

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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listen,  
children  
... listen!

by . . . Wallace West

The old man was long dead—but  
his widow still awaited his re-  
turn. And one night she heard . . .

MY GRANDMOTHER was fey. At least that's what the neighbors said. She could predict the weather by the way her left heel "etched." She always knew by some sixth sense when any of her blood was coming down from Indianapolis to visit our rumbledown farm. She insisted she heard angels singing (or sounds considerably more terrifying) during funerals at the New Harmony Church over the hill.

In the eyes of myself and my sister Annette Maw was as old as the gullies which cut up our clay fields. Probably she was about sixty when I first remember her. She still carried her lean body proudly though her back was bowed. She had a gift for mimicry and a merry smile marred by the fact that she had been salivated by taking too much calomel to fight off fever'n'aiger. This misfortune had caused her gums to recede and gave her a snaggle-toothed look. Some of her fangs moved when she ate but, to our eternal wonder, they never fell out.

She had the untiring wreck of a fine alto voice and regaled us with renditions of bloody old hymns or ballads like "The Ship's Carpenter" (*And three times 'round went our gallant ship e'er she sank to the bottom of the sea*) or an endless

---

*The elements of horror are as many and varied as the threads in a Gobelin tapestry—with special stimuli for each of us. Perhaps terror lies in the howl of a coyote, in the noises of an old house, in a blaze of fire. Or perhaps it responds to the mournful creak of wheels on a gravel road, to moonlight reflected from a huge old mirror.*

---

garbled song about a girl who masqueraded as a soldier to join her sweetheart in the wars between "Tors and Highlanzer."

I still have nightmares about those childhood years. The Brown murder was a recent memory—Patriarch Brown and his blind wife had been slaughtered by "persons unknown" in a hemlock-shrouded farmhouse half a mile from our cabin. Repercussions of the trial had hardly died away.

There was talk of another investigation and the *persons*—well known to everyone but the law—were prowling the countryside, flashing dark lanterns under doors and shouting threats of what would happen to neighbors who dared tell what they knew. Paw woke one night and fired his squirrel rifle at what he thought was a lantern but which was only a suddenly-flaming fireplace ember. The bullet knocked a newel post off my bed.

Despite the campaign of terror Paw just had to drive to the county seat once a month for supplies. Always he promised to be back by sundown. Always he met some old Butternut cronies—comrades-at-arms in the Knights of the Golden Circle during Civil War days. And in talking about how they had outfoxed and outfought the National Guard sent to punish them for desertion from the Union Army he usually would be delayed until the night closed in.

Then, as Annette and I lay in our bed beside the fireplace, refusing to go to sleep because we knew Paw

would bring us presents, Maw would open the front door, hook her bare foot around it and listen, tense with a fear which communicated itself to us.

The katydids might be quarreling. Or the baying of Mr. Morningstar's coon dogs might drift through the fall or winter air. A screechowl's sobbing might cause us to cling together in a shiver.

Finally we'd start whimpering. Then Maw would twist her wrinkled head back through the crack in the door and whisper, "Shhh! Listen, children . . . Listen! I think I hear Josiah's wagon. They hain't got him this time."

Often the belated team turned down some side road. And she would murmur, hardly louder than the katydids, as she resumed her vigil, "Shhh! Listen, children . . . Listen!"

When the hours of tension had set my whole body aching with what folks who don't know call "growing pains" and when the half-opened door had made the room almost as chill as the night, we would actually hear the faraway mournful creak of wheels on the gravel road, the jingle of trace chains, the rumble of a half-empty jolt-wagon bed.

"Thank you, dear just God!" Maw would breathe at last. Then she would follow her bare foot through the door and bustle about reheating the supper coffee and fixing a snack for Paw.

We would hear the wagon rumble into the yard. Next Paw would cuss Old Nell for her contrariness as he

unhitched and led her to the stable. And at last a great grey-bearded man, his arms laden with bundles, would stumble through the front door to be greeted by two elves in long underwear, dancing about him and screaming, "Whatcha got for me, Paw? Whatcha got this time?"

Usually it was jawbreakers or peppermint sticks. Once, when we sold the hogs, it was a store doll for Annette and a marvelous steamboat for me that you wound up with a key and sank the first time I tried it in the branch.

He always brought something pretty and useless for Maw too. And she always scolded and loved him for buying it. Then he'd go over to the creaky chair where Aunt Ellen rocked slowly, pat her plump shoulder and hold out a shell comb, a cheap ring or a handkerchief. And Aunt Ellen would look away from the mirror—for the first time that day, perhaps—take the thing in her plump white hand, and smile.

I should have mentioned Aunt Ellen before but I forgot. In fact, everybody forgot Aunt Ellen. She wanted it so. She had been deeply in love when she was a girl, they said. But her young man had had to see the world before he settled down. So he set out for that strange half-mythical land called Europe. And he never returned.

After she was sure he would not come back Aunt Ellen stopped speaking to people. She took her seat and just looked into the mirror. I remember the rockers of that chair

were worn almost through from constant use.

The mirror fascinated Annette and me. It was big—big as our front door and placed against the wall directly across from the entrance, so that if you didn't look closely you thought it *was* another door. And it had a great deeply-polished frame carved with intricate lacelike patterns that hurt your eyes if you looked at them too long.

I now know that it was the only thing of real value in the draughty log cabin. Maw said it was a "hearth-loom," brought from Virginia by her parents, the Whites, who had been "quality" in the Old Dominion before they migrated after the war of 1812, were stampeded by land agents into "locating" in the wrong part of the state and rapidly dissipated their means on an unproductive wilderness.

Maw had made up a song about that mirror. "The Whites, 'tis said, were privateers when England ruled the waves . . ." was the way it started. And it went on to tell how the mirror was part of their loot when they sacked and scuttled some tall merchantman.

To corroborate this story we had another relic, a "treasure chest" of the same dark wood, iron-bound and strong, which was used as a hens' nest beneath the house. Annette and I crawled under the floor from time to time to see if we could find any treasure still in it. But all we ever found were eggs.

After Paw had taken off his overcoat and Maw had put his packages

in the leanto kitchen he would sit before the fire, suck coffee through his beard and regale us with news from the outside—how Uncle Joe Cannon's control of Congress was about to be broken, what the Young Turks were up to, how T.R.'s trust-busting would boost farm prices and make us all rich again and how They had just found a rusted and bloody monkey wrench in Brown's well.

At last, tired and happy, with our mouths puckered from too many jawbreakers, we'd go back to bed. And we'd wake to a humdrum world which included school, collecting wood, milking our cow, riding Old Nell when she would let us and maybe going to an ice cream social at New Harmony, until it was time for Paw to make another epic trip to Martinsville.

But life was never completely humdrum when Paw was around. He knew every bird by its call, could lead us unerringly to the best raspberry patches and made marvelous popguns, slingshots and "fly killers" out of elder bushes and bits of string. When he tired of such things as the sun went down his tales about Napoleon and Hannibal crossing the Alps would hold us spellbound.

Openhanded to a fault Paw had lost most of his farm through the years by going on neighbors' worthless notes or lending them money and not having the heart to ask for its return. Yet he was the materialist of the family and never tired of poking fun at Maw's voices and premonitions.

Dressed in overalls, shaggy, massive and not always clean, he looked like a poor white. Nevertheless he had had a good education and once confessed to me, when Maw's back was turned, that in his youth he had made a tour of the state lecturing on atheism. And he had an endless fund of slightly bawdy sacrilegious stories which made May click her teeth at him and mourn that he would never go to heaven when he died.

Years slip past like water when one is young. We hardly noticed, Annette and I, that the bend in Maw's back was growing more pronounced and that Paw stopped oftener for breath when he plowed our stubby fields or sawed the endless cords of wood which still could not keep the living room warm when wintry winds swept down from some place that he called Medicine Hat. (Annette and I used to pretend we were on a ship as we walked across the rag carpet in the living room while it billowed upward as air blew under it through cracks in the floor.)

And then one night, after the usual period of listening, when Maw finally had heard the wagon creaking, closed the door and put on the bitter coffee, Old Nell jogtrotted into the yard and stopped without the usual accompaniment of curses. For a while Maw noticed nothing wrong. Then she slowly faced the door, lips firmly drawn over those wobbly teeth.

Annette and I, all ready for our jump out of the warm bed onto the

icy floor, watched her uncomprehendingly until we saw that Aunt Ellen had given over her unending vigil at the mirror and turned her head questioningly. Then we too knew that something was very strange.

As though moved by strings, placing one foot before the other with obvious effort, Maw started toward the door. After an eternity she reached it, opened it, closed it against her bare shank in the old accustomed gesture.

"*Josiah!*" we heard her scream as the foot disappeared.

With a sigh Aunt Ellen rose and waddled after her.

Maw—she was still strong as an ox and could swing an axe like a man—backed through the door after awhile, holding Paw under the armpits. Aunt Ellen carried his feet as they brought him in.

"The old fool!" Maw was whimpering. "I knew they'd get him. The old fool! I told him not to stay so danged late."

Her eyes were dry and glittering.

After the funeral—Annette and I boasted at school that the Brown murderers had done for Paw although a stroke undoubtedly was responsible—the old cabin never felt quite like home again. First a deluge of uncles, aunts and cousins descended upon us and insisted we sell the farm and move to town.

"Josiah would not have it so," Maw told them while Aunt Ellen nodded corroboration. So they compromised by having a hired hand in

to do the plowing and heavier work.

At the start nothing seemed vitally wrong except the absence of Paw's explosive laughter and endless stories, plus a growing dearth of first-class popguns and slingshots. Then, one rainy day when I had been brooding over one of his dog-eared books—"Vanity Fair," I think it was—I looked up, caught sight of Maw, her potato peeling forgotten, sitting tense beside the kitchen table.

I knew what it was that had been bothering me. Maw was still listening . . . always listening now. What I did not realize was that, without Paw's quizzical common sense to balance her, she was slipping imperceptibly into that never-never land which had so often beckoned.

Not long after this discovery I awakened, chilled, as the decrepit Seth Thomas clock clinked midnight. The door was open a crack and I could glimpse, by the last flickering embers, Maw's foot in its accustomed place.

"Maw," I called.

"Shhh! Listen! I think I hear a wagon."

"Maw," I screamed. "*Maw!*"

"What is it, honey?" she asked in her normal voice as she came inside, crossed the room and placed a horny hand on my forehead in one of her rare caresses.

"You'll catch cold," I mumbled, somehow ashamed.

"I was just listening to the katydids. They sound—fresh, like spring-water," she lied.

"Don't listen any more."

"All right, honey, I'll go to bed. Don't worrit yourself."

But she did not keep her promise.

Several months later I came home from school ahead of Annette, who was dusting erasers for the teacher. At the front door I stopped as I heard animated conversation inside. Thinking it was one of the neighbor women, who called occasionally to gossip, I rushed in, eager not to miss anything, then stopped, heart in mouth, terrified.

Aunt Ellen was out of the house on one of the chores to which she now condescended to put her white hands and Maw was occupying the old rocker before the mirror. But what frightened me was the chatter in two distinct voices which still continued.

"Maw," I gulped. "Who—who you talking to?"

"Why, with Mrs.—Mrs. Jones here, of course." She laughed although her eyes refused to meet mine. "Mrs. Jones, this is my grandson I was telling you about. Take off your cap, son, and say—"

"But Maw," I gulped. "There's no one there. It's just your reflection in the looking glass."

"Why—why so it is," she stammered, brushing one brown hand across her eyes. "I was just fooling." She jumped to her feet and started bustling about like her old indefatigable self. "Now run along and fill the wood box. Then wash your hands and help me peel these 'taters. I'm way late with supper, what with having to stop to talk—

I mean I must have set down to rest and went to sleep."

Then began one of the strangest battles in the history of fairie—two children against a mirror, for of course I enlisted poor Annette on my side. I tried to explain to Aunt Ellen but she merely smiled understandingly and patted me with one fat hand while her prominent eyes fluttered back to the glass.

I wrote a scrawl to Uncle Bill, my favorite, and he left his hardware store the next weekend and came down from the city with a little chinwhiskered doctor. Since psychiatry was almost unknown in those days the physician looked at Maw's tongue, thumped her chest, asked her a few questions, which she answered with sly humor, and pronounced her sound.

"I think it's you that's imagining things, boy," said Uncle Bill when he took me for a walk in the woods after one of Maw's wonderful chicken dinners. "We're all upset by Paw's going. Just don't worry about things."

"But Uncle Bill," I protested. "I heard what I saw."

"I know—I know." His lean shrewd face had a worried look, I noticed with an upward glance. "You're a highstrung youngster. Write me often, though. And I'll come down every time I can. Say—look!" I could almost hear him sigh with relief at an opportunity to change the subject. "There's a patch of violets already. Let's pick some and take them back to Maw and Ellen. It'll make them happy."

After that, of course, I had to carry on the fight with only Annette to help.

We tried everything—went right home when we could have been playing with the other kids after school—got Maw to sing for us by the hour—read out loud to her—inevitably her into the spring woods to pick flowers and look for birds' nests. Oh, it was a brave battle put up by a twelve and a ten-year-old against something alien and, somehow, far wiser than we.

At first Maw managed to banish her visions when she heard us come into the yard. Then we had to strive hard and harder to break the spell.

And one day we both became twins!

It happened when Annette and I came home one time the teacher took sick. It was much earlier than usual and we caught Maw rocking happily before the mirror, gossiping with her reflection.

"I'm so glad you brought your own children to visit me today, Mrs. Jones," she exclaimed the moment our images appeared in the glass behind hers. "My Tommy and Annette don't have many playmates, we live so far from any neighbors. I'm sure they'll be much happier now."

"Aw, Maw," Annette protested as we instinctively ducked out of range. "Those ain't real children. You're just looking at us in the looking glass."

But the damage had been done.

For once in my life I saw grandmother grow really angry.

"I'll have none of your sass, Annette," she stormed, rising and straightening her back until it cracked. "Mrs. Jones, I don't know what has come over my younguns. Now, will you two say you're sorry or must I whip you right before company?"

Shamefaced and shaken, we apologized to the empty air. And from that hour Mrs. Jones and her ghostly brats became our constant companions.

At first we hated and resented them, then, childlike, accepted the inevitable and even made the best of it. Sometimes, so real did Maw make the delusion become, we almost believed with her that the shadows were real. On rainy week-ends we found ourselves inventing games to play with them. Perhaps, in time, we might have gone to inhabit her world of dreams.

But Maw's health was failing rapidly. We tried to ignore the fact as she did, though it soon became pitifully obvious that Paw's loss had broken the iron will which had sustained her through so many adversities. Aunt Ellen more and more ceded her place before the mirror as she helped Annette and me do the lighter chores and even some of the cooking.

Bill Pailey came over every day now—Maw never paraded her shadows when he was around, knowing that the bluff farmer was somehow not to be trusted with such dream stuff. And the money which



aunts and uncles contributed, willingly or grudgingly, was more and more needed to fill the gaps in our finances.

"Tommy," Annette said to me one afternoon as we were plodding home from school along the muddy dogwood-bordered road. "What happens to people when they die?"

"Aw, I don't know," I muttered, kicking a loose stone with my copper-toed shoe. "Maw says the angels come and get 'em and take 'em to heaven."

"But the angels didn't come and get Dickie." Dickie was a wry-necked pin-feathered rooster that Paw had taught to come when we called, dig fishing worms for us and jump through a barrel hoop. "I went to look at Dickie's grave the other day. A dog had dug him up. There were just feathers—and bones."

"Aw," I said. "Chickens don't have souls. But Maw says that when Miz Pailey died last year she was there and she saw—"

"We're going to be awful lonesome, though," my sister sighed. "And you'll have to get up and make the fire every morning."

"What you mean?" I challenged.

"Nothing. Let's run. I'm cold." And she was off in a flutter of long legs, gingham and pale yellow braids.

After such a conversation I hardly dared enter the house that day. When I did go in, after fooling around at the barn as long as possible, I found Maw singing lustily about some man who had gone to

the gallows with a white dove riding on his shoulder to prove him innocent of the murder of his sweetheart.

"Where's Mrs. Jones and her kids?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"They went home," said Maw. "I told them to. Can't spend all my time gassing with a ugly old woman like that when I've got housecleaning to do."

And until long after sunset she made the feathers fly from the old pillows, beat up the crackling cornshuck mattresses, sprinkled and swept the floors and polished the meager kitchen utensils till they shone. Annette and I, feeling as if we had been released from jail, helped with a will. Aunt Ellen, reinstated in her rocking chair, frowned and sneezed by turns and said nothing as always.

"There," said Maw at last as she hung the home-made broom behind the kitchen range and sank into a chair, looking suddenly more worn and old than I had ever seen her. "There. It's all swept and garnished for when the bridegroom cometh."

"The bridegroom?" I glanced at her sharply.

"I was just fooling again, son." She stared down at her big-veined hands as they lay clasped in her lap. "Must be getting old, I guess. I just meant that I have a feeling your Uncle Bill will come tomorrow. And you know how fussy he is about everything being neat and clean." She rose reluctantly with a sigh, half of weariness, half of content. "Come. You and Annette get

undressed and get to bed. I'll sing you to sleep like I used to when you were little."

"You look just like my daughter, sir,  
Who from me ran away . . ."

Her old cracked voice still had its hypnotic quality and I felt my eyelids drooping despite my certain knowledge that this night, of all nights, I should stay awake.

"Maw," I mumbled. "I wanna drink."

Her bare feet padded into the kitchen. I heard the rattle of tin cup against galvanized bucket. Then she was back at my side again and the springwater was fresh on my dry lips and gums.

"Maw," I rambled on. "I don't wanna sleep. Tell me about when you were a little girl back in Virginia—and the big white horse and the black people . . ."

"Not tonight, honey. You're all tuckered out," she crooned, stroking my forehead and picking up the thread of that interminable song.

"I a-am not your daughter, sir,  
And neither do I know.  
I a-am from Highlanzer  
And they call me Jack Mon-  
roe . . ."

I woke with a start, those last lugubrious lines still ringing in my ears.

"She dre-ew out her broadsword.  
She bid this world adieu.

Saying 'Goodbye to Jack Highlanzer'

And 'Goodbye to Jack Monroe.'"

Have you ever awakened in a strange place—a hotel room perhaps—tried to locate a familiar lamp, the dim outlines of your own bed-chamber, the tick of a friendly clock? Or have you, perhaps, sought frantically for a door with your hands sliding vainly along black and forbidding walls?

This was the same room in which I had gone to sleep. The fire was almost out. By my side Annette breathed deep and slow. I could hear Aunt Ellen snoring not far away. Through the open door a full moon stretched its carpet almost to my bed. Yet, despite these comforting sights and sounds, everything about me seemed topsy turvy and utterly horribly wrong.

My bare toes curled with terror as I realized what it was. Our front door was in the south wall of the cabin. The moonshine was pouring in through a wide opening in the north wall—through the place where the mirror stood! And a cold wind was pouring in with it.

"Maw," I whispered, sitting up and rubbing my eyes.

Only the chorus of karydids answered.

But this was spring! Katydids sang only in the fall!

At the same moment I saw a bare foot and ankle etched in moonlight as it hooked around the age-darkened frame of the opening.

"Please, Maw." I still struggled

between dream and waking. "You'll catch cold out there."

She came partially inside the "door" then and smiled at me. And I noticed, with the lack of surprise which accompanies nightmares, that her teeth were white and firm in the moon-glow.

"Shhh!" she admonished. "I think I hear a wagon."

"But Paw is . . ." I began, then stopped spellbound.

Far in the distance, across rolling hills which lay bathed in beauty and above the fresh staccato mutter of katydids, I too caught the creak of wheels on a gravel road, the jingle of trace chains and the rumble of a half-empty jolt-wagon bed.

I crouched, hardly breathing, until I heard the wagon stop briefly at our sagging gate—we always kept it closed now—heard the rusty hinges squeak and then the friendly thump, thumprey, thump of the wagon as it resumed its progress into the yard.

"It's Uncle Bill, ain't it, Maw?" I pleaded.

"Bill's not due till tomorrow, honey," she answered softly as she shaded her eyes against the moonlight. "No, it's . . ."

"But it can't be," I sobbed. "He—the angels took him."

"Not Josiah! Angels wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole, thank the dear just God," she chuckled. "He'll have a whole raft of packages after all this while." She started forward briskly. "I'll go help pack them in."

"No, Maw! Don't leave—wait for me!" I screamed, plunging from bed and racing wildly after her receding back.

I regained consciousness to find Aunt Ellen bathing my forehead with hot vinegar. Annette was sobbing. My face was badly cut—I still wear the scar—and the mirror was shattered in its frame.

"Maw!" I struggled to get up. "She . . ."

"I know," said Aunt Ellen in just the thread of a voice unused for years as her plump white hands continued to apply the compress. "I understand."

When Uncle Bill arrived next morning there was a great to-do and the neighbors organized a search of the surrounding woods and the creek bottom. Of course they found nothing. I knew they wouldn't. Annette and Aunt Ellen knew they wouldn't. And I think Uncle Bill knew it too after he heard my story, although of course he wouldn't let on.

The rest of them patted my head and said, "Too bad, poor boy. He's under an awful strain," when I tried to tell them.

Several months later a woman's body was found in White River, full fifteen miles away. People said it must be grandmother, that she must have wandered that far before she died of exposure. Our aunts, uncles, cousins and nephews had a big funeral at the New Harmony Church over the hill.

But Annette and I wouldn't go.