ISAAC ASIMOV

DAY OF THE HUNTERS

It began the same night it ended. It wasn't much. It just bothered me; it still bothers me.

You see, Joe Bloch, Ray Manning, and I were squatting around our favorite table in the corner bar with an evening on our hands and a mess of chatter to throw it away with. That's the beginning.

Joe Bloch started it by talking about the atomic bomb, and what he thought ought to be done with it, and how who would have thought it five years ago. And I said lots of guys thought it five years ago and wrote stories about it and it was going to be tough on them trying to keep ahead of the newspapers now. Which led to a general palaver on how lots of screwy things might come true and a lot of for-instances were thrown about.

Ray said he heard from somebody that some big-shot scientist had sent a block of lead back in time for about two seconds or two minutes or two thousandths of a second – he didn't know which. He said the scientist wasn't saying anything to anybody because he didn't think anyone would believe him.

So I asked, pretty sarcastic, how he came to know about it. – Ray may have lots of friends but I have the same lot and none of them know any big-shot scientists. But he said never mind how he heard, take it or leave it.

And then there wasn't anything to do but talk about time machines, and how supposing you went back and killed your own grandfather or why didn't somebody from the future come back and tell us who was going to win the next war, or if there was going to be a next war, or if there'd be anywhere on Earth you could live after it, regardless of who wins.

Ray thought just knowing the winner in the seventh race while the sixth was being run would he something.

But Joe decided different. He said, "The trouble with you guys is you got wars and races on the mind. Me, I got curiosity. Know what I'd do if I had a time machine?"

So right away we wanted to know, all ready to give him the old snicker whatever it was.

He said, “If I had one, I’d go back in time about a couple or five or fifty million years and find out what happened to the dinosaurs.”

Which was too bad for Joe, because Ray and I both thought there was just about no sense to that at all. Ray said who cared about a lot of dinosaurs and I said the only thing they were good for was to make a mess of skeletons for guys who were dopy enough to wear out the floors in museums; and it was a good thing they did get out of the way to make room for human beings. Of course Joe said that with some human beings he knew, and he gives us a hard look, we should’ve stuck to dinosaurs, but we pay no attention to that.

“You dumb squirts can laugh and make like you know something, but that’s because you don’t ever have any imagination,” he says. “Those dinosaurs were big stuff. Millions of all kinds – big as houses, and dumb as houses, too – all over the place. And then, all of a sudden, like that,” and he snaps his fingers, “there aren’t any anymore.”

How come, we wanted to know.

But he was just finishing a beer and waving at Charlie for another with a coin to prove he wanted to pay for it and he just shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. That’s what I’d find out, though.”

That’s all. That would have finished it. I would’ve said something and Ray would’ve made a crack, and we all would’ve had another beer and maybe swapped some talk about the weather and the Brooklyn Dodgers and then said so long, and never think of dinosaurs again.

Only we didn’t, and now I never have anything on my mind but dinosaurs, and I feel sick.

Because the rummy at the next table looks up and hollers, “Hey!”

We hadn’t seen him. As a general rule, we don’t go around looking at rummies we don’t know in bars. I got plenty to do keeping track of the rummies I do know. This fellow had a bottle before him that was half empty, and a glass in his hand that was half full.

He said, “Hey,” and we all looked at him, and Ray said, “Ask him what he wants, Joe.”

Joe was nearest. He tipped his chair backward and said, “What do you want?”

The rummy said, “Did I hear you gentlemen mention dinosaurs?”

He was just a little weavy, and his eyes looked like they were bleeding, and you could

only tell his shirt was once white by guessing, but it must've been the way he talked. It didn't sound rummy, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, Joe sort of eased up and said, "Sure. Something you want to know?"

He sort of smiled at us. It was a funny smile; it started at the mouth and ended just before it touched the eyes. He said, "Did you want to build a time machine and go back to find out what happened to the dinosaurs?"

I could see Joe was figuring that some kind of confidence game was coming up. I was figuring the same thing. Joe said, "Why? You aiming to offer to build one for me?"

The rummy showed a mess of teeth and said. "No, sir. I could but I won't. You know why? Because I built a time machine for myself a couple of years ago and went back to the Mesozoic Era and found out what happened to the dinosaurs."

Later on, I looked up how to spell "Mesozoic," which is why I got it right. in case you're wondering, and I found nut that the Mesozoic Era is when a11 the dinosaurs were doing whatever dinosaurs do. Rut of course at the time this is just so much double-talk to me, and mostly I was thinking we had a lunatic talking to us. Joe claimed afterward that he knew about this Mesozoic thing, but he'll have to talk lots longer and louder before Ray and I believe him.

But that did it just the same. We said to the rummy to come over to our table. I guess I figured we could listen to him for a while and maybe get some of the bottle, and the others must have figured the same. But he held his bottle tight in his right hand when he sat down and that's where he kept it. it. [sic]

Ray said, "Where'd you build a time machine?"

"At Midwestern University. My daughter and I worked on it together."

He sounded like a college guy at that.

I said, "Where is it now? In your pocket?"

He didn't blink; he never jumped at us no matter how wise we cracked. Just kept talking to himself out loud, as if the whiskey had limbered up his tongue and he didn't care if we stayed or not.

He said, "I broke it up. Didn't want it. Had enough of it."

We didn't believe him. We didn't believe him worth a darn. You better get that straight. It stands to reason, because if a guy invented a time machine, he could clean

up millions – he could clean up all the money in the world, just knowing what would happen to the stock market and the races and elections. He wouldn't throw a11 that away, I don't care what reasons he had. – Besides, none of us were going to believe in time travel anyway, because what if you did kill your own grandfather.

Well, never mind.

Joe said, "Yeah, you broke it up. Sure you did. What's your name?"

But he didn't answer that one, ever. We asked him a few more times, and then we ended up calling him "Professor."

He finished off his glass and filled it again very slow. He didn't offer us any, and we all sucked at our beers.

So I said, "Well, go ahead. What happened to the dinosaurs?"

But he didn't tell us right away. He stared right at the middle of the table and talked to it.

"I don't know how many times Carol sent me back – just a few minutes or hours – before I made the big jump. I didn't care about the dinosaurs; I just wanted to see how far the machine would take me on the supply of power I had available. I suppose it was dangerous, but is life so wonderful? The war was on them – One more life?"

He sort of coddled his glass as if he was thinking about things in general, then he seemed to skip a part in his mind and keep right on going.

"It was sunny," he said, "sunny and bright; dry and hard. There were no swamps, no ferns. None of the accoutrements of the Cretaceous we associate with dinosaurs," – anyway, I think that's what he said. I didn't always catch the big words, so later on I'll just stick in what I can remember. I checked all the spellings, and I must say that for all the liquor he put away, he pronounced them without stutters.

That's maybe what bothered us. He sounded so familiar with everything, and it all just rolled off his tongue like nothing.

He went on, "It was a late age, certainly the Cretaceous. The dinosaurs were already on the way out – all except those little ones, with their metal belts and their guns."

I guess Joe practically dropped his nose into the beer altogether. He skidded halfway around the glass, when the professor let loose that statement sort of sadlike.

Joe sounded mad. "What little ones, with whose metal belts and which guns?"

The professor looked at him for just a second and then let his eyes slide back to nowhere. “THC were little reptiles, standing four feet high. They stood on their hind legs with a thick tail behind, and they had little forearms with fingers. Around their waists were strapped wide metal belts, and from these hung guns. – And they weren’t guns that shot pellets either; they were energy projectors.”

“They were what’!” I asked. “Say, when was this? Millions of years ago?”

“That’s right,” he said. “They were reptiles. They had scales and no eyelids and they probably laid eggs. But they used energy guns. There were five of them. They were on me as soon as I got out of the machine. There must have been millions of them all over Earth – millions. Scattered all over. They must have been the Lords of Creation then.”

I guess it was then that Ray thought he had him, because he developed that wise look in his eyes that makes you feel like conking him with an empty beer mug, because a full one would waste beer. He said, “Look, P’fessor, millions of them, huh? Aren’t there guys who don’t do anything but find old bones and mess around with them till they figure out what some dinosaur looked like. The museums are full of these here skeletons, aren’t they? Well, where’s there one with a metal belt on him. If there were millions, what’s become of them? Where are the hones?”

The professor sighed. It was a real, sad sigh. Maybe he realized for the first time he was just speaking to three guys in overalls in a barroom. Or maybe he didn’t care.

He said, “You don’t find many fossils. Think how many animals lived on Earth altogether. Think how many billions and trillions. And then think how few fossils we find. – And these lizards were intelligent. Remember that. They’re not going to get caught in snow drifts or mud, or fall into lava, except by big accident. Think how few fossil men there are – even of these subintelligent apemen of a million years ago.”

He looked at his half-full glass and turned it round and round.

He said, “What would fossils show anyway? Metal belts rust away and leave nothing. Those little lizards were warm-blooded. I know that, but you couldn’t prove it from petrified bones. What the devil? A million years from now could you tell what New York looks like from a human skeleton? Could you tell a human from a gorilla by the bones and figure out which one built an atomic bomb and which one ate bananas in a zoo?”

“Hey,” said Joe, plenty objecting, “any simple bum can tell a gorilla skeleton from a man’s. A man’s got a larger brain. Any fool can tell which one was intelligent.”

“Really?” The professor laughed to himself, as if all this was so simple and obvious, it

was just a crying shame to waste time on it. “You judge everything from the type of brain human beings have managed to develop. Evolution has different ways of doing things. Birds fly one way; bats Ay another way. Life has plenty of tricks for everything. – How much of your brain do you think you use. About a fifth. That’s what the psychologists say. As far as they know, as far as anybody knows, eighty per cent of your brain has no use at all. Everybody just works on way-low gear, except maybe a few in history. Leonardo da Vinci, for instance. Archimedes, Aristotle, Gauss, Galois, Einstein -”

I never heard of any of them except Einstein, but I didn’t let on. He mentioned a few more, but I’ve put in all I can remember. Then he said, “Those little reptiles had tiny brains, maybe quarter-size, maybe even less, but they used it all – every hit of it. Their hones might not show it, but they were intelligent; intelligent as humans. And they were boss of all Earth.”

And then Joe came up with something that was really good. For a while I was sure that he had the professor and I was awfully glad he came out with it. He said, “Look, P’fessor, if those lizards were so damned hot, why didn’t they leave something behind? Where are their cities and their buildings and all the sort of stuff we keep finding of the cavemen, stone knives and things. Hell, if human beings got the heck off of Earth, think of the stuff we ’ d leave behind us. You couldn’t walk a mile without falling over a city. And roads and things.”

But the professor just couldn’t he stopped. He wasn’t even shaken up. He just came right back with, “You’re still judging other forms of life by human standards. We build cities and roads and airports and the rest that goes with us – but they didn’t. They were built on a different plan. Their whole way of life was different from the ground up. They didn’t live in cities. They didn’t have our kind of art. I’m not sure what they did have because it was so alien I couldn’t grasp it – except for their guns. Those would be the same. Funny, isn’t it. – For all I know, maybe we stumble over their relics every day and don’t even know that’s what they are.”

I was pretty sick of it by that time. You just couldn ’ t get him. The cuter you’d be, the cuter he’d be.

I said, “Look here. How do you know so much about those things? What did you do; live with them? Or did they speak English? Or maybe you speak lizard talk. Give us a few words of lizard talk.”

I guess I was getting mad, too. You know how it is. A guy tells you something you don’t believe because it’s all cockeyed, and you can’t get him to admit he’s lying.

But the professor wasn’t mad. He was just filling the glass again, very slowly. “No,” he said, “I didn’t talk and they didn’t talk. They just looked at me with their cold, hard,

staring eyes – snake's eyes – and I knew what they were thinking, and I could see that they knew what I was thinking. Don't ask me how it happened. It just did. Everything. I knew that they were out on a hunting expedition and I knew they weren't going to let me go."

And we stopped asking questions. We just looked at him, then Ray said, "What happened? How did you get away?"

"That was easy. An animal scurried past on the hilltop. It was long – maybe ten feet – and narrow and ran close to the ground. The lizards got excited. I could feel the excitement in waves. It was as if they forgot about me in a single hot flash of blood lust – and off they went. I got back in the machine, returned, and broke it up."

It was the flattest sort of ending you ever heard. Joe made a noise in his throat. "Well, what happened to the dinosaurs?"

"Oh, you don't see? I thought it was plain enough. – It was those little intelligent lizards that did it. They were hunters – by instinct and by choice. It was their hobby in life. It wasn't for food; it was for fun."

"And they just wiped out all the dinosaurs on the Earth?"

"All that lived at the time, anyway; all the contemporary species. Don't you think it's possible? How long did it take us to wipe out bison herds by the hundred million? What happened to the dodo in a few years? Supposing we really put our minds to it, how long would the lions and the tigers and the giraffes last? Why, by the time I saw those lizards there wasn't any big game left – no reptile more than fifteen feet maybe. All gone. Those little demons were chasing the little, scurrying ones, and probably crying their hearts out for the good old days."

And we all kept quiet and looked at our empty beer bottles and thought about it. All those dinosaurs – big as houses – killed by little lizards with guns. Killed for fun.

Then Joe leaned over and put his hand on the professor's shoulder, easylike, and shook it. He said, "Hey, P'fessor, but if that's so, what happened to the little lizards with the guns? Huh? – Did you ever go back to find out?"

The professor looked up with the kind of look in his eyes that he'd have if he were lost.

"You still don't see! It was already beginning to happen to them. I saw it in their eyes. They were running out of big game- the fun was going nut of it. So what did you expect them to do? They turned to other game – the biggest and most dangerous of all – and really had fun. They hunted that game to the end."

“What game?” asked Ray. He didn’t get it, but Joe andI did.

“Themselves,” said the professor in a loud voice. “They finished off all the others and began on themselves – till not one was left.”

And again we stopped and thought about those dinosaurs – big as houses – all finished off by little lizards with guns. Then we thought about the little lizards and how they had to keep the guns going even when there was nothing to use them on but themselves.

Joe said, “Poor dumb lizards.”

“Yeah,” said Ray, “poor crackpot lizards.”

And then what happened really scared us. Because the professor jumped up with eyes that looked as if they were trying to climb right out of their sockets and leap at us. He shouted, “You damned fools. Why do you sit there slobbering over reptiles dead a hundred million years. That was the first intelligence on Earth and that’s how itended. That’s done. But we’re the second intelligence – and how the devil do you think we ’ re going to end?”

He pushed the chair over and headed for the door. But then he stood there just before leaving altogether and said: “Poor dumb humanity! Go ahead and cry about that.”