



TANCREDI

James Palumbo



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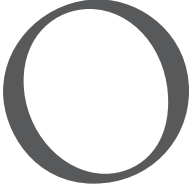
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I

TANCREDI SETS OFF TO SAVE THE WORLD

nce upon a time, in the not too far distant future, there lived a young man called Tancredi who didn't conform to the conventions of the world in which he lived. This was just as well, as Earth was in a dire situation. All the planet's inhabitants suffered from the incurable disease of short-term thinking. Its symptoms were the ceaseless grabbing for gain and gratification. Although the fruits of this behaviour were rendered meaningless by death, no one could conceive of any other way of living.

On the day Tancredi was born, scientists discovered a new star. It was so small it had gone unnoticed for millennia. Stargazers named it Surprise, in the spirit of a little astrological joke. On closer inspection they made another finding, this one less amusing. After a lifetime of obscurity the diminutive star intended to draw attention to itself. Activity on its surface indicated that one day it would go supernova. A star, so insignificant it had escaped detection, was destined to be the instrument of Armageddon across the Universe.

Tancredi was raised by an uncle, who was an elegantly dressed, upstanding citizen, but mean-spirited. His parents had been inventors, killed in a space accident. Their deaths had an unusual effect on Tancredi: he became acutely aware of his own mortality. This went beyond a psychological reaction to the loss of his parents. Tancredi realised that since death was inevitable, he might as well try to achieve something in life. From this he developed a mission – he would save the planet, an objective of unthinkable altruism.

Meanwhile, his uncle had calculated that if Tancredi had inherited his parents' ingenuity, he might profit with a new wardrobe.

The teenager locked himself in his room, littering it with strange drawings and mathematical calculations. Tancredi had no friends. Birthdays and school were forgotten by the sartorial miser; both were an expense. Tancredi was indifferent to pleasure, hardly ate, never spoke except to his dog. His sole aim was to find a means to accomplish his quest. He began with a series of inventions.

His first creation reflected his struggle to find meaning in a world obsessed with the quick and easy. The CrapOmeter was a machine programmed to identify myriad word combinations bearing the reek of excrement, its function to hold a mirror to the face of man's conceits. On identification of an offending phrase, it sang out: 'Crap Warning!' But it was not a success, as mankind was addicted to this form of communication.

His uncle was beset with worry. Had his investment in the child been unwise?

Oblivious to these concerns, the young inventor persisted in his experiments. He adapted the device to serve an even higher purpose. Worn on an arm strap, the MoronOmeter acted as an eye into the world of its user. It too had a warning function. If the user was doing something moronic, like watching reality TV, a voice intoned: 'Moron! Stop it!'

Much to Tancredi's surprise, and his uncle's delight, the machine was a sell-out, but not for the reasons he might have wished. Although the MoronOmeter was intended as a life-enhancing technology, it actually encouraged the behaviour it sought to prevent.

Just as pigs love filth, morons revel in their condition. The global brotherhood of swearers, alcoholics, drug takers and trouble makers were at last united with a purpose – who could be the most moronic? Foulness was now something at which to excel. Soon there was a Moron Master League, in which armies of the professionally unemployed battled to secure the honorific conferred by his machine.

Tancredi was now in his prime, a light-heavy-weight with rimless inventor's glasses perched on a handsome face, and thick hair falling in every direction. Although his uncle had spent most of the profits from his invention on silk kimonos and exotic linens, Tancredi had enough left to buy a ticket on a space

ship making its maiden voyage to the stars. He was terrified at the prospect of the journey, but knew there was no choice. Earth was a temple of expediency dedicated to the god of thoughtlessness. He must travel to fulfil his task.

Inexperienced and unsupported, the best he could do was launch himself in what might be the right direction. He hoped that determination, along with a little good fortune, would get him to where he needed to go. It was a troubled but purposeful young man who said goodbye to his uncle and the feckless people of Earth.



II

THE SPACE SHIP INVINCIBLE

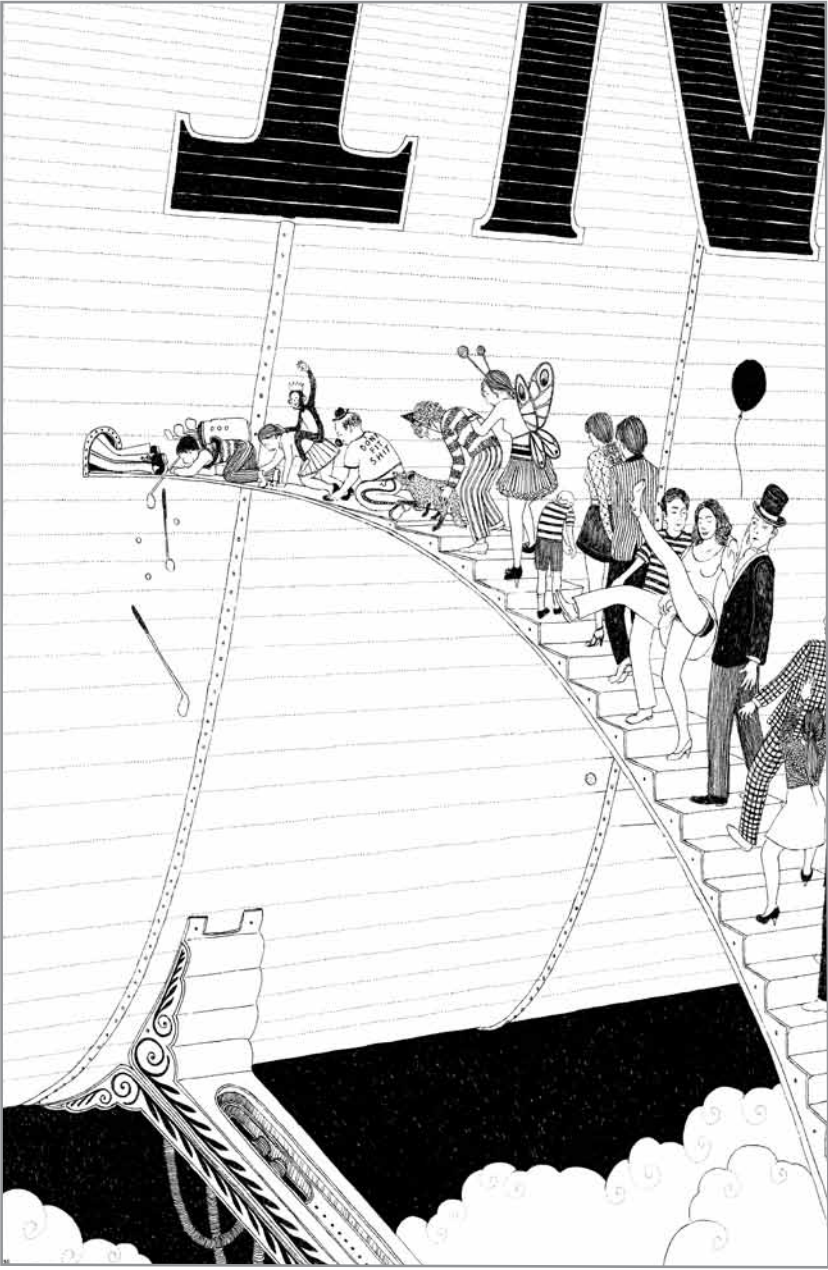
Tancredi looked up at the immensity of the ship's pin-shaped hull, a grey sea of shining metal dotted with windows and escape pods. He performed a somersault on the spot. Silly behaviour was the best antidote to anxiety. Before him was the spectacular vista of the mast, skyscraper-tall, disappearing into space. How would the monster get airborne?

Despite the size of the *Invincible*, embarkation was through a tiny portal set into its side, through which passengers were obliged to crawl on their bellies. It would take hours for everyone to board.

'Pirates, Sir,' said the ship's First Officer, noticing Tancredi's look of bewilderment. 'When everyone's in, pins will be set into the inner door as part of the ship's state-of-the-art defence system.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'Not at all. It's the latest technology. Our Astro-Voyager is the first to use it. When we're all happily boarded, you'll see how it works. You'll be amazed



by the beauty of the system. Simplicity combined with complexity to create harmonious unity.'

He beamed with the delight of somebody who has just recited a stock answer for the first time.

The First Officer went on to explain that pirate ships roamed space assessing the defences of target vessels. If a ship was too well-defended, the pirates would leave it alone. The *Invincible* was equipped with millions of undulating pins, attached to her inner hull. So long as they vibrated in unison, the ship was rendered invisible. The circuit was completed at the passenger door, where a guard was posted to defend against sabotage.

'When we get airborne you'll feel a jolt as the system engages,' he continued, wiggling his hips to illustrate the point. 'The pins will be undulating in harmony, and we'll disappear completely. Poof! We'll be undetectable.'

His hand swept the air like a conjurer performing a vanishing trick.

Tancredi felt nervous as he squeezed himself through the portal. In his eagerness to escape one mad world, was he crawling into another?

He inched along a tunnel, emerging into an atrium the size of a cricket pitch. His anxiety was not calmed by what he found – his fellow passengers in an ecstasy of whoops, claps and cheers, worshipping the ship's invincibility. Some were performing a can-can for no discernible reason.

Suddenly, Tancredi felt a blow to the back of his head. He had been hit by the slide section of a trombone. A band consisting of trombones, bass tubas, piccolos and kettle drums was marching up and down the deck, playing a single note. The bandsmen wore yellow costumes, with helmets from which sprouted gigantic 'I's. They were followed by a troupe of cheerleaders dressed in similar garb. The girls high-kicked and careened in every direction, linked arms and chanted:

'Invincible! Invincible! Yes! We're invincible!'

In their train appeared a trolley filled with all kinds of memorabilia, from little models of the ship to lollipops in the shape of the defensive pins. There was no short-term thinking here.

Presently, Tancredi turned his attention to a giant screen in the atrium. This showed the figure of the Captain, a man of Italian origin named Pizza, bustling about the ship's control room with all the gravitas of his position.

He appeared to be making adjustments to the ship's instruments. The room was, in fact, a stage set: the *Invincible* was operated by the Captain's thoughts.

'Welcome, spees cruisers,' Pizza boomed through a speaker, 'to the inaugural voyage of the *Invincible*, the safest ship in the univairs!'

Urged on by the band, the passengers cheered, and cries of *'Invincible!'* rang out.

‘Soon we begin our spees hadventure.’

He turned towards a panel with a button set in its centre.

‘As I press this button – *Avanti! La! We go!*’

The passengers gave another cheer, and awaited the moment of lift-off.

The button, of course, did nothing. The Captain pushed it with a flourish and thought ‘Go’. Immediately the *Invincible’s* engines roared into life. Tancredi felt the deck vibrate beneath his feet. This was the bad part, take-off, that feeling of airlessness, of being an insignificant dot in a giant flying capsule.

Tancredi considered grabbing hold of a deck rail, then remembered a calming technique he’d invented. He began to tap the side of his nose with his index finger, telegraphing a soothing message to his brain. As the vibrations worsened, his tapping became more intense.

‘Time to activate our new technology. Pin defence mechanism, engage!’

With this, the screen showed a picture of the First Officer. He had taken his place alongside the Captain and other senior crew on stage. Sure enough there was a jolt, then the officers performed a synchronised wiggle for good effect.

The passengers gawped as the picture on the screen changed to one of the vessel. As the monster moved upwards, Tancredi saw a cloud of space vapour

cascade from its fiery engines. Just as the ship reached the doorway to space,
it hung in the air, as if uncertain what to do. Suddenly the
screen went blank.

'Ha! Now we're invisible.

Per favore, enjoy
the trip.'

