

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# room for improvement

by . . . Mann Rubin

**In a room where solitude reigns even the dead may find time to resent ancient, intolerable wrongs.**

ALBERT WATKINS had been married a year before he discovered the room. He found it one rainy summer day under the hall stairs while seeking shelter for a dying geranium plant that had been spilled over by the rain and was now beyond repair. It was small and furnished comfortably with a mahogany desk, an easy chair, a library of several travel books and a window that looked out on a narrow cross-section of his garden.

He had seen the window many times in his excursions about the garden but somehow had never been curious about its precise location. Now the discovery came as a surprise. He left the plant under the desk, closed the door and made a mental note to ask his wife why she had never even so much as mentioned the room to him.

At the time Albert was forty-eight years of age, assistant manager at the Glenn City Bank and married to the former Elizabeth Towne Sumpter, the widow of his former employer. The late Mr. Sumpter had been a quiet-spoken,

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*From time to time we've brought you, with a great deal of gratification, the brilliant excursions into fantasy of up-and-coming young advertising writers, TV producer-directors and TV script writers. We don't know why, exactly, but fantasy seems to beckon with unusual persuasiveness to men and women in the vanguard, so to speak, of our modern age. And here with an eerily compelling magic at his fingertips comes Mann Rubin to add a new dimension to this phenomenon and imprison us within walls of strangeness in his own way.*

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diligent man to work for and Albert had always admired his ways.

Albert had courted and won Elizabeth after two years of subdued, respectful wooing. She had always seemed a mild, well-mannered woman, not unattractive, who could share contentedly and without fuss the life of a calm, unhurried dreamer like Albert Watkins.

Immediately after the wedding the newlyweds had taken up their residence at the old Sumpter house on Belmont Street. Almost at once the magic had fallen away. Elizabeth, in reality, was a shrew—a lean, scolding argument of a woman who never let him forget his deficiencies, his mistakes or his failures. After only a month Albert realized he was sentenced to live in a home where he was constantly overshadowed by the memory of his predecessor.

The house was filled with the name, the fame and the souvenirs of George Sumpter. His pictures hung everywhere: George Sumpter, student; George Sumpter, college graduate; George Sumpter, bridegroom. But the most treasured of Elizabeth's possessions, and to Albert the one most scarring, was the small silver urn which stood so majestically and bright in the living room beneath a large picture of George Sumpter, Odd Fellow.

The urn contained her late husband's ashes and was referred to once in every day either by word or gesture as a shrine of greatness.

She kept it polished and glistening in the center of the mantelpiece over the fireplace and never let Albert forget the giant of a man it had once represented.

But on this particular night, the night of his discovery, Albert was too excited by curiosity to allow his wife's routine to bother him. They were sitting in the living room. Albert had just finished the paper and was thinking about the small room again when she got up to do her nightly polishing.

"By the way, I discovered a secret of yours while you were out shopping," said Albert calmly.

"What secret?" she asked suspiciously.

"The room under the staircase," he said. "Why didn't you ever tell me about it? I could work on my plants there."

"You stay out," she said turning on him furiously. "That room's not for you. It was George's den. I don't want you snooping around it. I don't even go in myself. You keep away."

That was all. She stared him down and Albert returned to his newspaper in tight-lipped silence. He didn't even tell her about the plant he had left inside. Tomorrow he would pick it up when she wasn't around. They exchanged no further words the rest of the evening. She continued with her polishing and Albert did a crossword puzzle. Then it was time for bed.

Albert didn't remember the plant until two nights later. It was

Wednesday evening and Elizabeth had gone off to visit friends. He was passing the stairs when he recalled the room and what he had left there. When he opened the door and switched on a light he thought he had made a mistake. The floor was a lace-work of green leaves and geranium buds.

Albert could hardly believe his eyes. When he had left the plant it had been crushed and practically in shreds. Now it was blossoming in rich, velvet colors.

Albert studied the room, but nothing else had changed. Bewilderedly he carried the plant to the sun porch and returned it to its regular position on the windowsill. Later when Elizabeth came home she commented on the beauty of the new flower and asked him when he had found time to buy it.

But the sight of the healthy, flourishing plant made a far deeper impression on Albert Watkins. In the next few days, by guile and subterfuge, he was able to extract from Elizabeth bit by bit more information concerning the room. It had been George Sumpter's private den. He had built and furnished it himself and would go in at the end of the day to meditate and read. He called it his room for improvement and permitted no one to enter or clean it except in his presence. Occasionally, over week-ends, he would spend two or three hours alone inside the cubicle. Always when he emerged Elizabeth found him to be a new man.

At the same time as he gathered these stray pieces, Albert did not forget the strange phenomenon he had witnessed. Secretly he'd deposit other withered, dying plants in the room for an overnight stay. Each time on his return visit he was greeted by the same amazing spectacle. The plant would be miraculously giving forth vivid, sweeping blossoms completely at variance with its previous condition.

Alone, Albert would study the room for some secret force, some mystic pressure valve or button capable of turning the bare, unadorned chamber into such a tropical, thriving greenhouse. He could find nothing.

It was on the following Saturday that the next unusual event occurred. Elizabeth, after getting him up early and bawling him out for his behavior at a dinner party the night before, left to do her week-end shopping. Albert was alone. He had been waiting for just such an opportunity for some time. This was the morning he'd promised himself a thorough inspection of the room from top to bottom. He was going to search every plank, every wall until he found the secret source of energy that produced such startling floral effects.

Albert entered the room slowly and with the humbleness of a man who was keenly aware that he stood before a power mightier than himself. He examined the cubicle again, waiting for a sound or smell

or touch that might with luck indicate the presence of the unknown stimulator.

Carefully, Albert set down a small Mignonette plant he'd discovered that morning to be in a sorry condition—parched and rotting from a leaf fungus. The Mignonette plant was to be his patient, and this time his eyes would follow every transformation and change that took place.

Just as he put the plant in position and was about to settle back for the experiment he heard the back door open and his name being called. Almost immediately he recognized the voice as belonging to Eddie Wilson, a young neighbor of sixteen who lived in the house next door. Young Wilson had found Albert to be a good listener and frequently came to visit and chat about his feats of agility and strength as the local high school athletic hero.

As soon as Albert heard the door slam he tried to hurry into the hall and close off the room. He was too late. The boy saw him just as he was hiding the Mignonette in a corner, and came into the room slowly, his usual rush and enthusiasm no longer with him.

"Hi, Mr. Watkins," he said, with a puzzled stare. "What are you doing in here? I've never seen this place before."

"It's just a store-room," said Albert quickly and nervously, shielding the plant with his body. "I don't use it too often."

The boy came deeper into the room, his eyes taking in all the furnishings. "It ain't much," he said. "Is it?"

"No, it's not," said Albert, relieved.

He felt suddenly convinced that there would be no trouble, no need of explanations. He started for the door, but the boy didn't follow. For the first time Albert noticed that he was limping and that from beneath the cuff of his left trouser leg a layer of bandages protruded.

"What happened to your leg?" Albert asked.

"I sprained my ankle—fractured it, I think. Yesterday at basketball practice. I had X-rays taken. I'm out for the rest of the season."

Albert expressed his sorrow.

The boy sat down. "That's not the worst. Tonight we're playing Caterville for the State Championship. What a blow. They were depending on me."

Albert expressed his further regrets and once again tried to indicate that he was closing the room. The boy took no heed. He had settled himself in the easy chair, his leg stretched out before him, and was describing his injury in detail.

Albert listened sympathetically, nodding at proper intervals and shaking his head sadly when the story reached its tragic climax. All the while he watched the plant furtively for the first sign of a sudden sprouting that would have

given away all he didn't want known.

At last the boy finished and shifted restlessly as if wanting to leave. Albert watched him gratefully. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen what he believed to be the green movement of a bud unfolding. The boy's exit was just in time.

"What a blow," the boy repeated. He stood up dishearteningly and shuffled toward the door. Albert put a hand on his shoulder as a final gesture of sympathy and good will and walked with him for possibly eight paces.

Suddenly both of them realized that something had changed. The boy's limp was no longer visible. He had risen and walked in a natural gait almost to the door. Now he had stopped and was looking down at his ankle in amazement.

Albert was the first to speak. "What is it? *What's the matter with your leg?*"

"I don't know," said the boy. "My limp is gone! There's no pain any more."

He let out a yell of delight and spun around to face Albert. He began pacing back and forth quickly, shaking, experimenting, jumping on the still bandaged leg.

Albert tried to restrain him. "You'd better slow down, Eddie. Remember it's fractured. The X-rays proved it! That's what you said—"

"Not any more," laughed Eddie joyously. "It must have snapped

back into place all by itself. Just while I was sitting here. Look, look what I can do." By this time there was little chance of holding him down. He was running and jumping about the room, throwing imaginary basketballs into imaginary baskets on all four walls.

"I can play. I can play tonight. I've got to call the coach." Grabbing Albert's hand he shook it warmly and raced out the door with all the old spirit and zest that Albert remembered as characteristic of him.

Albert remained motionless for a long moment. For the first time he grasped the full, staggering, terrifying power of the room. It was true, he told himself. It truly was a room for improvement. Not only for flowers, but possibly for any object—human or inanimate—that was impaired, injured or broken. He imagined there was nothing it could not heal.

That night at dinner Albert hardly spoke at all. He was lost deep within himself and the words and criticisms which Elizabeth flung at him bounced off harmlessly. She was particularly bitter because she had met some friends during the day and discovered that she was the only one in her social circle who would not be wearing a new Spring coat for Easter. The humiliation had crushed her.

All through the meal and afterwards when they were again seated in the living room she kept after him, never letting him forget his

meager position in life and the miserable circumstances he was forcing her to live under.

Promptly at ten-thirty she brought out her silver-polish and her brush and commenced to perform her nightly function, comparing the bright, high elegance of her first husband's vault to the dim, tarnished life she now shared with a failure.

Albert watched her—this woman who had made his life so crowded and so small for a full year. Dimly he was aware that she was still scolding him for his insignificant status. As he studied her, her ranting became more cutting, her looks more intolerable, and slowly the idea began to germinate. It turned in his mind like a flank of beef on a spit, and he didn't let it go until it was crisp and cooked and ready to be served.

She finished her polishing and returned the urn to its regular position on the mantel. Her touch was gentle, loving, something Albert had never known.

"Well," she said at last, "what are you gaping at, sitting there like a grinning idiot?"

"Nothing, dear," he said, smiling weakly.

"What are you going to do about a Spring coat?" she demanded. "I'm not taking no for an answer. *I want something done.*"

"I'll do something," Albert said reassuringly. "You have my promise."

She glanced at him for a mo-

ment, puzzled by his mild complacency and willingness. Then she started for the stairs. "You'd better," she warned. "You'd just better."

When she reached the first step she stopped and looked back at him as if to make certain of her complete authority. "Turn out the lights," she said. "It's after eleven. I'm going to bed."

"Yes, dear," said Albert quietly. "Just let me finish the papers."

He watched her climb the stairs heavily until he couldn't see her any more. Then he heard her door close. He stayed in his chair for a long while. The house became still—everything tucked in for the night. After a time he stood up and walked to the urn. He had never touched it before. But now as he lifted it and carried it silently toward the room he could not remember ever holding anything that felt so cold and lifeless in all his life.

When he opened the door to the room he was greeted by the warm, pungent aroma of earth and roots and new buds. He placed the urn on the desk. In the half light coming from the hall lamp it appeared like a small silver flower ready to burst with blossoms. He watched it for a long minute, then stepped back and closed the door silently behind him. He was shivering.

"What's keeping you?" called the voice from upstairs. "What are

you doing? My back hurts. I want you to massage it."

"In a minute," said Albert calmly.

He was back in the living room switching off one of the lamps. As its glow vanished he moved to a corner deep in the shadows where he could watch the door. He was perspiring freely. The house was suddenly more quiet than he had ever known it to be. He wondered how long it would take.

He heard the first sound in less than a minute—a soft metallic click as if a small lock were being pried open. Distant it seemed—and unreal. At first he thought his ears might be playing a trick on him, but after a moment the scratching sound came again, this time louder. Albert pushed himself deeper into his corner and wiped the perspiration from his face.

From upstairs the voice came again, breaking into the quiet. "Where are you? Get up here at once. Who do you think you are?"

"Another minute," Albert called back, not caring now whether she heard him or not. His throat was suddenly very tight as if no further sounds could escape from it. He listened again. The noise beyond the door was constant now. Something fell and crashed heavily against the floor. It rattled. Then there was silence.

The silence did not stay long. The doorknob creaked slightly and

then began to turn. Albert pressed further into the darkness, his eyes straining for the first glimpse of whatever visitor was about to emerge.

The first thing Albert saw was the small cloud of smoke. It coiled out dark and lazy, hanging like a thin black curtain across the open doorway. It drifted toward him carrying the smell of burnt metal and long-forgotten ash. For a moment the smell seemed to permeate the entire house. It burned through Albert's nostrils until he wanted to scream. Every fibre of himself went numb as the stench reached deep into him and tore away all calm, all reserve, all strength. He tried to force his head to turn, to close his eyes and melt into the wall itself. But he was too late.

The hand emerged slowly. It was a hand—yet it was a lump. It had fingers and a palm, but its color was charcoal and its movement was that of something shapeless and dead. It moved out of the darkness gropingly, uncertainly, as if the light of the hallway was less real to it than the blackness from whence it had come. It paused.

From upstairs the bedroom door opened and the shrill voice of Elizabeth Towne Sumpter bellowed again. "You've had your last warning. I'm not standing for any more nonsense. I'll show you."

There was a soft click and the hall light was switched off. The house was plunged in darkness. Albert could see nothing. Some-



where in front of him slow breathing sounds began. The visitor was moving from its place of birth.

"I don't want to have to tell you again," Elizabeth shouted. "When I give an order you listen. Put that paper away and get up here. You have my back to massage. Get up here."

Albert could feel the visitor hesitate, turn, wonder, as if recalling something from a long-forgotten past. Upstairs a door slammed angrily and vibrated through the corridor. The visitor hesitated a moment longer. Then Albert heard the low shuffle of feet moving slowly upstairs. Albert stayed with his back pressed tightly against the wall, hearing only the dull creak of each ascending step.

A black form moved through blackness and was gone. Albert counted off twelve steps and knew that the form had reached the landing. A moment later he heard

a loud knock, followed by the exasperated scolding of his wife.

"It's about time," said Elizabeth. "Get in here. You'll find the liniment on the table."

The last sound Albert heard before the scream was the door opening. Then the door closed very quietly.

Albert Watkins did not know how long he remained in his corner. After a time a breeze came from somewhere and played against his face, making him feel suddenly alive and restless, making him feel as if a gate had opened wide on an unexpected turn in the road.

He moved to the hall closet and brought forth his coat and the walking stick he always carried when he planned to travel a long distance. He unlocked the front door and stepped out into the night.

Albert Watkins took a deep breath and started walking. The night was never more glorious.

