

Past Life Past Life past life past life past life past life past life

By Tyler McCurry

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A wholly absorbing deliciously Jurassic recounting of a cosmic carnival ride into the deep consequences of playing the wrong Karma hand in the revolving door of evolutionary life and reincarnation. You'd have to be dead (and maybe reincarnated as a stone) not be sucked into this layered, funny and unobtrusively sophisticated narrative that handily straddles the Mesozoic and the Cenozoic until everything comes down to a certain bathroom essential. Along with the author's unassuming but targeted prose and easy going style it should come as no surprise that we give this 'Grimms for Grown Ups'...*

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

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Really? So, what was I before I was Hank?

A toilet seat in the girl's bathroom in Sequoia High School in Redwoods City, California.

Gred was caught off-guard again.

Wow. That was oddly specific.

In January of 2021, a scientist named Jakob Vinther unearthed a perfectly-preserved, one-of-a-kind dinosaur cloaca, or a dinosaur's butthole in other words. It was apparently quite a find and there were even scant traces of fossilized feces in it for scientists to scrape out and study. Apparently there was a lot of speculation about how dinosaurs had sex and went to the bathroom and Gred wondered how much this Jakob guy would pay or what bits of his soul he would sell off to be here right now watching Suzie take a dump.

PAST LIFE

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1.

Hank didn't want to go out like this. He was a father, a grandfather and a great-grandfather too. He had two kids and four grandchildren and a great-granddaughter and his great-granddaughter was barely a year old. He had only just begun to know her.

He was an avid supporter of the Trump administration and still wore his **MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN** hat from Trump's 2016 campaign everywhere he went. Slowly but surely the severity of the nature of the coronavirus had started to become clear to everyone but he was one of those staunch anti-vaccers who believed it was all a hoax. Still, his daughter had pressured him into getting the vaccine for his own safety.

He refused. He never went out anywhere and he was always very careful. When his buddy from Vietnam called and asked if he wanted to go out for drinks at a secluded little dive bar they knew of that was hardly ever busy to swap beers and war stories like the good old days, he didn't think anything would come of it. The place was abnormally jam-packed, but they were sitting

in a corner, far away from the crowds. They took every precaution.

Two days later Hank tested positive for COVID-19 and now here he was about a fortnight's removed from that, on a ventilator clinging to life with a bright light in his eyes that he resisted the urge to go toward. His family was on their way but he did not think he would live to see them. The light was growing ever brighter. He closed his eyes for the last time. They would not open again.

Hank could still see the light and pretty soon it became a void. He went up to it and slipped through it and hit his head on something hard and white. He couldn't see or feel anything except the hard white barrier in front of him. With all his strength he pushed against it with his head until it burst, expecting to find a pearly gate on the other side.

Instead he flopped into a mass of wriggling scales and tails in the center of a mound of dirt with flecks of shells on top of it. One of the tails appeared to be his own and he looked down in amazement at his new bright green body with brown striations along the flanks and patches of feathers in several places. A stocky bipedal lizard, balancing itself with a long tail as it stomped around its nest to inspect its young, paused intermittently to lick him and its other hatchlings clean. He didn't know precisely what he was but he had seen the original

Jurassic Park so many times that there were more digits in the number of times he had seen it than there were in the entire cumulative amount of time the dinosaurs had actually existed. It was his son's favorite movie growing up.

There were no bones about it. He had become a dinosaur.

2.

While his new mom cleaned him off, picking eggshells from his scales, he tried to work things out. From the looks of it he had become one of the smaller terrestrial meat-eating dinosaurs, perhaps a baby *Carnotaurus* or even a *Velociraptor*, which was lucky. If he had become one of the big dumb dinosaurs the meat-eaters preyed upon, he didn't think he could stand that. A creature like that would always need to have its head on a constant swivel, ready to hide at a moment's notice if a predator was nearby. If he had been reincarnated as one of those, he would have lost his mind the moment he was reborn.

He was devout and strictly believed you went to heaven or hell when you died but he knew a lot of people subscribed to the notion of reincarnation. Some circles believed that when a person died, they were reborn as another human or even an animal or an inanimate object and were free to live a brand new life as someone or something else, a cycle that repeated constantly. It seemed ridiculous that his body and consciousness could be

transported back in time into the body of a dinosaur instead of being transported forward into the new life of a human or an animal just waiting to be born, and even if there was such a thing as a next life, this was more of a past life. Next life implied a life that had yet to be lived but all the dinosaurs had lived and died already and that made his mind hurt.

Whatever it was, a past life or a new life, it was a new lease on life, a second chance. After a while he decided to just roll with it and as he grew and learned to adapt to being a dinosaur the notion of what he was before and what exactly had happened to him became a distant memory that was getting to be more out-of-reach than the peak of the smoky volcano that was visible far beyond his nest.

His early years rolled by. He stopped growing once he was about four or five feet tall, roughly the same height as the *Velociraptors* from the *Jurassic Park* series, and it didn't take long for him to determine a *Velociraptor* or something similar was what he had become. His raptor mom taught him how to eat and hunt and his new scaly and slightly feathery dad was with him every step of the way, which was more than he could say for his human father. His deadbeat dad in his previous life had walked out on him and his mom when he was just a toddler. Somehow his mom managed to raise him on her own until she got in a car accident and died of massive internal hemorrhaging when he was

sixteen, forcing him to drop out of high school and enlist in the Navy. He was a big fan of the *Jurassic Park* novels and movies, probably because it was a series an old fossil like him could relate to, and like most boys he'd always loved dinosaurs growing up. Some were presumed to be scavengers and loners but others were actually very social animals and extremely efficient pack hunters.

Velociraptors definitely fell into the latter category. Some of his brothers and sisters weren't cut out for it. One by one, they were eaten or killed, until he was the last of his clutch. His parents showed him how to signal to the others and make delicate little tonal shifts in his hisses and bellows to tell other raptors different things. They gave him a new name that was something like "Gred" if he understood them correctly and he liked the name a lot.

For some reason he retained all of the memories he'd made as a human in his previous life, even as he was making new memories as a dinosaur, and he did his best to keep it that way. He didn't think that made any sense but for all he knew that was supposed to happen when someone was reincarnated. If that were the case then surely a creature's head would get so swollen from all the memories it had carried over from its previous lives that it would explode or something. Maybe after every few reincarnations there was a mind dump or a soft reset and he just

hadn't reached that point yet. Whatever the case might have been, he enjoyed his new past life.

He liked being Hank the human but he could get used to being Gred.

3.

One day Gred broke from the pack to go foraging in the badlands. He was the Alpha now and he could do as he pleased.

It was late in the day and he was about to head back when he locked onto the scent of another raptor, a female. She was not a member of his pack and her scent was unfamiliar to him. He burst through a thicket of low overhanging ferns into a lush jungle clearing and found a slender *Velociraptor* with a purple feathery and scaly body and striking lavender eyes drinking from a stream.

There you are. I was waiting for you to lock onto my scent and come.

She looked up from the little brooklet she'd been drinking from and started talking to him with a series of grunts and bellows. It was the furthest thing from the English language, but Gred was so versed in the language of the raptors now that he could speak it as well as English and understood it like English too.

Who are you? he bellowed back.

It was not a normal clearing. The dirt was ringed in ancient flowers of varying hues and was dotted in the kinds of primordial puddles of ooze that all life had arisen from. Off to the side was a gap in the trees that led to a dank green wooded area. The gap was dark and he couldn't really tell what lurked beyond it.

I said who are you?

The female raptor turned tail and ran through the gap in the trees into the dark wooded area beyond. Hank went in after her and followed her down a long and winding dirt path to a swamp at the heart of the jungle. A dragonfly the size of his snout flitted past him and landed on a low-hanging cattail.

In here.

Her bellow seemed to come from nowhere, or maybe from anywhere. A place like this messed with a dinosaur's senses and played tricks on it the way it would play tricks on a human. Rather than using his eyes and ears to locate her, Gred used his much more reliable nose and it didn't take long for him to pick up her trail.

He turned to his left and burst through a patch of cattails to find her on the opposite bank of the swamp, staring down at her reflection in the muddy water.

I've always loved swamps. What do you think, Hank?

That caught Gred off-guard. He'd had so much fun being a dinosaur that he hadn't thought about his past life in a long time.

You know my old name, from when I was human.

Of course. I'm the reason you became a dinosaur in the first place.

He went over to the banks and laid with her there and the two of them bellowed back and forth.

Who the hell are you? I'm not going to ask again.

My name is Suzie. Some call me the hand of fate.

Hand of fate?

When someone has been reborn and they're having trouble adapting to their new lives, the powers that be send me to them to help them get acclimated. You seem to be doing just fine though.

She swiped at the water with one of her clawed forearms.

In other words, I don't really know what I'm doing here.

Ripples radiated outward from where she had swiped at the bog and rose and fell across the surface of the water. A large animal roared in the distance and Gred was reminded that some of the larger sauropods lived in the badlands. It was mating season and they were fiercely territorial this time of year. A couple of raptors might be able to take one down but it was best if they didn't stick around.

Do you like it? Being Gred?

Gred nodded.

Oh yes. Much better than being a human.

That's good. I'm glad you don't miss being Hank. Some people miss their past lives terribly, especially if they were fortunate enough to live human lives.

Her long forked tongue flicked out to test the moisture in the air and slipped back into her snout.

You weren't always human. Your existence is just one long constant string of souls bouncing around from one life to the next.

Really? So, what was I before I was Hank?

A toilet seat in the girl's bathroom in Sequoia High School in Redwoods City, California.

Gred was caught off-guard again.

Wow. That was oddly specific.

Most individuals tend to lead oddly specific lives.

He got to his feet, feeling certain she was yanking his tail.

You're crazy. Toilet seats don't have souls.

You'd be surprised. All things are made of matter and matter is the building block of life.

Another loud roar shook the air. It was getting late and it was about time to go out and hunt. His pack would be wondering

where he'd gone off to and if he didn't come back soon they were liable to go out and look for him.

You can be reincarnated as anything or anyone from any time. At least, almost anything or anyone. Some people and things, mostly very bad people and things, are fixed.

Fixed?

One and done. Can't lead multiple lives. You're a Trump supporter, right?

Don't tell me you're one of those bleeding hearts.

He's not that bad. It has to be someone really bad.

Like who? Adolph Hitler?

Kind of. Hitler's body is a fixed body, but his soul isn't fixed.

What does that mean?

Someone or something can't be reincarnated as him, but he can be reincarnated into something else.

She got up and toed the water with the wicked sickle-shaped claw on her left foot.

Luckily we pick and choose who gets reincarnated into what. I believe he was reincarnated as a pomeranian sometime in the fifties, then as one of the girders holding up some WWII monument somewhere. Dunno which one.

She giggled. A raptor's laugh tended to be high and shrill and it gave him a chill when he heard it.

That was my boss's idea. Thought it'd be funny. You know, the man that persecuted so many jews becoming an artifice to prop up a monument built to commemorate his own evil.

She looked and sounded like a raptor but that obviously wasn't what she was and at first he wanted to see her in her true form, but thought better of it after a while. A *Velociraptor* in of itself was a pretty terrible beast and the last thing he wanted was to come face-to-face with something even scarier. She got to her feet and as she was doing these long ropey coils of poo squirted out of her cloaca and hit the dirt. He was surprised he even knew what a cloaca was and couldn't help but stare at it voyeurishly while this was happening.

You know it's impolite to stare?

I can't help it. Shouldn't you be doing that behind a bush?

We are animals. We can go where we like.

But you realize I can see you.

She shrugged her leathery shoulders.

That fact is not lost on me.

In January of 2021, a scientist named Jakob Vinther unearthed a perfectly-preserved, one-of-a-kind dinosaur cloaca, or a dinosaur's butthole in other words. It was apparently quite a find and there were even scant traces of fossilized feces in it for scientists to scrape out and study. Apparently there was

a lot of speculation about how dinosaurs had sex and went to the bathroom and Gred wondered how much this Jakob guy would pay or what bits of his soul he would sell off to be here right now watching Suzie take a dump.

Who's your boss? God?

Gred could just barely make out the wriggling flotsam in the bog. Organisms like that were common in this jungle and it was a safe bet dinosaurs and humans evolved from such organisms.

I'm not at liberty to say.

He wanted to run but something was keeping him there. She had a power over him that he couldn't explain. Once they locked eyes he couldn't look away and he didn't think he wanted to either.

5.

Why are you really here?

It's coming.

What is?

The end.

A meteor shot down from the sky and struck the volcano off in the distance that had been the backdrop of this jungle ever since Gred was born.

*We chose for you to be reincarnated as a **Velociraptor**, but unfortunately the time and place into which you're reincarnated*

is something we can't always determine. If my calculations are correct, the extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs begins today.

There was another roar, then another. A litany of painful screeches tore up the sky and it didn't take long to see why. There was a crash and a small dinosaur burst out of the brush. Its body was pockmarked in oozing red sores and it was leaving a red trail behind it. It crashed headfirst into a nearby palm tree and fell in a heap on the ground. After that it didn't move again and it was obvious that it was dead.

All the theories about how the dinosaurs died out are wrong, at least partly. A meteor was involved, but not the way most people think. See that volcano over there?

She pointed at the volcano, which was collapsing in on itself.

Unbeknownst to any of you, a microscopic flesh-eating bacteria, a remnant of precambrian life, has been lying dormant inside it. When that meteor struck it and destroyed it, this bacteria was freed from where it had been sealed away and is now floating freely through the air.

She beelined toward the dead dinosaur.

It moves quick. Obviously didn't take long to get here.

Gred felt a burning pain on his flank. He looked over his shoulder and saw oozing red sores popping out of his body. Suzie was unaffected.

First it latches onto your body, then gets into your brain through whichever orifice it prefers. It makes you go insane.

She started to back away.

I'm afraid you're going to die. Maybe that's why I was sent to you.

I'm going to die?

Gred suddenly panicked, looking around. Maybe there was somewhere he could run to, somewhere he would be safe at. He was a great runner but it wouldn't do any good. He'd already been infected from the looks of it and all the running in the world couldn't save him now.

Yes.

But I don't want to die.

Who cares? You'll just be reincarnated as something else.

But I like being a dinosaur.

He snarled at her.

I could just kill you. Would that set things right?

I wouldn't try it. It won't do any good and I promise you'll regret it.

She puffed up her feathers to make herself look twice her size.

Besides, you wouldn't stand a chance. I'm much bigger and stronger than you are.

It was true. The female raptors were the dominant ones and he had a feeling she was a good fighter. Tearing out her throat might set things right, but he was afraid to try it.

Maybe you'll be a human again. Who knows? Life isn't fair...still, I guess I can make it easier for you.

She drew a line in the sand with her toe-claw and shut her eyes. A flat rectangle of rainbow energy shot up into the air from the rut she had made and formed a doorway of sorts.

If you step through this, it will all be taken away. Your memories of being a dinosaur and a human. That way, you'll have a blank slate and you won't miss either of the two previous lives you've lived no matter what's waiting for you.

Already his mind was going. His ability to reason was fading away and was being replaced by a single overarching dullness that didn't feel like anything at all.

Be quick. You don't have much time.

No...I don't want to die...NO!

He didn't know why he did it. He'd always had a terrible temper as a human and that hadn't changed when he'd become a dinosaur. Before she could stop him, he lunged forward and tore a chunk of flesh out of her throat. He expected her to try and stop him or fight back but she didn't put up any resistance at

all, which was odd. He bit her right on the jugular and it was quick. She fell to the ground foaming and bleeding from the mouth and then finally fell still.

It didn't seem to do any good like she'd said and the doorway she created was still intact even after she was dead. Still, he felt much better with her out of the way and just before he died he humored her and stepped through it. True to her word, all his memories went away. He no longer remembered his human children or grandchildren or his time in the Navy or his dino mommy and dino daddy and deadbeat human dad. His mind was wiped clean of the thoughts and memories that had bogged him down all his lives and it was peaceful.

He did not go insane like that little dino did. He simply bled to death. Blood was pouring down his nose and neck and he laid down next to Suzie's dead body and closed his eyes and that was that.

When he opened his eyes something strange was happening. It was like he could see but everything around him was white. He had a fixed view of a bathroom from a peripheral angle like he was looking at it through the eyes of a fish. He heard a swirl of gently lapping water and gasped.

Oh hell. He was a toilet seat again. He heard a shrill raptor laugh in the air and he knew Suzie had to be behind this. He thought that he had killed her back in the swamp but judging

by the laugh he was hearing he hadn't succeeded and the worst part of all was that he remembered all of it.

He still had all of his memories from when he was human as well as the memories he had made as a dinosaur and the image of Suzie was still burned into his odd toilet equivalent of a mind. The rainbow doorway had either not taken away his memories like Suzie said it would or she had restored them out of spite to pay him back for trying to kill her. He never should have tried to kill her. Life wasn't fair but obviously there were fates worse than death.

At least the bathroom was pleasant. It was constructed of marble and granite and had a regal air about it. He was enjoying it right until the door opened.

"I still don't know why you had them replace all the toilet seats."

"What'd you expect? Trump's ass was on the other ones."

A slender elderly man of about eighty in a sleek blue suit with a red tie came in.

"Come down to dinner, Joe."

Joe? A toilet was a great place to mull things over and Gred the raptor, formerly Hank the human and now a nameless toilet seat, mulled that over for a bit. He looked closely at the man as best he could with his odd peripheral and fixed view

of the bathroom and when he saw the American flag lapel pin it hit him.

It was Joe Biden.

"Hurry up."

Biden pulled down his zipper and something told him there wasn't a cloaca behind it.

"In a minute, Jill. Just got to use the oval office."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I would like to go on record and say that I believe there is a life after death. Most religions tell us that either a promised land or a purgatory is waiting for us on the other side but many people also subscribe to the theory of reincarnation. The idea of someone or something dying, being reborn and getting to live a brand-new life has always been interesting to me and the concept for Past Life stemmed from an idea I came up with that someone could live a new life while also technically living a past life at the same time.*

This is where the dinosaurs came in. Have loved dinosaurs all my life and it was fun to toy around with the idea of a human becoming a dinosaur. I wouldn't say I'm religious but I do believe in a higher power and I do think it would be nice if people who didn't live a good life at first got a chance to live a better life as someone or something else rather than being thrust into the afterlife with no hope in hell of redeeming themselves.

My main inspirations for this story were the original Jurassic Park novel by Michael Crichton and Covid. Jurassic Park has been my all-time favorite novel for several years now and I've always dreamt of writing a great dinosaur story of my own. As far as Covid-19 is concerned, if the last year and a half has taught me anything, it is wise not to tempt fate by refusing to wear masks and follow CDC guidelines, particularly as vaccination levels rise and we get closer to herd immunity. As much as the thought of complying with something we don't agree with sickens us, at the end of the day it is up to us to prevent the spread of this deadly communicable disease, not just for the good of ourselves, but for the good of us all.

AUTHOR BIO: McCurry is a 30-year-old author from Olathe, Kansas with a passion for food, family and fun. His work has appeared in *Davega Bicycle*, *Aphelion Webzine*, the JCCC literary magazine *Mind's Eye*, the University of Kansas literary magazine *Coal City Review*, *Grand Little Things* and *Fleas on the Dog*. His story **Devilish** was published in **Issue 8**.