

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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H. L. Herbert
President

Leo Margulies
Publisher
Editorial Director

Kelly Freas
Cover Design

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bye
bye,
mindy

by . . . Milton Lesser

Some babies crave affection, and loving care. But little Mindy just liked to cuddle up to folks with a bent for quick suicide.

AS A PRACTICING pediatrician of some years experience Dr. Simon Cover had a peculiarly reliable arsenal of evasive techniques at his command. Upon interviewing a new patient he could always manage to look sympathetic without in any way committing himself.

"We've just moved into the neighborhood," Mrs. Oswald Langston told him on their first meeting. "Little Mindy is all I've got, Doctor. If there's something wrong with her, I'd rather you told me. I want you to be frank."

Mrs. Langston was a small, attractively-dressed woman with a pretty face, and the most intense, doleful eyes that Dr. Cover had ever seen. He immediately catalogued her as the nervous type. Someday pediatrics would emerge from the swaddling clothes stage of development and become a branch of medicine worthy of respect.

But until it did, Dr. Cover told himself bitterly, only a few far-seeing practitioners like himself would realize that the care and feeding of parents was as important to the baby's well-being as the care of the

Those of you who were cosmically bewitched and enchanted by the dark magic of Milton Lesser's THE DOUBLE OCCUPATION in a recent issue will find more magic here of a kind rare in science-fantasy even when it delves into the depth-within-depths mysteriousness of very young minds. What other baby, indeed, ever went quite so chillingly far as Mr. Lesser's little Mindy—a brain-child infant terrible—in a yarn so convincingly told?

baby itself. How, for instance, could an agitated, twitching, nervous woman like Mrs. Langston bring up a child without making a physical and mental wreck out of it.

While the nervous mother watched with an almost hysterical solicitude Dr. Cover put Mindy through her pediatric paces. She was a beautiful child with a head of jet black ringlets, and enormous blue eyes. She kept grinning all the time and didn't seem to mind the examination in the least. The only thing she objected to was Dr. Cover's cold stethoscope. She flinched when he placed it on her chest, then scowled at him and pouted.

"Now, Mindy," Mrs. Langston said. "That's only a stethoscope. You mustn't let it frighten you, darling."

"Cope-cope," lisped Mindy, still pouting. It was an unusual word, and the fifteen-months'-old child seemed to relish the sound of it. "Cope-cope," she said again. "Cope-cope—cope-cope!"

"She's an alert little baby," Dr. Cover nodded at Mrs. Langston, finishing his examination. "Would you mind telling me what made you think there was something wrong with her?"

"You tell me, Doctor. I'm prepared."

"My dear Mrs. Langston, calm yourself." Dr. Cover began putting away his instruments while Mrs. Langston dressed the child. "Hasn't your husband ever told you how detrimental to a child's development

an over-anxious parent can be? Hasn't *anyone* ever told you?"

"My husband is dead, Doctor."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Well that did go a long way toward explaining the nervousness. A widow! It was a shame, really. Mrs. Langston couldn't have been a day over twenty-five.

"I'll be perfectly frank with you, Mrs. Langston," Dr. Cover said. "There isn't a thing wrong with your child. She's a perfectly normal, perfectly healthy little girl."

"But Doctor . . ."

"Now you listen to me, young lady. I can't over-stress the importance of this child's environment and your attitude as a mother. It has been my experience that a woman in your unfortunate predicament tends to be over-protective, and too much neurotic 'mothering' can do a developing baby more harm than poor diet or lack of sleep. It's almost like a chronic disease, you see."

Just then Mindy, now fully dressed and toddling around the examination room, discovered the tip of Dr. Cover's stethoscope dangling from the instrument table. Grabbing it firmly in her plump little hands, she cried: "Bye bye, cope-cope. Bye bye!"

Mrs. Langston screamed, immediately drawing Dr. Cover's attention to herself.

"That's what I mean," he said sternly. "There's no *reason* for you to be so jumpy. What could be more normal than what Mindy just

said? She doesn't like the stethoscope, so she tried to make it disappear by telling it to go away. In a child her age such alertness is admirable—virtually an observance of cause and effect.

"Whenever someone leaves your home, I'm sure you usually say 'goodbye.' Mindy has observed this, but in her alert little mind she has put the cart before the horse, so to speak. When you say 'goodbye,' someone goes away. Wanting the stethoscope to go away, Mindy uses the same verbal formula. That's quite precocious, Mrs. Langston."

"But you don't understand, Doctor. Before we moved here, Mindy was just starting to play with the neighborhood children. She walked early and is large for her age, so she played with the two-year-olds. But they didn't like her, Doctor."

"They teased her because she was just a little too young for them—out of their age group. Children are like that—"

"No, I mean . . ." Mrs. Langston hesitated, biting her lip, and staring at Mindy. She seemed suddenly to regret her talkativeness, and covered her confusion by quickly and nervously paying Dr. Cover his fee of five dollars for the office visit. He escorted her to the door of the examination room, and watched her walk through the waiting room with Mindy toddling obediently at her side.

Mrs. Langston had an excitingly trim figure. Dr. Cover, himself a divorcé, thought it a shame she had

such a nervous, over-wrought temperament. Perhaps that could be rectified by sympathy and understanding. It was time Dr. Cover thought of re-marrying, anyhow. Perhaps he would pay a social call on Mrs. Langston in the near future.

At the door, Mrs. Langston turned to wave goodbye. Mindy turned too. "Say goodbye, Mindy," Dr. Cover called cheerfully. "You'll be a good little girl now, won't you?"

Obediently, Mindy began: "By . . ."

Mrs. Langston clamped a hand firmly over her daughter's mouth. "Oh, God," she moaned, and slammed the office door quickly. In the last glimpse Dr. Cover had of Mindy's pert little face, the child looked very disappointed.

Oddly enough, when he returned to his examination room to await the next patient, he couldn't find his stethoscope anywhere.

* * *

"How do you do, Mrs. Langston?"

"Oh, it's you, Dr. Cover. There must be some mistake. I didn't call . . ."

"I was in the neighborhood, and took the liberty of dropping in. I hope you don't think it presumptuous of me. How is our little Mindy?"

"She's perfectly all right, Doctor. She's out playing now."

Dr. Cover thought it peculiar

that so young a child should be out playing all by herself, and said so.

"Oh, it's all right, Doctor." The confident way in which the words were spoken didn't sound like Mrs. Langston at all. "There's a fenced-in courtyard behind these garden apartments. Nothing could happen to Mindy."

"Do you like your new neighborhood?" he asked.

Mrs. Langston sighed. "Well, frankly, I've been so busy looking for a job that I haven't had an opportunity to see much of it. Unfortunately we haven't been able to collect my husband's insurance yet."

Dr. Cover maintained a discreet silence.

"It's very difficult to find a job which would pay enough to enable me to engage a nursemaid for Mindy and to take care of our living expenses as well."

"I quite understand," Dr. Cover clucked sympathetically.

"I've never had to work before. I just don't know what kind of job I'd be best suited for, or even where to look—"

At that moment, Mindy came running up the sidewalk toward the open door of Mrs. Langston's garden apartment. If she had been in the fenced-in courtyard, she was in it no longer, strengthening Dr. Cover's conviction that the most worrying mothers were also the most careless. Behind her sprinted two other moppets. They were boys, Dr. Cover saw, and easily twice Mindy's age.

"She stole my airplane!" both lads cried out almost simultaneously as they chased Mindy, their faces pink with rage.

"Here, here, children!" Dr. Cover called out as the pint-sized posse and its quarry approached "I'm sure we can settle this peacefully."

With Mrs. Langston, he went out on the stoop, realizing how sorely she needed a steady male hand at the helm of her domestic life.

Did she realize it herself?

When Mindy saw Dr. Cover standing there, she changed her mind about fleeing to the sanctuary of the apartment. Instead, she turned, and ran swiftly out into the street.

"Mindy!" Mrs. Langston screamed, heading in her direction. "You get right out of the gutter this minute!"

"You'll only frighten her. . . ." Dr. Cover began, and froze. A large yellow truck bearing the words MID-QUEENS BEVERAGE COMPANY had turned the corner and was speeding straight down the street toward Mindy. The driver had apparently not seen her at all.

Mrs. Langston screamed and screamed. She couldn't reach her child in time, and she knew it. Without a thought for his own safety Dr. Cover leaped for the curb and shouted, "Mindy, look out for the truck."

He left the curb in a flying leap and dove at her just as the vehicle's brakes began to screech.

The truck couldn't possibly miss her, but—

At the last instant, Mindy glanced up with an alert look on her face, and cried: "Tuck. Bye bye, t'uck."

Dr. Cover went sprawling full length in the street, ripping his tweed trousers. Mindy remained calmly sitting on her plump little behind just out of reach of his scraped fingers. She had a mischievous look on her face.

The truck was nowhere in sight. *My nerves*, thought Dr. Cover. There hadn't been any truck. There needn't have been any truck—if Mrs. Langston hadn't seen it too. But surely it was impossible. Mrs. Langston had seemingly seen nothing, either. How could they have seen a truck if there just was no truck to be seen?

He carried Mindy back to the sidewalk, where Mrs. Langston padded her with a firm hand for running out into the street, in front of a truck that wasn't there. Mrs. Langston said nothing about seeing the truck and neither did Dr. Cover.

But at the final moment, just as a terrible accident had seemed inevitable, he had even *imagined* a truck driver's alarmed face. Now there was nothing but the dwindling memory of an hallucination to torment him. Was neuroticism raised to high C contagious? He snorted and determined to blot the incident from his mind. If Mrs. Langston mentioned the truck, he would claim he never saw it.

The two moppets were waiting with Mrs. Langston on the curb. "She stole my airplane," one of them said again, pointing an accusing finger at Mindy, who was still sobbing from her spanking.

"Airplane," said Mindy happily, no longer sobbing. "Airplane."

"If you took it," Dr. Cover said, "you ought to return it. There's a good girl, Mindy."

Mrs. Langston came vigorously to her daughter's defense. "Where could she possibly hide a toy airplane?" she demanded, staring reproachfully at Dr. Cover.

It was a good question—and a difficult one to answer. Mindy wore a pink ruffled sunsuit which couldn't have concealed an extra diaper, let alone a toy of any size.

"She stole my airplane," the moppet persisted, rubbing dirty little fists against his eyes.

"Did you take the boy's airplane?" Mrs. Langston asked her daughter.

"No, no," Mindy said, looking aggrievedly up at her mother. "No, no, no."

"You better run along home," Mrs. Langston told the two moppets. On the verge of tears, they departed down the street.

"Well," said Dr. Cover.

He began to wish Mrs. Langston would mention the truck. He felt horribly awkward now, and hardly knew what to say. He was almost grateful when Mrs. Langston told him she'd have to go inside and prepare dinner. She invited him to eat

with them, but he knew that she didn't really want him to stay.

Dr. Cover pleaded a previous engagement and returned home to his small bachelor apartment above his office where he had two baloney sandwiches and a bottle of beer.

He had almost forced the incident of the imaginary truck from his mind when he heard the eleven o'clock news broadcast, and the voice of his favorite announcer saying: "Now, here's our item guaranteed *not* to make the headlines. If you know the whereabouts of a big yellow truck belonging to the MID-QUEENS BEVERAGE COMPANY, you're smarter than its owner, Sam Morin of Northern Boulevard. The truck, driver and all, disappeared on its usual route through Kew Gardens this afternoon. Perhaps in this hot weather we've been having, you can't blame the driver too much, as the missing truck was loaded with four hundred cases of premium beer! And that's the cream of the news as this commentator skims it . . ."

Dr. Cover sat up very straight, a measuring worm with an ice-cold abdomen inching its way up his spine.

Then there had been a truck. There had been, there had been!

And now there wasn't.

It was a week before business brought Dr. Cover into Mrs. Langston's neighborhood again on a routine case of German measles. There really had been no urgency for him to make the emergency call at night,

but the anxious mother had insisted. Now, at nine-fifteen, it was too late for the double-feature he'd wanted to see in the big Loew's theater on Jamaica Avenue, and on impulse, he decided to visit Mrs. Langston instead.

The incident of the truck still bothered him. It hardly seemed possible under the circumstances that he could have imagined it. A man's peace of mind was valuable, particularly in Dr. Cover's profession and if Mrs. Langston knew the answer, he was now determined to force it out of her. Gently, of course.

Ten minutes later he was standing in Mrs. Langston's elm-shaded doorway saying, "I was in the neighborhood, and—"

"Come in," said Mrs. Langston. "Come in by all means. You're very welcome, Doctor."

She seemed eager for company. Dr. Cover followed her into the living room, where Mindy was sitting on the floor in a pair of seersucker pajamas.

"It's way past your bed-time, young lady," Dr. Cover said in his best bedside voice, his eyes still fastened on Mrs. Langston.

"I don't usually keep her up this late, Doctor," Mrs. Langston apologized. "But we've been having some trouble, and I've been giving Mindy a lecture."

"A lecture? She can understand a lecture?"

"Well, not really. But she knows from my voice when I'm angry and

when I'm pleased. You know how babies are."

"What kind of trouble were you having?" asked Dr. Cover as Mrs. Langston offered him a glass of lemonade.

"It's nothing, really."

"Mrs. Langston, I've been intending to ask you about something. Actually, it's why I'm here. You remember last week when those boys were chasing Mindy—"

"What boys?" said Mrs. Langston. "I don't remember any boys chasing Mindy." She laughed nervously. "Mindy is rather young for that, isn't she?"

"That's not what I meant. I meant—"

"Well, I'd rather not discuss it."

"She ran out into the street," Dr. Cover persisted. "A truck turned the corner and bore down on her. She was going to be run over. She—"

"Please, please, Doctor . . ." said Mrs. Langston. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The truck disappeared," Dr. Cover said. There *has* to be a rational explanation. He was beginning to feel mildly ridiculous.

"I've been at loose ends ever since my husband died," Mrs. Langston suddenly said. "I'm sorry I can't answer your question. Please don't press me."

What did her husband have to do with it? Her late husband? There had to be some connection, or she wouldn't have mentioned him. Usually a cautious, discreet

man, Dr. Cover was now too incensed with the situation to remember that a doctor must always be tactful.

"How did your husband die, Mrs. Langston?" he asked.

"Why, I . . . that's a strange question."

"I beg your pardon. But you're new in this neighborhood. You're all alone. You mentioned difficulties I can sympathize with. I thought perhaps I could help you."

"No, you can't. No one can help me. I'm beyond help." Tragically neurotic all right, diagnosed Dr. Cover. Free-floating anxiety—with probably a fair share of psychosomatic ailments, too. The neurasthenic types usually were like that. What most people failed to realize was that a psychosomatic ailment was not at all like hypochondria. The afflicted were really sick. They could even die from it. But emotional worry, over-anxiety was initially responsible. After that, it could be anything from heart disease to cancer to a ruptured appendix. The psychosomatic person was attacked at his or her weakest point.

"I insist," said Dr. Cover. "I really want to help you. If you'll tell me how your husband met his death . . ."

"All right, I'll tell you. I don't *know* how Harry died. I can't explain it. He—he disappeared."

"He disappeared? He ran out on you, is that what you mean? Then how do you know he's dead?"

No wonder the insurance com-

pany wouldn't pay. In all likelihood Mr. Langston was alive and healthy somewhere, having the time of his life. Naturally, a neurasthenic wife would quickly come to the conclusion that he was dead.

"No, you don't understand. He didn't run out on me. He disappeared right before my eyes."

Before Dr. Cover could reply, the doorbell rang. Mrs. Langston got up, and walked through the living room, across the hall and straight to the door. Dr. Cover heard angry voices, and when she came back a man and a woman were with her.

"I don't care about that," the man was saying. "We're going to call the police."

"That's perfectly ridiculous, and you know it," Mrs. Langston said.

The woman turned to her husband, "I just want Bobby back, that's all. I just want him back." Her voice broke in a sob.

The man nodded, then confronted Mrs. Langston accusingly. "Your Mindy led him off somewhere. He was playing with Mindy. The other children saw them playing together in the street. They went into your backyard, and Mindy came out alone. *Where's Bobby?*"

"Maybe you'd better call the police," Mrs. Langston suggested frostily. "I can't help you."

"We've already called them," the man said. "You may as well know. No threat could move you to sympathy or understanding—"

"I never liked that Mindy from the very beginning," the woman said. "She looks too—*alert.*"

"She's a very alert little baby," Dr. Cover said automatically, unaware that he was repeating a verbal stock in trade.

"And just who the hell are you?" the man snapped.

"Mrs. Langston's pediatrician—Dr. Cover."

"Mindy Langston isn't normal, is she, Doctor?" the woman asked, gripping Dr. Cover's arm.

"How do you mean, not normal?"

"Well, she's always stealing things. She never returns them, either. And neither does her mother."

"Bobby is more important, dear," said the man.

"I wish I could help you," Mrs. Langston said. "But why should Mindy be responsible if your son ran away? Anyway, I'm sure the police will find him."

"There's no way out of that backyard except the front way and Mindy came out alone. The other children saw her."

"The other children!" scoffed Mrs. Langston.

"I tell you Mindy hid Bobby somewhere."

Mrs. Langston looked at Dr. Cover and shrugged. A week ago, Dr. Cover would have shrugged back, smiling politely and slightly condescendingly. These over-anxious parents . . . But Dr. Cover wasn't shrugging now.

Sitting on the floor, little Mindy had begun to cry.

"Now see what you've done," Mrs. Langston told her desperate visitors. "I'm afraid you'll have to go. I'm afraid I'd better say good-bye." She clapped a hand to her mouth.

Mindy looked up eagerly. "Bye bye," she said. "Bye bye!"

Mrs. Langston whimpered—and fainted. The man and the woman were no longer in the room. They were no longer—anywhere.

Mindy had stopped crying.

Dr. Cover felt suddenly very weak. Hallucination again? Impossible. There was nothing wrong with him.

The mother was neurasthenic, and hence—psychosomatic. Her mind could make pathological changes in her own body.

Could the changes be more than environmental? Could they be in-born, inheritable? An infant makes no distinction between itself and its environment, thought Dr. Cover with swiftly mounting fear. Long before Mindy's age, naturally, the distinction would normally be made. But in Mindy's case . . .

What is the body—or *any* physical object—but a distinct, finite collocation of tiny particles, energy charges, electromagnetic vibrations? Was a psychosomatic person a mutation? If so, might not the next step be *outward*—an out-going psychosomatism? Not merely the power to make pathological changes in the body, in a physical object,

but to somehow *will it out of existence* by making the collocation of atoms disperse back to its original loose energy state?

"This," said Dr. Cover aloud, "is utterly fantastic." But he hadn't moved from his chair, hadn't gone to revive the unconscious Mrs. Langston. And, looking at Mindy, he was afraid.

Mutation?

A monster?

She wasn't a year and a half old yet. There was no telling what her powers would be like when she had matured and learned to channel them. Once that happened, nothing could be done to stop her. Absolutely nothing.

Trembling, Dr. Cover stood up, Mindy looked as if she wanted to say something. He mustn't let her, he told himself wildly. She might want to say goodbye.

Dr. Cover wanted to get out of the room, out of the house fast. But—

"Come here, Mindy," he said.

Mindy looked at him, and obeyed. "There's a nice little girl."

"Turt, turt," she said, grabbing at his shirt with dimpled little fingers. "Bye bye, turt."

Dr. Cover stood trembling and horrified in his undershirt. Mindy looked up at him with a pleased little grin on her face.

"Look at the chair," Dr. Cover said desperately, pointing to a sectional sofa in one corner of the room. "Say goodbye, Mindy. Good-bye, chair."

Obediently, Mindy said, "Bye bye, tair!"

And both sections of the sofa were gone.

Trembling uncontrollably now, Dr. Cover took Mindy into the bedroom. She could be the most extraordinary scientific discovery ever made. Used properly, her powers might revolutionize the world.

But Mindy showed every indication of being a spoiled brat.

I'm too vulnerable, Dr. Cover thought. All humanity is too weak and vulnerable. We're not ready for

this. Perhaps we'll never be ready. If there are any more like Mindy, it's all finished. Everything is set to go *poof*.

But the chances of there being any more seemed to him remote.

Still, if Mindy were a mutation, the mutation would breed true.

The last thing Dr. Cover did before he gave up his medical practice and retreated to the country where he leads the life of a hermit was to hold Mindy up before the bedroom mirror. He told her, "Mindy, say bye bye."