

jan bee landman

The Outing





a short science fiction story

by

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The tunnel wall was black, glistening with water. Cautiously Ogden Fairclough positioned his steel drilling arm.

"Fairclough! Whaddya waiting for? Inspiration? Get going, willya?" His foreman's voice, on override frequency.

"It doesn't look right," Ogden muttered.

Who cares? Just *do* it."

With a shrug of his shoulders Ogden set the drill in motion. The whirr was shrill, mosquitolike. He struck the wall. It shattered instantly. Water exploded from the cracks, flinging him back, against a prop. Something snapped in his back and sent a bolt of pain searing through his body. His arm was thrust against his helmet. He went blind. The water surged over him. One by one his senses failed. Within seconds he was completely without them. No sight, no sound, no sensation. Just naked awareness. He hated these accidents. *Cogito ergo sum*: I think, hence I exist, he thought.

Nothing happened for a very long time. He had no way of knowing but it seemed to last longer than ever before. Hour after hour after interminable hour. Mute, horrible darkness. Like being a lost soul. A ghost. Unbearable. If he could have stopped existing by sheer willpower he would have done so. Disease on these idiots, he thought. Don't they know how terrible it is? This nothingness. Mere thought, severed from all perception.

Next moment he was back in his own chair, gazing at a blank

screen. *Please wait*, it flashed, *your working personality file has been destroyed, back-up retrieval is in progress.*

A moment later he had another body. A new drilling arm. A new wall to attack. Thank heavens it would be Friday tomorrow. He could stand little more of this.

This wall was brown, dull. He drilled into it. The debris showered him like dirty hail. He had four more hours to go. Cogito ergo sum, he kept on thinking, I think hence I exist.

Six p.m. The down-tools signal went. He lowered his drilling arm and moved into a storage niche, where he waited patiently for transfer. A minute later he was back in his home chair. He stretched and yawned. His body was stiff. He removed the plug from his skull socket and rose.

His apartment was spacious and well illuminated by a broad window facing south. The interior coloring was pale blue, with darker blue furniture. A small dining table stood against the back wall. The adjoining wall all electronic equipment: computer terminal, large tv screen, music installation. On the other side of the room two doors, one to his bedroom, the other to a sanitation unit and his physical exerciser. That was it. There was one other door but it was locked. He sometimes wondered about that. He seemed to remember it had been open once. Not that he minded. He would not dream of going out in person. But still, he wondered, sometimes.

He went to stand at the window to look out at the mid-May afternoon. The sun shone with a warm creamy light. The next building, dull concrete checkered with rectangular windows reflecting bright blue sky, rose among swirling tree tops like a table rock from a green sea. The gray concrete stood out sharply against the expanse of trees that covered the landscape, in many hues, shifting from the bottlegreen darkness of pine to the pale, almost yellow hues of the lime trees. Among them horse chestnuts were in the last stage of their bloom and the hawthorn branches sagged under the weight of their blossoms.

A thoroughfare ran between the two buildings. Orange box cars slid by in an almost unbroken file. Occasionally one would rattle into the siding that led to Ogden's condo. Supplies.

When he turned round to his room, a green light had come on behind a wall panel. He went over, slid the panel aside and took out a silver tray. Dinner. Served in china and crystal. French onion soup. Tournedos in wine sauce, pommes parisiennes, baby carrots in butter. A bottle of Bourgogne 2015. Chocolate mousse. Not bad for a Thursday.

He ate with gusto and returned to the terminal, struck a few keys till the amusement menu appeared. It being a workday tomorrow there was no wild stuff. He could not make up his mind. He did not feel like being amused. Strangely this was happening to him more and more. He felt happy enough and

yet... there was a tinge of unrest. A fraying at the edges. He was beginning to question things. Was this all there was to life? He would dearly love some time to contemplate things, but that could never be. The thought had hardly crossed his mind when the screen of his terminal displayed the face of Tanya, his helpmate. Her soft, syrupy voice suggested mild reproach.

"Ogden? You haven't made your choice yet. Please do. You know relaxation is vital after a day's work."

He sighed. He settled for lo-drug intoxication with full audio transfer to the Plaza, where the Royal Philharmonic was playing Beethoven's Sixth. He returned the plug to his skull, struck a key and lay down on the sofa.

Next evening he came home in a jubilant mood. Friday! Deliverance at last. Two glorious days out of his confounded tunnels. Funtime. Into a great body, ready for every imaginable sensory delight. Motion, sight, sound and smell. Drugs, women and sex. Oh yeah, he rubbed his chubby hands. Sex. Long, intense and smutty. He'd wallow in it. He waddled into the bathroom where he broke into a loud burst of song

"I'm a lusty lad a-loitering," he howled.

He paused to study his elated face in the mirror. Not a pretty sight: pale & podgy, with black, unkempt hair straggling around unshaven cheeks. He scratched his scalp, causing a shower of dandruff. He had not washed in a week. Sloppy. But he could not be bothered. And why should he?

But now he decided to clean up first. He'd be on support for the duration. Another two days without washing would be too much. Even for him. He undressed and entered the shower booth.

Fresh and invigorated he took his dinner from the hatch and sat down with it before calling Tanya. Her smiling face appeared instantly. She always smiled. He wondered how she managed that.

"Good evening, Ogden," she said. "Happy weekend. You're in luck. The sensory perception transfer modem has just undergone several improvements. Discomfort intake has been reduced and sexual responsiveness heightened. There are background options to enhance your personality but these will cost you credits. Please study the menu carefully and make your choices."

"Any suggestions?"

Her smile broadened slightly.

"This weekend the trend for men is tall, muscular and blond. The women are likely to be small, slender and afro-arabic."

Humming cheerfully Ogden made his choices. Hardly a detail was ignored. Ear size, lip color, voice quality, amount of chest hair. Ogden loved this. It was like playing God. He almost itched with anticipation. When he had completed his physical make-up, he went through the options. He forked out his last credits on a large vocabulary and college education. It would

enable him to use big words and impress people.

Finally he had to choose a destination. The possibilities were exhausting. He could participate in activities as diverse as gladiator games in neoclassical Rome and mountaineering in the Himalayas. There were gambling weekends. Balloon voyages. South sea islands. High-class bordellos. Eighteenth-century opium dens. Whatever. Almost anything you could imagine. It was not easy to choose. He settled for a luxury Atlantic cruise.

Ogden always enjoyed watching transfers. No matter how often he had seen them, the fascination never ceased. The ship's host room was an enormous space, stretching away under a low ceiling, but pleasantly decorated. Thick burgundy carpeting on the floor, soft lights overhead, soothing music, a Mozart piano concerto. The parking meters stood closely together. Those in front of him were empty. He turned. Behind him, like a grand army, stood the idle hosts. Whitish, featureless dummies wrapped in gray overalls of multi-purpose foil. As he looked on, the host next to him was contacted. The foil came alive. It rippled and fluttered; the upper half shrank into a bodice, the lower half unfolded into a wide, long skirt. Ogden smiled. A woman. The host itself also changed. As if invisible hands were molding it. Two sizeable breasts swelled under the green foil. The face acquired features, chestnut curls sprang out of the scalp and came cascading down along the cheeks. Ogden waited till the very last moment. When a slight

tremor around the eyes announced actual transfer, he looked away. It would be bad manners to be caught ogling.

Smiling arrogantly he stood at the railing, sipping champagne. He could not help admiring his reflection in the glass partition separating ballroom and deck. He struck a magnificent figure. Tall, straight and muscular. Not blond, though. He had stuck to his own hair color. He was glad of it now, because the deck was swarming with tall, muscular, blond men. All in tuxedos or fancy uniforms. The women were gorgeous, nearly all dark of skin, with arabic features, moving with seductive grace in evening dresses that clung to perfectly rounded curves.

The ship rang with festive sounds. Music, laughter, the clink of crystal. Ah. He sighed. Life was wonderful. If only it could always be like this.

Two hours later he thought differently. He had talked and danced with half a dozen gorgeous women. But they had all been the same: beauty queens drilled to perfection, smooth and glib. Same features, same gestures, same witty small-talk. The idea that they were only puppets got to him.

Then his wandering glance locked into a pair of spectacular eyes. Big, languid and strikingly colored: light brown almost ochre, like sun-gilt autumn leaves at the bottom of a pond. The eyes met his stare calmly. His smile came of itself, and the eyes seemed to smile in return. He moved towards them almost in a trance, bumping into people as he went.

She was not small, just a half a head shorter than he. Her skin beautiful mahogany. A strong nose, rather big but delicately sculpted. She had thick yet curvaceous lips. Her body was erect, broad-shouldered, impressive.

"Hi," Ogden said, "I'm Sterling. Feel like having fun?"

With a faint Mona-Lisa smile she looked him over and nodded.

"Why not."

Felicity was her name. As always he felt some reluctance at first. Too conscious that basically this was only what someone *wanted* to look like. But gradually this notion disappeared. They danced. More or less. Thanks to his college background option he knew the moves, but lacked rhythm. She laughed at his clumsiness. So did he. Everybody laughed. Life was fun. But again, he detected a strangeness within himself. While she told him about being a descendant of some ancient desert tribe he felt tempted to ask her who she really was. Of course he did not. It would have been unpardonably bad taste. So he just smiled while she talked about camels. She knew a lot about them. They appeared to come in a staggering variety of colors.

They got drunk on champagne. It made her playfully lascivious; her hands began to roam, to touch and tease. She rubbed her body against his. He grew horny and responded to her taunts, stroking her fleshier parts: hips, buttocks, drawing her close so he could feel her breasts cushion against his chest.

He gave her hungry kisses, almost drooling with desire.

She remained playful, breaking loose whenever he got too passionate, flitting away like a butterfly in her pale yellow dress.

The after deck lay deserted in a clatter of rain. Against the darkness beyond the downpour lit up in the glare of decklights like a crystal reedbed, shimmering. The other passengers had gone to the main lounge, where some big show was in progress. Occasionally the blast of trumpets could be heard, faintly over the clatter of raindrops on the deck.

Felicity wandered out into the rain, head in her neck, opening her mouth to the falling water, giggling, drunk. All of a sudden she stood, teetering, on the portside railing.

"Look," she exclaimed. "I'm..." She uttered a high-pitched scream and plunged backwards, out of sight.

Ogden dropped the champagne bottle he was holding and rushed to the railing. He looked over the side. Black, foam-streaked water rushed by, far below him. He sprinted to the stern railing. One of the decklights shone seaward. In the beam he could just see a head and a flailing arm bob in the wake and vanish into darkness. He looked about. Lifebuoys hung along the railing at regular intervals. He grabbed two, leapt on the railing, hesitated for a moment and jumped.

The beach showed no sign of human activity. The black of night was fading to murky gray, like a concrete haze receding across

a wasteland of untrodden sands on both sides. The way inland was barred by a dark ridge, under a gray sky. The surf pounded and crashed, pounded and crashed. A few large gulls drifted silently through the air. Black and ominous. Little, long-legged birds were darting along the waterline, running to and fro with the bubbling sheets of water.

A strip of lilac cloud lit up above the ridge just as Ogden and the girl staggered from the sea.

"I'm c-c-cold." she said, sinking to her knees, clutching her shivering shoulders.

"Yes," he said, without really hearing, as he gazed about.

"And I don't like this place," she added.

He looked at her. Somehow she seemed less beautiful. Strange, because the water had hardly affected her appearance. Hairdo, make-up and dress all looked as if she had just come out of transfer. And yet ... something was different.

"Did you hear me?" she wailed.

"Hear what?"

"I don't like this place."

He grinned.

"I can throw you back into the sea, if that's what you prefer."

"Don't be silly. How are we going to get back?"

He shrugged. Things had changed. He felt different. His sensations were less acute than they had been, dulled. He heard the waves pound and crash, he could smell the brine and feel the breeze but a dullness seemed to envelop everything.

"I don't feel right," she said, hair swirling round her face in the strong breeze.

"Same here," he said, rubbing his lower arm. It felt rubbery. Not like flesh at all. She was also touching her body.

"I can feel the machinery inside me," she said. "Ugh, it's horrible. Like insects crawling."

Ogden paused to gauge his own sensations. He, too, could feel fibers, metals, some warm, others cold, parts spinning, closing, opening, tiny jets of power shooting to and fro. He got a frightening sensation of being locked up inside a strange, mechanical cage. It passed.

"More like being a robot, if you ask me."

She looked up and gasped.

"Jeez! You look different."

Only now did he realize what had made him think her less beautiful a moment ago. Her features had lost some of their sharpness, reminding him of medium quality in computer graphics. She looked kind of unfinished.

"You look different too," he said.

"Oh no!" She touched her face with both hands. "This is terrible. How can it be?"

"I suppose we're out of reach of the mainframe. We must be on batteries here. Lower definition. That's why we feel the machinery. That's why we look like dummies. Minimum support."

She turned her eyes up at him.

"I want to go home," she said.

"We could try the emergency homing code. What's your number?"

She did not respond. Her face was expressionless.

"I don't remember," she said after a while.

He tried to recall his own number. He could not either. Apparently the battery mode also reduced their memories. But why the homing code? If this wasn't an emergency, what was? Perhaps the transfer could not be performed on batteries anyway. Yes, that made sense.

"It's a nightmare," she said.

"Don't exaggerate. We need only get within range of the mainframe again."

They both looked around.

"And just how are we going to do that?" she asked.

"Find a town or something,"

"Perhaps we should wait here," she said. "Perhaps they'll come looking for us. What do you think?"

"I don't know." Saying this he realized how little he knew about his world. Not where he was, not what the authorities might do, not even what would happen to his body back home.

"Seems we know little of anything," he said.

"I know lots of things."

"Like what?"

"What's it to you?"

"Just curious."

"Well, don't be. You should know better."

He nodded, heaving a sigh. Yes, he should know better.

"Let's go," he said.

"Which way?"

Without thinking he pointed at a dune straight ahead.

She cast him a baffled look.

"That's strange," she said. "I was going to point at exactly the same spot."

"Really?"

"Yes. Isn't that strange?"

"Sure is. Perhaps we've got some kind of inbuilt homing device."

She gave him an eager smile.

"Oh, that would be good. It would mean we can find our way home automatically."

"It might."

They rose and walked inland. The sand became loose and deep. They sank into it up to their calves as they plodded up the dune. Ogden cursed on reaching the top. A wilderness lay before him. Rows of hills, all sandy nearby; blanketed with dull green vegetation further inland, littered with patches of pale fog banks that blended into a gray nothingness in the distance. Ogden scanned the scenery for buildings. There were none. Just the tops of sand dunes rising from the vegetation, like pale, bald pates.

Off they went, struggling up and down the sandy hills. After a while the valleys filled up with bushes, prickly and scarring. Ogden and the girl spoke little. Just practical remarks as they picked their way along animal trails through the brushwood. Their bodies were not made for roughing it. The soles of their feet wore quickly. They began to hurt.

After an hour or so the clouds broke. Fans of sunlight opened between heaven and earth. The fog evaporated. Birdsong filled the air. Gradually the thorny underwood gave way to heather and moss-cushioned sand. An occasional tree appeared. Ogden knew a bit about trees. These were Norwegian pines, tall, windswept into tortuous forms. Long, darkgreen needles. The going became rougher. They entered a dense stand of pines, shady and heavily scented. The ground was treacherous, uneven, littered with branches and fallen trunks, forcing them to move gingerly, step by step. Felicity suffered worse than he. Her feet were in shreds. The tissue had worn away, revealing the metallic webbing. She limped. As he helped her along, he experienced a potent, unknown joy in supporting her, holding her hand as she clambered over logs, occasionally catching her in his arms. She gradually seemed to warm to him, leaning against him for support.

Towards the end of morning they rested, by the side of a small lagoon, dangling their hot limbs in cool, transparent water. Ogden felt strangely elated. This was all so different, so new, so

vibrant. Wild creatures abounded. Ducks of many colors floated on the lagoon, dabbling or diving. The dunes jingled with the cheerful voices of countless, unseen songbirds. Hawks soared in the sky. Pheasants wandered in and out of the brushwood. A deer came to water's edge, not ten meters from where they sat, briefly startled by their presence but relaxing after a long, tense look and then apparently forgetting all about them as it drank and wandered away browsing. And rabbits. The first time Felicity saw them she uttered a delighted shout.

"Oh, look! Bunnies!"

"Bunnies?"

"Yes ... er ... rabbits."

"*Bunnies?!*" He chuckled. "Where on earth did you get that word?"

She looked down, twiddling her fingers.

"What's it to you?"

"It's just cute, that's all." he said, smiling.

Looking up she returned his smile. It gave him a funny feeling. He really liked her, in spite of her jaded appearance.

He lay down on his back and gazed up at the sky. Wisps of cloud were scattered across the pale blue expanse, making it look like an ocean dotted with crested waves. Felicity lay down beside him. Suddenly her hand touched his, giving him a tingling, joyful sensation. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze and looked aside. She lay watching him, a languid smile on her lips.

"I'm glad I'm not alone here," she said.

"Me too."

"But you need not have been here at all," she said, squinting a little in the sunlight. "Why did you come after me, anyway?"

The question caught him by surprise. Only now did he realize it had indeed been a very strange thing to do. Weekend host meetings were one-time affairs. Looks changed by the week. The chance of recognizing someone a second time was zero. The logical thing for him to have done was cut his loss and go in search of another partner.

"Well?" she insisted.

"I don't rightly know. I just did."

"I'm glad," she said warmly. He squeezed her hand again and she responded by squeezing his. It brought a lump to his throat. A bit unsettling, really. He could not remember ever having felt so strongly before.

"I'd love to give you a good time," she said, "But somehow I don't feel like it."

"Neither do I," he said. "I guess it has something to do with the batteries."

She nodded thoughtfully, gripping his hand more tightly.

"We are going to make it, aren't we?" she asked.

"Sure we are."

"But what if we don't?"

"We shall."

"But what if not?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I honestly don't know. I can't imagine that these hosts of ours are not equipped for an emergency like this. My guess would be that we'll go into some kind of coma, while the authorities come looking for us."

Her face brightened.

"You really think so?"

He nodded.

"Yep."

Her hand relaxed in his. She sat up.

The sun was growing fiercer, subduing the wildlife. The songbirds fell silent, the hawks abandoned the skies. Only the ducks on the lagoon remained active, cooling the air now and then with little sounds of splashing water.

Felicity looked around.

"It's lovely here," she said. "But I'm still dying to get home."

"Where's that?" he asked, tensing. This was pushing his luck. Such intimacies were taboo.

"XWZ 521," she answered, casually.

"Hey, that's a coincidence. I live at XWZ 544."

"You do? Gosh, that almost makes us neighbors. How nice. Don't you love the blooming chestnuts?"

He grinned.

"They're great."

"Yes," she said.

He moved closer to her, placed a hand on her naked

shoulder. It felt like warm rubber. She placed her hand on top of his, stroked it, as if it were a cat.

"I'm so sorry I can't give you a good time," she said. "I'll make it up to you once we get back to normal."

He just gazed into her eyes. Pale amber, streaked with gold. Exquisite. Pupils widening slightly. Could it be their real color?

"You have beautiful eyes. Are they your own?" he asked.

Her hand left his instantly. A deep frown knitted her brow. "I don't discuss that."

"No. I feared as much."

"What's the matter with you? That's the third time. Do you *like* embarrassing people?"

"No. It's not like that at all. It's just... it's just..." He fell silent, lacking words.

She sat looking at him, no longer frowning, a bit bemused.

"Well?" she said, after a while.

He shrugged.

"I don't know how to explain. It's you. Something about you that makes me want to get closer."

She averted her face.

"You just won't stop, will you?" she said, but Ogden thought he saw the hint of a smile in the corners of her mouth.

"I think it's time we moved on," she said. "Heaven only knows how far we still have to go."

Sheepishly he got to his feet, feeling rebuffed.

On they went again, after first tearing a few strips of fabric from their clothing to use as bandages for their feet against further damage. They walked slowly. Everything had changed for Ogden. He felt passing strange. Sad yet contented. Entranced by a sweet melancholy. Something altogether new. They spoke little, Ogden did not dare say much for fear of annoying her again. And she seemed unwilling to talk. But an unspoken intimacy had grown between them. When they helped each other across obstacles their touches became stronger and longer than strictly necessary. They smiled at each other a lot. Slow, caressive smiles matched by warm, cheerful glances. More and more Ogden became aware of the person within the body. He saw her little spontaneous motions. The way she started at a sudden sound or movement and was instantly mollified when she saw the harmless creature that had made it. The way she touched her mouth with her fingers when in thought. The quickness and abandon of her laughter. Her grimaces. She had a very expressive face. Surely all those wonderful expressions had to be her own? They could be programmed, true, but that would take ages. He could not imagine anyone being bothered to waste the greater part an evening out with such minor details.

Their progress was slow but steady. They entered a spacious woodland, inhabited by trees of many varieties. Oaks and beeches mainly, old giants, fresh in leaf, and flowering

hawthorns filling the air with their bittersweet aroma, birches shimmering as their delicate leaves streamed in the breeze. Open patches ablaze with yellow rape, through which they waded hand in hand, laughing.

As the sun began to set they reached the bottom of a hillock topped by a large Lebanon cedar, whose spiky outline resembled the head of some horny demon. There Felicity, who was a step or two behind him, suddenly uttered a little whimper.

Ogden swiveled round. She had sunk to her knees. As she looked up at him, plaintively, frightened, one of her eyes began to wink rapidly. Her mouth sagged open, uttering strange noises. Clicking, whirring. Her legs twitched underneath her.

"Felicity? What's wrong?"

"I d-d-don't know," she said, a metallic twang to her voice. "I feel t-t-terrible. It's like, it's like, it's like, likelikelike, kl'kl'kl...." Her voice trailed away into a mere gurgle.

"Oh, Christ," Ogden sank on his knees beside her, grabbing her hands. "It must be your batteries. Relax. Please try to relax. Please..."

Frantic with concern he looked at the sorry sight of Felicity's malfunctioning host. Her hair receded into her skull, her skin went white, her features became fluid, nose melting into her face, lips fading to a mere gash. Only her eyes - perhaps because they really were her own? - remained the same, but large with fright, pupils big, irises mere rims of gold. Ogden

rubbed her hands. What could he do?

A few minutes passed. Slowly Felicity's face resumed some shape, but nothing like it had been. Just the suggestion of a nose. Her lips thin, colorless. If it had not been for her eyes, whose rich color stood out in startling contrast to the whiteness of her skin, like two drops of amber on snow, he would not have been able to recognize her.

"Felicity?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"Can you walk?"

"I think so."

He helped her to her feet and supported her up the small hill, praying to unknown powers for salvation on the other side. In vain. Trees stretched to the horizon.

The cedar stood in a comfortable hollow on the crest. There they decided to spend the hours of darkness. The ground was carpeted with needles, soft, still warm.

Ogden looked out. The sun stood about a hand's breadth above the horizon. A copper disk, shedding a metallic light across the massed treetops. The wind came rushing through them like an invisible wave.

He turned his gaze on Felicity, who sat cross-legged in the hollow, hands lamely in her lap, staring out.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "You?"

She looked up at him. Her ochrous eyes half-closed against the glow of the sun. Her head was little more than a large white oval, a huge plaster egg, in which her eyes seemed embedded like shining jewels. She reminded him of some Japanese mask he had once seen. Geisha-like. And yet it changed nothing to him. He still sensed the same person within.

"No," she answered. Her voice slurred, mechanical. "I feel very little of anything. I'm numb all over. I hate this."

"I know."

"I'm not going to make it, am I?"

"Course you are. I bet this is just a temporary overload. Nothing a night's rest won't set right."

"But how can rest help a host? It's only a machine."

"I don't know. But if rest served no purpose our hosts would not make us feel tired, would they?"

"No, I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Just relax."

He sat with his back against the tree. She lay down, her head in his lap, and closed her eyes, removing the last visible remnant of her humanity. Ogden quickly looked away.

The sun was slowly turning to orange. Ogden watched with sinking heart. Despite his hopeful words, he had little doubt they were both doomed. There was no sign of civilization anywhere. He could not imagine Felicity being able to walk another full day. He wanted to weep, but his own host no longer supported that luxury.

As the light reddened, the wind died down to a whisper and birds raised their voices. A few bright stars lit up in the deep blue transparency of the skies. Ogden's despair deepened. In retrospect his life seemed a sheer waste. Fun & games. Shallow pastimes. Shallow emotions. Intoxication and orgasms.

Felicity lay in his lap, asleep, apparently. The host made small noises. Whirrs, clicks, like computer discs spinning. Ogden wondered what was going on inside her. Some kind of rebuild, he hoped.

A thrush in a nearby tree began to warble a short, undulating tune. From afar, muted by the distance, another thrush replied.

The sky darkened slowly. The birds fell silent. Only the wind remained audible, heaving sigh upon sigh.

He looked down at Felicity and started. Some of her features had returned and she lay looking at him. He felt a violent twitch inside his chest, near his heart.

"Hi Sterling," she said.

"Hi," he replied. "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Much."

In the twilight her eyes seemed to shine with an inner, golden light. His heart twitched again.

"My name is not Sterling," he blurted out. "It's Ogden, Ogden Fairclough. I am pale, fat and clumsy. I take poor care of myself. I'm usually unshaven, unwashed, undeodorized. I guess I smell like a pig most of the time."

"Stop it," she said. "I don't want to hear this."

"I fart a lot. I like farting. Gross, isn't it? I enjoy the smell, unsavory though it may be." He fell silent, a bit embarrassed. He should not have said that. "I don't know why," he added, feebly.

She looked away, lying perfectly still.

He held his breath as he watched her, tension clenching like a fist inside him. He needed something from her, needed it desperately, though he knew not what. *Please*, he thought.

"Strange," she said. "Your saying that."

"Why?"

"Well, I... er... enjoy certain odors, too."

"Farts?"

"No. Others. Similar though. I never admitted it to myself. It seemed so perverse. Only now do I realize..."

She slowly turned her eyes upon him. They had darkened, pupils larger, set in rings of liquid gold.

"I like you, Ogden," she said.

Something gave inside him. His tension snapped and a gush of soothing warmth flooded his being. This was what he had needed from her. This. Only this.

"Oh, Felicity..."

"No. My name's Marsha. I'm short and overweight. Nothing like Felicity. You would not fancy me."

"I wouldn't be too sure."

"You're *really* weird, do you know that?"

"Yes, I'm suppose I am. If we ever get out of this, there is one thing I want more than anything else."

She kept her eyes steady.

"Well?"

"See you again."

"That is madness," she said.

Her words chilled him to the core.

"Don't you want to see me again?"

"Oh yes. Very much. But it is still madness."

"Who cares?"

"I don't," she said.

He tried to smile. He could not do it. He touched his face. It was bland. A plaster egg. His nose had gone.

"What do I look like?" he asked.

"A snowball," she said.

He held her all night, while she slept fitfully. Her features returned during rest. Her strong, beautiful nose, her lascivious lips, long dark lashes. Each time she woke, she cuddled up to him, even raising her lips for a languid kiss. They were cold and firm, like rubber, and yet their touch sent a shiver down his spine.

"Nice," she would mutter drowsily and fall asleep again.

As before, when he helped her through the wilderness, he experienced the fierce joy of being needed. This was new. Need had never entered into his life before. Life was either work or

fun & games. Utterly worthless, he decided. Yes, even if they were not to come out of this, he could not regret it. This was better, much better than anything he had ever known before. He had no word for it, but her presence made him feel whole, worth being alive. Deeply contented he fell asleep.

Next morning Ogden awoke to a world devoid of color. In disbelief he blinked a few times. It changed nothing. Grays and whites. Not a speck of color anywhere. The image was not even sharp but coarse and grainy. *Not good*, he thought, *but irrelevant. Must move*. He sat up with a start. Only then did he notice the prostrate figure beside him. A pale host, lying on its side, knees drawn up, head resting on a patch of dark moss. *Two better than one*, he thought and bent over to give the host a shake. It responded at once, veering into a sitting position. Its head was as featureless as an egg, with just a suggestion of eyes. A cleft opened halfway down the front.

"Must move," it said. "Better together. Quick."

"Yes. Quickness is relevant." He said, standing up woodenly. The other did the same. It grabbed his hand and they began to walk. He had no idea where he was going, only the direction. It was almost as if he was at the end of an invisible line, being drawn in. They moved briskly. His head was all but empty. Hardly a thought crossed his mind as they marched silently along. Now and then he looked aside at the pale dummy beside him. Now and then it did the same. Whenever it did his heart-

valve would flutter a little. He felt its sudden acceleration.

*Untypical malfunction*, he thought.

Somewhere in time they stumbled on to a road, or what was left of it. Vegetation had burst through the tarmac everywhere and had turned the surface into a crazy, uneven mosaic of black slabs. Weeds thrived among them. Nettles, thistles, grasses. Pretty little flowers, in grays and whites. The breeze played with them. But Ogden no longer heard very much. He was going deaf.

A little later he lost his power of speech. He felt his face. Smooth as a ball. No mouth anymore. His eyesight was also going. Still his legs moved. *Replace batteries*, he kept thinking, *replace batteries, energy critically low*. He could hardly see. Nothing more than a faint difference in color between sky and ground. He was deaf, mute. Almost the zombie state after a fatal accident. His thoughts became basic. He had to keep on moving. Nothing else mattered. Only to move. And to clutch the hand of the other host. It stumbled along beside him. Through the fogginess of his eyes he could only make out its silhouette. he felt it squeeze his hand tightly. *Must move. Must survive*. He thought. Motion is all. Stillness is the end.

Finally he could hardly make another move. The other host had collapsed at his feet. Motionless. His field of vision had shrunk.

He could only see a couple of yards. Everything beyond was a gray blur. He concentrated all his willpower on bending his knees. It took time, but slowly he felt his joints give way. Suddenly he dropped to his knees. The jolt made his head wobble. Another tremendous effort enabled him to stretch out a hand to the other host. He drew its head round. It opened its eyes, or what was left of them. Two black smears on the eggshell of its head.

"Motion," he said, in a dragging voice.

No response.

"Motion," he repeated.

The black spots widened a little. A narrow cleft appeared across the lower half of the head.

"No motion. Insufficient energy."

"No," he said, "Motion must."

He managed to drag the other host to its feet again, and resumed his trek, sluggishly, step by weary step.

Like waking up in the midst of an earthquake. Ogden had some vague recollection of stumbling across a pale line in the road when it happened. A surge of energy, almost like an orgasm, erupted throughout his body. A bright, colorful scenery materialized around him, as if a 3-dimensional monitor had been switched on. A symphony of sounds exploded in his ears. All his muscles tightened. He jumped to his feet. Felicity stood beside him, radiant, smiling, her lightbrown eyes glistening.

She flung her arms round him, wriggling her body against his, her soft, moist lips hungrily caressing his mouth. He held her, kissed her, dizzily. A lump swelled in his throat. His heart overflowed.

"I love you," he whispered hoarsely, almost choking with emotion.

She drew back her head and gazed into his eyes with childlike wonder.

"Oh, me too. Me too." Her fingers touched his face, gentle as gossamer. In slow disbelief she shook her head.

"Oh Ogden, my love. This is so new."

Her lower lip began to tremble. Her eyes filled with tears, they slid one by one into her eyelashes and plunged to her cheek, shattering, drawing tracks through her dust-soiled skin.

The patrolmen were upon them like paparazzi. Big and brawny and loud. But helpful in a boisterous, patronizing way.

"Come missie, let's get you back first."

"Hey, wait a minute," Ogden shouted. "Where are you taking her?"

The patrolman grinned, perfect teeth in a perfectly tanned face. Eyes of blue steel.

"Don't worry, sir. You're both for the infirmary. Just your routine emergency check-up."

Marsha was bundled into the back of the van.

"Ogden?" Her voice, plaintive, small.

The next moment a host was flung out and thrown into the boot of a patrol car.

"Your turn, sir."

Before he knew what hit him he, too, had been bundled into the van, plugged in and transferred. In a matter of seconds he sat strapped to a restraining chair. Three grim, but eager psychiatrists stood ogling him. They were all bald, with white, pointed beards.

"Tell us everything," they said.

He did.

When he had finished the three men exchanged grim looks.

"Sounds bad," one said.

"Definite risk of post-traumatic disorders," said the second. "This calls for immediate mental cleansing."

"I agree," said the third. "Irreparable emotional damage seems inevitable otherwise."

Ogden looked from face to face.

"What is going on? What are you going to do to me?"

The middle one smiled.

"We are going to make you forget this whole nerve-racking episode."

*Forget Marsha?*

"But I don't want to forget," he said.

"It's essential. You have experienced severe emotional overload. Without cleansing you will suffer untold agonies. Trust us, it's for your own good."

"No!"

Ogden went wild. He began to struggle furiously, wrenching at the straps that kept him bound to the chair.

"Nurse!" shouted the middle one.

A white-clad female hurried over and jabbed a needle into Ogden's arm. Howling he spiraled into a black abyss.

*Home, bittersweet home*, he thought, opening his eyes after transfer. Another day gone. He yawned and stretched, feeling very stiff, which surprised him. It felt more like Monday than Wednesday. He got up with difficulty and stumbled to his bathroom for a long stare into the mirror. He studied his paperwhite, bloated face, still heavy with slumber. His hair stood out in black spikes. A five-day stubble shaded his cheeks. He could smell the brine of his perspiration.

Not a thing of beauty, that's for sure," he muttered. He fingered his flesh. Loose, flabby. He had a double chin, young as he was.

"But the real thing," he said, staring into his eyes. They were very blue, cornflower blue. As he gazed into them a terrible, crippling sadness overwhelmed him. Why? Some mishap at work? Another bloody accident? No. He had no recollection of that. Just another uneventful day. Why the sadness then? He returned to the living room, took his meal from the wall and sat down to a chicken curry, one of his favorites. He could hardly get it away. It tasted like sawdust. *What's wrong with me?* he

thought. Physical discomfort. A weight on his chest. Stomach spasms. A nagging urge to weep. *So alone*, he thought, *so mercilessly alone*.

"Ridiculous," he muttered. "I've always been alone. Why should it bother me now?"

He tried to eat his meal. It did not taste any better than before. Suddenly he was weeping. Tears dribbled down his cheek. He felt so sad, so inexplicably sad. He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand. No use, the tears just kept coming and coming.

Days passed. In the mines he worked in a daze, mechanically. Nothing seemed worth thinking about. Only one question would pop up in his mind now and then. *Why so sad?* He did not understand. In the evenings he only felt like going to classical concerts, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler. In dark halls he sat alone among vast audiences and wept quietly. Alone, so very much alone.

Friday came. His helpmate coaxed him into trying something else than the concerts.

"For heaven's sake Ogden! You can't go on like this. Snap out of it, man."

He smiled mournfully.

"I would if I could."

"Look at all the delights we have on offer."

The screen came alive with festive scenes. People laughing and dancing, kissing.

Ogden stared at them with revulsion. Their joy only deepened his sorrow.

A long list of pastimes began to scroll across the screen. Ogden watched moodily. He felt like participating in a wake, a funeral march, perhaps a flagellants' procession. But understandably none of these were on the list.

Suddenly his eye was caught by the words "Luxury Atlantic Cruise". His heart skipped a beat. Whatever for? It baffled him. He stopped the scrolling and gazed at the words. A cruise? Why should that affect him? He had never gone on one, never felt like going either. And yet, yet.....

He called in Tanya, who was all smiles.

"Found something?"

"I'll go on the cruise."

Her smile wavered just a little, but she retrieved it smoothly.

"Very well."

After ten minutes on the ship he already wanted to go home, sickened by the near hysterical atmosphere of fun, fun, fun around him. His fellow passengers seemed mindless idiots, whose exorbitant utterances of joy were like personal taunts to him, mocking his sorrow. All the grins, roars of laughter, backslaps, cheers, gulps of champagne, embraces. He soon fled the company to the afterdeck, which lay deserted in a dense, clammy fog. Vaguely the splashing of water could be heard, over the soft humming of the engines. He walked out on the wet

glossy deck and went to stand at the after railing. The view did not extend beyond a few meters. Below him, in a gray haze, he could make out the swirling white patterns of the ship's wake. *What am I doing here?* he thought. It made no sense. And yet something had drawn him. Even now, in his desolation, he felt better than he had for days. It had to mean something. But what? Suddenly he was startled by a ghostly shape emerging from the fog right before his eyes. In alarm he drew back. Only to grin with relief when he saw it had been a large Herring Gull, which seemed equally startled as he, banking sharply away.

He went into the lounge to get another drink. It was also largely deserted. Just a few couples sprinkled across the room, deeply engrossed in each other. Saccharine music poisoned the atmosphere. As he hurried outside with his freshly topped glass, he was surprised to find a girl standing almost in the same spot where he had stood, gazing out into nothingness. *A kindred spirit?* he thought and slowly sauntered into her direction.

When he reached the railing just beside her, she turned and startled him with her eyes. The weekend fashion dictated harsh, almost phosphorescent hues. Pink, orange, mintgreen. Hers, however, were light-brown, ochrous, almost golden, like sungilt autumn leaves at the bottom of a pond. She shot him a quick, inquisitive glance that bounced away almost the moment it struck him. *Instant rejection*, he thought. He was about to

turn away but something made him linger. He kept looking at her. She was very beautiful. Not small, just a half a head shorter than he. Her skin beautiful, mahogany brown. A strong nose, rather big but delicately sculpted. She had thick yet curvaceous lips. Her body was erect, broad-shouldered, impressive. She hung her head. He heard her gulp, and gradually break into small stifled sobs.

He went closer.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked up at him. Her eyes seemed to glow with an inner light. Pulsating. A setting sun.

She shook her head.

"Nothing. I just feel this way without knowing why."

"That's strange, I feel much the same."

Her eyes seemed to grow a little.

"Really?"

He nodded.

"Yes, so sad. But no clue why."

"It's madness," she said, looking away into the mist.

He stood watching her for a while, minutes perhaps. Then he spoke.

"Feel like having fun?"

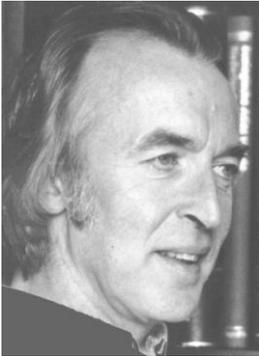
She turned her head to look at him, vaguely, as if she did not really see him. Her smile came hesitantly.

"Why not," she said.



**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.