, it even hurt when he pinched it.

"Fantastic, Gnaeus!" he said, elatedly. "Like real."

"Better." said Gnaeus. "This breaks not so easily."

Tony fell silent. He suddenly realized how old Gnaeus was. To him 700 years were not a problem. He was almost immortal. But if we could reproduce a human leg what else could he do? Perhaps that robot could also make him immortal as well.

"Gnaeus?"

"Yes."

"Could you also reproduce me? All of me, I mean."

"Perhaps."

Tony jumped up.

"Really!?" he shouted.

"I know not. That leg was easy. I shall first have to examine you."

"What are we waiting for?"

With Gnaeus close on his heels and Tony ran back to his cabin. He trembled with excitement. Hope and despair tumbled through his mind and made him giggle and sob in turn. Imagine!

"O, please, Gnaeus. Be fast. I cannot bear this uncertainty."

Gnaeus made him lie down on his bed naked. The robot positioned itself beside him and started to feel him with his

tentacles. Little suction cups were attached to his skin. Sometimes a needle pricked this flesh. Gnaeus made soft whirring sounds. This went on for more than an hour. Just when Tony thought that he could not stand one more second of it, the robot stepped back. His chest displayed familiar message "Please wait, I am thinking".

Clenching his fists in apprehension Tony looked on. His heart was pounded. Five minutes went by. Ten. Twenty. Gnaeus remained motionless. Tony marveled at this. What could it mean?

"Gnaeus?"

No response.

Tony shrugged his shoulders and went to the restaurant. There he ate a heap of french fries with apple sauce but everything tasted like dust. When he returned, Gnaeus was still thinking.

Tony sat down on the bed, glass of whisky in hand. Jeremiah climbed into his lap. He stroked the bear until it purred. Gnaeus stood motionless beside the bed. Sometimes the sound of clicking was heard inside the robot. Overhead the terrible abyss of the universe stretched away. Tony could not stand this waiting. He gulped down his drink, wanting to knock himself out as quickly as possible. With a wry grin he looked at the old robot. He had treated that loyal servant shabbily of late. He felt ashamed. Good thing that robots had no feelings. He wishes he had none himself.

After his fifth glass he fell asleep, thumb in his mouth, and Jeremiah against his cheek.

The next morning Gnaeus was still there. The blinking of the green control light indicated that he was still thinking. Tony felt sick with tension. He hardly dared think of the outcome of all this mechanical brooding.

In the bathroom he took a long hard look at himself in the mirror. He was 16. A pale and lanky skeleton of a boy with long tatters of carrot hair and dark bags under his eyes. His chin and cheeks were stubbly. A pungent odor of sweat wafted into his nose whenever he raised an arm. He could not go back like this.

"No," he said. "Not like this."

He tidied himself up. He took a bath, shaved, put on deodorant and clean clothes and collected his hair into a ponytail.

Four days later Gnaeus sprang into action again.

"It can be done," he said. "But I shall need the whole ship."

Tony burst into tears. He clasped to the cold metal of the robot and wept till he shook.

"Not good, Tony?" Gnaeus asked, holding him gently.

"Oh yes it is," Tony sobbed. "It is too good. Much too good. You are a marvel, Gnaeus. I am sorry that I treated you so badly."

"That I don't understand."

"It does not matter. It is a good, Gnaeus. Very good."

Gnaeus set to work. First he made strange crablike contraptions that crawled through the ship equipped with burners and claws. They demolished and built, dismantled and assembled, cut away walls and installed new ones, dividing them into hundreds of small double-walled compartments crammed with electronic components. The ship changed. It became smaller, more compact. The propulsion rockets remained intact but the rest was converted. Nine months later the work was done. The ship had changed from an ellipsoid into a short, broad wedge with four small tail fins.

Tony was in his cabin when Gnaeus brought him the news.

"Your new body is ready, Tony" he said.

"Really? Can I use it now?"

"Yes, but not together with this one, as you know." Gnaeus tapped Tony on the chest with a tentacle.

Tony nodded and Gnaeus led the way, took him to the pilot's chair, which had been fitted with a huge chromium helmet. Gnaeus clasped it tightly to Tony's head.

It began at once, dizzying, nauseating. As if he was being dragged backwards through time, reliving everything he had ever seen, heard, felt, in reverse order. The last thing he experienced was sinking into lukewarm quicksand.

When he came round, the first thing he felt was an almost

unbearable stiffness. He could not move. He wanted to blink, but he no longer had eyelids, or eyes. And yet he could see. Several things at once. As if he was watching six monitors at the same time. Only, there were no monitors. He saw space, felt it around him. He saw the interior of the ship. His own body, slumped in the chair, Jeremiah in his lap, Gnaeus in front of him.

He tried to move. Lots of things happened. Nothing he understood. Doors opened and closed, lights went on and out. There was motion, but all within. He could feel energy surging through him, like blood through veins. But everything seemed beyond his control, until he realized that he could make the ship do things by simply thinking about them. He wanted the ship to slow down. It did. He wanted to go faster. The ship accelerated. Wow! He had become the ship. Gnaeus had succeeded!

Emotion overcame him, but found no normal outlet, although shades of color passed along the inner walls like rainbows. He could feel! He had not expected that. He even felt a lot: the stinging cold outside, the tepid atmosphere inside, the heat of his engines. In thought he smiled. That Gnaeus! How he had underestimated that old-timer.

Meanwhile the robot was returning Tony's body to the conservation bay. They had agreed on that. Once they reached their destination, his awareness would be returned to his normal frame. He wondered whether he would still want to

return to something so small and fragile. The immense power of his new body enthralled him. He toyed with it. He had become a space bird. He could fly! He could glide and soar and swing left and right, move in any direction he wanted. On the way to Alpha Osseweii he would visit other solar systems. Look around. A few years more or less made little difference. And in the meantime ... Indeed, what in the meantime? What was he to do with himself for seven hundred years? The answer was obvious. All human culture was inside his board computer. He could read all books, see all movies, listen to all music. That should get him through the centuries. No need for boredom. And it would make him a fount of knowledge by the time he mingled with other people again. They would probably be delighted to have him. He could teach them a thing or two. Perhaps his parents would also be alive. And why not? If he could do it, so could they.

Centuries went by. Tony lived as he had imagined. The ship resounded with the masterpieces of earthly composers. He read books and watched movies. When he came near a solar system he toured the planets, saw the most wondrous sights, which he recorded, so that he could later watch them at his leisure. If the impressions became too overpowering, he closed down his major functions, which left him in a semi-comatose state. But he never dreamt anymore. Gnaeus stood motionless in a low alert status. Jeremiah wandered around aimlessly until his

batteries gave out. Then Gnaeus would come alive briefly to give the bear fresh batteries and the scene was repeated.

876 years later the time had come. The system of Alpha Osseweii came into view. Tony activated all his functions. Via the navigation computer he alerted Gnaeus, as he had done several times in emergencies during the trip. But this time the robot did not react. It stood in the middle of the main corridor, head slightly lowered, as if it were studying its feet. Tony did not understand. He increased all stimuli. A bone-piercing scream ripped through the corridors. Gnaeus remained motionless. Tony centered one of his cameras on the robot, zoomed in. What could be the matter? He checked the control lamps of Gnaeus. None of them burned. Tony cringed with fear, causing the ship to crack in its joints. Doors were slammed shut. Lamps burst. One of the main engines began to race. Calm down, he thought, I must stay calm. He focused his attention on a dark spot in space. After a few minutes' concentration he had calmed down enough to stabilize the ship, although strange rainbows kept shimmering in the walls. He had to stay calm. There was something wrong with Gnaeus. That was serious, but not insurmountable. The main thing was to make contact with his kinsmen. He would head for the inhabited planet first.

He focused on the solar system that he was approaching close

to the speed of light. With his depth telescopes he probed the planets. The outer ones were large and frozen, but more inward they became smaller, and warmer.

Suddenly he saw the familiar blue of a living planet. It moved him intensely. And again, the ship went haywire. The engine that had raced started to sputter. *More lamps exploded.* That's how I weep, he thought. But again he managed to regain his composure.

He was about 20,000 kilometres from the outer planet when he was met by a squadron of fighters. Five frisky machines, that circled him seemingly without effort. They hailed him.

"Zulu-Bravo Seven to UFO. Identify yourself. You are approaching our system. Access denied until we know your origin and purpose."

Tony wanted to scream out his identity. But he had no voice. How to react? Gnaeus had installed a simple internal communication, via one of the screens in the control room, on which Tony could express himself, but the robot had not reckoned with external communication. The plan had been that the human Tony would take over again at this stage.

He became desperate. The ship groaned. Pressures in the hull became so great that numerous cracks appeared. They were automatically sealed, but new ones appeared almost immediately. Frantically Tony searched his brain for a means of making contact.

"UFO, answer. We cannot admit you. Change your course, or we must use force."

Tony slowed down.

"UFO? Why don't you reply? Are you having problems with your communication equipment? Move your course 5 degrees if affirmative."

Tony did as asked.

"Understood, UFO. We shall escort you to an outer station. By the way: are you human?"

Tony moved course again.

"Great. Absolutely fantastic. Welcome!"

Howling, his main engine jammed.

He berthed at a space station, an immense torus, pearly white. There he saw his first people. Briefly all his systems were in danger of overloading. Energy sizzled through his lines. He quickly minimized all his functions. His joy was boundless. Home at last!

Pain. That was the only word to describe the sensation of energy torches burning into his body. He had disabled the automatic sealants to make penetration of the hull possible. Apparently some visual components were damaged, because his vision became a little hazy.

There were two of them, heavily armed. Tough-looking

customers, wearing transparent helmets. Both with glossy, bald pates and long beards, one young, in his thirties, white-skinned and black-haired, the other much older, gray, deeply tanned and covered in scars.

"Ever see so much junk?" said the younger man.

"Never," said the other.

Their speech sounded different from what Tony was used to. Fast, staccato, almost clipped.

The men entered the main corridor, where Gnaeus stood.

"Look at this" the older man said.

"What in hell is it?"

"Antique robot, I guess."

"Worthless." said the young one and gave Gnaeus such a push that the robot fell over and rolled jingling against a wall.

Tony cringed.

The men froze.

"Feel that?"

"Aye. Quaint. Hull stress, methinks."

"Where's the crew?"

"How should I know?"

They walked on.

"Feeling strange. Like being watched."

The men looked around.

The older man saw the camera.

"Hey, look. Camera."

They looked straight at it. The intensity of their looks

unnerved Tony. He had to swivel the camera aside.

"It moved," said the older man.

"Yeah," said the other. "Automatic, mayhap."

"Fighters reported ship response."

"That, too, can be automatic."

Tony was feverishly seeking means of making contact. The alarm! He activated it immediately. The screeching made both men clasp their hands to their ears.

"Hell. What a racket."

Tony lowered the volume.

"Strange vehicle. Ominous."

They went in the direction of the navigation room. Tony did everything he could to remain calm. Still, one of his auxiliary generators fell apart, knocking out the heating.

When the men entered the navigation room, Tony made the communication screen flash. The younger man walked up to it. Contact at last.

"Hello," Tony signaled. "My name is Tony van Woonsel. Right now I am the ship but in reality I am human. My own body is lying in the conservation room. Repair Gnaeus. He can make me normal again."

"Hey, look. Weird symbols on this screen."

The older man joined him in front of the screen.

"Antique font," he said. "Used millenium ago."

"Can you read it?"

"Nope."

Tony shuddered with dismay. The men almost lost their balance owing to the violence of the tremors that passed through the ship.

"Zounds! This is giving me creeps. Let's hasten and be gone."

Tony found it harder and harder to stay calm. This was going horribly wrong. But that could not be. Not after all those years, all that trouble, all that misery. It would be too cruel.

The men reached the door of the conservation space. Tony was at the end of his tether. The stress in his hull was mounting steadily. Everything was groaning and moaning.

"Hark!" said the oldtimer. "Methinks explosion imminent."

"Quick then." said the other and opened the door to the conservation space. As several lamps had been broken, the space was dimly lit. Tony's bathtub was at the far end, impossible to see from the door.

"Hello?" shouted the young man.

"Come on," snapped his partner. "Avaunt. There's nobody."

Tony could not believe what was happening. So close. And yet everything was slipping away. A numbness came over him. Something like surrender. The ship stopped groaning.

At the emergency lock that they had made in the hull the men paused to look around.

"What think you?" asked the younger man.

"Worthless, nobody will pay to salvage this wreck."

"What then?"

"Demolition. Lots of useful scrap."

Tony's nerves snapped. His emergency signal began to scream. The main generator exploded. Auxiliary systems took over and became instantly overloaded. The lights went out. In the darkness fountains of sparks erupted everywhere.

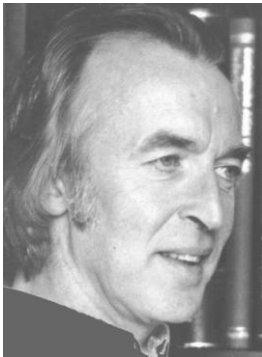
"Holy hell!" screamed the younger man. "Avaunt! Avaunt!" In the dark Tony heard the men clawing the walls blindly for the handle of the emergency lock. He desperately tried to regain control, but failed. One of the engines started spontaneously. With a mighty roar the ship tore loose from the anchorage. The men were flung through the corridor like rag dolls and smashed against a rear wall with a sickening crunch of breaking bones. Outside, in the space station alarms began to howl. Jet fighters were shot from launching tubes. With a mighty effort Tony also got the three other engines working. The ship accelerated, rearing like a horse. Briefly it seemed as if he would be able to outpace the fighters. Then something cracked way down in the hull and the ship shattered like glass. Tony went through some strange moments. Parts of his brain still worked. He felt the heat of a propulsion rocket that was still plowing ahead like a flaming cylinder. He heard the soft tinkling of a piano. He remembered his room on earth, early summer morning sunlight brightening his mother's face. He saw fragments of the ship drift by. Objects. His pale blue tricycle with the yellow trimming. Gnaeus, with his head on his chest, his tentacles waving as if he were conducting an orchestra. A family of frozen mice. A leaking packet of whisky.

And also the bathtub, containing the pale body of a lanky, red-haired young man, lying on his side, knees raised, a white bear in his arms and a faint smile on his lips.

Darkness set in. Briefly a low humming sound lingered, waxing and waning, like the buzz of an insect flying to and fro, until that, too, suddenly stopped, and he existed no more.

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 imaginative writing.