

## **The Man Who Fell into a Dinosaur** *by Jirat Prasertsup*

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He woke to find himself lying on an inclined floor in a narrow space, stuffy and oven-like. A shaft of sunlight at noon snuck through a crack overhead and shone into his eyes. It was the only source of light from the ceiling, which hovered about two meters above. Feeling dizzy, his body was soaked in sweat with every inch aching. It could have been that someone threw him in here, or he might have violently flung himself into something, ending up down here, weak and feeble.

After a few moments of recollection, he concluded that the latter was true: he had fallen into a dinosaur's belly.

It was a sculpture of a Tyrannosaurus, erected in the middle of a traffic island under a footbridge. He was accustomed to the sight of it on his way home. Last night, or perhaps the night before, a friend had invited him to stay over to sober up and offered him a ride home the next morning. But he stubbornly insisted on walking home by himself, ignoring the fact that it was well past curfew. Intoxication might have been to blame for his obstinacy, leading him to cross the empty road and stand alone on the traffic island.

Decades ago, a skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus was excavated here, in this town. Overnight it inspired a national craze for paleontological expeditions. Local authorities allotted enormous budgets for the construction of museums and tourist attractions. The newly discovered dinosaur sub-species was glorified as the town's newest mascot. They even campaigned on the pun 'Thailand-nosaurus' in hopes it would become a catchword to attract international tourists. That was a few years before he was born.

Owing to these earlier events, the dinosaur sculpture stood, perched in front of the footbridge over which no pedestrians ever crossed, for as long as he could remember. Its only use was as an understructure for the lavish decorative arch erected in honour of the king. The arch, given its grandeur and fortuitous location, posed as the town's entrance gate. Years passed and the throne was bequeathed from one king to another, but the Tyrannosaurus always remained.

It has been said that once the blindfold is lifted, you can never see things in the same light ever again. He realized this now, gazing upon the familiar landscape of his childhood. The roads leading into the town centre were edged by numerous

lampposts sculpted in the shape of a mythical beast, part human and part bird, as well as a dinosaur sculpture, an ornate arch, a large portrait of the king, and CCTV cameras stooping in the shadows of the footbridge. He watched them with a grin before bursting out into hysterical laughter that eventually turned into tears.

He wasn't sure if it was late Saturday or Sunday when he last spoke with his father over a video call. His father smiled, assuring him that he was much better now and that he would recover soon. A few days later, however, he learned that his father had been lying. A neighbour called to deliver the bad news: his father had died alone at home, just like the many hundreds of thousands of other fathers, mothers, and loved ones who had lost their lives to the rampant virus that surged time and time again, out of the government's control.

Though he wasn't sure what day it was, he vividly remembered the yellow shirt his father wore the last time they talked. No, actually, worn during all of their conversations. Despite his tireless efforts to factually illustrate to his father that the country's plunge into a state of near disintegration was not caused solely by the government's ineptitude, his father never listened and held onto his faith in the shirt's colour until his very last breath.

That night the roads were empty. The lampposts of golden mythical beasts cast their light for him alone, as though he had the entire road to himself. Suddenly, he started climbing up onto the dinosaur, clambering up the spine from its tail. He aimed to straddle its neck, the closest he could get to the king's portrait, which was centred on the extravagant arch.

What compelled him was a mystery. It was not misery, rage, rancour, or a sudden urge for provocation; he only wished to see the man in the portrait up close. Once he reached the sculpture's neck and turned on his feet so as to lean against the head of the dinosaur, he heard a cracking sound. In a split second, the brittle fiberglass surface under his feet surrendered to his weight, and he fell through.

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After learning of Uncle Pol's death, I sent my condolences via Facebook messenger. I regretted not being able to attend his funeral due to the current interprovincial travel restrictions.

I was teeming with words to write, hoping to reminisce and make up for all the years we had lost touch. Eventually, I decided to scrap the words and instead send a simple message of condolences.

Uncle Pol was his father. We were best friends from the time we were small, and his father was like a close family member. Uncle Pol never knew that my

relationship with his son was romantic, not even after we finally parted ways. I haven't seen him since.

The news of Uncle Pol's death brought with it a nostalgic glimpse of the past, and as I looked back, I realized that until this very day my love for his son had never waned...

He was kind, sensitive, and caring. We had been enjoying a congenial relationship for over a decade, when one night he came home from work and spotted the newspaper that I had laid over the potty pad for Fuse, our 3-year-old poodle. He immediately went berserk. On the page of the newspaper appeared a large portrait of the great man he wholeheartedly worshipped and praised as his other 'father'.

As he stepped into the room, Fuse had just finished peeing on the paper and was about to move its bowels right on the great man's face.

I pleaded my innocence. We kept our dog indoors—how can one potty pad be enough to absorb all the excrement? An old newspaper was lying around, so I laid it on top of the pad like I always did. I didn't even look at it, and even if I had, how could such an incident forever be avoided? Everywhere we laid our eyes—newspapers, magazines—there he was, the great man staring back at us. But my partner didn't listen, and he condemned me for my irredeemable sin.

Anybody would laugh at such a situation, but that was how we broke up.

I was crushed, and my world crumbled. I wept and whimpered, begging for his forgiveness, but it seemed he hadn't only fallen out of love with me. He had come to despise me completely. And no matter how much time had passed—with coups staged, prime ministers replaced, a global pandemic emerging hand-in-hand with an economic depression, when his most revered exemplar of decency began to morph into a dubious figure challenged by younger generations, and even when he began to share news and post statuses on Facebook questioning the legitimacy of the institutions that govern this country—he never forgave me. He never replied to my innumerable messages. His absolute resolution put me to shame. Eventually I gave up and faded away.

News of Uncle Pol's death prompted me to write again. As I said, I tried to keep it simple, tone down the sentimentality, reduce it to sincere condolences.

I thought that, at least out of courtesy, he would reply, and I would have been content knowing that he acknowledged the fact that I was there for him at a time of deepest grief.

Anyways, a week passed and he hadn't even read my message. I figured the funeral must have kept him away from Facebook, so I decided to telephone, only to be greeted with an automatic response, saying he could not be reached at the moment.

I tried to remain optimistic; who knew, he might have changed his telephone number. Still, I couldn't help but think that he might have blocked my number—to him and his memories, I might really be dead.

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The crack in the dinosaur's neck was within reach, but his injuries were so severe that he couldn't stand on his feet. After excruciating attempts to grab his phone from his back pocket, he was met with another of life's greatest disappointments: the phone's batteries were dead.

There was not much else he could do. He repeatedly pounded on the baking hot walls and shouted for help during the hushed afternoons when every so often a car would pass by. The only sound that kept him company was the loud chirping of birds that had built their nests in the nooks and crannies of the arch.

A tiny glimpse of hope came one night with the sound of a motorcycle pulling up nearby. A teenage couple ascended the stairs and started making out on the footbridge. He shouted at the top of his lungs, but the moans of the young couple were louder. Finally, when their love-making was over, the resounding cry for help from the dinosaur's abdomen reached them. In a twisted turn of events, however, the girl started to scream. The sound of rushed footsteps soon followed, then the roar of the motorcycle starting and hurriedly speeding away.

It was not until many weeks later that he was found. It was a torrid afternoon when an elderly homeless man was crossing the streets. Perhaps the desolateness of the footbridge was too uninviting, or the old man was too weak to climb the stairs, but he chose to cross the street below instead. Halfway across the road, the viral disease grabbed hold of his respiratory system, and the poor man never reached the other side.

A truck driver caught sight of him lying in the middle of the road; he turned the steering wheel sharply to avoid running over the body and crashed into the dinosaur sculpture on the traffic island. The sculpture was shattered. A piece of debris flew overhead and smashed into the arch, causing the whole structure to collapse.

The volunteer rescue team arrived only to be met with a baffling scene. All the passengers in the truck were safe, except for the severely injured truck driver.

Oddly, there were two corpses at the scene. One was the elderly man who, having narrowly avoided being run over, was now dead from asphyxia. The other was an unknown man; no one had a clue how he got there. He was in his early thirties and seemed to have been dead for quite some time. His body was sprawled out over sculpture's fragments and splintered wooden planks that had fallen from the arch. His corpse was gaunt and shrivelled, like sun-dried meat, and covered in a powdery dust, reminiscent of a fossil freshly unearthed.