

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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## second sight

by . . . Alan E. Nourse

(Note: The following excerpts from Amy Ballantine's journal have never actually been written down before at any time. Her account of impressions and events has been kept in organized fashion in her mind for at least nine years (even she is not certain when she started), but it must be understood that certain inaccuracies in transcription could not possibly be avoided in the excerpting attempted here . . .  
The Editor.)

Amy was too proud of her strange, bright gifts to be shaken by the fear in the eyes of others. But a woman apart needs understanding.

TUESDAY, 16 MAY. Lambert got back from Boston about two this afternoon. He was tired—I don't think I've ever seen Lambert so tired. But there was more than just exhaustion in the way he looked and acted. What was it? Anger, frustration? I couldn't tell for sure. It seemed more like *defeat* than anything else. And he went straight from the 'copter to his office without stopping off at the lab at all.

But it's good to have him back! Not that I haven't had a good rest. Charlie Dakin took over the reins for the week, of course, but Dakin

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*Once in a dream we had a science fantasy anthology to edit overnight. The great presses were roaring, the ink was flying, and a copy boy was shouting: "Only the best! Hurry! The fifteen top stories from FANTASTIC UNIVERSE!" We rapped on our portfolio and out trooped the most resplendent of characters, in single and double file, and with the imperishable head surgeon of Alan Nourse's GRAND ROUNDS leading the parade, in drum major regalia. We're not dreaming now, but we're just as enthusiastic about this, his newest story.*

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is a nothing, poor man. So easy to twist around and get all confused that I just didn't do *anything* all week. With Lambert back I'll have to get down to the grind again. Still, I'm glad he's here. I never dreamed I'd miss him so, just for a week.

Only I wish he'd gotten a rest—if he ever rests! I wish I knew why he went in the first place. Certainly he didn't want to go. I wanted to read him for it, but I don't think I'm supposed to know yet. Lambert didn't want to talk; he didn't tell me he was back, even though he knew I'd catch him five miles down the road. (I can do that now, with Lambert. Distance doesn't seem to make so much difference if I just ignore it.)

So all I got from his mind was bits and snatches. Something about me, and Dr. Custer, and a nasty little man called Aaronson or Behrenson. Heard of him somewhere, but can't spot where right now. I'll have to dig that out later, I guess.

But if he saw Dr. Custer, *why doesn't he tell me about it?*

WEDNESDAY, 17 MAY. It was Ronsen that he saw in Boston, and now I'm sure that something has gone wrong. I know that man. I remember him from a long time ago, back when I was still at the Institute, and long before I came here to the Study Center. He was their consulting psychiatrist, and he made a real impression on me, he did!

That's why I'm sure something very unpleasant is going on.

Lambert saw Dr. Custer, yes. But the Directors sent him to Boston because Ronsen wanted to talk to him. I wasn't supposed to know about it at all. Can you imagine? But Lambert came down to dinner last night, and walked right into my trap.

He wouldn't even look at me, the skunk. So I fixed *him*. I told him I was going to peek, and then I read him fast—before he could shift his mind to Boston traffic or something to keep me out. (He knows I can't stand traffic.)

I picked up a little—too little. There was something very unpleasant that Ronsen had said that I couldn't pick up. They were in his office, and Lambert was saying: "I don't think she's ready for it! At this point I'd never try to talk her into it. Why can't you people get it through your heads that she's a *child*, and a human being—not some kind of damned laboratory animal? That's been the trouble all along. Everybody has been so eager to *grab*, and nobody has given her a wretched thing in return."

Ronsen was smooth. Placating, but reproachful. A clear picture of him—short, balding, mean little eyes in a smug, self-righteous little face. "Michael, she's twenty-three years old. She's certainly out of diapers by now."

"But she's had only two years of training aimed at teaching *her* anything—"

"Well—there's no reason for *that* to stop, is there? Be reasonable, Michael. We certainly grant that you've done a wonderful job with the girl. You've a perfect right to be sensitive about others working with her. But when you consider that public taxes are paying—" His look completed the sentence.

"I'm sensitive about others exploiting her, that's all." Lambert was angry, bitter-angry. Now, three days later, the anger was still sharp in his mind. "I tell you, I won't push her. And I'd never let her come up here, even if I could secure her consent. She shouldn't be touched for another year or two at least."

"And you're certain that your concern is entirely—professional?"

Whatever the implication there, it wasn't nice. Lambert caught it, and oh, my! Chart slapping down on the table, door slamming, swearing—from mild, patient Lambert. Can you imagine? And then later, no more anger. Just disgust and defeat and a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. That was what hit me when he came back last night. He couldn't hide it, no matter how hard he tried.

Well, no wonder he was tired. I remember Ronsen, all right. He wasn't so excited about me, back in those days. *Wild one*, he called me. *We haven't the time or the people to handle a thing like this in a public institution. We have to handle her just the way we'd handle any other defective. She may be*

*a plus-defective instead of a minus-defective, but she's as crippled as if she were deaf and blind!*

Good old Ronsen. That was before they knew about me, of course. Years ago, when I was barely thirteen, before Dr. Custer got interested and started ophthalmoscopying me and testing me. In fact, it was before I'd ever heard of Lambert of the Study Center. For that matter, before anybody had done *anything* but feed and try to keep out of my way.

Well, I'm glad it was Lambert that went to Boston and not me—for Ronsen's sake. Maybe *he* thinks I'll work with him, but if he tries coming down here he's going to be wasting his time. He's not going to learn anything from me. I'll see to that.

Still, it makes me wonder. Am I really a cripple like Ronsen meant? Does being psi-high mean that? I don't think so, naturally. But what does Lambert think? Sometimes when I try to read Lambert I'm way out at sea. I wish I knew what he *really* thinks.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. I asked Lambert tonight what Dr. Custer had said. "He wants to see you next week," he told me. "But Amy—he didn't make any promises. He didn't even sound hopeful."

"But his letter," I cried. "He said the studies showed that there wasn't any anatomical defect . . ."

Lambert leaned back and lit his pipe, shaking his head at me.

He's aged ten years this past week. Everybody thinks so. He's lost weight, and he looks as if he just hasn't slept at all. "Custer's afraid that it isn't a question of anatomy, Amy."

"But what is it, then, for heaven's sake?"

"He doesn't know. He says it's unscientific, but that it may just be that what you don't use, you lose."

"Oh, but that's silly." I chewed my lip.

"Granted."

"But he thinks that there's a chance?" I asked.

"Of course there's a chance. And Custer will do everything he can. It's just that neither of us want you to get your hopes up."

It wasn't much, but it was something. Lambert looked so beat I didn't have the heart to ask him what Ronsen's proposal was, even though I know he wants to get it out and over with. Maybe tomorrow will be better.

I spent the day with Charlie Dakin in the lab, and did a little work for a change. I've been disgustingly lazy, and poor Charlie thinks it's all his fault. Charlie reads like twenty-point type ninety percent of the time, and I'm afraid he knows it.

I can tell just exactly when he stops listening to what I'm telling him and starts thinking how interesting it would be to go to bed with me. Then all of a sudden he realizes that I'm reading him, and it throws him for the rest of the

day. I wonder why? Does he really think that I'm shocked? Or surprised? Or *insulted*? When it's been like that, generally speaking, since the first day I put on a bra? Poor Charlie . . .

But I guess I must be good enough looking. I can read it from almost every fellow that comes near me. I wonder why? I mean, why not Marjorie over in the Main Office? She's a sweet girl, but she never gets a second good look. There must be some fine differential point I'm missing somewhere, but I don't think I'll ever get it.

I'm not going to press Lambert, but I *hope* he opens up tomorrow. He's got me scared silly by now. He carries a lot of authority around here, but other people pay the bills, and I know now that *he's* scared silly of something.

THURSDAY, 18 MAY. We went back to reaction testing in the lab with Lambert today. We have that study almost finished—as much as any study I've ever undertaken is ever finished, which isn't saying very much. This one was designed to do two things—clock my stimulus-response in comparison to normals, and find out just exactly when I pick up any given stimulus from the person I'm reading.

It isn't a matter of speed. I'm so fast to respond that it doesn't mean too much, from anybody else's standpoint, and it doesn't need any training as far as I'm concerned. But where along the line do I pick

up a thought impulse? Do I catch it at its inception? Do I pick up the thought formulation, or just the final crystalized pattern? Lambert thinks I'm with it all the time, and that some training in those lines would be worth my time.

Of course, we didn't find out—not even with the ingenious little random-firing device that Dakin designed for the study. With this gadget, neither Lambert nor I know what impulse the box is going to throw at him. He just throws a switch and it starts coming. He catches it and reacts, and I in turn catch it from him and react, and we compare reaction times.

This afternoon it had us driving up a hill, and sent a ten-ton truck out of control down at us. I had my flasher on two seconds before Lambert did, of course. But our reaction times are standardized, so when we corrected for my extra speed, we knew that I had caught the impulse about 0.07 seconds after it had flashed into his mind.

Crude, of course—not nearly fast enough. And we can't reproduce on a stable basis. Lambert says it's as close as we can get without cortical probes. And that's where I put my foot down. I may have a goldmine in this head of mine, but nobody is going to put burr-holes through my skull in order to tap it. Not yet a while . . .

That's unfair of course, because it sounds as if Lambert is championing at the bit to do it, and he isn't. I've read him, and I know he wouldn't

allow it. Let's learn everything else we can learn without it first, he says. But he also thinks I'm not competent to make the decision for myself.

Why does he keep thinking I'm a child? *Am I*, really? With everything, but *everything*, coming into my mind from all sides for the past twenty-three years, haven't I learned enough to make decisions for myself? Lambert says it's been coming in, all right. I just don't know what to do with it all. But somewhere along the line I have to reach a maturation point of some kind.

It scares me, sometimes. Because I can't find an answer to it, and the answer might be perfectly horrible. I don't know where it may end, and what's worse, I don't know what point it has reached *right now*.

Sometimes I get the feeling the difference between the way my mind works and the way Lambert's, or anybody else's works is more than just a superficial difference. I'm psi-high, and he isn't—granted. But is there more to it than that? People like Ronsen think there is. They think it's a difference between *human* function and something else, and it scares me.

Because it's *just not true*. I'm as human as anybody else. But somehow things have worked out that it's me who has to prove it. I wonder if I ever will. That's why Dr. Custer has to help me; everything hangs on that. I'm to go up to

Boston next week, for final studies and testing.

And if Custer can do something—what a difference that would make! Maybe then I could get out of this whole frightening mess, put it behind me and forget about it. With the psi, alone, I don't think I ever can.

FRIDAY, 19 MAY. Today Lambert broke down about Ronsen and his proposal. It was worse than I thought it would be. The man has hit on the one thing I'd been afraid of for so long.

"He wants you to work against normals," Lambert said. "He's swallowed the latency hypothesis whole. He thinks that all a normal person needs to bring latent psi into full bloom is a powerful stimulus, something or someone to draw it out."

"Well?" I said. "Do you think so?"

"Who knows?" Lambert slammed his pencil down on the desk angrily. "No, I don't think so. But what does that mean? It means nothing, absolutely nothing. It certainly doesn't mean I'm right. Nobody knows. Ronsen wants to use you to find out."

I nodded slowly and lit a cigarette. "So I'm to be a sort of refined electrical stimulator," I said. "Well, you know what you can tell Ronsen."

He was silent, and I couldn't read him. "Amy—I'm not sure we can tell him that."

I stared at him. "You mean you think he could *force* me?"

"He says that you're a public charge, and that as long as you have to be supported and cared for, they have a right to use your faculties. On the first point he's right. You are. You have to be kept and protected. If you got a mile outside these walls you'd never survive, and you know it."

I sat stunned. "But Dr. Custer—"

"—is trying to help, granted. But he hasn't helped yet. If he can, then it's quite a different story. But I can't stall much longer, Amy. Ronsen has a powerful argument: You're psi-high. You're the first full-fledged, wide-open, free-wheeling psi-high that's ever appeared in human history. The *first*. Others in the past have had a tendency, maybe, but nothing that they could control. You've got control, you're fully developed. You're *here*, and you're the only one."

"So I happened to be unlucky," I snapped. "My genes got mixed up—"

"That's not true, and you know it," said Lambert. "We've studied your chromatoglobulins until we nearly went crazy. They're the same as any normal person's. There's no gene difference, none at all. When you're gone, you'll be *gone*, and there's no reason to think your children will have any more psi than Charlie Dakin has."

Something was building up in me then that I couldn't control any

longer. "You think I should go along with Ronsen," I said dully.

He hesitated. His mind was crying *no, no, in the name of heaven!* But he said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to, sooner or later. Ronsen has some latents up in Boston. He's certain that they're latents. He's talked to the Directors down here and he thinks you could work with his people, draw them out. You could open the door to a whole new world for human beings—"

Something broke in my mind then. It wasn't just Ronsen, or Lambert, or Dakin, or any of the others. It was all of them, dozens of them, compounded year upon year upon year. "Now listen to me for a minute," I said. "Have any of you ever considered what I wanted in this thing? *Ever?* Have any of you ever given that a thought, once? Even when you were so sick of thinking great thoughts for humanity that you let another thought leak through? Have you ever thought about what kind of a shuffle I've had since all this started? Well, think about it once! *Right now.*"

"Amy, you know I don't want to push you—"

"Listen to me, Lambert. My folks got rid of me fast, when they found out about me. Did you know that? They hated me because I *scared* them! It didn't hurt me too much, because I thought I knew *why* they hated me. I could understand it, and I went off to the Institute with-

out even crying. They were going to come see me every week, ha, ha! But they never managed to make it, not *once* after I was off their hands. And then, after the Institute had had all of me they cared for, Ronsen examined me and decided that I was a cripple.

"He didn't know anything about me then, but he thought psi was a *defect*. And that was as far as it went. I did what the Institute wanted me to do. Not what *I* wanted, never. What *they* wanted—years and years of what they wanted. And then you came along, and I came to the Study Center and did what *you* wanted."

It hurt him. It cut deep, and I knew it. That was what I wanted—to hurt him and to hurt everybody. He was shaking his head, staring at me. "Amy, be fair. I've tried, you know how hard I've tried."

"Tried what? To train me? Yes—but why? To give me better use of my psi faculties? Yes—but why? Did you do it for *me*? Is that really why you did it? Or was that just another phony front, like all the rest of them, in order to use me, to make me a little more valuable to have around—or for other reasons?"

He slapped my face, hard, so that I spun around. I could feel the awful pain and hurt in his mind as he stared at me. I felt the bitter stinging in his palm that matched the burning in my cheek. And then something fell away in his mind,



and I saw something I had never seen before—

He loved me, that man. Incredible, isn't it? He *loved* me. Me, who couldn't call him anything but Lambert, who couldn't imagine calling him *Michael*, to say nothing of *Mike*—just *Lambert*.

But he could never tell me. The barrier was too great. I needed him too much. I needed love, but not the kind he wanted to give. So my love for him had to be hidden, concealed, suppressed—yes, *suppressed!* I needed the deepest imaginable understanding, but it had to be utterly unselfish. Anything else would have been unfair, so the barrier had to be built, and he had never dared to reach across it—

Lambertson had done that. *For me*. It was all there, suddenly, so overwhelming that I had to gasp from the impact. I wanted to throw my arms around him. Instead I sat down in the chair, shaking my head helplessly. I hated myself then. I had hated myself before, but never like this.

"If I could only go somewhere," I said. "Somewhere far away where I could just live by myself for a while, and shut all the doors, and be with strangers, and *pretend* for a while—just pretend—that I'm perfectly normal."

"I wish you could," Lambert said. "But you can't. You know that. Not unless Custer can really help."

We sat there for a while. Then I said, "Let Ronsen come down.

Let him bring anybody he wants with him. I'll do what he wants. Until I see Custer."

That hurt, too, but it was different. It hurt both of us together, not separately any more. It wasn't so hard that way.

MONDAY, 22 MAY. Ronsen drove down from Boston this morning with a girl named Mary Bolton, and we went to work.

I think I'm beginning to understand how a dog can tell when someone wants to kick him and doesn't quite dare. I could feel the back of my neck prickle when that man walked into the conference room. I was hoping he might have changed since the last time I saw him. But he hadn't. I wasn't afraid of him any more—just dimly weary of him after he'd been here about ten minutes.

But that girl! I wonder what sort of story he'd told her? She couldn't have been more than sixteen, and she was petrified. At first I thought it was *him* she was afraid of. But I was mistaken. It was *me*.

It took us all morning to get around just that one impediment. The poor child could hardly talk. She was shaking all over when they arrived, but did not resist my suggestion that we walk around the grounds, alone. I read her, bit by bit—a feeler here, an idea there, just getting her used to the idea and trying to reassure her. After a while she was smiling. She thought the lagoon was lovely, and by the

time we got back to the main building she was laughing, talking about herself, beginning to relax—

Then I gave her a full blast, quickly, only a moment or two. *Don't be afraid. I hate him, yes. But I won't hurt you for anything. Let me come in, don't fight me. We've got to work as a team.*

It shook her. She went white and stopped dead, staring at me. Then she nodded, slowly. "I see," she said. "It feels as if it's way inside, deep inside."

"That's right. It won't hurt. I promise."

She nodded again. "Let's go back, now. I think I'm ready to try."

We went to work.

I was as blind as she was, at first. There was nothing there, not even a flicker of brightness. Then, probing deeper, something responded, a fugitive hint, a suggestion of something powerful, deep and hidden. But where? What was her strength? Where was she weak? I couldn't tell.

We started on dice—crude, of course, but as good a tool as any. No good to measure anything, but that was what I was there for. I was the measuring instrument. The dice were only reactors. Sensitive enough—two centimeter-cubes, tossed from a box with only gravity to work against. I showed her first, picked up her mind as the dice popped out, lead her through it. *Take one at a time—the red one first. Work on it—see? Now we*

*try both. Once more—watch it! All right, now—*

She sat frozen in the chair. But she was trying; the sweat stood out on her forehead. Ronsen sat tense, smoking, his fingers twitching as he watched the red and green cubes bounce on the white backdrop. Lambert watched too. But his eyes were on the girl, not on the cubes.

It was hard work. Bit by bit she began to grab; whatever I had felt in her mind seemed to leap up. I probed her, amplifying it, trying to draw it out. It was like wading through knee-deep mud—sticky, sluggish, feeble. I could feel her excitement growing, and bit by bit I released my grip, easing her out, baiting her.

"All right," I said. "That's enough."

She turned to me, wide-eyed. "I—I did it."

Ronsen was on his feet, eagerly. "It worked?"

"It worked. Not very well, but it's there. All she needs is time, and help, and patience."

"But it worked!" He turned to Lambert, his eyes shining. "Do you know what that means? It means I was right! It means others can have it, can perhaps go beyond her." He rubbed his hands together. "We can arrange a full-time lab for it, and work on three or four latents simultaneously. It's a wide-open door, Lambert! Can't you see what it means?"

Lambert nodded, and gave me a long look. "Yes, I think I do."

"I'll start arrangements tomorrow," Ronsen said.

Lambert shook his head. "Not tomorrow. You'll have to wait until next week."

"Why?"

"Because Amy would prefer to wait, that's why."

Ronsen looked at him, and then at me, resentfully. Finally he shrugged. "If you insist."

"We'll talk about it next week," I said. I was so tired I could hardly look up at him. I stood up, and smiled at the girl. Poor kid, I thought. So excited and eager about it now. Does she have any idea what she's walking into?

Certainly Ronsen couldn't tell her.

Later, when they were gone, Lambert and I walked down toward the lagoon. It was a lovely cool evening; the ducks were down at the water's edge. Every year there was a mother duck herding a line of ducklings down the shore and into the water. They never seemed to go where she wanted them to, and she had to go back, prod them out into stream.

We stared at the water in silence. Then Lambert kissed me. It was the first time he had ever done that.

"We could go away," I whispered in his ear. "We could run out on Ronsen and the Study Center and everyone. We could pretend—"

He shook his head slowly. "Amy, don't—"

"We could! I'll see Dr. Custer, and he'll tell me he can help, I

*know* he will. I won't *need* the Study Center any more, or any other place, or anybody but you."

He didn't answer. I hated it, but I knew there wasn't anything he could answer. Not then.

FRIDAY, 26 MAY. Yesterday we went to Boston to see Custer, and now it looks as if it's all over. Now even I can't pretend that there's anything more to do. Custer was kind; he told me the truth, the final results of his studies.

Next week Ronsen will come down, and I'll go to work with him just the way he has it outlined. He thinks we have three years work ahead of us before anything can be published, before we can really be sure we have brought a latent into full use of his psi. Maybe so, I don't know. Maybe in three years I'll find some way to get myself excited about it. But I'll do it, anyway, because there's nothing else to do.

There was no anatomical defect—Custer was right about that. The eyes are perfect, beautiful gray eyes, Custer says, and the optic nerves and auditory nerves are perfectly functional. The defect isn't there. It's deeper. Too much deeper ever to change it.

*What you no longer use, you lose*, was what Custer said. With apologies because he couldn't explain it any better. It's like a price tag, perhaps. Long ago, before I knew anything at all, the psi was so strong it started compensating,

bringing in more and more from *other* minds—such a wealth of rich, clear, interpreted impressions that there was never any need for my own, and certain hookups never got hooked up. That's only a theory, of course, but there isn't any other way to explain it.

But am I wrong to hate it? More than anything else in the world I want to *see* Lambert, *see* him smile and light his pipe, *hear* him laugh. I want to know what color *really* is, what music *really* sounds like un-

filtered through somebody else's ears.

I want to see a sunset, just once. Just once I want to see the mother duck take her ducklings down to the water. But I never will. I see and hear things nobody else can, instead, and the fact that I am stone blind and stone deaf shouldn't make any difference. After all, I've always been that way—

Maybe next week I'll ask Ronsen what he thinks about it. It should be interesting to see.

