

Fiction

At the Mouse Circus

By Harlan Ellison



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The King of Tibet was having himself a fat white woman. He had thrown himself down a jelly tunnel, millennia before, and periodically, as he pumped her, a soft pink-and-white bunny rabbit in weskit and spats trembled through, scrutinizing a turnip watch at the end of a heavy gold-link chain. The white woman was soft as suet, with little black eyes thrust deep under prominent brow ridges. Honkie bitch groaned in unfulfilled ecstasy, trying desperately and knowing she never would. For she never had. The King of Tibet had a bellyache. Oh, to be in another place, doing another thing, alone.

The land outside was shimmering in waves of fear that came radiating from mountaintops far away. On the mountaintops, grizzled and wizened old men considered ways and means, considered runes and portents, considered whys and wherefores ... ignored them all ... and set about

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sending more fear to farther places. The land rippled in the night, beginning to quake with terror that was greater than the fear that had gone before.

"What time is it?" he asked, and received no answer.

Thirty-seven years ago, when the King of Tibet had been a lad, there had been a man with one leg—who had been his father for a short time—and a woman with a touch of the tar brush in her, and she had served as mother.

"You can be anything, Charles," she had said to him. "Anything you want to be. A man can be anything he can do. Uncle Wiggily, Jomo Kenyatta, the King of Tibet, if you want to. Light enough or black, Charles, it don't mean a thing. You just go your way and be good and *do*. That's all you got to remember."

The King of Tibet had fallen on hard times. Fat white women and cheap cologne. Doodad, he had lost the horizon. Exquisite, he had dealt with surfaces and been dealt with similarly. Wasted, he had done time.

"I got to go," he told her.

"Not yet, just a little more. Please."

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So he stayed. Banners unfurled, lying limp in absence of breezes from Camelot, he stayed and suffered. Finally, she turned him loose, and the King of Tibet stood in the shower for forty minutes. Golden skin pelted, drinking, he was never quite clean. Scented, abluted, he still knew the odors of wombats, hallway musk, granaries, futile beakers of noxious fluids. If he was a white mouse, why could he not see his treadmill?

"Listen, baby, I got need of fi'hunnerd dollahs. I know we ain't been together but a while, but I got this *bad* need." She went to snap-purses and returned.

He hated her more for doing than not doing.

And in her past, he knew he was no part of any recognizable future.

"Charlie, when'll I see you again?" Stranger, never!

Borne away in the golden flesh of Cadillac, the great beautiful mother Hog, plunging wheelbased at one hundred and twenty (bought with his semen) inches, Eldorado god-creature of four hundred horsepower, displacing recklessly 440 cubic inches, thundering into forgetting weighing 4550+ pounds, goes ... went ... Charlie ... Charles ... the King of Tibet.

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Golden brown, cleaned as best as he could, five hundred reasons and five hundred aways. Driven, driving into the outside.

Forever inside, the King of Tibet, going outside.

* * * *

Along the road. Manhattan, Jersey City, New Brunswick, Trenton. In Norristown, having had lunch at a fine restaurant, Charlie was stopped on a street corner by a voice that went *pssst* from a mailbox. He opened the slit and a small boy in a pullover sweater and tie thrust his head and shoulders into the night. "You've got to help me," the boy said. "My name is Batson. Billy Batson. I work for radio station WHIZ and if I could only remember the right word, and if I could only *say* it, something wonderful would happen. S is for the wisdom of Solomon, H is for the strength of Hercules, A is for the stamina of Atlas, Z is for the power of Zeus ... and after that I go blank."

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The King of Tibet slowly and steadily thrust the head back into the mailslot and walked away. Reading, Harrisburg, Mt. Union, Altoona, Nanty Glo.

On the road to Pittsburgh there was a four-fingered mouse in red shorts with two big yellow buttons on the front, hitchhiking. Shoes like two big boxing gloves, bright eyes sincere, forlorn and way lost, he stood on the curb with meaty thumb and he waited. Charlie whizzed past. It was not his dream.

Youngstown, Akron, Canton, Columbus, and hungry once more in Dayton.
O.

Oh aitch eye oh. Why did he ever leave. He had never been there before. This was the good place. The river flowed dark and the day passed overhead like some other river. He pulled into a parking space and did not even lock the god-mother Eldorado. It waited patiently, knowing its upholstered belly would be filled with the King of Tibet soon enough.

"Feed you next," he told the sentient vehicle, as he walked away toward the restaurant.

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Inside—dim and candled at high noon—he was shown to a heavy wood booth, and there he had laid before him a pure white linen napkin, five pieces of silver, a crystal goblet in which fine water waited, and a promise. From the promise he selected nine-to-five winners, a long shot and the play number for the day.

A flocked velvet witch perched on a bar stool across from him turned, exposed thigh and smiled. He offered her silver, water, a promise, and they struck a bargain.

Charlie stared into her oiled teakwood eyes through the candle flame between them. All moistened Saran-Wrap was her skin. All thistled gleaming were her teeth. All mystery of cupped hollows beneath cheekbones was she. Charlie had bought a television set once, because the redhead in the commercial was part of his dream. He had bought an electric toothbrush because the brunette with her capped teeth had

indicated she, too, was part of his dream. And his great Eldorado, of course. *That* was the dream of the King of Tibet.

"What time is it?" But he received no answer and, drying his lips of the last of the *peche flambée*, he and the flocked velvet witch left the restaurant: he with his dream fraying, and she with no product save one to sell.

There was a party in a house on a hill.

When they drove up the asphalt drive, the blacktop beneath them uncoiled like the sooty tongue of a great primitive snake. "You'll like these people," she said, and took the sensitive face of the King of Tibet between her hands and kissed him deeply. Her fingernails were gunmetal silvered and her palms were faintly moist and plump, with expectations of tactile enrichments.

They walked up to the house. Lit from within, every window held a color facet of light. Sounds swelled as they came toward the house. He fell a step behind her and watched the way her skin flowed. She reached out, touched the house, and they became one.

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No door was opened to them, but holding fast to her hair he was drawn behind her, through the flesh of the house.

Within, there were inlaid ivory boxes that, when opened, revealed smaller boxes within. He became fascinated by one such box, sitting high on a pedestal in the center of an om rug. The box was inlaid with teeth of otters and puff adders and lynx. He opened the first box and within was a second box frosted with rime. Within the frost-box was a third, and it was decorated with mirrors that cast back no reflections. And next within was a box whose surface was a mass of intaglios, and they were all fingerprints, and none of Charlie's fit, and only when a passing man smiled and caressed the lid did it open, revealing the next, smaller box. And so it went, till he lost count of the boxes and the journey ended when he could not see the box that fit within the dust-mote-size box that was within all the others. But he knew there were more, and he felt a great sadness that he could not get to them.

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"What is it, precisely, you want?" asked an older woman with very good bones. He was leaning against a wall whose only ornamentation was a gigantic wooden crucifix on which a Christ figure hung, head bowed, shoulders twisted as only shoulders can be whose arms have been pulled from sockets; the figure was made of massive pieces of wood, all artfully stained: chunks of doors, bedposts, rowels, splines, pintels, joists, cross-ties, rabbit-joined bits of massive frames.

"I want..." he began, then spread his hands in confusion. He knew what he wanted to say, but no one had ever ordered the progression of words properly for him.

"Is it Madelaine?" the older woman asked. She smiled as Aunt Jemima would smile, and targeted a finger across the enormous living room, bull's-eyed on the flocked velvet witch all the way over there by the fireplace. "She's here."

The King of Tibet felt a bit more relaxed.

"Now," the older woman said, her hand on Charlie's cheek, "what is it you need to know. Tell me. We have all the answers here. Truly."

"I want to know—"

The television screen went silver and cast a pool of light, drawing Charlie's attention. The possibilities were listed on the screen. And what he had wanted to know seemed inconsequential compared to the choices he saw listed.

"That one," he said. "That second one. How did the dinosaurs die."

"Oh, fine!" She looked pleased he had selected that one. "Shefti...?" she called to a tall man with gray hair at the temples. He looked up from speaking to several women and another man, looked up expectantly, and she said, "He's picked the second one. May I?"

"Of course, darling," Shefti said, raising his wine glass to her.

"Do we have time?"

"Oh, I think so," he said.

"Yes ... what time *is* it?" Charlie asked.

"Over here," the older woman said, leading him firmly by the forearm. They stopped beside another wall. "Look."

The King of Tibet stared at the wall, and it paled, turned to ice, and became translucent. There was something embedded in the ice. Something huge. Something dark. He stared harder, his eyes straining to make out the shape. Then he was seeing more clearly and it was a great saurian, frozen at the moment of pouncing on some lesser species.

"*Gorgosaurus*," the older woman said, at his elbow. "It rather resembles *Tyrannosaurus*, you see; but the forelimbs have only two digits. You see?"

Thirty-two feet of tanned gray leather. The killing teeth. The nostriled snout, the amber smoke eyes of the eater of carrion. The smooth, sickening tuber of balancing tail, the crippled forelimbs carried tragically

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withered and useless. The musculature ... the pulsing beat of iced blood beneath the tarpaulin hide. The ... beat...

It lived.

Through the ice went the King of Tibet, accompanied by the Circe-eyed older woman, as the shellfish-white living room receded back beyond the ice-wall. Ice went, night came.

Ice that melted slowly from the great hulk before him. He stood in wonder. "See," the woman said.

And he saw as the ice dissolved into mist and night-fog, and he saw as the earth trembled, and he saw as the great fury lizard moved in shambling hesitancy, and he saw as the others came to cluster unseen nearby. *Scolosaurus* came. *Trachodon* came. *Stephanosaurus* came. *Protoceratops* came. And all stood, waiting.

The King of Tibet knew there were slaughterhouses where the beef was hung upside-down on hooks, where the throats were slit and the blood

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ran thick as motor oil. He saw a golden thing hanging, and would not look. Later, he would look.

They waited. Silently, for its coming.

Through the Cretaceous swamp it was coming. Charlie could hear it. Not loud, but coming steadily closer. "Would you light my cigarette, please?" asked the older woman.

It was shining. It bore a pale white nimbus. It was stepping through the swamp, black to its thighs from the decaying matter. It came on, its eyes set back under furred brow ridges, jaw thrust forward, wide nostrils sniffing at the chill night, arms covered with matted filth and hair. Savior man.

He came to the lizard owners of the land. He walked around them and they stood silently, their time at hand. Then he touched them, one after the other, and the plague took them. Blue fungus spread from the five-pronged marks left on their imperishable hides; blue death radiating from

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impressions of opposed thumbs, joining, spreading cilia and rotting the flesh of the great gone dinosaurs.

The ice re-formed and the King of Tibet moved back through pearly cold to the living room.

He struck a match and lit her cigarette.

She thanked him and walked away.

The flocked velvet witch returned. "Did you have a nice time?" He thought of the boxes-within-boxes.

"Is that how they died? Was he the first?"

She nodded. "And did Nita ask you for anything?"

Charlie had never seen the sea. Oh, there had been the Narrows and the East River and the Hudson, but he had never seen the sea. The real sea, the thunder sea that went black at night like a pane of glass. The sea that could summon and the sea that could kill, that could swallow whole cities and turn them into myth. He wanted to go to California.

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He suddenly felt a fear he would never leave this thing called Ohio here.

"I asked you: did Nita ask you for anything?"

He shivered.

And then said, "What?"

"Nita. Did she *ask* you for anything?"

"Only a light."

"Did you give it to her?"

"Yes."

Madelaine's face swam in the thin fluid of his sight. Her jaw muscles trembled. She turned and walked across the room. Everyone turned to look at her. She went to Nita, who suddenly took a step backward and threw up her hands. "No, I didn't—"

The flocked velvet witch's hand darted toward the older woman, an asp that seemed to pass into Nita's neck. The silver tipped fingers

reappeared, clenched around a fine sparkling filament. Then Madelaine snapped it off with a grunt.

There was a terrible minor sound from Nita, then she turned, watery, and stood silently beside the window, looking empty and hopeless.

Madelaine wiped her hand on the back of the sofa and came to Charlie. "We'll go now. The party is over."

He drove in silence back to town.

"Are you coming up?" he asked, when they parked the Eldorado in front of the hotel.

"I'm coming up."

He registered them as Prof. Pierre and Maria Sklodowska Curie, and for the first time in his life he was unable to reach a climax. He fell asleep sobbing over never having seen the sea, and came awake hours later with the night still pressing against the walls. She was not there.

He heard sounds from the street, and went to the window.

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There was a large crowd in the street, gathered around his car.

As he watched, a man went to his knees before the golden Eldorado and touched it. Charlie knew *this* was his dream. He could not move; he just watched; as they ate his car.

The man put his mouth to the hood and it came away bloody. A great chunk had been ripped from the gleaming hide of the Cadillac. Golden blood ran down the man's jaws.

Another man draped himself over the top of the car, and even through the window the King of Tibet could hear the terrible sucking, slobbering sounds. Furrows were ripped in the top.

A woman pulled her dress up around her hips and backed, on all fours, to the rear of the car. Her face trembled with soft expectancy, and then it was inside her and she moved on it.

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When she came, they all moved in on the car and he watched as his dream went inside them, piece by piece, chewed and eaten as he stood by helpless.

"That's all, Charlie," he heard her say, behind him. He could not turn to look at her, but her reflection was superimposed over his own in the window. Out there in darkness now, they moved away, having eaten.

He looked, and saw the golden thing hanging upside-down in the slaughterhouse, its throat cut, its blood drained away in onyx gutters.

Afoot, in Dayton, Ohio, he was dead of dreams.

"What time is it?" he asked.

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