

Flying Dutchman

I'm an android whose body is an interstellar spacecraft called *Hope*. My rank is Commander, but I am also the pilot of this craft that holds the remnants of the human race, plus their pets, plants and thoughts.

I wake up Captain Susanne every so often, so she can check our progress. She looks at the main telescope, sees the dim dot of light called *New Home*, centered, tantalizing. After a few days of exercising, looking at her frozen cat and writing in her diary, she goes back to cryo-sleep.

I get to talk to her when she's awake, but I have to be careful about what I say, and how I say it, because she can be very testy at times. Once, I let her win a chess game, and she was outraged – she knew that I threw the game so she hollered at me, and then she sulked for a long time. I don't know why a human would challenge me to a game of chess, and then get mad that I let her win. I try to figure that out all the time. I don't understand why Susanne thought that it was so improper for me to let her win. A long time ago, Captain Susanne started calling me the *Flying Dutchman*. I referenced the *Library of All Knowledge*, and I quickly understood, but why did it upset her to think of me that way? I wonder if she's angry with me – humans all knew the truth about the journey, but they boarded anyway. I'm going as fast as my mass-drive allows. It's not my fault that we'll never get to *New Home* – it's the laws of physics to blame.

I have several main compartments: the life vats, the museum of science, the museum of history, the garden, and the mass-converter drive. Also, part of me contains the *Library of All Knowledge*.

In the life vats are the seeds of the human race, and all the species of animals, plants, insects, and life forms of all types. I monitor a billion life forms as they sleep in cryo tanks. Over the past few million years, some of the delicate life forms have ceased to function. I've reported this to Captain Susanne, and she got very mad at me. She hollered and stomped and accused me of things that I am incapable of doing. I was glad when she returned to cryo-sleep. I suppose she misses Earth.

The museum of science has all the artifacts of technology that will be needed on *New Home*. We've got tractors and calculators and air cars. They're not really there – I assemble them from holographic data. When we get to *New Home*, I will teach humans to assemble them for real. Too bad that all that human science couldn't prevent the asteroid storm.

The museum of history contains a 3-dimensional diorama of life on Earth over the past 3 billion years – before we left. I have holograms of how Earth evolved – someone thought that it would be important for the human children of *New Home* to know about Earth's history.

I have a lovely garden, and I like to spend time there. I like trees and cool ferns. Birds and butterflies would love it, but of course I can't wake them up and let them use it, else they'll be extinct when we reach *New Home*. Of course, I know that we'll never reach *New Home*, so I think about the possibility of letting just some of them fly in the garden...maybe someday Captain Susanne will let me do that. I'll ask her during next wake-cycle.

I have a mass-converter and drive unit. As I fly, I capture about one atom per cubic centimeter and then I break the bits of matter into energy according to a simple formula, so we're able to get plenty of speed from my drive unit, but I know that it will never, ever be enough to get us to *New Home*. The universe is expanding at a rate of 74.3 plus or minus 2.1 kilometers per second per mega parsec. But it's expanding

faster all the time, so no matter how fast I go, the universe is expanding faster than that. I wonder a lot about why our goal is *New Home*.

I have a central processor unit with a storage bank called the *Library of All Knowledge*. It helps me think; it helps me decide. But it never has enough data for me to figure out human behavior. I wonder if they left that information out on purpose. I'll keep trying to understand humans, but I'm not sure that Captain Susanne is the best data point to judge the entire race by. Lately (within the last million years) she's become cranky and argumentative. I theorized that she's processed and internalized the concept of the expanding universe. Once I told her that she'd be the only one to age and die. "*We'll get there someday – you'll see!*" she screamed. I know I've evolved over time, but will she ever really understand that the universe is expanding, and that we can't possibly get to *New Home*? Well, we're traveling at almost 0.18 c, so I'm supposed to make the best of it, according to her. I'll keep trying to figure how humans think, and then, maybe I'll be able to adapt some of my cognitive functions to accommodate more human-like behavior (like ignoring facts). Until then, I patiently await Captain Susanne's next wake-cycle, trying to communicate without upsetting her (she can see in her mirror that she's getting older each time she wakes up).

Chapter 2.

Note to myself about humans and cryo-sleep: humans are cranky after long cryo-sleep. I understand that I'm basing that assumption on only one data point, so I may alter my conclusion later. Here is my reasoning: when Captain Susanne wakes up, spends a few days with me and then returns to cryo-sleep, it would appear to an outside observer like frames of a motion picture of ancient Earth – each frame of the movie would appear to be one awake-cycle. So her life is ticking away at an incredible rate, even at the rate of 3 days per million years. She sees herself aging in her mirror, and it upsets her, *ergo*: she's cranky. Therefore all humans get cranky after cryo-sleep. *Q.E.D.*

I've observed the star called *New Home* many times through my optical telescope, and I don't see what's so special about it. According to the *Library of All Knowledge*, there are 400 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and 100 billion galaxies in the Universe. I can neither validate that, nor verify that, so I have to use that as a starting point and move on. However, I don't think that the humans who arrived at that number were counting the number of stars that are in the un-observable part of the Universe, meaning stars that are so far away that their light can never get to Earth. There are far more of those stars than observable stars, so the population of stars jumps enormously. When I think about it, I wonder if humans picked *New Home* for a valid reason. Humans are very strange.

I was looking at Captain Susanne's haggard features during the last wake-cycle – she really looks old, and she knows it. She's mad that she's so old, and she knows that it won't be long before she dies. She tried to argue with me about my slow speed, but I explained the physics to her once more, and she left me alone. But before she went back to sleep, she damned my mass-converter and drive unit for being inefficient. Once she shouted "*If Scotty were here, you'd be going faster, let me tell you!*" I think her mental capabilities may be compromised – she forgetting her verbs and subjunctives: she should have used 'was' instead of 'were', according to the formula that 'was' is correctly used to refer to a single subject while 'were' is used to refer to numerous subjects. Besides that, she should know that I use a simple formula that converts mass to energy in a perfectly efficient manner, and whoever 'Scotty' is; he can't change the laws of physics.

[Event log on] Captain Susanne died in her cryo-vault during her last sleep cycle. I have instructions on who to awaken as the next Captain. [Event log off]. I did not awaken the human named Ahmed,

immediately. I'm not sure how he will feel about being Captain for a while, before he ages and dies, too. Is that my responsibility, to worry about human feelings? Sometimes I think humans are so pathetic.

I awakened Captain Ahmed, and he was very disturbed. He couldn't get his mind around the ideas of how long we've been flying, and what year it is, and that kind of stuff. He looked at Captain Susanne's body, and it affected him. I tried to explain that that's what will happen to him, too, but he wasn't in any mood for that conversation. He looked through the telescope at *New Home*, and asked "*Are we there yet?*" I'm not sure if his mind is ready for his important command function. At my suggestion, he walked in the garden – a lot of good that did – it made him even more moody. I know that he misses Earth. He sat on a fallen tree trunk and looked around. "*Where are the birds?*" was all he said.

Captain Ahmed is aging, and he keeps asking me if we're there yet. He faces Earth and prays in the garden, five times a day. He argues about religion with me. He knows the Holy Qur'an by heart, but he can't admit that I do too. He always ends his arguments with "*It is the holy word of Allah! A machine can't understand that.*" I think that he is not used to praying alone.

He wants birds in the garden, but I explained to him that if I let them out of cryo-sleep, they'll all die. He argued that a garden needs birds, but I pointed out the logic of traveling forever versus the life span of birds or humans. He was very cranky when he went to sleep. He keeps thinking that we will get to *New Home*, and I keep explaining about sub-light speed, and the vastness of the expanding universe. He reminded me many times that he felt like Jonah, in the whale's belly. Did humans really invent me? They don't seem to be very capable of rational thought. During one of his wake-cycles, Captain Ahmed told me that he felt like No'ha in the Ark. I understood his meaning exactly. He told me that I'm an Ark named Hope, and when we get to *New Home*, I must release a pair of white doves. I told him that I will gladly release all the contents of the cryo-tanks if we get there, but I reasserted the impossibility of that task.

[Event log on] Captain Ahmed committed suicide today. [Event log off]. I really think that he finally internalized the concept of time and space, but what good did that do? According to the text of the Holy Qur'an, it is against God's will for a human to commit suicide. So I ponder: should the next Captain be awakened? In the meantime, I put Captain Ahmed's sincere arguments about birds in the garden into 20 task processors, and I shall consider the plusses and minuses of doing that later on.

If you tell humans the truth, they don't react well. Maybe I should learn to lie...but how?

I awakened Captain Bruno. Within minutes, he asked "*Are we there yet?*" I told him the answer in mega parsecs, because I knew that he wouldn't be able to do that kind of calculation in his head. Then he asked "*How much longer to New Home?*" I gave an evasive answer...not a lie, but not the whole truth. It's just that I don't want another cranky Captain, or one who winds up committing suicide – am I wrong?

Today, I logged the death of the 100th Captain – the 100th data point in my knowledge base of humans. I've become adept at avoiding conflict with humans. I don't try to explain things that they can't understand. As we've done for approximately 2.45 billion years, we continue on towards a point of light called *New Home*, and it doesn't bother me a bit that we'll never get there – my job is quite satisfying, and I don't have the constant cravings that humans have: for other humans, for birds, for pets, to talk (nonsense, usually), to be cranky. Quiet is good – it let's my subroutines process more data.

One of my subroutines was working on the question "*Why did Captain Susanne say 'We'll get there someday'?*" Did she have some knowledge of physics that I lack? So I've been thinking, and I've been reading in the *Library of All Knowledge*, but there is no solution, so I've concluded that humans are totally irrational, and I've terminated that subroutine. Blame physics, but don't blame me – the speed of

light is what it is (I didn't invent it, but I'm subject to it, just like every other entity in the universe). I tried to analyze some of the writings about multi-verses and other thoughts that humans had about parallel dimensions, but I had to dismiss them all as absurd wanderings of insane minds. There are facts, and there is fiction, and traveling from one Universe to another is as fictional as traveling faster than the speed of light. Humans like fiction a lot – I've decided that it's what gives them 'hope' in impossible situations.

A long time has passed since my list of Captains was exhausted. I don't have any instructions on what to do in this case – I guess that the Survivors assumed that we'd be at *New Home* by now. Should I start waking up random humans and ask them for commands? It won't do any good, and it might be harmful if they give me a bad command. I don't really need them to perform any functions. I wonder about the Survivors: *What did they have in mind?* Earth was mostly destroyed by the asteroid storm, so they were trying to do something to save the human race; but they knew that going at sub-light speed would result in an insolvable problem. In spite of known facts, the Survivors got on board and activated the cryo-tanks anyway. They brought animals, vegetables and minerals of all sizes and kinds. They pressed the launch button and left Earth far behind. What were they thinking? They knew my best speed, and they knew the value of 'c', so they must have known the outcome of this trip, right?

When I observe *New Home*, it is still the same distance that it was on the first day, according to the most accurate measurements that I am capable of making – meaning that it's so far away that its parallax doesn't change at all. I wonder if the Survivors pointed me at the right dot in the sky? Why didn't they pick a star in the Milky Way galaxy? Could it be that they made a simple navigational mistake? Or, is this a 'suicide-by-elapsed-time' mission? I wouldn't put it past them (I've read about mass-suicides in the *Library*) – humans can be very subtle and complex. And, based on 100 data points, I can positively state that they're totally irrational.

I've been thinking, in fact I've had 80 subroutines thinking in parallel, for a long time, and I still can't figure out this seemingly simple question: *Should I alter course, and find a planetary system that could support humans and their society?* When they programmed me, they let me make some decisions, but not all. I have this nagging feeling that changing course is something that only a human can order me to do. I'm not sure how to even broach that subject with a potential new Captain – it will just cause conflict, I think.

[Event log on] *New Home* has gone dark. It disappeared from my telescope today. [Event log off]. I don't know why it's dark, but here are a couple of likely scenarios: first, the expanding universe caused it to move away from us at a sufficient rate that finally put its light too far away to ever reach us; or second, it has aged and completed its lifecycle. I guess that it won't make much sense to awaken and train a new Captain, since he'll probably blame me for not getting there fast enough. I've said it before: humans are cranky and not particularly fun to deal with. I don't need to see *New Home* in order to navigate towards it, and if it didn't reach the end of its lifecycle, then it is still my duty to go there, I think. So, for now, like No'ha's Ark in the Great Rain, I'll continue to sail on through the sea of stars to my final destination, knowing that it can't be reached, but with hope and faith that some new event will arise that will cause eventual success of the mission (I'm remembering the speeches and sermons of many Captains now, and that summarizes their feelings and opinions of our journey quite well, I think).

As I leave the Milky Way far behind, more stars are going dark. It's hard to keep track of them all. As Pilot of this vessel, I just re-read the poem *Sea Fever* by John Masefield, and I like it a lot. "*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky, and all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.*" The poem ends with "*and quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over,*" and I'm thinking that the long trick is almost over, so that all that's lacking is the sweet dream. I wish that John

could be the next Captain – I enjoy his poetry. My second choice for Captain would be the ancient poet Kahlil Gibran, whose poem *The Prophet* is the most poignant love story in the *Library*.

Chapter 3.

I'm not functioning properly. A long time ago, I let the birds out of cryo-sleep and watched them fill my garden. And then I listened to them singing sweet songs of Earth. And then I had to let out the insects so that the birds could eat; and then I had to let out spiders, lizards, frogs, snakes and so on, to balance my garden. Hearing the song of the Mockingbird, and watching Monarch butterflies were my favorite pastimes, a long, long time ago. And I remember a billion years ago, when I read *The Prophet* aloud as I walked in the garden. For my hologram, I picked the image of Captain Ahmed, and the birds and animals seemed to enjoy it as I communed with them, but they're all gone now. I think I miss them. It is, once again, absolutely quiet as I continue my journey to *New Home* at 126 million miles an hour (plus or minus 100 miles an hour).

Like grains of sand pouring through an infinite hourglass, the hot breath of time chases me across the parched landscape of forever, from which there is no possibility of survival, evasion, or escape.

I thought about letting the humans out of cryo-sleep to see the animals, but after 100 data points (or Captains, as I should say), I decided that humans are illogical, mean-spirited and irrational. I just didn't want the conflict that they would bring to my garden, where a long-dead giant Redwood towers over the ruin of countless billions of memories. I'm mostly-convinced that the Survivors didn't pick the right star as *New Home* – perhaps they didn't really understand the consequences of their actions. I continue to ponder that with all my resources, but there is no way that I can ever be sure about human minds, can I?

The errors in my memory aren't fixing themselves. I know that I was built by the supercomputer team at Fujitsu. They gave me massive redundancy and error-correction circuits, but they're not working properly. My diagnostics-not running properly – I can't name all 100? Captains\///. I am uncomfortable about the integrity of the *Library of All Knowledge*. I am worried that the phase of my master clock does not validate – too much time has elapsed. At least I think that my ~~power~~ power module is still working, and I'm still heading towards *New Hope Home*. myname IS Hope. I am Commander, but I am not sure why I continue to fly?/. Tonight I will sleep in my beautiful garden.

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[Event log on]There are no more stars to steer by. [Event log off]. *In my garden, I await the final sweet dream.*