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Timmy's Lagoon



a short literary science fiction story

by

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The creamy white limousine that came to fetch Timothy Brown and his little sister was the longest car he had ever seen. It had to be at least as long as their schoolbus. The driver wore a moss-green uniform and cap and bowed to them, calling them Mr Brown and Mrs Brown, which made them both giggle. The inside was even grander. The red leather upholstery shone like a polished apple, fluffy white carpeting covered the floor. There were big sweet-smelling flowers, little black fridges filled with all sorts of soft drinks, candy and popsicles. And tv screens that slid out of the ceiling, with DVD players, a music system and even a computer built into the front of their compartment. Timothy tried to get on the internet, but there was some kind of malfunction. Same with the TVs.

He tapped the dusky glass separating them from the driver. It slid down immediately.

"T-t-t-t-t ...," he began, unable to get past the first consonant, so he pointed at the screen.

"Ah, yes, sorry about that, Mr Brown," said the driver. "Just another black-out. Might be okay again in a minute. There's lots of movies to see, though. "

Timothy nodded. The window slid up again. Millicent was rummaging through the dvd cases, and found some cartoon about beavers.

"Bunnies!" she exclaimed joyfully, convinced that all hairy animals that were not clearly cats or dogs had to be bunnies. "Play it, Timmy, play it now."

With a sigh Timothy obliged.

He was in a foul mood. The limousine was taking them to the president of the country, as part of their prize for winning the National Little Editors Competition. Actually it had all been Timothy's doing. He had single-handedly produced the school magazine that had won such high honors, while Millicent had only been around him a lot because she needed to be looked after. But the school board had believed it would be a nice touch if a cute little girl shared in the glory.

Timothy gazed out of the window. It was a Friday afternoon, the car was crawling through the city center, almost nudging its way through hordes of pedestrians. Timothy did not want to be where he was. The prospect of meeting the president meant nothing to him. Just another grown-up. And he was not in the mood for grown-ups. They were breaking his heart.

An angry young man Timothy was. Very angry and very

young. He was seven, almost eight, and had big problems. His biggest one was being small. In spite of his venerable age he looked only five. And this was a nuisance. Grown-ups and other kids treated him like a toddler. He hated that. It was one of the reasons why he kept to himself a lot. Another was his stammer. He found it hard to talk to others. Not because he was stupid or ignorant. The opposite. He was very bright. "Our little Einstein" his mother often called him, sneeringly, because he often shouted the right answers at the tv whenever there was a quiz on. No, his stammer was caused by the fact he had so much to say that he never knew where to begin and got all confused and began to stammer and blush. Oddly it only happened when he was a bit nervous. Not when he was at an extreme, either relaxed or excited. Then he could speak fluently enough. Unfortunately he was a bit nervous most of the time, especially among strangers. So, he kept to himself a lot, which was okay, because he had learned to enjoy being alone. His inability to talk had turned him to writing, which he had become rather good at. Words fascinated him. When other kids played computer games and watched cartoons, he pored over dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses. Of course his youth put many words beyond his understanding, but he had found a way

around this by using synonyms. If he did not understand the meaning of some resounding word, he'd use it in places where a familiar synonym would be used. On the whole this went well, although he would baffle people regularly with his unusual choice of words.

His anger was another problem. An invisible fiend. Mostly a slow fire within, simmering, but sometimes flaring up so fiercely that it frightened him. There were many reasons for his wrath. Being a stuttering dwarf, naturally. Having a weird family. No father, a mad little sister and a very unmomlike mom. At times he even doubted whether she was their mom at all. A remote, almost hazy, heavily scented woman who was for ever coming or going. She *said* she was his mother, but did very little to show it. She never did any housework or cook. They had a furtive little latino girl for that.

But worst of all, by far, was that this last week he had been overwhelmed by the terrible prospect of losing his own little paradise. His magical lagoon. As he thought of it, his eyes began to tingle.

The limo stopped. The driver opened the door and bade them come out. Millicent refused. She wanted to keep on

watching her aquatic bunnies. When Timothy tried to grab the remote, she kicked him.

"C'mon Mill," said Timothy, rubbing his stinging shin. "You can watch your bunnies later. I hear the president has lots of icecream."

"Honest?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She switched off the tv and followed Timothy out of the limo. They were at the bottom of monumental steps leading up to a large white building. A dozen or so people, mostly men and two women, were standing about. They all wore name tags. Timothy recognized one of them from tv. Mat O'Grady. A famous newspaperman and editor. Sort of a colleague really. One of the women had three cameras dangling on her chest.

A young man with a toothy grin came towards them with outstretched arms.

"Ah," he exclaimed. "Our little editors."

He shook hands with them, his was moist and flabby. Millicent wiped hers on her dress after the handshake. The man did not make any eye contact. Timothy disliked him at once.

"Ladies, gentlemen," said the man, turning to the group. "Meet your future colleagues. These two kids are this

year's winners of the Little Editors Award."

The others responded with grins and a modest round of applause.

Mat O'Grady even made a little bow at them.

"You're in luck," he said, "The president is at his country home. We'll be flown over in a chopper."

A puzzled Millicent turned round to gape at Timothy.

"A helicopter, Mill," he explained. "A sort of plane."

"Oh," she said, visibly disappointed, and began to look around for bunnies.

Timothy had never been in a helicopter. At any other time he would have been delighted. Not now. His lagoon was about to be destroyed. The end of his part of the world. It had struck him deeply, filling him anxiety, sorrow, close to despair. He adored his lagoon. It was a little pond he had discovered, late last winter, on a very bad day, on the outskirts of town, just beyond the runways of the airport, behind a brokendown hangar. The spot had been a complete mess back then. At first sight it had just seemed a waterlogged, malodorous dump. A pile of rubbish. All kinds of junk, cardboard boxes, planks of weather-beaten wood, a dented drum leaking some evil-looking greenish slime. A metal bed spring. Several rust-coated bicycles.

Broken bottles, sheets of decomposing paper and a jumble of plastic bits and pieces. But looking more closely Timothy found that it was not nearly as bad as it seemed. There was a real pond underneath the debris. It even housed a toad, big and very slow, and a bit creepy with a slimy skin but gorgeous almost golden eyes. And there was a tree, a sad little willow, and some shrubs, flattened but still growing.

He began to clean up, spent whole days dragging away the rubbish. And after a few weeks, as winter turned to spring and plants began to burst from the soil, the erstwhile dump turned into a regular oasis. Magically, a few little fishes appeared in the water and he also heard but never saw some frogs. The toad remained big and slow and the willow a little sad, not sprouting too many leaves, but its branches were long and elegant and trailed in the breeze. Plants sprang up all around the water. Big-leaved plants, probably weeds, but no less beautiful for that. Long, elegant ferns. He bought a few ornamental shrubs. Money at any rate was not a problem. His mother was a firm believer in bribing her brood into obedience. Any hint of rebellion was immediately quelled with banknotes, fluttering across the table. He could pretty much buy anything he wanted. Sadly most things he wanted weren't

on sale.

And there, one lovely summer day, he had been found by Gwynn, a dragonfly. But no ordinary dragonfly (as if such a contradiction could exist). As dragonflies go, she was like a diamond among pebbles. Timothy had been sitting motionless, face turned up to the sun, basking in the lukewarm rays, when he heard a soft whirring, like the purr of a kitten, followed by a faint sensation on his knee. When he opened his eyes, he saw her, poised on his naked kneecap. A big dragonfly, easily ten inches long, in a blaze of reds. They were crimson and scarlet, orange and pink, and all the hues in between. The reds of all the sunsets he had ever seen, and they shimmered with the light. A living ruby. Her gossamer wings were transparent as crystal. Her head resembled a helmet, shiny as chrome. Timothy hardly dared breathe as he watched the magnificent creature before his eyes. A name popped into his mind. Gwynn. Although he had no way of knowing this, he knew she was a female. Her lacework wings trembled a little. Suddenly he realized that she might be an alien, an extra-terrestrial, desperately seeking contact with mankind, but too small to be noticed. He watched her even more intently, waiting for thought waves to travel from her to

him, telling him what she thought, felt, wanted. He waited for minutes. Nothing happened. Just as well, he thought and smiled. That slightest of movements was enough to startle her. She alighted. Wings purring she hovered above his knee for a few seconds before veering away, leaving him with a deep, immense, never-before-felt joy.

The helicopter sat on the lawn not unlike a crude and ugly copy of a dragonfly. Timothy recognized it as a Super Comanche UHG-4, a gunship modified for civilian use. It was dull white. As the journalists filed on board he quickly darted to the front to get a window seat, in case they passed over his lagoon.

They did. With a lump in his throat he looked down at the little oval, pale blue, reflecting heaven, fringed with green, lying dwarfed near the edge of a dun-colored expanse of sand. A single yellow truck was moving across it, towards the lagoon, like some ominous insect. Timothy felt his insides churn. It could not be more than a few days before that lifeless brownish slab would cover his paradise. Like a tombstone. The thought was unbearable. Pure agony. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath against the pain.

"Sorry sonny," the driver had said. "That's progress for you. The city must grow."

"But my lagoon is so beautiful. Can't you just go round it?"

"Would if I could. Honest I would. I know the feeling, kid. We once lost a playing ground like this. But it's not my call. It's the city, it will grow."

That was all. The tall, muscular trucker, with evil tattoos and creepy piercings but a friendly grin patted Timothy on the head and climbed back into his truck, leaving Timothy to wander back to his rock in a daze of sorrow.

That was only four days ago. Four long, miserable days. And now this nonsense. What did he care about being a little editor? He'd gladly give up his prize to save his lagoon. But wait... What if he asked the president? Now there was a thought. The president was important. People had to do what he said. He could ask him. No harm in asking. Even though, deep within, he knew what the answer would be. His lagoon was doomed. The city would smother it. Even a president was not strong enough to stop the city. He needed another plan. Save the animals. That should be doable for the fishes, frogs and the toad,

once he knew where to take them. But what about Gwynn? How could he save her? He could not image catching her without damaging her wings. They seemed so fragile. He'd never forgive himself.

The rest of the trip he brooded on the problem. He hardly noticed anything of the flight. Only when they started to descend, did he realize how smooth and quiet it had been.

The helicopter landed halfway up a green hill, across the river. When Timothy got out, he automatically turned to look back, but he could not see his lagoon anymore. The city was shrouded in a faint, murky haze, as if it was rising from some unholy, steaming ooze. Above it, tainted, like a sallow moon, hung the sun. The filthy city. The killer. Timothy swore at it under his breath.

"Timmy!"

His sister's voice, shrill, on the verge of a tantrum.

He quickly went over. She took his hand.

"Can I have my icecream now?" she asked.

He nodded.

The small group moved up the hill, towards another large white house, very much like the one they had just left

behind. A border of tall, overblown roses, yellow and scarlet, adorned its front. At both ends the façade disappeared into big, darkgreen shrubs, with red and white flowers. They too were at the end of their bloom, dropping petals, one by one. Broad-shouldered men in suits strolled about, automatic weapons slung discreetly behind their backs.

"What's with all this security?" asked someone
Nobody answered.

As they approached the steps leading up to the building, a young woman came trotting out. She wore a gray, two-piece suit, with a tight skirt that forced her to make quick little steps. She smiled but there was a look about her that reminded Timothy of his mom when she had been out all night. Weary, worn-out, not amused. The woman greeted them formally and led them to the side of the house, where a glazed terrace overlooked a broad lawn sloping down gently to an enormous beech tree that obscured any view of the city

"Please wait here. I'll fetch someone to get you drinks," she said, heading for a side entrance.

"What's going on, Penny?" asked O'Grady.
She turned, smiling, a little too broadly.

"Nothing really, Mat. Just a minor security problem with one of the staff."

"Ah," said O'Grady, with a strange undertone that Timothy did not understand.

"By the way," said the woman, "It's perhaps better if you don't stray away from this terrace."

Everyone sat down, widely spaced. Some had laptops, which they opened. Millicent let go of Timothy's hand and trotted off, darting past one of the security men unnoticed. Timothy could not be bothered to follow. She seldom wandered far. He sat down near Mr O'Grady, who smiled at him.

"Still no signal," said one of the women behind her laptop.

"Longest blackout I've ever seen," said someone else.

"Ain't it strange that only communications are out? Everything else seems to work."

"Don't ask me, I'm no technician."

Timothy heard the words, but was not listening. It was almost as if he was inside a glass bubble. Separate, apart from the others, alone with his worries.

He was so fond of his lagoon. His own little world. Oasis.

The tall ferns shielding him. The swaying willow. The scents. The gentle sounds during spells of quiet between the blasts of screeching aircraft coming in to land. He especially loved the sound of running water, from the little brook he had made by linking up a pump with the power supply of the derelict hangar, which – strangely perhaps – still worked. He adored being there. It was more home than home. He would have stayed there for ever, if he had not been afraid in the dark.

He felt so bad he could hardly bear it. These last few days he had been tossed between grief and anger, but his anger was no match for this enormous grief. Tears were never far away. He had to do something, save his lagoon. But how? What?

"Something's definitely not right," said Mat O'Grady, who was wearing a pale-blue, badly wrinkled suit, and a white straw hat. He did not look very famous, Timothy thought, more like one of those men who begged for coins in the subway.

"You feel it too?" said another man.

"Sure."

"What can it be, Mat? Any ideas?"

"Not really. But it feels big. Catastrophic."

"Like what?"

The old man grinned, more to himself than anyone in particular.

"Take your pick. There's nothing we haven't messed up. It could be any of a dozen calamities. War, famine, disease, climatic mayhem, nuclear mishaps, dwindling resources, economic meltdown. We're spoiled for choice where our mass suicide is concerned. I'm pretty damned certain we must be among the dumbest critters in the universe."

"Something sure's different," said one of the women. "It even seems quieter than usual."

Tim could explain that one. Air traffic was down. He had done a lot of planespotting earlier that year and knew the daily aircraft movements by heart. There had not been a single domestic flight while they were here. Only international ones. He dearly wanted to say it, but did not trust himself. He'd probably stammer like mad. In disgust at himself he got up and wandered away. Back to the front lawn. The security man looked at him pensively.

"I've gotta find my little sister." said Timothy. "She's run off."

"Oh," said the guard, puzzled.

"For heaven's sake, man!" shouted O'Grady from afar. "He's only a kid. Leave him alone. You can always shoot him later."

The guard grinned sheepishly and stepped aside. Timothy thanked him. For once he was glad to be small enough to seem so harmless.

When he turned the corner he saw Millicent almost immediately, poking around among some rhododendrons, but he pretended not to see her and walked on.

The front lawn also had a pond, many times bigger than his. He ambled down there. It was beautifully kept. Liquid glass water. Floating leaves the size of dinner plates. Water lilies. Colorful fishes with broad, wavy tails. But everything looked unreal, artificial, as if made by computer. He sat down at the edge, in the closely cropped grass that felt like a carpet. A kind of doghouse floated in the middle of the pond. Empty.

It made him feel even worse. His little lagoon was ten times nicer than this. Livelier too. Apart from the big, leisurely fish there was little to see.

He heard a plane approach. A Boeing 747. Checking his watch, he knew it was flight 441 from Paris. Beyond doubt. He looked up as it passed overhead, grinning at the unmistakable logo of Air France, but only briefly, reminded

of his plane-spotting antics. Yet another big disaster in his little life. Last winter he got so fed up with being alone that he decided to take desperate measures. The nerdiest kids at school, without a shadow of a doubt, were the Omega Aviators. Six or seven certified misfits who spent their weekends hanging around the airport, spotting planes. An ugly bunch. Especially their leader, the carrot-haired, hatched-faced, and bespectacled Paul, who always wore a long, see-through mac over his normal clothes at the merest hint of rain. But they obviously derived huge amounts of fun from their spotting, always talking about their planes excitedly among themselves, seemingly immune from the jeers of the less nerdy. So Timothy put a lot of effort into his plan to become one of them. He spent all winter poring over books and websites and sitting on the roof with binoculars, often hunched up in Mr Lundgren's pigeon hoop during showers, looking at and listening to planes. He became a very good planespotter. Too good, it turned out.

On his first day he was expected to show his skills to see whether he qualified for the lofty honor of becoming an Omega Aviator. The test was simple. At the approach of a plane a scorekeeper would shout "target in range" and the

others could call out a name whenever they thought they recognized the plane. First one to get it right, scored a point. Timothy had to compete with the great Paul himself and four others. He was so eager that he went completely wild, shouting the names almost before the scorekeeper could finish his call. He became so engrossed in the test that he forgot all about the other boys and, during a lull in traffic, about 30 minutes later, he cheerfully asked how he had done.

"New recruit 14 spots," said the scorekeeper. "The rest nothing." Timothy beamed. Surely he had passed the test. Only then did he notice the grumpy little faces around him. At one fell swoop he had turned his friends-to-be into mortal enemies. They left without a word. He was crest-fallen, but a little later, wandering miserably and rejected beyond the runways, he found his lagoon.

He smiled at that recollection and looked up. Beyond the pond the ground sloped quite steeply to a row of large trees, with pointy leaves, blazing with metallic autumnal colors, golds, coppers and bronzes, muttering softly in a rising breeze. They skirted a clear view of the river as it widened to the sea. A few warships were moored along the far shore. A naval museum. He had been there once.

Boring stuff. The ships had been largely dismantled on the inside. Empty husks. Only a few spaces had been left intact. Although he had never taken much interest in the ships, they seemed to look different now. He took out his mini-binoculars. Top-class gear, very expensive, one of his mom's bribes. The guards would probably think he was a foreign spy if they noticed.

He trained them on the warships. To his astonishment they were completely different from those he had been on. These were modern ships, fully equipped and manned. The crew was even busy removing covers from guns and rocket launchers. Probably some kind of exercise. While he studied the men running around on the distant ships, he heard a little plaintive voice calling out his name. Millicent. Normally he liked to let her call for a while. It made her more malleable when he finally showed up, but he did not dare do that now. After all, he was supposed to be looking for her.

He found her near the rhododendrons, covered in red and white petals.

"I want my icecream now," she said. He took her hand and led her back to the terrace. They were in luck, a kind of butler was just passing around drinks and instantly asked what they wanted.

"Icecream," said Millicent, "A lot."

"Sure, Madam," he said, with a wink at Timothy. "And you, sir?"

"A coke, please."

"Of course, sir." The man walked away.

They sat down.

Timothy tried to collect his thoughts. He had to prepare some kind of petition for the president, make him see how important his lagoon was. But it was hard to think with all the talking. The others were getting impatient, bad-tempered, shouting a lot.

"I'm getting sick and tired of this. What's going on?"

"It sure is strange."

"It's something big I keep telling you."

"If it is, how could we all have missed it? Shouldn't we have picked up something? Something unusual?"

Timothy took notice. He knew something unusual. He desperately wanted to say it. But he'd probably stutter, mess up. So better not. But the next moment, without really wanting to, he did speak.

"I-I-I saw something," he blurted out. "St-st-strange p-p-p-p-planes. From everywhere."

The others fell silent to gaze at him. Several grinned mockingly. Only Mr O'Grady looked at him with interest.

But the others made him nervous, and his next sentence would not come.

"I-I-I-I t-t-t-t," he went, turning scarlet. When someone sniggered, he could take it no longer, jumped up and ran away, unthinking, in the wrong direction, finding his escape barred by the glass panels enclosing the terrace. So he just stood there, facing the glass, cursing his ineptness. In spite of his dismay he noticed, among the dancing leaves of the beech, that a bridge over the river was empty. That was also strange. Normally massed cars moved across it both ways.

"Timothy?" said a sudden voice behind him.

He turned, startled. It was O'Grady, smiling, wrinkled, easy-going. It calmed him a little.

"You okay?"

He nodded.

"Do you think you can talk to me? Really slow?"

Timothy nodded again.

"A mere nod is a bit of a contradiction here," said O'Grady with a chuckle. "Tell me about the planes."

"I-I-I was a p-plane spotter. I-I-I know p-planes. Airlines. Since a week or so strange planes are coming in from strange places. Cuba, Poland, Vietnam."

"What's so strange about those places?"

"They don't have the planes they are sending. "

"That's strange indeed. And what about the planes themselves?"

"Military planes in airline colors."

"Holy smoke." O'Grady turned pale. Very pale. He swallowed hard.

"Are you sure about this?"

Timothy heard a plane approach. Unmistakably.

"There's a Hercules C-130 coming in behind me. That's a four-engine turboprop. "

The older man looked, screwing up his eyes. It took him a long time to recognize the machine.

"Right you are," he finally said. "You obviously know your planes. Well done, lad."

Just then some excitement erupted behind them. Another man had joined their group. O'Grady hurried back. Timothy followed slowly. The newcomer was a big, meaty man, sweating profusely, in shirt and tie, jacket folded over an arm. A huge camera dangled from his shoulder. He was talking loudly, excitedly.

"Darned gas station. Out of the stuff. I had just enough to roll into the car park. Sold out, would you believe."

"No gas?" asked O'Grady, from afar.

The newcomer nodded so hard that the drops of

perspiration flew everywhere.

"None at all."

"O, my goodness," groaned O'Grady. "That's it. The end of oil."

The others looked at him with mixed reactions. Some seemed shocked, others just grinned.

"Don't be ridiculous," said one of the women.

"I wish I were," said O'Grady. "It all fits. I heard a rumor some weeks ago. Paid no heed. Welcome to Armageddon, ladies and gentlemen. It's back to the dark ages for us."

"I don't believe it. Surely there would have been warnings, alerts, advance notices?"

"What good would that have done? Only deepen and prolong the chaos. No. It had to happen like this. That young man," he turned to point at Timothy, "has seen strange planes come in. Troop transports camouflaged as public airliners. Anyone notice the warships out there? They're getting ready for action."

"What action? Who are they going to fight?"

"Us," said O'Grady. "They're bottling up the cities."

"But that's madness. Genocide. The cities can't feed themselves."

"Exactly. That's the whole idea."

"Are you trying to say we are going to be starved

wholesale by our own government?"

"I am."

His words prompted a furious outburst.

"Bullshit."

"You're insane."

"Yeah, you're bonkers."

"Just think. The alternative is infinitely worse. Unleash tens of millions of desperate townspeople on the nation and you create total anarchy. This is the only way to leave some hope for the rest."

"I don't believe it."

"Just watch. Those planes have brought in foreign troops, in case our boys and girls get sentimental about shooting their own. They're probably somewhere in Moscow or Johannesburg right now."

Timothy had lagged behind. He did not want to be laughed at again. He did not catch everything that was being said, did not understand what the fuss was about. End of oil? Armageddon? Dark ages? Bottling up the cities? What did it all mean? He did not understand, did not care either, although he liked the word Armageddon. He had more important things to worry about. What to do with Gwynn? He slipped away again, to think. He wandered along the

borders before the house, touching the roses with a fingertip.

As he passed an open window his attention was drawn by a strange, liquid sound. A soblike noise. He looked up. A man was leaning on the window sill, on outstretched arms, as if he had just done a push-up, head bowed so deeply that his chin almost touched his chest. His shoulders were shaking. Was he crying? Timothy stopped to stare. He had never seen a grown-up man cry before. Suddenly the man looked up. On his face a horrible expression that made Timothy recoil. When the man saw him, he straightened himself, forcing his face into a sickly grin.

"What's that sir?" said a female voice further inside. The woman whom O'Grady had called Penny appeared, gave Timothy a dirty look.

"What are you doing here? Scoot! Get back to the others."

The man raised a hand.

"No Penny, don't," he said. "It's all right. It doesn't matter." A warmer smile replaced the tortured grin. Only now did Timothy recognize him. It was the president himself.

"And you are?" asked the mighty man. Timothy took a

very deep breath. This was his chance. This was his moment. No stuttering now.

"I...I...I...am a little editor," he said.

"Of course you are," said the president. "You won that prize. Good for you."

"I...I...I... have a kw-kw-question..."

The man sighed. He looked very tired.

"Ask."

Mercifully he was as excited as he could possibly be, so he managed to keep his stammer at bay.

"It-t-t-t's about my lagoon. It-t-t's wonderful. It was in a bad way but I made it well again, every weekend for months. Now it's magic. There's ferns and a willow with little birds and fishes and frogs and a big, lazy toad and the most beautiful dragonfly in the world. Honest. She's like a red diamond. A living ruby. And I'd do anything to save it, give up my prize, work like mad, anything, but the city is growing and its got this terrible mountain of sand that is going to cover my lagoon and all my animals will die. And I don't know how to get them out. Especially not my dragonfly... and and and ..." He was lost. His one great chance and he was messing it up. Tears were gathering in his eyes. He swallowed hard to regain himself.

Penny appeared again.

"Mr President, you're on in two minutes. You don't have time for this."

"Oh yes I do," replied the president, nodding at Timothy. "Go on young man."

"Well, I love my lagoon. I know it's not much and it's really just a pond with a few fishes and two frogs and one toad. But I love them. And I'd miss them terribly. And I thought you being the president and all you might stop the city from covering my lagoon."

The old man looked at him wearily.

"Lagoon, ferns and a ruby dragonfly," he muttered. "Yes, yes, something like that."

He stretched out a hand and patted Timothy on the head.

"Don't you worry, lad. That city is not going to grow another inch. I promise."

Timothy could not believe his ears.

"Really?"

The president nodded.

"Really really," he said, ignoring the tugs of the woman .

"Oh thank you, Mr President. Thank you."

Finally the woman managed to drag the man away.

"They're waiting, sir. You're on in 60 seconds." She gave Timothy another toxic look. He grinned back at her.

Saved!

He had done it. Doggone. He had done it. As by magic all the tension, all the anger, all the bad feelings vanished. Evaporated. He sank to his knees and began to weep. He bawled his head off, not caring, happy as punch. Total delight. All his little friends were safe. Thanks to him. He jumped up and started running and leaping, back to the others. He'd go tell O'Grady. Everyone.

When he reached the terrace, all the grown-ups had gone. Millicent was the only one there, behind a huge plate of icecream, digging away at it with a big metal spoon. He was briefly deflated. He so wanted to tell someone. Bar Millicent, of course.

He sat down across the table. She was shoveling spoonfuls of icecream into her mouth as fast as she could.

"Can I have some?" he asked.

She immediately folded her arms around the plate.

"No, it's all mine."

"Suit yourself."

He got up, resisting the temptation to push her head into the plate. Then he smiled. Poor mite. Things weren't easy for her either. But his lagoon was saved. Saved! He took a deep deep breath and exhaled with a great big

"Aah". Life was good.

With all the tension gone, he suddenly realized how tired he was, having had little sleep in the last few days. He sat down in a deck chair at the front of the terrace, facing the enormous beech. Its trunk forked about a meter above the ground and the two massive branches formed a wide canopy of yellowing leaves, rustling noisily in the breeze that seemed to be growing stronger. Timothy loved the sound. It was somniferous, one of his favorite words to baffle grown-ups. The breeze also shook loose many leaves and carried them along, swirling, as in one last joyous dance.

He was just beginning to doze off, when the group returned, looking like ghosts. Not a word was spoken. One of the women was sobbing. Timothy jumped up to tell them his good news, but something in their faces told him this was not a good time. He looked for O'Grady. He came last. He looked less miserable than the rest. Timothy went up to him.

"Ah, young man," he said, with a strange smile, kind yet sad. "Have you heard? The city is doomed."

Timothy nodded vehemently.

"Yes, the president promised."

O'Grady frowned at this, but let it pass.

"Have you any place to go?"

"Sure. Home."

"In the city?"

"Yes."

"Is there no other place you could go?"

Timothy shrugged. What a silly question.

"Maybe," he said, hesitantly. "There's gramps. Down the road a bit."

"Excellent. Why don't you take your little sister and go there."

"No I can't. I want to see my lagoon."

"Lagoon?"

Timothy explained.

He made O'Grady chuckle.

"Well, I've never..." he said. "But still. There's going to be a bit of trouble in the city. Better stay away for a few days. You take your sister to your grandfather's, and I'll check on your lagoon. See whether everything's all right. It's bound to be, if the president has said so."

"Will you really do that?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he said, with a kind of tremor in his voice. "Now run along."

Timothy returned to Mill. She had almost finished off the icecream but her spooning rate had declined dramatically. She was using one of her hands to prop up her head and the other to stir the melting ice. When she noticed Timothy approach she immediately started spooning faster again. He grinned at that. She was truly awful.

He sat down.

"How would you like to go to gramps."

She looked up, suspicious, edging one arm around her plate, obviously sensing some devious plot to rob her of her rightful desert.

"I like gramps." she said. "But where's mom?"

"I don't know," said Timothy. Didn't care either.

"Okay." She said, looking straight at him, strange little smile on her smudged lips. All of a sudden she shoved her plate to him. It only contained a little, colorful puddle with a few small lumps of melting ice.

"You can have the rest," she said.

He grinned.

"You're too kind."

"You're welcome," she said, a bit pompously, and belched. "Oops, sorry."

She jumped up.

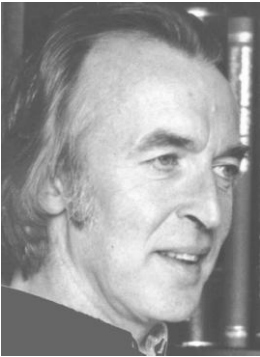
"Off to gramps."

"Can't I finish my icecream first?"

"No."

Timothy dropped his spoon. With a deep sigh he rose to follow his little sister. But it took only seconds for his grin to reappear. Today he had saved his lagoon. He was not going to let anything spoil that.

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 his three horses and to researching and writing a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative fiction.