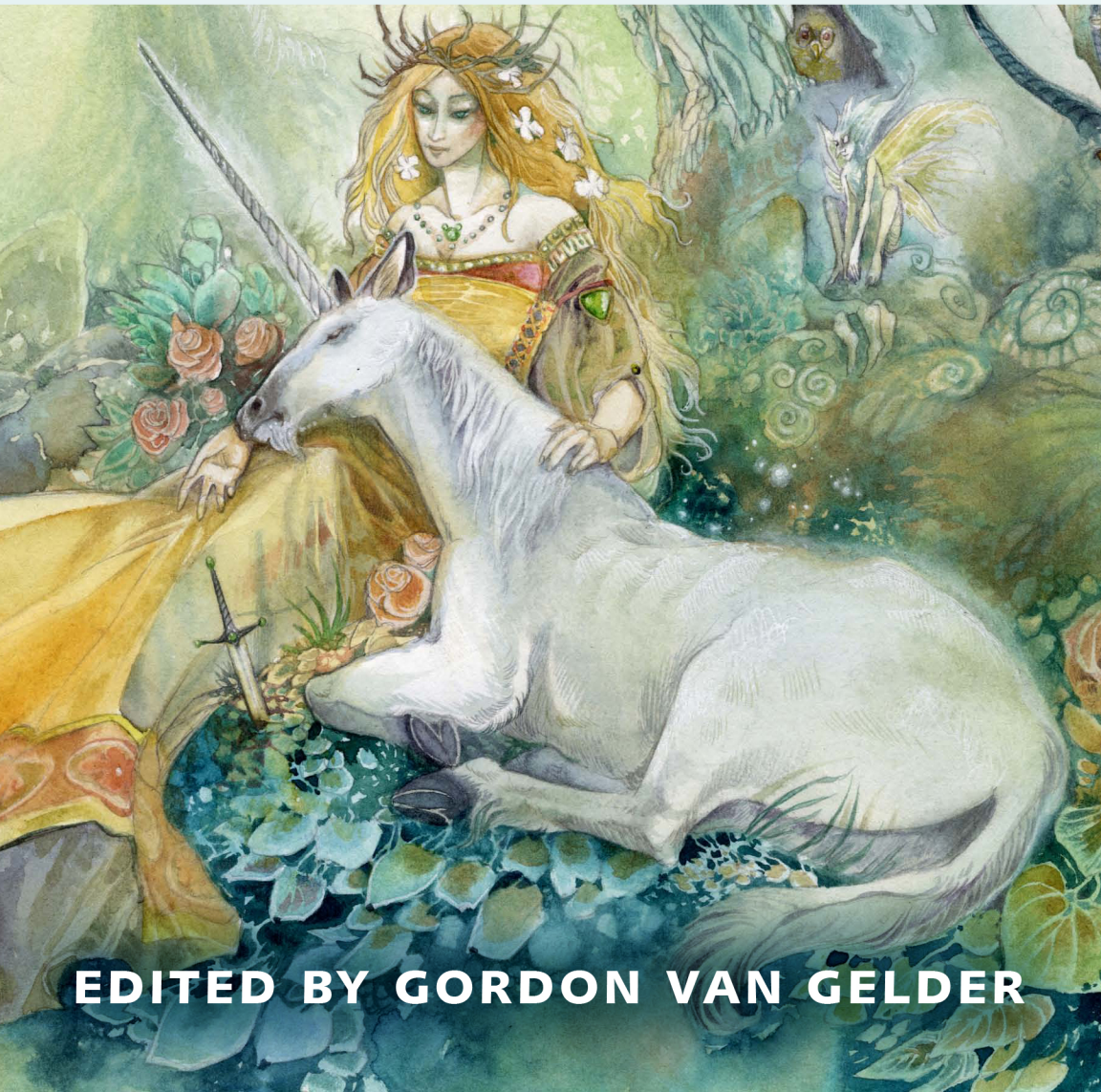
The Fantasy & Science Fiction Book of UNICORNS

volume one



EDITED BY GORDON VAN GELDER

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Tachyon Publications LLC
1459 18th Street #139
San Francisco, CA 94107
415.285.5615
www.tachyonpublications.com
tachyon@tachyonpublications.com

Series Editor: Jacob Weisman
Project Editor: Rachel Fagundes

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For

David Hartwell

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The Silken-Swift

Theodore Sturgeon

THERE'S A VILLAGE by the Bogs, and in the village is a Great House. In the Great House lived a squire who had land and treasures and, for a daughter, Rita.

In the village lived Del, whose voice was a thunder in the inn when he drank there; whose corded, cabled body was golden-skinned, and whose hair flung challenges back to the sun.

Deep in the Bogs, which were brackish, there was a pool of purest water, shaded by willows and wide-wondering aspen, cupped by banks of a moss most marvellously blue. Here grew mandrake, and there were strange pipings in mid-summer. No one ever heard them but a quiet girl whose beauty was so very contained that none of it showed. Her name was Barbara.

There was a green evening, breathless with growth, when Del took his usual way down the lane beside the manor and saw a white shadow adrift inside the tall iron pickets. He stopped, and the shadow approached, and became Rita. "Slip around to the gate," she said, "and I'll open it for you."

She wore a gown like a cloud and a silver circlet round her head. Night was caught in her hair, moonlight in her face, and in her great eyes, secrets swam.

Del said, "I have no business with the squire."

"He's gone," she said. "I've sent the servants away. Come to the gate."

"I need no gate." He leapt and caught the top bar of the fence, and in a continuous fluid motion went high and across and down beside her. She looked at his arms, one, the other; then up at his hair. She pressed her small hands tight together and made a little laugh, and then she was gone through the tailored trees, lightly, swiftly, not looking back. He followed, one step for three of hers, keeping pace with a new pounding in the sides of his neck. They crossed a flower bed and a wide marble terrace. There was an open door, and when he passed through it he stopped, for she was nowhere in sight. Then the door clicked shut behind him and he whirled. She was there, her back to the panel, laughing up at him in the dimness. He thought she would come to him then, but instead she twisted by, close, her eyes on his. She smelt of violets and sandalwood. He followed her into the great hall, quite dark but full of the subdued lights of polished wood, cloisonné, tooled leather, and gold-threaded tapestry. She flung open another door, and they were in a small room with a carpet made of rosy silences, and a candlelit table. Two places were set, each with five different crystal glasses and old silver as prodigally used as the iron pickets outside. Six teakwood steps rose to a great oval window. "The moon," she said, "will rise for us there."

She motioned him to a chair and crossed to a sideboard, where there was a rack of decanters—ruby wine and white; one with a strange brown bead; pink, and amber. She took down the first and poured. Then she lifted the silver domes from the salvers on the table, and a magic of fragrance filled the air. There were smoking sweets and savories, rare seafood and slivers of fowl, and morsels of

strange meat wrapped in flower petals, spitted with foreign fruits and tiny soft seashells. All about were spices, each like a separate voice in the distant murmur of a crowd: saffron and sesame, cumin and marjoram and mace.

And all the while Del watched her in wonder, seeing how the candles left the moonlight in her face, and how completely she trusted her hands, which did such deftness without supervision—so composed she was, for all the silent secret laughter that tugged at her lips, for all the bright dark mysteries that swirled and swam within her.

They ate, and the oval window yellowed and darkened while the candlelight grew bright. She poured another wine, and another, and with the courses of the meal they were as May to the crocus and as frost to the apple.

Del knew it was alchemy and he yielded to it without questions. That which was purposely over-sweet would be piquantly cut; this induced thirst would, with exquisite timing, be quenched. He knew she was watching him; he knew she was aware of the heat in his cheeks and the tingle at his fingertips. His wonder grew, but he was not afraid.

In all this time she spoke hardly a word; but at last the feast was over and they rose. She touched a silken rope on the wall, and panelling slid aside. The table rolled silently into some ingenious recess and the panel returned. She waved him to an L-shaped couch in one corner, and as he sat close to her, she turned and took down the lute which hung on the wall behind her. He had his moment of confusion; his arms were ready for her, but not for the instrument as well. Her eyes sparkled, but her composure was unshaken.

Now she spoke, while her fingers strolled and danced on the lute, and her words marched and wandered in and about the music.

She had a thousand voices, so that he wondered which of them was truly hers. Sometimes she sang; sometimes it was a wordless crooning. She seemed at times remote from him, puzzled at the turn the music was taking, and at other times she seemed to hear the pulsing roar in his eardrums, and she played laughing syncopations to it. She sang words which he almost understood:

Bee to blossom, honey dew,
Claw to mouse, and rain to tree,
Moon to midnight, I to you;
Sun to starlight, you to me . . .

and she sang something wordless:

Ake ya rundefle, rundefle fye,
Orel ya rundefle kown,
En yea, en yea, ya bunder bee bye
En sor, en see, en sown.

which he also almost understood.

In still another voice she told him the story of a great hairy spider and a little pink girl who found it between the leaves of a half-open book; and at first he was all fright and pity for the girl, but then she went on to tell of what the spider suffered, with his home disrupted by this yawping giant, and so vividly did she tell of it that at the end he was laughing at himself and all but crying for the poor spider.

So the hours slipped by, and suddenly, between songs, she was in his arms; and in the instant she had twisted up and away from

him, leaving him gasping. She said, in still a new voice, sober and low, "No, Del. We must wait for the moon."

His thighs ached and he realized that he had half-risen, arms out, hands clutching and feeling the extraordinary fabric of her gown though it was gone from them; and he sank back to the couch with an odd, faint sound that was wrong for the room. He flexed his fingers and, reluctantly, the sensation of white gossamer left them. At last he looked across at her and she laughed and leapt high lightly, and it was as if she stopped in midair to stretch for a moment before she alighted beside him, bent and kissed his mouth, and leapt away.

The roaring in his ears was greater, and at this it seemed to acquire a tangible weight. His head bowed; he tucked his knuckles into the upper curve of his eye sockets and rested his elbows on his knees. He could hear the sweet susurrus of Rita's gown as she moved about the room; he could sense the violets and sandalwood. She was dancing, immersed in the joy of movement and of his nearness. She made her own music, humming, sometimes whispering to the melodies in her mind.

And at length he became aware that she had stopped; he could hear nothing, though he knew she was still near. Heavily he raised his head. She was in the center of the room, balanced like a huge white moth, her eyes quite dark now with their secrets quiet. She was staring at the window, poised, waiting.

He followed her gaze. The big oval was black no longer, but dusted over with silver light. Del rose slowly. The dust was a mist, a loom, and then, at one edge, there was a shard of the moon itself creeping and growing.

Because Del stopped breathing, he could hear her breathe; it was rapid and so deep it faintly strummed her versatile vocal cords.

"Rita . . ."

Without answering she ran to the sideboard and filled two small glasses. She gave him one, then, "Wait," she breathed, "oh, wait!"

Spellbound, he waited while the white stain crept across the window. He understood suddenly that he must be still until the great oval was completely filled with direct moonlight, and this helped him, because it set a foreseeable limit to his waiting; and it hurt him, because nothing in life, he thought, had ever moved so slowly. He had a moment of rebellion, in which he damned himself for falling in with her complex pacing; but with it he realized that now the darker silver was wasting away, now it was a finger's breadth, and now a thread, and now, and now—

She made a brittle feline cry and sprang up the dark steps to the window. So bright was the light that her body was a jet cameo against it. So delicately wrought was her gown that he could see the epaulettes of silver light the moon gave her. She was so beautiful his eyes stung.

"Drink," she whispered. "Drink with me, darling, darling . . ."

For an instant he did not understand her at all, and only gradually did he become aware of the little glass he held. He raised it toward her and drank. And of all the twists and titillations of taste he had had this night, this was the most startling; for it had no taste at all, almost no substance, and a temperature almost exactly that of blood. He looked stupidly down at the glass and back up at the girl. He thought that she had turned about and was watching him, though he could not be sure, since her silhouette was the same.

And then he had his second of unbearable shock, for the light went out.

The moon was gone, the window, the room. Rita was gone.

For a stunned instant he stood tautly, stretching his eyes wide. He made a sound that was not a word. He dropped the glass and pressed his palms to his eyes, feeling them blink, feeling the stiff silk of his lashes against them. Then he snatched the hands away, and it was still dark, and more than dark; this was not a blackness. This was like trying to see with an elbow or with a tongue; it was not black, it was *Nothingness*.

He fell to his knees.

Rita laughed.

An odd, alert part of his mind seized on the laugh and understood it, and horror and fury spread through his whole being; for this was the laugh which had been tugging at her lips all evening, and it was a hard, cruel, self-assured laugh. And at the same time, because of the anger or in spite of it, desire exploded whitely within him. He moved toward the sound, groping, mouthing. There was a quick, faint series of rustling sounds from the steps, and then a light, strong web fell around him. He struck out at it, and recognized it for the unforgettable thing it was—her robe. He caught at it, ripped it, stamped upon it. He heard her bare feet run lightly down and past him, and lunged, and caught nothing. He stood, gasping painfully.

She laughed again.

"I'm blind," he said hoarsely. "Rita, I'm blind!"

"I know," she said coolly, close beside him. And again she laughed.

"What have you done to me?"

"I've watched you be a dirty animal of a man," she said.

He grunted and lunged again. His knees struck something—a chair, a cabinet—and he fell heavily. He thought he touched her foot.

"Here, lover, here!" she taunted.

He fumbled about for the thing which had tripped him, found it, used it to help him upright again. He peered uselessly about.

"Here, lover!"

He leapt, and crashed into the door jamb: cheekbone, collarbone, hip bone, ankle were one straight blaze of pain. He clung to the polished wood.

After a time he said, in agony, "Why?"

"No man has ever touched me and none ever will," she sang. Her breath was on his cheek. He reached and touched nothing, and then he heard her leap from her perch on a statue's pedestal by the door, where she had stood high and leaned over to speak.

No pain, no blindness, not even the understanding that it was her witch's brew working in him could quell the wild desire he felt at her nearness. Nothing could tame the fury that shook him as she laughed. He staggered after her, bellowing.

She danced around him, laughing. Once she pushed him into a clattering rack of fire-irons. Once she caught his elbow from behind and spun him. And once, incredibly, she sprang past him and, in midair, kissed him again on the mouth.

He descended into Hell, surrounded by the small, sure patter of bare feet and sweet cool laughter. He rushed and crashed, he crouched and bled and whimpered like a hound. His roaring and blundering took an echo, and that must have been the great hall. Then there were walls that seemed more than unyielding; they struck back. And there were panels to lean against, gasping, which became opening doors as he leaned. And always the black nothingness, the writhing temptation of the pat-pat of firm flesh on smooth stones, and the ravening fury.

It was cooler, and there was no echo. He became aware of the whisper of the wind through trees. The balcony, he thought; and

then, right in his ear, so that he felt her warm breath, "Come, lover . . ." and he sprang. He sprang and missed, and instead of sprawling on the terrace, there was nothing, and nothing, and nothing, and then, when he least expected it, a shower of cruel thumps as he rolled down the marble steps.

He must have had a shred of consciousness left, for he was vaguely aware of the approach of her bare feet, and of the small, cautious hand that touched his shoulder and moved to his mouth, and then his chest. Then it was withdrawn, and either she laughed or the sound was still in his mind.

Deep in the Bogs, which were brackish, there was a pool of purest water, shaded by willows and wide-wondering aspens, cupped by banks of a moss most marvellously blue. Here grew mandrake, and there were strange pipings in mid-summer. No one ever heard them but a quiet girl whose beauty was so very contained that none of it showed. Her name was Barbara.

No one noticed Barbara, no one lived with her, no one cared. And Barbara's life was very full, for she was born to receive. Others are born wishing to receive, so they wear bright masks and make attractive sounds like cicadas and operettas, so others will be forced, one way or another, to give to them. But Barbara's receptors were wide open, and always had been, so that she needed no substitute for sunlight through a tulip petal, or the sound of morning-glories climbing, or the tangy sweet smell of formic acid which is the only death cry possible to an ant, or any other of the thousand things overlooked by folk who can only wish to receive. Barbara had a garden and an orchard, and took things in to market when she cared to, and the rest of the time she spent in taking what was

given. Weeds grew in her garden, but since they were welcomed, they grew only where they could keep the watermelons from being sunburned. The rabbits were welcome, so they kept to the two rows of carrots, the one of lettuce, and the one of tomato vines which were planted for them, and they left the rest alone. Goldenrod shot up beside the bean hills to lend a hand upward, and the birds ate only the figs and peaches from the waviest top branches, and in return patrolled the lower ones for caterpillars and egg-laying flies. And if a fruit stayed green for two weeks longer until Barbara had time to go to market, or if a mole could channel moisture to the roots of the corn, why it was the least they could do.

For a brace of years Barbara had wandered more and more, impelled by a thing she could not name—if indeed she was aware of it at all. She knew only that over-the-rise was a strange and friendly place, and that it was a fine thing on arriving there to find another rise to go over. It may very well be that she now needed someone to love, for loving is a most receiving thing, as anyone can attest who has been loved without returning it. It is the one who is loved who must give and give. And she found her love, not in her wandering, but at the market. The shape of her love, his colors and sounds, were so much with her that when she saw him first it was without surprise; and thereafter, for a very long while, it was quite enough that he lived. He gave to her by being alive, by setting the air a-thrum with his mighty voice, by his stride, which was, for a man afoot, the exact analog of what the horseman calls a "perfect seat."

After seeing him, of course, she received twice and twice again as much as ever before. A tree was straight and tall for the magnificent sake of being straight and tall, but wasn't straightness a part of him, and being tall? The oriole gave more now than song, and the hawk more than walking the wind, for had they not hearts like his, warm

blood and his same striving to keep it so for tomorrow? And more and more, over-the-rise was the place for her, for only there could there be more and still more things like him.

But when she found the pure pool in the brackish Bogs, there was no more over-the-rise for her. It was a place without hardness or hate, where the aspens trembled only for wonder, and where all contentment was rewarded. Every single rabbit there was the champion nose-twinkler, and every waterbird could stand on one leg the longest, and proud of it. Shelf-fungi hung to the willow-trunks, making that certain, single purple of which the sunset is incapable, and a tanager and a cardinal gravely granted one another his definition of "red."

Here Barbara brought a heart light with happiness, large with love, and set it down on the blue moss. And since the loving heart can receive more than anything else, so it is most needed, and Barbara took the best bird songs, and the richest colors, and the deepest peace, and all the other things which are most worth giving. The chipmunks brought her nuts when she was hungry and the prettiest stones when she was not. A green snake explained to her, in pantomime, how a river of jewels may flow uphill, and three mad otters described how a bundle of joy may slip and slide down and down and be all the more joyful for it. And there was the magic moment when a midge hovered, and then a honeybee, and then a bumblebee, and at last a hummingbird; and there they hung, playing a chord in A-sharp minor.

Then one day the pool fell silent, and Barbara learned why the water was pure.

The aspens stopped trembling.

The rabbits all came out of the thicket and clustered on the blue bank, backs straight, ears up, and all their noses as still as coral.

The waterbirds stepped backwards, like courtiers, and stopped on the brink with their heads turned sidewise, one eye closed, the better to see with the other.

The chipmunks respectfully emptied their cheek pouches, scrubbed their paws together, and tucked them out of sight; then stood still as tent pegs.

The pressure of growth around the pool ceased: the very grass waited.

The last sound of all to be heard—and by then it was very quiet—was the soft *whick!* of an owl's eyelids as it awoke to watch.

He came like a cloud, the earth cupping itself to take each of his golden hooves. He stopped on the bank and lowered his head, and for a brief moment his eyes met Barbara's, and she looked into a second universe of wisdom and compassion. Then there was the arch of the magnificent neck, the blinding flash of his golden horn.

And he drank, and he was gone. Everyone knows the water is pure, where the unicorn drinks.

How long had he been there? How long gone? Did time wait too, like the grass?

"And couldn't he stay?" she wept. "Couldn't he stay?"

To have seen the unicorn is a sad thing; one might never see him more. But then—to have seen the unicorn!

She began to make a song.

It was late when Barbara came in from the Bogs, so late the moon was bleached with cold and fleeing to the horizon. She struck the highroad just below the Great House and turned to pass it and go out to her garden house.

Near the locked main gate an animal was barking. A sick animal, a big animal . . .

Barbara could see in the dark better than most, and soon saw the creature clinging to the gate, climbing, uttering that coughing

moan as it went. At the top it slipped, fell outward, dangled; then there was a ripping sound, and it fell heavily to the ground and lay still and quiet.

She ran to it, and it began to make the sound again. It was a man, and he was weeping. It was her love, her love, who was tall and straight and so very alive—her love, battered and bleeding, puffy, broken, his clothes torn, crying.

Now of all times was the time for a lover to receive, to take from the loved one his pain, his trouble, his fear. "Oh, hush, hush," she whispered, her hands touching his bruised face like swift feathers. "It's all over now. It's all over."

She turned him over on his back and knelt to bring him up sitting. She lifted one of his thick arms around her shoulder. He was very heavy, but she was very strong. When he was upright, gasping weakly, she looked up and down the road in the waning moonlight. Nothing, no one. The Great House was dark. Across the road, though, was a meadow with high hedgerows which might break the wind a little.

"Come, my love, my dear love," she whispered. He trembled violently.

All but carrying him, she got him across the road, over the shallow ditch, and through a gap in the hedge. She almost fell with him there. She gritted her teeth and set him down gently. She let him lean against the hedge, and then ran and swept up great armfuls of sweet broom. She made a tight springy bundle of it and set it on the ground beside him, and put a corner of her cloak over it, and gently lowered his head until it was pillowed. She folded the rest of the cloak about him. He was very cold.

There was no water near, and she dared not leave him. With her kerchief she cleaned some of the blood from his face. He was still very cold. He said, "You devil. You rotten little devil."

"Shh." She crept in beside him and cradled his head. "You'll be warm in a minute."

"Stand still," he growled. "Keep running away."

"I won't run away," she whispered. "Oh, my darling, you've been hurt, so hurt. I won't leave you. I promise I won't leave you."

He lay very still. He made the growling sound again.

"I'll tell you a lovely thing," she said softly. "Listen to me, think about the lovely thing," she crooned.

"There's a place in the bog, a pool of pure water, where the trees live beautifully, willow and aspen and birch, where everything is peaceful, my darling, and the flowers grow without tearing their petals. The moss is blue and the water is like diamonds."

"You tell me stories in a thousand voices," he muttered.

"Shh. Listen, my darling. This isn't a story, it's a real place. Four miles north and a little west, and you can see the trees from the ridge with the two dwarf oaks. And I know why the water is pure!" she cried gladly. "I know why!"

He said nothing. He took a deep breath and it hurt him, for he shuddered painfully.

"The unicorn drinks there," she whispered. "I saw him!"

Still he said nothing. She said, "I made a song about it. Listen, this is the song I made:

And He—suddenly gleamed! My dazzled eyes
Coming from outer sunshine to this green
And secret gloaming, met without surprise
The vision. Only after, when the sheen
And Splendor of his going fled away,
I knew amazement, wonder, and despair,
That he should come—and pass—and would not stay,

The Silken-swift—the gloriously Fair!
That he should come—and pass—and would not stay,
So that, forever after, I must go,
Take the long road that mounts against the day,
Travelling in the hope that I shall know
Again that lifted moment, high and sweet,
Somewhere—on purple moor or windy hill—
Remembering still his wild and delicate feet,
The magic and the dream—remembering still!

His breathing was more regular. She said, "I truly *saw* him!"

"I'm blind," he said. "Blind, I'm blind."

"Oh, my dear . . ."

He fumbled for her hand, found it. For a long moment he held it. Then, slowly, he brought up his other hand and with them both he felt her hand, turned it about, squeezed it. Suddenly he grunted, half sitting. "You're here."

"Of course, darling. Of course I'm here."

"Why?" he shouted. "Why? *Why?* Why all of this? Why blind me?" He sat up, mouthing, and put his great hand on her throat. "Why do all that if . . ." The words ran together into an animal noise. Wine and witchery, anger and agony boiled in his veins.

Once she cried out.

Once she sobbed.

"Now," he said, "You'll catch no unicorns. Get away from me." He cuffed her.

"You're mad. You're sick," she cried.

"Get away," he said ominously.

Terrified, she rose. He took the cloak and hurled it after her. It almost toppled her as she ran away, crying silently.

After a long time, from behind the hedge, the sick, coughing sobs began again.

Three weeks later Rita was in the market when a hard hand took her upper arm and pressed her into the angle of a cottage wall. She did not start. She flashed her eyes upward and recognized him, and then said composedly, "Don't touch me."

"I need you to tell me something," he said. "And tell me you will!" His voice was as hard as his hand.

"I'll tell you anything you like," she said. "But don't touch me."

He hesitated, then released her. She turned to him casually. "What is it?" Her gaze darted across his face and its almost-healed scars. The small smile tugged at one corner of her mouth.

His eyes were slits. "I have to know this: why did you make up all that . . . prettiness, that food, that poison . . . just for me? You could have had me for less."

She smiled. "Just for you? It was your turn, that's all."

He was genuinely surprised. "It's happened before?"

She nodded. "Whenever it's the full of the moon—and the squire's away."

"You're lying!"

"You forget yourself!" she said sharply. Then, smiling, "It is the truth, though."

"I'd've heard talk—"

"Would you now? And tell me—how many of your friends know about your humiliating adventure?"

He hung his head.

She nodded. "You see? They go away until they're healed, and they come back and say nothing. And they always will."

"You're a devil . . . Why do you do it? Why?"

"I told you," she said openly. "I'm a woman and I act like a woman in my own way. No man will ever touch me, though. I am virgin and shall remain so."

"You're *what*?" he roared.

She held up a restraining, ladylike glove. "Please," she said, pained.

"Listen," he said, quietly now, but with such intensity that for once she stepped back a pace. He closed his eyes, thinking hard. "You told me—the pool, the pool of the unicorn, and a song, wait. 'The Silken-swift, the gloriously Fair . . .' Remember? And then I—I saw to it that *you'd* never catch a unicorn!"

She shook her head, complete candor in her face. "I like that, 'the Silken-swift.' Pretty. But believe me—no! That isn't mine."

He put his face close to hers, and though it was barely a whisper, it came out like bullets. "Liar! Liar! I couldn't forget. I was sick, I was hurt, I was poisoned, but I know what I did!" He turned on his heel and strode away.

She put the thumb of her glove against her upper teeth for a second, then ran after him. "Del!"

He stopped but, rudely, would not turn. She rounded him, faced him. "I'll not have you believing that of me—it's the one thing I have left," she said tremulously.

He made no attempt to conceal his surprise. She controlled her expression with a visible effort, and said, "Please. Tell me a little more—just about the pool, the song, whatever it was."

"You don't remember?"

"I don't *know*!" she flashed. She was deeply agitated.

He said with mock patience, "You told me of a unicorn pool out on the Bogs. You said you had seen *him* drink there. You made a song about it. And then I—"

"Where? Where was this?"

"You forget so soon?"

"Where? Where did it happen?"

"In the meadow, across the road from your gate, where you followed me," he said. "Where my sight came back to me, when the sun came up."

She looked at him blankly, and slowly her face changed. First the imprisoned smile struggling to be free, and then—she was herself again, and she laughed. She laughed a great ringing peal of the laughter that had plagued him so, and she did not stop until he put one hand behind his back, then the other, and she saw his shoulders swell with the effort to keep from striking her dead.

"You animal!" she said, good-humoredly. "Do you know what you've done? Oh, you . . . you *animal*!" She glanced around to see that there were no ears to hear her. "I left you at the foot of the terrace steps," she told him. Her eyes sparkled. "Inside the gates, you understand? And you . . ."

"Don't laugh," he said quietly.

She did not laugh. "That was someone else out there. Who, I can't imagine. But it wasn't I."

He paled. "You followed me out."

"On my soul I did not," she said soberly. Then she quelled another laugh.

"That can't be," he said. "I couldn't have . . ."

"But you were blind, blind and crazy, Del-my-lover!"

"Squire's daughter, take care," he hissed. Then he pulled his big hand through his hair. "It can't be. It's three weeks; I'd have been accused . . ."

"There are those who wouldn't," she smiled. "Or—perhaps she will, in time."

"There has never been a woman so foul," he said evenly, looking her straight in the eye. "You're lying—you know you're lying."

"What must I do to prove it—aside from that which I'll have no man do?"

His lip curled. "Catch the unicorn," he said.

"If I did, you'd believe I was virgin?"

"I must," he admitted. He turned away, then said, over his shoulder, "But—*you*?"

She watched him thoughtfully until he left the marketplace. Her eyes sparkled; then she walked briskly to the goldsmith's, where she ordered a bridle of woven gold.

If the unicorn pool lay in the Bogs nearby, Rita reasoned, someone who was familiar with that brackish wasteland must know of it. And when she made a list in her mind of those few who travelled the Bogs, she knew whom to ask. With that, the other deduction came readily. Her laughter drew stares as she moved through the marketplace.

By the vegetable stall she stopped. The girl looked up patiently.

Rita stood swinging one expensive glove against the other wrist, half-smiling. "So you're the one." She studied the plain, inward-turning, peaceful face until Barbara had to turn her eyes away. Rita said, without further preamble, "I want you to show me the unicorn pool in two weeks."

Barbara looked up again, and now it was Rita who dropped her eyes. Rita said, "I can have someone else find it, of course. If you'd rather not." She spoke very clearly, and people turned to listen. They looked from Barbara to Rita and back again, and they waited.

"I don't mind," said Barbara faintly. As soon as Rita had left, smiling, she packed up her things and went silently back to her house.

The goldsmith, of course, made no secret of such an extraordinary commission; and that, plus the gossips who had overheard Rita talking to Barbara, made the expedition into a cavalcade. The whole village turned out to see; the boys kept firmly in check so that Rita might lead the way; the young bloods ranged behind her (some a little less carefree than they might be and others snickering behind their hands). Behind them the girls, one or two a little pale, others eager as cats to see the squire's daughter fail, and perhaps even . . . but then, only she had the golden bridle.

She carried it casually, but casualness could not hide it, for it was not wrapped, and it swung and blazed in the sun. She wore a flowing white robe, trimmed a little short so that she might negotiate the rough bogland; she had on a golden girdle and little gold sandals, and a gold chain bound her head and hair like a coronet.

Barbara walked quietly a little behind Rita, closed in with her own thoughts. Not once did she look at Del, who strode somberly by himself.

Rita halted a moment and let Barbara catch up, then walked beside her. "Tell me," she said quietly, "why did you come? It needn't have been you."

"I'm his friend," Barbara said. She quickly touched the bridle with her finger. "The unicorn."

"Oh," said Rita. "The unicorn." She looked archly at the other girl. "You wouldn't betray all your friends, would you?"

Barbara looked at her thoughtfully, without anger. "If—when you catch the unicorn," she said carefully, "what will you do with him?"

"What an amazing question! I shall keep him, of course!"

"I thought I might persuade you to let him go."

Rita smiled, and hung the bridle on her other arm. "You could never do that."

"I know," said Barbara. "But I thought I might, so that's why I came." And before Rita could answer, she dropped behind again.

The last ridge, the one which overlooked the unicorn pool, saw a series of gasps as the ranks of villagers topped it, one after the other, and saw what lay below; and it was indeed beautiful.

Surprisingly, it was Del who took it upon himself to call out, in his great voice, "Everyone wait here!" And everyone did; the top of the ridge filled slowly, from one side to the other, with craning, murmuring people. And then Del bounded after Rita and Barbara.

Barbara said, "I'll stop here."

"Wait," said Rita, imperiously. Of Del she demanded, "What are you coming for?"

"To see fair play," he growled. "The little I know of witchcraft makes me like none of it."

"Very well," she said calmly. Then she smiled her very own smile. "Since you insist, I'd rather enjoy Barbara's company too."

Barbara hesitated. "Come, he won't hurt you, girl," said Rita. "He doesn't know you exist."

"Oh," said Barbara, wonderingly.

Del said gruffly, "I do so. She has the vegetable stall."

Rita smiled at Barbara, the secrets bright in her eyes. Barbara said nothing, but came with them.

"You should go back, you know," Rita said silkily to Del, when she could. "Haven't you been humiliated enough yet?"

He did not answer.

She said, "Stubborn animal! Do you think I'd have come this far if I weren't sure?"

"Yes," said Del, "I think perhaps you would."

They reached the blue moss. Rita shuffled it about with her feet and then sank gracefully down to it. Barbara stood alone in the shadows of the willow grove. Del thumped gently at an aspen with his fist. Rita, smiling, arranged the bridle to cast, and laid it across her lap.

The rabbits stayed hid. There was an uneasiness about the grove. Barbara sank to her knees, and put out her hand. A chipmunk ran to nestle in it.

This time there was a difference. This time it was not the slow silencing of living things that warned of his approach, but a sudden babble from the people on the ridge.

Rita gathered her legs under her like a sprinter, and held the bridle poised. Her eyes were round and bright, and the tip of her tongue showed between her white teeth. Barbara was a statue. Del put his back against his tree, and became as still as Barbara.

Then from the ridge came a single, simultaneous intake of breath, and silence. One knew without looking that some stared speechless, that some buried their faces or threw an arm over their eyes.

He came.

He came slowly this time, his golden hooves choosing his paces like so many embroidery needles. He held his splendid head high. He regarded the three on the bank gravely, and then turned to look at the ridge for a moment. At last he turned, and came round the pond by the willow grove. Just on the blue moss, he stopped to look down into the pond. It seemed that he drew one deep clear breath. He bent his head then, and drank, and lifted his head to shake away the shining drops.

He turned toward the three spellbound humans and looked at them each in turn. And it was not Rita he went to, at last, nor

Barbara. He came to Del, and he drank of Del's eyes with his own just as he had partaken of the pool—deeply and at leisure. The beauty and wisdom were there, and the compassion, and what looked like a bright white point of anger. Del knew that the creature had read everything then, and that he knew all three of them in ways unknown to human beings.

There was a majestic sadness in the way he turned then, and dropped his shining head, and stepped daintily to Rita. She sighed, and rose up a little, lifting the bridle. The unicorn lowered his horn to receive it—

—and tossed his head, tore the bridle out of her grasp, sent the golden thing high in the air. It turned there in the sun, and fell into the pond.

And the instant it touched the water, the pond was a bog and the birds rose mourning from the trees. The unicorn looked up at them, and shook himself. Then he trotted to Barbara and knelt, and put his smooth, stainless head in her lap.

Barbara's hands stayed on the ground by her sides. Her gaze roved over the warm white beauty, up to the tip of the golden horn and back.

The scream was frightening. Rita's hands were up like claws, and she had bitten her tongue; there was blood on her mouth. She screamed again. She threw herself off the now withered moss toward the unicorn and Barbara. "She can't be!" Rita shrieked. She collided with Del's broad right hand. "It's wrong, I tell you, she, you, I . . ."

"I'm satisfied," said Del, low in his throat. "Keep away, squire's daughter."

She recoiled from him, made as if to try to circle him. He stepped forward. She ground her chin into one shoulder, then the

other, in a gesture of sheer frustration, turned suddenly and ran toward the ridge. "It's mine, it's mine," she screamed. "I tell you it can't be hers, don't you understand? I never once, I never did, but she, but she—"

She slowed and stopped, then, and fell silent at the sound that rose from the ridge. It began like the first patter of rain on oak leaves, and it gathered voice until it was a rumble and then a roar. She stood looking up, her face working, the sound washing over her. She shrank from it.

It was laughter.

She turned once, a pleading just beginning to form on her face. Del regarded her stonily. She faced the ridge then, and squared her shoulders, and walked up the hill, to go into the laughter, to go through it, to have it follow her all the way home and all the days of her life.

Del turned to Barbara just as she bent over the beautiful head. She said, "Silken-swift . . . go free."

The unicorn raised its head and looked up at Del. Del's mouth opened. He took a clumsy step forward, stopped again. *"You!"*

Barbara's face was set. "You weren't to know," she choked. "You weren't ever to know . . . I was so glad you were blind, because I thought you'd never know."

He fell on his knees beside her. And when he did, the unicorn touched her face with his satin nose, and all the girl's pent-up beauty flooded outward. The unicorn rose from his kneeling, and whickered softly. Del looked at her, and only the unicorn was more beautiful. He put out his hand to the shining neck, and for a moment felt the incredible silk of the mane flowing across his fingers. The unicorn reared then, and wheeled, and in a great leap was across the bog, and in two more was on the crest of the farther

ridge. He paused there briefly, with the sun on him, and then was gone.

Barbara said, "For us, he lost his pool, his beautiful pool."

And Del said, "He will get another. He must." With difficulty he added, "He couldn't be . . . punished . . . for being so gloriously Fair."

The Flight of the Horse

Larry Niven

THE YEAR WAS 750 AA (AnteAtomic) or 1200 AD (Anno Domini), approximately. Hanville Svetz stepped out of the extension cage and looked about him.

To Svetz the atomic bomb was eleven hundred years old and the horse was a thousand years dead. It was his first trip into the past. His training didn't count; it had not included actual time travel, which cost several million commercials a shot. Svetz was groggy from the peculiar gravitational side effects of time travel. He was high on pre–Industrial Age air, and drunk on his own sense of destiny; while at the same time he was not really convinced that he had *gone* anywhere. Or any when. Trade joke.

He was not carrying the anesthetic rifle. He had come to get a horse; he had not expected to meet one at the door. How big was a horse? Where were horses found? Consider what the Institute had had to go on: a few pictures in a salvaged children's book, and an old legend, not to be trusted, that the horse had once been used as a kind of animated vehicle!

In an empty land beneath an overcast sky, Svetz braced himself with one hand on the curved flank of the extension cage. His head was spinning. It took him several seconds to realize that he was looking at a horse.

It stood fifteen yards away, regarding Svetz with large intelligent brown eyes. It was much larger than he had expected. Further, the horse in the picture book had had a glossy brown pelt with a short mane, while the beast now facing Svetz was pure white, with a mane that flowed like a woman's long hair. There were other differences . . . but no matter, the beast matched the book too well to be anything but a horse.

To Svetz it seemed that the horse watched him, waited for him to realize what was happening. Then, while Svetz wasted more time wondering why he wasn't holding a rifle, the horse laughed, turned and departed. It disappeared with astonishing speed.

Svetz began to shiver. Nobody had warned him that the horse might have been sentient! Yet the beast's mocking laugh had sounded far too human.

Now he knew. He was deep, deep in the past.

Not even the horse was as convincing as the emptiness the horse had left behind. No reaching apartment towers clawed the horizon. No contrails scratched the sky. The world was trees and flowers and rolling grassland, innocent of men.

The silence— It was as if Svetz had gone deaf. He had heard no sound since the laughter of the horse. In the year 1100 PostAtomic, such silence could have been found nowhere on Earth. Listening, Svetz knew at last that he had reached the British Isles before the coming of civilization. He had traveled in time.

The extension cage was the part of the time machine that did the traveling. It had its own air supply, and needed it while being pushed through time. But not here. Not before civilization's dawn; not when the air had never been polluted by fission wastes and the combustion of coal, hydrocarbons, tobaccos, wood, et al.

Now, retreating in panic from that world of the past to the world of the extension cage, Svetz nonetheless left the door open behind him.

He felt better inside the cage. Outside was an unexplored planet, made dangerous by ignorance. Inside the cage it was no different from a training mission. Svetz had spent hundreds of hours in a detailed mock-up of this cage, with a computer running the dials. There had even been artificial gravity to simulate the peculiar side effects of motion in time.

By now the horse would have escaped. But he now knew its size, and he knew there were horses in the area. To business, then . . .

Svetz took the anesthetic rifle from where it was clamped to the wall. He loaded it with what he guessed was the right size of soluble crystalline anesthetic needle. The box held several different sizes, the smallest of which would knock a shrew harmlessly unconscious, the largest of which would do the same for an elephant. He slung the rifle and stood up.

The world turned gray. Svetz caught a wall clamp to stop himself from falling.

The cage had stopped moving twenty minutes ago. He shouldn't still be dizzy!—But it had been a long trip. Never before had the Institute for Temporal Research pushed a cage beyond zero PA. A long trip and a strange one, with gravity pulling Svetz's mass uniformly toward Svetz's navel . . .

When his head cleared, he turned to where other equipment was clamped to a wall.

The flight stick was a lift field generator and power source built into five feet of pole, with a control ring at one end, a brush discharge at the other, and a bucket seat and seat belt in the middle.

Compact even for Svetz's age, the flight stick was a spinoff from the spaceflight industries.

But it still weighed thirty pounds with the motor off. Getting it out of the clamps took all his strength. Svetz felt queasy, very queasy.

He bent to pick up the flight stick, and abruptly realized that he was about to faint.

He hit the door button and fainted.

"We don't know where on Earth you'll wind up," Ra Chen had told him. Ra Chen was the Director of the Institute for Temporal Research, a large round man with gross, exaggerated features and a permanent air of disapproval. "That's because we can't focus on a particular time of day—or on a particular year, for that matter. You won't appear underground or inside anything because of energy considerations. If you come out a thousand feet in the air, the cage won't fall; it'll settle slowly, using up energy with a profligate disregard for our budget . . ."

And Svetz had dreamed that night, vividly. Over and over his extension cage appeared inside solid rock, exploded with a roar and a blinding flash.

"Officially the horse is for the Bureau of History," Ra Chen had said. "In practice it's for the Secretary-General, for his twenty-eighth birthday. Mentally he's about six years old, you know. The royal family's getting a bit inbred these days. We managed to send him a picture book we picked up in 130 PA, and now the lad wants a horse . . ."

Svetz had seen himself being shot for treason, for the crime of listening to such talk.

". . . Otherwise we'd never have gotten the appropriation for this trip. It's in a good cause. We'll do some cloning from the horse before we send the original to the UN. Then—well, genes are a code, and codes can be broken. Get us a male, and we'll make all the horses anyone could want."

But why would anyone want even one horse? Svetz had studied a computer duplicate of the child's picture book that an agent had pulled from a ruined house a thousand years ago. The horse did not impress him.

Ra Chen, however, terrified him.

"We've never sent anyone this far back," Ra Chen had told him the night before the mission, when it was too late to back out with honor. "Keep that in mind. If something goes wrong, don't count on the rule book. Don't count on your instruments. Use your head. Your head, Svetz. Gods know it's little enough to depend on . . ."

Svetz had not slept in the hours before departure.

"You're scared stiff," Ra Chen had commented just before Svetz entered the extension cage. "And you can hide it, Svetz. I think I'm the only one who's noticed. That's why I picked you, because you can be terrified and go ahead anyway. Don't come back without a horse . . ."

The Director's voice grew louder. "Not without a horse, Svetz. Your *head*, Svetz, your HEAD . . ."

Svetz sat up convulsively. The air! Slow death if he didn't close the door! But the door was closed, and Svetz was sitting on the floor holding his head, which hurt.

The air system had been transplanted intact, complete with dials, from a Martian sandboat. The dials read normally, of course, since the cage was sealed.

Svetz nerved himself to open the door. As the sweet, rich air of twelfth-century Britain rushed in, Svetz held his breath and

watched the dials change. Presently he closed the door and waited, sweating, while the air system replaced the heady poison with its own safe, breathable mixture.

When next he left the extension cage, carrying the flight stick, Svetz was wearing another spin-off from the interstellar exploration industries. It was a balloon, and he wore it over his head. It was also a selectively permeable membrane, intended to pass certain gasses in and others out, to make a breathing-air mixture inside.

It was nearly invisible except at the rim. There, where light was refracted most severely, the balloon showed as a narrow golden circle enclosing Svetz's head. The effect was not unlike a halo as shown in medieval paintings. But Svetz didn't know about medieval paintings.

He wore also a simple white robe, undecorated, constricted at the waist, otherwise falling in loose folds. The Institute thought that such a garment was least likely to violate taboos of sex or custom. The trade kit dangled loose from his sash: a heat-and-pressure gadget, a pouch of corundum, small phials of additives for color.

Lastly he wore a hurt and baffled look. How was it that he could not breathe the clean air of his own past?

The air of the cage was the air of Svetz's time, and was nearly 4 percent carbon dioxide. The air of 750 AnteAtomic held barely a tenth of that. Man was a rare animal here and now. He had breathed little air, he had destroyed few green forests, he had burnt scant fuel since the dawn of time.

But industrial civilization meant combustion. Combustion meant carbon dioxide thickening in the atmosphere many times faster than the green plants could turn it back to oxygen. Svetz was at the far end of two thousand years of adaptation to air rich in CO_2.

It takes a concentration of carbon dioxide to trigger the autonomic nerves in the lymph glands in a man's left armpit. Svetz had fainted because he wasn't breathing.

So now he wore a balloon, and felt rejected.

He straddled the flight stick and twisted the control knob on the fore end. The stick lifted under him, and he wriggled into place on the bucket seat. He twisted the knob further.

He drifted upward like a toy balloon.

He floated over a lovely land, green and untenanted, beneath a pearl-gray sky empty of contrails. Presently he found a crumbling wall. He turned to follow it.

He would follow the wall until he found a settlement. If the old legend was true—and, Svetz reflected, the horse had certainly been big enough to drag a vehicle—then he would find horses wherever he found men.

Presently it became obvious that a road ran along the wall. There the dirt was flat and bare and consistently wide enough for a walking man; whereas elsewhere the land rose and dipped and tilted. Hard dirt did not a freeway make; but Svetz got the point.

He followed the road, floating at a height of ten meters.

There was a man in worn brown garments. Hooded and barefoot, he walked the road with patient exhaustion, propping himself with a staff. His back was to Svetz.

Svetz thought to dip toward him to ask concerning horses. He refrained. With no way to know where the cage would alight, he had learned no ancient languages at all.

He thought of the trade kit he carried, intended not for communication, but instead of communication. It had never been field-tested. In any case it was not for casual encounters. The pouch of corundum was too small.

Svetz heard a yell from below. He looked down in time to see the man in brown running like the wind, his staff forgotten, his fatigue likewise.

"Something scared him," Svetz decided. But he could see nothing fearful. Something small but deadly, then.

The Institute estimated that man had exterminated more than a thousand species of mammal and bird and insect— some casually, some with malice—between now and the distant present. In this time and place there was no telling what might be a threat. Svetz shuddered. The brown man with the hairy face might well have run from a stinging thing destined to kill Hanville Svetz.

Impatiently Svetz upped the speed of his flight stick. The mission was taking far too long. Who would have guessed that centers of population would have been so far apart?

Half an hour later, shielded from the wind by a paraboloid force field, Svetz was streaking down the road at sixty miles per hour.

His luck had been incredibly bad. Wherever he had chanced across a human being, that person had been just leaving the vicinity. And he had found no centers of population.

Once he had noticed an unnatural stone outcropping high on a hill. No law of geology known to Svetz could have produced such an angular, flat-sided monstrosity. Curious, he had circled above it—and had abruptly realized that the thing was hollow, riddled with rectangular holes.

A dwelling for men? He didn't want to believe it. Living within the hollows of such a thing would be like living underground. But men tend to build at right angles, and this thing was all right angles.

Below the hollowed stone structure were rounded, hairy-looking hummocks of dried grass, each with a man-sized door.

Obviously they must be nests for very large insects. Svetz had left that place quickly.

The road rounded a swelling green hill ahead of him. Svetz followed, slowing.

A hilltop spring sent a stream bubbling downhill to break the road. Something large was drinking at the stream.

Svetz jerked to a stop in midair. *Open water: deadly poison.* He would have been hard put to say which had startled him more: the horse, or the fact that it had just committed suicide.

The horse looked up and saw him.

It was the same horse. White as milk, with a flowing abundance of snowy mane and tail, it almost had to be the horse that had laughed at Svetz and run. Svetz recognized the malignance in its eyes, in the moment before it turned its back.

But how could it have arrived so fast?

Svetz was reaching for the gun when the situation turned upside down.

The girl was young, surely no more than sixteen. Her hair was long and dark and plaited in complex fashion. Her dress, of strangely stiff blue fabric, reached from her neck to her ankles. She was seated in the shadow of a tree, on dark cloth spread over the dark earth. Svetz had not noticed her, might never have noticed her . . .

But the horse walked up to her, folded its legs in alternate pairs, and laid its ferocious head in her lap.

The girl had not yet seen Svetz.

"Xenophilia!" Svetz snarled the worst word he could think of. Svetz hated aliens.

The horse obviously belonged to the girl. He could not simply shoot it and take it. It would have to be purchased . . . somehow.

He needed time to think! And there was no time, for the girl might look up at any moment. Baleful brown eyes watched him as he dithered . . .

He dared waste no more time searching the countryside for a wild horse. There was an uncertainty, a Finagle factor in the math of time travel. It manifested itself as an uncertainty in the energy of a returning extension cage, and it increased with time. Let Svetz linger too long, and he could be roasted alive in the returning cage.

Moreover, the horse had drunk open water. It would die, and soon, unless Svetz could return it to 1100 PostAtomic. Thus the beast's removal from this time could not change the history of Svetz's own world. It was a good choice . . . if he could conquer his fear of the beast.

The horse was tame. Young and slight as she was, the girl had no trouble controlling it. What was there to fear?

But there was its natural weaponry . . . of which Ra Chen's treacherous picture book had shown no sign. Svetz surmised that later generations routinely removed it before the animals were old enough to be dangerous. He should have come a few centuries later . . .

And there was the look in its eye. The horse hated Svetz, and it knew Svetz was afraid.

Could he shoot it from ambush?

No. The girl would worry if her pet collapsed without reason. She would be unable to concentrate on what Svetz was trying to tell her.

He would have to work with the animal watching him. If the girl couldn't control it—or if he lost her trust—Svetz had little doubt that the horse would kill him.

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The horse looked up as Svetz approached, but made no other move. The girl watched too, her eyes round with wonder. She called something that must have been a question.

Svetz smiled back and continued his approach. He was a foot above the ground, and gliding at dead slow. Riding the world's only flying machine, he looked impressive as all hell, and knew it.

The girl did not smile back. She watched warily. Svetz was within yards of her when she scrambled to her feet.

He stopped the flight stick at once and let it settle. Smiling placatorially, he removed the heat-and-pressure device from his sash. He moved with care. The girl was on the verge of running.

The trade kit was a pouch of corundum, $A1_20_3$, several phials of additives, and the heat-and-pressure gadget. Svetz poured corundum into the chamber, added a dash of chromic oxide, and used the plunger. The cylinder grew warm. Presently Svetz dropped a pigeon's-blood star ruby into his hand, rolled it in his fingers, held it to the sun. It was red as dark blood, with a blazing white six-pointed star.

It was almost too hot to hold.

Stupid! Svetz held his smile rigid. Ra Chen should have warned him! What would she think when she felt the gem's unnatural heat? What trickery would she suspect?

But he had to chance it. The trade kit was all he had.

He bent and rolled the gem to her across the damp ground.

She stooped to pick it up. One hand remained on the horse's neck, calming it. Svetz noticed the rings of yellow metal around her wrist; and he also noticed the dirt.

She held the gem high, looked into its deep red fire.

"Ooooh," she breathed. She smiled at Svetz in wonder and delight. Svetz smiled back, moved two steps nearer, and rolled her a yellow sapphire.

★★★

How had he twice chanced on the same horse? Svetz never knew. But he soon knew how it had arrived before him . . .

He had given the girl three gems. He held three more in his hand while he beckoned her onto the flight stick. She shook her head; she would not go. Instead she mounted the animal.

She and the horse, they watched Svetz for his next move.

Svetz capitulated. He had expected the horse to follow the girl while the girl rode behind him on the flight stick. But if they both followed Svetz it would be the same.

The horse stayed to one side and a little behind Svetz's flight stick. It did not seem inconvenienced by the girl's weight. Why should it be? It must have been bred for the task. Svetz notched his speed higher, to find how fast he could conveniently move.

Faster, he flew, and faster. The horse must have a limit . . .

He was up to eighty before he quit. The girl lay flat along the animal's back, hugging its neck to protect her face from the wind. But the horse ran on, daring Svetz with its eyes.

How to describe such motion? Svetz had never seen ballet. He knew how machinery moved, and this wasn't it. All he could think of was a man and a woman making love. Slippery-smooth rhythmic motion, absolute single-minded purpose, motion for the pleasure of motion. It was terrible in its beauty, the flight of the horse.

The word for such running must have died with the horse itself.

The horse would never have tired, but the girl did. She tugged on the animal's mane, and it stopped. Svetz gave her the jewels he held, made four more and gave her one.

She was crying from the wind, crying and smiling as she took the jewels. Was she smiling for the jewels, or for the joy of the ride?

Exhausted, panting, she lay with her back against the warm, pulsing flank of the resting animal. Only her hand moved, as she ran her fingers repeatedly through its silver mane. The horse watched Svetz with malevolent brown eyes.

The girl was homely. It wasn't just the jarring lack of makeup. There was evidence of vitamin starvation. She was short, less than five feet in height, and thin. There were marks of childhood disease. But happiness glowed behind her homely face, and it made her almost passable, as she clutched the corundum stones.

When she seemed rested, Svetz remounted. They went on.

He was almost out of corundum when they reached the extension cage. There it was that he ran into trouble.

The girl had been awed by Svetz's jewels, and by Svetz himself, possibly because of his height or his ability to fly. But the extension cage scared her. Svetz couldn't blame her. The side with the door in it was no trouble: just a seamless spherical mirror. But the other side blurred away in a direction men could not visualize. It had scared Svetz spitless the first time he saw the time machine in action.

He could buy the horse from her, shoot it here and pull it inside, using the flight stick to float it. But it would be so much easier if . . .

It was worth a try. Svetz used the rest of his corundum. Then he walked into the extension cage, leaving a trail of colored corundum beads behind him.

He had worried because the heat-and-pressure device would not produce facets. The stones all came out shaped like miniature hen's-eggs. But he was able to vary the color, using chromic oxide for red and ferric oxide for yellow and titanium for blue; and he could vary the pressure planes, to produce cat's-eyes or star gems at will. He left a trail of small stones, red and yellow and blue . . .

And the girl followed, frightened, but unable to resist the bait. By now she had nearly filled a handkerchief with the stones. The horse followed her into the extension cage.

Inside, she looked at the four stones in Svetz's hand: one of each color, red and yellow and light blue and black, the largest he could make. He pointed to the horse, then to the stones.

The girl agonized. Svetz perspired. She didn't want to give up the horse . . . and Svetz was out of corundum . . .

She nodded, one swift jerk of her chin. Quickly, before she could change her mind, Svetz poured the stones into her hand. She clutched the hoard to her bosom and ran out of the cage, sobbing.

The horse stood up to follow.

Svetz swung the rifle and shot it. A bead of blood appeared on the animal's neck. It shied back, then sighted on Svetz along its natural bayonet.

Poor kid, Svetz thought as he turned to the door. But she'd have lost the horse anyway. It had sucked polluted water from an open stream. Now he need only load the flight stick aboard . . .

Motion caught the corner of his eye.

A false assumption can be deadly. Svetz had not waited for the horse to fall. It was with something of a shock that he realized the truth. The beast wasn't about to fall. It was about to spear him like a cocktail shrimp.

He hit the door button and dodged.

Exquisitely graceful, exquisitely sharp, the spiral horn slammed into the closing door. The animal turned like white lightning in the confines of the cage, and again Svetz leapt for his life.

The point missed him by half an inch. It plunged past him and into the control board, through the plastic panel and into the wiring beneath.

Something sparkled and something sputtered.

The horse was taking careful aim, sighting along the spear in its forehead. Svetz did the only thing he could think of. He pulled the home-again lever.

The horse screamed as it went into free fall. The horn, intended for Svetz's navel, ripped past his ear and tore his breathing-balloon wide open.

Then gravity returned; but it was the peculiar gravity of an extension cage moving forward through time. Svetz and the horse were pulled against the padded walls. Svetz sighed in relief.

He sniffed again in disbelief. The smell was strong and strange, like nothing Svetz had ever smelled before. The animal's terrible horn must have damaged the air plant.

Very likely he was breathing poison. If the cage didn't return in time . . .

But would it return at all? It might be going anywhere, any when, the way that ivory horn had smashed through anonymous wiring. They might come out at the end of time, when even the black infrasuns gave not enough heat to sustain life.

There might not even be a future to return to. He had left the flight stick. How would it be used? What would they make of it, with its control handle at one end and the brush-style static discharge at the other and the saddle in the middle? Perhaps the girl would try to use it. He could visualize her against the night sky, in the light of a full moon . . . and how would that change history?

The horse seemed on the verge of apoplexy. Its sides heaved, its eyes rolled wildly. Probably it was the cabin air, thick with carbon dioxide. Again, it might be the poison the horse had sucked from an open stream.

Gravity died. Svetz and the horse tumbled in free fall, and the horse queasily tried to gore him.

Gravity returned, and Svetz, who was ready for it, landed on top. Someone was already opening the door.

Svetz took the distance in one bound. The horse followed, screaming with rage, intent on murder. Two men went flying as it charged out into the Institute control center.

"It doesn't take anesthetics!" Svetz shouted over his shoulder. The animal's agility was hampered here among the desks and lighted screens, and it was probably drunk on hyperventilation. It kept stumbling into desks and men. Svetz easily stayed ahead of the slashing horn.

A full panic was developing . . .

"We couldn't have done it without Zeera," Ra Chen told him much later. "Your idiot tanj horse had the whole Center terrorized. All of a sudden it went completely tame, walked up to that frigid bitch Zeera, and let her lead it away."

"Did you get it to the hospital in time?"

Ra Chen nodded gloomily. Gloom was his favorite expression and was no indication of his true feelings. "We found over fifty unknown varieties of bacteria in the beast's bloodstream. Yet it hardly looked sick! It looked healthy as a . . . healthy as a . . . It must have tremendous stamina. We managed to save not only the horse, but most of the bacteria too, for the Zoo."

Svetz was sitting up in a hospital bed, with his arm up to the elbow in a diagnostician. There was always the chance that he too had located some long-extinct bacterium. He shifted uncomfortably, being careful not to move the wrong arm, and asked, "Did you ever find an anesthetic that worked?"

"Nope. Sorry about that, Svetz. We still don't know why your needles didn't work. The tanj horse is simply immune to tranks of any kind.

"Incidentally, there was nothing wrong with your air plant. You were smelling the horse."

"I wish I'd known that. I thought I was dying."

"It's driving the interns crazy, that smell. And we can't seem to get it out of the Center." Ra Chen sat down on the edge of the bed. "What bothers me is the horn on its forehead. The horse in the picture book had no horns."

"No, sir."

"Then it must be a different species. It's not really a horse, Svetz. We'll have to send you back. It'll break our budget, Svetz."

"I disagree, sir—"

"Don't be so tanj polite."

"Then don't be so tanj stupid, sir." Svetz was not going back for another horse. "People who kept tame horses must have developed the habit of cutting off the horn when the animal was a pup. Why not? We all saw how dangerous that horn is. Much too dangerous for a domestic animal."

"Then why does our horse have a horn?"

"That's why I thought it was wild, the first time I saw it. I suppose they didn't start cutting off horns until later in history."

Ra Chen nodded in gloomy satisfaction. "I thought so too. Our problem is that the Secretary-General is barely bright enough to notice that his horse has a horn, and the picture-book horse doesn't. He's bound to blame me."

"Mmm." Svetz wasn't sure what was expected of him.

"I'll have to have the horn amputated."

"Somebody's bound to notice the scar," said Svetz.

"Tanj it, you're right. I've got enemies at court. They'd be only too happy to claim I'd mutilated the Secretary-General's pet." Ra Chen glared at Svetz. "All right, let's hear *your* idea."

Svetz was busy regretting. Why had he spoken? His vicious, beautiful horse, tamely docked of its killer horn . . . He had found the thought repulsive. His impulse had betrayed him. What could they do but remove the horn?

He had it. "Change the picture book, not the horse. A computer could duplicate the book in detail, but with a horn on every horse. Use the Institute computer, then wipe the tape afterward."

Morosely thoughtful, Ra Chen said, "That might work. I know someone who could switch the books." He looked up from under bushy black brows. "Of course, you'd have to keep your mouth shut."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't forget." Ra Chen got up. "When you get out of the diagnostician, you start a four weeks vacation."

"I'm sending you back for one of these," Ra Chen told him four weeks later. He opened the bestiary. "We picked up the book in a public park around ten PostAtomic; left the kid who was holding it playing with a corundum egg."

Svetz examined the picture. "That's ugly. That's really ugly. You're trying to balance the horse, right? The horse was so beautiful, you've got to have one of these or the universe goes off balance."

Ra Chen closed his eyes in pain. "Just go get us the Gila monster, Svetz. The Secretary-General wants a Gila monster."

"How big is it?"

They both looked at the illustration. There was no way to tell.

"From the looks of it, we'd better use the *big* extension cage."

Svetz barely made it back that time. He was suffering from total exhaustion and extensive second-degree burns. The thing he brought back was thirty feet long, had vestigial bat-like wings, breathed fire, and didn't look very much like the illustration; but it was as close as anything he'd found.

The Secretary-General loved it.

Braid of Days and Wake of Nights

E. Lily Yu

For Jay Lake and Bronwyn Lake

THE SEAT BENEATH her was glossy plastic and not interested in prolonging their acquaintance. Shifting from thigh to thigh, Julia Popova flipped through newspapers in search of the logo and slogans for bourbon that she had labored over for weeks.

> *New York Times*, March 3, 2005—ESCAPED CARRIAGE HORSE. Reports to the Parks Department of a stray white horse in Central Park puzzled the Horse and Carriage Association and the Teamsters alike. "No one's unaccounted for," said spokesman Mark Houdlin. "Both the Clinton Park and Hell's Kitchen stables are full at the end of the day."
>
> *New York Daily News*, March 3, 2005—LOST OPERA HORSE? Recent sightings of a white horse on the lam in Central Park have perplexed locals and police. A spokesman from the Metropolitan Opera was unable to confirm

> rumors that their production of "Aida" is short one four-legged cast member.
>
> *New York Post*, March 3, 2005—MYSTERIOUS VOLUNTEER BEAUTIFICATION EFFORTS IN PARK. Seen Central Park lately? You might not recognize it. Over the last two weeks the Lake was raked for plastic cups, the Turtle Pond's thick algae was skimmed off, and the Kennedy Reservoir is now clear as a freshly Windexed mirror. No one has owned up to seeing or being one of the unknown do-gooders, but park staff are thankful.

Julia found her quarter-page ads in Business and Travel. Orange silk and opalized ammonites. *Blissful extinction.* The amber bottle gleaming like sunken treasure in the middle of it all. But the colors that were arresting on the office computers were watery in newsprint, diluted by the fluorescent lights of the clinic.

"How'd they turn out?" Vivian asked. The soft leatherette armchair seemed to swallow both her and the taxane drip feeding into her left arm.

Julia shook her head.

"Okay, how was your date with whatshername, Ellen?"

Julia sighed. "I don't want to talk about it. But look at this. They're still writing about the horse."

"For Chrissake, Julia."

"Soup. It looks like they're selling fancy soup. Beef, butter, onions. I told them to use less color. Save it for the slicks. Client's going to yell at me tomorrow."

"You should quit."

"I wish."

With an immaculate thumbnail, Julia peeled open the ziplock bag in her lap. The coil of hair inside, wide as her thumb and nine feet long, was woven throughout with black and gold strands in equal proportion. When Vivian began chemo last May, her hair had skimmed the lower edge of her scapulae. Three weeks later, her purple stripes had rinsed to blond, and she had not dyed them again. Vivian had smiled at Julia in the bathroom mirror, eyebrows high and brave, but after the first handful slithered to the floor, she handed the humming razor to Julia and covered her eyes.

"You do it," she said.

The braid was almost finished. Julia had added some of her own hair as needed, taking surreptitious snips behind her ears and bleaching her brown waves in a bowl. Vivian's false gold was easier to match than her black. The braid felt both coarse and silky, crackling softly when she ran her fingers along it. Only a few loose locks remained at the bottom of the bag.

Vivian kept glancing at the braid, then away, shivering.

"The hell are you doing with my hair?"

"The Victorians made jewelry out of their relatives' hair," Julia said.

"Sure, but in front of them?" Vivian screwed up her mouth. "I'm not dead yet."

"It's not a mourning piece."

"So what is it?"

"A gift."

"For who?"

Julia hesitated. "Maybe you?"

"Nope. No way." Vivian scratched the down on her skull. She couldn't stand wigs and wore brilliant silk scarves printed with

birds and stars instead. "Weird, isn't it? Doesn't bother me when it's growing on my head, but I can't stand it when it's cut. Slopped around the salon floor—ugh. Like seeing a severed hand."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I won't look."

Vivian opened *Applied and Environmental Biology* and held it up to her face while Julia overlapped yellow strand and black, tugging, straightening, smoothing. When, after half an hour, she noticed Vivian hadn't turned the page, she pinned the end of the braid and dropped everything into her purse.

Eventually a nurse in pink scrubs sailed over and slid the cannula out of Vivian's arm. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

Vivian pushed herself upright without speaking, her face pale, and lurched toward the bathroom. Julia followed. Over the retching and splashing, she made soothing noises and rubbed circles in Vivian's back.

"Pharmacy stop?"

"Thanks."

Julia had bought her indestructible orange Beetle as a ticket out of rusting Paterson with three summers waitressing in an Italian restaurant and five illustrations for two evanescent magazines. She called it the Lady. When the art school letter came, Julia had fought all day with her parents and cried all night for a month before stuffing the Lady to the roof and driving to Providence. She had not looked back.

Although parking took a large bite out of her budget, the odometer clocked 170,000, and the odors of frying oil, mint gum, nail polish, and drive-through coffee had painted a thin and indelible layer over the interior, Julia kept the Lady when she moved to Queens. Even thinking about selling the Lady struck her

as disloyal. Vivian's sudden need was in many ways welcome, and Julia told herself that she had kept the car for times like these.

She left Vivian hunched in the car and ducked into the hard bright aisles of the corner drugstore. At the counter she collected a battery of pharmaceuticals in orange canisters: yolk-yellow Zofran, pentagons of Ativan, dented white Percocet, and smooth white Lomotil. The paper bags crinkled as she thrust them into Vivian's hands.

"You doing okay?"

Vivian was breathing through her teeth, and a bitter, stinging smell drifted from her skin. She wouldn't meet Julia's eyes. "Swell."

Julia double-parked on 119th and watched Vivian until she vanished into her walkup.

Although Central Park at night featured often in her mother's monthly litany of New York horrors, and Julia could not walk there after dark without twitching and jumping at shadows, in all the newspaper accounts she had read, the horse had never been observed before twilight. She went at dusk on a Friday with the braid snaking through the belt loops of her jeans and a jackknife jammed into a pocket to compensate for the judo classes she had never taken. Hawkers of ice cream and soda were shuttering their silver carts. Couples pushed strollers through the orange puddles of park lights, leaning into each other. The air began blue and dimmed and filled with bats.

"Come out," she whispered. "I'm here."

The fine gray gravel of the Bridle Path crunched under her canvas shoes. She walked to Riftstone Arch, now a pool of darkness, and peered underneath. The smell of urine scraped her nose but

bothered her less than it once had. There was a faint, bubbling snore.

"Hello?"

Plastic rustled. Something moved.

"What do you want?" The voice was whiskey and dry leaves.

Squinting into the gloom, Julia distinguished two dim eyes and a glint of teeth. "I'm looking for a white horse."

"Fresh out of horses, sorry. All I got is UFOs and Elvis." The chuckle was low but female, and Julia unlocked her shoulders. "Why?"

"For a friend. She's sick." She tried a smile. "My name's Julia."

The woman who shuffled out was tall and swaddled in stained clothes. "Lorrie."

"So have you seen a horse? No halter, no bridle. Just running loose."

"How's a pony ride help?"

"It might be a unicorn." She bit the inside of her cheek, anticipating laughter. None was forthcoming. Lorrie only folded her arms and tilted her head. "Saint Hildegard wrote that unicorn liver healed leprosy. That unicorn leather cured fevers. The horn was good against poison. No one says anything about cancer, but I figure—"

"Why you askin me?"

"You live here. You might have seen it."

"I don't live here." She coughed thickly. "I been crashin with my uncle when I can, but his house is fulla kids. New wife can't stand me. Sometimes I hit the drop-in center, but those are bad nights."

"Oh."

"March is too cold to sleep outside. You hafta be desperate."

Julia pulled a rumpled bill from her back pocket and held it out, but her hand was swatted aside.

"My problems they bigger than a dollar, unicorn girl."

Julia said, "You must think I'm nuts."

"Of course you is. You carryin a fruit knife shorter than my pinky. You think that's gonna keep you safe from folks like me." She wheezed with laughter as Julia's hand went to her hip. "Your fingers smell like metal. You keep dippin in that pocket. You leanin backwards like you wanna run."

"I'm sorry." Her face went hot.

"It's A-okay. You crazy. And whiter than Wonder Bread. Lots of you come joggin scared around here at night, like you think we bite."

"You didn't laugh when I started talking about unicorns."

"Don't nobody in this city think I exist either. Used to work at the Aqueduct before I hurt my back. Thought I was invisible then. Now? Bam! Gone. What've I got against unicorns?"

"Have you seen one?"

Lorrie shook her head. "Go home."

"Please. Tell me."

"You got ten dollars? I'd use it better than you."

When the money was safely concealed in her clothes, Lorrie straightened and stared. "Think, babygirl. If there a unicorn here? All of us be sleepin sweeter. With no pain. We be smellin honey, fresh bread, lilacs, good days. The wild ones they settle. The angry ones they calm down. If we got a unicorn, why would I tell you? With that knife in your pocket? Leather? Livers? A sick friend? What's that knife for?"

Julia heard bodies stirring sleepily under the bridge.

"Nowhere in this city is safe for me," Lorrie said. "I do what I can to get by. You smell safe and selfish. Hunger and pain and need, you don't know. Go home."

Julia took two steps back, then turned and hurried up the path. She could feel Lorrie's eyes on her. Not until she emerged from the chained green tangle of the park into the traffic of Central Park West did she exhale her double lungful of fear.

"I have to talk to you—"

"If there's a unicorn," Julia said, "I'll bring you its horn. I promise. Abracadabra, Australopithecus, poof, tumors gone. Like *that*."

"No. Listen to me." Vivian shut the cabinet and set two mugs on the scarred table. A chocolate cake slumped half-eaten on scalloped gold paper. *WE'LL MISS YOU VIV* in green jelly icing. A cardboard box of her notebooks and rubber-banded pens had been shoved under a chair, and Julia kept kicking it by accident.

Her last day at the lab, Vivian said. Everyone had pretended the departure was a happy one.

"But that's not what you want to tell me."

"Ginger? Chamomile? Black?" Vivian fanned out the tea bags. "We're stopping chemo. I'm done."

"You can't."

"Three fresh lesions on my liver. You want to argue? It's right here, you can talk to it if you want." She tipped a kettle, and hot water chortled into the mugs. "Be real persuasive, cuz they say two months, best case."

Julia raised a cup, the steam blurring her vision. The right words were somewhere, buried under jingles, loud typefaces,

the shotgun poetry of advertising. Never again would she smell bergamot without the sting of tears.

"Give me some time. Let me try."

"Spend my last days vomiting, you mean?"

"There's a unicorn, Vivian."

Vivian's laugh was hard and tired. "People stopped believing in unicorns in middle school."

"So I have a rich imaginative life. Sue me."

"You couldn't imagine your way out of a cubicle." Vivian rubbed her eyes. "I remember when you talked grants, galleries, art shows, MoMA. Where are you now? Selling watches and vacations to people who don't want them. Cold calling. Retouching portraits of steak."

Julia pushed away from the table. "I have to live, Viv."

"And I have to die. Well, we all do. But I'm going to do it the way I want. With friends. With dignity. More water?"

"No."

Vivian refilled both mugs. "Anyway, Asian girls never get unicorns."

"How do you know that?"

"Beagle. L'Engle. Lewis. Coville and Gaiman, even though I was too old. I looked anyway, just in case. When I was a kid it was Laurence Yep, take it or leave it. Lots of dragons, no unicorns. None for you either, right? Aren't you more likely to find a domovoi or a leshy? When did Russia get unicorns?"

"Late fifteenth century."

"You checked."

"Of course I checked."

Vivian grabbed Julia's hand across the table. "It's sweet of you, but you've got better things to do."

"Fine. No unicorns for you." Julia picked up a pen and one of the insurance forms on the table. "Say you're giving up. What's next?"

"Hospice. Starting next week."

Hospice meant nurses, Julia discovered, and the sweetish smell of Roxanol. Clutching a sheaf of filled-out forms, she let herself in with the spare key, then stood in the hallway, bewildered, as brisk strangers squeezed past her. A silver IV tree had sprouted in the kitchen. Vivian's aunt, who drove up from Queens on the weekends with cooked food in foil pans, fussed at Julia, plucking off her coat and bag.

"Nothing serious," she said to the expression on Julia's face. "It's the rules. Someone has to be here every day. One of her cousins, or me."

Vivian was lying in bed, her eyes closed, a transparent loop of oxygen around her head. The tall windows she loved were ajar and clattered softly as the warm, astringent air inside mixed with the damp breath of March.

Loneliness gusted through Julia, sudden as rain.

"What am I going to do without you?" she asked, hating herself for the question.

Vivian opened one eye. "Watch it. I'm not dead yet."

"You know what I mean."

"I can still beat your ass. Tremble in fear."

Julia sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, careful not to bounce. Nine years ago they had washed up in New York together, both of them certain that success lay around the corner, or behind the next door, even as the gum-glazed sidewalk ate blisters into

their heels and the rent came due again and again and again. The thought of living without Vivian's rude jokes and good taste, her crayon annotations of newspapers and leaflets, her abrupt phone calls—"You free at eight? Nice dress? Good!"—hollowed her chest. "What will I do?"

"Cry. Breathe. Live. Fall in love. You'll be better at that when I'm gone, really you will. Skydive. Have children, if you want them. Play tennis. Snorkel. Visit Morocco. All the things I can't do anymore. Next question."

"It's not fair."

"Fair?" Vivian smacked the mattress. "I wanted kids. I got Gregory and cancer. I wanted a career in microbiology. I got two postdocs and Gregory and a layoff and cancer."

"And six second-author papers in first-tier journals."

"I'm thirty-three, Julia. Thirty-three! I'll never ride a horse or learn how to snowboard, I'll never drive to the Grand Canyon and order coffee in every diner on the way, I'll never see Moscow, I'll never have a houseboat, I won't win any Nobels, I won't see any more meteor showers, I won't pick any more apples, and I'll never, ever have a daughter. Don't talk to me about *fair*. Don't even think about fair when you're in the same room as me. I'll rip it out of your head and crush it into a ball and eat it."

Vivian's aunt stuck her head into the room. "Everything all right?"

"Yup."

"Doing great."

The aunt retreated. Vivian bit her lip and crushed the edge of the quilt in her hands. In a quiet voice, she said, "He'll be here Saturday. Can you pick him up from JFK?"

"Who?"

"Gregory."

Julia blinked. "He's coming?"

"He heard I was going off chemo."

"How thoughtful. I'm shocked."

"I may have called him." Vivian put her hands over her face. "I may have asked him to come."

"So I meet him at the airport and make him disappear? I don't do murder, normally, but for you—"

"Just bring him here."

"Vivian—"

"Loose ends," she said, not meeting her eyes.

The marriage had not been a long one. Vivian had disappeared for a year, a deeper and more profound absence than when she was dating Gregory, while she tried on *wife* as if it were a winter coat, turning and stretching and looking at herself in it, testing its warmth. She smiled less and less, the few times Julia caught her, and a little gutter of worry dug itself into her brow.

One month after the separation, Vivian had called and let the room around her fill with silence.

"I'm coming over," Julia said, after waiting in vain for a word.

In a voice small and sticky with grief, Vivian said: "Okay."

Julia had barged into the apartment with two bottles of cheap chardonnay and a handful of black-and-white movies. Vivian scrubbed her eyes with the back of one hand.

"I'm such a mess—"

"It's fine."

Vivian's third glass was almost empty when she snatched the remote and jabbed down the sound.

"He said he never wanted children. Three years into our marriage! He only told me he did because he thought I might

change his mind. Or that he might change mine. 'I wanted to give us a chance,'" she said, imitating his sweeping gestures, and laughed with a catch in her throat. "'Too many cultural differences,' he said. 'I don't want my kids speaking a language I don't know. How would that look to everyone?' He said it was hard enough listening to me jabbering with my relatives, not knowing when we were laughing at him. He said the kids wouldn't resemble either of us—how was he supposed to handle that—"

Julia splashed out another half glass for her. "He loved you, though."

"Never. Never ever." Vivian shuddered.

"I was at your wedding. I saw how he stared at you." Vivian had glowed and glimmered, her dress a waterfall, her hair black wings. "No one could see you and not love you."

"Except him."

"All right. He's a jackass. Why am I defending him?" Julia slung an arm around Vivian's shoulders. "I barely saw you while you were together. He's a jerk of the first water, just for that."

"I'm sorry."

"Doesn't matter. You're back now, so honestly, I owe him."

After a long silence, Julia glanced sideways. Vivian had fallen asleep, legs drawn up to her chest, beginning to snore. Julia tossed a blanket over her before turning off the TV and the lights.

It was rare for Vivian to ask for anything, and although Julia disapproved so strongly her stomach hurt, she could not say no. On Saturday, she drove into the arteriosclerotic snarl of the airport to retrieve Gregory. She found him, punctual as a banker, planted at the prearranged section of curbside pickup: his hair as curly as

ever, houndstooth jacket and trousers slightly mellowed from the straight line, a pair of tortoiseshell glasses weighing down his face. One suitcase, sized for the overhead bin, sat at his feet. He blinked rapidly at the Lady as Julia pulled alongside and beeped.

"You're—Jean—"

"Julia Popova. You haven't changed at all."

He had to duck his head climbing into the car. "That's right. Vivian's friend."

"Admit it, you don't remember me."

"I do, I do." He grinned at her. "Her best friend. The artist. Took me a second."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've got a hotel on the East Side. Vivian first, though."

They inched out of the airport under a pewter sky, the churn of jet engines trembling the little car. Odd, how airports diffused an industrial grayness across the landscape, washing out yellows and reds, leaching warmth from complexions.

"How long has Viv been sick?" Gregory said. "If you don't mind my asking."

"She didn't tell you?"

"She's been very mysterious about the whole thing. I didn't know until two weeks ago. 'Hey Gregory,' she says. 'I'm dying. Stage Four ovarian, isn't that *funny*? Want to swing by one last time?' Like she hadn't pitched me out the door."

Julia snorted.

"So how long?"

"Chemo off and on for the last eleven months."

Gregory chewed his lower lip, gazing at the pawnshops and discount clothing stores that glided by. "Did everyone know?"

"Her friends. Her family."

"I don't believe it."

"Suit yourself."

"Did they take out her ovaries?"

"Excuse me?" Julia almost missed a stoplight flicking from yellow to red. She stomped on the brakes, and they both choked against their seatbelts. "What's that to you?"

"She's my wife," Gregory said. And that, however regrettable, was true.

It was night when they arrived. A half moon hung in the strip of sky between buildings. Gregory wavered on the sidewalk, looking up.

"You can go home now," he told her through the car window.

"Are you sure?"

"I'll get a taxi. I appreciate it, Julia."

She sat in the car, watching windows blink awake in his path. For forty-five minutes she listened inattentively to the radio station she had flicked on to forestall conversation, and to the light breeze that rattled paper cups and cans down the street. Black and brown people walked by, chattering, smoking, hefting groceries. The moon fell behind a roof. Gregory did not come outside.

At last she turned the key in the ignition and drove home.

The next day thickened into a soup of meetings in conference rooms sharp with the smell of whiteboard markers and phone calls that locked in zero new clients. Julia stopped at a café for a roast beef sandwich with too much mustard before heading to the park. She was looking forward to grass and greenness and the sight of water, even stagnant and sulfurous water. As she sucked threads of onion from between her teeth, her cell phone hummed.

"Are you going to Central Park?"

"Gregory?"

"Which entrance?"

"I'm taking the A."

"Okay, which stop?"

"The Museum. Look, I'd rather not—"

"See you there."

Julia huffed and stomped down the steps into the station. She was busy, urgently busy, and not about to wait for him. But as she walked to Naturalists' Gate, she heard her name.

Gregory, pressed and polished, waved at her from a bench. Her own hair had blown every which way. Her irritation deepened.

"I thought this was it. Vivian said you used to meet here after work and walk to Conservatory Garden."

The humid summer evenings she and Vivian had spent wandering through the park, pausing for ice cream éclairs and the occasional concert, appeared at an impossible distance. It had been centuries, surely. Kingdoms had risen and crumbled in the interim. She was obscurely hurt that Gregory knew about those days.

"What else did she say?"

"You're hunting a unicorn."

Julia compressed her lips. "She's told you a lot, then."

"Vivian's very fond of you. Thank you for taking care of her."

"Someone had to."

"Do you mind if I come? I've never gone on a unicorn hunt."

I do mind, Julia wanted to say, but the words stuck in her throat. Her silence did not discourage him. They walked together into the darkening park, Gregory glancing at her, tipping his head toward her, as attentive as if they were a couple.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I have some ideas."

"Isn't there a procedure? You need a virgin—"

"How do *you* know?"

"I read," he said. "Or I used to. Viv fell for my bookshelf before she fell for me. Ask her about it sometime. So, you borrowing a kid for this?"

"No."

"It's just, if you don't mind my saying so, you look past the age—also too beautiful—"

"Fuck off," she said.

He stared at her. "You are?"

"I said fuck off."

"Do you mean technically? Are you a lesbian? Or have you never—"

"I mean get lost. Catch a cab, go home. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Look, I didn't mean to—" He raised his palms in apology. "How do I say it? There's no imagination in my job. No imagination outside of it, either. No time to read, no time to socialize, and no nice girl dates a married man. Work, sleep, work. Dull as hell. I got excited when I heard about your unicorn."

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm not."

Julia strode off, Gregory trailing behind her. At the eastern edge of the Ramble, she bent over two hoof-shaped patches of verbena and goldenseal. The clusters ran in double lines across the grass.

"What's that?"

"The flowers of old New York," she said. "They grow where it goes."

Gregory pinched off a purple blossom and sniffed it. "This is amazing," he said.

From what she had seen, she figured that the age of the plants corresponded to the freshness of the trail. She ignored luxurious, knee-high tracks of bee balm and wild ginger in favor of a younger trail of asters, following it until it vanished at an outcrop of schist.

"Damn," she said, slapping the rock. "This one, I thought—"

"Keep going," Gregory said.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

They were descending Cedar Hill when Gregory dropped to a crouch.

"Here," he said. The print was damp, as long as her hand, an impression of teardrops curving toward each other. It was speckled with seedlings.

Julia knelt, bending until her nose was on a level with the sprouts. Their cotyledons were spread, the tips of the first true leaves beginning to unfurl. It was not clear what they would become.

"I'm not making this up," she said.

"No."

"They're growing, look."

There was a faint metallic scrape behind them, like a hobnail on rock. Julia's neck prickled. She pushed herself upright, brushing her hands on her jeans, and dug in her purse for the knife. The night was thick around them, and she could not see much.

On the crest of the hill, a flash of silver.

"Oh," she said, transfixed.

Tree trunks divided and obscured the white form, but as it picked its way through them, she glimpsed a feathering mane, a silver wisp of beard, a horn like a slant of light. It shone pearl and silver in the darkness.

"You are," she said. "You exist."

As if it had heard, the unicorn swung its head toward them. The point of its horn traced a bright curl in the air. In that long, frozen moment, Julia observed the fine pulse of one vein in its neck, the mud on its forelocks, the leaves tangled in its mane. Vapor fogged its nostrils. It regarded them with an opaque intelligence, considering.

Then it wheeled and trotted in their direction.

Gregory stayed still. Moving slowly, Julia slid the coil of black and golden hair from her purse and weighed it in one hand. Would the unicorn let her wrap her arms around its neck? Or would she have to lasso it? Any horse could snap the braid with a toss of its head, but according to her research, a unicorn would not. A gilt watch chain would do the trick. An embroidered girdle. A necklace. If her books were correct, all she needed was the horn.

Ten steps separated them, and still the unicorn advanced. Julia held her breath. Five steps. Three. Two.

Gregory snatched the knife from her left hand and lunged.

"Wait!"

The knife was cheap and small, but she had spent half an hour rubbing it over a whetstone, wincing, as her parents had taught her to do.

A dark, dripping line opened along the pale neck. With a cry like bells, the unicorn shied away. It ran faster and fleeter than any horse, a shimmer in the trees, a glint, then gone.

Gregory sprawled on the grass, the knife wet and black in his hand. She prodded each of his arms and legs, checking for injury, then yanked him to his feet. Tears burned her eyes, and she mopped at her face, frustrated.

"Asshole. How could you?" she said. The unicorn—Vivian—the question rang with accusations.

"What else was the knife for? What were you going to do?"

She opened and shut her mouth and could not speak.

They headed out of the park in silence. Here and there, on a bench, under the dark arc of a bridge, Julia spotted a huddled body husbanding its warmth. Those who needed unicorns as much as she did. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she walked faster, too weak and foolish, she knew, to ask forgiveness.

"Why waste your time on someone like him?" Julia said. She sat on the edge of the bed, watching Vivian eat breakfast, and offered mug and spoon at appropriate intervals.

"He's helping with the bills," Vivian said reasonably. "And it's his health insurance."

"He could write a check from anywhere."

"It's not just that." Vivian dipped her spoon into each of the dishes that crowded her tray—zhou, strawberry Jell-O, bone soup with slices of winter melon, chocolate pudding—without raising it to her lips. Her skin was soft and loose against her bones. She was not eating, the aunt had whispered to Julia. "I'm trying to remember what was beautiful about him."

"Him? Nothing."

"You're angry at him?"

"Yes."

"So am I. And I don't want to die with that much anger. It's the size of a house, roof, floors, porch, everything."

"So you have him over every day to yell at him?"

"We talk."

"For hours."

"Don't be silly. I talk to you too."

Julia tightened her lips. "Not every day."

"You have work."

"It doesn't seem healthy to me."

Vivian sighed. "Didn't you see the flowers?" The kitchen table was flooded with lilies and chrysanthemums, more than Vivian had vases for, and she made Julia haul home an armful every visit. "Know who they're from? Classmates. Roommates. Colleagues. Friends. Cousins. He has to wait outside when anyone else is here."

"Don't tell me you don't enjoy that."

"Oh, I do. I do." She smiled. "You've taken good care of me. I know. I notice. But when you're looking death in the face at thirty-three—"

"You're not. Don't say that."

"Cut the crap, Julia."

"But Gregory—"

"He's figured out something you haven't. I'm dying. He knows it. He doesn't waste words. We don't waste time."

"Tell me how."

"How what?"

"How to not waste your time."

"That's your job."

In the quiet that followed, they heard the long, bright song of the doorbell, then the snick and thunk of Vivian's aunt unbolting the door. Muffled voices reached them, one a familiar baritone.

"Is Gregory here? Give us a minute—"

Julia returned to Central Park alone. The damp wind numbed her fingers and wormed its way up her sleeves. She clutched her thin coat, wishing for a scarf.

As she walked the twenty blocks from Sheep Meadow to the Reservoir, she could find no unexpected flowers, no tracks, no magic. Where hoofprints of columbine and wake robin had flourished the week before, there were now only bare and indistinct spots of earth. Few people remained in the park. The one or two she saw ducked their heads against the wind and never looked up.

It grew colder as the night deepened. Dew soaked her canvas shoes and cotton socks, prickling her toes. She wished for company, anyone at all, even Gregory. After an hour of searching, she had seen no sign that the unicorn ever existed.

"Well," she said aloud, "that's that," and turned toward 86th Street and the subway.

"Nice bag there, lady."

In the dark, Julia could make out only a pale grin, a paler shock of hair, and the switchblade presented by way of introduction. She had not noticed his approach, preoccupied as she was with her hunt. The calm of perfect terror settled over her.

"My wallet, right?" she said, fishing it out of her purse.

"Why not your whole bag?"

"There's nothing you want in there." She riffled the bills in her wallet and tossed it at his feet.

His eyes never left hers. He stepped forward and wrenched the purse from her arm. "I'll be the judge of that."

Every nerve shrilled at her to run. She locked her knees. "Please," she said. "My friend's hair. She's dying."

"You'll shut up, if you know what's good for you." He upended her bag and shook it. Pens, tampons, fliers, and tissues scattered across the grass. The detritus of an insignificant life, she thought, starting to shake.

"Run."

She didn't.

He grabbed a fistful of her jacket and held the braid under her nose. "Or come get it."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Let me go, please—"

"Too bad you're not prettier."

He hooked his arm around her neck, cutting off her air. Her lungs burned as he tightened his chokehold. Her knees buckled. The unspoken fears of nights and days coalesced into a fine point. *So this is it. My turn. This. Now.*

A hundred carillon bells clanged together. Over the wet, dark grass, a white shape tilted at them, indistinct at first, but growing brighter and clearer every moment.

The man swore and dropped her. She fell on her face, grateful for the dew that seeped into her clothes, the distinct sensation of each blade of grass against her skin. When she had caught her breath, she pushed herself to her knees.

He was running, his jacket flapping around him. The unicorn crashed past her in a glorious arc of white, the whorled horn pointed at his fleeing back. For an instant she imagined it spearing his back, the stutter of blood, him stumbling, sinking, deserving it—

"No!"

The pale body pivoted, pawing the air. When it landed, snorting steam, it was facing her. The gash on its neck had scabbed over into a rough crust of garnets. Julia glanced down, ashamed.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She picked up the braid of black and golden hair and offered it to the unicorn. "I won't hurt you, I promise. Not this time."

The unicorn approached her and sniffed the braid. Her fingers tangled in its beard, which was silk and cobweb and gossamer. Its breath burned her skin with cold.

"I need you," Julia said. "Will you come with me?"

She made herself meet its eyes, which were as old and secret as fossils, and felt very small. After a long, careful look, the unicorn sighed and bowed its head.

Julia looped the braid loosely around the broad neck and fumbled with a knot. She was close enough to smell the odors of cinnamon, tamarind, and cardamom rising from its skin. When that was done, she bent and shoveled the pieces of her life back into her purse, heedless of the wet leaves stuck to her keys, the mud on her wallet. The unicorn waited for her to rise and grasp the braid, and then it set out after her.

They left through Hunters' Gate and went north on Central Park West. The streets were hushed and empty of cars. A few pedestrians hurried along on the far side of the road, none of them looking in her direction, though as they passed, Julia noticed, they slowed and straightened, brows smoothing, hands falling to their sides.

She was shivering with cold and shock. Every now and then she leaned against the unicorn's side, and its breath was a deep rumble in her ear. The long, spiraling horn wrote eights in the air as they walked.

At intersections, the traffic lights flared green in all directions. Above them, one by one, lit windows snapped out. A shouted argument that had spilled onto a fire escape subsided to a murmur, and the high, inconsolable wail of an infant faded. Soon they were enveloped in quiet.

"Will you help her?" Julia said. "I can't lose her. She's the best thing in my life."

The unicorn did not answer. As if it knew the way, it went up Seventh Ave and turned onto 119th. Its hooves printed moist, silvered daguerreotypes on the sidewalk behind them.

Vivian's building was dark. Julia led the unicorn up the stoop and through the narrow doorway, watching anxiously as its flanks twitched and shuddered between the jambs. She had not planned for the two flights of stairs to Vivian's apartment. But the unicorn placed one foot, then the next, on the threadbare runner, each step making a muffled chime. Less graceful, Julia groped hand over hand along the railing. Though she left the light switch alone, the unicorn gave off a fragile, glowworm light.

A neighbor's tabby sat on the second-floor landing, its eyes two small bright moons. As the unicorn passed, it tucked in its paws and purred.

On the third-floor landing, Julia unlocked the door, and she and the unicorn entered Vivian's apartment. Moonlight cut black paper silhouettes out of the flowers on the kitchen table. Everything was stark and sharp, but Julia still stumbled over a single shoe and skidded on a magazine before she grasped the loose brass doorknob and let them both into the bedroom.

Vivian was sitting in bed, resting against Gregory. His arms were around her, his cheek against her bare head. When he saw them, his face softened with wonder.

"Julia?"

Vivian opened her arms to them. Their arrival might have been the most ordinary thing in the world.

"You did find a unicorn."

"I did."

It went to her. Vivian cradled the long white head, touching their foreheads together. "How lovely you are. You're so much more than I imagined."

"You can cure her, right?" Julia said. Her shoes were icy puddles, and she was swaying on her feet. The unicorn paid no attention to

her. With a pang, she saw that the story was no longer hers. It had slipped through her fingers as easily as the end of the braid, leaving her a witness at its periphery.

"Of course," Vivian said, to a question no one else had heard. "Yes."

The unicorn lowered its horn and nudged up the hem of Vivian's oversized T-shirt, exposing the pale skin of her belly. Julia gritted her teeth, afraid to watch, unable to look away.

The tip of the horn plunged through the skin and withdrew.

Moonlight spilled out of the hole, an icy light that made the room swim. Vivian convulsed, whimpering. Gregory stroked her face, her hands, her arms, whispering to her, soothing, pleading. Julia ached to see them.

When the spasms had passed, and Vivian lay exhausted among the tangled quilts, there was no sign of the wound. But a glimmering light suffused her skin.

"Is it over?" Julia said. "Are you okay?"

"It hurts, but it will be all right." Vivian clasped Gregory's hand. "Help me."

Gregory gathered her up, one arm around her shoulders, another under her knees. As the unicorn knelt, he settled her onto its back. She wrapped a fistful of its mane around each hand and smiled at Julia, through Julia, her eyes fixed somewhere else now.

"You shouldn't be afraid," Vivian said.

The unicorn clambered to its feet and tensed. Then the two of them leapt out of the open window—but the window had not been open, Julia thought—and landed with a sound like church bells on the pavement two stories below. Ringing and pealing, the unicorn's hooves sang down the sidewalk, fading with distance.

Julia blinked, and the room was as dim as before, the window shut and locked against the night. Vivian was motionless in bed, Gregory feeling along her wrist with clumsy, desperate fingers, listening, waiting. Then he raised his head, loss naked in his eyes. On either side of the cold white bed they stood, unable, for a very long time, to say the impossible thing that had occurred.

Billy and the Unicorn

Terry Bisson

ONE DAY BILLY saw a unicorn. He could tell what it was by the big horn growing out of its head. It was standing at the edge of the woods.

"Want a unicorn?" the unicorn asked. It was white.

Billy shook his head. "Girls like unicorns," he said. "I'm a boy."

"Boys would like unicorns too," said the unicorn, "if they knew what unicorns were really like."

Billy thought about that. "What are they really like?" he asked.

"Take me home and you'll see," said the unicorn.

"You're too big," said Billy.

"Yes, but unicorns don't eat anything," said the unicorn. "Plus, we're invisible."

Billy took the unicorn home. It was hard to get it in the door. His mother couldn't see it, though.

He put it in his room and stood it in the corner. Its horn glowed in the dark.

"Turn out that light," said Billy's mother. "Go to sleep."

Cool! thought Billy. She could see the light but not the unicorn.

Billy hung a T-shirt over the unicorn's horn. It looked like a little ghost in the dark.

★★★

"Hey," said Billy.

The unicorn was going to the bathroom.

"You can't go to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Too late," said the unicorn. A big blue jewel dropped down between its legs.

It was as big as a Brussels sprout. It had lots of square sides.

"Pick it up," said the unicorn.

"No way," said Billy.

After a while, the blue jewel disappeared.

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Unicorn Escapes from Zoo."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It went to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Shut up," said Billy's father. "Go to your room. Both of you."

When Billy got back to his room, the unicorn was going to the bathroom again.

"Hey," said Billy.

"Go ahead, pick it up," said the unicorn. "It doesn't stink."

Billy picked it up. It was warm, but it didn't stink.

"It's like money," said the unicorn. "You can buy magazines with it."

Billy liked magazines. He went to the store and picked one out.

"Dale Earnhardt," said the store owner. "That's a special memorial issue. Got any money?"

Billy shook his head.

"Then you're out of luck," said the store owner. "He was one of the Greats."

"This is like money," said Billy. He showed the store owner the blue jewel. It was still warm.

The store owner sniffed it. "You get two for that," he said. He gave Billy another magazine. It was all about girls.

"I don't like girls," said Billy.

"Give it to your unicorn," said the store owner.

"Did you really escape from the zoo?" Billy asked.

"No," said the unicorn. It was looking at the girls. Billy had to turn the pages. The unicorn had no hands.

"The paper says you did."

"I planted that story," said the unicorn. "There is no zoo."

Billy thought about that.

"Turn the page," said the unicorn.

"I thought you didn't like girls," said Billy.

"These aren't wearing any clothes," said the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Can I ride on your back?" Billy asked.

"After you go to bed," said the unicorn.

That night Billy rode the unicorn around the yard. Its horn was like a headlight. It left little tracks in the sandbox.

"How come my mother can't see you?" Billy asked.

"She never tried," said the unicorn. "Plus, unicorns are invisible."

"How come I can see you, then?"

"We're not that invisible," said the unicorn.

Billy thought about that. "Can I take you to school?" he asked.

"Unicorns don't like school," said the unicorn.

Billy was watching TV when the phone rang.

It was the store owner. "I want my magazines back," he said. "That jewel disappeared."

"It's like money," said Billy.

"Money doesn't disappear," said the store owner. "Bring back my magazines or I will call the FBI."

"I'm not afraid of the FBI," said Billy.

But he was. His hands were trembling as he hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" asked Billy's mother.

"Nobody," said Billy.

"Where's my Dale Earnhardt magazine?" asked Billy. He couldn't find it anywhere.

"I found out he's dead," said the unicorn. "So I tore it up with my horn."

"Oh no," said Billy. "He was one of the Greats."

"Dead people don't belong in magazines," said the unicorn.

"The store owner wants his magazines back," said Billy. He tried to get the girl magazine back but the unicorn was standing on it. It had sharp feet like a deer.

"You're going to get us both in trouble," said Billy. "He'll call the FBI."

"Just turn the page," said the unicorn. "Let me worry about him."

★★★

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Store Owner Killed by Unicorn."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It's invisible," said Billy. "It has a sharp horn."

"Shut up, both of you," said Billy's father.

"That was cool," said Billy. "But I think you should hide somewhere else." He was getting tired of the unicorn.

"I like here," said the unicorn. "But I need another magazine. I'm finished with this one."

Billy had an idea. "You would like it at school," he said. "There are lots of girls there."

"Do they wear clothes?" asked the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy. "They will let you look up their dresses."

The next day, Billy took the unicorn to school. The teacher couldn't see it. The boys couldn't either.

The girls could, though. "Billy has a unicorn," they said, clapping their hands together. "Can we ride on it?"

"You can have it," said Billy. He was tired of the unicorn. "Jewels come out of its butt."

"That's cool," said the girls. "It can sleep in the girls' bathroom."

"It doesn't sleep," said Billy.

"Get on," said the unicorn. It took all the girls for a ride. It looked up their dresses as they got on and off.

"What's going on?" asked the boys.

Billy told them about the unicorn. "It's invisible," he said. He left out the part about the store owner.

"Invisible stuff is make-believe," said the boys. "Plus, unicorns are strictly for girls."

"Boys would like unicorns too, if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

But the boys couldn't see it. "Billy has a unicorn," they said. "Billy the girl!"

They made fun of Billy.

This was their big mistake.

"Home from school already?" asked Billy's mother.

"They let us out early," said Billy.

"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper at the supper table. "Unicorn Kills School Boys."

"That must be why they let Billy out early," said Billy's mother. "It was a tragedy."

"It says here that it tore them up with its horn," said Billy's father. "Then it ran into the girls' bathroom."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy's mother.

"The teacher called the FBI," said Billy's father. "They will investigate."

"It wasn't my fault," said Billy.

"Nobody said it was," said Billy's father. "Pass the Brussels sprouts."

"I'm pretty sure unicorns are make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"Boys would like unicorns too if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

"No they wouldn't," said Billy's father. "Now shut up, both of you."

The Final Quarry

Eric Norden

THE LAST UNICORN on earth lay dozing in the sun on a hilltop in northern Thessaly, memories buzzing softly through his brain like the murmur of distant bees. As unicorns go, he was not a noticeably distinguished specimen, for age had dulled the gloss of his ivory pelt, and here and there along his withered flanks tufts of hair had fallen out, lending him a patched, faintly moth-eaten quality. But his eyes, even now when filmed with dream, were luminous with wisdom, as if they had drunk in the centuries like dew, and his imperious spiral horn rested lightly on the grass, a gleaming golden icicle in the summer sunlight. He stirred once in his sleep, as the thoughts of a child in the valley reached him, crystalline as the chime of a steeple bell, and then, replenished, lapsed into deeper slumber. The dark, demanding voices of the earth no longer spoke to him, and it had been a thousand years since silent wings beat the air above his head, or tingling laughter pealed in ageless mockery as he sipped from the waterfall below the gorge, but the old unicorn did not begrudge the new masters of earth, and was content to savor the endless tapestry of his dreams. A zephyr prematurely tinged with autumn brushed his horn gently as a butterfly's wings, perhaps in warning, but he slept on.

★★★

The older and immeasurably grosser of the two Englishmen shoved his plate of cold stuffed eggplant across the rough-planked wooden table with a violent, stabbing motion and snarled at the innkeeper.

"If this is the best you have to offer us, we shall ride on to Pharanakos tonight!"

His florid face was suffused with a darker flush of fury as he wrenched the coarse linen napkin from his neck and hurled it to the packed dirt floor. His companion, a slim youth in his early twenties, elegantly attired in a fawn-gray cheviot lounge suit of a cut popularized by the late king and a resplendent waistcoat of brocaded maroon silk, languidly surveyed the room and tapped a cone of ash from his thin black cheroot onto the remains of his own dinner.

"My dear Marius," he drawled, "for once I do wish you could forget your belly and remember the purpose of our visit. We are not here as scouts for the *Guide Michelin*, and as for myself, I should rather grub like a pig for roots than spend one more hour in that infernal coach."

As the innkeeper hastily snatched the plate from the table and scurried towards the kitchen amidst a flurry of apologies in broken English, Sir Marius Wallaby, Bart., turned his wrath on his traveling companion.

"God's blood, Deverish, don't let me hear from you what the purpose of this journey is. If I hadn't been gulled by your mad tale back in Athens, I wouldn't be sitting in this miserable excuse for an inn, two hundred miles from the last pretense of civilization, feeding on warmed-over table scraps and guzzling mare's piss for

wine." He groaned piteously. "And my last bottle of hock gone two days back, with no decent cellars between here and the coast."

Nigel Deverish sipped with overtly sadistic relish from his glass of white Retsina.

"As for myself, I rather enjoy its clean, piney bite," he said. "But then I am obviously no connoisseur in such matters."

"The matters in which you are a connoisseur I tremble to contemplate." The older man's anger crumpled abruptly as his huge frame slumped back into a rickety rattan chair precariously accommodating his twenty stone, and he ran one hand, plump and livid as a baby lobster, through thinning sandy hair before speaking in a voice thickly edged with fatigue.

"I must caution you I don't intend going on like this much longer, Deverish. Don't think I'm not up to it physically—God knows. I've been on treks in Africa and Brazil that make this expedition look like a walking tour of Surrey." He grimaced wearily. "But then I was always after something tangible, something that left a spoor I could follow, something I could fix in the sights of my rifle. We must have passed through thirty of these half-arsed villages in the past three weeks and no one even knows what we're talking about. The whole idea is so damned vague, it's like trying to grab a handful of smoke, and it's getting on my nerves, Deverish, I'm not ashamed to confess."

Nigel Deverish eyed his companion with thinly veiled contempt. Sir Marius Wallaby was a huge, corpulent man in his early fifties, with a flaccid basketball of a head, candid, hyperthyroid eyes of a pale, china-blue prominent in his ruddy face, now stubbled by a two-day growth of orangy beard, and a mouth pursed like a querulous rosebud. He was dressed with customary carelessness in a rumpled Norfolk hacking jacket, multi-darned

cardigan of muddy-brown wool, heather-green tweed knickers, and battered Peal's brogues. Hardly the picture, Deverish reflected grimly, of a man worth half a million if a guinea, but Wallaby cared nothing for appearances, or money. His only passions were, in interchangeable order, the table, the hunt, and the bottle. Wallaby's tempers were fierce but transient, for like a toothless dog he had learned long ago to rely on his bark. He was as petulant as a child, Deverish had perceived on their first meeting, and as innocent; an easy man to use, but only if one were willing to cosset him like a nanny.

"My dear Marius," he now soothed, "no one understands better than I your disappointment. But surely, for the man of indomitable will, such frustrations only serve to redouble the determination to succeed. Had Stanley given up before Victoria Falls . . ." He let the sentence trail off meaningfully, mildly sickened by the ingenuousness of his appeal, but equally convinced of its effectiveness.

"Yes, yes, I suppose you're quite right," Wallaby murmured, sitting imperceptibly straighter. "It doesn't do to get discouraged too quickly on these things." He sipped distastefully from his wineglass. "Years ago in Mombasa I ran into a dicey old Dutchman who swore he'd seen a white rhino in the Gambezi. He'd been tracking it off and on for years whenever he could steer a safari into the area, and everyone thought he was crackers, of course, but one day he walked right into Starrs', threw the skin on the bar, and ordered drinks for the house. Showed us all, he did. Never forgot it." Wallaby scowled darkly. "Which is probably why I'm here with you today instead of enjoying a bottle of decent hock in Athens."

The innkeeper moved deferentially to their table and placed a worn copper platter before Sir Marius. "This looks a bit better,"

the Englishman grunted as he dubiously surveyed an array of *media dolma* and *moussaka*, a local dish of beef cunningly cooked with aubergines, mushrooms, and tomatoes, and smothered in a simmering soufflé of feta cheese. The elderly Greek smiled encouragingly and placed another bottle of Retsina on the table.

"You enjoy, *Kyrios,* you enjoy." Panayotis beamed proudly. "I know how to cook for English. I work in Athens three years. That's where I learn your language, also French and a little Turkish." The innkeeper had regaled them earlier with his travels, for as the only local man to venture forth as far as fabled Athens and the sea, he was a minor celebrity, and served as mayor of the cluster of rude stone-and-wattle cottages comprising the hamlet of Theodoriana. "You will find the best food in the Pindus mountains right here, here with Panayotis, milord."

"I don't question that," Sir Marius grunted, tentatively slipping a fork into a mussel entwined with grape leaves, "only whether it's a recommendation." But after one bite, he smiled abruptly, like ice melting, and nodded approval to the innkeeper, who half giggled with relief and obsequiously bobbed his grizzled head in an awkward half bow. Why do the peasants always fawn on the hulking, ill-mannered boor, Deverish reflected bitterly, when it's so obvious I'm the sole gentleman in our party? He gulped his Retsina convulsively, and lit another cheroot, gratefully dragging the harsh smoke into his lungs.

After the meal was over and cloyingly sweet honey-and-nut pastries had been washed down with Turkish coffee and ouzo, Wallaby belched contentedly and plucked a cigar from a battered lizard-skin case.

"Doubtless have indigestion later on, but at least I feel halfway human for the time being," he grumbled. Panayotis diffidently

presented a bill, and Wallaby, without examining it, tossed a jumble of fifty-drachma notes onto the table.

"Take our rooms from that and keep the change."

The innkeeper's eyes fixed hotly on the bills for a long moment before he scrabbled them up with trembling hands, his mumbled words of gratitude cut short by Wallaby's roar for a bottle of Metaxa. Deverish choked back the bile in his throat. Of course the old fool could afford to throw away his money—he'd never had to sweat for it. He cursed for the thousandth time the perverse law of nature ordaining that cretins like Wallaby be blessed with wealth, while the rare man of genius must grovel in muck for the offal of everyday existence, lyric words and vaulting imagery strangled stillborn. Deverish stared at Wallaby guzzling brandy like a bloated pig greedily snuffling for truffles, and his hand involuntarily strayed to the sheaf of poems in his jacket pocket. It would not be long now. His eyes slivered as he smiled suddenly, exultantly, and when he spoke he no longer had to struggle to keep the hatred from his voice.

"Don't you think you overpaid the chap a bit, old boy?"

Wallaby looked up from his brandy and scowled.

"You're bad enough as a guide, Deverish, don't start doubling as my accountant. In any case, the draft from Athens gives me enough to buy and sell this whole pigsty of a town—not that I'd want it, God knows." He slurped noisily from his glass and wiped his moist forehead with a tattered red bandana. "And another thing, Deverish, once and for all stop calling me 'old boy,' and trotting out your whole insufferably tatty Oxbridge act. I don't give a damn about a man's birth, and I've always held Debrett's the least reliable stud-book of the lot, but the pose bores me to tears and will only get you laughed at back in London." His eyes suddenly softened. "I

don't mean that harshly, Deverish. Just be yourself, that's all. You'll get along better that way."

Deverish stood up abruptly, his sallow cheeks flaming. Wallaby's insult he could have almost savored, on account so to speak, but the gratuitous fillip of condescension was intolerable. His fists tightened into balls and he spun on his heels to hide his face from Wallaby's eyes.

"I'll speak to the innkeeper now and see if he knows anything," Deverish said tautly, his words barely above a whisper.

"All right, all right, we've gone this far, go ahead." Wallaby belched, and took a long pull from his glass. "Though I'm beginning to think that photograph of yours was some kind of forgery, or perhaps just a shot of an ibex or aurochs. You probably wouldn't know the difference anyway."

With a surge of secret satisfaction, Deverish composed himself. He, after all, was the master of this situation. There had never been any photograph, merely the maudlin mumblings of an old Greek in a Salonika bar drunkenly bemoaning his native Karanakis, where unicorns still lived and flitted through the forest glades. Deverish had been amused at first, but the old man's words held the germ of an idea. He had met Sir Marius Wallaby for the first time the day before at the Travellers Club, where he had eloquently requested the wealthy baronet's backing to publish a volume of his verse, only to be summarily rebuffed and packed off like a beggar with a fiver stuffed in his pocket as a token of Wallaby's largess—which, to make it worse, he was forced by dint of circumstances to accept. But Deverish knew of Wallaby's reputation as a hunter; the old man had stalked everything from elephants in Africa to cougars in Peru, and photo stories of his expeditions appeared regularly in the lurid illustrated press. If the opportunity to bag the greatest game of

all—the last surviving unicorn—presented itself, could the old fool resist the temptation? Wallaby's childlike credulity needed little priming from Deverish, and the baronet accepted the tale eagerly, immediately moving to outfit an expedition. Now, three weeks later, the two of them were alone in one of the most desolate areas of Greece, two hundred miles from the nearest police station, in a mountainous countryside where accidents were bound to occur, particularly to someone fat, clumsy, and slow of foot—someone, above all, with the equivalent of two thousand English pounds in Greek drachmas stuffed in his pockets.

Breaking off his reverie, Deverish strode to the kitchen and peremptorily ordered the innkeeper to their table. Panayotis followed, but not, Deverish noted irritably, with the alacrity he displayed in response to even the rudest of Wallaby's summonses. Once seated, the old Greek gratefully accepted a glass of Metaxa and listened closely as Deverish explained their quest in fluent Greek, frowning thoughtfully before finally replying in tortured English—Wallaby didn't know a word of any foreign language not featured on menus—that he had never heard of such an animal.

"But, milord," Panayotis continued haltingly, addressing only Wallaby as was his custom, "there is an old man, a priest, who lives in the woods. He stayed many years in a monastery on Mount Athos and is now what you would call *hermetos*, for he exists only on nuts and berries, and will kill no living thing for food. There are some who say he is mad"—Panayotis crossed himself surreptitiously at the blasphemy—"but I see much truth in his eyes. He lives in a cave at the foot of Karajides mountain, but once in a while he comes here, and I give him bread and wine." He took another sip of Metaxa. "This priest knows the woods and mountains like none of us, who are all farmers and seldom wander far from

our fields. I have seen him in the forest once or twice, and the animals follow him, even the deer, and are not afraid. He feeds them, and sometimes he talks to them." Panayotis looked momentarily embarrassed, fearful the Englishman would despise his credulity. "Of course, milord, for all I know he is not even a real priest; the priest at Calabaris in the valley comes here once a month to preach since we have no church of our own, and he says he knows nothing of this *hermetos*. But I think he is a holy man."

Wallaby gestured impatiently with one pudgy hand.

"I don't care if he's a saint or a highwayman. If he knows the woods and mountains of this territory, I want to speak to him. We've been going around in circles for three weeks because your damned peasants have eyes for nothing beyond their bloody turnip plots. Can you bring him to us?"

The innkeeper's brow furrowed doubtfully.

"That I do not think, milord. He visits here only when he desires, and you could wait weeks before he come again." He brightened perceptibly. "But I could lead you to his cave—it is not a long walk."

Wallaby heaved agonizedly out of his chair and began waddling towards the stairs, the bottle of Metaxa dangling loosely from one hand.

"All right, we'll leave at seven in the morning. Wake me at six, prepare a warm bath, and for breakfast fry me six eggs, coffee, some toasted bread, and a side of bacon." He cut off the innkeeper's protest. "Then kill the pig, I'll pay you for it. Seven o'clock." He nodded curtly to Deverish and hauled his bulk laboriously up the stairs. Deverish sat hunched over his brandy for at least another hour, and the innkeeper was puzzled by the Englishman's sporadic bouts of smirking laughter. Yes indeed, he thought, savoring the

words, do kill the pig. And you will pay for it, dear Marius, you will surely pay for it.

Deverish awoke after a restless night on a hard pallet-like bed and shaved painfully in cold water brought him in a chipped porcelain basin by the innkeeper's eldest son, a handsome boy in his late teens with tousled, coal-black hair, smooth olive skin, and the classic features of a young Homeric prince. He eyed the youth appraisingly for a moment, and then dismissed the thought. Later, back in Athens or elsewhere on the Continent, but not here, not now. He could afford no taint of suspicion, much less scandal—the stakes were too high.

Downstairs, Wallaby crouched over a three-week-old copy of the *Times* he had purchased in Ioannina, the last stage of their journey maintaining vestigial contact with the outside world. He had already polished off his breakfast, and looked up irritably as Deverish took his place at the table and accepted a steaming mug of harsh black tea from the innkeeper.

"Can't you ever be on time, man? I said we'd depart at seven, and seven it is, whether you've eaten or not. Hurry up with that breakfast!" Panayotis, who had been hovering over Wallaby's shoulder, resignedly padded out to the kitchen, no trace of resentment on his face, and Wallaby immersed himself in the paper for a few more moments before hurling it to the table with a muted imprecation.

"Must know the damned thing by heart now," he growled. "I can recite King George's movements from morning to night, and throw in a verbatim report of the Kaiser's speech at Potsdam." He looked accusingly at Deverish. "If I'd known we'd be running about half of Greece on this mad chase of yours, I'd have taken some serious reading matter along."

Deverish's lip curled imperceptibly. Wallaby's idea of serious literature was the latest issue of the *Strand*, and the peregrinations of Conan Doyle's absurd fictional fabrication—or, on a more refined level, the muddled bleats of eunuchs such as George Manville Fenn, Dick Donovan, and W. Clark Russell. For hours on the coach from Athens, Wallaby had rattled on with indefatigable enthusiasm over the latest literary excretions of these favored pygmies—all the while oblivious to the presence at his side of one who could burn his words into the ages if only freed from the material shackles binding lesser men and allowed to breathe, to move, to create. Once, at the very outset of the trip, when his plan had not as yet fully crystallized, Deverish granted Wallaby a second chance to become his patron and read the fool several of his best poems. Wallaby had listened abstractedly, finally nodding judiciously and patting Deverish on the shoulder. "Nice stuff, I'm sure, but I prefer poets who make themselves clear, like Kipling or Housman. All this agonizing over life and death is a bit deep for me. But keep at it, old boy, by all means keep at it." Wallaby had returned with evident relief to his copy of *Nature*, and neither of them referred to the subject again.

Under Wallaby's impatient eye, Deverish wolfed an indifferent breakfast of lumpy porridge and cold slabs of greasy bacon and then departed with the innkeeper for the hermit's cave. As the small party left the village and passed through the open fields of the valley, Deverish's spirits failed to lighten, although it was a cool, antiseptic morning, with a clean summer breeze rippling the air and scudding ragged tufts of cloud across a sky of the washed metallic blue found only in the Mediterranean. Deverish wanted Wallaby alone, high in the mountains, not on a hiking trip through the forest in quest of some half-crazed recluse, but he had waited this long, and could afford to wait a few hours or a few days longer.

A short journey it might be to the innkeeper, but for Deverish the trek appeared interminable, burdened as he was with both their hunting rifles and a rucksack containing rations and extra cartridges. For all his bulk Wallaby pressed on relentlessly through the fields and into the thick woods of hawthorn and birch lapping at the foot of the more lightly forested mountain slopes, his plump cheeks redder than usual from exertion, intermittently whistling bawdy tunes and pausing only for an occasional swift swig of brandy from his capacious silver flask. Deverish was consistently astounded and repelled by the man's insatiable appetite for liquor, and by the fact that it never exacted a toll the following morning, whereas his own four brandies of the night before had bequeathed him an aching head and churning stomach, tinged with the bleak edge of nervous despair always attendant to his hangovers. Wallaby, predictably enough, was in the best of spirits and insisted on regaling Deverish with his hunting exploits.

"Only thing I've never killed is a fox," he said as the old Greek led them through a copse of silver birch and into a small sun-swept clearing at the foot of a rugged, barren hillside. "No sport there, the poor terrified beast doesn't have a chance, run to ground by a pack of bloody baying hounds and a hundred horsemen. A coward's pastime, if you ask me—I always give my game a sporting chance." He pulled out his flask again and took a quick, slobbering gulp, wiping his mouth with the back of one scarlet hand. "Whatever else they say about that fellow Wilde, he had the fox hunter's number: 'the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable.' Eh?" Wallaby burst into a sudden peal of laughter and slapped one meaty thigh, as if the words had been his own spontaneous observation. Deverish merely grimaced—there was something blasphemous at the words of Wilde dribbling from the flaccid lips of this great oaf—and joined the old Greek, who had halted in the middle of the clearing.

"The holy man lives here," Panayotis whispered reverently, as Wallaby lumbered to his side, "in that cave there, milord." He pointed to a black gash in the pitted face of the hill. "I will go on ahead and see if he will talk with you." Panayotis dropped his pack to the ground and extracted two bottles of wine and a sack stuffed with flat bread, dates, feta cheese, and pungent black Calamaris olives—it had been decided that a bit of discreet bribery might lubricate the priest's tongue—and entered the cave.

Wallaby and Deverish stood together without speaking in the clearing for several moments after the innkeeper left them. Deverish was restless and nervous, and the insistent glare of sunlight pained his eyes. He was suddenly conscious of the intensity of birdsong in the surrounding trees, and as he looked closely he saw hundreds of different birds arrayed in the branches, their voices beating out to serenade the men in the clearing. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a pleasant scene, but now the noise was too orchestral, too insistent, and Deverish found it vaguely disturbing, if not actively tinged with menace. There were too many birds for such a small clearing, and he had a tingling sensation of their *awareness*, as if their tiny eyes were all fixed on his, the jarring cacophony of birdsong directed at him alone. He jerked around to face the cave, sweat springing out on his brow, just as Panayotis emerged and waved them to enter.

Deverish followed Wallaby and the innkeeper into a dank warren littered with scraps of food and fouled linen. The air was so noxious Deverish almost choked, and abruptly he experienced a wild impulse to flee back into the sunlit glade. But then he saw the man huddled in one corner, and his artist's fascination with the grotesque dispelled all fear. The hermit was tall, at least six feet four, and incredibly filthy, his bony frame draped in the tattered

remnants of a soutane, a huge, hand-carved wooden crucifix dangling from his neck. His hands and feet were polished black with a solid patina of filth, and greasy, tangled dark locks fell below his shoulders. The hermit's beard was a living thing, a coiled snake dangling to his waist, encrusted with grime and particles of food, but his teeth, when he smiled to greet them, were startlingly white, and his eyes were the clear light blue of the bleached sky outside. The man should have been repellent, but even to Deverish he was strangely impressive. He did not rise but remained crouched in the corner, extending both hands in a mute gesture of welcome. Deverish wondered if they were expected to sit on the filthy floor of the cave, but Wallaby merely squatted on his haunches before the old man and motioned Deverish to explain their mission, while Panayotis hovered edgily by the entrance, occasionally casting awestruck glances at the hermit. Deverish, remaining on his feet, quickly told the priest that he and Wallaby had heard reports of a unicorn surviving in these remote hills, and wished to verify them. The old man was silent for a long moment, his eyes cast down and pensive, before he looked directly up at Deverish and spoke softly. Deverish couldn't follow him at first, but finally he realized the old man was speaking classical Greek, the words pure and clean as a mountain stream.

"But are not unicorns mythical beasts, stranger?" The old man employed the word *barbaros*, a proper classical usage, but with a faint underlay of emphasis that vaguely disturbed Deverish.

"Who can say for sure what is myth and what reality, Father?" he replied carefully, the ancient words creaking with disuse on his tongue. "We seek only truth."

The old man's smile faded, and he sighed. Deverish watched with loathing as a louse crawled from the tangled mat of hair under

his armpit and struggled laboriously along the tattered remnants of one sleeve.

"If you seek only truth," the hermit continued, "then I shall answer you with truth. But first I must know more of your purpose in coming here. Is it only the search for knowledge that impels you?"

The startlingly blue eyes fixed on his, and suddenly the facile words caught in Deverish's throat.

He could only nod feebly, and the old man sighed again.

"I can call no man a liar, because there are too many truths. So to answer you, yes, there is such a beast in these hills, the very last one in the entire world. He is old and tired, and sleeps much in the sun, but sometimes we meet and share our thoughts. He feeds on goodness, and that is why he is old and infirm, and soon shall die, for it is a meager diet today."

The old priest was obviously mad, but Deverish continued in order to keep Wallaby's flickering interest in their quest alive, for with the sportsman's intuitive flair, the fat Englishman had sensed the spoor of his elusive quarry and now was glancing back and forth at the two of them like a spectator at a match of lawn tennis, hoping by sheer intensity of will to fathom the alien words. "Where can we find this beast?" Deverish asked, choking back a smile. The momentary sense of discontinuity he'd experienced earlier had dissolved, and now he felt only contempt tinged with pity for the pathetic demented fool before him.

"He lives on the slopes above Thanatakis mountain, five miles to the south of here. His legs are weak, and he seldom ventures far from his waterfall. He will not flee from you, for he is very tired and does not know fear."

Deverish turned to Wallaby and gave him a quick digest of their conversation, registering with satisfaction the glint of excitement in the other man's eyes. Wallaby pulled himself to his feet and started towards the cave door, but before he could follow, the hermit's hand shot out and clutched at his sleeve. Deverish noted with disgust that the fingernails were long, talon-like, and reamed in filth. He tried to shake his arm free, but the old man's grip was inordinately strong, and suddenly the deep, distant eyes fastened on his, and again Deverish felt a vague disorientation, a falling away from reality.

The old man spoke softly, never looking from Deverish's face.

"You are here to kill the unicorn, are you not?"

For one irrational moment Deverish accepted the reality of the hunt as passionately as Wallaby. The priest repeated his question quietly, and Deverish did not have the strength to lie. He felt suddenly nauseous, and the hermit's eyes were like twin stakes impaling him. He nodded weakly, and the old man shook his head and clasped his one free hand to the wooden crucifix about his neck.

"I had known you were coming for some time now. The birds told me."

His grip tightened on Deverish's arm.

"I cannot stop you, for these things are ordained," the old man whispered, "but I must tell you this: you go to slay the most precious creature left on earth."

He paused, and Deverish again felt the eyes tearing into his mind like arrows. Wallaby called something impatiently from the doorway, but he could not move.

"Listen to me, my son," the priest continued, the ancient words falling with liquid precision from his lips, "this beast you seek to slay is the last guardian of man's innocence. Unicorns live

on thoughts of beauty, and the radiance of their souls has fallen like sunlight on the world for thousands of years, even before the Old Ones were dreamed into substance on Olympus." The priest's voice fell even lower and the mad eyes filmed with grief. "But the day Christ died on the cross the King of the Unicorns took it upon his race to suffer penance for the act, for otherwise God's wrath delivered on the heads of man would indeed have been terrible. And so on that day, while the heavens shook and the earth trembled on the brink of chaos, he ordered all the females of his race to die, and in great silver flocks they mounted the heights of Thessaly and threw themselves to death on the crags below, singing the ancient songs as they fell. Their voices reached the ear of God, and the tears of Christ rained upon Greece for three days and three nights, and beauty crept into the dreams of everyone."

He is mad, thought Deverish feebly, why does he keep looking at me, why does he not let me out into the sunlight?

"Since then," the priest went on, "the remaining unicorns have died one by one, always by the violence of man's hand, because Christ in his love has spared them pain or illness or suffering or death, save that inflicted by his own tormentors. And with the death of each unicorn over the centuries, something of beauty, something of innocence, has gone out of the world, and a candle has been extinguished in the heart of every man, and the darkness has grown. This poor tired beast you plan to kill is the sole custodian of that ancient, guttering flame. When he is slain the last light of God's mercy is snuffed out, and even children's hearts shall become soiled, and wonder will die slowly, strangled until it becomes only a word, and innocence shall never return. A vast darkness hovers over the earth, peopled with the horrors of the apocalypse, and this beast is man's last solitary light. So God intended it, and so shall it be. Go and destroy him." The bony fingers released Deverish's sleeve,

and he was free. With a wrenching effort he staggered forward and rejoined Panayotis and Wallaby. The priest's eyes followed him, but at a slightly wrong angle, and it was only then that he realized that the old man was blind.

As Deverish stumbled into the sunlight, Wallaby looked at him inquisitively.

"What was the old beggar whispering to you about just now?" he inquired, and then scowled as he saw Deverish's face. "You look white as a ghost, man. Have a swig of cognac, it'll do you good."

Deverish accepted numbly, noticing with clinical detachment as he raised the flask to his lips that his hands were trembling. His legs felt like jelly, but he followed Panayotis and Wallaby across the clearing, and it was only when they reached the edge of the copse of white spruce trees that he realized all the birds in the glen had fallen silent.

Wallaby was anxious to set out at once on foot for Thanatakis mountain and the lair of his quarry, but Panayotis dissuaded him.

"For such a trip you need pack animals, milord," he protested. "I have a cousin with a farm less than a kilometer away and I will go fetch mules and more supplies. While I am gone, rest here and eat so you will be strong for your journey."

Wallaby negligently tossed him a five-hundred-drachma note to pay his cousin, and the old Greek scampered off gleefully. Deverish had little desire to remain in such close proximity to the madman in the cave—he could still feel those dead, empty eyes fastened on him as if they could read his soul—but the experience had been so unsettling and had so jarred his already taut nerves that he could not have continued in any case, and now he eased himself gratefully to the ground at the foot of a birch, the tension gradually seeping from his body until he lay in a luxuriantly languid stupor in the

dappled pool of shade beneath the tree. Wallaby lay stretched out beside him, gorging on a packed lunch of cold lamb, goat's cheese, olives, and brandy, but Deverish had no appetite.

Panayotis returned within the hour, just as Deverish had begun to doze, leading on a tether two bony mules that appeared barely capable of supporting Deverish's weight, let alone Wallaby's twenty stone.

"My cousin let you keep these for two days, if you wish to stay overnight, but he say you should come back before sunset because the spirits of the old gods still walk the high hills at night and are sometimes thirsty for Christian blood." He crossed himself and then grimaced self-consciously. "My cousin is superstitious, of course, milord—he is just an uneducated man. He speaks no English."

Wallaby ignored the Greek's chatter but looked quizzically at the decrepit mules.

"Why have you brought only two animals?"

Panayotis' eyes shifted from Wallaby's and he shuffled his right foot nervously.

"Milord, it is impossible for me to go with you. You understand, there is the inn, I must be there in case other travelers come . . ."

"The inn!" Wallaby roared, his face flaming, the cheeks puffing like twin blood sausages. "That flea-bitten hovel! Your only customers are a few pig farmers guzzling your foul pinecone wine, and there are no travelers in this area except ourselves. You're our guide, man, albeit a paltry excuse for one at best." His voice dropped and he looked almost imploringly at Panayotis. "Without you we'll never find this place the priest spoke of. Surely you will not desert us now, just when we're so close to our goal?"

Panayotis was shamefaced. "Perhaps I can lead you to the foot of the mountain, milord, but no farther." The faintest edge of a whine tinged his voice. "From there you will have no trouble finding this place by the waterfall of which you speak. But I cannot go up the mountain with you."

Panayotis cast a quick, fearful look over his shoulder at his holy man's cave, and Deverish realized with a surge of elation that the innkeeper had somehow picked up the old priest's apprehensions about their journey and was reluctant to be further involved. Deverish struggled lest his face register his joy, for this meant that at last he would be alone in the mountains with Wallaby.

He called Panayotis aside, cutting off Wallaby's sputtered protests over the guide's desertion, and spoke swiftly in colloquial Greek, striving to impart an earnest ring to his words.

"My dear Panayotis, I wish you would accompany us all the way up the mountain. My friend does not like to admit that he is no longer a young or agile man, and a climb like this could prove too much for him. With the two of us along the chances of any ill befalling him lessen appreciably."

He watched the Greek's face with wry amusement as servile respect for Wallaby struggled with superstitious awe of his cherished holy man in the cave. As Deverish had known, the latter conquered. "It is impossible, *Kyrios*," he muttered miserably, looking down at his feet. "I do not know why you have come here, but I cannot accompany you beyond the foot of the mountain." He looked up anxiously. "Perhaps you can convince milord to call off this trip, since you feel he is not strong enough for it." His eyes brightened. "You come back to the tavern and I will prepare a fine meal, with much wine and brandy. He forget about the mountain then, no?"

Deverish spoke with quiet sincerity. "No, Panayotis, I am afraid he will not forget. We must go on. I only pray he will not

injure himself again, as he has in the past on mere piddling slopes. But you have done your best, and I am grateful for your presence on the initial stage of our journey."

As Panayotis dejectedly led the mules from the hermit's glen, Deverish reflected with fierce elation that it would come as no surprise to the old innkeeper when he returned alone.

The journey took the better part of the day, and when they finally reached the foot of Thanatakis mountain, Deverish was soaking with sweat. Wallaby's scarecrow mule had miraculously accommodated its rider's bulk, although the beast's belly sagged and nearly scraped the ground as they proceeded up the lowland slopes, luxuriantly carpeted with wildflowers, and reached the more rugged terrain leading to the Kanakatos mountain range. Unable to adjust comfortably to the jarring gait of his beast, Deverish had walked most of the way, and by the time they approached the mountain his feet were numb and his legs moved with the jerky, automaton stride of a mechanical toy. The cool, pine-scented air was honied with bee song, and the countryside was a study in brilliant color, its blues and greens scraped fresh from a painter's palette, but Deverish stumbled on obliviously, anxious only to reach their destination and to be alone at last with Wallaby. The climb had been uphill all the way, but never steeply, and it was difficult for Deverish to imagine they were really in the mountains unless he assayed a glance down into the valley and saw the cluster of rude cottages in Panayotis' village, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, the inn itself a dollhouse study in miniature. Then Panayotis finally halted the party before a small gorge slashed into the barren face of the hillside. The sky was paling to rose and a breeze tinged with evening coolness lightly stirred the pines. The old Greek, anxious to depart, doffed his hat obsequiously to Wallaby.

"Whatever you search for, milord, I hope you find. I return now to the village to keep your rooms in readiness for your return." He glanced anxiously at Wallaby, who in fact had weathered the journey far better than Deverish and was now breathing in the cool air with greedy gulps, and added in humble benediction: "May God be with you both."

"Well, Deverish," Wallaby bellowed as the Greek departed, slapping his hands together in eager anticipation, "you're the unicorn expert. What now? Is he a nocturnal beastie, or shall we make camp and wait for morning?"

Deverish looked around him, at the empty gray crags thrusting desolate fingers into the darkening sky, and then let his eyes travel down past the rocky hillside, bare save for a few sparse pines, and on to the thickly forested valley below. Once Panayotis was well on his way there would be no other human being within miles of them, but this business was still best done at night.

"It's best we fortify ourselves with a light meal and proceed forthwith," Deverish told him. "I fear my expertise is less than you imagine, but once in the beast's territory I advise we strike quickly, lest he become alarmed by our presence."

"Good, good," Wallaby cried, "the sooner the better! This shall be a splendid hunt, my dear Deverish, a positively splendid hunt."

His eagerness dissolved abruptly, the beetling eyebrows knitted, and he scowled.

"If, of course, that holy man of Panayotis' isn't just a lunatic amusing himself by inventing tales to send us traipsing down the garden path."

"My dear Marius," Deverish swiftly appeased him, "I can assure you the old priest knows this countryside as no one else, and claims with certitude to have seen such a beast. Wrong he may conceivably be, but of his sincerity there can be no doubt."

And thank God, Deverish added fervently to himself, that this tiresome child's charade shall soon be done for good and all.

His words served to rekindle Wallaby's enthusiasm, and they both wolfed a quick meal of goat's cheese and dates. Deverish's appetite had returned; the doubts and fears that inexplicably assailed him in the presence of the old hermit had dissolved like mountain mist the moment Panayotis departed, and he was now exultant in anticipation of his final triumph.

As the sun passed below the pines and darkness settled gently over the peaks, Wallaby and Deverish tethered the mules, left behind the better part of their supplies, and proceeded through the gorge and up a hilly slope surmounted by a small clearing sentried by a solid ring of stunted spruce trees. The carpet of grass in the glade had been beaten flat, obviously by the feet of living creatures, and was curiously free of wildflowers and weeds, as if cleared by the pruning hand of man. Deverish looked about uneasily for a moment, but nothing moved in the foliage, and the light of the full moon illuminated the hillside in photographic clarity.

Wallaby walked ahead gingerly, for all his bulk still nimble on his toes, clutching his Mauser .465 in both hands, while Deverish's own rifle remained slung negligently over one shoulder.

"Go softly now," Wallaby murmured, his eyes bright. "This is our quarry's terrain and one careless move may warn him off for good."

As they passed through the glade, a faint murmuring broke the preternatural stillness, which Wallaby swiftly traced to a small stream meandering along the rocky hillside.

"You said the priest spoke of a waterfall," Wallaby whispered, and Deverish nodded contemptuously. It would be over soon now, but to savor fully his victory he must play the game out a bit longer.

They followed the stream for a few hundred more yards, as the whisper of running water rapidly swelled to a muted thunder. Deverish heard Wallaby's grunt of excitement ahead as they passed through a small grove of spruce trees and found themselves in another clearing facing on a steep ravine, where the stream ended in a foaming miniature white waterfall churning gently over a brief expanse of rocky hillside to form a tiny pool of clear crystal water.

Wallaby held Deverish back and scrutinized the area closely before scrabbling down the cliff side.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing at some imprints in the moist earth by the edge of the pool. "Hoofprints!" Wallaby bent down to look closer, and his voice sang with excitement.

"Cloven hoofs! And no deer this far up! We've found him!"

Deverish held the rock he'd picked up as they passed through the gorge lovingly in his right hand, its roughly pitted surface sensuously caressing his palm.

"Deverish, my dear fellow," Wallaby cried exultantly, still on his knees, "you were right after all! I never should have doubted you." He turned his beaming face towards Deverish, as the younger man had hoped, and the eager, innocent child's eyes blinked only once as the rock struck down into his forehead, the jagged point splitting open the great ruddy face from hairline to the bridge of the nose, and exploding a slimy pudding of brain matter onto Deverish's hands. Wallaby died instantly, but Deverish was impelled to strike and strike again, until nothing remained of the face but a ripe pulp the color and consistency of the scooped innards of an autumn pumpkin. Finally, exhausted and alternately laughing and sobbing, Deverish rose to his feet and with considerable difficulty dragged the great body back across the clearing and to a steeper

cliff face plunging into a black ravine at least three hundred feet deep, and at the bottom studded with needle-like crags.

He extracted Wallaby's billfold from the inside jacket pocket and riffled tenderly through the sheaf of bills, almost five thousand drachma, and another thousand back at the inn where he, as Wallaby's grief-stricken comrade, would soon have access to it.

Deverish tumbled the bloated body over the edge and listened with satisfaction to the seconds that elapsed before it landed with a soft plop on the rocks below. It was done.

Deverish turned, picked up his rucksack and rifle, and as an afterthought tossed Wallaby's gun over the edge of the ravine, sighing deeply as his lungs drew in the cool night air, tinged with the clean, heady scent of pine. He looked out over the ravine for a long, final moment and was about to light a cheroot before returning to the rough camp at the foot of the gorge, when he experienced a disconcerting sensation of eyes fixed hotly on the back of his neck. It was absurd, of course, an obvious trick of nerves, but he turned and sighed with relief when he saw there was nothing.

Deverish was halfway back towards the gorge when he felt the same prickling sensation again. He swung around, annoyed at his ready indulgence of such fancies, and a scream gurgled silently in his throat. Less than five feet away a silver shadow gleamed in the moonlight, its contours indistinguishable save for two huge, luminous eyes looking imploringly into and through his, just as the old priest's had, and registering incomprehension tinged with a pity more terrifying than any accusation. Deverish jerked the rifle to his shoulder and convulsively snapped off three shots.

The creature made no sound but sank to its knees, dipping a slender spiral horn to the earth as if in salutation, or relief. Deverish covered his eyes with his hands, but when he finally stopped

trembling and looked again, there was nothing on the ground before him; and when he staggered forward and closely scrutinized the spot where the thing had been, nothing remained but a tiny mound of silvery dust, which the breeze quickly snatched away in coruscating swirls that sparkled oddly in the moonlight.

Deverish returned, shaken, to the camp, the money in his pocket momentarily forgotten, as the wind grew in intensity and howled through the trees with manic frenzy before waning at midnight to a gentle breeze whispering through the forest like a sigh. Across Europe, in that summer of 1914, birds cried in the darkness, and new dreams crept into men's minds as old dreams died; while four hundred and twenty miles from the mountains of Thessaly, in the city of Sarajevo, the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip passed a restless night loading and unloading his automatic pistol.

The Sacrifice

Gardner Dozois

THERE WERE FOUR of them who entered the haunted darkness of the Old Forest that night, but only three who would return, because three was a magic number.

Featherflower walked silently beside her father Nightwind, her head high, trying not to stumble over the twisted, snakelike roots that seemed to snatch at her legs, trying not to flinch or start at the sinister noises of the forest, the wailing and hooting of things that might be birds, the rustling and crackling of the undergrowth as unseen bodies circled around them in the secret blackness of the night. Her heart was pounding like a fist inside her, but she would not let herself show fear—she was a chief's daughter, after all, and though he led her now to an almost certain death, she would not betray his dignity or her own. Firehair walked slightly ahead of them, as befitted a young war leader in the prime of his strength, but his steps were slow and sometimes faltering, the whites of his eyes showing as he looked around him, and Featherflower took a bitter and strength-giving pleasure from the unspoken but undeniable fact that he was more afraid than she was. Grim old Lamefoot brought up the rear, his scarred and graying body moving silently as a ghost, imperturbable, his steps coming no faster or slower than they ever did.

They had been silent since the trees had closed out the sky overhead—the Old Forest at night had never been a place that encouraged inconsequential chatter, but this silence was heavy and sour and unyielding, pressing down upon them more smotheringly even than the fey and enchanted darkness that surrounded them. Featherflower could sense her father's agony, the grief and guilt that breathed from him like a bitter wind, but she would not make it easier for him by deed or gesture or word. She was the one who was to be sacrificed—why should she comfort *him*? She knew her duty as well as he knew his, had been born to it, and she would not fight or seek to escape, but it hurt her in her heart that Nightwind—her *father*—would do this thing to her, however grave the need, and she would not make it easier for him. Let it be hard, as it soon would be hard for her, let him hurt and sweat and cry aloud with the hardness of it.

So they walked through the forest in silence and guilty enmity and fear, the great and living darkness walking with them, a-bristle with watching eyes, until ahead there was a glitter of light.

The forest opened up around them into a small meadow, drenched with brilliant silver moonlight. At the far end of the meadow rose an enormous oak tree, a giant of the forest, its huge branches spread high above them like waiting, encircling arms.

"Here," said old Lamefoot the wizard. "He will come *here*."

When they had crossed the meadow and stood beneath the arms of the oak tree, Featherflower said quietly, "Father, must this be?"

Nightwind sighed. "The trees do not bloom, the streams dry up, the grass is sere . . . It has been long and long since such a thing was done, and I had hoped my time would pass before it was again needful, but clearly the gods have turned their faces away . . ." He

fell silent again, looking very old. "*He* will come here," Lamefoot said in his grim gray voice, "and if he accepts you, then the powers will smile on us again . . ." Firehair looked guiltily away from her, glanced nervously around him with wide frightened eyes and said only "It is for the good of the Folk . . ."

She blew out her lips at him in scorn, snorting derisively. "Then for the good of the Folk, I will stay," she said, and sat herself down beneath the giant old oak.

Lamefoot studied her closely. "You will not run away, child?"

"No," she said calmly. "I will not run away . . ."

They watched her for a while longer then, but there was nothing more for anyone to say, and so at last they went away and left her there, Nightwind giving one last agonized look back before the darkness swallowed them.

She was alone in the Old Forest.

Trembling, she waited beneath the ancient oak. Never had she been so afraid. The dark shapes of the trees seemed to press menacingly close around the meadow, kept at bay only by the silver moonlight. A bat flittered by through that moonlight, squeaking, and she flinched away from it. Something howled away across the cold and silent reaches of the forest, howled again in a voice like rusty old iron. Featherflower's head turned constantly as she sought to look in all directions at once, straining wide-eyed to pierce the gloom beneath the trees. She would not give way to fear, she would not give way to fear . . . but her defenses were crumbling, being sluiced away by a rising flood of terror.

A crashing in the forest, growing louder, coming nearer, the sound of branches bending and snapping, leaves rustling, the sound of some large body forcing its brute way through the entangling undergrowth . . .

She looked away, fear choking her like a hand, stopping her breath.

Something *coming* . . .

There was movement among the trees, the bare branches stirring gently as though moved by the ghost of the wind, and when she looked again *he* was there, seeming to materialize from the dappled leaf-shadows, his head held high, paler than the moonlight, clothed in the awful glory of his flesh, so noble and swift-moving and puissant, so proud and lordly of bearing that all fear vanished from her and she felt her heart melt within her with poignant and unbearable love.

Their eyes met, hers shy and guileless, his bright and clear and wild, liquid as molten gold. She tossed her own head back, moonlight gleaming from the long white horn that protruded from her forehead, and pawed nervously at the ground with a tiny silver hoof.

He came to her then across the broken ground, the human, moving as lightly and soundlessly as mist, and laid his terrible head in her lap.

Hunting a Unicorn

Vered Tochterman

HUNTING A UNICORN is not as easy as it sounds.

No, scratch that. It doesn't even sound easy. Only I didn't know that when the sorcerer Pranthar's apprentice came and asked me to get him a Unicorn's horn for a spell he was busy casting, in exchange for a respectable bag of gold pieces ("What do I care what you do with the rest? Steaks, if you feel like it," he said when I asked him about the rest of the carcass). So I agreed.

First of all, you need to find a girl in her virginal state. A maiden. Unicorns can be caught only using a virgin serving as bait. They will come to her, but not to anybody else. The beasts are like purity testers, without all the instruments. And I dare you to try and go around the village asking girls which of them is a virgin. Many slaps did I earn that way. And club threats. And one not particularly gentle encounter with a trough.

Eventually, Zera, the daughter of Mueny the miller, agreed to come along. She looks like your worst nightmare, so I felt certain she was a virgin.

We wandered the enchanted forest until we reached the Unicorn's lair. We located it by the holes in the tree trunks, which are typical of the way Unicorns sharpen their horns. Initially, the marks were far apart and old, and we knew that we were still far, but

gradually they became nearer and fresher. We were approaching our target.

But as we drew near it, we began feeling odd feelings. First, Zera's eyes met mine. Then, her hand rubbed against my shoulder, as if by mistake. Then, my knee accidentally touched hers. I started sweating with no apparent reason, and Zera's breath hastened. And when we were at the very entrance to the Unicorn's lair . . .

Well, I won't go into details. I'll only add that if you intend to hunt a Unicorn, take into account that non-virgins cannot come near them. And that in spite of their gentle appearance, they do have natural defenses. Pheromones, the wizards call it. God damn these creatures, I wish they were all wiped out. Though I must admit, my wife Zera does not agree with me on that one.

How to Make Unicorn Pie

Esther M. Friesner

I LIVE IN the town of Bowman's Ridge, Vermont, founded 1746, the same year if not the same universe as Princeton University. But where Princeton has employed the intervening centuries to pour forth a bounteous-if-bombastic stream of English majors, Bowman's Ridge has employed the same time to produce people who are actually, well, *employable*.

Bowman's Ridge is populated exclusively by three major ethnic groups, the two most numerous of which are Natives and Transients. I've lived here for twenty-five years, in one of the smaller authentic Colonial Era houses on Main Street. It has white clapboard siding, conservatively painted dark green shutters, the original eighteenth-century well, a floral clock, a flourishing herb garden, a rockery, and a paid-up mortgage. Local tradition claims that Ethan Allen once threw up here.

I'm still just a Transient. That's how the Natives would have it, anyway. On the other hand, at least I'm a Transient that they can trust, or perhaps the word I want is tolerate. Just as long as I don't bring up the unfortunate subject of how I earn my living, everything is roses.

You see (and here I ought to turn my face aside and drop my voice to the requisite hoarse whisper reserved for all such disgraceful confessions), I . . . *write*.

UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN!

Someone get a firm hold on the carriage horses lest they stampede and make sure that no pregnant women cross my path. I wouldn't like to be held responsible for the consequences.

No, I am *not* taking on unnecessarily. I've seen the looks I get on the street and in the stores. I've heard the whispers: "There goes Babs Barclay. She *writes*." (Uttered in the same deliciously scandalized tone once applied to prim old maids with a secret addiction to overdosing on Lydia Pinkham's elixir, cooking sherry, vanilla extract, and hair tonic.)

To the good folk of Bowman's Ridge, having a writer in their midst is rather like having a toothless, declawed cat in the chicken coop. The beastie may look harmless, logic may insist that in its present state sans fang and talon it is by fiat harmless, but the biddies still huddle together, clucking nervously, because . . . You never know.

I know what they are afraid of. It's the same fear that's always plagued small towns condemned to harbor the Pen Pushers from Planet Verbiage. It's the ultimate terror, which I first saw voiced by a secondary character in one of the *Anne of Green Gables* books when the heroine began to garner some small success as an author: *What if she puts us in one of her stories?* Not a direct quote, but it'll do.

Forget what you think you know about fame. Not everyone wants his or her allotted fifteen minutes' worth. The people of Bowman's Ridge want it even less than the people of Avonlea, or

Peyton Place, or any other small town that had the poor judgment to allow writers to burrow into the wainscotting and nest for the winter. They are simple, honest, hardworking folk, who will take a simple, honest tire iron to your head if you so much as hint that you're going to make the outside world aware of their existence. (I think that the surplus of deferred fame-bites gets funneled into an offshore account where Donald Trump's ego, Michael Jackson's manhood, and Madonna's uterus spend much too much time making withdrawals. I *could* be wrong.)

It doesn't do me a lick of good to explain to my friends and neighbors that their fears are for naught. I write romances. *Historical* romances. Books with titles like *Druid's Desire* and *Millard Filmore, My Love*. The only way I'd write about anyone from Bowman's Ridge is if they were romantic, famous, and dead. Why, they could no more get into one of my books than a taxman into heaven, a linebacker into leotards, or a small, sharp sliver of unicorn horn into a nice big slice of Greta Marie Bowman's apple pie.

"Ow!"

It was a snoozy afternoon in mid-November and I was seated at the counter in the coffee shop when it happened. The coffee shop in Bowman's Ridge is the nexus for all manner of social interaction, from personal to political. I'm afraid my Transient heart doesn't get all revved up over the Planning and Zoning Commission's latest bureaucratic brouhahaha or the Women's Club's plans for yet another authentic Colonial weekend to honor the memory of our own Captain James Resurrection Bowman (1717–1778). I go there because the coffee is good, but the apple pie is downright fabulous.

Or so I thought, until I found the figurative needle in the Northern Spies.

Carefully I put three fingers into my mouth and drew out the thing that had stung me, tongue and palate. I pulled it between my

lips to clean off any adhering fragments of cooked apple and flaky crust. I have no idea why I went to the trouble. Would it make any difference to my throbbing mouth if I got the barb clean before seeing what it was?

I might as well have saved myself the effort and simply spit it out. Even clean and wiped dry on a paper napkin, it was nothing I could put a name to. About as long as the first joint of my little finger and one-quarter as wide, it caught the light from the coffee shop overheads and shimmered like the inside of an abalone shell.

"Something wrong, dear?" Muriel's shadow fell over the object of my attention.

Muriel and her husband Hal own and run the Bowman's Ridge coffee shop. I like to think that they belong to some mystic fraternal order of interior decorators—the Harmonic Knights of the Cosmic Balance, Fabric Swatch and Chowder Society—for the way they keep the place charming without being cloying. Anyone who's dallied in small town Vermont knows how easy it is for an eatery to sink into the La Brea Cute Pits. Either the management heaps on the prêt-à-porter antiques, or wallows in frills and dimity, or worst of all, beats it with the Quaint stick until it catches a case of Terminal Rusticity from the knotty-pine paneling and dies.

Hal and Muriel just serve good food, never patch the vinyl counter stools with duct tape, adorn the place suitably for holidays, and periodically change the basic decor according to the grand, universal imperative of We Felt Like It. Oh! And they never shop at Everything Guernseys, thanks be to God, Jesus, Ben and Jerry.

Muriel has never treated me like a Transient and she sees to it that all the waitresses know how I take my coffee (black, two sugars) without my having to tell them every time. She even awarded me the supreme accolade, posting a *Happy Birthday, Babs* message on

the whiteboard where they display the daily Specials. This privilege is as good as telling the world that I might not be a Bowman's Ridge Native, but I was one of the Transients they could take out of the attic on visiting days to show the neighbors. I like Muriel a lot.

So of course I lied to her. "Nuh-uh," I said, hastily clapping my hand over the extracted sliver. "Nothing's wrong, not a thing, great pie."

Muriel gave me a searching look, but all she said was, "Yes, Greta Marie said she's gotten some superior apples this season." Then one of the waitresses came up to tell her she was wanted in the kitchen and she was gone.

Left to myself once more, I uncovered the sliver and picked it up delicately between thumb and forefinger. It twinkled with all the hues of prism-shattered light, but it was made of no substance I could name. The man on the stool next to me cast a curious glance at it, but promptly went back to reading his newspaper. People in this town don't pry. Why bother, when every scrap of local news scoots around faster than a ferret on amphetamines? Sooner or later, everyone knows everything about everyone else.

Well, I thought, *it's very attractive, whatever it is. I'll bring it home; maybe Rachel can make something out of it.* Rachel is my teenaged daughter. She has discovered the Meaning of Life, which is to make jewelry out of any object you find lying around the house, yard, or municipal dump, and pierce another part of your body to hang it from. At least this object was pretty, and I always say that a good soak in Clorox will clean anything, up to and including Original Sin.

I was so fascinated by the way the light played off my little bit of found art that I didn't notice Muriel's return until I heard her say, "Uh-huh. Thought so."

Caught in the act, I tried to cover up my sorry attempt at willful misdirection by dropping the sliver onto the open pages of the magazine I'd brought into the coffee shop with me and slamming the glossy cover shut on it. Slapping my hand over the bare-chested male model on the cover, I gave Muriel a sickly smile. "Dropped a contact," I said. "I don't want it to fall on the floor."

No dice. You can't fake out a woman who can tell good tuna salad from bad at fifty paces. "Honey, who are you trying to protect?" she said. "Greta Marie? You don't even know her."

That was true. Greta Marie Bowman belonged to the third and smallest segment of Bowman's Ridge society: Eccentrics. As my dear mother would say, an eccentric is what you call a lunatic who's got money. Mom was speaking from the jaded, materialistic perspective of big city life, however. In places like Bowman's Ridge, we realize that money doesn't excuse abnormal behavior. You don't have to be rich and crazy to be classed as an eccentric; you can be poor and crazy, so long as you're also the scion of one of the town's oldest families. Or in Greta Marie Bowman's case, the scionette.

Yes, she was the descendant of *that* Bowman. And yes, she was living in what the Victorians referred to as genteel poverty. Whatever mite of income she derived from her ancestors' surviving investments needs must be eked out by the sale of apple pies to the coffee shop. This was one of those cold, hard facts that everyone knew and no one mentioned. A Mafia don brought up to follow the steel-jacketed code of silence, omertà, is a harebrained blabbermouth next to a resident of Bowman's Ridge who's got something *not* to say.

"Look, it's nothing," I said. "I may not know her, but I certainly don't want to get her in—"

"Trouble?" Muriel finished for me. She sighed. "Babs, you want to know the meaning of the word? That thing you just found in your pie, what do you think would've happened if someone else had found it?"

"Not much. Everyone around here *knows* Greta Marie and no one would say anything that would—"

"Think that goes for the Summer People?"

Na-na-na-*naaaaah*. Cue the sinister chords on the pipe organ. The only critters lower on the Bowman's Ridge food chain than Transients are Summer People. I don't know why the Natives despise them so. They are the single best thing to happen to the local economy since maple leaf–shaped anything. They swarm up here every June, July, and August, with a recurring infection come leaf-peeping time, and pay top dollar to stay in spare rooms that would otherwise be mold sanctuaries. They attend church bazaars and rummage sales, fighting to the death to buy the nameless tin and wicker doohickeys that the Natives clean out of Aunt Hattie's attic. (Aunt Hattie could never tell what the hell that bug-ugly objet d'awful was either.) And of course if you've got any piece of house-trash, no matter how old, no matter how dilapidated, all you have to do is stencil a pig or a sunflower or a black-and-white cow on it and it's outahere, courtesy of the Summer People.

On the other hand, serve them a slice of pie that's packing a concealed shiv and they'll bring the Board of Health down on your head faster than you can sell them a busted butter churn.

"I see what you mean," I said. "But the season's over, the Summer People are all gone, and—"

"Skiers," Muriel reminded me. "Snowmobilers."

"Oh." I'd forgotten that, like weasels, when winter came the Summer People changed their coats and returned to our little town in swarms.

"It really would be a kindness to tell her." Muriel patted my hand in a motherly way. "Won't you please?"

"Ummmm. Why don't you?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" She laid her hands to her bosom. "She'd just simply fold up and die if I did. She doesn't take criticism too well, poor child." Only Muriel would refer to a spinster pushing fifty-five as *poor child*, bless her. "She'd stop baking pies for us altogether. She needs the money, though she'd never admit it. What would become of her then? It'd be plain awful."

In my heart I agreed with Muriel, though more out of my love for the pies than any concern for the pie-maker's welfare. "But if she doesn't take criticism well, how could I say—?" I began.

Muriel pish-tushed me like a champion. "But it's *different* if it comes from you, Babs."

I didn't need to ask why. Wasn't it obvious? I was a Transient. My cautionary words concerning unidentified opalescent objects in the pastry wouldn't shame Greta Marie the way a Native's would. In fact, if I were to go to Greta Marie's place and accuse her of using the fat of unborn goats for piecrust shortening, she could live it down.

So I went.

Greta Marie lived out on the Old Toll Road. This was a stretch of highway so narrow, frost-heaved, and godforsaken that the fact that someone had once collected real American money from travelers to allow them the privilege of breaking their axles in the ruts and potholes was a testimony to Yankee ingenuity, to say nothing of Yankee gall. There was hardly enough room for two cars to pass, unless one climbed up onto the shoulder at a forty-five-degree angle, bumping over the gnarled roots of pine trees flanking the way. Luckily, the Old Toll Road had gone from being a throughway leading to Montpelier to a dead end leading to nowhere when the

bridge over Bowman's Gorge collapsed in 1957. The town decided it would be a waste of money to rebuild it, since by then everyone took the state highway anyway, and that pretty much put an end to the two-way traffic problem.

That is, it did unless you happened to be heading *up* the road at the same time that Greta Marie Bowman was headed *down* it. She drove an old Rambler the color of mud with a crumpled fender and enough dings in the sides to make it look like the only car on the road suffering from cellulite. Wonderful to relate, she could actually get that bundle of battered tin up to considerable speeds, even over the humps and hollows of the Old Toll Road.

Wonderful to relate if you're safely out of the way, terrifying to tell if you're driving the car that's right in her path. Like a deer caught in the headlights, I spied the glitter of Greta Marie's Coke-bottle glasses and I froze. My hands spasmed tight to the steering wheel, my foot refused to move from the accelerator, and the only thing I could think was: *Dear Lord, if I die, what the hell body part will Rachel pierce to commemorate the funeral?*

I felt like a complete idiot when Greta Marie brought her vehicle to a ladylike stop with room to spare and nary the smallest squeal of brakes to be heard. She peered over the steering wheel like a marmot testing the first sniff of spring air, then dropped from sight behind the dashboard. One hefty car door swung wide and she was walking toward me, all smiles. I lowered the window to greet her and was nearly bowled into the next county by her preferred scent, Eau de Mothballs, but in the name of preserving the honor of all Transients, I managed to dig up a smile of my own and paste it to my face.

"You're that writer-person!" was how Greta Marie Bowman chose to say hello.

"Um, yes, I am."

"Oh, I knew you'd come! Really I did!" She clapped her hands together with girlish glee.

"You did?" This was news to me. I wasn't sure whether it was good news. In her oversized, out-at-elbows black cardigan, with her steel-gray hair anchored to the top of her head with at least three pairs of knitting needles, Greta Marie Bowman put me in mind of a large, amiable spider.

"My gracious, and when I think that we almost missed each other entirely—!" She spoke in the chirpy, lock-jawed accent of a young Katharine Hepburn. "Now you just follow me up to the house and we'll *talk*."

And then, as God is my witness, she gave me a roguish wink, went back to her car, and backed up *at speed* all the way to the ancestral Bowman property, which lay a good quarter mile or more up the Old Toll Road.

From what I had gathered in my quarter century of Bowman's Ridge residence, the Bowmans had always been farmers, but they made a better living selling off the land than tilling it. The hard soil of their property let a diligent man grow him a bumper crop of rocks, though only if he was willing to work for it.

The last male Bowman to inhabit the place had been Greta Marie's grandfather, dead lo these many years. By the time he was under his native soil, he'd sold most of it. The only exceptions were the ancestral apple orchard, a swampy meadow beyond that, and the homestead plot. This latter supported a meager vegetable garden, a dilapidated chicken coop and poultry yard, the half of the old barn that was still standing, and the Bowman house proper. All of these flashed before my eyes as Greta Marie hauled me out of my car and into the front parlor, where she assaulted me with tea.

"Now the important family papers are mostly safe in the attic," she said, pouring out some oolong strong enough to strip paint

from metal. "I can let you have those today, but the best sources are Caroline Elspeth's notebooks, and they're over in Brattleboro at Cousin Victoria's house. She said she was going to do something with them, but everyone knows how far that got. Vicky never finished anything in her entire life except her husbands."

I took a sip of tea, set the cup aside, and stammered, "I—I beg your pardon?"

Greta Marie slapped a wrinkled hand over her mouth and, as I hope for glory, tittered like a chipmunk. "Oh mercy, there I go again. I forgot: You're not from around here. You wouldn't know about Vicky." And with that, she proceeded to bring me up to speed on Cousin Victoria Bowman Randall Smith Chasen, her antecedents and her heirs. It was a lengthy recitation that left me knowing more about the Bowman family and any related Native families—which is to say everyone in town—than I'd ever wanted or needed to know.

When she was done, I gazed down at my now-frigid cuppa and murmured, "That was . . . very interesting, Miss Bowman, but I don't see—"

"—how you can use all that for your book? Well, of course you can't use all of it," Greta Marie reassured me. "After all, I wouldn't be very bright if I gave away *everything*. I simply must reserve some of it for my own book as well. I'm sure you won't begrudge me that much? Mine won't be nearly as fascinating as yours, but then you've had so much more *experience*, you have *connections*, and as Daddy always used to say, when you've got connections, who needs talent?" Another giggle, this one ending in a snort. "All I want to write about is the branch of the family that settled near Brattleboro, old Zerusha Bowman's boys and that Martin woman—you know, she swore she came from Boston, but everyone here just knew she was from *New York*." Pronounced *Sodom*.

It was then that the diaphanous phantom of Understanding tiptoed up and tapped me gently on the cranium with an iron mallet. To this day I couldn't tell you whether my subsequent spate of blather was more of an apology for not having come to use the generations of Bowmans past as raw material for my next book, or an explanation for why I had come.

"Oh," said Greta Marie, regarding the shining sliver I held out to her in my cupped hand. "I see." If she were at all disappointed, she bore it well and swallowed it whole. "That certainly was careless of me. Thank you so much for bringing it to my attention." She stood up from behind the tea things, which I assumed was my cue to scurry back into the Transient woodwork, duty done.

As it happened, I was wrong. No sooner had I risen to my feet, stammering some social pleasantry about having to go home now, I'd left the children on the stove, but Greta Marie raised one briary brow and inquired, "Then you'd prefer to come back another time to see the unicorns?"

Three minutes later, to the tick, I was outside the Bowman house with Greta Marie, leaning my elbows on the top of a drunken split-rail fence that marked the boundaries of the meadow. And there, prancing and pawing the spongy ground and bounding hither and yon in matchless beauty at the slightest provocation, were the unicorns. There were three of them, all a luminous white so pure as to be almost ice-blue, with flossy manes the color of smoke glimpsed by moonlight. Even without the time-honored single horn in the middle of the forehead, it would have been impossible to confuse these entrancing beasts with the most thistledown-footed thoroughbred.

Which was a good thing, because . . .

"Their *horns*," I gasped. "Where are their horns?" I leaned farther over the fence, staring at the three dancing shapes in the meadow. "All they've got are these . . . *lumps*."

"Lumps?" Greta Marie shaded her eyes, as if that gesture could hope to counteract a truly heroic case of myopia. She sighed. "Oh dear. It's happened again. Wait here." She left me teetering on the gateway to Wonderland as she trudged off to a nearby tool shed, to return with a small, bright hacksaw in hand. Setting two fingers to her lips, she blew a piercing whistle.

The unicorns heard and the effect was galvanic. They paused in their frolic, heads up, ears pricked forward, a pose of frozen loveliness so exquisite that it hurt my heart to see it. Then they broke from a standstill to a gallop, three clouds of lightning racing across the meadow. For an instant I was afraid that they meant to charge right through the fence—God knows, it didn't look strong enough to halt a stampede of bunny rabbits—but I needn't have worried. Dainty cloven hooves planted themselves hard and decidedly in the earth just a hand span from the fence, bright garnet eyes twinkling with amusement. I could have sworn that the critters were laughing at me.

Just so I wouldn't make that mistake in future, the largest of the three curled his lips back from a double row of nastily pointed teeth and *did* laugh at me. It was a sound birthed at the junction of a horse's whinny, a stag's belled challenge, and a diva's scorn. He did it loudly and at length, giving me more than enough time to study him.

His eyes were, as I've mentioned, a deep, gem-like crimson, very large, highly intelligent, and possessed of an almost human capacity for malice. And yes, there in the place where tradition dictates the horn must be, there sprouted a pearly lump. Small as it was, I could see that it wasn't to grow into the sleek pool-cue object some folks

fancied, nor was it the twisty narwhal tusk others preferred their unicorns to sport. It was multi-sided, multi-edged, and the edges thereof fuzzy with the added menace of minute, vicious serrations, almost barbs. At full growth it would be deadly, and not an easy death either. Just looking at it made my skin go cold.

The unicorn cocked his head at me as if to say, *Seen enough, rube? Take a picture; it lasts longer.* Then he swung his muzzle away to plant a long, snuffly kiss on Greta Marie's withered jowl.

"There's a good boy, there's a fine fellow." Greta Marie stroked the slab of silky white cheek. "Now just hold still, this won't hurt a bit." Placing one hand on the unicorn's nose, she used the other to ply the hacksaw. The steel blade bit into the base of the resurgent horn, which made a frightful screeching as it was severed. The unicorn submitted to the operation with that air of gallant indifference popularized by the better class of eighteenth-century highwaymen about to swing at Tyburn Tree. Greta Marie worked quickly. There was a dull *plop* as the horn-nub hit the dirt.

"There," said Greta Marie. She fluffed up a little fur to cover the newly raw spot on the unicorn's forehead and announced, "Next!"

I watched with a combination of fascination and revulsion as she proceeded to treat the two remaining miracles as if they were parlor cats getting their claws clipped. When the third shining stub fell to earth, she sighed with satisfaction, then shouted, "Shoo!" Spooked like a flock of buff Orpingtons, the unicorns took off for the far end of the meadow, the place where boggy grassland melted into a small patch of wildwood. They flickered under the shadows of the leafless branches, then turned to fog and were gone from sight.

"Well, we won't be seeing any more of them today," Greta Marie declared, stooping to gather the fallen nubbins. Still dumbfounded, I followed her back into the house, where I watched

her set the horn-nubs on a butcher's block cutting board and whack them to flinders with a cleaver. Using the flat of the blade, she scraped the resulting pile of iridescent toothpicks into an old stoneware crock marked *Garlic*.

"You . . . *save* them?" I asked. She gave me a look that as good as accused me of Wastefulness, chief among the Seven Deadly Sins of Transients.

"I *use* them," she replied.

"Er, how?" Visions of an alchemist's lab hidden in the old Bowman root cellar taunted me. I pictured Greta Marie huddled over her bubbling alembics, a stuffed corkindrill suspended above her head while she added a pinch of unicorn's horn to her latest batch of hellbroth.

"Why, I simply— Never mind, it would be easier to show you. Do you have a minute to spare? Several?" And with that she opened a cabinet and donned not the wizard's pointed hat, but the cook's muslin apron. Still without waiting for my yea or nay, she proceeded to favor me with the privilege of witnessing the process by which Greta Marie Bowman took plain apples, sugar, spice, and pastry, and confected them into the food of the gods.

When at last she dropped the top crust into place over the mounded fruit filling and fluted the edges, she turned to me and commanded, "Watch." From the *Garlic* cannister she took one splinter of unicorn's horn and with five deft jabs opened steam slits in the piecrust. "There. *That's* how I use them."

She cleaned off the sliver and dropped it into a jelly jar on the windowsill above her sink before popping the pie into the oven. "You can get about three perfect pies out of each one," she informed me. "After that they crumble into dust—the horns, not the pies. But the dust makes a wonderful scouring powder—gets out every stain you can think of and a few you can't—so I don't feel too bad

about getting so little use out of them. And the critters are always growing new ones."

She removed her apron and folded it over the back of a kitchen chair. "I can't imagine *where* my mind was when I let that splinter you found slip into the pie. Oh wait, yes I can. That must've been the day I was in such a terrible hurry, and it seemed like every time I turned around, the phone was ringing itself off the hook. No wonder I got all muddled, between trying to get the Congregational Church bazaar organized and all that baking and *baking*—! Ed Franklin had come by that week to bring me three extra bushels of Cortlands—he's had a bumper crop this year. I know he meant it to be kind, but I had my own apples to use and I knew that if I didn't get his Cortlands baked up they were going to go bad on me. Not that it matters anymore—I could use rotten apples in my pies and the horn would turn them to nectar, just nectar—but old habits do die hard. My mother raised me to bake a decent apple pie and I can't do any less." She finally paused for breath, plucked the kettle from the stove, and beamed at me. "More tea?"

I left her house about an hour later, burdened with the apple pie, the Bowman family papers, the promise to at least *try* to write *Jim Bowman's Woman*, and a vow of silence: Under no circumstances was I to tell a single, living soul about the presence of the unicorns on the Bowman property. As Greta Marie herself told me, the only reason she went to all the trouble of sawing off the creatures' telltale horns was so that unexpected callers who caught sight of them would assume they were only horses.

"But if you want to keep them a secret, why did you show them to me?" I'd asked.

"Oh, you're different," Greta Marie reassured me. "It doesn't matter if you know about them." Right. *Sic semper Transientis*, or however you'd say *Transients Don't Count* in Latin.

I went back to the coffee shop to make my Mission Accomplished report to Muriel. I was promptly rewarded with a cup of coffee, a glazed donut, and the question: "So which one of the unicorns is your favorite?"

"Nurk?" I replied, mouth stuffed with a chunk of donut that bid fair to wedge itself in my throat if I let shock get the better of me. I chewed vigorously, swallowed, then leaned across the counter like a comic strip anarchist to whisper, "You *know*?"

Muriel chuckled. "Bless your heart, Babs, *everyone* knows. Only no one *says* anything. You know, I can't say we were at all surprised when the first one showed up, oh, maybe ten, twelve years ago. It was the middle of winter, long about Christmastime, when we have the Pinecone Handcrafts Fair at the firehouse; *you* know. Greta Marie's car was in the shop so Sally Norton and her boy Ron offered to drive up the Old Toll Road to fetch Greta Marie there and back. They pulled up into her yard and that's when they saw her and it. She'd already sawed the creature's horn clean off, but even so, even in the nighttime with no more light to see by than the spill off that old kerosene lantern she leaves burning near the gatepost, there was no way a sighted person could ever believe that was a horse! Of course Sally and Ron never said *that* to Greta Marie."

"Of course not," I mumbled.

"And if you ask me, it was *that* natural when the other two joined the first one. Frankly I'm kind of puzzled that there aren't *more* than three haunting the Bowman place. Maybe three unicorns are all that's left in this part of the state, and it's no wonder they've all come to roost with Greta Marie."

"It is?"

"Of course it is! Lord love you, Babs, don't tell me that an educated city woman like you doesn't know what it takes to attract a unicorn?"

City woman? Twenty-five years ago, maybe. Which translates into Bowman's Ridge–ese as *yesterday*.

And I *did* know what it takes to attract a unicorn.

"Oh, come *on*, Muriel!" I protested. "Don't you stand there and try to tell me that Greta Marie is the one and only virgin in this whole town!"

Muriel's eyes twinkled. "All right, I won't. Wouldn't be true, anyhow. But how long does your average virgin last, these days? Sixteen, seventeen years at most, and that's like an eyeblink of time to a unicorn. They're immortal, you know," she confided. "I may belong to a different generation, but I'm not blind or stupid. We all know what goes on with our young people, especially since the government's been making them go to that regional high school at Miller's Falls." Pronounced *Sodom* again, and no matter that the government redistricting edict was handed down in 1953, when even Vegas was wholesome.

"You see," Muriel went on, "it's not just that Greta Marie's a virgin, it's that she's so damn *good* at it. Pardon my French."

"So everyone knows and no one objects?" I asked.

"Why should they? She's a respectable member of this town and if she wants to raise mythical beasts on her own property that's her own business . . . as long as she keeps them under proper control at all times and they don't pose any threat to the community."

"That's comforting to know," I said with a merry chuckle that didn't become me at all. (The glazed donut had gone straight to my brain and the sugar rush convinced me I could try my hand at wit.)

"You see, I found this darling little dragon's egg on my lawn last Easter and I was worried that if I hatched it, people would talk."

Muriel stared at me blankly for the count of three, then said, "You writers," and took off as if the kitchen had caught fire.

I was left alone at the counter, Dorothy Parker manqué, with nothing to hide my blushes save my coffee cup and my copy of *With Pen and Passion*. The cup being empty, I chose to go to ground behind the cover of the very magazine between whose pages I had dropped the original sliver of unicorn horn.

This might be the best place to mention that *With Pen and Passion* is one of the many fine periodicals to which I subscribe as part of my career as a romance writer. *WiPP*, as we in the trade call it, is a slick monthly whose chief allure is the book review column. That is to say, whose chief allure *had been* the book review column.

As long as we're opening narrative parentheses, let the worst now be revealed: His name was Wellcome Fisher and he was my own damned fault.

I'd met him at a romance writers' convention in New York City about ten years ago. He was an aspiring author, scion of a proud old New England family, almost attractive in a tweedier-than-thou kind of way, well-bred, well-read, pumped full of the Wisdom of the Ancients at the ivy-covered tit of Mother Princeton, raring to put pen to word processor and make his genius known to the fortunate masses. There was just one little thing standing in the way of his brilliant career: He couldn't write for toffee.

Of course I didn't know this from the start. He seemed like such a nice man. (Many successful romance writers *are* male, you know.

They all write under female pseudonyms unless they're Fabio or churning out mainstream lunchblowers like *The Bridges of Madison County*.) He introduced himself, said how much he admired my work, and asked if he could buy me a drink.

He bought me several. It was all strictly professional. We had a lovely, long chat about the importance of research in writing historical romance. He told me that he was always extremely punctilious about his research, and he didn't understand why the one book he had managed to sell was doing so poorly.

"I don't merely say 'Gwendolyn stood before her mirror wearing a velvet gown,'" he told me. "I put in details." And he gave me an autographed copy of *Lady Gwendolyn's Gallant* so that I could see for myself.

I did, once I got it home. Wellcome had done his research, all right. His book gave me a painfully thorough education about the provenance of food, clothing, furniture, music, and transportation in Regency England. It told me who ate what and how much of it, who slept where and for how long, and who used which finger to excavate whose nostril. In fact, it told me everything except an entertaining story.

We had exchanged telephone numbers, so when the inevitable happened and he called to ask my opinion of his work, I found myself in a bit of a quandary. I don't like to lie, I just do it for a living. However, neither do I like to tell someone that his book, his effort, his hardbound baby, stinks like a gopher's armpit. For one thing, it's cruel. For another, it's dangerous. Alas for the world, we now no longer know which eager young writer will take constructive criticism as an invitation to assassination.

So I hedged. I evaded all direct questions about the book itself. I chattered and gobbled and blithered about a plethora of other

subjects in an attempt to divert Wellcome Fisher from the original aim of his call.

Unfortunately, one of the subjects on which I blithered was the fact that *WiPP* was looking for a few good book reviewers. Wellcome heard, applied, and the rest was history, much like the *Hindenburg*, the *Titanic*, and the Reagan Years. From the moment he got the job, he announced that he would now devote his fair young life to the aesthetic improvement of the Romance genre. It was a noble aim, in theory.

In practice he appeared to have slapped on a pair of six-shooters and gone out gunning for authors whose work had committed the unpardonable sin of having a better track record than his. (Which is to say, everybody and Cain's dog.) He implemented this game plan by reducing any book he reviewed to a pitiful clutch of *execrables*, *derivatives*, *pathetics*, and *don't bothers*.

Any book, including mine. Though we remained on social terms, Wellcome was quick to inform me that he would not let our acquaintanceship sway his critical judgment, and he proved this by a scathing review of *Raleigh, Truly* (sixth in my ever-popular Elizabethan series). Furthermore, said he, I ought to be grateful. He was only being honest.

I, in turn, informed him that I thought his critical judgment consisted entirely of bloody-minded revenge on writers who, unlike himself, had managed to create something people wanted to read. What was more, he might call it honesty, but anyone with half a glass eye could see that he had more axes to grind than Paul Bunyan. The rest of our interview is clouded in my mind, but I believe that a condescending remark on his part, a bowl of extra-chunky salsa on mine, and a dry-cleaning bill for a man's suit figure in it somewhere.

If only the chunks had been larger! Wellcome sustained no permanent injuries from the episode. He wrote on, his pen unblunted and his bile unmitigated, an Alexander Woollcott wannabe in full flower (deadly nightshade, since you asked). As a matter of fact, the very issue of *WiPP* into which I had slipped the odd finding from my apple pie likewise contained Wellcome's review of my latest novel, *Beloved Babylonian*. I'd been waiting to read it until I was sure we were all out of razors.

Why did I let his reviews *do* this to me? Even though I knew he trashed everyone's books equally, even though I knew he wrote solely out of envy and spleen, his words still had the power to wound, or at least to give me the stray twinge in the coccyx. When he wrote romances, he bludgeoned whole chapters to death with a stack of research books as high as it was dry, but when he wrote reviews, he was the undefeated master of a myriad barbed bitcheries. We writers claim to be indifferent to any voice save that of our Muse, but we writers lie.

Living among the stoic folk of Bowman's Ridge for twenty-five years had not helped to harden my skin or toughen my ego. However, it had taught me the simple, rock-ribbed lesson most hardscrabble folk learn early: Get the worst out of the way first. I decided to read Wellcome's review, swallow his abuse, question his masculinity, and curse his name, all so that I'd be able to enjoy the rest of the magazine in peace afterward.

> Fans of Barbara Barclay's stunning Elizabethan series will rejoice to learn that the justly praised First Lady of the Torrid Quill is now also the Queen of Sizzling Cuneiform. *Beloved Babylonian*

> takes you on a breathless, breakneck, no-holds-barred roller coaster ride of ecstasy through the reign of that hottest of historic hunks, Hammurabi himself. No wonder they called it the Fertile Crescent! If you want to read the best and the brightest that this field has to offer, then I urge you to run, don't walk, to your local prosemonger and buy your copy now! If these books don't fly off the shelves, they'll set them on fire.

"Babs? Babs, honey?" Muriel shook me gently by the shoulder. "You've just been sitting here for the past ten minutes staring off at nothing. You all right?"

"Uhhhh, sure," I said, and clutching my copy of *WiPP* to my heaving bosom, I fled. I didn't stop fleeing until I was safe at home, up in my office, with the door shut and the cat banished. I didn't like doing the latter. Like many another writer's cat, my gray tabby Gorbaduc has aided my career immeasurably by critiquing all my manuscripts with her asshole. It was the only thing that she and Wellcome Fisher ever had in common.

Until now. I read the other reviews. Each was as glowing and brimming with bouquets as the love-feast he'd laid out for *Beloved Babylonian*. I put down the magazine, unable to move, unable to speak, and more than a little inclined to scream. I'm a flexible sort, but to accept the fact that Wellcome Fisher would ever write an all-rave review column required my mind to acquire the elasticity of a boneless belly dancer. Wellcome's abandonment of acrimony was the apocalyptic harbinger that

St. John missed, the Unlisted Number of the Beast. I don't like it when my whole world pitches itself tush over titties without a word of warning. It frightens me.

"What's happened to that man?" I mused aloud. "Is he sick? Is he insane? He couldn't have gone nice on us spontaneously. What could put *him* in a charitable mood? Oh God. Oh no. Oh please don't let it be that he's actually gone and sold another of his books! Even vanity presses couldn't be that unprincipled. No, it can't be that. It's too horrible to contemplate. He must be up to something else, and it's something big and nasty or he wouldn't be trying to put us off guard with a few kind words."

I re-read his review column and my hands went damp and cold. "Jesus, to counterbalance something like this it's going to have to be something really big, and really, *really* nasty." I shuddered to think what that something might be. Wellcome Fisher had little talent, but like the Spanish Inquisition's primo torturer he was a man of bottomless invention, mostly vindictive. This was not going to be pretty.

Existential fear is one thing, dinner's another. Every writer is allowed only so much time to wallow in the great trough of emotional resonance, with all-day privileges extended solely to those of us foresighted enough to be born male and to have obtained that handy labor-saving device, a wife. This was not the case for me, and while my husband is a dear who "helps with the housework" (Translation: "Where do we keep the butter? Where's the frying pan? Are you *sure* we have a potato peeler?"), he was out of town on yet another of his ever-recurring business trips. (Alas, the darling of my heart is in Sales, and I am left forlorn. Not all single parents are divorced or unmarried, you know.) A glance at my desk clock told me that time and frozen fish sticks wait for no man and so,

using that wonderful human survival skill called *If I stop thinking about it, it will go away,* I purposely put Wellcome Fisher's aberrant reviews from my mind and hied myself downstairs to the kitchen.

The plates were on the table, grace was said, and Rachel had just informed me that squash was Politically Incorrect (and gross), when the telephone rang. I scowled—first at the phone, then at Rachel—and announced, "If that's one of your friends, they know very well that it's the dinner hour and I'm going to tell them they can just call back later." This said, I picked up the receiver.

"What is the meaning of this flagrant violation of my constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, you pandering troll?" a voice boomed in my ear.

"Oh. Hello, Wellcome," I replied.

"You can tell *your* friend to call back later, too, Mom!" Rachel called out joyously. (When did any daughter of mine develop such a provoking smirk, I'd like to know?)

"It's all right, dear, it's no friend of mine; it's a critic," I replied, not bothering to cover the mouthpiece.

"Eeeuuuwww." Rachel made a face even more contorted by revulsion than when I'd served her squash. Truly I had raised her well.

I returned my attention to my caller: "All right, Fisher, what are you yapping about?"

"You know damned well that to which I refer, Barbara Barclay, you sorry hack. I call your attention to the December issue of *With Pen and Passion*, my review column in particular."

"I've seen it," I told him. "Really, Wellcome, you were much too kind. Much."

I could almost see the apoplectic color rising in his face when he spluttered out, "You're damned well right I was much too kind!

If I weren't so fornicating kind you'd be getting this call from my lawyer!"

"Of course I would," I replied serenely. At last I had my answer: He was insane. Multiple personality disorder at the very least. He must've written those reviews under the brief influence of the Good Wellcome Fisher, and now that Evil Wellcome had reasserted sovereignty, he wanted to shift the blame.

"Don't condescend to me, jade. And don't try to convince me that this is none of your doing. I know exactly what I wrote about that hideous mound of toxic verbiage you call *Beloved Babylonian*, and this review is not it! Nor are any of the others printed therewith the work of my pen. Oh, you'll pay for this effrontery, Barbara. *J'accuse!*"

It had been ages since Rachel was a bratty two-year-old, but it was remarkable how quickly I recovered the patient, measured tone of voice necessary for dealing with tantrums. "Wellcome, dear, before I put in a long-distance call to the wacko-wagon down in your neck of the woods, would you mind telling me how you think I managed to change your precious spew—I mean, reviews?"

"Ha! As if you didn't know. Thanks to a barbarous mob of so-called readers whose vulgar tastes are directly responsible for the imminent fall of Western Civilization, you are an author who is—who is not without"—something was sticking in his craw, but he made the effort and horked up—"*who is not without some influence in the publishing world*."

Ah, so he'd built his palace of paranoia on that little patch of quicksand. I was a Name in the field of Romance, therefore I could prevail upon the publishers of *WiPP* to delete Wellcome's real reviews and insert some of my own creation. Sure, I could.

Now that I saw whither his twisted thoughts tended, I didn't know whether to laugh out loud or pity the naiveté that believed genre authors could influence anything except their editors' drinking problems.

"Look, Wellcome, I'm telling you that I didn't have anything to do with—" I began. Then a stray thought struck me. "Could you hold the line a sec?"

Without waiting for his answer, I put down the phone and fetched my copy of *WiPP*, opening it to the reviews. Something was nagging at me, worrying the corners of my mind. It was a scrap of legendary lore that I'd acquired years ago, back in college, when *Lord of the Rings* held all the secrets of the Universe and my holiest desire was to get an elf greased up, buck naked, and ready to rock 'n' roll. But when I wasn't dreaming of more unorthodox uses for pointed ears, I read a lot, everything from trilogies to treatises on myth and folklore. After all, when you just *know* you're going to be the Queen of Elfland (or at least the Love-Slave) you don't want to make the gaffe of addressing a troll as if he were a dwarf, or calling a boggart a bogle.

From out of the mists of those damned embarrassing memories, a graceful white creature stepped. It printed the grass of an emerald meadow with its cloven hooves and knelt beside a tainted fountain. It touched the poisoned waters once with its horn. Once was all it took. The waters bubbled up bright and clean, free of all contamination.

Carefully I ran my fingers along the inner spine of the magazine until they encountered the faint trace of stickiness I had been half expecting. No matter how carefully you lick a batter spoon clean, some residual goo will cling to it until it's properly washed, and no

matter how painstaking you are about getting all the apple filling off a sliver of unicorn's horn before you drop it between the pages of your magazine . . .

"Wellcome," I said wearily, picking up the phone again, "I confess. I did it. I used my amazing professional influence to force the publishers of *With Pen and Passion* to drop your original reviews and substitute mine, but it wasn't supposed to happen until the April issue, as a prank. I'll be happy to contact them ASAP with a full retraction. Good enough? Good boy. Good-bye."

I didn't wait for him to answer. I hung up the phone but it took a while before I could unclench my hand from the receiver. I stood there for some time, silently cursing the incredible-but-true reason behind the metamorphosis Wellcome's vitriloic rants had undergone along with the promise of confidentiality I'd made to Greta Marie.

As if you needed to be sworn to secrecy! I thought. Outside of Bowman's Ridge, who the hell would believe you if you did talk about the unicorns?

I finally got a grip on my emotions and sat down to dinner. I was pleased to see that Rachel had cleaned her plate while I'd been on the phone with Wellcome. It wasn't until she'd scooted upstairs to do her homework that I noticed a double heap of mashed squash covering my fish sticks. I molded a tiny little voodoo doll of Wellcome Fisher out of the surplus squash, drove a fish stick through its heart, and enjoyed my dinner in peace.

Peace is precious because, like chocolate, it never lasts long enough to suit me. Wellcome Fisher took the next bus to Montpelier, rented a car, and showed up at my house the following afternoon, without benefit of invitation. I would have set the dogs on him, but we don't have any dogs and Gorbaduc wasn't in the mood.

His first words to me when he stepped out of the car were, "I don't believe you, you shameless Machiavellian magsman!"

"Fine, thanks, and you?" I muttered. I have nothing against reality save the fact that there is no way—short of small arms fire, a Doberman, or a dimensional trapdoor—that you can hang up on a face-to-face encounter with a petty-minded twit like Wellcome.

"I have here in my hand certain documents—" he began, wagging a clutch of papers at me as he advanced like grim Pedantry, "—that prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that your confession is as full of holes as your plots. Behold the galleys of those same reviews which you *claim* to have removed and replaced! They are precisely identical to the versions published."

I frowned. "So what's the problem? Of course they'd be identical. That's how galleys work, you know. Who gave you those?"

"They were given to me by the editor of *With Pen and Passion* approximately three months ago, as is the usual procedure for production of all of my columns. According to my wont, I faxed back the typographical errors and kept the galleys themselves for my library. The *problem*, as you so infelicitously put it—" (Here a needle-toothed leer spread itself over Wellcome's face, a grimace for a dyspeptic possum to envy.) "The *problem* is that when I filed these galleys they were *my* reviews as originally written, but when I took them out for inspection yesterday, after our delightful conversation, they had somehow become *yours*."

(The unicorn bends his head over the polluted stream and touches it once with his horn. The magical powers of purification act immediately, but they can't distinguish one drop of water from another. Unicorns don't do partial cures or managed care. It's all or nothing.)

"Tell me the truth, Barbara," Wellcome was saying. "Tell me how you managed to accomplish this, short of hiring cat burglars to infiltrate my domicile."

"I can't tell you."

"Then perhaps you can tell my attorney."

"You wouldn't believe me and neither would he."

"Faugh!" (The man actually said *Faugh!*)

"It's a long story and parts of it are pretty far-fetched."

"You're not scaring me, Barbara; I've read your Elizabethan series."

I held on to my temper by counting the bristly ginger hairs springing from Wellcome's ears, then said, "If it were up to me, I'd tell you straight out, devil take the hindmost. It's not. It involves someone else, a respected and respectable person who lives in this town. I'd like to keep living in this town too, so I'm not going to tell you dick without this other person's permission, and I don't care if you sue my ass off."

"And if this person gives consent?" Wellcome's pudgy lips drew themselves into a moue of anticipation.

"Then I'll tell you everything."

"Hmph. Very well. Let us be on our way." He pivoted on one battered loafer and headed for his rental car. When I neglected to come bounding after, he paused and in tones of the highest snittery commanded, "Well, get *in*. You say the person you must consult likewise lives in this dainty suburb of Ultima Thule? Fine. You shall play Virgil to my Dante and bring about a meeting without delay."

I decided that some battles aren't worth fighting: Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas, and that includes getting down to

word-wrestling with this pedigreed SOB. I got into the car and directed him back to the center of town, where I led him straight into the coffee shop.

"And what do we call *this* fallen temple of Epicurus?" Wellcome inquired loudly as we walked through the door. It was past the breakfast rush and before the lunchtime crowd, a few minutes short of eleven, for which I gave thanks. The only witnesses to my mortification were the three waitresses, two young mothers preoccupied with keeping their toddlers from shoving toast into each other's ears, and Muriel.

"We don't need to call it anything; it's the town coffee shop," I gritted.

"Ah. How delightfully self-referential. And what unspeakable offense against human society have I committed that entails even temporary incarceration here as my punishment?"

"That's what I've always admired about you, Wellcome," I said. "Your simple yet elegant style. I brought you here because this is where we've got the best chance of meeting the person we're after. Now can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'm assuming a decent cappuccino is out of the question. I'll settle for a clean cup." He sniffed, wrinkled up his nose dramatically, and made a great business out of whisking off the immaculate surface of one of the counter stools with his handkerchief. Muriel saw him do this, her expression unreadable. I performed the usual pantomime of those forced to keep company with chowderheads: sickly smile, shrug of shoulders, silent mouthing of It's-not-my-fault. Muriel pressed her lips together and went into the kitchen. While I writhed, our waitress came over and Wellcome asked her what was the ptomaine du jour in a voice so carrying that even the young mothers took note of us.

Oh, for a cloak of invisibility! or even just an Acme anvil to fall from the ceiling and squoosh Wellcome into clod-butter. I placed my order, though I had precious little appetite for anything except a certain critic's head on a platter.

It was while Wellcome was ingratiating himself with the waitress by staring at her breasts that Greta Marie arrived. My sense of timing had been impeccable: She always made her delivery at around eleven o'clock. She backed in through the door, an apple pie balanced on either hand, a look of intense concentration on her face. I hailed her by name and she startled like a duchess dry-gulched by a whoopee cushion, then recovered and smiled.

It took me a while before I realized that she wasn't smiling at me.

"*You're* Wellcome Fisher!" she gasped, rushing forward, still bearing pies. I couldn't say whether her bosom was heaving with the strain of unbridled passion, but the front of her tatty old Navy peacoat was imitating a bellows pretty well. "The flyleaf photo just doesn't do you justice. Oh my! Babs never told me that you were one of her writer friends. This is such an honor! I simply adored *Lady Gwendolyn's Gallant*! So rich! So detailed! So—"

Forty minutes later, I walked myself back home. If Wellcome noticed me leave, he made no demur, and as for Greta Marie, she'd scarcely noticed my presence to begin with. I left the two of them seated at the counter, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, Greta Marie telling Wellcome how wonderful his book was and Wellcome telling Greta Marie that she was so very, very right.

That was the last I heard of Wellcome Fisher for weeks thereafter. *WiPP* made no inquiry into the unique eruption of sweetness and light in Wellcome's reviews, and the man himself seemed to have dropped the matter. He also seemed to have become

a regular fixture in Bowman's Ridge, motoring up whenever he had the time, just to be with Greta Marie. Townsfolk saw them walking hand in hand down Main Street, a public display of affection that was the Bowman's Ridge equivalent of indulging in the love that dare not bleat its name on the church lawn. Eyebrows lifted, tongues clicked, and whoever coined the phrase "No fool like an old fool" must've been raking in the residuals for all the times the good Natives muttered those very words under their collective breath. If Greta Marie overheard, she didn't care. She was happy.

I suppose I should've been happy too. I suppose that as a Romance writer I should've sat back and enjoyed such a picturebook-perfect ending, cue violins and soft-focus fadeout. Unfortunately, just because I write the stuff doesn't mean I believe it. My outlook on life would be so much serener if I did. It's impossible to enjoy a front row seat for Happily Ever After when you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, and if I knew Wellcome, it was going to be a brogan.

So I waited, and Thanksgiving came and went. I waited, and the Christmas decorations went up all over town. I waited, and Bobo Riley stuffed two pillows down the front of his old red union suit, slapped on a cotton batting beard, and passed out candy canes to all the kids who came into his hardware store with their folks. But as for Greta Marie and Wellcome—? Nothing. Not even a rumor of trouble in paradise. It was just too good to be true.

Muriel agreed. "I don't know what's gotten into the girl," she said to me. (In this town you're a girl until you become the charge of your husband or the undertaker.) "She's all atwitter, can't find her head using both hands and a road map most days, and irresponsible—? I don't like to say how many days she's skipped bringing in the pies, and when she does, the quality's fallen off

something terrible. When I think how good those pies used to be, I could just weep. Not that I'd ever mention it to her. Poor child would die. On the other hand, she really ought to know. I don't suppose you'd consider—?"

Which is how I came to be driving up the Old Toll Road to the Bowman place in the snow. I'd taken the precaution of calling ahead. No way was I going to risk my neck jouncing over ice-filled ruts for nothing. Greta Marie told me how much she'd be looking forward to my visit, and then:

> Dear Babs,
> So sorry I missed you. Got a call from the postmaster that there's a registered letter for me downtown from my Wellcome. Let's make it another time.
>
> Very truly yours,
> Miss Greta Marie Bowman

I tore the note off the front door and stuffed it in my pocket, then went stomping back to the car, thinking bloody red thoughts. Just as my gloved hand touched the handle, I heard a loud trumpeting sound, the singular, strange, fascinating cry of the unicorn. I looked back at the house and saw one come walking around the corner in stately beauty.

It was the largest of the three, the one who'd given me that contemptuous stare the first time I saw the critters. He'd changed; his horn was back, grown almost to full length. It shone with its own pale phosphorescence, a flickering blue-green flame. The beast held his head high and seemed to be in the best of spirits. Maybe animals can't smile, as we humans understand the grimace, but

they do have their ways of letting the world know they're happy, and this was definitely one happy unicorn.

Was, that is, until he saw it was only me. I could mark the exact moment when recognition struck him right where the horn grew. His feathery tail, once flaunted high as a battle flag, now drooped with disappointment. His whole demeanor seemed to say, *I was expecting someone else.* A spark of anger kindled from dashed hopes turned his eyes a dangerous scarlet. How dare I be anyone but the woman he was waiting for? He lowered that long, razor-edged horn in a manner that made my heart do a drumroll of dread. I'd seen how fast he could run and I knew that there was no chance of my getting inside the car before he reached me. I wondered whether it was going to hurt when he skewered me for the heinous crime of not being Greta Marie.

Then his head bent even lower, so low that the tip of his horn came within an inch of the ground. A dull gray film obscured its glorious fire. Sorrow had conquered anger. He let out a little whicker of misery that wrung my heart with pity.

I went up to him and threw my arms around his neck, crooning words of comfort. Yes, I talked to him as if he were a despondent collie pup. Yes, I voluntarily brought myself within easy stabbing distance of the horn. Yes, I'm an idiot, I admit it, it says so on my driver's license. If you want proof-positive of my stupidity then consider the fact that I went into writing because I wanted a high-paying, glamorous job where everyone respected me and internecine mudslinging just wasn't the Done Thing. But I couldn't turn my back on the poor creature.

"There, there," I said, running my hands through his flossy mane. "She'll be back, you'll see. It's just that she's a little soppy now. Love makes you temporarily brain-dead."

The unicorn looked me in the eye, his gaze eloquent. *Don't sugarcoat it, my lady,* he seemed to say. *You and I both know what love leads to. She may be back, but she won't be the same, and where are we going to find another virgin at this time of year? Those Christmas parties are hell on maidenheads.*

"You mean that Greta Marie and Wellcome have—?" Curse my imagination! The very thought of Wellcome alfresco and taking care of business was enough to purge a catfish. My conscious mind immediately tacked up wall-to-wall signs reading *Don't Go There, Girlfriend. Don't Buy the Ticket, Don't Even Ask to See the Full-Color Brochures.*

The unicorn flared his nostrils, scorning the whole hideous idea. Ah, true, true: Would he still be hanging around the property if Greta Marie had done the dire deed with Wellcome already? But to judge by his hangdog expression, he figured it was only a matter of time.

"Look, I'm sorry, but what can I do about it?" I told him. "Greta Marie's happy. I realize she's been neglecting you, but—"

The unicorn snorted again and tossed his head, casting off my paltry attempts at consolation. I watched as he picked his way across the farmyard, heading toward the straggle of apple trees. I thought I glimpsed the images of his two companions in the distance, under the spindly shadow of the branches, but that might have been a trick of light on snow.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "Don't give up!" I called. "Please don't just walk away! Even if she and Wellcome Fisher *do* get nasty, it's never going to last. Greta Marie's not stupid and she's not desperate: One day she'll see him for the ego-leech he is, unless he slaps her in the face with it first. That's when she'll really need you. She's been good to you for God knows how many years; you

owe it to her to stick around. *Nice* unicorns. *Good* unicorns. Sit! Stay!"

I was babbling, but it got their attention. Three shimmery streaks of marine light lifted beneath the barren orchard boughs, three pairs of glowing garnet eyes winked at me once before vanishing.

I drove back to town alone.

Greta Marie was in the coffee shop, seated on one of the stools at the counter nearest the big display window up front, reading her registered letter over a steaming cup of Muriel's best brew. It was a wonder she could make out the words for all the stars in her eyes. When she saw me come in, she broke from covert in a whir of bliss.

"Babs, it's so wonderful! I do hope you forgive me for not being at home when you called, but it was such a good thing I came to town and got this letter. Darling Wellcome! I know he meant to give me a few days' notice, but when one is as significant a figure in the field of belles lettres as he, sometimes it's simply impossible to take time for personal matters until the demands of one's career have been met."

Belles lettres? Wellcome? The only demand ever attached to his career was "Please, please, *please*, don't write another book!" As I seated myself on the stool beside hers, I did a rapid mental translation of Greta Marie's words, allowing for drift, wind resistance, drag, and converting from the Stupid-in-Love scale.

"There's something vitally important in there and he didn't bother mailing it until the last minute?" I presumed, nodding at the letter. Muriel brought me my own cup of coffee, glanced at Greta Marie, then looked at me and raised her eyebrows in a manner that said *Lost Cause.*

"Oh, I don't mind," Greta Marie chirped, pressing the unfolded sheets of spiral notebook paper to her heart. Wellcome might waste words, but never stationery. "He says he's coming up today, and that I'm to meet him here because there's no sense in him driving all the way out to my place and then all the way back into town to the travel agent." She pronounced those last two words as if they'd been Holy Grail, fraught and freighted with a deeper meaning than was given mere mortals like me to know.

"Planning a little trip, hm?" I asked, striving to keep it casual.

"A very *special* sort of trip, Babs dear." She blushed. "I do think he's coming up to ask me . . . to ask me if I would consent to become . . . if I would consent to become his—"

"*There* you are!" Wellcome Fisher burst into the coffee shop with the élan of a juggernaut. He shouldered his way between us, nearly shoving me off my stool without so much as a word of greeting. Usually it is a fair treat to be ignored by Wellcome Fisher, but not when it means you've been relegated to the role of superfluous stage dressing. I was miffed. I got up and moved, taking my cup with me.

Wellcome slithered onto the stool I had vacated. He looked Greta Marie up and down, his gaze severe and judgmental. "You're not prepared," he accused.

"Prepared, dear?" It was sickening to see the way Greta Marie went into mouse mode at the sound of her master's voice. "But—but I'm *here*. You did say to meet you *here*, didn't y—?"

"Ye gods, and was that *all* I said?"

Greta Marie cringed, but she summoned up the gumption to reply, "Well . . . yes. That and the part about going to the travel agent." She extended the letter for his inspection and added, "See, darling?"

He rolled his eyes, playing the martyr so broadly that I wondered whether he had a pack of stick-on stigmata hidden in the pocket of his anorak. "Merciful powers above, you're a supposedly intelligent wench: Do I have to spell out *everything* for you, chapter and verse? Are you *that* literal-minded? Are you incapable of basic *inference*?" He paused, striking a toplofty pose, apparently waiting for the applause of the multitude.

Now mind you, the hour of Wellcome's self-styled Calvary was lunchtime and the coffee shop was packed to the gussets with the usual Natives, all of whom knew and respected Greta Marie Bowman. It was out of this selfsame respect that they went deaf, dumb, and blind by common consent. They understood that she had fallen in with this acerbic yahoo of her own free will, they realized that she had brought all her sufferings down upon her own head voluntarily, they were firm in the belief that she should have known better, but damned if they were going to underwrite her humiliation, deserved or not. No one present reacted to Wellcome's words with so much as a glance in his general direction. In fact, as far as the good folk of Bowman's Ridge were concerned, Wellcome wasn't even there. They didn't just ignore him, they nullified him.

Gadfly that he was, Wellcome did not take kindly to being overlooked. The Natives' lack of cooperation irked him. He took a deep breath and brought his fist down on the countertop just as he bellowed, "You peruse, but you do not *read*. Have you no grasp of *subtext*?"

Poor Greta Marie. I could see her lips begin to tremble, her eyes to shine with tears that didn't spring from joy. "I'm—I'm sorry, dear," she said, her voice all quavery. "I—I suppose you mean I ought to be prepared for—for our trip, yes?"

Wellcome slapped his brow and let his celluloid smile glide across the room. "*Finally!*" he informed the audience. They gave no sign that he had spoken. "At the very least, I expected you to be packed."

"Packed? But—but how could I? I wouldn't know what to bring. We haven't even discussed where we'll be going."

His shoulders sagged. Now he was both martyr and victim. "I thought you *listened* to me," he complained, wounded to the marrow. "Haven't I said time and time again how the winter weather affects my artistic spirit? Haven't I spoken of my very deep, very basic *need* to follow the sun?"

"You *did* mention something about visiting your aunt in Tampa every year, but—"

"Well, my dear Auntie Clarice has just written to say that *she* is going off on a holiday cruise this coming week, and that *we* may have the use of the condo in her absence, with her blessing." He beamed at her as if he'd just laid the crown jewels of Zanzibar at her feet.

Greta Marie turned pale. "Oh no," she said, hands fluttering before her face. "This *coming* week? Oh no, it's much too soon. I couldn't possibly make all the arrangements. Reverend Fenster is too taken up with the Christmas season, and we Bowmans have always been married from the Congregational church. Besides, there's simply nowhere we could book a large enough hall for the reception, let alone arrange for refreshments, and what about the blood test and the license and my gown and—"

Wellcome's brows rose and came together until he was glaring at Greta Marie from beneath the shelter of a hairy circumflex. "*What* the devil are you jawing about?" he demanded. "Since when does one need a blood test to go to Tampa?"

"Oh," said Greta Marie softly. She folded her hands above her bosom and repeated, "Oh." Her head bowed like a flower on a broken stalk. "I thought you meant we were going to be—" she began, then sank into silence.

"What? To be what?" Wellcome was mystified. For one fleeting moment he seemed rapt by words that were not his own as he attempted to solve this present conundrum. "Do you imply—? That marriage twaddle you were spouting about your ancestors and the First Congregational Church—? Surely you weren't *serious*?" Without waiting for her reply, he dismissed the very possibility with a brief wave of his hand. "No, no, you couldn't have been; something else must be nibbling your liver. Spit it out, woman! I don't indulge in telepathy."

Greta Marie set her hands firmly on the edge of the counter. I swear that I could see the ranks of Bowmans long gone form up in ghostly phalanx behind her and then, one by one, add their ectoplasmic might to the stiffening of her backbone. By degrees she sat up taller, straighter, prouder, looked Wellcome in the eye, and coldly said, "I thought you were a *gentleman*."

There could be no greater condemnation uttered by a woman of Greta Marie's age and station. For all his failings, Wellcome was not slow on the uptake; the penny dropped, the "marriage twaddle" that he had dismissed as ridiculous returned to leer at him, nose to nose. I saw the flickering play of emotions over his countenance: shock, comprehension, a smidgen of shame, and then the urgent realization that if he didn't act fast, he was in peril of losing face before the one earthly creature he loved above all others.

If you think the creature in question was Greta Marie, you haven't been paying attention.

Frost crackled at the corners of his mouth as he smiled thinly and said, "Well. Here's a surprise. Don't tell me that you still cherish orange blossom dreams at your age?"

Greta Marie jerked her head back as if she'd been slapped. His words jarred her to the core, that much was plain to see, but the old blood bred hardy souls. She drew her mouth into a tight little line and refused to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

This sat ill with Wellcome, who would have preferred more concrete evidence that his words had hit the mark. "And I thought we understood each other," he said, reloading his figurative blowpipe with a freshly venomed dart. "What a sorry disappointment you are. I expected more of you. I believed that you were different, that you were a woman of perception, a woman of spirit, one to whom the petty constraints and empty rituals of society mean nothing so long as she can serve Art."

That did it. That was my limit. "Art my *ass*," I blurted out. "You just want to get *laid*."

Wellcome curled his lip at me. "Enter the white knight," he drawled. "And what concern of yours is this? Barbara Barclay, champion of Romance! I should think you'd want to encourage your friend to seize the golden opportunity I'm offering her. Do you honestly believe she'll get many more like it on this side of the grave? *If* she ever got any before."

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this!" Greta Marie stood up and started for the door, but Wellcome blocked her escape.

"I urge you to reconsider," he counseled her. "I've always been passably fond of you, you know, especially your good sense. Certainly a woman like you, wise enough to perceive the rich aesthetic contributions of my work to world literature, must also see that I have only your best interests at heart in proposing *cette*

petite affaire. Tampa is lovely at this time of year. Do you *want* to end your days as a hollow husk, a top-shelf virgin whose life will be forever incomplete without so much as the memory of a man's attentions? I'll spare you that horrible fate, but you're going to have to be a good girl and—"

Greta Marie just gave him a *look*; a look that plugged his chatter snugger than jamming a badger in a bunghole; a disinterested, calculating look such as a farmer might give a stubborn tree stump, mentally debating which was the best crack into which to jam the dynamite.

"My ancestor, Captain James Resurrection Bowman, received a grant of land in this town as a reward for his heroism in the Revolutionary War," she said. "A friend of his received a similar grant, except his was much smaller and located on Manhattan Island. He offered to swap, Captain James chose to decline. In retrospect it was a stupid choice, but it was his own. All my life I have followed Captain James's example; I have always made my own choices. If I remain a virgin until I marry, it will not be for lack of such . . . generous offers as yours, but because that is my decision to make and no one else's."

"Talk about stupid choices," Wellcome snarled.

Still calm and collected, Greta Marie gave him one short, sharp, effective slap across the face, and it wasn't a figurative one either, no sirree. And with the echoes of flesh-to-flesh impact still hanging on the air she said, "The only stupid choice I made was loving you."

The incredible happened: The denizens of the coffee shop, to a man, rose to their feet and gave that slap a standing ovation. Bobo Riley from the hardware store was even heard to let out an exultant Yankee whoop that would have put a Rebel yell to shame.

That should have been Wellcome's cue to leave, making as gracious an exit as he might hope for in the circumstances. Alas, Wellcome had never been a man to read the signs or take the hint. If you told him his writing clunked like a freight train off the rails, he took this to mean that it had the power of a runaway freight instead.

He seized Greta Marie's hands. "So you do love me," he exclaimed triumphantly. "Ah, I see your little scheme: You're playing hard to get. You've read far too many of the shoddier sort of Romance novels, those dreadful bodice-rippers—" (Here he looked meaningfully in my direction.) "—and you want a rough wooing. So be it!"

He was more athletic than his nascent paunch and pasty skin might lead you to believe, fully capable of sweeping a grown woman of Greta Marie's size off her feet and out the door before any of us could react. She shrieked in shock, not fear, but she didn't struggle as he made off with her. Maybe she thought she'd already made enough of a scene in the coffee shop to last Bowman's Ridge well into the next century.

I was the first to address the situation. "Hey! Aren't we going to do something?" I demanded of my fellow townsmen.

No one answered. Most of them went back to eating lunch. Bobo Riley looked as if he wanted to take action, but something was holding him back.

"Babs . . ." Muriel jerked her head, indicating I was to sit back down at the counter. Dumbly I obeyed in time to hear her whisper, "It's not our place to interfere in other folks' domestic quarrels."

"This is an abduction, not a family spat," I hissed. "If I know Wellcome, he won't stop until he's stuffed Greta Marie into his rental car and *driven* her all the way to Tampa! And then what? She hasn't got enough cash to come back on her own hook, and would

she ever dream of calling anyone up here to send her the bus fare home?"

Muriel didn't say a word. We both knew the answer: Greta Marie would sooner become a beachcomber or—the horror!—give Wellcome his wicked way with her before she'd ask a fellow Native to lend her some money. On the other hand, her fellow Natives would sooner allow a thrice-cursed outlander like Wellcome Fisher to make off with the last living Bowman than they'd ever dream of interfering directly in someone else's personal matters.

"Well, I don't care what the rest of you do, *I'm* not going to put up with this!" I announced and started for the door. A large, work-hardened hand darted in front of me to hold it open. I looked up into Bobo Riley's kind blue eyes.

"Mind if I walk with you down street a bit, Mrs. Barclay?" he asked. "I just happen to be going your way."

Within two minutes I found myself transformed into the most popular woman in Bowman's Ridge. Simply everyone in the coffee shop was suddenly seized with the simultaneous urge to pay their check and join me for a little stroll down Main Street. Even Hal abandoned his kitchen and Muriel her place behind the counter, leaving the waitresses and a few stragglers behind to hold down the fort. We weren't going to deliberately *interfere* in anything, perish forbid. We were just going to exercise our constitutional right to take, well, a constitutional.

We followed the faint sound of Greta Marie's fists beating a muffled tattoo on Wellcome's chest. They hadn't gotten far. Wellcome had parked his rental about a block away, down by the old war memorial on the green. Our itinerant Town Meeting caught up with him as he was trying to dig out the car keys without letting go of his prize.

When he saw us coming his eyes went wide as a constipated owl's. He forgot all about the "rough wooing" under way and dropped Greta Marie smack on the town green, then took to his heels. At first I thought that he was running away in fear for his life, that he intended to beat feet all the way to Montpelier, but it turned out that I underestimated him. He fled only as far as the war memorial—a truncated obelisk, its sides inscribed with the names of the Bowman's Ridge men who'd died in both World Wars, Korea, and Viet Nam, its flat top crowned with an urn that the Women's Club filled with flowers on appropriate occasions. Spry as a springtime cockroach, he clambered up the monument and perched there, holding onto the lip of the empty urn.

"A lynch mob," he sneered down at us from his perch. "How typical of the rustic mind. Haven't you forgotten something? Pitchforks? Torches? You crackerbarrel cretins, how dare you harass me? A plague on your pitiful frog-fart of a town! And *you*—!"

His glittering eyes zeroed in on Greta Marie. Bobo Riley had fallen behind the rest of us in order to help the lady up and now squired her on his arm. "This is all your fault, you squalid excuse for a hicktown Hypatia! You pathetic pricktease, I'll wager you fancy yourself quite the bargain basement Mata Hari, don't you? *Don't you?*"

"Oh!" Greta Marie covered her face with her hands and shuddered. Wellcome's sharp tongue had finally drawn blood. She was crying, and in public, too! Bobo Riley folded his big arms protectively around her and glowered up at the treed critic, growling threats that failed to stem Wellcome's spate of vengeful poison.

"Don't cry, darling," Wellcome crooned sarcastically. "There's nothing wrong with you that a good upcountry rogering wouldn't cure. So sad that you'll never get it now. Thank God I came to my

senses in time. You contemptible dirtfarm Delilah, how a man of my breeding could have ever been mad enough even to *consider* the sensual enrichment of your dusty, backshelf, remaindered life—!"

Greta Marie threw her head back and howled her misery to the skies.

They were on him in the time it takes to blink. We never saw them come; they were simply there, all three of them, eyes holly-berry bright, horns blazing in the thin winter sunlight. The largest of the three, the one I'd comforted earlier that same day, was the first to reach him. It set its forefeet on the pediment of the war memorial, paused for an instant to look Wellcome in the eye, then jabbed him straight through the center of the chest with its horn. He fell to the snow-covered green and lay there unmoving.

The other two unicorns took it in turns to sniff the body and to snort their disdain. They did not depart as abruptly as they had arrived. The three of them turned as one and trotted up Main Street, tails swishing, in the direction of the town library. One of them paused to munch on a swag of Christmas greenery decking the front of the florist's. No one made the slightest move to stay them, and Greta Marie, still weeping in Bobo Riley's arms, never once tried to call them back.

Wellcome Fisher was dead. We had no illusions of anyone being able to survive a direct thrust to the heart with something as sharp and pointed and long as a unicorn's horn, but we only *thought* we had all the answers until Hal bent over the body and exclaimed, "Hey! There's no hole."

Everyone swarmed around. Hal was right: There was no hole. Not a puncture, not a piercing, not a scratch. No blood stained the snow. There wasn't even the teensiest rip in Wellcome's clothing. The crowd buzzed.

I stood apart. I knew what had happened, but darned if I was going to tell my neighbors. They already thought I was weird enough, and if I started explaining about the rules that govern unicorns—!

The unicorn is not a monstrous beast; it doesn't kill for sport or spite, it lives to heal, not harm. It bears upon its brow a horn whose touch has the power to purge all poisons and make what is polluted sweet and wholesome once more. The unicorn hadn't been trying to kill Wellcome, merely to cure him. It had touched his heart with its magical horn, intending to remove only the taint of malice and envy, leaving behind all that was good and selfless and decent in the man. No one was more surprised than the unicorn by what actually happened.

Let's just put it this way: It was going to be one hell of an autopsy, one of the starring organs gone without an external clue to explain its vanishment. Oh well, the medical examiner would probably call it a coronary anyway, heart or no heart. Old Doc Barnett hates to make waves.

It took a goodly while to sort things out on the green. By the time Chief Dowd and the rest of the local authorities finished taking statements ("Dunno. He just sorta keeled over. Not a mark on him, see?") and viewing the body, it was getting dark. I looked around for Greta Marie. I figured she shouldn't try to drive herself home after all she'd been through today.

I'd been anticipated. When I found her, she told me that Bobo Riley had already offered to drive her home and she'd accepted. Despite the fact that several other Natives were within earshot, Bobo went on to say that he'd pick her up at her place come morning and take her back to town so she could recover her car next day. Then he asked her if she'd like to help him down at the

hardware store by dressing up as Mrs. Claus and giving the kids candy. This was the Bowman's Ridge equivalent of him clasping her to his manly chest, raining kisses upon her upturned face, and telling her that he desired her above all women with a raw, unbridled passion that knew no bounds. I don't know if Greta Marie felt all the earth-heaving thrills and collywobbles I put into my books, but her eyes were shining with that special To Be Continued light.

I went home. Rachel was waiting for me by the front gate. Something was clearly wrong. Instead of her usual air of carefully cultivated angst and ennui, she was bouncing like a Labrador puppy.

"Mom! Mom! This is so cool, you've got to see this! I don't think he belongs to anyone, and he is soooo gorgeous. I'll take care of him myself, I promise, and if there's some kind of problem with the zoning geeks I'll pay for his board out of my own allowance, honest. Can I keep him? Can I? Can I? Pleeeeease?"

"Keep—?"

The unicorn stepped out of the lengthening shadows, rested his heavy head on my daughter's shoulder, and—one Transient to another—grinned.

This story is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Clifton Webb.