

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# THE CURRENT CATALOGUE

BY JESS SHELTON

CHARLIE and Sarah Simpson were simple, as unassuming as old furniture. Life for them was a smooth flow of crocheting and pipe-smoking and the reminiscent, easy gossip of the aged. In fact, now that their children had grown and gone to places unknown to the Ozark hills, now that money flowed through the mails, Charlie had developed the notion that everything comes to him who (sits around and) waits. For it did: steady checks from Arthur and little Charlie and from the Government. With the money, ease and simplicity.

Until the electricity, until the mail order catalogue, until the strange, inexplicable things.

The catalogue had arrived unbidden in the mail one day, with an explanatory letter discussing the virtues of electric appliances. Struck by the lavish color photographs of the new things, Sarah and Charlie filled out a form, signed it, folded money in an envelope, and waited.

Charlie's hands were shaking. "Hur-

ry," said Sarah. "I cain't hardly wait!"

"Now, now," he murmured.

"Hit ain't ever day we git new things."

With an explosive grunt, Charlie ripped the top off the package. The second was easier. Putting the boxes aside, he stood back with Sarah to admire the appliances. The chromium of the electric roaster and coffee maker gleamed eerily on the table, but to the old couple the luster was no more than the anticipated beauty of new things.

"Let's try em out," Sarah suggested, her voice low and reverent.

Charlie looked about, jabbed his hand into the cartons. "There ain't no directions," he said.

"The catalogue." When he got it from the porch swing, they sat side by side at the table and read the descriptions of the appliances. "It just says," Sarah told him, "the roaster cooks a whole meal at once. And the coffee pot is called a coffee *maker*." She turned her head to glance into his

worried face. "Plug the coffee pot in," she said.

Charlie looked like he was in pain. "Just plug it in?"

"Ain't it a coffee maker?"

He gazed at her for a moment longer, his face almost touching hers. Shrugging his shoulders then, he leaned down and stuck the plug into the wall outlet. "Hit ain't doing nothing," he grumbled.

Sarah pursed her lips. "You got to wait. It'll start."

"But them things is empty!"

Sarah sighed. "Does the catalogue say ere thing about that? Now, does it?"

He reread the description. "No, I reckon not," he whispered. "But it does seem like..." He cut off his voice.

The coffee maker was hissing, ever so slightly.

This was the beginning. Every afternoon they sat in the kitchen, the heart of the house, where they had sat through the years, secure in the peace of their aging, understanding little and caring less about the world outside the ridges bordering their valley. But now the cabinet, which for so long had sheltered Sarah's blue china and cut glass, displayed the strangely gleaming appliances. The things made themselves known always—glittering brightly in the daytime, and in the black of night standing out in their places with ghostly luminescence.

Striking a wooden match on his pants leg, Charlie puffed on his pipe, shook out the match flame then as he glanced toward the cabinet. "What we going to have?" he said, cocking his eyebrows apprehensively.

Sarah winked. "Coffee, anyhow. We know that. Get the roaster down, too."

"Do we have to?" His lined face paled. "That stuff last evenin..."

"Now, Charlie. We went to all the trouble to send for them fancy machines and pay for them, so we got to put them to use. Hit just ain't right

not to."

Grimacing, he placed the roaster on the kitchen table, unwrapped the cord, and plugged it into the shiny new wall outlet. "Coffee yet?"

She nodded. "I'll git us some cups and saucers."

It took a little while. The roaster always took longer, of course, so they were most concerned at first with the coffee maker. For two minutes it was silent; then slight hissing noises began, and barely perceptible electrical gurgles. Charlie and Sarah leaned closer toward it and remained motionless as the house grew silent save for the hissing. With a startling sound, the tiny gurgle grew louder and more liquid, then became a loud boiling, splashing quickly darkening amber coffee against the glass percolator top. Charlie and Sarah let out their imprisoned breath and slumped in their chairs.

They waited for the roaster while they drank their coffee.

"Hit ought to commence soon," Charlie remarked.

"Well, hit usual takes a half hour or so to git going."

He glanced at the old clock on the back wall. "It's a half hour now, anyways."

Sarah stuck out her hand to shush him. "There it is," she whispered. "Listen!"

The electric roaster had been emitting tiny hisses for a while, but Charlie and Sarah had agreed never to count them. Now came a loud popping, the spitting of hot grease and the sizzling of meat cooking in the intense heat. They listened to it for a few moments, then got up from the table and began to take dishes from the bottom of the cupboard.

"Hit smells good this time," Charlie murmured.

"Beef, maybe?" Sarah leaned close to the roaster and sniffed.

"I surely hope so. We ain't had no beef outen it since Wednesday."

"There's lots of kinds of meat."

"I know that!" Charlie grunted. "But it does seem as how they'd have beef a little more, since folks everywhere like it so." He sniffed at the roaster. "Dare I peek?"

Sarah put her hand to her mouth to think for a moment. "The catalogue don't say ere thing about peeking," she decided.

"It ought to be all right."

"Well, I don't know..." She looked bleakly at him.

"All right, woman," he grunted, plopping back down in his chair. "I won't do it."

"Now, Charlie. I—I reckon you can peek if you're a mind to. I just said: the catalogue don't say ere thing about it."

"All right, all right! I'll do it like it says. If it don't say nothing about peeking, and we cain't tell what we're gonna have for supper, I ain't gonna peek!"

"Hit does *smell* like beef."

He nodded his head grumpily. "Mmmph," he said.

Another forty minutes remained before the roaster gurgled, spat, and sizzled its last. As the kitchen grew still, Charlie and Sarah sat rigid in their chairs, staring at the shimmering chrome of the appliance. Sarah got up nervously then, almost tipping over her chair. Charlie dropped ashes from his pipe and had to lean down to blow them from his supper plate.

"Go on, woman," he urged her. "Open it."

She hesitated. "Why don't you? I did last evening."

Charlie tipped the roaster cover to let the steam escape, and looked in. "It is beef!" he croaked. "Sarah, we got beef this time!"

Mopping her forehead with her apron, Sarah waved her hand at him. "Well, take it out," she snapped. "A person'd think you never seen a new cooker before!"

"Howdy, Rogers!" Charlie waved to the mail truck driver. Two letters

in his hand, Rogers came easily up the walk and tipped his hat to Sarah. "Howdo, folks," he said.

"Something for us?" she asked.

"Letter from little Charlie," Rogers replied, glancing at the mail. "And one from—uh, well, hit ain't got no return address." Reluctantly he handed the letters to her and stood watching, with wrinkles forming around his eyes.

"How's everthing?" Charlie asked him.

Rogers scratched his head. "Cain't kick." He attempted to look at the letters again, but Sarah tipped up the one she was reading. "How's little Charlie?"

Sarah smiled. "Oh, he's fine, thank you."

"Mmmm. How you all like them electric gadgets you got?"

"Tolerable," Charlie said.

"You was smart. I'm figuring on gitting me one of them store catalogues, too." He glanced again at the letters, but noticing Sarah's raised eyebrows he shrugged his arms and started back to his truck.

"They're all right," Charlie said, with a crack in his voice. "Like the catalogue says, at least they save us money."

Rogers said, "I reckon," got into his truck, gunned the motor, and waved.

Sarah looked at the cloud of dust down the road. "He's about the noisiest man on two legs."

"What *is* in the letter?"

She handed it to him. It was from the mail order company.

"*Dear Customer,*" it read:

*"We hope your recent purchases from our current catalogue are satisfactory. Unfortunate as such matters can be, even with our careful quality control we sometimes do encounter a problem of an appliance not performing to specifications. Because we are anxious to please each customer, do not*

*hesitate to inform us if you have any inquiries or needs for service on your appliances.*

*Thank you again for joining our thousands of satisfied customers."*

"You see this?" Charlie pressed his finger against the letter. "About being anxious to please?"

Sarah nodded. "I did. I don't reckon folks'd complain, do you?"

"Oh, we been savin' money on food. Trouble is, I'm half a mind to write them and ask if they cain't fix that roaster oven."

"Hit works all right."

He frowned at her and sniffed contemptuously. "You women don't know a thing about machines! If it worked all right, you'd think you'd know what you was goin' to have for supper. Hit just don't seem right, not knowing ever day, waiting like we do, getting all upset till we find out if hit's ere thing we can eat."

With her chin cupped in her small hand, Sarah was thinking, physically concentrating. "You know," she murmured. "They say them things is for the modern housewife, not old fashioned folks. Now, I ain't a *modern* housewife, cause that means a young snip of a thing, and—"

"Well, you ain't no young snip," he observed.

"Charlie Simpson!"

He waved his pipe at her. "Go on, girl," he said.

Sarah grinned. "Maybe them things is just for young folks, who can eat ere thing it makes. I'm thinkin' of lookin' in that catalogue just to..." He sat beside her on the porch seat as she opened the slick colorful catalogue. "Here," she said. "Hit says, *Cooks a whole meal at once*. It does that, don't it?"

Charlie was stuffing tobacco into his pipe. "I reckon so," he agreed. "But it don't say what kind of meal."

"It cooks all kinds."

"I know! But we still don't know from day to day—"

"We only had it a little better'n a week. Mayhap it runs in a circle, pork one day, beef the next, then chicken, like that."

Charlie sat smoking silently for a while. "You got a point, woman. Once we figger the pattern..."

Sarah glanced at the catalogue again. "Look," she said, her fingers caressing a photograph of a kitchen table with several gleaming appliances on it: a pop-up toaster, a coffee maker, an electric skillet. "Now there's somethin' we could use! There's one of them frying pans you just plug in. It says here it *cooks bacon and eggs beautifully every time*."

"That does sound good," Charlie agreed as he looked closely at the picture.

"And this here toaster, too. Hit says it *works almost like magic. No levers to pull. Just set dial for shade of toast you want*. Don't that sound handy?"

"Hit ought to be."

"Why don't we send for them?"

He laid his hand across hers on the catalogue. "Not yet, Sarah. I want to write them folks and settle up about that roaster over first. Then, if we don't git no satisfaction, we'll buy these here things. We can have bacon and eggs, anyhow, if we don't like what the roaster makes."

"The roaster works all right, Charlie!"

"Git me a pencil and paper, woman, and don't argue."

A half hour later he sighed, dropped the pencil to the table, and read the letter to Sarah:

*"Dear sir, I got to admit your electric things is mighty handy and my wife nor I cant complain as how they aint saved us money on food for they has. Now I got a problem with the roster over for it dont work proper. Dont you folks take hurt at what Im saying for I know how them things goes. Sometime a machin dont work right and I know you will fix it.*

*What it is is the roster oven works alright but were old folks and wed kind of like to know whats for supper but we dont ever know for we cant tell till we open the roster oven. yours truly*

*Charlie W. Simpson rt 6 Possum Mo."*

Sarah sniffed. "Well," she said. "We'll see what them folks got to say in a couple days or so."

The return letter arrived six days later. Charlie and Sarah rushed into the house to open it, leaving nosy Rogers standing out in the yard.

"Go on," she urged him nervously. "Read it."

Charlie grunted once or twice, adjusted his glasses, and held the letter a good two feet from his face. "Here's what it says," he said:

*"Dear Mr. Simpson:*

*We received your letter of the 28th in regard to the electric roaster you recently purchased from our company.*

*We sincerely want to have satisfied customers, Mr. Simpson, please believe this, and we shall do everything within our power to please you.*

*We regret to inform you that your letter of the 28th left us somewhat in doubt as to the exact complaint which you have to make about the electric oven. Would you write again, and answer the following questions:*

- 1. Do you plug the appliance into a 110-120 volt outlet?*
- 2. Does the appliance heat up on all sides and on the bottom?*
- 3. Do you give the appliance sufficient time to cook your food?*
- 4. Has the appliance ever burned your food or undercooked it, when given the sufficient amount of cooking time?*

*Please answer these questions, and we will reply immediately.*

*Remember: we wish to satisfy!"*

Charlie gestured at Sarah. "Paper and pencil," he grunted. "Them folks

just don't seem to understand."

"Be sure to answer them questions," she warned him.

"I will," he growled. He began to write, his hand angry, his mouth forming the words, and a few minutes later read her his reply:

*"Dear sir. I thout I made things cleer in my first letter but I will tell you again. But first I will anser your questions. One we plug in the roster oven alright, two the roster oven heats up proper all the way around, three, we set and wate by the table every evening till the roster oven goes off, four we aint complaining as how it burns food or dont cook it right for the food is always cooked to a tern but WE DONT KNOW WHAT WERE GOING TO HAVE FOR SUPPER. The roster oven works fine and we got no complant about it but want to know how we can tell what were going to have for supper. If you can tell us wed be mighty pleased. Yours truly Charlie Simpson rt 6. Possom Mo."*

"That says it," Sarah agreed, with a nod of her gray head.

Charlie licked the envelope and rubbed it on the table top. "Next time," he grumbled. "Maybe they'll up and tell us."

Again they waited for six days, left nosy Rogers the mailman standing curious in the yard, and rushed inside to open the letter from the catalogue company.

*"Dear Mr. Simpson:*

*As to your letter of the 5th, we are happy to learn that your electric oven is working properly. As you said, your electricity is sufficient, the roaster heats properly, and you have no complaints about food being undercooked or burned.*

*Now, about your other complaint. We fear that our company can do little to remedy such a problem. Perhaps it might be wise for you to talk to your*

*wife. We have found, in our own marital situations, that such little conflicts occur in the best-run of homes, and that the solution is relatively easy: ask her, sir, what she plans to have for supper. Then, if she is kind enough to tell you, you will know, and your family will once more be the well-knit, happy sort. Thank you again. If there is any further trouble, please do not hesitate to write us. Remember: we wish to satisfy!"*

Charlie looked darkly at Sarah. "Did you know all along?" he growled.

"I swear I didn't, Charlie!"

He tapped the letter with his forefinger. "You heard what the letter said."

She pushed her hand up alongside her forehead. "Mayhap I'm too old," she murmured.

"You ain't too old! You jest been keepin things from me!"

Her eyes were wet by now. It made him nervous, madder because he was nervous. "Don't go and bawl," he grumbled at her. She continued to shake her head and cry softly. "You got no call to." He rubbed his mouth, looked at the letter again. "Just stop it, now."

"I'm too old," she said, shaking her head. "Just too old!"

Charlie crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it across the room. "Look here," he said. "We ain't neither of us spring chickens, are we? You stop crying, now." But her eyes were still wet. "You cain't help it if you're gittin up in years and ain't able to know like them modern housewives is." He sighed with relief when she wiped her eyes and smiled at him. "Hey, I tell you what. You recall a couple of weeks back, how we talked about that thing cooks eggs and bacon, and tother what makes toast?"

"Yes, Charlie?" she said hesitantly.

"Let's order em! Then we ain't got no worry from that roster oven!"

The packages came six days later, sealed in cardboard cartons like the others. "You want to try them?" Charlie said. Sarah nodded, her eyes hungry on the two appliances. "Both of em?"

She nodded again. "Go on, Charlie. Ain't you just dyin to see?"

"Want some coffee, too, while we're at it?"

"Charlie, please?"

"All right, woman." He patted her shoulder. "Dont git upset. Them're just modern doodads, like the others, and there ain't no call to act silly."

"Go on, then, and plug in the coffee maker." She hurried to the cupboard. "Wait, don't plug in them others yet! I want to git us some dishes, then we can set and watch."

With the table set and Sarah in her chair, Charlie plugged the two new appliances into the wall outlet. "It takes a while," he said.

"Ain't it funny the way they always shine?"

Charlie couldn't take his eyes from the appliances. "Yes," he breathed. "Like as if you had to just set and look."

"Maybe that's what makes em work."

"No, that's foolish! They're made that way in the factory!"

The toaster began first. It hissed slightly as the heat from the elements crept up through its sides; then it began to tick audibly, counted off time for a while, and with a sharp snapping sound popped up two pieces of golden brown toast.

"Unplug it now," said Sarah. She was breathing hard. "We can have more after while."

The electric skillet began. Its shiny aluminum surface had been bare and dry after John had taken it from the paper box. Now something was forming in it, a lustrous film of grease, popping lightly from the heat. Gradually, dimly perceptible streaks of brown,



and yellow and white rounded forms, appeared.

"Ain't it weird?" Charlie whispered.

"O Lord. I ain't sure how long it'll take me to git used to that!"

The following day went smoothly. For breakfast they had coffee made by the coffeemaker, bacon and eggs which they watched mystically form out of the empty skillet, and toast. It was cinnamon toast, something new to them, but Sarah bravely took some and pronounced that it was better than the ordinary kind. Their lunch was lighter: merely some crackers and cheese. That was fortunate, they realized later, for at suppertime they opened the electric roaster to find a ten pound turkey with dressing, sweet potatoes, and green peas.

Yet every afternoon their nerves tautened, Charlie snapping at Sarah more and more each day, grumbling to himself as he walked about the house, complaining steadily as the two of them began to wonder what would be in the steaming roaster for supper. Even breakfast, after a few days, became just as bad.

"I like my eggs turned over!" Charlie snapped one morning.

"We tried it, but they won't turn over."

Picking at his teeth, he looked glumly at the sunny-side-up eggs in his plate. "I cain't figure why they don't," he muttered.

"I declare, you're actin older ever day! That's just how it's made! What do you expect for fourteen dollars?"

"Mmmph. I ain't so sure I like raisin bread toast, neither."

Sarah was buttering a slice of it. "It's good," she said, taking a bite.

He watched her painfully. "That thing's made toast out of bread I never seen in all my life! Cinnamon bread, raising bread, some black doughy stuff with kernels in it..."

Sarah poured herself a cup of coffee from the glittering coffeemaker.

"Hit's time you got modern, old man. Hit's kind of nice, anyways," she added, nodding to herself. "Having different things all the time."

Looking distastefully at the raisin bread toast, Charlie wrinkled his nose and took a bite. "I cain't take too much more of it, no matter what that catalogue says," he grumbled.

Early the next morning—it was scarcely daylight—Sarah turned in bed, then sat upright as she heard the sounds in the kitchen. Slipping on her robe, she started to call out to Charlie, but for some reason stopped herself, and, instead, tiptoed silently down the stairs. Charlie was already dressed, standing by the old woodstove. The kitchen was filled with a soft warmth from the fire, with the fragrant odor of boiling coffee. Walking to the cooler, Charlie got out four eggs, broke and dropped them one by one into the popping fat of the old iron skillet. With a deft scoop of the turner he transferred several strips of bacon from a plate to the skillet.

After he set the table the food was about ready. He flipped the eggs over, waited a moment, and scooped them out. Then he poured the coffee from the old porcelain pot, got out a jar of strawberry preserves, and sat down in his usual place.

"I fixed enough for both," he said, in a matter of fact voice, without even looking at her. "You might as well set and eat something."

She saw that her blue china and cut glass were back in their old place in the cupboard. The appliances were nowhere in sight. She put her hand on his arm and said, "Charlie, I love you."

He looked at her. His thick gray brows were pulled down, and his right cheek dimpled as he sucked at one of his teeth. Then laugh wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. "You try them eggs and bacon," he ordered her. "And you tell me if you ever et better."

She obeyed him. Before she finished chewing the first mouthful, she nodded her head. "I declare, Charlie, you're right."

They were sitting on the porch later in the morning, the soft warmth of the June day hovering gently about the marigold-bordered yard. Sarah had the catalogue in her lap, fingering its slick pages, as Charlie watched languidly for the mail truck.

"After a while she said, "Charlie?"

"Hmmm?"

"Don't it seem kind of a shame, just to throw them away like that?"

He grinned confidently. "Some things is more important than others, ain't they?"

"Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

She touched the catalogue with her finger. "Look at this. A ice cream maker. You just plug it in the wall, and..." Her voice trailed off as he saw the expression on his face.

"I did forget one thing," he muttered, his pipe clenched between his teeth. He was up quickly, snatched the catalogue out of her lap, and disappeared around behind the house.

When he came back to the front porch, Sarah said, "Charlie, what did—"

He was laughing now, his eyes twinkling. "Now," he said. "Wasn't you about to tell me what we was gonna have for supper?"