

Tyrannosaurus Rex, Ray Bradbury

Tyrannosaurus Rex

He opened a door on darkness. A voice cried, ‘Shut it!’ It was like a blow in the face. He jumped through. The door banged. He cursed himself quietly. The voice, with dreadful patience, intoned, ‘Jesus. You Terwilliger?’

‘Yes,’ said Terwilliger. A faint ghost of screen haunted the dark theater wall to his right. To his left, a cigarette wove fiery arcs in the air as someone’s lips talked swiftly around it.

‘You’re five minutes late!’

Don’t make it sound like five years, thought Terwilliger.

‘Shove your film in the projection room door. Let’s move.’

Terwilliger squinted.

He made out five vast loge seats that exhaled, breathed heavily as amplitudes of executive life shifted, leaning toward the middle loge where, almost in darkness, a little boy sat smoking.

No, thought Terwilliger, not a boy. That’s him. Joe Clarence. Clarence the Great.

For now the tiny mouth snapped like a puppet’s, blowing smoke. ‘Well?’

Terwilliger stumbled back to hand the film to the projectionist, who made a lewd gesture toward the loges, winked at Terwilliger and slammed the booth door.

‘Jesus,’ sighed the tiny voice. A buzzer buzzed. ‘Roll it, projection!’

Terwilliger probed the nearest loge, struck flesh, pulled back and stood biting his lips.

Music leaped from the screen. His film appeared in a storm of drums:

TYRANNOSAURUS REX: THE THUNDER LIZARD.

Photographed in stop-motion animation with miniatures created by John Terwilliger. A study in life-forms on Earth one billion years before Christ.

Faint ironic applause came softly patting from the baby hands in the middle loge.

Terwilliger shut his eyes. New music jerked him alert. The last titles faded into a world of primeval sun, mist, poisonous rain and lush wilderness. Morning fogs were strewn along eternal seacoasts where immense flying dreams and dreams of nightmare scythed the wind. Huge triangles of bone and rancid skin, of diamond eye and crusted tooth, pterodactyls, the kites of destruction, plunged, struck prey, and skimmed away, meat and screams in their scissor mouths.

Terwilliger gazed, fascinated.

In the jungle foliage now, shiverings, creepings, insect jitterings, antennae twitchings, slime locked in oily fatted slime, armor skinned to armor, in sun glade and shadow moved the reptilian inhabitors of Terwilliger’s mad remembrance of vengeance given flesh and panic taking wing.

Brontosaur, stegosaur, triceratops. How easily the clumsy tonnages of name fell from one’s lips.

The great brutes swung like ugly machineries of war and dissolution through moss ravines, crushing a thousand flowers at one footfall, snouting the mist, ripping the sky in half with one shriek.

My beauties, thought Terwilliger, my little lovelies. All liquid latex, rubber sponge, ball-socketed steel articulature; all night-dreamed, clay-molded, warped and welded, riveted and slapped to life by hand. No bigger than my fist, half of them; the rest no larger than this head they sprang from.

‘Good Lord,’ said a soft admiring voice in the dark.

Step by step, frame by frame of film, stop motion by stop motion, he, Terwilliger, had run his beasts through their postures, moved each a fraction of an inch, photographed them, moved them another hair, photographed them, for hours and days and months. Now these rare images, this eight hundred scant feet of film, rushed through the projector.

And lo! he thought. I’ll never get used to it. Look! They come alive!

Rubber, steel, clay, reptilian latex sheath, glass eye, porcelain fang, all ambles, trundles, strides in terrible prides through continents as yet unmanned, by seas as yet unsalted, a billion years lost away. They do breathe. They do smite air with thunders. Oh, uncanny!

I feel, thought Terwilliger, quite simply, that there stands my Garden, and these my animal creations which I love on this Sixth Day, and tomorrow, the Seventh. I must rest.

‘Lord,’ said the soft voice again.

Terwilliger almost answered, ‘Yes?’

‘This is beautiful footage, Mr Clarence,’ the voice went on.

‘Maybe,’ said the man with a boy’s voice.

‘Incredible animation.’

‘I’ve seen better,’ said Clarence the Great.

Terwilliger stiffened. He turned from the screen where his friends lumbered into oblivion, from butcheries wrought on architectural scales. For the first time he examined his possible employers.

‘Beautiful stuff.’

This praise came from an old man who sat to himself far across the theater, his head lifted forward in amaze toward that ancient life.

‘It’s jerky. Look there!’ The strange boy in the middle loge half rose, pointing with the cigarette in his mouth. ‘Hey, was that a bad shot? You see?’

‘Yes,’ said the old man, tired suddenly, fading back in his chair. ‘I see.’

Terwilliger crammed his hotness down upon a suffocation of swiftly moving blood.

‘Jerky,’ said Joe Clarence.

White light, quick numerals, darkness; the music cut, the monsters vanished.

‘Glad that’s over.’ Joe Clarence exhaled. ‘Almost lunchtime. Throw on the next reel. Walter! That’s all. Terwilliger.’ Silence. ‘Terwilliger?’ Silence. ‘Is that dumb bunny still here?’

‘Here.’ Terwilliger ground his fists on his hips.

‘Oh,’ said Joe Clarence. ‘It’s not bad. But don’t get ideas about money. A dozen guys came here yesterday to show stuff as good or better than yours, tests for our new film, Prehistoric Monster. Leave your bid in an envelope with my secretary. Same door out as you came in. Walter, what the hell you waiting for? Roll the next one!’

In darkness, Terwilliger barked his shins on a chair, groped for and found the door handle, gripped it tight, tight.

Behind him the screen exploded: an avalanche fell in great flourings of stone, whole cities of granite, immense edifices of marble piled, broke and flooded down. In this thunder, he heard voices from the week ahead:

‘We’ll pay you one thousand dollars, Terwilliger.’

‘But I need a thousand for my equipment alone!’

‘Look, we’re giving you a break. Take it or leave it!’

With the thunder dying, he knew he would take, and he knew he would hate it.

Only when the avalanche had drained off to silence behind him and his own blood had raced to the inevitable decision and stalled in his heart, did Terwilliger pull the immensely weighted door wide to step forth into the terrible raw light of day.

Fuse flexible spine to sinuous neck, pivot neck to death’s-head skull, hinge jaw from hollow cheek, glue plastic sponge over lubricated skeleton, slip snake-pebbled skin over sponge, meld seams with fire, then rear upright triumphant in a world where insanity wakes but to look on madness—Tyrannosaurus Rex!

The Creator’s hands glided down out of arc-light sun. They placed the granuled monster in false green summer wilds, they waded it in broths of teeming bacterial life. Planted in serene terror, the lizard machine basked.

From the blind heavens the Creator’s voice hummed, vibrating the Garden with the old and monotonous tune about the footbone connected to the…anklebone, anklebone connected to the…legbone, legbone connected to the…kneebone, kneebone connected to the…

A door burst wide.

Joe Clarence ran in very much like an entire Cub Scout pack. He looked wildly around as if no one were there.

‘My God!’ he cried. ‘Aren’t you set up yet? This costs me money!’

‘No,’ said Terwilliger dryly. ‘No matter how much time I take, I get paid the same.’

Joe Clarence approached in a series of quick starts and stops. ‘Well, shake a leg. And make it real horrible.’

Terwilliger was on his knees beside the miniature jungle set. His eyes were on a straight level with his producer’s as he said, ‘How many feet of blood and gore would you like?’

‘Two thousand feet of each!’ Clarence laughed in a kind of gasping stutter. ‘Let’s look.’ He grabbed the lizard.

‘Careful!’

‘Careful?’ Clarence turned the ugly beast in careless and non-loving hands. ‘It’s my monster, ain’t it? The contract—’

‘The contract says you use this model for exploitation advertising, but the animal reverts to me after the film’s in release.’

‘Holy cow.’ Clarence waved the monster. ‘That’s wrong. We just signed the contracts four days ago—’

‘It feels like four years.’ Terwilliger rubbed his eyes. ‘I’ve been up two nights without sleep finishing this beast so we can start shooting.’

Clarence brushed this aside. ‘To hell with the contract. What a slimy trick. It’s my monster. You and your agent give me heart attacks. Heart attacks about money, heart attacks about equipment, heart attacks about—’

‘This camera you gave me is ancient.’

‘So if it breaks, fix it; you got hands? The challenge of the shoestring operation is using the old brain instead of cash. Getting back to the point, this monster, it should’ve been specified in the deal, is my baby.’

‘I never let anyone own the things I make,’ said Terwilliger honestly. ‘I put too much time and affection in them.’

‘Hell, okay, so we give you fifty bucks extra for the beast, and throw in all this camera equipment free when the film’s done, right? Then you start your own company. Compete with me, get even with me, right, using my own machines!’ Clarence laughed.

‘If they don’t fall apart first,’ observed Terwilliger.

‘Another thing.’ Clarence put the creature on the floor and walked around it. ‘I don’t like the way this monster shapes up.’

‘You don’t like what?’ Terwiliger almost yelled.

‘His expression. Needs more fire, more…goombah. More mazash!’

‘Mazash?’

‘The old bimbo! Bug the eyes more. Flex the nostrils. Shine the teeth. Fork the tongue sharper. You can do it! Uh, the monster ain’t mine, huh?’

‘Mine.’ Terwilliger arose.

His belt buckle was now on a line with Joe Clarence’s eyes. The producer stared at the bright buckle almost hypnotically for a moment.

‘God damn the goddam lawyers!’

He broke for the door.

‘Work!’

The monster hit the door a split second after it slammed shut.

Terwilliger kept his hand poised in the air from his overhand throw. Then his shoulders sagged. He went to pick up his beauty. He twisted off its head, skinned the latex flesh off the skull, placed the skull on a pedestal and, painstakingly, with clay, began to reshape the prehistoric face.

‘A little goombah,’ he muttered. ‘A touch of mazash.’

They ran the first film test on the animated monster a week later.

When it was over. Clarence sat in darkness and nodded imperceptibly.

‘Better. But…more horrorific, bloodcurdling. Let’s scare the hell out of Aunt Jane. Back to the drawing board!’

‘I’m a week behind schedule now,’ Terwilliger protested. ‘You keep coming in, change this, change that, you say, so I change it, one day the tail’s all wrong, next day it’s the claws—’

‘You’ll find a way to make me happy,’ said Clarence. ‘Get in there and fight the old aesthetic fight!’

At the end of the month they ran the second test.

‘A near miss! Close!’ said Clarence. ‘The face is just almost right. Try again, Terwilliger!’

Terwilliger went back. He animated the dinosaur’s mouth so that it said obscene things which only a lip reader might catch, while the rest of the audience would think the beast was only shrieking. Then he got the clay and worked until 3 A.M. on the awful face.

‘That’s it!’ cried Clarence in the projection room the next week. ‘Perfect! Now that’s what I call a monster!’

He leaned toward the old man, his lawyer, Mr Glass, and Maury Poole, his production assistant.

‘You like my creature?’ He beamed.

Terwilliger, slumped in the back row, his skeleton as long as the monsters he built, could feel the old lawyer shrug.

‘You seen one monster, you seen ’em all.’

‘Sure, sure, but this one’s special!’ shouted Clarence happily. ‘Even I got to admit Terwilliger’s a genius!’

They all turned back to watch the beast on the screen, in a titanic waltz, throw its razor tail wide in a vicious harvesting that cut grass and clipped flowers. The beast paused now to gaze pensively off into mists, gnawing a red bone.

‘That monster,’ said Mr Glass at last, squinting. ‘He sure looks familiar.’

‘Familiar?’ Terwilliger stirred, alert.

‘It’s got such a look,’ drawled Mr Glass in the dark, ‘I couldn’t forget, from someplace.’

‘Natural Museum exhibits?’

‘No, no.’

‘Maybe,’ laughed Clarence, ‘you read a book once, Glass?’

‘Funny…’ Glass, unperturbed, cocked his head, closed one eye. ‘Like detectives, I don’t forget a face. But, that Tyrannosaurus Rex—where before did I meet him?’

‘Who cares?’ Clarence sprinted. ‘He’s great. And all because I booted Terwilliger’s behind to make him do it right. Come on, Maury!’

When the door shut, Mr Glass turned to gaze steadily at Terwilliger. Not taking his eyes away, he called softly to the projectionist, ‘Walt? Walter? Could you favor us with that beast again?’

‘Sure thing.’

Terwilliger shifted uncomfortably, aware of some bleak force gathering in blackness, in the sharp light that shot forth once more to ricochet terror off the screen.

‘Yeah. Sure,’ mused Mr Glass. ‘I almost remember. I almost know him. But…who?’

The brute, as if answering, turned and for a disdainful moment stared across one hundred thousand million years at two small men hidden in a small dark room. The tyrant machine named itself in thunder.

Mr Glass quickened forward, as if to cup his ear.

Darkness swallowed all.

With the film half finished, in the tenth week, Clarence summoned thirty of the office staff, technicians and a few friends to see a rough cut of the picture.

The film had been running fifteen minutes when a gasp ran through the small audience.

Clarence glanced swiftly about.

Mr Glass, next to him, stiffened.

Terwilliger, scenting danger, lingered near the exit, not knowing why; his nervousness was compulsive and intuitive. Hand on the door, he watched.

Another gasp ran through the crowd.

Someone laughed quietly. A woman secretary giggled. Then there was instantaneous silence.

For Joe Clarence had jumped to his feet.

His tiny figure sliced across the light on the screen. For a moment, two images gesticulated in the dark: Tyrannosaurus, ripping the leg from a pteranodon, and Clarence, yelling, jumping forward as if to grapple with these fantastic wrestlers.

‘Stop! Freeze it right there!’

The film stopped. The image held.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Mr Glass.

‘Wrong?’ Clarence crept up on the image. He thrust his baby hand to the screen, stabbed the tyrant jaw, the lizard eye, the fangs, the brow, then turned blindly to the projector light so that reptilian flesh was printed on his furious cheeks. ‘What goes? What is this?’

‘Only a monster, Chief.’

‘Monster, hell!’ Clarence pounded the screen with his tiny fist. ‘That’s me!’

Half the people leaned forward, half the people fell back, two people jumped up, one of them Mr Glass, who fumbled for his other spectacles, flexed his eyes and moaned, ‘So that’s where I saw him before!’

‘That’s where you what?’

Mr Glass shook his head, eyes shut. ‘That face, I knew it was familiar.’

A wind blew in the room.

Everyone turned. The door stood open.

Terwilliger was gone.

They found Terwilliger in his animation studio cleaning out his desk, dumping everything into a large cardboard box, the Tyrannosaurus machine-toy model under his arm. He looked up as the mob swirled in, Clarence at the head.

‘What did I do to deserve this!’ he cried.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Clarence.’

‘You’re sorry?! Didn’t I pay you well?’

‘No, as a matter of fact.’

‘I took you to lunches—’

‘Once. I picked up the tab.’

‘I gave you dinner at home, you swam in my pool, and now this! You’re fired!’

‘You can’t fire me. Mr Clarence. I’ve worked the last week free and overtime, you forgot my check—’

‘You’re fired anyway, oh, you’re really fired! You’re blackballed in Hollywood. Mr Glass!’ He whirled to find the old man. ‘Sue him!’

‘There is nothing,’ said Terwillinger, not looking up any more, just looking down, packing, keeping in motion, ‘nothing you can sue me for. Money? You never paid enough to save on. A house? Could never afford that.

A wife? I’ve worked for people like you all my life. So wives are out. I’m an unencumbered man. There’s nothing you can do to me. If you attach my dinosaurs, I’ll just go hole up in a small town somewhere, get me a can of latex rubber, some clay from the river, some old steel pipe, and make new monsters.

I’ll buy stock film raw and cheap. I’ve got an old beat-up stopmotion camera. Take that away, and I’ll build one with my own hands. I can do anything. And that’s why you’ll never hurt me again.’

‘You’re fired!’ cried Clarence. ‘Look at me. Don’t look away. You’re fired! You’re fired!’

‘Mr Clarence,’ said Mr Glass, quietly, edging forward. ‘Let me talk to him just a moment.’

‘So talk to him!’ said Clarence. ‘What’s the use? He just stands there with that monster under his arm and the goddam thing looks like me, so get out of the way!’

Clarence stormed out the door. The others followed.

Mr Glass shut the door, walked over to the window and looked out at the absolutely clear twilight sky.

‘I wish it would rain,’ he said. ‘That’s one thing about California I can’t forgive. It never really lets go and cries. Right now, what wouldn’t I give for a little something from that sky? A bolt of lightning, even.’

He stood silent, and Terwilliger slowed in his packing. Mr Glass sagged down into a chair and doodled on a pad with a pencil, talking sadly, half aloud, to himself.

‘Six reels of film shot, pretty good reels, half the film done, three hundred thousand dollars down the drain, hail and farewell. Out the window all the jobs. Who feeds the starving mouths of boys and girls? Who will face the stockholders? Who chucks the Bank of America under the chin? Anyone for Russian roulette?’

He turned to watch Terwilliger snap the locks on a briefcase.

‘What hath God wrought?’

Terwilliger, looking down at his hands, turning them over to examine their texture, said. ‘I didn’t know I was doing it, I swear. It came out in my fingers. It was all subconscious. My fingers do everything for me. They did this.’

‘Better the fingers had come in my office and taken me direct by the throat,’ said Glass. ‘I was never one for slow motion. The Keystone Kops, at triple speed, was my idea of living, or dying. To think a rubber monster has stepped on us all. We are now so much tomato mush, ripe for canning!’

‘Don’t make me feel any guiltier than I feel,’ said Terwilliger.

‘What do you want, I should take you dancing?’

‘It’s just,’ cried Terwilliger, ‘he kept at me. Do this. Do that. Do it the other way. Turn it inside out, upside down, he said. I swallowed my bile. I was angry all the time. Without knowing. I must’ve changed the face. But right up till five minutes ago, when Mr Clarence yelled, I didn’t see it. I’ll take all the blame.’

‘No,’ sighed Mr glass, ‘we should all have seen. Maybe we did and couldn’t admit. Maybe we did and laughed all night in our sleep, when we couldn’t hear. So where are we now? Mr Clarence, he’s got investments he can’t throw out.

You got your career from this day forward, for better or worse, you can’t throw out. Mr Clarence right now is aching to be convinced it was all some horrible dream. Part of his ache, ninety-nine per cent, is in his wallet.

If you could put one per cent of your time in the next hour convincing him of what I’m going to tell you next, tomorrow morning there will be no orphan children staring out of the want ads in Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. If you would go tell him—’

‘Tell me what?’

Joe Clarence, returned, stood in the door, his cheeks still inflamed.

‘What he just told me.’ Mr Glass turned calmly. ‘A touching story.’

‘I’m listening!’ said Clarence.

‘Mr Clarence.’ The old lawyer weighed his words carefully. ‘This film you just saw is Mr Terwilliger’s solemn and silent tribute to you.’

‘It’s what?’ shouted Clarence.

Both men, Clarence and Terwilliger, dropped their jaws.

The old lawyer gazed only at the wall and in a shy voice said, ‘Shall I go on?’

The animator closed his jaw. ‘If you want to.’

‘This film’—the lawyer arose and pointed in a single motion toward the projection room—‘was done from a feeling of honor and friendship for you. Joe Clarence. Behind your desk, an unsung hero of the motion picture industry, unknown, unseen, you sweat out your lonely little life while who gets the glory? The stars. How often does a man in Atawanda Springs, Idaho, tell his wife.

“Say, I was thinking the other night about Joe Clarence—a great producer, that man”? How often? Should I tell? Never! So Terwilliger brooded. How could he present the real Clarence to the world? The dinosaur is there; boom! it hits him!

This is it! he thought, the very thing to strike terror to the world, here’s a lonely, proud, wonderful, awful symbol of independence, power, strength, shrewd animal cunning, the true democrat, the individual brought to its peak, all thunder and big lightning. Dinosaur: Joe Clarence. Joe Clarence: Dinosaur. Man embodied in Tyrant Lizard!’

Mr Glass sat down, panting quietly.

Terwilliger said nothing.

Clarence moved at last, walked across the room, circled Glass slowly, then came to stand in front of Terwilliger, his face pale. His eyes were uneasy, shifting up along Terwilliger’s tall skeleton frame.

‘You said that?’ he asked faintly.

Terwilliger swallowed.

‘To me he said it. He’s shy,’ said Mr Glass. ‘You ever hear him say much, ever talk back? swear? anything? He likes people, he can’t say. But, immortalize them? That he can do!’

‘Immortalize?’ said Clarence.

‘What else?’ said the old man. ‘Like a statue, only moving. Years from now people will say, “Remember that film, The Monster from the Pleistocene?” And people will say, “Sure! why?”

“Because,” the others say, “it was the one monster, the one brute, in all Hollywood history had real guts, real personality. And why is this? Because one genius had enough imagination to base the creature on a real-life, hard-hitting, fast-thinking businessman of A-one caliber.”

You’re one with history, Mr Clarence. Film libraries will carry you in good supply. Cinema societies will ask for you. How lucky can you get? Nothing like this will ever happen to Immanuel Glass, a lawyer. Every day for the next two hundred, five hundred years, you’ll be starring somewhere in the world!’

‘Every day?’ asked Clarence softly. ‘For the next—’

‘Eight hundred, even; why not?’

‘I never thought of that.’

‘Think of it!’

Clarence walked over to the window and looked out at the Hollywood Hills, and nodded at last.

‘My God, Terwilliger,’ he said. ‘You really like me that much?’

‘It’s hard to put in words,’ said Terwilliger, with difficulty.

‘So do we finish the mighty spectacle?’ asked Glass. ‘Starring the tyrant terror striding the earth and making all quake before him, none other than Mr Joseph J. Clarence?’

‘Yeah. Sure.’ Clarence wandered off, stunned, to the door, where he said, ‘You know? I always wanted to be an actor!’

Then he went quietly out into the hall and shut the door.

Terwilliger and Glass collided at the desk, both clawing at a drawer.

‘Age before beauty,’ said the lawyer, and quickly pulled forth a bottle of whiskey.

At midnight on the night of the first preview of Monster from the Stone Age, Mr Glass came back to the studio, where everyone was gathering for a celebration, and found Terwilliger seated alone in his office, his dinosaur on his lap.

‘You weren’t there?’ asked Mr Glass.

‘I couldn’t face it. Was there a riot?’

‘A riot? The preview cards are all superdandy extra plus! A lovelier monster nobody saw before! So now we’re talking sequels! Joe Clarence as the Tyrant Lizard in Return of the Stone-Age Monster, Joe Clarence and/or Tyrannosaurus Rex in, maybe, Beast from the Old Country—’

The phone rang. Terwilliger got it.

‘Terwilliger, this is Clarence! Be there in five minutes! We’ve done it! Your animal! Great! Is he mine now? I mean, to hell with the contract, as a favor, can I have him for the mantel?’

‘Mr Clarence, the monster’s yours.’

‘Better than an Oscar! So long!’

Terwilliger stared at the dead phone.

‘God bless us all, said Tiny Tim. He’s laughing, almost hysterical with relief.’

‘So maybe I know why,’ said Mr Glass. ‘A little girl, after the preview, asked him for an autograph.’

‘An autograph?’

‘Right there in the street. Made him sign. First autograph he ever gave in his life. He laughed all the while he wrote his name. Somebody knew him.

There he was, in front of the theater, big as life. Rex Himself, so sign the name. So he did.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Terwilliger slowly, pouring drinks. ‘That little girl…?’

‘My youngest daughter,’ said Glass. ‘So who knows? And who will tell?’

They drank.

‘Not me,’ said Terwilliger.

Then, carrying the rubber dinosaur between them, and bringing the whiskey, they went to stand by the studio gate, waiting for the limousines to arrive all lights, horns and annunciations.

The end