

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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my
past
is
mine

by . . . Gerda Rhoads

Take one tiny memory out of a man's life—and the entire universe may turn topsy turvy.

THE VOICE ASKED at Eddie Tomlinson's elbow, "Is this seat free?"

Eddie nodded, and hardly looking around, picked up his hat which he had carelessly put on the seat at his side. A little impatiently he placed it on the rack overhead. Then he went back to his contemplation of the wooded hills through which the train was threading its way.

It was the first time he had been in the country since it happened and perhaps he had allowed himself, against his better judgment, some unconscious hope. Possibly because it was autumn, the very best part of autumn for being in the country. Certainly he *must* have allowed himself to hope, otherwise he would not again be feeling the sharp despair, which in recent months had subsided into a bleak and monotonous resignation.

"Dreary, isn't it?" said the voice of a stranger.

Eddie turned sharply towards the man who had taken the seat

Gerda Rhoads was born in Vienna and came to the United States with her parents by way of London and Rio. She was educated at Hunter College, became a ballet dancer, took up painting and has done some very charming canvases. Then she married a painter and they went to Paris and she turned to writing. Sounds glamorous, doesn't it? With the publication of this her first story Gerda Rhoads proves her pen is glamor-tipped too.

next to him. Could it be? Could the same thing have happened to this man? In that case the psychiatrists would have been proved wrong and . . . well, nothing would be changed really. But perhaps it meant some ray of hope. At least he would not be so alone, he would be able to talk to this man. They could talk about it together. He almost blurted out the question right away. But he'd had so many unpleasant experiences with it that he'd refrained from asking it for a long time, and now the habit of silence held him back.

He looked at his neighbor more closely. The man's skin was freckled, he could tell that, and the hair rather light. There was something vaguely familiar about the eyes, about the whole face, but these days people tended to look rather alike . . . or anyway, more so than before.

The man looked at him attentively.

"Haven't we . . . no it couldn't be," he suddenly said. Then he added softly, so that Eddie could barely hear him, "It's become so hard to recognize old friends."

Eddie felt sure of it now. This man had sensed a kinship in him, and was in the same boat. But he was afraid to ask the question, so he was throwing out subtle hints, inviting *Eddie* to ask. Eddie took one more glance at the landscape, and then looked steadily at the man.

"I must ask you something,"

he said, forcing himself to speak slowly and calmly above the wave of excitement. Then he stopped, because he realized how the question would strike the stranger if he weren't what he seemed. "It's a strange question," Eddie continued haltingly.

"Go ahead," said the man encouragingly, his face earnest, "I won't think you crazy." The fear left Eddie.

"Do you, or did you ever, know color?" he asked.

"Color?" The man seemed disappointed, but not shocked.

"Yes, you know, red, green, blue, yellow and all the others . . ." Eddie's voice trailed off as his excitement faded. The stranger obviously didn't know, or there would have been an immediate response. All that showed on his face was disappointment faintly tinged with curiosity. At least, though, there was no ridicule.

"What was that word again?"

"Color."

"Co-lor . . . interesting. Would you tell me about it? Try to describe it."

"It can't be described," Eddie said, almost sharply. Then, relenting, he added, "I've tried before, many times, just after it happened."

"After *what* happened? I wish you'd tell me. I'd like to know for . . . for personal reasons, which I may tell you afterwards. Of course you may have related it so many times that it bores you."

"No, as a matter of fact I haven't. I haven't told the whole story for months, and then only once." Eddie felt hope again. This man, though he didn't know color, obviously knew *something*. What he knew might help more than the unlikely theories of doctors and psychiatrists.

"It happened a little over six months ago on a rainy spring night," Eddie began. "I tell you all the details, about the rain and all, because who knows what counts and what doesn't?"

"Go on," said the man, "don't leave anything out."

"That night I felt lonely and sort of depressed, and I decided to go to the movies. Nothing much was playing in my neighborhood, so I went to look at the cheap revivals on Forty-second Street. I wandered around for a long time in the rain, getting more and more depressed.

"I couldn't find anything good playing, and I didn't feel like going home again, and just then I saw this garish poster of a bullfighter. Above it the movie marquee said, 'Blood and Sand.' I'd seen the movie before, and didn't think it was anything so special. But I remembered the color, real vivid and romantic. So I decided to go see it again. It was better than going back to the apartment."

"You said the word *color* again," the stranger interrupted, "you better try to explain that to me right now. Color, I mean."

"I can't," Eddie answered sadly. "If you've never seen it, I just can't. I told you I tried before. Anyway, that night there was still color, that is, up until the time I walked into that movie house. I came in in the middle of the film, during a scene which had impressed me a lot. The big bull ring with the golden-yellow sand, and the bullfighters wearing blue and green and gold and many other colors—the words are probably new to you—and the bright red cape. I tell you, I remembered that scene so clearly *because* of the colors, and now it was all black and white and grey.

"Those at least are words that you know: black and white and grey, and you know what 'tone' means. Well, color has tone too, but there is so much more, such great differences . . . It can't be described, but everything had it. Of course even in those days they made many movies in just black and white. But this particular one had been in color, as I said, and really fine color.

"When I came in then, as I said, in the middle of the bullfight scene and saw it was all just black and white, the red cape and the blue sky and all, I thought at first that I'd gone crazy, that my memory was playing terribly inventive tricks on me. Then came other scenes of which I'd remembered the color in great detail. I decided that I couldn't just have invented all that color so precisely

and believed that I'd really seen it. It occurred to me that maybe this was just a cheap black and white reprint of the original color film.

"Well, I stayed till the end of the film because, as I said, I didn't feel like going home that night, and I got pretty much used to the black and white, though the film was certainly much poorer that way.

"I stayed till the bull fight scene came around again, and when I first got out into the lobby I was too blinded by the sudden bright light to notice anything. It was out in the street that I got the shock. There was no color out there at all. The posters, the neon signs, people's clothes were just shades of grey, if they weren't black or white. I looked into a mirror on the side of a store window, and my own maroon tie was just a sort of darkish grey. It was as if everything, all life, had become a black and white movie.

"I was terribly frightened. I thought something had happened to my eyes, or to my brain. I ran back to the movie house, but the ticket booth was already closed. I asked a man who was just coming out, 'was that movie in color?' and he looked at me as if he thought me crazy, and walked on without answering. Of course it was a silly question, and what difference did it make if that movie was in color or not if I couldn't see color *anywhere*?

"So I walked towards the subway to go home. I told myself I was dreaming, or else I was overtired or something. It would have been quite a natural thing to happen to me if I had been overtired, because I'm a commercial artist, and used to be always working with color. Sort of an occupational disease maybe. I told myself that if after a good night's sleep I still didn't see color, I'd go to a doctor. That way I calmed myself a bit, and I slept like a log all night.

"Next morning I still didn't see any color, so I called up the agency and said I wouldn't be in that day because I was sick. Then I went to see a doctor. I just went to a man who had an office down the street, because I've never been sick since I got to New York, and hadn't any special doctor to go to. I had to wait a long time, and in the waiting room there was a copy of Holiday Magazine, a magazine that was always full of color pictures, and of course they were all black and white now. I got so worried glancing through it that I put it away, and closed my eyes till my name should be called.

"The doctor listened to my whole story, and then he said, 'What do you mean by color?' He pronounced it as you did—like a foreign word. I tried to explain it to him. That was the first time I'd tried to explain color, and I saw how impossible it was. Then I caught myself and thought *how*

obvious, this doctor is just trying to test me. Obviously he knows what color is, red and blue and all the rest, and here I'm trying to explain it to him, which is impossible. So I realized, or thought I realized, that the doctor was just trying to test me, to see if my mind was working logically. So I asked him for a dictionary.

"He gave me a Standard College Dictionary and I looked up color, to show him the definition, but it wasn't there. The dictionary jumped from coloquintida to Colosseum. So I looked for spectrum and for rainbow and for all kinds of synonyms, and for the names of some of the colors themselves, and none of it was listed. When I looked up from the frantic search the doctor had a strange expression on his face. 'I'm afraid I'm not equipped to help you,' he said, and wrote down the name and address of a psychiatrist for me.

"That's about all there is to the story, except that when I went home I looked through all my books, poetry and prose, which had been full of descriptions in terms of color. You know, red lips and blue sky and green trees and such, and it was all gone. No such words were in any of the books. I went to the library too, and looked in all kinds of books. And for a while I went around asking people the question I asked you earlier. I tried a few times more to describe color, before I gave up. I soon gave up asking

people, because they thought me crazy or drunk, and I didn't want to end up in some institution.

"I felt terrible of course, not only because life without color is so barren, but also because it was all so confusing. I felt so alone. I walked around in a daze for a long time, not knowing any more what was true and what wasn't and still hoping it was all a dream. But I dreamed at night, and I dreamed in color, and then woke up to the colorless world. After a while the color went out of my dreams too.

"I went to see the psychiatrist finally, not because I really expected any help or explanation from him, but just to be doing something. I told him the whole story. That was the last time I told it, and it was over five months ago. He made a diagnosis. He said that because of some insecurity in my emotional life, some happening in my childhood, no doubt, I had needed to construct a wholly individual world for myself. He said that kind of thing *does* happen, though usually not to such a complete and well-worked out extent, that it usually passes during adolescence. But my insecurity, or whatever it was, had apparently been very pronounced, and my imagination fertile. He said there was no need now to analyse the causes any further, since the syndrome had vanished by itself, and I was apparently cured.

"Since then I haven't told anyone, and till today I haven't asked the question. I've got pretty used to the grey world, and I work in black and white and tone. But inside of me I can't believe the psychiatrist, and I guess I don't want to. I guess I keep hoping all the time, and I was very sad just now, looking at the autumn trees."

Eddie sat in silence for a while, until he realized with embarrassment that he had been fixedly staring at the man next to him.

"What do you make of it?" he asked as lightly and casually as he could.

"Well," said the stranger, slowly and carefully, "except for the details and the exact circumstances it is very much like my story . . . No, no, with me it wasn't color, though there is a word, or rather there was a word, for that which was. The word is 'povodil' and I can't describe or explain it any better than you can color. But it was as much part of my world as your color. More so, in fact, because it wasn't just visual, but was perceptible to all the senses and was also part of reasoning.

"It stopped more than two years ago, and like with your color, the world became as though it had never existed. I had an extremely hard time adjusting. It was like coming to another planet, learning a new language . . . Well I just can't describe it, if you don't know povodil. You can see now why I wanted to hear your story. There

was another reason too . . . You see people look so different now. But I have learned to a certain extent how to recognize the people I knew, before povodil went, and I feel pretty sure I knew you once. Did you ever go to the University of Virginia?"

"Yes," Eddie said surprised, "I did. Class of '34." He looked again at the stranger, remembering the first impression he had had of having known the fellow. He had a rather average Irish type face, with a short nose and a generous mouth, and crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. He had freckles too, and his hair, being rather light, might be red. He searched his memory for a redhead he had known at the University.

"It seems very improbable," the man was saying now, interrupting his attempts to remember, "it doesn't seem possible that you could be he. But back at the University there was a fellow I remember very well. He was a graduate student, and he was doing very interesting research on the *pronding of povodil*. There was a great deal of talk about it when his thesis came out. I was just a junior then but I remember it. I remember him, and you look like him. Of course you look different, but you look as he would look without povodil and twenty years older. His name was, let's see what was his name? . . . Eddie Tomlinson. That was it."

Eddie started when he heard his

name. He hadn't been listening to what the fellow was saying, he had been too busy trying to place him.

"Eddie Tomlinson! Why that's *my* name!" he cried now, in surprise. "How did you know it?"

"I just told you."

"Oh, yes, yes," Eddie said quickly, not wanting to admit that he hadn't heard. A face, a situation, a name were coming to the surface of his mind.

"Jerry Conlan," he exclaimed suddenly. "You must be Jerry Conlan!"

"Yes," said the man absently, "yes, that's my name. How very strange," he continued softly, "that you should be Eddie Tomlinson, one of the most promising young povodilomans of the time . . . and

you've never heard of povodil or of prondation or deg or any of it."

He went on mumbling to himself while Eddie remembered that day when, after an art class, he had gone to watch the light rehearsal of the Drama Club's newest production and had been so impressed by the ingenious use of colored light that he had sought out the student who had designed them. He had talked for quite a while to the fellow, who had been a redhead named Jerry Conlan.

"So you're Jerry Conlan," Eddie interrupted his neighbor. "And what do you do these days? Still stage design and lighting? Or is it something else?"

"Stage design?" asked Conlan, "lighting? What's that?"

