



BEYOND THE PAST

NIDAL MANSOUR

The alarm went off at 5.00 AM. The young professor got out of bed and started his morning routine. It was his first day teaching at the university. He started the day with a few gymnastic exercises after which he took a nice, long shower and then had some breakfast. He had to get everything over and done with before starting work at 8 AM.

Because it was close to his home, he cycled to work. Then he didn't have to worry about the morning traffic or that his car possibly wouldn't start. He showed up at work about 25 minutes early, which meant he had time to prepare. His first lecture was about the universe and he tried to imagine how to start, how to explain things in a way that would capture the young students' attention and not bore them to death. He leaned back in his chair, both hands folded behind his head, contemplating.

The universe was the most unexplored thing in human history. Research was carried out and guesses were made about what Earth would have consisted of millions and billions of years ago. There is so much information to be found in the soil, in the shape of fossils. We find little pieces of bone from creatures we never even imagined walked the earth, we connect the dots and recreate ... KNOCK, KNOCK. Jack was pulled back to the here and now, out of the trance he had been in. Without his say so, the door opened and the Head of University, Mrs Trisseltoft, marched in with her eternally stern looking face. "What should I do with you? Your application was so promising, and you came across as someone whose mind was in the right place!"

Still partly lost in a trance, his brain slowly started working again, like an old car with a cold engine, which had not been used for a long time.

"What time is it?" he slowly mumbled. He knew the answer, because by now, he was wide awake. He jumped up

from his chair, squashed the papers into his bag, which he'd thrown on the floor, and stormed out of the stuffed office. He heard Mrs Trisseltoft shouting from behind, but by then he was already heading down the hallway.

He opened the door to the classroom, where the deafening noise ceased for a moment, but then started again, albeit slightly lower. Jack knew that first impressions were terribly important, and he had already spoilt so many of them. He stood by the blackboard, cleared his throat, but it took several coughs to get the attention of his students. Then he began the important lecture, he had been planning for weeks ...

When his first lecture on palaeontology was over, Jack collapsed in a chair. He had been a palaeontologist for quite a few years now, but having to share his knowledge was new to him. The semester at the university had only just begun, and already his office was filled from floor to ceiling with drawings, diagrams, books and fossils and models related to his work and great hobby: extinct animals from the Jurassic period. For more than a year now, he had been working on a book about these amazing creatures.

He got up from his chair. Fortunately, he did not have to teach any more that day, which meant that he was free to go somewhere else. He knew exactly what he was going to do with the rest of the day. He walked toward the exit of the building and the warm afternoon air enveloped him like a warm blanket.

He felt at home here at the university. There were so many memories from his own student days. However, even back then, the most exciting thing had been his physics professor's lectures. Jack had gotten on really well with him, and they had talked about anything and everything between heaven and earth once Jack had finished whatever chores the professor had asked him to do.

Jack turned around and walked down the narrow hallway that led to the professor's office. There was a warning triangle on his door. Jack knocked four times, slowly but firmly. Nothing happened, and so he opened the door, carefully. The old professor was in his old armchair, his back turned, hunched over a pile of papers with lots of numbers and equations. Finally, the Professor heard him approach, and he turned around in his chair around. His face was aging, marked by fine, deep wrinkles, particularly across his forehead. His hair was longish and grey. Jack knew that he had been a physics professor at the university for more than 40 years. The office was large, only it looked small because of all the stuff gathered in there over the years.

Apart from teaching physics, the Professor also spent his time experimenting and inventing things no one else would even dream of.

"Oh, hi Jack. I thought you might come by. I have a small surprise for you." The Professor smiled widely. "But first, tell me about your teaching, how did it go? Was it challenging? You must never let anything get to you."

Jack looked around the office. He would gladly spend a day studying all the Professor's notes and books. "I'm not sure, I'm really cut out for teaching. And Mrs Trisseltoft does not seem terribly impressed either." Jack sighed and crouched even more in his chair.

The professor's smile widened. "But you know, Mrs Trisseltoft loves brilliant nerds like us, which is also why she's kept me on for so long. You just need to gain her trust. But enough of that! I may have just the thing to cheer you up."

The Professor turned around and walked over to an old cupboard, which had probably been black once upon a time, only now the paint was cracked. He opened it and appeared to be looking for something. Though, from where he was sitting, Jack couldn't see what. Finally, the Professor turned around again. His face was now back in its familiar folds,

revealing that something was about to happen. He walked over to Jack and placed an oblong box on the table next to him.

“Open it,” the Professor whispered, as he kept a close eye on Jack’s facial expression. Jack picked up the box. It was heavier than he expected, and the size of his fist. He opened the lid and was unable to suppress his disbelieving smile. And only when he had picked up the object from the box did he slowly realise what it was. They couldn’t be artificial. The four, long yellowish claws, roughly the same length as his hand, shone almost like crystals in the dim light. Jack knew exactly who the claws had once belonged to: Giganotosaurus Tyrannosaurus, one of the greatest carnivores from the Jurassic period, slightly bigger than the famous Tyrannosaurus Rex. Jack’s jaw dropped, he couldn’t move a muscle.

It was the Professor who broke the silence. “I’m thinking you could use that in your teaching. I guarantee that you won’t find specimens more beautiful than the ones you’re holding right now.” Jack slowly recovered. Stuttered as he asked: “How on earth did you get hold of them? They’re in such perfect condition that one would think that you’d recently come across a living specimen.”

The Professor immediately withdrew into himself as he slowly responded: “Don’t you worry about that. What I can tell you is that it wasn’t easy! Anyway, I must be getting on with my research. Goodbye, Jack.” He turned his back to Jack and began spreading out some drawings across his desk. Jack knew that asking more questions would be futile, so he got up from the chair, and carefully put the lid back on the box with the valuable claws. Then he said “Thank you,” loud and clear as he left and closed the door behind him.

Once Jack was out on the street again, he almost bumped into a young man in a long white coat, who came running along the pavement. He stopped, out of breath, and leaned

against the slanting fence. "How is he today? I hope he won't be mad because I'm late."

Jack frowned. He had trouble understanding Rick, who was still desperately trying to drag enough oxygen into his lungs.

"He seemed his usual self, slightly distracted, you know." Rick pushed himself off the fence, which swayed threatening from side to side, and wormed his way past Jack and opened the door. "Nice talking to you, whoever you are, see you later." He closed the door and Jack continued along the pavement, lost in his own thoughts.

It was getting dark as he reached his small apartment. His thoughts hovered around the claws, safely tucked away in their box and in his inner pocket and about the Professor's secretive look. He walked up the narrow stairs and reached the blackpainted front door, which opened into his one-bedroom apartment. He fumbled trying to find the light switch.

The second he pressed the switch, something exploded with a deafening noise, or at least that was what Jack thought it sounded like. Way too many people had been crammed into his flat (it felt like a herd and he wondered whether they were even able to even breathe). It wasn't an explosion or a meteorite, just his happy and joyful family. A tall, blond, handsome man welcomed Jack by throwing his arms around him.

"We thought you needed something slightly livelier in your life, not just all those dead dinosaur-friends of yours. Congratulations on your new job. You finally made it!" He threw out his arms, pointing at everyone else in the crowded living room.

His brother had always been the family favourite, with his good looks and his unmistakable understanding of numbers. Now, he was head of the National Bank, and he lived in a great big house with a lovely wife. Yes, James had it all.

His mother approached. "So, Jack, did you have a good day at university? Now that you have a decent job, you'll be able to afford something bigger as well." She gave him a proud smile, something Jack was not used to. His brother, who had overheard his mother speaking, yelled, "All you need now is a nice girlfriend."

A touchy subject for Jack. Everyone who knew him, knew that his love-life had never been easy. His only defence was the tried and trusted: "Yeah, in another world." Which resulted in a gentle laugh from everyone else in the room.

His father was standing at the far end of the room, talking to his mother's sister, Annie. Jack admired his father. His moving business had only recently become successful, and the reason why? So many couples were getting divorced. Only, Jack had never really been a part of his father's dreams. He had not been interested in taking over his father's company. His mother had never judged him, had always said that one should follow one's dreams. And she was the one who had made sure that he was accepted as a palaeontology student, made sure that was able to give it everything he had.

It turned into a late night. Everybody had a lovely time and congratulated Jack on his new job. James left as the last one. "Don't mind what anybody else says, brother. You're just great, even if you do live with a dinosaur." Jack could smell that his brother had probably seen the bottom of a few too many bottles of beer.

In class, the following day, Jack was better prepared. After his guests had departed the night before, he had spent several hours, way past midnight, planning his lecture for the following day. He had discovered that despite his vast collection of palaeontological finds, there were quite a few gaps. However, he would enjoy showing the gawking students the wonderful claws, the Professor had given him the day before.

These rare treasures were the perfect way of getting their attention. He had to pay the Professor a visit to find out if he could provide him with more exciting finds. As soon as the lecture ended, he hurried down the dark hallways until he reached the Professor's office. As always, he knocked first, and as always there was no response. He opened the door, and to his great surprise, the room was empty.

For a brief moment, he wondered where the Professor might be, but his concern was soon replaced by a childish urge to explore the unknown. He walked up to the large desk, littered with piles of papers. Numbers and drawings that meant nothing to Jack were scribbled on most of the papers. It looked more like hieroglyphs than anything else. He continued browsing through the huge bookcase, next to the desk, and to his surprise he found another piece of paper in the Professor's handwriting, filled with enigmatic numbers and drawings, the likes of which Jack had never seen before. He kept looking ... Then he glanced at his watch.

"Oh, no, I'm going to be late again." He sped out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Running down the hallway, he kept thinking about whether the Professor would realise that someone had been in his office, poking their nose around. He briefly thought of the unlocked door ... It was unusual for the Professor to leave his door unlocked.

During the following long lesson, Jack couldn't think about anything but the strange numbers and signs. In his wildest imagination, he couldn't imagine what they meant. He had to ask the Professor, or his curiosity would eat him alive. What did the Professor spend all his time on in that dark office of his? He had often heard other people refer to the Professor as a mad old hatter, but Jack had never agreed. Then again, thinking about the numerous experiments and ideas the Professor was forever working on, it could come