

short story

The Dinosaur's Baby

by E. Harikumar
translated from
Malayalam

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"The dinosaur baby came once again last night", Rajeev said. "It was watching me through the window grille for a long time."

Breakfast time, and it is Rajeev's story time. As the sunlight creeping through the window spreads on the table top, creating patterns, he recollects his dreams in abundant detail. Slowly the stories unfurl one by one. Mohan is bound to be attentive, being the lone listener. Shailaja, his Mom is busy fixing breakfast in the kitchen.

"I was sleeping." He said. "The dinosaur baby watched me for a long time, and I think it has taken a liking for me. And you know, finally it just took out its tongue and licked me. It has such a soft tongue, and has a very cute face too, like a puppy."

This is the second episode. First day, that is day before yesterday, it came and looked at Rajeev, who was sleeping in his first floor bedroom. It was standing on its hind legs, so he said, and was pressing its short front legs on to the wall. It was roughly twenty feet high, but was a baby dinosaur. Rajeev wanted to kiss its cute face, but didn't venture to do it, not knowing whether the animal would like it.

This is the beginning of a new series, a series that abound in animal characters. The animals that loved him or tormented him in his dreams were numerous, the animals as small as a pussy cat and big as an elephant. But an animal of this magnitude appears for the first time. A twenty feet dinosaur, and it is just a baby dinosaur only! As the size of the animal characters increases, the stories also tend to be bigger and last for days together.

"Haven't you had your Dosa yet?" Shailaja, who came to deliver a hot dosa, shouts. He wouldn't listen. He was busy recollecting his dream and giving an elaborate account of it to his Dad.

"It's hind legs are pretty fat. The front legs are short and thin. It was standing there with the front legs hanging in front of it, his lovely tongue jutting out. Poor thing, it must be very hungry. Daddy, what do dinosaurs eat?"

What do dinosaur's eat? He doesn't not know either. Is it grass? Was there grass a hundred million years ago? Really he did not know.

"Why don't you eat your Dosa?" He asked. "The auto riksha will be here in a moment, and you will have to hurry."

As Rajeev started gobbling dosa Mohan thought. 'I have ruined his dreams.'

"Mummy, have you seen my blue socks? Yesterday Paul Master said he would punish me for wearing black socks. Gimme my lunch box."

"Where's the lunch box? I told you to hand me the lunch box the moment you come in the evening, for washing. Give it to me, quick. Now, there are two iddlies left in it. Why didn't you eat 'em all?"

Now there is a virtual turmoil. By the time the auto comes at half past eight, Rajeev makes Shailaja spin like a dancer. When the auto leaves she just sinks into a chair tired.

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"Come to think of it," she says, "this is the turmoil with just one. Guess if we had four of his kind?"

"Keep quiet," Mohan says, "I have got more important things to think about. For example the dietary habits of dinosaurs. By the time he comes from school I have to be ready with the answer. He has to feed a dinosaur at night. Then I have my own problems, unimportant though, to solve. I have to dispose of battery eliminators worth fifty thousand Rupees immediately."

It was the Delhi salesman, who ditched Mohan by his sales talk. He had shown him the orders he got just from two districts alone. They are worth over forty thousand. Mohan fell in that trap, and got into a sole selling arrangement with that company. The terms are very attractive. The first consignment will be worth Rupees fifty thousand. Then every month, they will be sending consignment worth ten thousand. They say the item is in great demand.

Now, Mohan thought, I go abegging at the doorsteps of shops carrying the fifty thousand worth of stock.

'Battery Eliminators? Sorry, we have a lot of stock," they say. 'This will move slowly, one or two at a time. Do you have transformers. A lot of demand for that item.'

Either I have turned out to be a bad salesman. Mohan thought. Or the item I am selling is in least demand. At any rate creditors, including banks have started pestering him. The due date is well over long ago.

Next in the list of problems is his residence. He has after long search found out a small house in town for rent and has to pay a deposit of five thousand rupees. The rent is same, but he can cut on his travel. That's a good point, and he has given notice to the present landlord. He can give deposit in the new place only after getting deposit back from the present landlord.

"Let me have my breakfast." Shailaja said.

While sipping tea from the glass she said. "If you have a multitude of problems, do you know what to do? My grandpa used to say. First arrange the problems in order of importance, and then start doing the most important thing, and then the next one. It's so easy. Do me a favour? Can you bring me a dosa, it is on the pan. And you have also to make another one for me."

He went to the kitchen and brought the dosa.

"I am a man capable of doing miracles! But here I am wasting my precious time making dosa for my wife. Your grandpa probably did not have any of these problems."

"No. My grandpa has kanji for breakfast, and two unmarried sisters of my grandma were staying with them. They compete each other to make the best chatni for him. All right, tell me what is most important of your problems?"

"The diet of a dinosaur."

"The diet of what?"

"A dinosaur. A baby dino. This is the latest in Rajeev's dream series. When each of his dream series is over, I will get a doctorate in that subject. This is the most difficult thesis yet. I don't know where to go for research."

"You could try the zoo. Find out what they feed them on."

Mohan did not say anything. Either she made a mistake. She must have taken dinosaur for rhinoceros. Probably she hasn't heard about dinosaurs. She is lucky that Rajeev is not here. He would have laughed his head off.

It looks like Rajeev is growing up to be a male chauvinist. It happened last week. Mohan was passing urine in the bathroom.

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Upstairs they are sharing the bathroom with Rajeev. There is door from both the rooms. Shailaja made bed for Rajeev and opened the door to the bathroom only to find Mohan peeing. She went out in a hurry and closed the door. Rajeev saw it. He knew that Dad was in the bathroom peeing, and he was watching Mummy's movements. When he saw her getting into the bathroom and coming out in a jiffy, he started laughing. He was somersaulting in the bed and laughing.

Before going to bed when Mohan went to the bath again, Rajeev came along and asked him in a whisper.

"Did Mummy see it?"

He whispered back seriously. "No."

"Lucky for us, isn't it? It would have been bad had she seen it. It's alright if boys see each other. But girls!"

On saying this he opened the fly and took out his little thing and fitted it between his tiny fingers.

"Yeah." Mohan said seriously.

When he was sure that Rajeev was asleep, Mohan repeated this bit of interesting dialogue to Shailaja, and she started laughing till her stomach ached.

In the Library reference section a book on prehistoric animals was kept open before him. Mohan was pondering. Something is wrong somewhere. Everything is topsy-turvy and nothing seems to work. When he realised that the Marwadi was exploiting him, he fought back and left the job. A good job was in peril. It was then that he started as a self styled businessman. Till now he got three visiting cards printed in succession, and sold anything from nails to radio parts. Everything ended in loss, in the same pattern. By the time he brings a much sought after item for sale, the demand nosedives and there is no taker for that.

'Oh, this item? It's lying in our godown, bundles of them.' Or, 'eighteen rupees? We can supply you the same for twelve rupees? There is plenty of stock.'

The shopkeepers yawn at his sales talk, and suggest the name of their adversaries. Why don't you go there and try. They might take it.

His salesmanship, which made orders for machines worth millions for the Marwadi, has gone to dogs. Something is wrong somewhere.

In front of him the dinosaurs which lived in different ages grinned. When these ferocious animals walked, the earth trembled. Then, when the ice age set in, these monsters died one by one. He saw the last dinosaur raising its head helplessly. For a bit of warmth, for a bit of food.

Now, after sixty million years of solitary hibernation, it has woken up to be the pet of a six year old boy, with a cute face and soft tongue to lay watch outside his window. A long sleep that lasted aeons.

I have got to see an astrologer. He thought. In fact he was thinking about seeing one for some days. He had kept his horoscope in his bag. Something is happening beyond his rational thinking, and he has to find it out.

He went out carrying the bag containing samples. He had once gone to an astrologer for a horoscope matching. The Swamy is still in the same pose, squatting on a tigerskin wearing a white dothy and a shawl on the shoulder. He had a chandan marking on the forehead and a gold-rimmed spectacle on the nose. In front of him sat an old man and a young man, probably his son. They have come to check whether two horoscopes match for a marriage.

"No", the astrologer said emphatically, "these horoscopes will not match."

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"Swamy, can you not somehow match them?"

"I get say." Swamy said. "But eight months from now, these horoscopes will create a lot of problems. The girl is twentysix, okay. But these horoscopes will never match. Moreover there is *dasasanthi* too."

They paid the Swami his *dakshina* and went away. A girl past twentysix. Everything matched, but not the horoscope. Search, the unending search.

"What do you want?" Swamy asked.

Mohan came out of his reverie. Opening his briefcase he took out a horoscope and handed it over to the astrologer. Swamy fitted his specs on his nose and opened the horoscope. As he read he started frowning and wrinkles appeared on his forehead.

"Whose horoscope? Is it yours?"

"Yes."

"You've lost your job exactly three years four months ago. You must have fought your way out. Right now you are jobless."

Mohan did not say anything. The designation of a self-styled businessman is not a job.

Swamy was pondering. He continued. "It was *Ketu dasa* for the last four years and seven months. You still have two and half years left in that *dasa*. There cannot be any prosperity during this period. Right now you are troubled by the evil look of *Saturn* also. It is very bad time, you have got to be careful. You will have loss of money, loss of prestige. There will be obstacles in your way. You will start with something hopefully, but will end up in heavy loss. Invest you will five, but will lose ten. That's the way it is."

Is Swamy reading my mind?

"After *Sani dasa*, the remainder of *Ketu* is not bad. But real prosperity will come only after *Ketu dasa*. *Sani* will last for another nine months. You've got to be careful."

While Swamy was talking Mohan went to a recluse. So, that is it. All these were already written. What will become of a child born at a particular year, at a particular day, hour, minute and seconds. In the heap of scrolls kept somewhere in a mysterious hidden corner of the cosmos. Perhaps the creator had made up his mind about the composition and future of the universe billions of years before the dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals walked on earth.

"Can you go to the past as you prophesy the future?"

"Of course, yes. But you couldn't possibly be interested in knowing the past, since you already know it, like you know you have lost your job. People will be interested to know their future, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean the immediate past. I mean sixty million years ago, when the dinosaurs grazed the earth."

Swamy looked at him with a suspicious eye. He put on the specs he had removed earlier, and laced through the horoscope. Again calculations. After a while he kept aside his specs and looked at him.

"No, I don't see anything that cast a shadow on your mental health. Look, right at the moment it is bad time for you. That's all. Be patient and wait for some time. Next on your horoscope is *Shukra dasa* and that will bring a lot of prosperity. Till then lie low, visit the Devi temple twice a day....."

He paid the *dakshina* and went out. Swamy thinks that I have lost my head. Mohan thought. What I wanted to know was whether Swamy could go aeons back, into the ice age and beyond where the huge reptiles roamed. One of the dinosaurs that grazed the land has, after ages, taken birth again to become the pet of a six year old

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boy, to stand watch on the sleeping boy outside his window, with a cute face and soft tongue, to lick the boys cheeks.

Swamy will never understand it.

Now he has to meet a shop keeper. He had promised to tell Mohan whether he could lift the stock. If this shopkeeper also backs out, he could very well throw the stock of fifty thousand rupees to the attic.

Luckily for him the shop keeper was in the shop, but he wouldn't look at him, as if he has not seen him. Mohan reminded him about his talk yesterday for half an hour when he reduced the price by 20 percent. Reducing the price by 20 percent means he would be losing ten percent. At least part of the money invested will be salvaged.

"You had promised to let me know today whether you could lift the stock."

"Oh, yes, the battery eliminator." He said. "There is no demand for it. If you want you can keep two dozen here. I will pay you after it is sold."

Where is two dozen, and a stock of fifty thousand?

He came back. He had nothing to hope.

Way back home Shailaja told him.

"Two people came to see the house, couple of hours back. I told them to come when you're back."

They knocked at the door in two minutes.

"Heard you're vacating this place? When are you vacating?"

"On the first."

"Mind if we come in and have a look?"

"Not at all. Come in."

"See this is the sitting room. The fan is provided by the landlord. This is the common room, very spacious. From the common room you enter the kitchen. The kitchen is very convenient. The racks..., a platform for keeping the gas stove, down there is the sink. This door leads to the bedroom. I'm using it as my office. There are two bedrooms upstairs, and a common attached bathroom. Come, I'll show you.

Water? Yes, you get 24 hours running water. There is a sump and a motor."

He was tired. He rushed home in a hurry to have a cup of tea. When the people have left Shailaja asked.

"Why do you have to take so much trouble. To get a tenant for the Lonappan Mappila why do you have to show so much enthusiasm?"

She's right. Mohan thought. During the last ten days at least eight parties have come and seen the house. They came in groups of two to twelve persons. In all this eight occasions, he had eulogised the house. The ability of Lonappan Mappila to control me from a distance of five kilometers, is tremendous. Unless someone takes the house and pay the deposit, I will not get back my deposit. Unless I pay the deposit at the new place, I will lose that house. So, whenever a party comes to see the house I take out the robe of a broker and explain, 'this is the sitting room.....'

As usual Rajeev came from school with a little suspense.

"Mummy, do you know what I drew in the class? Daddy don't tell."

The question is meant for Mom. He is not happy that Daddy guesses all his secrets. So all questions and riddles are directed at his Mom with a warning to Daddy. 'Daddy don't tell.'

Mohan has already guessed.

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When he was sure that Mom has failed in her guesses he took out a paper before Mohan could say anything.

It was a baby dinosaur. A cute face of a puppy, shining eyes, a long neck, fat hind-legs, pretty big tummy, short front legs and a endlessly trailing tail. The picture was not altogether bad. It was a conglomeration of a kangaroo, a giraffe and a pomeranian.

Suddenly he remembered that he had become an authority on palaeontology and that he could boldly face Rajeev with any question relating to dinosaurs. He was waiting for Rajeev to ask him questions, to impress upon him.

It was then that Shailaja brought two letters. One from the bank asking him to remit ten thousand Rupees immediately. The other was from a creditor saying that it is not proper to delay payment. Send at least ten thousand with interest immediately.

He thought there would be some respite. *Sani* and *Kethu* from opposite sides strangulate him.

Rajeev came carrying paints and brushes.

"Daddy, I'm going to paint a big dinosaur. Gimme some paper."

"Don't disturb me now." Says Mohan "I have a bad headache."

"Just give me some paper. Then I won't disturb you any more."

A little bit help. A few good words. Where will I get these. He has never felt so helpless before. He felt angry at himself.

Rajeev was still waiting for the paper. Mohan suddenly burst out.

"Didn't I say get the hell out of here. You and your dinosaur. Your pet! What a dirty animal is it? Don't you know what a monstrous face it has?"

Rajeev fell silent and listened to Mohan letting out steam. When the outburst was over, he walked away slowly to the kitchen.

Mohan could hear him crying. He was complaining to Mom.

"My dinosaur is very cute. Why is Daddy telling that is not cute? Look what I have drawn. It is coming during night and licking me. He does it because he likes me."

He is spending sleepless nights nowadays. Rajeev's dinosaur is tormenting him. Closing the eyes he sees a boy walking away on a lonely path, holding a long rope tied to the collar of a twenty feet tall dinosaur. The earth vibrates at every step the dinosaur takes. The nature of the path is unchanging as they move through the endless path. In between, the loss of fifty thousand, or the fact that he does not have a place to live in after the first of next month, does not worry him.

Rajeev is a bit anxious about the new place. Since it is a single story building, there is no upstairs. Naturally his bedroom is on the ground floor. This, he says, will create problems for the dinosaur baby. It will sprain it's neck stooping down to look through the window. Mohan suggested a remedy. He said there is a big ground across his window and the dino can lie down on its tummy and watch through the window. This will spare him the sprain on the neck.

He couldn't however tell Rajeev that just below his window is a dirty canal bordering a busy narrow street.

"Aren't you scared of sleeping near the window on the ground floor?" Shailaja asks him.

"Why should I be scared?" Rajeev asks. "When such a big dinosaur keeps vigil throughout the night, the thieves won't dare."

Rajeev usually sleeps alone. But once in a while, he comes to the master bedroom with his pillow and blanket.

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"Chi..Sleeping with Mummy? No?" Shailaja says.

Smelling that their plans are going awry, Mohan diplomatically says.

"Sunny, go and sleep in your room."

He is not relenting. He says. "Everyday I am sleeping alone. Today lem'me sleep with you."

From the age of two onwards he was sleeping alone.

"What's so special about today?" Shailaja asks.

"I read Hardy Boys mystery book."

"Who told you to read such books at bedtime?"

"There was no other book. Mummy, please let me sleep with you. At least for some time."

"No, no, big boys don't sleep with mothers. You are learning bad manners."

"Rajeev," Mohan tells sternly, "Go and sleep in your room."

He was frightened. He took his pillow and blanket and went back to his room. There were tears in his eyes.

Shailaja felt sad and upset. She said. "I'm not in a mood for anything. We could have asked him to sleep with us. Please call him."

Mohan did not say anything. He was lying on his back, eyes wide open. He remembered his visit to the astrologer, the shopkeeper, who after giving hope for a full day rebuffed him at the last moment, and the Delhi salesman, who cheated him showing false orders, and the derogatory threatening letters of creditors.

An hour must have elapsed, Shailaja fell asleep. Mohan got up and went to Rajeev's room and put on the light. He was sleeping hugging a pillow. There were four other pillows on four sides. He says it is a fortress and that sleeping inside makes him secure and fearless. He wouldn't say what the pillow that he is hugging is meant? That's his secret.

By the side of the pillow lay the picture of the dinosaur he had drawn. He has tried to make its face look prettier by colouring it. He stooped and kissed Rajeev's cute face, and then softly licked his cheeks.

He felt immensely jealous of the dinosaur who watches Rajeev through the window and licks his cheeks in moments of liking. He wishes painfully if he could become a dinosaur that keep vigil at his bed throughout night.

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