

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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everybody
knows
joe

by . . . C. M. Kornbluth

At least two persons live in each
of us. At least one of them is Joe.

JOE HAD QUITE A DAY for himself Thursday and as usual I had to tag along. If I had a right arm to give I'd give it for a day off now and then. Like on Thursday. On Thursday he really outdid himself.

He woke up in the hotel room and had a shower. He wasn't going to shave until I told him he looked like a bum. So he shaved and then he stood for a whole minute admiring his beauty in the mirror, forgetting whose idea it was in the first place.

So down to the coffee shop for breakfast. A hard-working man needs a good breakfast. So getting ready for a backbreaking day of copying references at the library, he had tomato juice, two fried eggs, three sausages, a sugared doughnut and coffee—with cream and sugar.

He couldn't work that off his pot in a week of ditch-digging under a July sun, but a hard-working man needs a good breakfast. I was too disgusted to argue with him. He's hopeless when he smells that short-order smell of smoking grease, frying bacon and coffee.

He wanted to take a taxi to the library—eight blocks!

"Walk, you jerk!" I told him. He started to mumble about pulling

*For a young man Cyril Kornbluth has been around a long time—at least in the upper reaches of science fiction and fantasy writing. His "Little Black Gog" is already accepted as a classic, his collaborations with Judith Merril "Mars Child" and Fred-
erik Pohl "The Space Merchants," novels of high entertainment and worth. We
are delighted to present him in a little story that should scare the pants off everybody.*

down six hundred bucks for this week's work and then he must have thought I was going to mention the high-calory breakfast. To him that's hitting below the belt. He thinks he's an unfortunate man with an affliction—about twenty pounds of it. He walked and arrived at the library glowing with virtue.

Making out his slip at the newspaper room he blandly put down next to *firm*—*The Griffin Press, Inc.*—when he knew as well as I did that he was a free lance and hadn't even got a definite assignment from Griffin.

There's a line on the slip where you put down *reason for consulting files (please be specific)*. It's a shame to cramp Joe's style to just one line after you pitch him an essay-type question like that. He squeezed in, *Preparation of article on year in biochemistry for Griffin Pr. Encyc. 1952 Yrbk.*, and handed it with a flourish to the librarian.

The librarian, a nice old man, was polite to him, which is usually a mistake with Joe. After he finished telling the librarian how his microfilm files ought to be organized and how they ought to switch from microfilm to microcard and how in spite of everything the New York Public Library wasn't such a bad place to research, he got down to work.

He's pretty harmless when he's working—it's one of the things that keeps me from cutting his throat. With a noon break for apple pie

and coffee he transcribed about a hundred entries onto his cards, mopping up the year in biochemistry nicely. He swaggered down the library steps, feeling like Herman Melville after finishing *Moby Dick*.

"Don't be so smug," I told him. "You still have to write the piece. And they still have to buy it."

"A detail," he said grandly. "Just journalism. I can do it with my eyes shut."

Just journalism. Somehow his three months of running copy for the A.P. before the war has made him an Ed Leahy.

"*When* are you going to do it with your eyes . . . ?" I began but it wasn't any use. He began telling me about how Gautama Buddha didn't break with the world until he was 29 and Mohammed didn't announce that he was a prophet until he was 30, so why couldn't *he* be one of these days suddenly bust loose with a new revelation or something and set the world on its ear? What it boiled down to was he didn't think he'd write the article tonight.

He postponed his break with the world long enough to have a ham and cheese on rye and more coffee at an automat and then phoned Maggie. She was available as usual. She said as usual, "Well then, why don't you just drop by and we'll spend a quiet evening with some records?"

As usual he thought that would be fine since he was so beat after a hard day. As usual I told him, "You're a louse, Joe. You know all

she wants is a husband and you know it isn't going to be you, so why don't you let go of the girl so she can find somebody who means business?"

The usual answers rolled out automatically and we got that out of the way.

Maybe Maggie isn't very bright but she seemed glad to see him. She's shooting for her Doctorate in sociology at N.Y.U., she does part-time case work for the city, she has one of those three-room Greenwich Village apartments with dyed burlap drapes and studio couches and home-made mobiles. She thinks writing is something holy and Joe's careful not to tell her different.

They drank some rhine wine and seltzer while Joe talked about the day's work as though he'd won the Nobel prize for biochemistry. He got downright brutal about Maggie being mixed up in such an approximate unquantitative excuse for a science as sociology and she apologized humbly and eventually he forgave her. Big-hearted Joe.

But he wasn't so fried that he *had* to start talking about a man wanting to settle down—"not this year but maybe next. Thirty's a dividing point that makes you stop and wonder what you really want and what you've really got out of life, Maggie darlin'." It was as good as telling her that she should be a good girl and continue to keep open house for him and maybe some day . . . maybe.

As I said, maybe Maggie isn't very bright. But as I also said,

Thursday was the day Joe picked to outdo himself.

"Joe," she said with this look on her face, "I got a new LP of the Brahms Serenade Number One. It's on top of the stack. Would you tell me what you think of it?"

So he put it on and they sat sipping rhine wine and seltzer and he turned it over and they sat sipping rhine wine and seltzer until both sides were played. And she kept watching him. Not adoringly.

"Well," she asked with this new look, "what did you think of it?"

He told her, of course. There was some comment on Brahms' architectonics and his resurrection of the contrapuntal style. Because he'd sneaked a look at the record's envelope he was able to spend a couple of minutes on Brahms' debt to Haydn and the young Beethoven in the fifth movement (*allegro*, D Major) and the gay *rondo* of the—

"Joe," she said, not looking at him. "Joe," she said, "I got that record at one hell of a discount down the street. It's a wrong pressing. Somehow the first side is the first half of the Serenade but the second half is Schumann's Symphonic Studies Opus Thirteen. Somebody noticed it when they played it in a booth. But I guess you didn't notice it."

"Get out of *this one*, braino," I told him.

He got up and said in a strangled voice, "And I thought you were my friend. I suppose I'll never learn." He walked out.

I suppose he never will.

God help me, I ought to know.