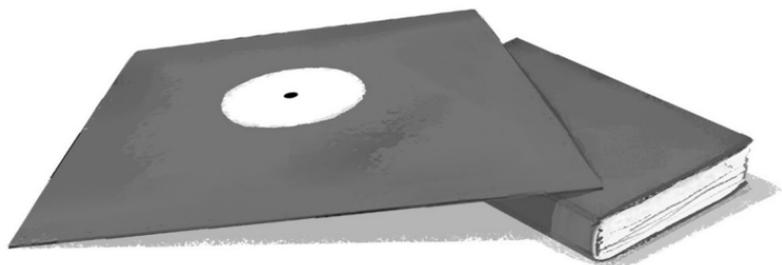


**GAYLE
FORMAN**

*We are
inevitable*



SIMON & SCHUSTER

The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs

They say it took the dinosaurs thirty-three thousand years to die. Thirty-three millennia from the moment the asteroid slammed into the Yucatán Peninsula to the day that the last dinosaur keeled over, starving, freezing, poisoned by toxic gases.

Now, from a universal perspective, thirty-three thousand years is not much. Barely a blink of an eye. But it's still thirty-three thousand years. Almost two million Mondays. It's not nothing.

The thing I keep coming back to is: Did they know? Did some poor T-rex feel the impact of the asteroid shake the earth, look up, and go, *Oh, shit, that's curtains for me?* Did the camarasaurus living thousands of miles from the impact zone notice the sun darkening from all that ash and understand its days were numbered? Did the triceratops wonder why the air suddenly smelled so different without knowing it was the poison gases released by a blast that was equivalent to ten billion atomic bombs (not that atomic bombs had been invented yet)? How far into that thirty-three-thousand-year stretch did they go before they understood that their extinction was not looming—it had already happened?

The book I'm reading, *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs* by Steve Brusatte, which I discovered mis-shelved with atlases a few

months back, has a lot to say on what life was like for dinosaurs. But it doesn't really delve into what they were thinking toward the end. There's only so much, I guess, you can conjecture about creatures that lived sixty million years ago. Their thoughts on their own extinction, like so many other mysteries, they took with them.



Fact: Dinosaurs still exist. Here's what they look like. A father and son in a failing used bookstore, spending long, aimless days consuming words no one around here buys anymore. The father, Ira, sits reading in his usual spot, a ripped upholstered chair, dented from years of use, in the maps section, next to the picture window that's not so picturesque anymore with its Harry Potter lightning-bolt crack running down the side of it. The son—that's me, Aaron—slumps on a stool by the starving cash register, obsessively reading about dinosaurs. The shelves in the store, once so tidy and neat, spill over, the books like soldiers in a long-lost war. We have more volumes now than we did when we were a functioning bookstore because whenever Ira sees a book in the garbage or recycling bin, or on the side of the road, he rescues it and brings it home. We are a store full of left-behinds.

The morning this tale begins, Ira and I are sitting in our usual spots, reading our usual books, when an ungodly moan shudders through the store. It sounds like a foghorn except we are in the Cascade mountains of Washington State, a hundred miles from the ocean or ships or foghorns.

Ira jumps up from his seat, eyes wide and panicky. “What was that?”

“I don’t—” I’m drowned out by an ice-sharp crack, followed by the pitiful sounds of books avalanching onto the floor. One of our largest shelves has split down the middle, like the chestnut tree in *Jane Eyre*. And anyone who’s read *Jane Eyre* knows what that portends.

Ira races over, kneeling down, despondent as he hovers over the fallen soldiers, as if he’s the general who led them to their deaths. He’s not. This is not his fault. None of it.

“I got this,” I tell him in the whispery voice I’ve learned to use when he gets agitated. I lead him back to his chair, extract the weighted blanket, and lay it over him. I turn on the kettle we keep downstairs and brew him some chamomile tea.

“But the books . . .” Ira’s voice is heavy with mourning, as if the books were living, breathing things. Which to him they are.

Ira believes books are miracles. “Twenty-six letters,” he used to tell me as I sat on his lap, looking at picture books about sibling badgers or hungry caterpillars while he read some biography of LBJ or a volume of poetry by Matthea Harvey. “Twenty-six letters and some punctuation marks and you have infinite words in infinite worlds.” He’d gesture at my book, at his book, at all the books in the shop. “How is that not a miracle?”

“Don’t worry,” I tell Ira now, walking over to clear up the mess on the floor. “The books will be fine.”

The books will not be fine. Even they seem to get that, splayed out, pages open, spines cracked, dust jackets hanging off, their fresh paper smell, their relevance, their dignity, gone. I flip through an

old Tuscany travel guide from the floor, pausing on a listing for an Italian pensione that probably got killed by Airbnb. Then I pick up a cookbook, uncrease the almost pornographic picture of a cheese soufflé recipe no one will look at now that they can log onto Epicurious. The books are orphans, but they are our orphans, and so I stack them gently in a corner with the tenderness they deserve.

Unlike my brother Sandy, who never gave two shits about books but conquered his first early reader before he even started kindergarten, I, who desperately wanted the keys to Ira's castle, had a hard time learning to read. The words danced across the page and I could never remember the various rules about how an *E* at the end makes the vowel say its own name. The teachers would have meetings with Ira and Mom about delays and interventions. Mom was worried but Ira was not. "It'll happen when it happens." But every day that it didn't happen, I felt like I was being denied a miracle.

Toward the end of third grade, I picked up a book from the bins at school, not one of the annoying just-right baby books that got sent home in my backpack, but a hardcover novel with an illustration of a majestic and kindly lion that seemed to be beckoning to me. I opened the first page and read the first line. And with that, my world changed.

Ira had been reading to me since before I was born, but that was not remotely comparable to reading on my own, the way that being a passenger in a car is nothing like being the driver. I've been driving ever since, from Narnia to Hogwarts to Middle-earth,

from Nigeria to Tasmania to the northern lights of Norway. All those worlds, in twenty-six letters. If anything, I'd thought, Ira had undersold the miracle.

But no more. These days, the only book I can stomach is *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs*. Other than that, I can't even look at a book without thinking about all that we've lost, and all we are still going to lose. Maybe this is why at night, in the quiet of my bedroom, I fantasize about the store going up in flames. I itch to hear that *foof* of the paper igniting. I imagine the heat of the blaze as our books, our clothes, our memories are incinerated. Sandy's records melt into a river of vinyl. When the fire is over, the vinyl will solidify, capturing in it bits and pieces of our lives. Fossils that future generations will study, trying to understand the people who lived here once, and how they went extinct.

"What about the shelf?" Ira asks now.

The shelf is ruined. Consider this a metaphor for the store. Our lives. But Ira's brow is furrowed in worry, as if the broken shelf physically pains him. Which it probably does. And when something pains Ira, it pains me too. Which I why I tell him we'll get a new shelf.

And so it begins.



The next morning, Ira wakes me with a series of gentle shakes. "Aaron," he says, a manic gleam in his hazel eyes, "you said we'd go buy a new shelf."

Did I? It's still dark outside. My head is full of cotton balls.

"C'mon!" Ira urges.

I blink until the digital clock comes into focus. It's 5:12. "Now?"

"Well, we have to drive to Seattle and back and if we leave at six, even if we hit traffic, we'll be there by eight when Coleman's opens and we can be done by eight thirty and there won't be traffic heading north, so we can be back by ten."

According to the laminated sign on the door Mom made a lifetime ago, Bluebird Books is open from ten to six, Monday through Saturday, closed Sundays. Ira insists on abiding by our posted times, even on snow days, even on sick days. It's part of what he calls the bookseller covenant. The fact that no one ever comes into the store before noon, if they come in at all, does not seem to play into his logic.

"Can't we get shelves in Bellingham?" I'm still not fully awake, which is why I add, "At the Home Depot?" even though I know Ira does not shop at Home Depot. Or Costco. Or Amazon. Ira remains committed to the small, independent store. A dinosaur who supports other dinosaurs.

"Absolutely not!" Ira says. "We have always shopped at Coleman's. Your mother and I bought our first bookshelf from Linda and Steve. Now come on!" He yanks away the covers. "Let's get moving."

Twenty minutes later, we are firing up the Volvo wagon and pulling out of the driveway. It's still midnight dark, dawn feeling very far away. At this hour, the businesses are all shuttered, so you can't tell which ones are kaput—like Dress You Up, which

still has its dusty mannequins in the window—and which are just closed.

Ira slows to wave to Penny Macklemore as she unlocks the hardware store, one of many businesses in town she owns. “Good morning, Penny!” He unrolls his window, showering us both with a blast of Northwest air, whose dampness makes it feel far colder than it actually is. “You’re up early.”

“Oh, I’m always up this early,” Penny replies. “That’s why I catch all the worms.”

“Well, we’re off to buy some new shelves,” Ira replies. “See you later.”

We drive toward the interstate, down the winding road, past the mills that used to employ half our town and now stand empty, partially reclaimed by the forests they once transformed into paper.

“Your mom and I bought all our furniture from Coleman’s,” Ira says as he merges onto the interstate. “It’s run by a husband and wife. Well, it was until Steve died. Now Linda runs it with her daughter.” Ira pauses. “Kind of like you and me.”

“Right,” I say, wondering if Linda Coleman’s daughter also has fantasies about her store going up in flames. Wood, after all, is as flammable as paper.

“No matter how long it’s been,” Ira continues, “Linda always remembers the last thing we bought. ‘Ira,’ she’ll say. ‘How’s that display table working out?’ Even if it’s been years.”

What Ira is talking about is the hand-sell. He is a big believer in the hand-sell. Once upon a time, he and Mom were very good

at it. Before the asteroid came and ruined the business and frayed his brain, Ira had an almost photographic memory of what any given customer had read last, and therefore an uncanny ability to suggest what they should read next. So for instance, if Kayla Stoddard came in, stopping to chat with Mom about the brand-new coat (with tags on) Kayla had scored at the Goodwill, Ira would remember that the last two books Kayla had bought were *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, and would surmise, correctly, that she was on a Poirot kick and would quietly have *Appointment with Death* ready for her. He and Mom used to sell a lot of books this way.

“Linda will find us a good replacement for the broken shelf,” Ira says as a gasoline tanker tears past the Volvo on the uphill. “And then we can organize a bit here and there and turn things around.”

Ira often talks about *turning things around*. But what he really means is turning back time, to before the asteroid hit. And though I’ve read a fair number of books about the theoretical possibility of time travel, as far as I know, no one has invented a time machine yet. Still, I don’t blame him for wishing.

When we pull into Coleman’s, right at eight, the store is dark and locked. I run out to check the sign on the door. “It says it opens at nine,” I call to Ira.

“That’s odd.” Ira scratches his beard. “I could’ve sworn it was open from eight to four. Linda arranged the schedule like that so they could be home with the kids in the evening. Though the daughter, Lisa is her name,” Ira says, snapping his fingers

at the synaptic connection, “she’s grown now, so maybe they changed the hours. Now we’re going to open late.”

He frowns, as if there will be people waiting eagerly at our doorstep the way we are waiting at Coleman’s.

“Well, since we have time to kill, do you want to get some breakfast?” I ask.

“Sure,” Ira agrees.

We get back in the car and drive toward a shopping center. On one end of the parking lot is one of those giant health food emporiums. On the other side is a bookstore. Its windows are jammed with artful displays of new titles, smiling author photos advertising upcoming readings, a calendar of events. All signs of a bookshop thriving—in Amazon’s backyard, no less—having survived algorithms, pandemics, TikTok. A reminder that not all species went extinct after the asteroid hit. Just the dinosaurs.

The sight of the store deflates Ira, who slumps in his seat and refuses to get out of the car. “Just go grab me something.”

The health food store is decked out for Halloween: gourds and pumpkins and artisanal candy with “real sugar” because apparently that’s a selling point. The prepared-food area is like a museum: fresh-cut fruit symmetrically laid out, a buffet of scrambled eggs and fluffy biscuits warming under a heat lamp. Ten dollars a pound. The egg breakfast at C.J.’s is five bucks, including juice and coffee.

I set off for something more affordable. And it’s there, between kombucha scobies and shade-grown coffee, I see it: a table with records for sale. The cheapest one is twenty bucks. They go up, significantly, from there.

A tattooed hipster mans the table. He wears a fedora with a feather in it. I can't tell if it's a Halloween costume or just his "ironic" style.

"You collect vinyl?" he asks.

"Me? No!" I tell him. "I don't like records, or CDs, or music, for that matter."

The hipster rears back as if I just informed him that I mutilate kittens for fun. "What kind of person doesn't like music?"

My reply is automatic, an age-old distinction I don't even question: "A book person."



Around eight forty-five, bellies full of on-sale granola bars, we pull back into the Coleman's parking lot just as a guy wearing a red vest is unlocking the metal gate. "Hello," Ira calls, leaping out of the car. "Are you open?"

"We open at nine."

"Could we come in now?" Ira replies. "I'm an old friend of Linda's."

"Who's Linda?"

"Linda Coleman. Owner since nineteen seventy . . ." Ira points to the sign, the words dying in his mouth as he sees the placard beneath the Coleman's sign that reads UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.

"Oh, yeah, they sold the store," the guy tells us.

"To your family?" Ira asks unsteadily.

"To Furniture Emporium," he replies.

“Does your family own that?” Ira asks.

“No, it’s the chain. They kept the name, though, because people know this place. But it’s really a Furniture Emporium now.”

“Oh,” Ira says. “I see.”

The clerk is friendly enough. After he unlocks the door and flips on the lights, he says, “You can come in early.” He opens the door. “Browse if you want.”

Set loose, Ira is adrift. He jogs up and down the aisles, swiveling left and right like a lost child in the grocery store.

“How about this one?” I ask, pointing to an oak shelf that looks vaguely like the one that broke, in that it is large, wooden, and reddish.

“Okay, okay, good, good,” Ira says, speaking in duplicate as he does when his anxiety spikes. “How much?”

I peer at the price sticker. “On sale for four hundred and forty-five dollars.”

I have no idea if that’s a lot for a shelf. Or if we can afford it. Though I technically own the bookstore, Ira still takes care of the business end of things.

“We’d like the red oak shelf,” Ira calls to the clerk. “Delivered.”

They start filling out the paperwork. When Ira gives our address, the clerk is not familiar with our town. I show him on my phone. “Oh, man, that’s far.”

“Linda always delivered for us. Steve used to drive the truck himself. Charged fifty dollars.”

“Delivery that far is gonna be . . .” He types into the computer. “One fifty.” He looks at Ira. “You’d be better off buying it online. Get free shipping.”

Online? You're better off telling Ira to sell his kidney. Which he wouldn't. Give it away? Yes, but not sell it.

"Ira," I try. "He has a point."

"I won't buy online. From a chain."

"But this *is* a chain."

"But this is where I've always bought my furniture." He nods to the clerk, who tallies up the total.

"Four forty-five, plus tax and delivery. That comes to six thirty-four."

"Six thirty-four," Ira repeats in a reedy voice.

"Maybe we should forget it," I begin.

"No," Ira says. "We need a shelf." With a shaking hand, Ira counts the bills in his wallet. "I have two hundred in cash. Charge the rest," he says, pulling out a credit card.

"Where'd you get that card?"

"Oh, I've had this one for years," he replies.

Before I can point out that he must know I know this is bullshit, the card is declined. "Try this one," Ira says, forking over another one.

"How are you getting all these cards?" When Ira and Mom transferred ownership of the store to me on my eighteenth birthday and then declared bankruptcy a few months later, it was supposed to wipe out the debt than had been sinking us. And it was also meant to wipe their credit clean. Ira's not meant to be eligible for new cards.

"They're in my name," Ira replies, his breath growing ragged as he hands over yet another card. "They won't hurt the store. They won't hurt you."

“They? How many cards do you have?”

“Just three.”

“Just three?”

“It’s not a big deal. Sometimes you have to borrow from Peter to pay Paul.”

When the third is declined, Ira bows his head. “Linda used to let me pay on installments,” he tells the clerk.

“Sure,” the clerk says. “We can do that.”

Ira looks up, a painful smile on his face. “Thank you. Is it okay if we pay two hundred now?”

“Yep,” the clerk replies. “The balance is due before we deliver. We’ll hold it for ninety days.”

Ira blinks. His mouth goes into an O shape, like a fish gasping for air.

“Ira, he means layaway. Not credit. You have to pay before you get the shelf.”

“O-oh,” Ira stutters. His breathing picks up and his eyes bulge. I know what’s coming next.

“Excuse us a moment.” I lead Ira to a bench outside and help him to take deep, slow breaths. “Let’s just forget the shelves.”

“No!” Ira’s voice is raspy, desperate. “We can’t.”

“Fine. Then let’s order online.”

“No!” Ira hands me his wallet. “Just go get something.”

“But Ira . . .” I begin, the frustration twisting in my stomach. Because sometimes I just want to shake him. Why can’t he see it? A shelf won’t magically transform us into a bookstore like the one in this shopping center. It’s over for us. Time to accept our extinction. Like Linda Coleman apparently has.

But then I look at him: this broken man, who has given me, all of us, all of him.

“Fine,” I say, closing my fist around the wallet. I go back inside and slap two hundred dollars out on the counter. “What will this get us?”

What it will get us is metal shelves.

This turns out to be important.