

THE PARKING TOWER

by
JAMES D. HOUSTON

*Charlie Bates had always found a place to park in the tower.
But on this particular day—*

Charlie Bates knew better than to try parking along the street. The curbs were lined with cars that never moved, never left their spaces. And the cars that were moving crept in endless columns, inhabited by people who had nowhere else to live or who couldn't find a parking place close enough to make it worthwhile going home. These cars were in perpetual motion, searching, circling, ready to lunge into spaces that never appeared. So Charlie had a habit of parking in a many-floored tower near his office, in the city's center.

This habit pleased him. It was the smart thing to do, the sensible adjustment to an almost intolerable situation. He was a man of the modern world, who knew what it took to survive.

"You have to decide," he'd often say, "which battles you're going to fight."

One morning Charlie arrived downtown later than usual. It was nearly noon when he turned into the cool entrance tunnel and stopped at the lighted glass cage. The attendant, in white overalls, handed him half a time-punched ticket and said, "Pretty full right now, Mr. Bates. You'll just have to check each floor as you go up."

"Okay. I'll find something, Mel. Thanks."

The concrete floor was dark and shiny with the polish of a million tires. Charlie eased away from the cage's light, passed the gas pumps, aimed for the curving ramp that spiraled upward around its concrete core. He drove

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confidently, sure of the territory. In his rearview mirror he saw a woman driving behind him. She looked scared, as if she feared not finding a space at all. Charlie felt superior to her. At the first landing he saw other cars searching up and down aisles for empty spaces. He smiled at their naïveté.

At the second landing a quick glance told him this floor, too, was full. He had learned how to spot empty spaces without slowing down. He could scan an entire floor while rounding the flat place around the concrete core. The woman behind him peeled off and headed down an aisle. He smiled again.

He didn't bother to look at floors three, four, or five. He pitied the drivers wandering these lower levels. He took great pleasure in setting his wheel to pull the grade without adjusting his steering. His car handled well on the incline, he thought.

At floor six, he glanced right, left, and straight ahead, half for lack of anything better to do. All spaces were full. He angled into the climbing tunnel again, heading for seven. "Lucky seven," he thought. Charlie had never parked higher than seven. As the track flattened, he was ready to peel off and follow an aisle to some waiting space. But his peripheral vision told him that seven, too, was full. Suppressing a tiny pang of fear, he held the angle and entered the curving tunnel again, finding some

comfort in the fact that at least he hadn't lost the set of his wheel.

Floors eight, nine, ten, and eleven were full. At floor twelve he thought he saw a space far down the aisle to his right, and he peeled off, proud now, since it wasn't a space an average driver would have seen from the ramp. A bulky concrete pillar nearly concealed it. At the end of this aisle Charlie turned left, ready to slip into his niche between the fenders of two other cars, only to discover another row of closed trunks and chrome bumpers and license plates. He stopped and stared. He was sweating. It had been months since he made a mistake like that. "I'm getting jittery," he thought. "It's ridiculous."

He jammed into first gear and sped back toward the upward ramp with a violent roar, leaving a billow of exhaust fumes behind him to settle on the rows of silent cars.

He almost hit a convertible that was rounding the spiral track in front of him. It was the woman who had peeled off at the second level. She stopped and leaned out the window, yelling, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Sorry ma'am," Charlie began, "I didn't realize anyone . . ."

"Oh, that's all right. I mean what's going on in this parking tower? What kind of a parking tower is it when you can't find a place to park?"

"There'll be something up ahead."

"You think so?"

"Sure. I've been parking here for months, never had any trouble."

"I hope you're right. It's kind of scary."

"Scary?"

"Eerie, sort of. I mean, there's nobody up here, not even anybody waiting for the elevator or anything."

"It's always like that up here. Listen, I'll tell you what. If you're worried, just fall in behind me. We'll look together. Will that make you feel better?"

"Oh, thank you, yes, it would. Thank you very much."

She backed up. Charlie pulled in front and started to climb again.

"She really looks worried," he thought as they passed floor thirteen. He imagined it could be a little scary, up here all alone. He set his wheel and wondered if she would notice his style on the turns.

He felt very alert now, a veteran, an old pro showing this rookie the ropes. He didn't want to be caught slowing down unless there definitely was a place to park. He passed floors fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen. At each level Charlie glanced right, left, and straight ahead, saw the unbroken pattern of cars, then glanced in his rearview mirror to watch the woman slow down and nearly stop while she too looked around, finally gunning her engine to catch Charlie halfway to the next floor.

As levels flashed past them, he could see the woman's face contorting strangely. At floor twenty she began honking her horn and waving. Charlie stopped at the next landing and walked back to her door.

Hysterically she yelled, "What's going on around here! What's going on!"

Charlie was dismayed. "I really don't know, ma'am. I wish I did."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going back down! I can't take any more of this!"

He watched her face, framed in the open window, grow pale with fear. "I'd agree with you about that, except I really don't know what good it would do to go back down. There just weren't any parking places, you saw that. If you go back out in the street, you're no better off."

"What are we going to do then?"

She shouted this as if it were all Charlie's fault.

"Now you just relax for a minute, ma'am, and we'll start climbing again."

"Oh I can't. I simply can't!"

"We have to, don't you see? We don't really have much choice in the matter."

She began to sob uncontrollably.

"Don't leave me here. Please don't leave me here alone."

"Nobody's leaving you here. C'mon, snap out of it. Few more floors, we're bound to find a spot. C'mon."

She sat up abruptly, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm being very foolish. You're absolutely right."

Charlie was about to return to his own car when she reached for his hand, clutched it tightly, and said, "What's your name?"

"Bates. Charlie Bates. What's yours?"

"Deedee."

"Deedee?"

"Uh huh."

At that moment another car rounded the track from the floor below and nearly rammed Deedee's rear bumper. The car stopped, and a florid man stuck his bald head out the window.

"Hey, what's going on around here?"

Charlie straightened up. "Sorry

mister. Just trying to help this lady . . ."

"I don't care about her. Where did all these cars come from?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Charlie answered, shrugging, smiling.

"I was supposed to be at a meeting half an hour ago, and I've spent the whole time on this merry-go-round."

"It's aggravating, I'll grant you that."

"Well then, get moving!" The man leaned on his horn, filling the cavern of floor twenty-one with a hollow blare.

Charlie jumped into his car and headed upward again, followed by Deedee and the florid man, who kept blaring his horn. The noise unnerved Charlie. He

found his speed increasing steadily with every upward turn. By the time they reached floor thirty, he was going forty miles an hour. Deedee kept up with him, and the man's horn seemed to grow louder the farther he got from his important meeting.

At floor thirty-nine the man peeled off. Charlie knew there was no room. In his rearview he could see the scarlet face; it looked ready to burst. He could hear the constant horn echoing over roofs of the thousand cars packed tightly there, the frantic cry of a crazed animal in alien surroundings. He heard gears grinding and screaming as the wild car snorted among the aisles, and from the floor above, Charlie heard the horn stop and the final reverberating crash as the florid man tried to force his way into the narrow space between two parallel-parked sports cars.

Charlie's wheel was set, and the speed was hypnotizing him. He was going forty-five. He noticed they were passing floor forty-five, and he thought he saw some meaning in that. He tried to increase his speed a mile per floor, to see how fast they could actually climb. His car was performing beautifully, he thought. He glanced at the temperature gauge. It had risen some, but there was nothing to worry about.

At floor fifty-five Deedee began honking again, waving with one arm. "She shouldn't do that," Charlie told

himself. Then, as if he'd prophesied it, her right fender caught the wall when she flattened for fifty-six, gouging out a hunk of concrete. He knew she was scared and losing her nerve, but he kept climbing. There was no alternative. Every floor was full.

He was going an even sixty when they passed that floor. Behind him Deedee's horn blared erratically while she careened from wall to wall in the winding corridor. She was out of control and Charlie regretted it. He couldn't stop now, though. At floor sixty-one, in desperation, Deedee peeled off for the last time, still honking out some strange telegraphy, and Charlie heard her crash into the row of cars nearest the ramp, heard the metallic explosion, and no screech.

"She didn't even use her brakes," he thought. He shuddered and shook his head, and although he'd reached floor sixty-three, he cut back to sixty miles an hour. He could make the curve easily at sixty, as long as his wheel held and the radiator didn't boil.

He was proud of his car, a little proud of himself too, going it alone now, without the comfort of Deedee behind him. Amazing, among other things, how his perception had improved. Even passing a landing at sixty he could tell in an instant whether or not there was space to park, though in truth he no longer paid much attention to that. At

this point he didn't really believe there'd be a parking space, and somehow it didn't seem to make much difference.

He began to lose count of the floors. The continual upward spiral made him dizzy. The floors blurred, and for a while he couldn't tell which way he was headed—up, down, or sideways. Then miraculously his vision cleared, the dizziness passed, replaced by a marvelous giddy well-being, a light-headedness that made him feel all-powerful, convinced him he could do no wrong, make no mistakes. Was it lack of oxygen, he wondered, a rarefying atmosphere? He knew such a thought should frighten him. But it didn't. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, nothing could go wrong because now he could make no mistakes.

Charlie sped upward, whirling and whirling, past floor upon floor of the parking tower, until at last he saw a radiance ahead. The ramp leveled out, and he broke into sudden, eye-piercing sunlight. The road widened as other single tracks like his fed into what became a twelve-lane freeway crossing what seemed to be an endless plain. In five of the other lanes he saw drivers like himself, blinking in the bright light and looking around. They all sped along at sixty, and they started waving to each other.

Charlie yelled to the man nearest him, "Hey, we made it!"



The man yelled back, "Yeah, how about that?"

Eager to share his elation, Charlie shouted, "Some road, huh!"

"You betcha!" the man replied.

The other men were yelling at each other, and they raced together like that for miles, until the man next to Charlie shouted in another tone, "Hey, what's that up ahead?"

Charlie squinted, saw what appeared to be a row of cars coming from the other direction. He yelled, "I don't know!"

The distant spots grew bigger, approaching at high speed. The other

man yelled, "Hey, am I seeing things? Or are they in our lanes?"

"That's what it looks like," Charlie shouted, "but that's impossible!"

He leaned toward his windshield, peering through the glare. Another car was headed right for him. He glanced at his speedometer. Eighty miles an hour. For the first time he noticed that little mesh fences about as high as his window sill separated him from the other lanes, so there was no changing lanes without crashing into a fence. He jabbed his brake. His tires grabbed and squealed, his rear end spun, tearing at one of the fences. When he finally



stopped, his tail hung over into the adjoining lane. His companions kept going, and while he sat there, he watched five simultaneous explosions on the road ahead as ten cars collided head-on at eighty miles an hour, hoods, trunks, fenders flying in all directions, the hulks aflame and burning fiercely.

A moment later the car that should have hit his came barreling past, narrowly missing Charlie's front end by swerving in toward the opposite fence.

Charlie yelled, "Hey!"

The man turned, surprised. His car angled into the fence, crossed the next

lane, went through another fence, through six fences that way, until it hit an anchored fence post and exploded.

Shaken, Charlie started his car. His doors and fenders were badly smashed, but the engine and wheels seemed okay. Cautiously he proceeded forward, squinting in the bright sunlight, trying to see down the long lane ahead. No more cars appeared. After several miles the road began gradually to dip. The freeway divided into several strands. He was traveling a single track again, and before he realized what was happening, he had passed a sign that said **DOWN RAMP**.

The grade inclined sharply, curving

toward a murky tunnel, and his car was picking up speed. Charlie jabbed for his

brakes. But he had torn something at the fence, and they wouldn't hold.



Comment

1. a. Why does Charlie Bates make a habit of parking in the parking tower near his office?
 - b. What details show you he is sure of himself and confident of finding a space?
 - c. When does he feel the first pang of fear?
2. a. At the twelfth floor Deedee remarks that the tower is eerie. What specific reason does she give for feeling this way?
 - b. What clues can you add to show that there is something eerie about the situation?
3. a. What happens when Charlie reaches the top of the tower?
 - b. What happens to Charlie?
4. Do you consider this a realistic or a fanciful story? Explain your answer.