

TRICERATOPS

By Kono Tensei

English translation by David Lewis

The father and son were returning from cycling. They had set out together on a Sunday of deepening autumn, heading for the cycling course along the river. On the way back they had been forced to burrow through the exhaust and dust of the national highway before finally reaching the residential area a mile from home. Their house lay beyond this slightly aging neighborhood, on the other side of the small hill, in the new subdivision.

It was only a little past seven, but the autumn sun was sinking quickly and darkness had begun to gather about them. The father and son stopped their bikes beneath the yellow light of the streetlamps and breathed the cool air in deeply.

“Are you okay, Dad?”

“My knees are ready to fall apart. Let me rest a minute.”

“I don’t feel a thing.”

“I guess you wouldn’t,” said the father. He smiled wryly as he lit a cigarette.

“Somebody’s making curry!” his son cried suddenly. “I’m starving to death. Can’t we go now? It’s just a little bit farther.”

“I guess so.”

The father crushed out the cigarette with the tip of his shoe and put his hands back on the black handlebars. It was at the instant the father and son had put one foot to the pedals, at the instant they were looking down the road ahead of them, were beginning to gather momentum, a huge shadow darted across the intersection no more than five or six meters away, shaking the very earth as it passed.

It had the feeling of mass, of power, of a bulldozer, of a ten-ton truck.

Though its passage took but an instant, it indelibly burned on their eyes an image of thick, clearly animal skin, an almost slimy sheen, the

quiver of flesh and muscle.

Hands still tightly gripping the handlebars, the father and son lowered their feet from the pedals and stared.

Thick dust swirled beneath the street lamps. The tremors gradually subsided.

It seemed a subterranean rumbling still growled about them.

Then, quite abruptly, even that rumbling stopped.

It stopped with a slightly unnatural air, almost as though a tape recording had been suddenly switched off, but in any case it had ceased, and their surroundings filled again with crying babies, the smell of dinner cooking, raucous TV commercials.

Shall we . . . ?

The father asked with his eyes, and his son nodded.

They stopped their bikes at the intersection and looked ahead.

A scattering of streetlamps threw down hazy light. Traces of gas and watermain work were everywhere around them. The road stretched on with its splitting asphalt, returned to silence.

“Where’d it go?” the son asked.

“Aaah.”

The father shook his head.

The two of them were silent for a while.

“Dad, what do you think it was?”

“I don’t know.”

“I almost thought it was a rhinoceros. It was too big to be a cow. It looked seven or eight meters long. And if my eyes weren’t fooling me, it was twice as high as this fence. That would make it three meters, uh-uh, even taller.”

“Aaah,” said the father again. “I guess a rhino might get loose from the zoo sometimes. It’s not impossible. But didn’t you see two horns on that thing’s head?”

“Horns? Yeah, it did look like two horns.”

“So it couldn’t be a rhinoceros.”

“So it was a cow after all? A bull?”

“It must be. You don’t see many of them anymore, but it’s my guess a bull got loose from some farm or pasture near here.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if it keeps on like that, there’s going to be one whale of an accident when it meets a truck.”

“Yeah.”

The father and son looked back down the road. They listened. But aside from the cheerful night noises with their tales of domestic peace and tranquillity, there were no hints of anything amiss in the town.

Almost as though it never happened.

The father shook his head.

If I’d been alone, I’d have thought I was hallucinating.

After a long while the father and son pedaled silently and hurried along the road home. The street began its gradual ascent, and they stopped several times to rest.

The town spread out behind them. They turned and looked back, but there were no signs of anything unusual, no accusing shadows, and nowhere a trembling of the earth, a rising plume of dust.

“Dad, did you see the tail?” the son asked suddenly.

“Mmmm, what about it?”

“Didn’t you see it? A superfat tail?”

The father and son reached the crest of the hill and passed through the last sparse copse of trees.

Suddenly their own subdivision lay before them.

The lights were on in all the new houses of the new town, but somehow—perhaps because of the sharp glare of the scattered mercury-vapor lamps—the homes seemed to hunch stockily against the earth.

The mother had dinner ready for them.

“Oh, come on now. Was it really that big?”

Chopsticks in midair, the mother eyed the father and son across the dinner table.

“It was! It was so big I thought it was a rhino.”

“Well, it’s terrible if it’s true. The whole town must be in an uproar.”

“Actually there wasn’t any at all. Even the running noise stopped, just like that.”

“That’s right. It stopped like we’d never heard a thing.”

“But that’s impossible. Oh, I see now. That’s why you two were so interested in the news all of a sudden. And did they say anything about it on the news?”

“Not a thing. But it may be too early, too soon, for it to get on the news.”

“Boy, it’s gotta get on the news! Look, it’s seven, eight meters long for sure, and at least three meters high.”

“I think you’re just exaggerating. Really, have you ever seen or even heard of a cow that big? This isn’t a joke, is it? You’re not playing games with me?”

“We are not. Anyway, we saw it for sure. Didn’t we, Dad?”

“Absolutely. If that was a cow, it’d be a cinch there’d be steaks for five hundred people or more.”

“Oh, stop it this instant! You *are* joking.”

The mother laughed shrilly, and the father and son looked at each other, their expressions strangely vague.

After a while the father also laughed, dryly, shortly.

“Well, it hardly matters. There was a little earthquake; then that thing went zipping by. So we got a good shock out of it. Maybe the shadows threw us off, made it look bigger than it was. All that’s really certain is that it wasn’t a dog or a pig or some animal like that, but a really big rascal, right?”

“Yeah.” The son nodded, still not quite satisfied, and began to work his chopsticks.

A variety show was on the television screen. A skimpily clad Eurasian girl was weaving her arms and legs as she sang, almost howled, in a strange, strained voice. The wife laughed shrilly again.

“What is it?”

“The singer, she just blew her nose!”

“Her nose?”

“Oh, come on! You were just telling me about it yesterday, weren’t you? You said this girl sometimes blows her nose when she’s straining too hard. I thought I’d never heard anything so stupid in my life, but really just now she blew her nose. I, oh, it’s too *funny!*”

The mother rolled with laughter again.

The father and son smiled tightly and lowered their eyes.

* * * *

The father stayed up nearly half that night, drinking. His wife and son had gone to bed, but he, somehow unable to sleep, rose and, putting his legs up to the electric heater in the living room, propped himself up on one arm and began to drink leisurely away at the whiskey he poured little by little into his glass. The last news of the day started on the television, left on since early evening, but, as expected, there was no mention of the shadow they had seen.

Were they really just seeing things?

The alcohol seeped through every cell in his aching muscles, slowly tanning his exhausted body like leather. At least that was how it felt to the father as he continued to watch the shifting screen.

At some point he dozed off.

Someone was blowing his nose. Gradually the noise grew rougher, increasing in violence until it sounded like bellows. *This is no joke. No singer's going to blow her nose like that. This is one heck of a dream.* Half-asleep, half-awake, his mind spun idly.

Eventually the noise was joined by a low moan, shameless and huge, as though echoing from inside a mammoth cave. *No way. This isn't that singer's voice. What's going on?*

His eyes snapped open.

A moan.

A noise like a bellows.

And the sounds continued.

He looked at the television set. The station was already off the air, and the screen held a sandstorm of cracking light. He turned it off and listened.

The noise was coming from outside.

The father peered through a crack in the curtains.

Scraggly potted plants filled the little garden, no larger than a cat's forehead. Beyond the hedge loomed a huge black shadow, with an eye that glittered piercingly in the dark.

It did look a little like a rhinoceros.

But the horn on its nose was even sharper than a rhino's, and beneath it the mouth curved like a raptor's beak, and from that mouth puffed violent white breath like a steam locomotive.

The head was fully a third the size of the body, resembling a buffalo's. Two long horns jutted out like spears, but the turned-up, helmetlike shield between the head and abdomen was like that of no other animal he had ever seen.

A door opened.

The father turned to find his son standing in the room. The boy had pulled his trousers on over his pajamas, and he looked soberly at his father as he pushed one arm into his sweater.

"Is it there?" the son asked in a low voice.

"Yes."

The father jerked his jaw in the direction of the shadow outside.

The mammoth animal scratched the fence twice, three times with the tips of its horns, then slowly swung its side toward them. It began to walk. Like a heavy tank moving out for a night battle.

The dark brown back, the hips, the thick, heavy tail like a giant lizard's trailing down from those hips, all these passed slowly through their field of vision. The quiver of muscle beneath thick skin.

"That's not a cow or rhino," said the son, his voice sticking in his throat.

"It seems to be a dinosaur. That's all I can think of."

"If it's really a dinosaur, then I've seen it in my books. It's a famous one. Not *Allosaurus*, not *Stegosaurus*—"

"This one's beak is pointed, but its teeth don't look like much."

"It has a mouth like a beak?"

"That's right."

"Then it's *Triceratops*! Isn't that right, Dad! *Triceratops*. It means the three-horned dinosaur. The nose horn and two on its forehead, that makes three, right!"

“Then that’s it. *Triceratops*.”

Triceratops, living and fighting and fighting again in an endless struggle for survival in the late Cretaceous, Mesozoic world seventy million years before, domain of history’s most savage beast, the carnivorous monster *Tyrannosaurus rex*. *Triceratops*, that massive herbivore, possessing the most powerful armament of any animal ever known. *Triceratops*, *that* triceratops, was even now walking leisurely down the road before their very eyes.

“Shall we go outside?”

“Sure!”

Father and son slipped through the entrance door of their home. It was chilly outside, but there was no wind.

Ten meters away the small mountains of triceratop’s hips swayed steadily forward, dragging a tail like a telephone pole. They couldn’t see the beast’s face beyond the expansive sweep of the shield. But from triceratop’s posture they could well imagine its cautious advance, front legs crouched, head lowered, body in readiness for the slightest sign of danger.

At last triceratops reached the end of the street. Before it stood a stone fence and to the left and right, walls of brick and stone.

Hell head back this way.

Father and son drew back between the gateposts, but in the next instant they stopped, rooted speechless in their tracks.

Triceratops did not stop. It put its head up against the stone wall and sank smoothly into the hard surface. The shield vanished, the front legs and the slice of backbone above them vanished, the hips and hind legs vanished, the tail from base to tip, inch by steady inch, simply disappeared.

* * * *

Morning came, and the father, setting off to work, and the son, setting off for school, both left the house at the same time.

The father and son exchanged glances and walked to the stone fence at the end of the road. The wall stood solidly, blocking their way.

They fingered it, but found nothing unusual.

Nor was there a single break in the mortar-painted sides, the window glass of the house beyond the wall.

“I’ve read about dimensional faults and stuff like that,” the son said.

“Mmmm. But those are all just theories.”

“Theories?”

“When you say that something you can’t prove might be this way or that way, that’s a theory.*”

“So there aren’t any dimensional faults?”

“Well, someone just thought them up. They might really exist, and they might not. If you figure they exist, then the surface of this wall must be right about the fault line. Between our world and the world of *Triceratops*, seventy million years ago. But really you can try explaining it just about any way you please.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, you could think that our world and *Triceratops*’s world exist simultaneously. Instead of popping in and out of a fault line every now and then, we’re really both here all the time with just a bit of a lag in between. That would explain why we can somehow look through into that other world, and they can look through to us. It’d be just that fine a difference.”

“Huh?”

“I started thinking about it when there was a thick, warm animal smell in the house this morning. And this isn’t the first time, you know. It’s been like this for at least two or three months now. The people living here must be experiencing the same thing.”

“Triceratops went inside their house?”

“You’ve got it now.”

“So can they see it, too? Just like us?”

“Maybe. But you know how people’s heads are. We try to deny things that we think are impossible. It’s a kind of protective instinct. So even if we somehow do see it, or feel it, we usually just shut it out automatically, choose not to see it, not to do it. If we see it again, two, three times maybe, then common sense comes to the rescue and we laugh it off. ‘Nerves.’ ‘Boy, what a crazy idea!’ And that’s the end of it.”

“And if it still doesn’t stop?”

“Then people stop accepting you. You can’t have a productive social life anymore.”

The boy shook his head lightly from side to side, then laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing much. I was just thinking about Mom. I didn’t tell her what I saw last night. Can you guess what would happen to me if I did?”

The father laughed, too.

“Well, she’d sure put you on the rack. That is, if it wasn’t right after she’d just seen the same thing herself.”

“I guess I can’t tell any of my friends about it, either.”

“Of course not. Now let’s get going. We can talk it over when we get home.”

The father and son started walking.

Occasionally speaking and laughing happily together.

And every time they met a neighbor:

“Good morning!”

“Good morning!”

Scattering high-spirited greetings all about them.

* * * *

The father and son often saw dinosaurs after that.

Sometimes, glancing up at the sunset, they'd glimpse the shadow of a huge winged creature like *Pteranodon*, weaving across the sky. But the only earth-hugging dinosaurs they saw were triceratopses.

Apparently the local habitat was best suited to *Triceratops*. The beast asleep in the garage, its head so perfectly aligned with the family car that it seemed a strange horned automobile was snoring humorously away, the huge dinosaur passing over the head of a small child crying fretfully by the roadside, all these apparitions were triceratopses.

Sometimes the father and son would even see them—though only transparently—walking the sunbathed road in full daylight.

Nor was it only what they could see. The cloying animal smell, the low grunting. Running nonstop to the station on ice-stretched, frigid mornings as they gasped and choked on impossible flower pollen. Listening to the distant, bassoonlike cries of a female triceratops in heat, howling through the long night.

You and your dad seem awfully close these days. Anything special going on?

There were days when his mother would badger him, but the son simply grinned.

"Nothing special," was all he'd say.

It was on one of those days, yet another Sunday evening when they had gone cycling about the neighborhood, though not as far as on the day they first met triceratops. After passing through the copse on the top of the hill and coming out above their subdivision, the father and son came to a stop, finding themselves speechless and unable to move.

A triceratops huddled superimposed over every house in the town, their skin—brilliant green beneath the mercury lamps—gently rising and falling with their breathing. Occasionally one would open its eyes in a narrow slit, and every time the lids raised, the pupils would glitter in brilliant rose, perhaps because of rhodopsin pigment like that found in some species of crocodile.

It was a scene of phantasmal beauty, like the winking of giant fireflies.

“Do you suppose the land over there’s the same as the town?”

“Maybe they can see us and feel us like we feel them. Maybe they’re just trying to keep warm.”

“You may be right.”

“Isn’t it a weird feeling? Everyone’s going to work or leaving for school from a dinosaur’s belly, and they’re coming home to the belly, eating dinner, watching TV.”

“But that’s how it is.”

“Hey, my room’s in its butt.”

“Don’t let it get to you.”

“But it’s really peaceful somehow, isn’t it? They may look fierce, but I’ve never seen a triceratops fighting.”

“They hardly ever run, either.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Just the one we saw that first time, in the other town,”

“I wonder what he was running for.”

“Anyway, it’s peaceful enough today.”

“There’s nothing better than peace.”

* * * *

The peace did not last long.

It was a day when yellow sand blown from the continent filled the air and turned the sun the color of blood, a harsh, unpleasant day.

It was the day that the son, looking casually toward the national highway from the hilltop while returning from a friend’s house, saw a dozen dinosaurs running on strange hind legs—like ostriches — long tails held high, kicking up clouds of dust.

“Those were tyrannosauruses for sure. Superfat back legs and little skinny front ones like decorations. Pointed mouths. Anyway, tyrannosauruses. And they were really moving fast. They came running at least as far as the station.”

“We’re just a little way from the station here, but I didn’t feel anything like tyrannosaurus when I was coming home just now. Even the triceratops in the garage just opened his eyes a bit and stared at me like he always does.”

“But I really did see them.”

“Maybe they ran right through town and went somewhere else?”

“But I wonder why they would do that. They went out of sight near the station.”

“Hmmm.”

The father crossed his arms.

“In that case maybe they’re still milling around there somewhere. Or maybe—”

“Let’s go see,” said the son.

“You two are up to something again, aren’t you?”

The mother shouted after them. The father and son smiled, waved, and mounted their bicycles.

They went as far as the station, but there was no trace of any tyrannosauruses. After watching the station plaza for a while, they turned leisurely back home.

A small creek flowed close to the station, completely covered with concrete. There was a playground built on top of it. The long, covered drain formed a second road, stretching almost to their subdivision.

“Let’s go back this way.”

The father and son pedaled their bicycles slowly over the concrete plating. The tires bounced heavily every time they jumped a gap between the plates.

Their front lights waved widely.

Before long they became aware of a strange noise. It sounded like rapid water and, an octave lower, the grunting of countless pigs. Moments later they felt the earth begin to rumble.

And suddenly they looked down at their feet. And ran to the metal lid of an air vent.

They were running beneath the metal mesh of the lid, fiercely kicking up the water as they ran. Their wet hides glistened; their necks were outstretched. The pack of tyrannosauruses dashed for the subdivision like a conveyor belt, a never-ending stream.

They had been following the watercourse. The group near the national highway had been but a single part, a flying column, and had merged with the main group at the station.

“This is bad.”

It hardly mattered if they hurried, yet the father and son began to pedal furiously.

As they neared the subdivision, countless tyrannosauruses danced up through the concrete sheeting ahead of them, looking like a geyser of muddy water.

All the houses on the slanting slope of the subdivision heaved up their roofs and began to move.

The triceratops had risen.

The fighting began.

Before their eyes, a triceratops, head lowered, charged forward and plunged sharp horns into the carotid artery of an attacking tyrannosaurus. The carnivore, its blood fountaining into the air like water from a fire hose, fell back, lashed its long tail, and leaped hugely, gouging out the triceratop's eyes with a single sweep of the key-shaped claws on its forelegs.

Three more tyrannosauruses swooped onto the mammoth body of the triceratops, crumpled just six meters in front of their home. The huge reptiles plunged razor teeth into the belly meat, already ripped apart by

then-claws. The surroundings were flooded in a murky river of blood.

“Isn’t that our triceratops?” cried the boy, his voice shaking.

“You’re right.”

A tyrannosaurus had fallen in front of the entrance-way. The father and son warily watched its huge bloodshot eyes, the convulsive contractions of its belly, as they wheeled their bikes up the driveway.

The fighting lasted throughout the night.

Even at the height of the raucous laughter of a televised singing contest, the father and son could hear the war cries, could feel the thick hide splitting, the shrieks of the hour of death.

By morning the combat had almost ended, and the countless corpses of triceratopses and tyrannosauruses, some still barely twitching the tips of their tails, some dragging the ripped tatters of their stomachs, lay tumbled across the landscape.

Almost without exception, the corpses of triceratopses had their entrails dug out, their ribs laid bare, and their neck shields chopped into ribbons. But most of the tyrannosauruses showed only deep puncture wounds in their necks and bellies, escaping utter destruction.

There were even a few scattered survivors. But none had escaped unscathed. All had lost the energy to keep on fighting.

One tyrannosaurus, his flung-out leg half mincemeat from the thigh down, continued to drag out and gobble the guts of the triceratops he had slaughtered.

Behind him sprawled the body of one of his comrades, a gaping hole bored through its neck, its body clotted with dried blood, while no more than five meters away a triceratops grazed silently on the grass, blood still seeping from one of its eyes.

Every now and then the tyrannosaurus would raise its head and glare—though perhaps this was only their fancy—balefully at the grazing triceratops.

If you eat that crud, why’d you kill us?

The father and son almost felt they could hear that voice.

If there's too much to eat, why did you keep on butchering us?

The triceratops's unbloodied eye seemed to ask that back.

The father and son watched as they walked slowly to the station. The corpses that weren't dripping were at least tolerable. But even they were brought up short where the large intestines of a tyrannosaurus lay heaped across the road, as if they had sprung writhing from the animal's torn-open belly. After a moment's pause they edged by on the side of the street.

A woman in fashionable white slacks passed through the blood-smeared landscape, her shoes clicking loudly, her eyes suspiciously watching father and son.

A microbus filled with kindergarteners passed through that landscape, bearing its load of lively chatter.

An elementary-school student passed through that landscape, singing a jingle.

Skylark dancing to the sky
God is reigning in the sky
The world, the world's a trifle.