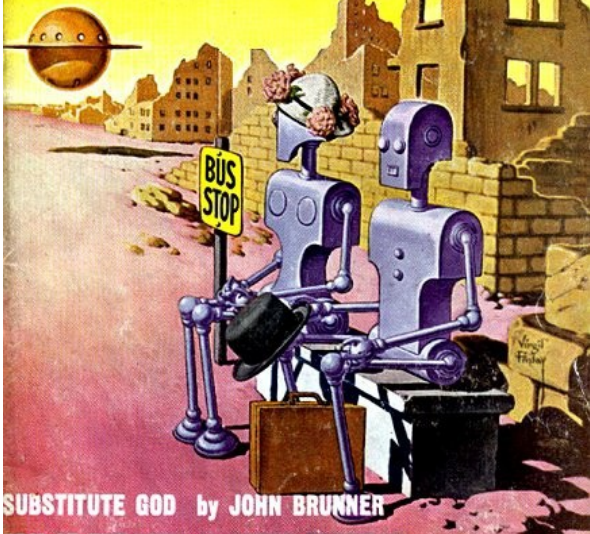


FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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The Flying Cuspidors

V.R. Francis

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Transcriber's Note:

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Hotlips Grogan may not be as handsome and good-looking like me or as brainy and intellectual, but in this fiscal year of 2056 he is the gonest trumpet-tooter this side of Alpha Centauri. You would know what I mean right off if you ever hear him give out with "Stars Fell on Venus," or "Martian Love Song," or "Shine On, Harvest Luna." Believe me, it is out of this world. He is not only hot, he is radioactive. On a clear day he is playing notes you cannot hear without you are wearing special equipment.

That is for a fact.

Mostly he is a good man—cool, solid, and in the warp. But one night he is playing strictly in three or four wrong keys.

I am the ivory man for this elite bunch of musicians, and I am scooping up my three-dee music from the battered electronic eighty-eight when he comes over looking plenty worried.

"Eddie," he says, "I got a problem."

"You got a problem, all right," I tell him. "You are not getting a job selling Venusian fish, the way you play today."

He frowns. "It is pretty bad, I suppose."

"Bad is not the word," I say, but I spare his feelings and do not say the word it is. "What gives?"

He looks around him, careful to see if anybody in the place is close enough to hear. But it is only afternoon rehearsal on the gambling ship *Saturn*, and the waiters are busy mopping up the floor and leaning on their long-handled sterilizers, and the boys in the band are picking up their music to go down to Earth to get some shut-eye or maybe an atomic beer or two before we open that night.

Hotlips Grogan leans over and whispers in my ear. "It is the thrush," he says.

"The thrush?" I say, loud, before he clamps one of his big hands over my kisser. "The thrush," I say, softer; "you mean the canary?"

He waves his arms like a bird. "Thrush, canary—I mean Stella Starlight."

For a minute I stand with my mouth open and think of this. Then I

rubber for the ninety-seventh time at the female warbler, who is standing talking to Frankie, the band leader. She is a thrush new to the band and plenty cute—a blonde, with everything where it is supposed to be, and maybe a little extra helping in a couple spots. I give her my usual approving once-over, just in case I miss something the last ninety-six approving once-overs I give her.

"What about her?" I say.

"It is her fault I play like I do," Hotlips Grogan tells me sadly. "Come on. Leave us go guzzle a beer and I will tell you about it."

Just then Frankie comes over, looking nasty like as usual, and he says to Grogan, "You are not playing too well today, Hotlips. Maybe you hurt your lip on a beer bottle, huh?"

As usual also, his tone is pretty short on sweetness and light, and I do not see why Grogan, who looks something like a gorilla's mother-in-law, takes such guff from a beanpole like Frankie.

But Grogan only says, "I think something is wrong with my trumpet. I have it fixed before tonight."

Frankie smirks. "Do that," he says, looking like a grinning weasel. "We want you to play for dancing, not for calling in Martian moose."

Frankie walks away, and Hotlips shrugs.

"Leave us get our beer," he says simply, and we go to the ferry.

We pile into the space-ferry with the other musicians and anyone else who is going down to dirty old terra firma, and when everybody who is going aboard is aboard, the doors close, and the ferry drifts into space. Hotlips and I find seats, and we look back at the gambling ship. It is a thrill you do not get used to, no matter how many times you see it.

The sailor boys who build the *Saturn*—they give it the handle of *Satellite II* then—would not know their baby now, Frankie does such a good job of revamping it. Of course, it is not used as a gambling ship then—at least not altogether, if you know what I mean. Way back in 1998 when they get it in the sky, they are more interested in it being useful than pretty; anybody that got nasty and

unsanitary ideas just forgot them when they saw that iron basket floating in a sky that could be filled with hydrogen bombs or old laundry without so much as a four-bar intro as warning.

Frankie buys *Satellite II* at a war surplus sale when moon flights become as easy as commuters' trips, and he smoothes out its shape so it looks like an egg and then puts a fin around it for ships to land on. After that, it does not take much imagination to call it the *Saturn*. Then he gets his Western Hemisphere license and opens for business.

My daydreaming stops, for suddenly Hotlips is grabbing my arm and pointing out the window.

"What for are you grabbing my arm and waving your fist at the window, Hotlips?" I inquire politely of him.

"Eddie," he whispers, all nervous and excited from something, "I see one."

I give him a blank stare. "You see one what?"

"One flying cuspidor," he says, his face serious. "I see it hanging out there by the *Saturn* and then suddenly it is gone. Whoosh."

"Hallucination," I tell him. But I look out hard and try to see one too. I don't, so I figure maybe I am right, after all.

I do not know about this "men from space" gimmick the science-fiction people try to peddle, but lots of good substantial citizens see flying cuspidors and I think to myself that maybe there is something to it. So I keep looking back at the *Saturn*, but nothing unusual is going on that I can see. My logic and super-salesmanship evidently convinces Hotlips, for he does not say anything more about it.

Anyway, in a few minutes we joggle to a stop at Earthport, pile out, wave our identification papers at the doorman with the lieutenant's bars, and then take off for the *Atomic Cafe* a block away.

Entering this gem of a drinking establishment, we make our way through the smoke and noise to a quiet little corner table and give Mamie the high-sign for two beers. A few minutes later she comes bouncing over with the order and a cheery word about how

invigorating it is to see us high-class gentlemen instead of the bums that usually hang around a joint like this trying to make time with a nice girl like her.

"That is all very nice," I say to her politely, "and we are overjoyed beyond words to see you too, Mamie, but Hotlips and I have got strange and mysterious things to discuss, so I would appreciate it if you would see us later instead of now." With this, I give her arm a playful pat, and she blushes and takes the hint.

When we are alone, I ask Hotlips, now what is the trouble which he has.

"Like I tell you before," Hotlips says, "I have a problem. So here it is." He takes a deep breath and lets fly all at once. "I am in love of the thrush, Stella Starlight."

I am drinking my beer when he says this, and suddenly I get a snootful and start coughing, and he whams me on the back with his big paw so I stop, more in self-defense than in his curing me. Somehow, the idea of a big bruiser like Hotlips Grogan in love of a sweet fluffy thing like Stella Starlight seems funny.

"So?" I say.

"So that is why I play so bad tonight," he says. Seeing I do not quite catch on to the full intent of his remarks, he continues. "I am a happy man, Eddie. I got my trumpet, a paid-for suit of clothes, a one-room apartment with green wallpaper. Could a man ask for much more?"

"Not unless he is greedy," I agree.

Hotlips Grogan is staring at his beer as though he sees a worm in it and looking sadder than ever. "It is a strange and funny thing," he says, dreamy-like. "There she is singing, and there I am giving with the trumpet, and all of a great big sudden—whammo!—it hits me, and I feel a funny feeling in my stomach, like maybe it is full of supersuds or something, and my mouth is dry just like cotton candy."

"Indigestion," I suggest.

He shakes his big head. "No," he says, "it is worse than indigestion." He points to his stomach and sighs. "It is love."

"Fine," I say, happy it is not worse. "All you got to do is tell her, get married and have lots and lots of kids."

Hotlips Grogan's big eyebrows play hopscotch around his button nose, so I can tell he does not think I solve all his troubles with my suggestion.

"You are a good man, Eddie," he tells me, "but you are too intellectual. This is an affair of the heart." He sighs again. "I am never in love of a girl before," he goes on, more worried, "and I do not know how to act. Besides, the thrush is with us only a day, and Frankie already is making with the eyes."

"So what should I do, give you lessons?" The idea is so laughable I laugh at it. "Anyway, Frankie always makes with the eyes at thrushes."

"Yes," Hotlips Grogan admits, "but never before have I been in love of any of the thrushes Frankie has made with the eyes at. Frankly, Eddie, I am worried like all get out about this."

"Sometimes I do not even understand the way you play even before the thrush comes, Hotlips," I admit. "Like for instance yesterday when we play 'A Spaceship Built for Two.' This is a song, as you know, that does not have in it many high notes, but even when you play the low notes they sound somewhat like they maybe are trying to be high notes. It is a matter which is perplexing to one of my curious nature."

Hotlips looks sheepish for a minute and then he says, "It is a physical disability with me, Eddie. When I am young and practicing with my trumpet one day, I have an accident and get my tongue caught in the mouthpiece, and it is necessary for the doctor to operate on my tongue and cut into it like maybe it is chopped liver."

"I am sorry to hear this, Hotlips," I say.

"I do not tell anyone this before, Eddie," Hotlips confesses. "But afterward when I play the trumpet, I play two notes at one time, which at first is pretty embarrassing."

"This is great, Hotlips," I proclaim as a big idea hits me; "you can

play your own harmony. With talent like that, and my brain—"

But Hotlips is shaking his head. "No, Eddie," he says. "The other note is way off in the stratosphere someplace and no one can hear it, even when the melody note is low. And the higher the note is you can hear, the higher the other note is you cannot hear. Besides, now I cannot even play what I am supposed to play, what with the thrush around."

I sit there with my beer in my hand and think about it for a while, while Hotlips looks at me like a lost sheepdog. I scratch my head but I do not even come up with dandruff.

Finally, I say, "Well, thrush or not, if you play no better than you do this afternoon, Frankie will make you walk back home without a spacesuit."

"That is for positive," Hotlips agrees sadly. "So what can I do?"

I am forced to admit that I do not know just what Hotlips can do. "However," I say, "I have an idea." And I call Mamie over and tell her the problem. "So you are a woman and maybe you know what my musician friend can do," I suggest.

Mamie sighs. "I am at a loss for words concerning what your friend can do, but I know just how he feels, for it is like that with me, too. I am in love of a handsome young musician who comes in here, but he does not take notice of me, except to order some beer for him and his friend."

I click my teeth sympathetically at this news.

"And I am too shy and dignified a girl to tell him," Mamie continues sadly. "So you see I have the same problem as your friend and cannot help you."

"See," I whisper to Hotlips, "it is perfectly normal."

"Yes," he hisses back. "But I am still miserable, and the only company I desire is that of Stella Starlight."

"Maybe it really is your trumpet," I suggest, not very hopeful, though.

Hotlips shakes his head. "Look," he says and takes the trumpet from his case and puts it to his lips, "and listen to this."

Inwardly, I quiver like all get out, because I figure that is just what the management will tell us to do, once Hotlips lets go. Hotlips puffs out his cheeks and a soft note slides from the end of the trumpet—low, clear, and beautiful, without a waver in a spaceload. Only a few people close by can hear the note and they do not pay us any attention, except to think that maybe we are a little nuttier than is normal for musicians.

From his first note, Hotlips shifts to a higher note which is just as pretty. Then he goes on to another one and then to another, improvising a melody I do not hear before and getting higher all the time. After a while I can hardly hear it, it is so high, but I can feel the glass in my hand vibrating like it wants to get out on the floor and dance. I hold on to it with both hands, so my beer will not slosh over the side. Then there is no sound at all from the trumpet, but Hotlips' cheeks are puffed out and he is still blowing for all he is worth—which is plenty, if he can play like this when Stella Starlight is around.

I tap Hotlips on the shoulder. "Hotlips, that is all very well for any bats in the room which maybe can hear what you play, but—" He does not pay me any attention.

Suddenly there is a large crinkle-crash of glass from the bar and a hoarse cry from the bartender as he sees his king-size mirror come down in little pieces. At the same time, glasses pop into fragments all over the room and spill beer over the people holding them. Even my own glass becomes nothing but ground glass and the beer sloshes over the table. At the moment, however, I do not worry about that.

There are other things to worry about which are more important—like Hotlips' and my health, for instance, which is not likely to be so good in the near future.

Like I say, Hotlips does not play loud and it is noisy in the place, so there are not too many who hear him. But they look around, all mad and covered with beer, and see him there with the trumpet in his hand and a funny look on his big face, and they put two and two together. I can see they figure the answer is four. And what makes things worse,

they are between us and the front door, so we cannot sneak past like maybe we are just tourists.

"Hotlips," I say to him, my voice not calm like is usual, "I think it is a grand and glorious idea that we desert here and take ourselves elsewhere."

Hotlips agrees. "But where?" he wants to know.

I am forced to admit to myself that he comes up with a good question.

"Over here," Mamie said suddenly, and we look across the room to see her poking her nose through a side door.

We do not wait for a formal invite but zoom across the floor and through the door into another, emptier room. Mamie slams the door and locks it just as two or three bodies thump into it like they mean business.

"The manager is out there and is not completely overjoyed with your actions of a short while ago," Mamie informs us, explaining, "I recognize the thump the character makes."

"Evidently," I surmise, "he is in no mood to talk to concerning damages and how we can get out of paying them, so we will talk to him later instead of now."

"See what I mean, though, Eddie," Hotlips says. "I play fine when Stella Starlight is not in the place. Like I say, it is love and what can I do about it."

"It is a problem," I say. "Even if you *do* play, you will no doubt be fired and cannot pay for the damages to the bar room and to the customers' clothing." Already there are holes in my plastic clothing where the beer splashes. "If you can only give out on the *Saturn* like you play here," I sigh, "we can break all records and show Frankie—"

Suddenly Mamie is tugging at my arm.

"Mamie," I inquire politely of her, "why are you tugging at my arm?"

"That is it," she informs me and leans forward and whispers in my ear.

"But—" I say.

"Hurry," she says, pushing us out another door. "You have only got this afternoon to do it."

"But—" I say again, and Hotlips and I are in the alley looking at the door which Mamie closes in our face.

"What does Mamie say?" Hotlips wants to know eagerly. "Can she fix it up with me and Stella Starlight?"

I scratch my head. "That I do not know, Hotlips, but she does give me an idea which is so good I am surprised at myself I do not think of it alone."

Hotlips gives me a blank stare. "Which is?"

"Come on," I say mysteriously. "You and me have got things to do."

It is hard to say who is more nervous that night, Hotlips or a certain piano player with my name. Frankie is smirking like always, and Stella Starlight is sitting and looking beautiful while she waits for her cue. Hotlips is fumbling with his trumpet like maybe he never sees one before. And I—even I am not exactly calm like always.

The band begins to warm up, but we do not knock ourselves out because there are still no customers to speak of. Frankie's license makes it plain that he has to stay over the western hemisphere so he has to wait until it gets dark enough there for the people to want to go night-clubbing, even though it is not really night on the *Saturn*, or morning or anything else.

We play along like always, and Hotlips has his trumpet pressed into his face, and nothing but beautiful sounds come from the band. I do not know if Frankie is altogether happy about this, for he does not like Hotlips and would like this chance to bounce him. But what surprises me most is that the thrush, Stella Starlight, keeps looking back at Hotlips like she notices him for the first time and is plenty worried by what she sees.

We have a short break after a while and I am telling Hotlips that the idea goes over real great, when Stella Starlight waltzes over. Hotlips' big eyes bug out and I can see him shaking and covered with goosebumps.

"You do not play like that before, Hotlips," she coos. "What did you do?"

Hotlips blushes and stammers, "Eddie and I fix—" But I give him a kick in his big shins before he gives the whole thing away.

"Hotlips does some practicing this afternoon," I tell her, "to get his lip in shape for tonight."

She looks at me like she is looking through me, and then she turns back to Hotlips and says, soft and murmuring: "Please do not play too high, Hotlips. I am delicate and am disturbed by high sounds."

She waltzes away, and I scratch my head and try to figure out what this pitch is for. Hotlips is not trying to figure out anything; he just sits there looking like he has just got his trumpet out of hock for the last time.

"Hotlips," I say to him.

"Go away, please, Eddie," he tells me. "I am in heaven."

"You will be in the poorhouse or maybe even in jail if you tell somebody how we fix your playing," I warn him.

"I still feel funny feelings though, Eddie," he tells me, frowning, "like I cannot hit high notes now if I try."

"Then do not try," I advise. "One problem at a time is too much."

There is a commotion at the entrance on the other side of the dance floor, where some people all dressed up come in. A woman is holding her head and moaning and threatening to faint all over the place.

Frankie hurries over to us, running fidgety hands through his hair. "For goodness sake, play something," he almost begs.

"What gives?" I inquire.

"Flying cuspidors," Frankie says in a frantic tone. "They are all around the place, like they are maybe mad at something, and a few minutes ago they buzz the ferry and get the passengers all nervous and upset. If they do that again, business will be bad; maybe even now it will be bad. Play something!"

He hops out in front with his baton and gives us a quick one-two,

and we all swing into "Space On My Hands," real loud so as to get people's minds off things which Frankie wants to get people's minds off of.

Stella Starlight gets up to sing, but she looks more like she would rather do something else. She stares at Hotlips and at the trumpet on his lips and begins to quiver like she is about to do a dance.

I remember she says she does not like high notes, and this song has some pretty well up in the stratosphere, especially for the trumpet section, which is Hotlips.

She is frowning like maybe she is thinking real hard about something and is surprised her thoughts do no good. Her face becomes waxy and there is a frightened look on it.

She quivers some more, as the notes go up and up and up. Then she lets out a shriek, like maybe she is going to pieces.

And then she does. Actually.

Right before our popping eyeballs she goes to pieces.

As each one in the band sees what is going on, he stops playing, until finally Hotlips is the only one. But the trumpet is in Hotlips' hand, and the music is coming from the recording machine we place under his chair. The notes are clear and smooth, and you can almost feel the air shaking with them.

But nobody notices the music or where it comes from. They are too busy watching the thrush, Stella Starlight.

She stands there, her face as white as clay, shaking like a carrot going through a mixmaster. And then tiny cracks appear on her face, on her arms, even in her dress, and then a large one appears in her forehead and goes down through her body. She splits in the middle like a cracked walnut, and there in the center, floating three feet from the floor is a small flying cuspidor.

Nobody in the room says anything. They just stand there, bug-eyed and frightened like anything. Somewhere, across the room, a woman faints. I do not feel too well myself, and I am afraid to look to see how Hotlips takes this.

There is no sound, but I hear a voice in my mind and know that the others hear it too. The voice sounds like it is filled with wire and metal and is not exactly human. It says:

"You win, Hotlips Grogan. I, as advance agent in disguise, tell you this. We will go away and leave you and your people alone. We place a mental block in your mind, but you outsmart us, and now you know our weakness. We cannot stand high sounds which you can play so easy on your trumpet. We find ourselves a home someplace else."

With that, the cuspidor shoots across the room and plows right through the wall.

"That's the engine room!" Frankie wails.

There is a sudden explosion from the other side of the wall, and everybody decides all at once they would like to be someplace else, and they all pick the same spot. The space ferry is pretty crowded, but we jam aboard it and drift away from the *Saturn*—musicians, waiters and paying customers all sitting in each other's laps.

The *Saturn* is wobbling around, with flames shooting out at all angles, and Frankie is holding his head and moaning. In the distance, you can just about make out little specks of cuspidors heading for the wild black yonder.

So all is well that ends well, and this is it.

Frankie uses his insurance money to open a rest home on Mars for ailing musicians.

Hotlips is all broken up, in a manner of speaking, over Stella Starlight's turning out to be not human, but he consoles himself with a good job playing trumpet in a burlesque house where the girls wear costumes made of glass and other brittle stuff.

As for me, Mamie gets me a job playing piano at the place where she works, and everything is okay except for one thing. When Mamie is around I cannot seem to concentrate on my playing. I feel a funny feeling in my stomach, like maybe it is full of supersuds or something,

and my mouth is dry like cotton candy.

I think maybe it is indigestion.

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