

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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doorway to heaven

by . . . *Theodore Pratt*

They didn't advise anything. It was up to people to make up their minds. But if they got tired, they'd be welcome.

AT FIRST John didn't know where he was and failed to be sure about what had happened, except he knew it was something drastic and terrifying. Whatever the place was where he had landed, it seemed to be nice, though rather misty, for you couldn't see far or very clearly in any direction unless you peered closely, when things cleared up a little, but not enough to distinguish any object, if there was any to see.

He supposed he had—well, that it had happened. At eighty-five, he knew he couldn't last much longer. And here he was. But where? There was no one else to be seen in the mist, which he now sniffed, and found quite pleasant. It was unlike regular mist, being dry, and it appeared to be faintly perfumed, in an unobtrusive way.

Whatever this place was he wondered if Martha had landed here. Fifteen years ago it happened to her. Her loss had devastated him. But he couldn't deny that there had been a certain relief in it, too, for Martha had been a Termagant, a shrew, and a nagger. Sometimes it got on his nerves something terrible. Once in a while he didn't think he

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could stand it any longer. It always made him mad when he thought of how she had changed from the delightful, wonderful girl he married to a mean and ill-tempered woman; it hadn't been fair.

He stopped thinking about Martha and her possibly being here when, out of the mist, there materialized, right in front of him, what looked like an office receptionist's desk, with a visitor's chair set in front of it. Behind the desk sat a very attractive young blonde clad in a white crisp nurse's dress with a pretty cap. She greeted him, "I'm sorry I wasn't here to receive you, John, but so many are coming these days I was busy elsewhere."

He stared at her. In his old man's voice, quavering still more because of the upsetting thing that had happened to him, he replied, "Well, I—why, hello . . ."

"Please sit down," she invited, indicating the chair at the desk.

He sat, rather weakly; he was still bewildered and confused.

The young lady told him warmly, "It's nice to have you here."

"W-where am I?" he wanted to know.

"Here," she told him pleasantly.

"But—where's here?" He was afraid to ask, but forced himself. "Is—is it hell?"

She shook her head and smiled in a way which seemed to say that almost everybody asked this. "No, it isn't anything like that."

Relieved, and hopefully, he inquired, "Is it—Heaven?"

She shook her head and smiled again. "Not exactly."

"Then what is it? Maybe Purgatory?"

She answered, "Because we want it to be all things to all people we don't have any official designation or name for it."

"Ain't so sure I want to be in a place that don't know what it is."

"Oh, we know what it is, John."

"What?"

She was more evasive than ever. "After a little while it won't matter to you what it's called."

"Well, it does now. I want to know where I am."

"You can call it anything you want, John."

"All right, then, maybe it's kind of—well, a doorway to Heaven?"

"That's as good as anything. I'm sure you'll get on to things here fast, John."

"Will I?" He wasn't so certain. "Say, I hope you don't mind my asking, but who are you?"

Gently she said, "I'm just here to make it a little easier when you arrive."

"But I thought—" He looked about. There were no pearly gates or gates of any kind. "St. Peter . . ."

"You see," she explained, "he wouldn't do for everybody. A Moslem, for instance."

He looked at her neat nurse's dress. "You would?"

"It was thought so."

He could agree with that. "What happens now?"

"Nothing."

"But don't you take down my full name and address or anything?"

"What is your full name, John?"

"Why, it's—it's . . ." He couldn't think of it.

"Things like that don't matter here, John."

Testily, he informed her, "I'll remember it in a minute! I guess I know my own name, all right! It's . . ."

"Don't let it trouble you, John; we only go by first names here."

"Well, I expect you've already got it in your records."

"We don't keep any records."

"You don't?"

"There have been so many, John. And it was thought that if we once started to keep records we'd become a bureaucracy and people wouldn't like that."

"I guess they wouldn't."

"We try to keep everything as easy and free here as possible."

"Do, do you?" John was beginning to feel more confident, even a bit suspicious. "What about rules? You got any rules?"

"Well, yes, there are a few rules."

"Knew it!" he cried triumphantly. "Knew there was a catch to it somewhere. It's always the way. Something begins to look good, and it turns out it's too good to be true."

The young lady was not affronted by his burst of temper. As equitably as before she explained, "There are different sets, to fit each case."

He addressed her severely. "All right, what are the ones for me?"

"The first is that, if you want, we can make you feel young again. Please understand we can't make you look any younger than the time you decided to come here, but we can give you new arteries, a new heart, young muscles, things like that."

"Can, hey?"

"We can rejuvenate you in every way you choose, except in looks, if you care to be. Some prefer to stay as they arrive."

"Some do and some don't, is that it?"

"That's it, John."

He leaned forward in his chair, asking, "How many—?"

"Most do."

He sat back. "Thought so. Never believed people when they said they wouldn't be young again if they could—they only said that because they never had the real chance and knew they didn't. All right, that's a pretty good rule, but how about the others?"

"The second one for those in your category is that you can have your grandchildren at any age you want them to visit you and you can spoil them without anybody interfering."

"Say, that sounds all right, too." Something occurred to him. Worriedly he asked, "Except—nothing's happened to them? They ain't here, are they?"

"Nothing's happened to them, John, and they aren't here."

"But how can—?"

"It's sort of a special arrangement."

"Not bad," he conceded, "not bad at all. Any more rules for me?"

"Just one."

"Bet this is the bug under the chip."

"I think you'll like it, John."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. What is it?"

"It's complicated, so I'll have to ask you to listen carefully. Maybe you've noticed it's a little misty here, making it difficult to see things. There's a purpose in that. You only see things you really want to see, John, that is, things you want to see very much."

"That so? It means you can see anything you want?"

"Anything."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

John thought that over, skepticism growing in him. "Well," he decided, "I don't like to go against you, young lady, but I just don't believe it."

"Why don't you try it?" she suggested.

"You mean pick out something and try to see it?"

She nodded.

"Now look here!" he stormed. "I'm just going to show you it can't be done."

"Please do," she invited.

"All right!" he declared. At first he thought of trying it on Martha, if she was here. But at the thought of it actually working he decided it was too soon for that. He informed

the young lady, "Here's one that won't work: Is George Washington here?"

"Very much so, John."

"All right. I'm going to try to see him and when I don't—"

"Just look hard, John."

He looked hard. The mist, a few yards from the young lady's desk, cleared, and sitting about on comfortable Colonial chairs, he saw a group of people. They were clad in Revolutionary dress, including powdered wigs, and among them was a man clearly to be recognized as George Washington. He stopped talking with his friends for a moment and looked over and said, "Hello, John."

John was so startled and surprised that he half started up in his chair and stuttered, "Why, h—hello, George. I mean . . ."

George Washington waved in friendly fashion and went back to talking with his friends as the mist closed in again, shutting them all off.

John sat back again. He stared at the young lady. "Well, I never!" he exclaimed. "That was George Washington and I called him by his first name!"

"He expected you to, John."

"And he called me 'John' just as if he knew me!"

"Everyone knows everyone else here, John."

He reflected on his strange experience. "That's quite a rule you got there."

"There's one more part of it you'd better know."

He waited, hoping it wasn't the bug under the chip.

"Only newcomers like yourself," she explained, "can look up other people. The ones already here can't look up those newly arrived. And if, after you've looked up someone, you don't want to see him any more, you just have to stop looking and he'll go away."

He asked, "What's the reason for that?"

"Well, it was thought that some people might not like to see others, if they happened to not care for each other before, or something like that. And if they did look up certain people and found it to be a mistake it could be rectified. There had to be some arrangement like that to control it."

"That only controls it one way, in favor of them like me, I'll admit, but only one way."

"It was the best we could do, John."

"You mean this place ain't perfect?"

She smiled. "We have a saying here about perfection, John, that goes like this: 'If there was any such thing, it would explode'."

John observed, with a chuckle, "You know, that's pretty good. But I've been wondering who is 'We'?"

"Oh, just sort of everybody."

"Are you saying there ain't—that is, any—?"

"I didn't say that, John."

"Well, then, who runs the place?"

"Everybody."

"You're beating around the bush."

"There aren't any more answers, John."

"Are you one of us?"

"In a way."

"There you go again."

"Do you think you know the rules that apply to you, John?"

"You told me all of them?"

"That's all."

He went over them in his mind. Contritely, he said, "Guess I shouldn't have sounded off the way I did about them."

"That's all right, John."

He thought of Martha again. "My wife, she—"

"We don't use the word you were about to use, John."

"All right, she—anyway, she left a good deal before me, fifteen years, when she was seventy."

"I know."

"You do? Then—I mean, is she here?"

"She's here, John."

"All I have to do is want to see her enough, and I could?"

"That's right, John."

"But it wouldn't work the other way—she couldn't want to see me and do it?"

"No, John."

"Doesn't she even know I'm here?"

"She'll never know unless you call her, John."

"Well," John admitted, "that's

quite an arrangement, quite an arrangement."

She smiled her nice smile. "Some call it 'very interesting,' and others say it's 'quite a state of affairs'."

John wanted to know, "When a husband comes first, it works the other way, I suppose?"

The young lady nodded. "Then it's up to the wife."

"I'm going to ask you a question, young lady, maybe it ain't any of my business."

"You can ask anything you want, John."

"Of them like me, how many do and how many don't?"

"It's the same as before, John; most do."

"That so? What if a man, say, decided to get his arteries young again and not look up his wife but maybe somebody else?"

"That's his privilege, John."

He thought about that some more. "Supposing he does that and then decides maybe he'd rather look up his wife?"

The young lady shook her head this time. "I'm sorry, John, but he can't do that. A man in your age category can send other people back but not young girls—you see, it would hardly be fair to them. I forgot to tell you that once he makes such a decision he lives with it for the rest of time."

"That so?"

"That's so."

"Anything else you forgot to tell me?"

"Only that you don't have to de-

cide these things right away. Look around for as long as you want. Later, if you want to be rejuvenated, look hard for me and let me know your decision."

Worriedly, John asked, "Does that rejuvenation—I mean is it kind of a bad operation?"

"It only takes a minute and doesn't hurt at all, John."

He was relieved but not sure at all about having it.

"Is there anything else you need to know, John?" the young lady asked.

"You going some place?"

"I'll stay with you as long as you like, John, but others are coming and I will be needed to receive them."

"I don't want to keep you, but what'd you mean before when you said people 'decided' to come here? I didn't decide anything of the kind."

"Don't you remember, John, just the other day saying to yourself, 'I think I've had enough. I'm tired. I wouldn't mind going now'."

"What if I did?"

"But don't you understand? You said that—and now you're here."

Slowly, he admitted, "See what you mean. But what about—well, somebody out and out kills himself, especially young? You advise such a thing as that?"

"We don't advise anything here, John, but let people make up their own minds. We think that a person should live out his natural life, but if someone gets that tired he's welcome here. Is there anything else?"

"I'll probably think of a lot of things after you're gone."

"Then . . ." The mist began to close in on her. The chair on which John sat seemed to be evaporating, so that he had to scramble to his feet to keep from sitting down hard.

"Hey!" he cried.

Her voice was faint in the thickening mist. "Let me know about the rejuvenation, John." Then she was gone entirely.

John stood entirely surrounded by the dry, pleasant mist. There was nothing and no one else to be seen.

He stood helplessly for a moment. He felt lonesome and a little frightened. Perhaps he would call up Martha without thinking about anything else. Then he decided to look around a little first, as the young lady suggested. No use jumping into the fire first thing.

He began to walk. He wondered what it was like for old people, such as himself, here. To his surprise, there materialized a number of them. A tennis court appeared and playing on it was a very aged couple. At least they were in appearance. But they served, swung, and dashed about the court as though they were in their teens. The old man finally jumped over the net and nimbly ran up to the old woman and embraced her, tightly, and while she hugged him back, clinging to him, they kissed, fervently.

"Say!" John exclaimed to himself. If he and Martha could have a thing like that, possessing youth

again to use with all the knowledge and experience of a lifetime . . . Then he remembered Martha's continual scolding.

He saw another old couple cavoring in a swimming pool in the same uncanny fashion as the first one played tennis. In quick succession, he saw a number of such couples at strenuous games that ordinarily would kill them in about five minutes or at least break a hip or two.

Another couple came into view. This time the man was quite old, John judged to be nearly his own age, while the woman was not a woman at all but a young girl, looking to be about eighteen. This couple sat glumly on a bench. Each stared at nothing without saying anything. The man's arteries might have been renewed but the great disparity in their ages prevented them from having anything of interest to discuss; stuck with each other they were just bored stiff.

Shaking his head, John walked on. Perhaps it didn't always have to be that way. Possibly a man could find a girl with whom he could have a good deal in common.

Still, he recognized the danger. And if you once chose a young girl you couldn't send her back.

Maybe it would be better to play it safe with Martha. But before calling her up, he would find out what she was like now. He'd ask somebody. But who? There wasn't anybody about.

He wished there was someone

here he could ask and tried to picture someone. Instantly, in the mist a few yards in front of him, an elderly man appeared, who announced cheerfully, "Here I am, John. My name's Charlie."

"Say," John said, "thanks for appearing. How do you like it here, Charlie?"

"Couldn't be better," Charlie told him.

"Could you tell me a few things?" asked John. "I mean, like were you married back on—back there?"

"I was a bachelor, John. But I've found somebody here that's just right for me. Would you like to meet her?"

"Sure would," John said.

"Harriet," Charlie called, and then, beside him, a smiling woman of about his own age appeared.

"Hello, John," she greeted.

"Well—why, hello, Harriet," John replied. "I guess you like it here, too, don't you?"

With a fond glance at Charlie, Harriet corroborated, "Very much."

"I wonder," John asked, "if either of you know Martha."

"'Martha'?" asked Charlie.

"My wife."

Gently, Harriet informed him, "There are millions of Marthas here, John."

"Our last name is—is . . ." John dribbled to a stop. He saw, in a flash, what he was doing, which, in trying to find out in advance what Martha was like, was hedging. Then he understood at least one reason

for the rule of knowing no full names here, to prevent what he was attempting.

Charlie and Harriet began to recede into the mist. "Wait a minute!" John called. "Won't I see you again?"

As they disappeared, their voices, in unison, floated back, "All you have to do is want to."

"One more thing!" he cried. "What is this place?"

But they were gone.

They were certainly a good example of keeping in your own age bracket. But John couldn't yet entirely let go of the other idea, especially because of not knowing if Martha had changed. He remembered a young girl of only seventeen in his neighborhood who had been drowned tragically last year. Her name was Gladys and she was probably here. He would like to see her.

Immediately Gladys stood before him in all her fresh young beauty. "John!" she cried.

It was startling to have her call him by his first name when always before, quite respectfully, she had addressed him as 'Mister'. Mister what? She might know.

"Gladys," he asked her, "what is my last name?"

"I don't remember," Gladys said.

"Do you know the name of this place?"

"Who cares?" She came up to him, quite close. "Am I glad to see you! I didn't think anybody would ever call me." She reached up soft round warm white young arms and

put them about his neck, holding up her face appealingly and pouting her lips invitingly.

"Why!" he exclaimed.

"John," she whispered, "don't you like me?"

"I like you very much," he replied. He didn't confess that she also scared him. "But—"

"You mean because you're old and I'm young?" Gladys asked. "Don't let that worry you any. You can turn in your arteries for young ones." She held up her lips again.

It was a great temptation to lower his own on her glowing mouth. Then recollection of the glum old-young couple came to John and he managed to resist it. "I don't think—"

"Oh, John!" Gladys pleaded. "Don't send me back! Please don't send me back!"

Her arms, still about his neck, began to dissolve, along with the rest of her. As she disappeared, John reassured her, calling, "Somebody better will find you, Gladys—don't worry!"

John walked on. He knew he could put off Martha no longer. At least he would see what she was like now. The only danger was that, once calling her up, she might browbeat him so that he could never send her back.

He decided to take the chance. He pictured Martha.

And there, suddenly, she was, standing in front of him, the snip of little woman she always was, yet formidable in manner, with her arms

crossed in disapproving fashion as usual.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "It's about time!"

John's heart sank. She sounded just the same. "Martha—"

"Don't 'Martha' me," she advised. "Where have you been all this time?"

He informed her evenly, "You know very well where I've been, Martha."

"Back there," she accused. "Enjoying yourself. Getting to be fifteen years older than I am. Look at you! What kind of a couple do you think we'll make this way?"

"We'd make a good one," he said, "if you—"

"Always blaming me!" she scolded.

"Martha," he said, "you're just the same, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" she demanded.

"A little worse, if anything," he said, "because I can see you've got new arteries to give you more strength to complain."

"Now you look here, John—John . . ." She couldn't remember their last name, which was a blessing, for if there was anything John had disliked it was her habit of addressing him by his full name when she scolded, using it as though he were guilty of something.

"No," John said quietly, "you look here." He realized that he must take a stand now or forever hold his uneasy peace. The fear of her instilled in him before by her actions

seemed to be removed here. "I asked to see you, Martha, because I thought you might have changed, become softer, more like the girl I married. But I see you haven't."

"Don't you say such things to me!"

"I'm saying them, Martha. And you know the rule here about my calling you up and sending you back."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" John smiled. And as he smiled Martha began to grow faint in appearance as the mist thickened about her.

Out of it her voice came frantically. "John! Wait! Wait!"

He waited. She remained static, fuzzy in the mist. "Well?" he asked.

Her voice was meek when she called, "John, I'll be good! I'll be different." She sounded scared.

"You sure about that?" he asked.

In a small voice she answered, "I'm sure."

"I don't want you spoiling things any more," he warned. "We could be happy here, like others I seen. There's a couple I met named Charlie and Harriet I think'd be good to know. And we could do such as seeing our grandchildren together, too."

"Yes, John, that would be nice."

"You were never one to be satisfied with what you had, Martha, such as having a thing like that.

And me. But you'd have to start now being satisfied and happy about it and keep to it, all three."

"I'm already started, John."

"All right," he decided, "come on back all the way so I can see if you mean it."

She came back all the way. Her arms were no longer crossed in her scolding position. Her face seemed softer when she assured him with a new kind of obedient tone in her voice, "I mean it, John."

"Don't you forget," he reminded, "that I can send you back any time. And will."

"I won't forget, John." She looked at him in a way he could not at first believe, in adoration, just the way she had looked at him on their honeymoon.

He asked, "You want to see the grandchildren now?"

She came up to him and put her arms about his neck. "A little later, John," she whispered. "Right now I like you as you are, but I think you'll agree that it would be nice if you got your arteries fixed up first thing."

"Maybe," he admitted. He did not smile as he looked down at her, and before he did, he decided that things were very well arranged indeed here in the doorway to Heaven or whatever it was. Maybe Martha would know what it was, exactly, and then again it didn't seem to matter much any more.