

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# the lovely house

by . . . Michael Shaara

It was almost breath-taking  
in its odd perfection, high  
on the hillside — a strange  
and beckoning perfection....

THERE was a very light fog and the air was still. We had just turned north on the road toward Dover when Eileen saw the house.

"Oh!" she cried, "what a lovely house!"

I looked. Eileen can never drive for very long without seeing what she calls a "lovely" house, but I had grown used to it then and I looked. I was surprised.

It really was a lovely house.

It was very odd. I looked up and saw it perched in the mist on the side of a hill, dark and quiet and lonely. Even in the mist, even in the damp cold of the afternoon, it was still obviously a beautiful house.

"Let's go up," Eileen said excitedly, "let's go see it."

"All right," I said, wondering at myself.

We drove up a wet, rocky road. When we had gone a little way we found that the house was not near the road at all, but back quite a way beyond some trees. It was standing alone in a plain grassy field, with no roadway or path leading up to it. Still, although it was a long wet walk from the road and I am not the man for this sort of thing, we got out of the car and walked up to see it.

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*Michael Shaara, who'll be remembered for his DEATH OF A HUNTER (October 1957) and for his earlier CONQUEST OVER TIME (November 1956), returns with this short-short suggesting one method by which the alleged extra-terrestrials in our midst may be gathering the samples they're here for.*

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"Well now," Eileen said with finality, smiling, "this-is-it!" As I looked at the dark building, I caught the same feeling, I went very suddenly all warm and soft inside, I could understand what she meant. There was a something about this house which flowed out and enveloped us—a peculiar, soothing, dreamy something which I could not understand. For a moment I stared at the house, stared hard, trying to see what it was about the house that was so unusual. But there was nothing. It was just walls and windows and roof. It was just a house.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Eileen was saying. "Isn't it what we've always wanted?"

"Sure is nice," I said. "First house I ever saw look nice in a fog, without any lights on. Funny."

"Beautiful," Eileen murmured.

I looked at her. She was staring at the house gravely, dreamily. Abruptly she started to walk forward and I caught her arm.

"Where are you going?"

"I . . . I," she finally turned her eyes toward me, "I was going to look into the windows."

Her face was bright red and flushed, happy, but somehow also remarkably calm. I had never seen her look this way before and I misunderstood. I made up my mind.

"Listen dear," I said quickly, "would you like to buy this house? Would you like to live here?"

Now that her eyes were away from the house they seemed to clear

suddenly and she jumped with delight.

"Oh, can we, darling, can we? I'd love to!"

"All right. Let's drive into Dover and see the real estate man. Doesn't look like there's anybody living here, what with no path or road—maybe it's for sale. Or if it isn't, we can get the plans and build one ourselves. All right?"

She nodded, looking back.

"Couldn't I stay here," she said, "while *you* go?"

I stared at her. She finally came.

The fog seemed to be getting thicker and it was very cold.

The real estate man in Dover was a dry little man named Carson whom I have known for some time. I expected that he would know all about the new house out on the hill and by this time I had become very curious. But Carson could tell me nothing.

Because Carson said that there wasn't any house there.

At first I thought he'd misunderstood my description. I gave it to him again.

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, "I know the road you mean. Little rocky road runs up the side of Van Vleck hill. Man, there's no house on that hill. Never was. I was up there just the other day . . ."

For the first time now I began to feel that there was something very peculiar. I knew Carson and he knew me. There was no reason for jokes. But Carson refused to

admit there could be a house on that hill.

"Look," I said, "I saw that house. Not ten minutes ago I saw it. If you don't believe it come on up and take a look. Somebody must have built without you knowing it."

"But there ain't no . . ."

"I *saw* it, darn it. Come on." It was suddenly very important to me that he came.

He stared at me for a moment, then grinned slightly.

"All right," he said amiably, "but I think you should know that that's my property. Ain't nobody building a house on my property 'thout my knowin'."

A few moments later we turned in the dirt road, looked up the hill.

The house was still there.

Carson was speechless. He got out of the car and began running through the trees and onto the field. Eileen followed him.

Then I saw that there were people standing around the house. For a short, stabbing moment I was afraid. But I saw a number of cars parked by the road and I realized that other people passing by, seeing the house, had also stopped. I began to walk up the hill feeling very strange and uncomfortable.

The people by the house were all young couples. They were standing arm in arm, heads against shoulders, gazing admiringly and dreamily at the house. Just as Eileen had done. It was all quite weird until I looked at the house and caught

the same feeling. Even the real estate man was saying what a beautiful house it was.

"Oh, darling," Eileen breathed, coming to me with a tenderness I haven't seen in years, "isn't it a beautiful house?"

I swore to myself. Either they were all crazy or I was. But vaguely, weakly, I could feel a faint sucking pull coming at me from the house, and I guessed that these people were all feeling the same thing, only much stronger. I did not know why it did not affect me, maybe I am very stubborn, but I began to be very much afraid.

Eileen left me then and tried to look in the windows, which were all glazed and opaque. All about me the other couples were passing, silent and gazing.

It was then that I saw that this dark thing before me was not really a house.

For a stark, flashing moment, as my fears increased, the lines of the house shimmered and floated away, and I saw through the illusion to the black mass beyond.

And then the house came back. And the door opened.

It swung open quickly, silently. In the dark hall, vaguely, against a far panel of rich red oak, a crimsoned picture hung upon the wall. It was enormously beautiful. From nearby I heard a gasp of delight as Eileen started forward. But a very young couple was nearer.

Drawn by the pull of the lovely house, they ran up the steps and

through the door, laughing delightedly. The door closed upon them with a sharp metallic click.

For an endless second we hung in the stillness, on the edge of the fog, while the house shivered quickly and dissolved in the mist. Where the house had been a squat

thing sat, round and black and ugly.

The unnameable thing had accomplished its mission; it had cleverly collected its specimens. With a blast of great flame from beneath its sides, rising on a shaft of bright orange fire, the trap, the *ship*, blasted straight up into the sky.