

Note: This is an abridged version of the original story by Ray Bradbury. Key terms are underlined.

A Sound of Thunder

The sign on the wall read:

TIME SAFARI, INC. SAFARIS TO ANY YEAR IN THE PAST.

NAME THE ANIMAL.

WE TAKE YOU THERE TO SHOOT IT.

Eckels smiled as he gave the man behind the desk ten thousand dollars.

"Does this safari guarantee I come back alive?"

"We guarantee nothing," said the official, "except the dinosaurs."

He turned.

"This is Mr. Travis, your Safari Guide in the Past. He'll tell you what and where to shoot. If you disobey instructions, there's a penalty of another ten thousand dollars, plus legal penalties, when you return."

"Damn," Eckels said "A real Time Machine." He shook his head. "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Smith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Deutscher had won, we'd have a dictatorship. We're lucky, now just worry about—"

"Shooting my dinosaur," Eckels finished the sentence.

"Tyrannosaurus Rex. The worst monster in history. Sign this document. Anything happens to you, we're not responsible. Those dinosaurs are hungry."

Eckels turned red angrily. "Trying to scare me!"

"Frankly, yes. Six safari leaders were killed last year, and a dozen hunters. We're here to give you the most excitement a hunter could ask for. Traveling back sixty million years to kill the biggest monster in all Time." They moved silently across the room, taking their guns with them, toward the Machine. There were four other men in the Machine. Travis, the safari leader, his assistant, Lesperance, and the other hunters, Billings and Kramer. The Machine turned on, time went backward. The Machine slowed and then stopped. They were in an old time, a very old

time indeed, three hunters and two Safari leaders with their blue metal guns across their knees. "Christ isn't born yet," said Travis. "Moses has not gone to the mountain to talk with God. The Pyramids, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler—none of them exists."

The men nodded.

"That," Mr. Travis pointed—"is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before our new president." He showed them a metal path that went into the green jungle. "And that," he said, "is the Path, laid by Time Safari for your use. It's raised six inches above the earth. Doesn't touch even one piece of grass, flower, or tree. It is to keep you from touching this world of the past in any way. Stay on the Path. Don't go off it. If you fall off, there's a penalty. And don't shoot any animal unless we say it is okay."

"Why?" asked Eckels.

"We don't want to change the Future. A Time Machine is risky. We might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, destroying an important link."

"That's not clear," said Eckels.

"All right," Travis continued, "we accidentally kill one mouse here. That means all the future families of this one mouse are destroyed, right?"

"Right."

"And all the families of the families of that one mouse! With a step of your foot, you destroy first one, then a dozen, then a thousand, a million, a billion possible mice!"

"So what?" said Eckels.

"So what? What about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? Ten mice die, then a fox dies. Ten foxes dies, a lion dies. Billions of things die. Fifty-nine million years later, a caveman goes hunting. But you, friend, have stepped on all the tigers in that area because you stepped on one single mouse. So the caveman starves. And the caveman is not just a man! He is an entire future country. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a race, a people, an entire history. Step on a mouse and you change everything. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, there might never be a United States. So be careful. Stay on the Path. Never step off!"

"I see," said Eckels. "Not even touch the grass?"

"Correct. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't change the atmosphere."

"How do we know which animals to shoot?"

"They're marked with red paint," said Travis. "Today, before our trip, we sent Lesperance back with the Machine. He came to this particular time and followed animals."

"Studying them?"

"Right," said Lesperance. "When I find one that's going to die when a tree falls on him, I write down the exact hour, minute, and second. I shoot a paint bomb. It leaves some red paint on his skin. We can't miss it. Then we arrive in the Past so we meet the Monster not more than two minutes before he would have died. We kill only animals with no future. See how careful we are?" They were ready to leave the Machine and moved forward into the morning.

"Safety catches off, everyone!" ordered Travis. "You shoot first, Eckels. Then Billings. Then Kramer."

"I've hunted tiger and elephant. But Jesus, this is it," said Eckels. "I'm shaking."

Travis raised his hand. "There he is."

The jungle became very quiet. Silence. A sound of thunder. Out came Tyrannosaurus Rex. It was thirty feet above the trees.

"It sees us!"

"There's the red paint on its chest!"

"Get me out of here," said Eckels, afraid. "This is too much for me."

"Eckels! Not that way!"

Eckels, not looking back, walked to the edge of the Path, stepped off the Path, and walked, not knowing it, into the jungle. His feet stepped into green moss.

The guns fired. Like a mountain, the dinosaur fell. A huge tree branch broke. It crashed on the dead monster.

"There." Lesperance checked his watch. "Do you want a trophy picture?"

"What?"

"We can't take anything back to the Future. The body has to stay right here. The body stays.

But we can take a picture of you standing near it."

The two men tried to think, but gave up, shaking their heads. They let themselves be led along the metal Path and got back into the Machine. Eckels was already there.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Get up!" cried Travis.

Eckels got up.

"Go out on that Path alone, you're not coming back in the Machine. We're leaving you here! You nearly killed us. Look at his shoes! He ran off the Path. We guarantee no one leaves the Path. He left it. I'll have to report to the government. What has he done to Time, to History!"

"Take it easy, all he did was kick up some dirt."

"How do we know?" cried Travis. "We don't know anything! It's all a mystery! Get out there, Eckels!"

Eckels said. "I'll pay anything. A hundred thousand dollars!"

Travis stared at Eckels. "Go out there. The Monster's next to the Path. The bullets can't be left behind. They don't belong in the Past; they might change something. Here's my knife. Dig them out!"

Eckels returned five minutes later, his arms red to the elbows. He held out his hands. Each held a number of steel bullets.

"Switch the machine on. Let's go home."

1492. 1776. 1812.

They cleaned their hands and faces. They changed their dirty shirts and pants. Eckels was up and around again, not speaking. Travis stared at him for a full ten minutes.

"Don't look at me," cried Eckels. "I haven't done anything."

"Who knows?"

"I just ran off the Path, that's all, a little mud on my shoes—what do you want me to do?"

"I'm warning you, Eckels, I might kill you yet. I've got my gun ready."

"I'm innocent. I've done nothing!"

1999. 2000. 2055.

The Machine stopped.

"Get out," said Travis.

The room was there as they had left it. But not the same as they had left it. Travis looked around. "Everything okay here?" he asked

"Fine. Welcome home!"

"Okay, Eckels, get out. Don't ever come back."

Eckels could not move.

"You heard me," said Travis. "What're you staring at?"

Eckels stood there. What sort of world it was now? But the immediate thing was the sign painted on the office wall. The sign had changed:

TYME SEFARI, INC. SEFARIS TU ANY YEER EN THE PAST.

YU NAIM THE ANIMALL.

WEE TAEK YOU THAIR. YU SHOT ITT.

Eckels fell into a chair. He looked at the dirt on his boots. "No, it can't be. Not a little thing like that. No!" In the mud, green and gold and black, was a butterfly, very beautiful, and very dead. "Not a little thing like that! Not a butterfly!" cried Eckels. It fell to the floor, a small thing. It couldn't change things. Killing one butterfly couldn't be that important! Could it?"

His face was cold. He asked: "Who—who won the presidential election yesterday?"

The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know damn well. Deutscher, of course!

Who else? Not that weak guy Smith. We have got an iron man now!" The official stopped.

"What's wrong?"

Eckels moaned. He dropped to his knees. He touched at the golden butterfly with shaking fingers. "Can't we," he asked the world, himself, the officials, the Machine, "can't we take it back, can't we make it alive again? Can't we start over? Can't we—"

He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, cold. He heard Travis breathe loud in the room; he heard Travis lift his gun, click the safety, and raise the gun.

There was a sound of thunder.

Comprehension Questions

Instructions: Work with a classmate to answer these questions in your own words

1. How does the company Time Safari try to make travelling to the past safe?
2. Why does a tree branch fall on the tyrannosaurus rex after it has been shot?
3. Why did the world change when the men came back to the present?
4. How did the world change? Give two or three examples.
5. How are the political candidates described before and after the safari?
6. What is the sound of thunder? Find two answers.

Discussion Questions

Instructions: Discuss the questions below with a classmate.

1. What did you think of the end of the story? Did you feel bad for Eckels? Do you think Travis did the right thing?
2. Would you ever go on a safari like the one described in the story? Why, or why not?
3. If you could travel back in time, what would you want to see?
4. Do you think that small actions in our daily lives can have a big impact? Can you give any examples?

Comprehension Question Answers

(answers may vary)

1. They build a metal path that floats and does not touch anything. They tell you to never leave the path. They only help you hunt animals that will die soon anyway and mark those animals with red paint.
2. This is how the tyrannosaurus rex would have died naturally. The tree would have fallen on it and killed it.
3. Because Eckels stepped on a butterfly which caused a chain reaction similar to the one described by the guide when he tells the story about the mouse, the tigers and the caveman.
4. The sign changed because the English language has changed. Words are spelled differently. The outcome of the election has changed. Deutscher has won instead of Smith. The public's opinion of politics has changed. People now like Deutscher and his type of politics.
5. At the beginning of the story, Deutscher is described as a dictator and someone you would have to run away from. Smith is described as a fine president. After the trip to the past, Deutscher is seen as a strong leader or iron man who can deal with the difficult world. Smith, on the other hand, is seen as too weak.
6. The sound of thunder refers both to the sound of the tyrannosaurus rex and the sound of the gun shot when Travis kills Eckels.