

Cutie Pie

by Nicholas Fisk

He was helpless and alone – stranded on an alien planet – but he fought his despair with all the courage of his race.



Some of the highest minds on Earth combined to build *Questar*, the spaceship that accidentally captured a creature living on the planet Quta-pi.¹

Some of the lowest minds on Earth gave the creature its popular name: Cutie Pie. You see how these minds worked.

“From Quta-pi we bring you – Cutie Pie!” Great. Fantastic. Listen, men, we’ve got a *property* here. Get out there and sell.

Heaven knows, the creature was “cute.” So cute that all over Earth, millions of human eyes, glued to millions of color TV sets, goggled rapturously at the iridescent “feathers” (pearly down the belly, radiant and shimmering patterns everywhere) that covered Cutie Pie’s curved, cozy, rounded body. Human hearts doted on his dark, liquid eyes; on the gentle mouth that seemed to smile; on the busy little “hands,” complete with thumbs, the Cutie Pie used with such astonishing speed and skill.

“Aaah Aaah...!” crooned the world, “Aaah! Just look at him now! He’s making his bed!”

“Oo, mummy do look! He’s cleaning his whiskers again!”

Almost at once there were Cutie Pie dolls, coloring books, tee shirts, fan clubs, cereal cartons, cartoon series – anything, everything. Fortunes were made instantly. How could the promoters fail? The creature was adorable. “Oh, he’s just too sweet to

¹ *Quta-pi* (kyu’ta pi’)

live!” the world said.

How right the world was. Every day, Cutie Pie nearly died.

“If only I could actually *see* him – *touch* him – *hold* him!” people mewed. They could not. Cutie Pie – no, this is too much, let us give him his own, proper name, Ch-tsal² - Ch-tsal was hermetically sealed. He lived in a glass prison, a scientific tomb. Temperature – exactly 180°F; humidity – precisely 98 percent; atmosphere – hydrogen, oxygen, and careful proportions of a dozen exotic gases. This atmosphere imitated that of Quta-pi, the place where Ch-tsal had been captured. So, the Earth scientists agreed, it must be right.

Ch-tsal knew better. For him, every day was an agonizing fight for life. The 180°F temperature roasted him. The 98 percent humidity stifled him. The so carefully proportioned atmosphere choked him.

For although Ch-tsal was captured on Quta-pi, that planet was not his home. He merely changed to be there. For Ch-tsal was, in our terms, an adolescent. The elders had sent him out to undertake what we could call an initiation: he went out as a “boy,” to return with the dignity of a “man,” having faced difficulties and dangers in strange places. Quta-pi was the strangest, most hostile place he had to visit. However, his stay there was to be brief.

Or so it was planned. But on Quta-pi the sky had split and thundered (that was our spaceship *Questar*). A *thing* had descended and scarred the planet’s surface (that was *Questar’s* scoop, a sort of rake gathering samples of soil, rock, shale). Ch-tsal, stunned, was scooped up too.

He shudderingly remembered silver creatures with bubble faces (those were the crew of *Questar*). He glimpsed them briefly, then lost consciousness. Now he was a prisoner of white-clad men with tube-and-goggle faces. They came into his glass prison fast and went out faster. They wore gas masks to protect themselves against the atmosphere they had created for Ch-tsal.

He knew these killers did not mean to torture him. They were not wicked; he could feel that they meant well. But he could not talk to them, could not explain. Ch-tsal

² *Ch-tsal* (che zal’)

had no vocal chords; his race does not speak as we do. He could only look past the goggles into the eyes, begging them to understand. But they could not, did not.

If Ch-tsal's eyes seemed liquid to the watching world, it was probably because of the endless tears he shed.

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“Aaaah!” the world said. “Look! He’s doing it again! He’s *grooming* himself!” “Combing his lovely silky whiskers with his darling little hands!” “Cleaning his *booful* feathers!”

He was indeed. Ch-tsal unceasingly groomed his feathers because they were filters, temperature-controllers, respirators and much else. As for his whiskers – they were his receivers, antennae, language-carriers, voice, lifeline. They linked him to his people. So even at home, these precious whiskers were groomed frequently. They had to be kept working perfectly.

In the glass prison they did not work.

So Ch-tsal, to add to his physical miseries, was deaf, dumb, and cut off. Alone. Alone, alone, alone...

He fought his despair with all the courage and complex experience of his race (far older than ours). His five stomachs and numerous organic filters just allowed him to stomach the food and atmosphere supplied to him (“Aaaah, look! He’s making something! A sort of game! Can you understand it? I can’t...”).

Best of all there was sleep – and dreams; he was home again, free again, loved and loving again. Such dreams!

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On the nineteenth day, Earth time, of his captivity, Ch-tsal woke from a beautiful dream to an appalling reality.

Lying on the floor of his glass prison were – feathers. Jeweled feathers from his back, the longer, more boldly patterned feathers from his sides, and down from his belly.

They had fallen out in the night.

To Ch-tsal, this calamity was what sudden growths of hair would be to a human. Imagine. You wake one morning to find your face, the backs of your hands, your arms, your body, covered with tufts of coarse hair! Unthinkable!

And even worse for Ch-tsal. He had dreamed of his mother: her beauty – the shapes and patterns and colors of her feathers – was largely of her own creation. Like all those of her race, she had created her own style of beauty; willed her own individual, self-expressive loveliness. So, in his different way, had Ch-tsal. His feathers said, “This is me, Ch-tsal. As you can see simply by looking at me, I am such-and-such an individual with certain definite tastes and hopes and beliefs.” To him, his feathers were what clothes may be to humans – but more.

To lose his feathers was to lose himself.

To become naked was to become a monster.

He wept, prayed and attended to himself incessantly but without hope. His feathers continued to fall, and his whiskers. The scientists attending him peered through the glass walls and creased their brows. They world at large at first said, “Oh, the poor thing!” “Surely something can be done?” “Poor Cutie Pie!”

Soon the pity soured. “Really, it’s not nice!” “I think it’s disgusting.” “What’s on the other channels?”

And then a baby panda was born – and the Olympic games came round, and a new girl singer arrived who wore a one-piece glitter swimsuit back to front. The Cutie Pie tee shirts and badges and books were thrown away. Ch-tsal was forgotten.

By now he was hideous and near to death. Naked, he crouched in a corner of his glass prison, his dull eyes staring back at the bright eyes of the TV cameras. His picked at his muzzle, where his whiskers had been. There was nothing left for him. He had long realized that the glass walls prevented him from sending or receiving messages. Now he realized that even if he escaped, he would be powerless. Without his whiskers, he could no longer contact home. And if the impossible happened – if he could find a way of reaching home – how could he reappear there naked, without his feathers?

His scientist-jailers were sympathetic, but they too were powerless. They were also a little annoyed with him. His sickness accused them of incompetence; his survival

was an embarrassment. “Cutie Pie” were words they flinched from.

They did their best. One day, two scientists came into the prison to examine the slack, naked, ugly body of Ch-tsal. “We could try a change of diet,” one said. “What, again? We’ve tried everything,” the other replied. They put down the food bowl and examined Ch-tsal through the glass of their gas-mask goggles. They looked at him hard and long- too long: We’d better get out!” they said and hastened from the glass cell, feeling the strange gases beginning to seep through the masks and into their noses. “Quick! The decontamination chamber!”

One of them pressed the button that closed the glass wall. The food bowl jammed it. It could not close, not completely. The food bowl squashed into a figure of eight and a small gap was left.

Ch-tsal thought, “I can get through that gap. Escape. But I am too tired and I no longer care.” But then he thought of the heavens and the stars and the planets – and among them, the little planet that was his home.

So he left his prison and escaped into the world of Earth.

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Earth astonished him.

The air – he could breathe it! The temperature – it was pleasant! There was even a sun (only one – his planet had three) to warm his decaying body, tingle his naked skin! Then shadow again, and coolness, and delight!

It rained; and Ch-tsal new ecstasy. For the first time, his body was less than agony to him. For whole moments, as the raindrops beat on his tortured flesh, he felt even the gates of his mind open. He would have sent a message of thanks to his God, but of course he could not; his whiskers, his “voice,” were gone. He gave thanks all the same, beaming his mind as hard as he could. Then alone, still alone, he enjoyed the rain.

He knew he had to hide and how to hide. He was efficient in everything, though deadly tired. His clever hands explored the facts and things of Earth and found them easy. You turn this knob or push this handle...you slide this up or pull this down. Everything was big and crude and simple. Child’s play.

He found food in the extension to Mrs. Chatsworth’s house on Cedar Avenue.

She grew cacti. They tasted unpleasant but they were food, definitely food, not the poisonous stuff of the prison cell. He ate plants, made himself a carrying bag, cut himself a store of food and carried it off.

Now all he wanted was a friend; a creature, however simple or alien, to give him comfort. He had been alone so long.

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He found a creature asleep. It was a handsome thing with fur that reminded Ch-tsal of his own feathers. The fur was colored and patterned, very elaborately; surely not by accident?

The creature awoke and opened golden eyes. It arched its back – saw Ch-tsal – and attacked, fast and viciously. It had white hooks set in its head and brown-black hooks at the end of its limbs.

It took all of Ch-tsal's mental power to quiet the creature. When it was quiet, it turned out to be useless. It had only the simplest and crudest thoughts – comfort, hunting, mating, food, territory. It could not link its thoughts. He left the thing purring and went on his way.

After the cat, a dog. Ch-tsal, ashamed of his nakedness, was frightened to approach the well-covered, furry animal which radiated the sort of uncertain silly niceness that some of the creatures on Ch-tsal's own planet displayed. The dog growled and wagged its tail. Ch-tsal sensed that it might attack him, or adore him, or both. The dog licked him. Disgusted, Ch-tsal left it. The dog stared after him wagging its tail. It did not follow.

It rained again and Ch-tsal lay on his back, limbs spread, blessing every cold, clear, clean drop. He rubbed the wetness into his skin – and felt stubby prickles!

He felt his muzzle. Tiny, wiry projections tickled his fingers! His heart leapt with hope. He gave thanks. But still he had nobody to turn to. He was still alone.

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He met the one he needed. The name of this person was Christopher Harry Winters. He age, at the first meeting, was six weeks and three days.

C.H. Winters was a good happy baby. Ch-tsal first saw him lying on a rug in a garden warmed by the early summer sun. He was just the same size as Ch-tsal. Better

still, he was completely naked. Ch-tsal did not have to feel ashamed in his company.

The baby kicked its legs and waved its clenched fists and made sounds. From his hiding place, a rhododendron bush, Ch-tsal could see that it leaked water from its mouth. Later, he learned that it was quite a leaky little creature altogether (which confirmed Ch-tsal's suspicion that this was an ungrown specimen of the senior species of Earth; babies were much the same on his home planet).

A big creature, not naked, came out to attend the baby. This, as Ch-tsal quickly deduced, was the mother. Ch-tsal could pick up the strong, thick waves of loving emotions that flowed between mother and baby. He remembered them from his own childhood.



He stayed in or near the rhododendron bush for three days, constantly gathering strength, often eating (by now he had the choice of a dozen foods), and always observing Christopher. Obviously he could not approach the baby in the daytime, his ugly, naked shape would be seen by the mother. In any case, the daytime Christopher was not what Ch-tsal wanted. Awake, the baby was just an active, healthy blob of animal matter, without reason or logic in its excellent mind.

It was the night-time Christopher he needed.

One night, CH-tsal made his way into Christopher's nursery and lay down on the cot by the sleeping baby, who was almost exactly his size.

"Talk to me!" Ch-tsal said, probing with his mind. The baby stirred. "Please talk!" Ch-tsal said and laid his whiskery muzzle against the plump hand.

The baby smiled in its sleep. Its mind began talking.

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It did not talk of what it knew now (which was next to nothing) but of what it has always known; its race memories. Ch-tsal learned what it was like for a human to plunge

through a great wave, green and icy; to hunt down animals in dark forests; to let fly an arrow and somehow know for certain, as it left the bow, that it would hit its mark. He learned of the glories of battle, the terrors of defeat, the chill wickedness of snakes, the smell of wood smoke.

In his turn, Ch-tsal told the baby of the building of crystal cities, of creatures in caves, of the pioneer ships that opened up the galaxy, of the Venus invaders and how they were repulsed, of the five ways of knowing God, and of the taste of a certain food that grew only when his planet's three moons were full.

At last, both fell into the true sleep, when the mind closes itself to all but dreams. When morning came, Ch-tsal was gone. The mother fussed over her baby. By now, he often laughed. He was made happier than ever by his talks with Ch-tsal. As he gurgled and bubbled, part of his unformed mind romped among the jewels of last night. He chuckled, and his mother nuzzled his neck. He laughed out loud and pulled her hair. His own hair grew longer and curlier each day.

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So, too, did Ch-tsal's feathers and whiskers. He forced them to grow, mostly by will, but also by careful attention to them and to his person. He energetically searched for food, ate with careful greed, exercised furiously, groomed his plumage continuously. His feathers were still ugly, but this did not worry him. The important thing was that his whiskers grew. He took to crouching rigidly, for hours on end, head up, staring into the night sky, whiskers vibrating, reaching out to home; and trying not to despair when no answer came.

When Christopher was four months old, and the summer was fading, Ch-tsal's feathers were so splendid that he had to be still more careful about hiding himself. He glittered in the darkness; and knew that not all humans slept at night. Some were hunters, as Christopher had told him. They had killing weapons.

But one particular night when Ch-tsal was reaching out to the sky, he heard his mother's voice, very faintly and brokenly. He replied: she heard. There came all sorts of marvelous, tearful, joyous words...

Ch-tsal forgot caution and went mad. In the dewy moonlight of the woods, he

became a firework, a bombshell, a Catherine wheel³, spinning and zooming and bouncing off tree trunks. He whizzed and somersaulted and flashed and looped the loop on the wet leaves.

Two young men, hopefully poaching with airguns, saw him. But Ch-tsal saw them first and beamed a single pulse of ecstasy so powerful that the young men fell over backwards. They shook their heads and gaped.

They never mentioned the incident to each other or to anyone else, fearing to be thought fools.

Nor did they ever mention the spaceship.

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SPACESHIP LANDS IN HERTS⁴ VILLAGE! The newspaper yelled it. TV followed it up. It seemed a big story: bigger than a baby panda, bigger than the girl singer, a real sensation.

It soon fizzled out. You can get only so much mileage from talking heads on TV screens – from long shots of scientists staring at burnt grass in a roped off area – from a patch of burnt field with a furrow leading to a dimple like “!”

WHATEVER BECAME OF CUTIE PIE? seemed a better story. Was there a link between the alien creature and the spaceship? But this faded too. The questions were fine – but where were the answers?

Only one person on Earth knows them and he is still too young to tell them to anyone but his mother...

“He come. He did come.”

“Did he, darling? I’m glad. Hold your mug properly.”

“He did come last night, oh yes. It was nice.”

“Drink up, darling. More. More.”

“Telling stories he was, oh yes. And come again soon.”

“You’re sure *you’re* not telling stories, darling? Drink it all up, there’s a big boy.”

³ *Catherine Wheel* a type of firework that, when lit, revolved on a pin, making a wheel of fire or sparks

⁴ *Herts* Hertfordshire, a county in southeastern England

Christopher sticks out his lower lip and stares at his mother. Why should she think him a liar? Why won't she accept a simple truth – that quite often, in the night, someone else is there beside him in the bed (not actually there, only in his mind, but there all the same) – and that they tell each other stories – and that this friendship will last all his life?

His mother kisses C.H. Winters.

C.H. Winters forgives his mother and finishes his milk.