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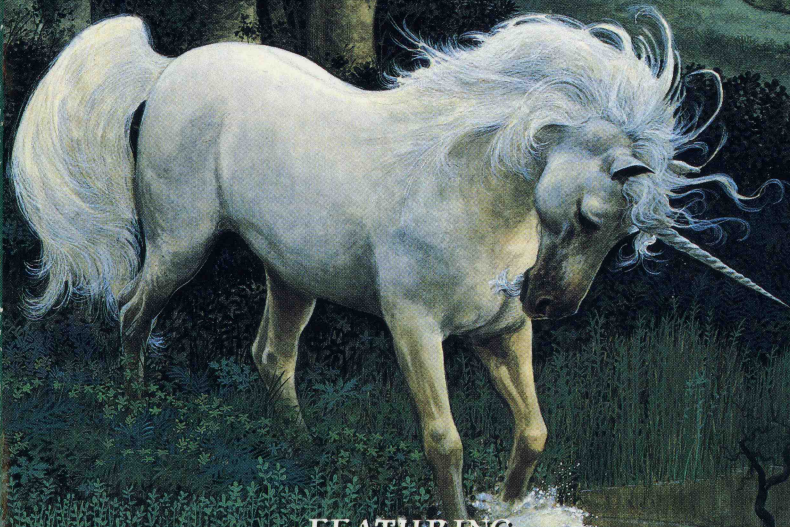
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And with you, I will stay

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For I, a mortal, dared to dream,
And tamed a unicorn.

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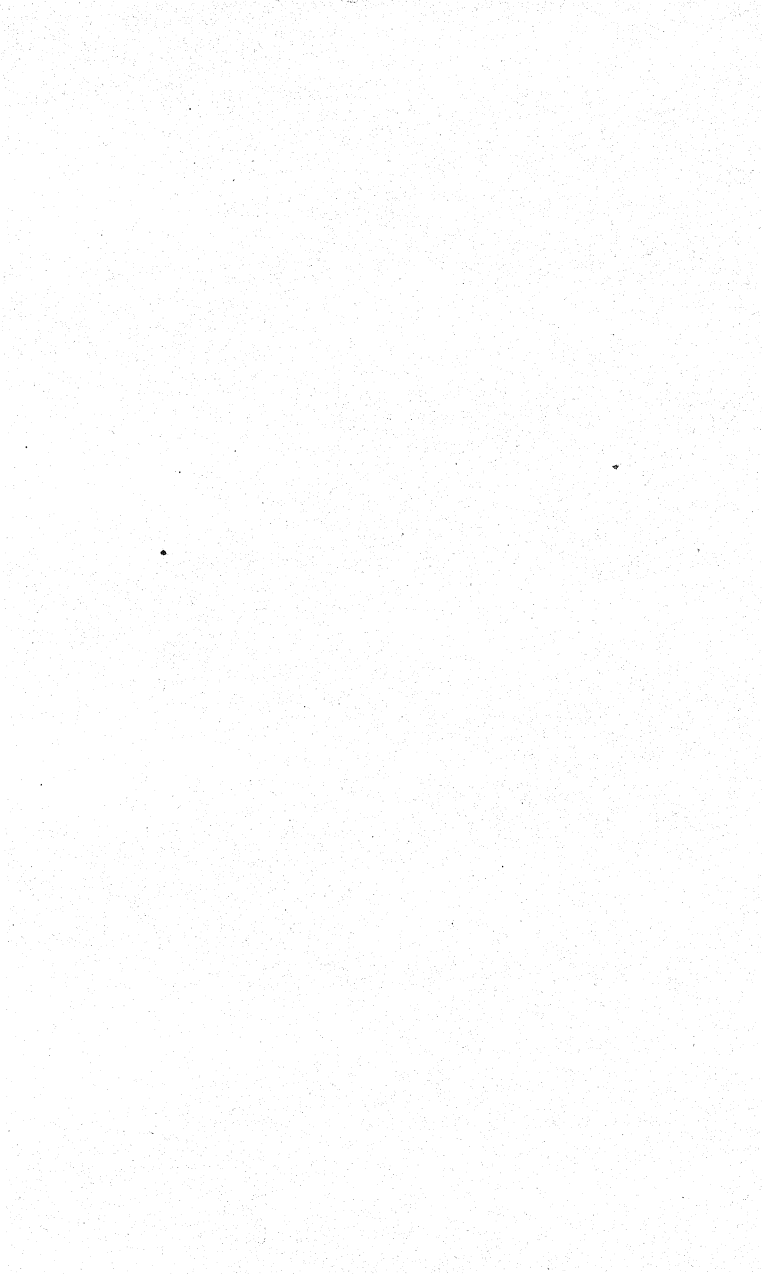
Christopher Casper

AND

Jody Scobie

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Preface

After the dragon, the unicorn is probably the most popular and pervasive of all mythological beasts. Although we tend to think of the unicorn in a medieval European setting, it was known to the classical Greeks and Romans, and in actuality is an ancient symbol that can be found all over the world, in Jewish and Hindu mythology as well as Christian folklore. Like the dragon, the unicorn also has a Chinese counterpart, the *k'i-lin*, one of the four animals of good omen (the dragon, the phoenix, and the tortoise are the other three), and the foremost of all the creatures who live on the land. While the *k'i-lin* is depicted as having the body of a deer and the tail of an ox, the more familiar version of the unicorn is the Western Unicorn, usually described as being like a white horse with a goat's beard and a long twisted horn projecting out of its forehead.

Although originally a symbol of untamable ferocity—in Solinus's words, of all creatures "the cruelest is the Unicorne, a Monster that belloweth horrible . . . He is never caught alive; kylled he may be, but taken he cannot be"—by medieval times the unicorn had become a meek, gentle, and mild creature, a common symbol of Christ: a beast who would be drawn to seek out a virgin and trustingly lay his head in her lap . . . whereupon the huntsmen would leap out of concealment and fall upon him with spears and knives. The unicorn's horn, gained through such cruel deceptions as these, was probably the most valued magic object in European mysticism. In Edward Topsell's words, powdered unicorn horn "doth wonderfully help against poyson," and in addition is proof "against the pestilent feaver . . . against the bitings of ravenous Dogs, and the strokes or poysonsome stings of other creatures . . . and . . . against the belly or mawe worms." It also helped you to drink as much as you wished without becoming drunk, and even made "the teeth white or clear"—

all this *in addition* to its well-known properties as an aphrodisiac! No *wonder* there are so few unicorns left!

Even in our busy modern world, the unicorn seems to have lost none of its power to fascinate, and is as potent an archetype today as it ever was in the Middle Ages. The image of the unicorn can be found everywhere these days, from calendars to coffee mugs, from jewelry to stuffed toys to posters . . . but to find the *soul* of this elusive beast, one must turn to the works of contemporary fantasists, where the myth of the unicorn is still alive and growing, changing in sometimes surprising ways as society itself changes . . . and where the unicorn itself may be encountered in its most vivid, evocative, and elemental form.

As *you* are about to encounter it yourself, in the stories that follow!

The Calling of Paisley Coldpony

by
Michael Bishop

Michael Bishop is one of the most acclaimed and respected members of that highly talented generation of writers who entered SF in the 1970s. His renowned short fiction has appeared in almost all the major magazines and anthologies, and has been gathered in three collections: Blooded on Arachne, One Winter in Eden, and Close Encounters With the Deity. In 1981 he won the Nebula Award for his novelette "The Quickening," and in 1983 he won another Nebula Award for his novel No Enemy but Time. His other novels include Transfigurations, Stolen Faces, Ancient Days, Catacomb Years, Eyes of Fire, The Secret Ascension, and Unicorn Mountain. His most recent novel is Count Geiger's Blues. Bishop and his family live in Pine Mountain, Georgia.

Here he offers us a fascinating study of a young Ute Indian girl's strange search for something beyond the life we know. . . .

* * *

i.

In the Sun Dance lodge, she found that she was one of sixteen ghostly dancers and the only female.

Was this the second or the third day? Or the fourth of one of those controversial four-day dances decreed by Alvin Powers in the late 1970s? No. She'd been a mere child then, and the year after Powers's heart attack Sun Dancing with the Wind River Shoshones in Wyoming, DeWayne Sky had a vision calling on the Southern Utes to go back to their traditional three-day ceremony.

But the young woman felt sure it wasn't the first day, for on the first day the center pole—the conduit of power from the Holy He-She—supported no buffalo head. Although the sun coming into the Thirst House struck so that she could not really focus on the totem lashed just beneath the crotch of the sacred cottonwood, she could see that *something* was there.

On the second day of the event, the tribal Sun Dance committee had tied it in place—an animal head now so halo-furred that she could give it no clear outline. She was praying to it, as well as to the Holy He-She, to channel water down the Tree of Life into her orphaned body so that she could do miracles. The miracle that she most wanted to do was the restoration of the health and dignity of her tribe. And of herself, too.

Which day is this? she wondered again. How much longer must I dance with these men?

In the path to the center pole next to her own path strutted Larry Cuthair. This was strange. Larry was between his junior and senior years of high school, a grade behind her.

It defied all logic that the Great Spirit had chosen Larry—in too many ways a quasi-Anglicized young man—to dance now. In fact, she would have bet that Larry was a decade or two away from such an honor, if he were going to attain to it at all, and yet he was dancing up to the Tree of Life and falling back from it in the path next to hers. She could smell not only his boyish sweat but also the chalky odor of the white paint smeared all over his belly and chest, his face, neck and arms. The ceremonial skirt he wore, his beaded waistband, and the eagle feathers that he clutched also gleamed white—in eerie contrast to the multicolored garb of the dancers at every other Sun Dance she'd attended.

This, too, was peculiar. But, then, looking around the dance floor of the Thirst House, she saw that all the other dancers—DeWayne Sky, Brevard Mestes, Timothy Willow, *all* of them—had powdered themselves in the same alarming way.

Their skirts, ivory. Their waistbands, like bone. Their bare feet, chalk-dusted and ghostly.

The impression that she had was of a room in an insane asylum for spendthrift bakers, men compelled to throw handfuls of flour into the air and then to frolic solemnly in the fallout. But, of course, when she looked, she saw that she (though a woman, and the sort of woman who would pester a Sun Dance chief to accept her into a ceremony once exclusively male) had followed their example. Her own body paint was white. So were her doeskin dress, her sequined apron, her eagle-bone whistle, and every bead on every necklace or bracelet adorning her person. She had joined the crazy bakers in their floury celebration, and this Sun Dance would fail because its purpose was not just to acquire power, but to appease the Old Ones already dead—to guide their spirits to rest in the ghost lands beyond the mountains. Its purpose certainly wasn't to mock the Old Ones by pretending to be an *ini'putc'* oneself.

“Why are we dressed like ghosts?” she cried.

Her cry went unanswered. The noise of the men drumming in the corral's arbor, the guttural chanting of the men and women around the drummers, and the shuffling and shouts of encouragement from the spectators opposite the singers—all these noises kept her from being heard. But maybe that was good. She knew that to talk too much while dancing was considered folly. It cut one off from the trance state triggered by the heat, the drumming, the chanting, the pistoning of legs, the prayerful flailing of arms.

And, she knew, it was this trance state that gave one access to God's Spine, the Tree of Life, the Sacred Rood at the heart of the lodge. For only through the center pole and the totems tied to it could one take the power that every dancer coveted for the sake of the entire Sun Dance community. Maybe it was good that no one had heard her shout. Many of her neighbors already resented DeWayne Sky for letting her—a woman only recently out of high school—dance with the men. They would

take great pleasure in telling everyone that she had been guilty of sacrilege, or at least of imperfect seriousness, while dancing, and that her behavior in the corral not only disgraced her and her dead mother, Dolores Arriola, but also destroyed the value of the dance for every Southern Ute. That was the more dreadful result, for all her tribespeople would ostracize her.

But so what? she thought. Ever since Mama D'lo shot herself, I've lived without their help. I don't need them and I don't want their approval. I want the Utes to be strong—to be better than they are—but if they turn their backs on me, so what? It's only what *I've* been doing to *them* since the night Mama spray-painted our walls with her brains. So I'm dancing today—my second day? my third? my fourth?—as a kind of apology for appearing not to wish them well. I *do* wish them well. I just don't want them to smother me with their fretful love.

Again, she shouted, “Why have we all made ourselves look like *ini'putc'*?”

But the shrill piping of eagle-bone whistles and the constant thunder of drums kept everyone from hearing her. Except, she soon learned, Larry Cuthair, who strutted up and rebuked her. Did she want to screw up everything? he growled. The Old Ones would think her questions out of place, disrespectful.

“The way we look is out of place!” she countered, dancing at Larry's side. “The way we look is disrespectful!”

Larry regarded her with something like incredulity. “DeWayne Sky told us to dress and paint ourselves like this—to pretend to be our own ancestors.”

“We should honor them, Larry, not mock them!”

“But he only instructed us as he did because *your* dreams—the ones you had in the spring—showed us dancing this way. It's all your doing, Paisley.”

“Horseshit!” said Paisley Coldpony. She danced away from the center pole, angry at Larry for feeding her such garbage.

All her doing? How?

Yes, the Shoshones at Fort Hall sometimes used white body

paint at their Sun Dances, one of which she had attended with D'lo three years ago, but it was idiotic to say that she had influenced Sky to tell every Southern Ute dancer to wear white dress and body paint because of her dreams.

What dreams? And why would their Sun Dance chief go along with such a major change solely on her say-so? Some people believed that three or four dancers every year lied about their dream calls, saying that they had had one when they really hadn't, and would-be dancers who went to Sky with a vision requiring novel alterations in the ceremony got looked at askance.

Besides, Paisley told herself, I *had* no dream like that. I had no such dream at all. But if not, what was she doing dancing with these men? They owed their tribe three days without food or water—solely in the hope of gaining the Great Manitou's curing powers, the repose of the dead, and their neighbors' respect. You couldn't dance without being dream-called, but Paisley had no memory of her summons. What was happening here?

Defiantly, she cried, "Why are we mocking our dead?"

An old man on the north side of the lodge shook a willow wand at her. Although Paisley had never known him to dance, he regarded himself as an expert on the ritual. The whites in Ignacio knew him as Herbert Barnes, the Utes as Whirling Goat. He had a face like a dry arroyo bottom and a voice like a sick magpie's.

"Do it right!" he taunted her. "Do it right or get out!"

Dancing toward the Tree of Life, half blinded by the sunlight pouring through its fork, Paisley shrieked her whistle at Whirling Goat, then gestured rudely at him. Another broken rule—but the old sot had provoked her.

"You don't know how!" he called. "You don't belong!"

"Stuff it, goat face," Larry Cuthair said, swerving out of his path toward the spectator section. Barnes retreated a step or two, pushing other onlookers aside, but halted when farther back in the crowd. From there, he croaked again for Paisley's

removal—she was fouling the ceremony, turning good medicine to bad.

At that point, the gate keeper and the lodge policeman decided that Barnes was the one “fouling the ceremony” and unceremoniously removed him. Many onlookers applauded.

“Forget him,” Larry whispered when next they were shoulder to shoulder on their dance paths. “He’s a woman hater.”

Whirling Goat confirmed this judgment by breaking free of his escorts at the western door, running back into the Thirst House, and yelling at her, “You foul the dance! You pollute the lodge!” He held his nose in a gesture implying that, against all law and tradition, she had entered the corral while in her cycle.

Many people jeered, but now Paisley couldn’t tell if they were jeering Barnes or her. What hurt most was that she was clean, as her people still insisted on defining a woman’s cleanliness. And Whirling Goat, a famous toss-pot often as fragrant as a distillery, could not’ve smelled even Larry’s sister Melanie Doe’s overpowering styling mousse without having a ball of it stuck directly under his nose. In any case, the gate keeper and the lodge policeman dragged him outside again.

Much aggrieved, Paisley told Larry, “He was lying.”

“I know,” Larry said. He smiled to show that he didn’t mean to denigrate her entire gender, but the smugness of the remark ticked her off as much as had Whirling Goat’s old-fashioned bigotry. She moved away from Larry, toward the backbone of the lodge. She tried to make the furry totem on the center pole resolve out of the sun’s glare into a recognizable buffalo head.

Meanwhile, it amazed her to see that Tim Willow, a dancer, was wearing reflective sunglasses. His face appeared to consist of two miniature novas and a grimace. Surely, it couldn’t be fair to Sun Dance thus disguised, thus protected. Or could it?

ii.

Hours passed. Paisley’s thirst increased. Her throat felt the way Barnes’s face looked—parched. That was to be expected;

it was a *goal* of the dance to empty oneself of moisture so that the purer water of *Sinawef*, the Creator, could flow down the cottonwood into the lodge and finally into one's dried-out body. Thirst was natural, a door to power.

What was *not* natural, Paisley reflected, was the sun's refusal to climb the Colorado sky. It continued to hang where it had hung all morning, forty-five degrees over the eastern horizon, so that its fish-eyed disc blazed down at a slant obscuring the bison-head totem in the Tree of Life. And without eye contact, how could she or anyone else receive the sun power mediated by Buffalo?

As living ghosts, Paisley decided, we've frightened the sun.

In spite of the sun's motionless fear, time passed. You could tell by watching the spectator section of the lodge. People kept coming in and going out, a turnover that would have distracted her if she hadn't been concentrating on her dancing. But, of course, she *couldn't* concentrate on it—her worry about the whiteness of the dancers and the stuckness of the sun prevented her.

Sidelong, though, she was able to make out the faces of some of the spectators. Two of the people were whites. Although her tribe had a public relations director in Ignacio and publicly encouraged tourism, many Southern Utes had little truck with white visitors at the annual Sun Dance.

Paisley's mother had told her stories about white cultists in the 1960s, drug freaks with more interest in peyotism than the Sun Dance. They had disrupted the event by speaking gibberish at the center pole or by dancing to the point of collapse on the first day. On the first day, no *Ute* would presume to charge the sacred cottonwood, seize it, and fall down in the grip of "vision." But the "Bizarros"—the cultists' own name for themselves—had done such things and worse, thereby defiling the dance.

One of this morning's white spectators looked like a refugee from the 1960s. She wore blue jeans, a T-shirt with Bob Dylan's curly head undulating across her breasts, and a leather

hat with a peace-symbol button on the brim. She was pretty, sort of, but Payz could tell that the woman was at least twenty years older than she was—two decades, an entire generation. How did that happen to people? Old Indians, even a sot like Whirling Goat, seemed to have been born old, but old whites—even middle-aged ones—often seemed to have decayed into that state.

Next to the woman stood a man. He was too young, surely, to be her husband and too old, Paisley felt, to be her son and too unlike her in appearance, she concluded, to be her brother. What did that leave? Friend? Colleague? Stranger? Whatever the relationship, he was thin—starvation-thin.

He made her think of what an Anglo male with anorexia nervosa would look like if Anglo males were ever to buy in to the grotesque lie that they could be attractive only if their bodies resembled those of famine victims. His eyes, which seemed too big for his head, were sunken in their sockets. Still, he had the kind of face that whites considered handsome—if only it had been less drawn, less pale.

In any case, he *wasn't* a hippie. His blondish hair was short, brushed back from his temples and forehead in a way that looked nostalgically hip. And he was wearing a long-sleeved sailcloth shirt—much too hot for July—with the legend *Coca-Cola* right across its chest.

His female companion lifted her arms, and Paisley saw that she was holding a camera—one of those kind that pop the negative out and develop it right in front of you.

Paisley nearly stopped dancing. Cameras weren't allowed in the Thirst House. People who brought them in were expelled and told not to come back. True, the Shoshones at Fort Hall and Wind River allowed cameras and recording equipment, but the Utes never had, and Paisley couldn't imagine a time when they would. Such things were products of Anglo technology. Although not bad in themselves, they had no place in the sacred corral.

A flash bulb flashed, but the flash was obscured by the sun's

pinwheeling brilliance. Paisley thought she heard the camera eject the developing print, but, given the din, that wasn't likely. She *saw* the print, though. The woman in the floppy leather hat passed it to her pale companion, lifted her camera again, and triggered a second flash.

She's taking my picture, Paisley thought half-panicked. But why? I'm nothing to her, and besides, it isn't allowed. Now the emaciated man was holding two prints for his companion, and she was taking a third photo. Her flash exploded impotently in the sunlight.

Someone noted the flash, though. DeWayne Sky, five dancers to Paisley's right, stopped strutting and waved his arms over his head like a man trying to halt traffic on a busy street.

It took a moment, but the Ute men at the drum, seeing their Sun Dance chief's gesture, lifted their sticks. Immediately, all the singers stopped singing.

For the first time since the ordeal had begun—whenever that may have been—Paisley could hear other voices from the camping areas and shade houses around the lodge; bread frying in skillets, children skylarking, adults playing the hand-and-stick game.

"Seize her," the ghostly-looking Sky commanded the gate keeper and the lodge policeman.

Some of the Ute onlookers near the woman grabbed her arms as if she might try to run, but she stood like a stone. "I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed by the abrupt halting of the dance. "Have I done something wrong?"

No one spoke. An Indian man, a visiting Jicarilla Apache, took her camera from her and passed it to another man and so on all the way out of the lodge—as if, Paisley thought, it were a bomb.

"Hey!" the skinny Anglo said, but the Apache who had seized the camera silenced him with a scowl.

"Not allowed," Sky said to everyone and no one. Then the woman was in the custody of the gate keeper and the

policeman, who began strong-arming her toward the Thirst House door.

Her male friend, although no one had touched him or ordered his eviction, started to follow, but the woman said, "I'm the one who's broken the rules, Bo. You don't have to come with me."

"Not allowed," Sky repeated loudly. He padded across the dusty lodge to look at the man. He pointed his eagle feather-wand. "You can't stay, either," he said.

Why? Paisley wondered, suddenly sympathetic to the visitors. I know that cameras aren't permitted, but what has that poor skinny man done, Chief Sky? Do you deem him guilty because he's here with the woman?

And then she realized that the man—"Bo"—was still holding the developing prints. Ah, of course. It would be a sacrilege to let him depart with them.

Larry Cuthair ambled to the rail of the spectator section and thrust out his hand for the squares of solution-glazed cardboard. The skinny man surrendered them to Larry as if they meant nothing to him. Maybe they didn't.

"Now he can stay, can't he?" Paisley said. These words escaped her altogether unexpectedly. She was as embarrassed by them as she would have been if Whirling Goat had been right about her dancing during her period. Every pair of eyes in the Thirst House turned toward her.

"No, he may not," DeWayne Sky said imperiously. "He, too, has trespassed against the Holy He-She—he, too."

"How?" Paisley challenged him.

"It's all right," the white man said. "I'll go with Lib. Just let me by."

No one moved—not the powder-white dancers, not the drummers and singers, not the onlookers. The gate keeper and the policeman stood motionless at the gate, holding the woman who had brought the dance to a halt by taking photographs. Meanwhile, the stalled sun shone down on this tableau like a huge static flash.

"He's come here for a reason!" Paisley shouted. "He's come to us for healing!"

How do I know that? she wondered. Nevertheless, she did. She had simply intuited that this skinny Anglo had presented himself at the Sun Dance in humility and hope. He was a white, granted, but he was also a sincere candidate for shamanization at the hands of Sky or one of the other newly empowered dancers. So this must be the *last* day of the three-day ceremony. He had come on the third day to keep from having to endure the whole ordeal, an ordeal for which he lacked the strength; meanwhile, the woman, his friend, had accompanied him to provide moral support. It was just too bad that her curiosity—not malice or greed—had led her to carry in the prohibited camera.

"His reasons mean nothing," Sky said. "His crime is bringing moisture into the Thirst House."

"Moisture?" Paisley said. "His hands are empty."

"There," said Sky, pointing the tip of his eagle feather at the man's shirt. "Right there."

Paisley gaped. Sky meant the advertising legend on the young man's jersey—that inescapable soft drink. Even the name of the product, because the product was a beverage, was forbidden in the Thirst House. Paisley recalled that once she had seen a fellow Ute expelled because he was wearing a T-shirt advertising a well-known beer. On that occasion, though, the expulsion had seemed okay, for the man had known better. Later, wearing an unmarked shirt, he had returned to a fanfare of catcalls. But this man was a visitor, and his embarrassment would keep him from coming back.

"That's stupid," she said. "Anyone with spit in their mouths would have to leave."

"It's okay," the Anglo said. "I'm going."

DeWayne Sky glared at Paisley. "Spit is a part of who we are. *That*—" he gestured to the brand name on his jersey—"is no part of our bodies. It is *no* part of who we are."

You forget, Paisley mused, that there are soft-drink machines at the Ute Piño Nuche restaurant and motel in Ignacio. And you

forget that right here on our camp grounds, there are motor homes with refrigerators full of canned drinks.

"What are you sick with?" Paisley asked Bo.

He hesitated a moment before saying, but when he said, everyone looked at him with new eyes—fear-filled eyes. People moved away from him, parting like that sea in the Bible.

"You can't catch it just by standing next to him," the woman in the floppy hat said. "That's not the way it works."

"Take him out," Sky commanded.

Neither the gate keeper nor the lodge policeman moved.

"I can take myself out," the Anglo said. "Too bad, though—I've been kicked out of places a lot less interesting."

He walked the gauntlet of appalled and fascinated Indians. But as soon as he and the woman had left the Thirst House, ranks closed again. Sky waved for the drummers and singers to resume. Paisley watched the other dancers, including a subdued Larry Cuthair, begin to strut back and forth in their well-trampled paths to the center pole. So she began to jog-dance again, too. The sun still hadn't made any progress in its noonward ascent, and its fiery disk still blurred the animal head tied to the pole.

After a while, Larry strutted up beside Paisley and handed her two developed prints from the white woman's camera. Paisley held them at arm's length, squinting at them as she danced. The images on the slick squares would not resolve any better than would the totem on the center pole. But a fearful uneasiness welled in her—not because the skinny man had a fatal disease—but because Sky had not let him stay. It seemed to her that even though Bo was white, and whites had done little for her people but lash them more tightly to the follies of the past forty years, he owned it to *this* white man to try to heal him.

To Larry's surprise and dismay, Paisley tore up the photographs he had given her. The pieces fluttered to the floor of the Thirst House, where they were quickly ground into the dust by rhythmically shuffling feet.

After that, Paisley lost all consciousness of onlookers—they faded totally from sight. She was a spirit, a powder-white spirit, dancing with other such spirits, and she had the disturbing feeling that she was seeing the event not through her own eyes, but instead through those of the emaciated, dying Anglo.

At last, the sun began to climb. As it did, Paisley, knowing herself on the brink of vision, approached the Tree of Life with more *vigor*. The other dancers recognized how close she was, and Tim Willow began to compete with her, strutting, flailing his arms, making his mirrored lenses pinwheel dizzily.

Paisley ignored him. She was dancing faster, driving harder at the pole, urging herself to attack and touch. Only if she *touched* the sacred tree would the waters of the Holy Manitou flow into her, empowering her in ways that might one day benefit them all.

For her final run, she retreated to the backbone of the Thirst House. She lifted her eyes to the glittering eyes of the totem on the center pole. The sun had ceased to blind her, and what she saw hanging where a buffalo head should hang was not Buffalo but . . . something else. Paisley refused to flee. She screamed—not like a frightened woman, but like a warrior—then rushed the pole with such uncompromising fury that all the other ghostly dancers stopped to watch, shrilling their eagle bones.

“Mother!” she cried. “Mother!”

God’s Spine staggered her with a jolt of power. She collapsed at its base.

The vacuum left in heaven by this discharge of power sucked her spirit up after it. High above Ignacio, Colorado, she eventually regained consciousness. Her cold body, however, lay far below, a small white effigy in the Thirst House.

How strange, she mused, seeing herself and being seen, dreaming herself and being dreamt.

iii.

Paisley could sense someone kneeling over her cold body, a hand on her brow. It seemed to be the skinny Anglo whom Sky

had run out of the Thirst House for wearing a Coca-Cola shirt, just as he had banished that hippie woman for taking pictures.

But when Paisley opened her eyes, reflexively grabbing at this ghost, she found that she was lying on her pallet in her house five miles outside of Ignacio. It wasn't early July, the week of the Sun Dance, but April, and her wood-framed house was cold, just as it had been every night since her mother's suicide.

You've dreamed again, the young woman told herself. Your dream is a call. No one will want you to dance, least of all an old fart like Whirling Goat, and only a bit more a stiff traditionalist like DeWayne Sky, but you've got to face down their opposition. Mama D'lo's an Old One now—it's she who's calling you to dance.

Paisley didn't know the hour, only that it was the middle of a cold weekday night, near Easter. She had school tomorrow, but she couldn't wait until tomorrow to settle this matter. In the empty house, a shell of walls and doors, she dressed as warmly as she could and set off toward Ignacio. The nearby houses of the Willows and the Cuthairs, as ramshackle as chicken coops, brooded by the roadway in the windy dark.

As she walked, carrying her school books so that she would not have to return for them, she pulled her poncho tight and thought about her dream. This was the seventh time she'd had it, or a variation of it, since her mother's suicide. She couldn't ignore the fact that the Old Ones—or, at least, the Old One that D'lo had become—wanted her to dance this July.

That troubled her, for she had planned to leave the reservation the day after her high-school graduation to search for her father. A delay of a month—thirteen years after her parents' divorce—ought not to weigh so heavily on her, but just waiting until the end of school was proving harder than she'd thought. Another month or so would seem an eternity.

Coming into the commercial section of town owned by Anglo and Chicano business people, she strolled along Main Street past the drugstore, a cafe, the laundromat. The sidewalk

was mostly dark and deserted, but as she neared the dim foyer of a bar, two boys—young men, if she wanted to be generous—fell out of the place, staggered toward her grinning, and spread their arms to make it hard for her to get around them without stepping into the street. She knew them as former classmates, moderately well-heeled dropouts with damn little to do.

“Hey, Payz, how 'bout taking a ride with Howell and me?”

“How 'bout *givin'* us a little ride?”

The dreariness of the confrontation, the stupidity of it, made Paisley's dander rise, but she replied only, “Let me by.”

“No, missy. Can't do that,” Howell said.

“You know us,” Frank said. “We're not exactly strangers.”

“You're too drunk to drive or ride, either one, Frank.”

Frank cursed her roundly, but without viciousness, surprising her by staggering past as if she weren't worth another minute of their valuable time. Tall and burly, he was supporting the gangly, lean Howell in a way that reminded her of a bear trying to push a potted sapling along.

Grateful for their short attention spans, Paisley strolled on toward Pine River, the Piño Nuche motel-restaurant, and the diffuse Ute enclave north of town where DeWayne Sky lived.

But, a moment later, some sort of pointy-nosed sports car with flames pin-striped on its flank pulled up beside her, Frank at the wheel. Howell, meanwhile, was lolling at the shotgun seat like a manikin stolen from a tall-and-thin men's shop. Frank paced her up Main Street at ten miles per hour, his head half out the window and his mouth slurring a variety of one- or two-syllable activities that he seemed to think she would enjoy sharing with him.

Paisley wasn't amused. She had business in Ignacio. And she was tired of hearing Anglos throw around words like *papoose*, *squaw*, and *wampum* as if they were something other than cliches or insults, especially the way Frank was deploying them. She told him to fuck off and declined to speak to him again. At the next cross street, though, Frank blew his horn, turned directly across her path, and dialed up the volume of a

song on his tape player whose lyrics were nothing but orgasmic grunts. The pulsing bass of this song put the empty street a-tremble. Even the besotted Howell came around long enough to open his mouth and pop his eardrums.

"Get out of my way!" Paisley shouted. "Move it!"

Frank replied with an elaborate pantomime involving his fingers and tongue. All that she could think to do to show her outrage and contempt was to grab up an official city trash container at the end of the sidewalk and hurl it with all her might at Frank's car. It was a feat that, even as she performed it, astonished her—mostly because the four-sided receptacle, featuring a detachable metal top with a swinging door, had not been emptied recently and weighed at least fifty pounds. When it hit the car, it clattered, rebounded, and scattered debris, some of which spilled through Frank's window along with the dormered lid.

Frank shouted, Howell woke up again, and Paisley recovered the main body of the trash container for another assault. This time, though, she carried it, dripping vile liquids and moist pasteboard, to the front of Frank's car, where she wielded it after the fashion of a battering ram, repeatedly slamming one corner into the nearest headlamp. It took three whacks to shatter the glass, by which time Frank had managed to jettison the trash-can lid. Now he tried to halt her vandalism by running her down. Paisley skipped aside, one-handedly bashing the container into his car again and knocking his rearview mirror off its mount.

A siren began to keen, and they all looked around to see Deputy Marshal Blake Seals come barreling into the intersection in one of Ignacio's two patrol cars.

iv.

Seals introduced her into the middle cell of five in the block at the rear of the marshal's office, and she was relieved to find that none of the others held prisoners. The drunk tank at the end of the damp hall looked exactly like a cave or the entrance to

a mine shaft—a concrete grotto. For a time, Seals stood outside her cell, his pock-marked face like a big albino strawberry and his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his windbreaker so that it bellied out in front like a sail. He wasn't a cruel Anglo, just a pompous and partisan one.

“Sorry there's nobody in tonight for you to talk to.”

“Couldn't you find any other Indians to arrest?”

“You were making a public disturbance, Miss Coldpony.”

“I was the *victim* of a public disturbance. Those turkeys were drunk. Frank tried to run over me.”

“The kid was just trying to depart the scene before you turned his Trans Am into scrap metal.”

It was a temptation to renew their street argument, but they'd hashed out the details three dozen times already, in the middle of Ignacio, and Seals had sent the “kids”—friend of his—home to bed, promising Frank that the “perpetrator” would spend the rest of this chilly night “incarcerated.”

Well, here she was, *incarcerated*. She would have cursed Seals for the fact that the jail stank of disinfectant if not for the linked fact that it would've reeked of something far less bearable if he hadn't earlier bothered to “sanitize” everything. That was one of the questionable bonuses of being deputy of Ignacio—you also got to be custodian.

“Sorry there's only that—” gesturing at the urinal—“if your bladder gets heavy. We don't have many female guests.”

“Leave me alone, Deputy.”

“I could bring you a bucket.”

“Stick your head in it.”

He grinned, mysteriously delighted by her retort. “Put my foot in that one, didn't I?” He returned to the office. Paisley sat down on her grungy mattress, which lay askew on what looked like a pig-iron frame. She wouldn't be in for long, though. Her phone call had gone to DeWayne Sky, who, although not overjoyed to be roused at four in the morning, had told her to hang on, he would vouch for her, put up her bail, or whatever.

She was welcome to stay the rest of the night with LannaSue and him.

In the drunk tank down the hall, somebody or something coughed, a painfully congested hacking.

"Deputy," Paisley called, "I'm not alone back here."

"That's only Barnes," Seals shouted from the office. "I forgot about him."

Barnes. Herbert Barnes. Whirling Goat. Seals had shoved him into the cave and forgotten about him. The old man careened out of its bleak dampness, slumped against the bars with his arms hanging through. He was wall-eyed with cheap liquor or bread-filtered hair tonic, and his white hair tufted out from his temples in a way that made him resemble a great horned owl. Usually, reservation police took care of him, but tonight—last night—he had fallen to the efficient ministrations of Blake Seals.

"Hello, Alma." He sounded more weary than drunk. Maybe a nap had rubbed the nap off the velvet of his nightly stupor.

"Paisley," Paisley said. "My name is Paisley."

"Your mother called you Alma," the drunk lessoned her. "Soul' in Spanish."

"I know what it means. But my father named me Paisley, Paisley Coldpony, and that's the name on my birth certificate."

"You lived with your mother longer than your daddy. Your name is Alma Arriola." He pulled some string out of the pocket of his dirty suede coat and, with his hands outside the bars, began making cat's cradles with it. He was remarkably dexterous for so old and alcohol-steeped a brave. Paisley found her irritation with his comments about her name softened a little by the web-weaving of his stubby fingers.

"Jackrabbit," he said, rotating the string figure so that she could see this two-dimensional creature loping across the blackness of the drunk tank.

"Arriola's Spanish name, too," he added pedantically, hacking her off again. Then he dismantled the airy jackrabbit and began a second latticework figure.

“And Barnes is an Anglo name, Whirling Goat.”

Paisley knew that some of her hostility to the old guy was left over from her dream. She resented what he'd said to her in it and was sorry to find him—dare she even think the word?—*polluting* the cell block. (If, given the disinfectant fumes stinging her eyes, further pollution were even possible).

“And this is a goat,” he said, holding up the second figure and whirling it for her benefit. “When I was eight, I rode a goat for three minutes that none of my friends could even catch. My name—it comes from that.”

“Which one of your friends had the stopwatch, Herbert?”

But neither this sarcasm nor her rude familiarity would provoke him. He ceased to whirl, and handily collapsed, the goat, only to follow it with several successive string compositions, all of which he was magically weaving for his own amusement. His equanimity put her off. She wanted to puncture it.

“I'm going to dance in the Sun Dance. I've been dream-called.”

“What do you think of this one?” he said, holding up a figure that initially made no sense to her. Standing at the bars of her cell, she peered at the crisscrossing strings with real annoyance. Her world-shaking declaration of intent had slipped past him like a coyote squeezing untouched through a hole in a henhouse.

“What is it?” she grudgingly asked.

He coughed, but his preoccupied hands were unable to cover his mouth. “Kar'tajan,” he managed.

“What?” The word summoned no resonances for her.

“Kar'tajan,” he repeated. “But only the head, Alma—only the head and the horn.”

Now Paisley recognized it. It was the head—the head and the horn—of a unicorn. She could not imagine how he had produced it with a single piece of looped string, but he had, and the awkward way that he held his hands to sustain the figure was justified by its fragile elegance. She'd never known that

Barnes, *aka* Whirling Goat, had such a talent—or *any* talent, for that matter, beyond making a year-round nuisance of himself and sourly kibitzing every performer at every important Ute ceremony. But, so soon after the seventh repetition of her dream, the sight of the string figure—*this* string figure—gave her a decided pang. For it, too, seemed part and parcel of her summons.

“Why do you call it a kar’tajan?”

“Because that’s its name. That’s the name our Holy He-She gave it—before history turned the world inside-out.”

“It’s a unicorn, Whirling Goat. There’s no such animal.”

“It’s a kar’tajan, Alma. I’ve seen one.”

From the office, Seals shouted, “He saw it drinking over by the Pine with this humongous herd of pink elephants!”

The deputy’s words, and then his guffaws, dismantled the mood of balanced wonder and unease that Paisley had been experiencing—in much the way that Barnes’s hands collapsed the string figure of the kar’tajan or unicorn. He stuffed the looped string back into his coat pocket and slumped more heavily against the bars.

“Can’t you do a buffalo?” Paisley felt strangely tender toward him. She hoped that he wouldn’t relapse into the stupor that had probably occasioned his arrest.

“Ain’t nothing I can’t do with string.”

“Do me a buffalo, then.”

Barnes coughed, more or less negatively.

Damn you, Blake Seals, Paisley thought. And then, as unbidden as lightning from a high azure sky, a memory bolt illuminating the headless corpse of her mother struck her. She was seeing again the clay-colored feet on the lounge’s footrest, the dropped .12-gauge, and the Jackson Pollock brain painting on the walls behind the old chair. She’d just come home from a debate with the kids at Cortez, a debate that her team had won, and there was Mama D’lo, waiting to share the victory with her, messily at ease in the lounge, forever free of motherly obligation. Although maybe not.

"I've been dream-called," Paisley said. Defiantly, she looked at Barnes. "To dance in the Sun Dance."

"Good. Good for you." He hacked into his forearm.

Paisley stared at him. "Didn't you hear me? I've been granted a vision. I'm to dance with the men."

"It's what your mama wants." Barnes shifted against the bars. "She told me. That being so, you should do it."

"Told you? Why would she tell *you*, old man? When?"

"Tonight. A little time past." He indicated the impenetrable blackness behind him. "Pretty funny talk we had."

Seals lumbered into the upper end of the cell block. "Every talk you have while you're swackered is funny, Barnes. Chats with old Chief Ignacio. Arguments with John Wayne. Even a midnight powwow with Jesus."

"Get your butt out of here, Deputy," Paisley said. "Who asked you to horn in?"

Smirking, Seals raised his big hands as if to ward off physical blows. "Simmer down. I'm going. Just forgot for a minute we was running a hotel here." He backed out, closing the cell-block door behind him.

"You saw her tonight, Mr. Barnes? *Tonight?*"

"Yes. In here. I was on that pissy mattress—" pointing his chin toward it, a shadow in the dark—"and D'lo showed up, maybe from the San Juan Mountains. She stood over me, signing."

"Signing?"

"You know, hand-talk."

"But why? To keep Seals from hearing?"

"That didn't matter. He was patrolling." Barnes hunched his shoulders. "Alma, that was her only way to talk. You see?"

Paisley understood. She had seen her mother's *ini'putc* in the Cuthairs' stationwagon on the day of her funeral, and the revenant, like the corpse, had had no head. But then the ghost had vanished, leaving Paisley to doubt what she had witnessed.

"What did she say? What did her hand talk mean?"

"Just what you say, Alma. That you must dance this year.

That she desires it. That no one should hinder you, girl or no girl."

"It's 'no girl,' Mr. Barnes. It's 'woman.'" She told him as a matter of information, not to scold—for she was ready to forgive the old fart for his bad behavior in her dream.

A moment later, Paisley said, "But why did she visit you? Why did she come here to give you that message?"

"I have a reputation," Whirling Goat said proudly.

As a sot, Paisley silently chastised him, but she knew that he meant as an expert on certain ceremonial matters and so refrained from disillusioning him. Let Barnes claim for himself the dubious glory of an *ini'putc* visitation.

"Also," he said, "Dolores must have foreknown."

"Foreknown what?"

"That you'd be arrested tonight. That it would be good for me to give you my blessing."

"I have your blessing?"

"Of course. I gave it to you already. How many children do I show my string creatures?" He hacked again, magpie croaks.

"Not many," Paisley hazarded.

"Damned straight. Now, though, you're among them."

Talk lapsed. Paisley wondered if her run-in with Frank Winston and Howell Payne had been providential. Yes, it probably had. But she had no time to mull the matter further, for Blake Seals entered the cell block again, this time leading a haggard-appearing DeWayne Sky and announcing loudly that she was "free to go." Her esteemed tribal councilman was vouching for her character.

"What about Mr. Barnes?" Paisley said.

"What about him?" Seals echoed her.

"He's slept it off. He isn't drunk any longer. You should let him out, too."

"It's an hour or two till dawn," Seals protested. "He can get a snootful in five minutes, a sloshing bellyfull in ten."

"Let Mr. Barnes out, too," DeWayne Sky said. He was wearing khaki trousers with a turquoise belt buckle so large

that it made Paisley think of a chunk of the Colorado firmanent for which the councilman's family seemed to've been named.

Not liking it much, Seals released the old drunk along with the unrepentant Trans Am basher. In the jail's front office, he called them over to a metal desk to reclaim their belongings. All Paisley had was her school books, but Barnes had a small clutch of items—his wallet, his house key, a few salted peanuts, and some sort of foil-wrapped coin that Sky picked up and turned in the glare of the light bulb as if it were an extraordinary find.

“What the hell are you doing with this, Barnes?”

“He's a Boy Scout,” Seals said. “His motto is ‘Be Prepared.’”

Sky threw the coin back down on the desk. “Hell, man, you're eighty-something. And nine tenths of the time you're so stinking drunk, your carrot'd have to have chronic droop, anyway.”

A rubber? Paisley speculated. Is Barnes, our oldest bachelor, actually carrying a rubber around with him?

“There's the other one tenth,” the old man said, neither shamed nor amused by Sky's attack. He stuffed the battered coin into his pocket along with his other pocket fillers and moved to the door as vigorously as he paraded around the camp grounds at the Bear Dance in May and the Sun Dance in July. Those were two weeks out of the year—maybe the only two—that he scrupulously laid off wine, whiskey, beer, hair tonic, everything but the old bucks charged with organizing and running the dances. Paisley was proud of him for getting through the door upright, his dignity intact and that silly antique rubber in his pocket.

“What do you want to do?” DeWayne Sky asked her. “Stand here till Marshal Breault comes on duty?”

She didn't and so they left.

v.

The Skys lived in a wood-frame house that, several years ago, they had remodeled in an unusual way. Around it, entirely

around it, Sky had had built a conical frame whose summit rose better than forty feet above the original roof. Sky's workmen had stuccoed the frame, windowing it at various places with huge rectangular sheets of Plexiglas to let in the sun. At night, spotlights lit the cone so that you could see it from several blocks away, a garish white tepee rising among the scattered tract houses like an advertisement for a Wild West amusement park.

The cone's huge stucco flap opened to the east, as prescribed for tepees by sacred tradition, but the door to the house inside the frame faced south. Thus, Paisley and her rescuer—once he'd parked his Ford Bronco in the driveway—had to walk an enclosed track between the house and the inside tepee wall to reach the *real* entrance to his living quarters.

Paisley felt decidedly weird following DeWayne Sky around this bizarre corridor, but she remembered that he had erected the fake tepee not just to pretend that he was still living in one, as most whites mockingly accused, but to avail himself of the power to call spirits that round houses—and only round houses—could impart to those living in them. A house with corners, a house with none of the circularity of earth and sky about it, preached DeWayne Sky, cut one off from the spirits and thus robbed one of power.

Although Paisley feared that merely masking a boxy house with a big stucco tepee was not the best way of persuading the gods that you were back in touch with both the earth and the Old Ones, she knew that in the years since erecting his cone, DeWayne Sky's power and influence among the Southern Utes had grown enormously. He'd spent a lot of money on his "folly," but he'd got all of that back, and a great deal more, representing his people at Indian caucuses around the country, presiding as the grand marshal in Frontier Day parades in various towns, and taking part in all five Shoshone-Ute Dances, just like a true shaman. Now, he was chairman of the tribal council and chief of the Sun Dance committee, and

who'd have the sand to tell him that his big stucco tepee hadn't gotten him in good with the Great Manitou?

Not me, Paisley thought. Not on a dare.

LannaSue Sky handed her a cup of hot tea, sweetened with honey, and pointed her to a couch covered with a scratchy Navajo blanket. On the knee of her jeans, the tea cup warmed a circle that Paisley couldn't help regarding as a tiny replica of the base of the tepee surrounding them.

When LannaSue returned to bed, Sky paced in front of Paisley in his boots, a stocky man with two tight braids hanging to his waist and a paunch decorated by that sky-blue belt buckle.

"What's the word, Alma? What's going on?"

"The word's Paisley," she corrected him.

He waved off the correction with angry impatience. "Tell me stuff I don't know. Tell me important stuff."

"Names are important. Names let us—"

"Okay. If I call you Paisley, you call me Papa Tuqú-payá, got it?" *Tuqú-payá* was the Ute word for sky, one of only a few dozen in her people's tongue that Paisley knew. "Understand?"

"Sure, Papa Tuqú-payá."

"Talk to me, Paisley. But only important stuff."

So she related her Sun Dance dream. Parts, however, she kept to herself, the parts that still frightened or unnerved her.

A lamp in the living room relieved a little of the predawn gloom, but when she looked out its picture window, she saw only the interior wall of the fake tepee. A melancholy claustrophobia rose in her. Nevertheless, she kept talking, and when she was finished, she repeated that tonight's dream had been her seventh in the past five weeks. Therefore her visit to town.

"Women don't dance," Sky declared.

"Women *have* danced, Papa Tuqú-payá. At Fort Hall, they do it all the time. They've done it here, too."

"Twelve years ago, child. Two months later, one of them who'd danced, Theresa Eagle, took sick. The white doctors had

no idea with what, but she saw the sacred water bird in the tube connected to her IV bottle and soon thereafter died.”

“Mama told me that four other women danced. Nothing like that happened to them.”

“No. It happened to other people. Our last Sun Dance chief, the one who let the woman dance—his wife died of a heart attack that year. The aunt of the tribal council’s last chairman—she died, too. I could make a list.”

“None of that matters, Papa Sky. I’m being dream-called. If I’m not, why am I having this dream again and again?”

LannaSue Sky trundled back into the living room in her robe and sat down by Paisley. “Of course you’re being called.” She looked at her husband. “Who can sleep with this darling here?”

Sky tossed his braids over his shoulders—apparently, in this context, a gesture of disgust.

“Are you afraid to let Paisley dance? Afraid that, two months later, *your* beloved wife might die?” LannaSue briefly smothered a laugh, then gave up and released it. “Beloved wife, my ass. What he’s afraid might die is his beloved *workhorse*.”

“LannaSue—”

“Okay. I’ll shut my silly mouth.” She patted Paisley’s knee, the one without the tea cup. “For a while, anyhow.”

The Sun Dance chief started pacing again, trying to recoup some of his pilfered authority. “If I let you dance, your dream says we must all paint ourselves like *ini’putc*—ghosts.”

“I don’t know. Is that what it means?”

“I hope not. If we did that, Paisley, it would be like saying the Mauche—we Southern Utes—are dead. Dead people can’t ask the Creator to give them power.”

“They can ask to be resurrected,” LannaSue said.

Sky ignored this. “Forget that, for now. Why are there Anglos in your dream—the floppy-hatted woman, the sick man?”

Paisley shrugged. Even now, she could see them clearly—but she was fairly sure she had never met them in life.

“You haven’t told me everything,” Sky said. “Your dream scared you. It scared you so bad you’re afraid to tell it all.”

His keenness in this startled Paisley. Some of the Muache said that DeWayne Sky was a fraud—but he had never knowingly violated any ceremonial tradition, and his knowledge of her reaction to her own dream seemed to her a good sign.

“Tell me,” he commanded her. “Tell me even what you’re afraid to tell.”

“Otherwise,” LannaSue said, taking the empty tea cup for her, “he won’t be able to accept you into the dance.”

Grimacing, Sky made a curt be quiet gesture.

“I don’t even know that I *want* to dance,” Paisley admitted, her mind confusingly aboil again.

“Not your decision,” Sky said. “My decision. Tell me so I can decide. If you *don’t* tell me, the decision’s out of my hands, and it’s simple: ‘No way, gal. No way.’”

Great, Paisley thought. That would keep me from dancing. And if I don’t have to dance, I can leave that much sooner to look for my father. But then it struck her that if she didn’t fully divulge the contents of her dream, the dream would continue to recur, and to vary with each recurrence, until it had driven her as crazy as Moonshine Coyote, a woman whose husband and three sons were all in prison and who often sat in a wheelbarrow near Highway 172 drinking cherry Kool-Aid and spitting mouthfuls at passing motorists.

“Come on,” Sky said. “You’re wasting my time.”

“Yeah, you could be sawing logs,” LannaSue tweaked him.

“There’s three or four things,” Paisley said. “The first is those pictures the woman took.” Both Skys waited expectantly for her to go on. So she told them that when her dream self had looked at the developed prints handed her by Larry Cuthair, she found that they showed only the interior of the Thirst House—no dancers, no singers, no drummers, no spectators at

all. The people taking part in the event as pseudo-ghosts had become real ghosts when processed by Anglo picture-taking technology.

Which was just another variation, Paisley now realized, on that old cultural-anthropological chestnut about the camera's ability to steal a shy African bushman's, or an innocent Amazonian cannibal's, soul. From what Paisley knew of anthropologists, though, it seemed more likely that it was the people on the *taking*—not the *being taken*—end of the camera who forfeited their souls.

"That frightened you even in your dream," Sky said. "You tore the pictures up. You scattered the pieces."

"Yes."

"What else?"

She told him about the trouble she'd had focusing on the totem on the sacred cottonwood. The brightness of the sun, and the angle at which it shone down, had been the main culprits, but it was also likely that she hadn't *wanted* to see what was in the tree's crotch, knowing that it wasn't Buffalo but . . . something else.

"What?" Sky asked. "What was it?"

LannaSue gripped Paisley's knee, reassuringly squeezed it. At last, Paisley told them, "My mother's face."

Having confessed this, she could *see* her mother's face again—not blown to smithereens as on the night of the suicide, but as it had been before that. Beaten-looking and imploring. Except that, in the dream, her face had been as large as a bison's head.

"Mama D'lo wants her to dance," LannaSue said. "D'lo's spirit is restless."

"Don't jump to conclusions, woman!"

"She has no son to dance her to rest, DeWayne. If it's to be done, Alma—Paisley here—will have to do it."

Well, that was exactly what Whirling Goat had told her in the jail. It made sense. Mama D'lo's *ini'putc'* had visited

Barnes in the drunk tank to ask him to assure her that she was doing exactly right in going to Sky with her seventh dream.

Sky, however, stomped out of the living room into another part of the house. Paisley was perplexed. Maybe LannaSue had so badly provoked him that he was washing his hands of both of them. Women weren't supposed to organize or dance in the Sun Dance, although they could support the men by singing or by bringing willow bundles to them during rest periods—and yet here were two women, his own wife and a teen-age girl, one telling him how to interpret a dream and the other presenting herself to him as a would-be dancer. No wonder the poor old buck was pissed.

But a minute later, Sky was back, holding a red-cedar flute, an instrument that—he said gruffly, sitting down on an ottoman in the middle of the room—he had made himself. Its song would help Paisley make sense of the two shredded photographs.

“How?”

“Shut your eyes. Hear my song. When it stops and I say you're doing something, do it.—LannaSue, turn out that lamp.”

LannaSue obeyed, and the room, an hour before dawn, was so dark that Paisley felt better closing her eyes than sitting in it trying to find enough light to see by. Sky began to play. The melody was thin, broken, and not terribly pretty. But it altogether took her, snaking in and out of her mind as if seeking a hole to go into and hide. In fact, when the melody stopped, Paisley half believed that it had found this hole.

“A woman dancer in the Thirst House,” Sky intoned, “bends down and picks up the pieces of two torn photographs.”

That's me, Paisley thought. That's me he's talking about, me he's telling me what to do. And in the darkness of her skull, inside the darkness of a boxy house inside the darkness of a stucco tepee, she saw herself clad all in white, powdered like a ghost, kneeling in the dust to gather up the scraps of treated

pasteboard. As she did, Sky began to play again—the same harsh and monotonous, but compelling, tune. He kept playing until the white-clad avatar of Paisley Coldpony kneeling in the Sun Dance lodge of her own mind had picked up every single fragment of paper.

Said Sky then, “The woman carries these pieces to the drum and spreads them out on top of it.”

The red-cedar flute crooned again, and Paisley performed in her head what Sky had just attributed to the neurological automaton—the day-dream simulation—he called “the woman.” To Paisley, it felt a lot like moving a computer figure through a two-dimensional labyrinth on one of the Apple monitors that they had at school now; the sense of being two places at once was just that strong, as was her awareness that she could back out—albeit with a pang of real loss—at nearly any moment she wanted.

“The woman fits the pieces together—into two pictures. She takes all the time she needs.”

Paisley took all the time she needed.

The flute ceased to croon.

Said Sky, “The woman speaks aloud. She tells everyone at the Sun Dance what the pictures show.”

The obedient self-projection in Paisley’s mind stared down at the puzzle-fit photos on the drumhead. In reassembling them, she had paid their images little heed, but now she was shocked to find that one was a picture of Samuel Taylor Coldpony—her father—standing next to the leather hatted woman who had supposedly *taken* the pictures. They stood side by side in the corral.

The other photo, meanwhile, was of an emaciated unicorn—or kar’tajan, as Barnes would call it—rearing at the Tree of Life in the Sun Dance lodge, its front hooves flashing like knives at the totem affixed to it.

Startled, Paisley opened her eyes on the dark.

“She *tells* them,” reiterated Sky, “what the pictures show.”

Reluctantly, staring at nothing, Paisley told the Skys what her dream self had just seen.

Laying the flute aside, her mentor said, "To find your father, Paisley, you must only find that woman."

"What of the sick unicorn?" she blurted. That Barnes had shown her a string-figure unicorn in the jail seemed not so much a happy, as a monstrous, coincidence.

"The unicorn and the sick Anglo in your dream," Sky said, "are different sides of the same coin."

Like the "coin" that Barnes always carries? she wondered. But there was no way to ask Sky such a strange question, and she didn't yet know how a young man with AIDS and a kar'tajan with protruding ribs could mirror anything in each other but illness.

No matter. Sky had an explanation: "The parents of the sick young man have turned him away, just as you think your folks have done, Sam by never coming to see you and Mama D'lo by . . ."

LannaSue said, "She knows, DeWayne."

"That's why you saw D'lo's face on the Tree of Life. And why his unicorn is trying to cut up the totem with its hooves."

Suddenly, Paisley could stand no more. "You sound like one of those goddamn BIA psychologists! Like Chief Sigmund Sky of the Muache Shrinks' Association!"

She reached across LannaSue and turned on the lamp. The sudden light made everyone in the room—eyes narrowed, mouths pursed—look constipated.

The Sun Dance chief picked up his red-cedar flute, rose from the ottoman, and stomped off toward his tiny study. At the door, he turned and gave Paisley a bitter look.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," he said. "LannaSue, find her something to eat."

vi.

She ate scrambled eggs, to which LannaSue had added diced green pepper and jalapeño cheese. Her hunger surprised her. Ten minutes ago, eating had been the least of her concerns.

LannaSue was nursing a cigarette and a cup of coffee. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The question surprised her even more than did the extent of her hunger. "I *am* grown up, LannaSue."

"Okay. What do you want to do?"

"Finish school. Dance in the Sun Dance. Find my father." She couldn't think what else to add.

"You want to be a *po'rat*," LannaSue told her.

LannaSue Sky's absolute certainty on this score was yet another surprise, and Paisley halted her fork in mid-ascent. "How do you know that? Hell, I don't know that."

The Southern Utes had passed a quarter of a century without a bona fide *po'rat*, or shaman. They had had leaders aplenty, chiefs and organizers and tribal councilmen, but persons with *powa'a*—supernatural authority from the One-Above—well, the Muache had had to import such persons from the Navajos, the Jicarilla Apaches, or even the Shoshones, whose Sun Dance procedures were so lax that they let dancers suck wet towels in the Thirst House and had no ban on photography so long as the picture-takers were Indian.

Not even DeWayne Sky, tepee or no tepee, qualified as a *po'rat*, although he had striven mightily to help maintain the integrity of the Bear Dance and the Sun Dance. On the other hand, not being a bonafide shaman, he hadn't tried to resurrect the *mawo'gwipani*, or the Round Dance, at which everyone danced to hold white diseases—smallpox, clap, polio—in check. Nor the old wedding rite in which a couple sat together in a smoke-filled tepee to prove their compatibility and faithfulness. nor the ritual of laying a baby's birth cord on an anthill to bless the child with strength and good fortune. Sky's curing powers were beyond the average, but far from impressive in the old way.

For dynamic medicine, a true *po'rat*—a genuine shaman—was required, and Paisley's people not only had no one qualified, they had no candidates. Why LannaSue would suppose that *she* might make a candidate, much less a full-

fledged medicine woman, Paisley was unable to guess. No matter how often she claimed to be grown, she knew in her heart that she was still a school girl, whose daddy had never visited her in all the years since his leavetaking and whose Mama D'lo had . . . done what she'd done. And here she was putting away scrambled eggs as if she hadn't eaten at school yesterday and gulping them down like a starved dog.

How can I be a *po'rat*? Paisley wondered. How can this kindly lady see me even as a *would-be* medicine woman?

"DeWayne!" LannaSue called, holding a smoked-down cigarette in front of her. "DeWayne, stop sulking and come here!"

A moment later, Sky propped himself against the doorjamb. "You should've married a poodle, not a man."

"DeWayne, Paisley's dream—it's calling her to be a *po'rat*, a medicine woman, a healer, not only a dancer."

"You've got piñon nuts for brains, LannaSue. If you open your mouth again, they'll rattle onto the floor."

"The sick man in her dream," said LannaSue, undeterred by this warning. Speculatively, she added, "The *kar'tajan* in the photo she pieced back together to your flute's song."

"What about them?" Sky said.

Paisley was confused again. LannaSue had just said *kar'tajan*, the very word that Barnes had used earlier this morning. Moreover, Sky—despite his put-on disgruntlement—was clearly heeding his wife's words, trying to follow her reasoning.

"The Sun Dance is for earning power to heal with, and the Anglo with the deadly illness in her dream requires healing. So does the *kar'tajan* in her dream photo—it's angry and sick, too."

Sky was noncommittal. "So?"

"Paisley calls for the man's healing. She wants to help him. But you say he's broken the rules, and you throw him out."

"He *has* broken the rules," Sky retorted, astonishing Paisley by talking about her dream as if it were an event of which he and his wife shared a real memory. "He brought in moisture."

“Only a name on a shirt.”

“He brought in moisture, he brought in Anglo advertising, and he brought them with the picture-taking woman.”

I only *dreamed* those things, Paisley thought, looking back and forth between the arguing husband and wife. And it was *my* dream. How can they argue about *my* dream?

But another part of her mind declared, Paisley, you dreamed it *seven times*. It's got to be seriously considered, and DeWayne and LannaSue are doing that.

“Fetch the god sheet, DeWayne.”

“Christ, woman, that's only to come out at the end of the Sun Dance. Next you'll be asking me to piss on the sacred fire.”

“After asking for the healing of the man you threw out, Paisley had a vision. I think it means she's to become a *po'rat*. Fetch the god sheet. We'll see.”

It looked for a minute that Sky might stomp off again, outraged and truculent. Paisley would not've blamed him. The god sheet, if that somewhat awkward term signified what she thought it did, was a piece of linen that the Sun Dance chief brought forth during the closing ceremonies to impress the Shoshones, Arapahos, Apaches, and Navajos who had come to take part, for only the Muache had anything so impressive to display at dance's end. That LannaSue was asking Sky to get it now, months ahead of time, for no other purpose but to determine her suitability for shamanhood—well, it staggered Paisley. She finished eating, drank the last of her coffee, stared embarrassedly at her hands.

“He's getting it,” LannaSue said. “Come on.”

They found Sky peeking around his study door into the living room, holding something—the god sheet, Paisley figured—behind it out of sight. “Not a word of this to anyone,” he said, “Not a word of this from either of you pathetically shy females to anybody outside this house. Got me?”

“Come on. Bring it out. I'll throw the rug back. You can lay

it down right here.” LannaSue tapped the floor with her foot.

“Blindfold her,” Sky said.

“What? There’s nobody here but us, DeWayne.”

“Do it. In this, I’ll have my way. She has to be blindfolded for the test to work. And turn that damn lamp out again.”

Blindfolded? The lamp out? Was she going to get to see the god sheet or not? All the hocus-pocus—which she couldn’t relate to the time-honored rituals of either the Bear or the Sun Dance—frightened Paisley. Hell, LannaSue’s notion that she had *po’rat* potential frightened her. Before she could say anything, though, LannaSue had tied a clean dish towel around her eyes and further insured her sightlessness by pressing a pair of Sky’s sunglasses into place over the towel. Blind man’s bluff.

She could still feel, however, and when Sky billowed the sheet out and let it drift down like a provisional carpet, she felt the stirred air slap her like something wet. Moisture, when you were dry, was power, but she wasn’t dry, and this whole business—now that she had told her dream and eaten—seemed peculiar. Still, she trusted the Skys, and if they thought this was the way to test her, well, it must be okay.

LannaSue sat her down, helped her remove her shoes and socks. Then she was standing behind Paisley, her large hands gripping her shoulders. Sky retreated and returned. When his red-cedar flute began to play again (the same painful melody), LannaSue pushed her gently forward, telling her to step lightly on the god sheet.

“Try to make a crossing,” she said.

A crossing? Paisley thought. I can make a crossing with my eyes closed—which was a joke almost good enough to laugh aloud at. But when LannaSue released her, all her fragile bravado fell part and she hesitated.

Legend had it that the god sheet—the sacred linen—was an authentic Muache relic. At some point over the past half century, a Ute visionary who had just successfully completed the Sun Dance went walking in the hills near the dance grounds

and happened upon the footprints of a stranger. This Indian was wrapped in the sheet that he'd worn into and out of the Thirst House over the three days of the dance, and it occurred to him that these footprints—they were narrow and bare—were Jesus's. The Mormons claimed that the Indians were a lost tribe of Israel, after all, and that, once upon a time, Jesus had appeared in the New World. In any case, the Ute visionary laid his cloaklike sheet atop the strange footprints, and the sheet, according to legend, absorbed them into its fabric so thoroughly that no amount of scrubbing or detergent could lift them out again.

Now, the Sun Dance chief was the keeper of this holy relic, and Paisley stood at its edge, unable to see it, knowing that she might cross it to inherit to . . . well, an apprenticeship that might one day confer upon her divine power.

"Walk, darling," LannaSue Sky encouraged her. "Walk."

Paisley took a step. Sky's flute continued its balky crooning, and the young woman heard the music in the same way that she felt the god sheet—as a spiritual warmth. In fact, although the pine floor was cold and the sheet itself frigid, as she navigated the musty smelling relic, Paisley noticed that the soles of her feet—step by careful step—seemed to absorb more and more warmth, more and more tingly energy, and it was tempting just to dash from one side of the linen to the other.

"The woman in the Thirst House goes slow," Sky said. "She goes slow and watches what there is to watch."

The flute resumed playing. Paisley overcame the urge to dash. Soon, she found herself observing again her own ghostly automaton in the Sun Dance corral of her mind.

There before her self-projection's eyes, hanging from the holy cottonwood like Jesus on his Roman cross, was the skinny Anglo in the Coca-Cola shirt. He had been crucified on the center pole, his arms stretched out into unsupportive air and his feet nailed to the Tree of Life with splinters of antelope bone. The gaunt Anglo was saying something, mumbling aloud, but all that Paisley's dream self could make out was the end of his

mumble—" . . . forsaken me"—a phrase with the rising intonation of a question.

Whereupon the Anglo faded from her dream self's sight, vanished into the white air of the imaginary Sun Dance lodge, to be replaced on the center pole by another totem altogether—the head not of a buffalo or of her own dead mother, but of a taxidermically prepared specimen of a mythological beast that Paisley knew as a unicorn but Whirling Goat and the Skys as a kar'tajan, as if they all had some ancient knowledge to which she was not yet privy and on which she might never gain a steady grip. All the other dancers rushed this totem. Leaping, then falling entranced, all had visions, while Paisley's dream self watched from her own Sun Dance path, buoyed by the activity but confused by it, too.

Then she saw that the gaunt Anglo, clad now only in an Indian breechclout, stood beyond the Thirst House entrance. He looked at her peculiarly for a moment, then motioned her to forsake the lodge and follow him. Paisley could feel the soles of her feet—her real feet—growing warmer and warmer as she struggled to obey the mysterious Anglo's summons. It was pity that drew her, not quite conviction, and she knew that once she had seen what he required of her, she would return to the Thirst House to appraise herself of the contents of all her fellow dancers' visions.

Suddenly, the pine floor was cold under her feet again.

"You're across!" a woman's voice cried.

Paisley hoped that LannaSue would remove her sunglasses, untie her blindfold, and give her a look at the god sheet, but Sky, she could tell, was gathering up the sheet, hurriedly folding it, and returning it to its hiding place in his study. Only when he had come back from this task did LannaSue turn on the lamp, remove the blindfold, and hug her. Both she and Sky were beaming at her—as if she had just climbed Mount Everest or swum the English Channel. Paisley blinked at them, more confused than ever, her mind a jumble of images—some

distilled from dreams and some from all that had happened to her since coming to town.

"I'm taking you as a Sun Dancer," Sky told her.

LannaSue said, "And for training as the new Muache *po'rat*."

Toying with one of his braids, Sky nodded.

"But why?" Paisley asked them. "What did I do?"

"You walked where the Walking Man walked," LannaSue said. "On the sheet where *his* footprints lie, you put *your* feet."

Paisley looked at her mentor and her mentor's wife. She felt gratitude for their approval of her and what she had reputedly accomplished, but also skepticism. All she had for evidence that she had done anything very significant was that odd warmth—which still just perceptibly lingered—on the soles of her bare feet. And, of course, the Skys' word that she had walked exactly atop the Walking Man's or Jesus', footprints. It seemed simultaneously a remarkable achievement and a con.

"Great responsibility comes with this honor," Sky said.

Paisley knew. Already, the responsibility had begun to weigh on her. Taking part in the Sun Dance would keep her from leaving to find her father until July, and her apprenticeship as a shaman would require not only her early return but a long sojourn on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico so that a true Navajo shaman could adopt and train her. Life seemed even more complicated than it had after Mama D'lo's suicide.

"It's wonderful," LannaSue said, chucking her under the chin as if she were a baby. "You'll bring us hope again—hope and pride and power."

Paisley slumped to the sofa. She looked through the picture window. The inside of the fake tepee was pinkly agleam, dawnlight filtering through the hard plastic windows set high in its stucco cone. Was it possible that her dreams had led her to such a pass? Her private, impalpable dreams?

LannaSue hunkered in front of her, gripping her knees with her vise-like hands. For a moment, she simply hunkered

there—Paisley thought that squatting so must be hard for her, she was by no means a petite woman—but abruptly said, “Some folks think that dreams aren’t real, darling. Some folks think they’re nothing but nonsense.”

Sky grunted a derisive assent. The derision in it was for the people his wife was talking about, not for his wife. They were in harmony again. Paisley’s walk had restored them to it.

“But dreams are of God, and dreams cause real things to happen, and you, a dreamer, are greatly blessed, darling.”

“I—” Paisley began.

“Greatly,” LannaSue said. She struggled out of her squat and looked at her husband. “When it’s time,” she said authoritatively, “DeWayne will drive you to school.”

vii.

After school, Paisley mooched a ride from Larry Cuthair on his motorcycle. They didn’t go home immediately, though, because Larry wanted to buy some notebook paper in Ignacio.

They rode into town together, Larry entered the drugstore, and Paisley sat at the curb on his bike waiting for him to come back. While she was waiting, she looked halfway down the block and caught sight of a man staggering out of the laundromat. It was Herbert Barnes, who’d probably spent most of the day in the washateria with a bottle of cheap booze. He careened along, as if about to fall from the sidewalk into the street. Paisley ran to him and grabbed him by the elbow.

“Whirling Goat, are you okay?”

He cocked a bloodshot eye at her. “Course I am,” he croaked, patting the pocket of his coat. “Got me some spirits right here—some dandy Old Crow for a randy old Ute.”

“Chief Sky says I’m accepted for the Sun Dance,” she said. “He and LannaSue believe I’ve been dream-called.”

“You’re pretty?” he said doubtfully.

“Thank you,” Paisley said, equally doubtfully.

“You’re very pretty?”

“I don’t know.”

Barnes shifted his weight from one wobbly leg to the other. A look of obscene slyness came into the one eye that he was managing to keep open. "Your mama D'lo told me you oughta take me home with you," he said. "You know, to watch over you."

"Yeah. In hand talk."

"I . . . s-swuh-swear," Barnes half hissed, half coughed. Up the street, Larry shouted, "Paisley, come on!"

Paisley slipped the five-dollar bill that LannaSue had forced on her that morning into the old fart's coat. He'd only spend it on drink, but there was no way she could reform him in the next ten minutes nor was she about to take him home with her. The money was guilt money, but it was also . . . well, a token of esteem for what he had once been. He believed that he had seen a kar'tajan, and he carried in his pocket a foil-wrapped lucky coin—a talisman, both absurd and poignant, of hope.

"Paisley!" Larry Cuthair yelled again.

She kissed the smelly old sot on the cheek and ran back up the sidewalk to climb aboard Larry's motorcycle.

Unicornuopia

by

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Lawrence Watt-Evans won a Hugo Award in 1988 for his popular story "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers," a story from Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine that also won the IAsfm Reader's Award that year—in fact, Watt-Evans, a frequent contributor, has won the IAsfm Reader's Award on two other occasions, including a win for the year's Best Poem. He has also published widely in markets such as Amazing, Pulphouse, Aboriginal SF, and The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. His many books include the novels The Wizard and the War Machine, Denner's Wreck, The Cyborg and the Sorcerers, With a Single Spell, Shining Steel, and Nightside City, the anthology Newer York, and a collection of his short fiction, Crosstime Traffic. He lives in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., with his wife and two children.

In the very funny story that follows, he shows us that sometimes you can have too much of a good thing. . . .

* * *

The cycle had finally turned; I knew the Change had come at last, and magic was returning to the world.

For a thousand years and more magic had been fading, withering, dying, but now the gates of Faerie were open once more, and magic was spilling out into mundane reality.

This was the opportunity not merely of a lifetime, but of a dozen, a *hundred* lifetimes! The world had been so long without magic that the only wizards left were a few doddering old fools who had hung on past their time, a few crazies who had never realized that their spells didn't work, and a handful of scholars like myself.

All that magic, and no one who knew how to use it!

Oh, soon enough every fortune-teller and New Age loon in New York would catch on, would realize that real power could be had—but in the interim, I was free to shape the substance of reality to suit myself.

It's fortunate for all of you that I'm basically a modest, well-meaning man.

I could, I suppose, have had power over all of you. I could have summoned djinni, erected a palace of ivory and gold, enslaved whole nations, taken half of Hollywood as my harem . . . and, to be honest, I seriously considered it.

Hey, who *wouldn't*?

On the other hand, I could have ended war and hunger and want, I suppose. I thought about that, too.

But it wouldn't last. I didn't want to change human nature—I was afraid I'd wind up the only true thinking person left on a planet of zombies, and I couldn't face that. And without changing human nature, how could I bring peace? Seriously, now, no idealistic propaganda—do you really think any peace would last out the day?

Magic has limits.

And if I had managed it, I wouldn't have been able to maintain it; as I said, in a few weeks, months at the most, wizards would be springing up on every side. I would have a head start, and I thought I could keep an edge, but I didn't think I was going to make it as World Ruler, either benevolent or otherwise.

So I looked at other goals. I had a bit of a fling—I mentioned a harem, didn't I? And I did some traveling, and one thing and another.

But then I decided it was time to settle down. I'd been playing with time a bit, so it was still early, no one else was really aware of the magic yet, though the hints were certainly there. I went back to the university, conjured myself a pleasant little estate on the edge of town, and sat down to think out just what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I wanted to study, of course, and learn; I could do that, with or without magic, though the magic wouldn't hurt any.

And I wanted a home and a family.

I considered that carefully. A home I now had, and infinitely better than my old apartment it was. But a family?

I mentioned the harem, didn't I?

That was fun, but they really wouldn't do as a family. I wanted a companion, a woman I could share my life with—and I knew just the person.

Helen Pettigrew.

She and I were old friends, we'd dated a few times, but she had never taken me very seriously. A medievalist specializing in the arcane arts? An instructor without tenure? *Why should she take me seriously?*

I'd hoped that something might develop between us, but it never really had.

Now, though—now, things were different.

It wasn't hard to make the date. It was surprisingly easy to convince her to come see my new house, too. I was hopeful.

The expression on her face when she first stepped inside was absolutely priceless. She stared up at the chandelier, at the grand staircase, at the carpets and the statuary and all the rest of it, and her mouth hung open as if she were a kid watching her first fireworks.

"Al," she exclaimed, "how can you possibly *afford* it?"

I smiled. "Magic," I said.

"No, seriously," she said. "This place must cost a *fortune!*"

"I *am* serious," I said. "It's magic!"

She closed her mouth to stare at me.

"Really," I told her. "Come on to my workshop, and I'll show you."

I took her hand—I don't know if I'd have been quite so bold a fortnight before, but a few days in a harem can wear down one's inhibitions. At any rate, I took her by the hand and almost dragged her back to my workroom, so eager was I to show her.

"Al," she said, "I know you've always studied magic, and

alchemy, and all that, but that doesn't . . . it isn't *real*, you know. . . ."

"It *wasn't*," I said, "but it is *now!*"

I flung open the door and stood aside, proudly displaying my wizard's chamber.

"What a mess!" she said.

I had forgotten that the place was in rather a state of disarray. "Come on," I said, leading her in.

When we reached the center of the room, she pulled free, set her feet on the floor, folded her arms, and announced, "I'm in. Now, Al, what was it you wanted to show me?"

"Magic," I said. I had been prepared for this; I took my wand from the workbench and made a few passes.

I started simple, conjuring flowers, first from the air, and then growing from the floor. I summoned songbirds, made thunder and lightning, and all the while I was explaining my discovery, how I had found that magic was returning.

She looked very dubious indeed.

"It's not all tricks?" she asked, kicking at an iris.

"No," I assured her, "it's real."

"So just what all can you do?"

"Anything," I said proudly, if a bit inaccurately, "anything at all. I conjured up this house and everything in it!"

She cocked her head to one side and stared at me.

I suppose, had I thought about it, I would have realized just how hard all this would be to accept. I had been studying magic for so long that I had forgotten how completely most people disbelieved in it.

"Anything?" she said.

I nodded.

"You mean if I ask you to conjure something up out of thin air, you can do it? Anything I ask for?"

"Anything," I agreed, "anything at all."

"Even something that doesn't exist?"

I nodded again, but I admit my smile wasn't quite so sincere as it had been a moment before.

Magic has limits.

“Even something that’s *never* existed?” she demanded.

“Probably,” I said, choosing discretion. Magic *does* have limits.

“When I was a little girl,” she said, “I always wanted to see a unicorn. I used to collect them, in fact—stuffed ones, and statuettes, and pictures. If this is *real* magic, can you conjure up a real *unicorn*?”

“Of course!” I said, relieved that she hadn’t come up with something utterly bizarre. “What sort of a unicorn would you like?”

“Just a unicorn. A real one, with its own magic—not just a horse with a horn.”

A real, magical unicorn—that was a trifle harder than I had thought at first, as I had never before conjured anything with its own personal magic. “There are several different versions of the unicorn myth,” I said, stalling, while I tried to think of the best way to tackle the job.

“All right, then,” she said, “you said you could do anything, right? So bring me one of each.”

I had put my foot in it, no doubt about it. “This may take awhile,” I admitted.

She smiled—or perhaps, though I hate to say it of the woman I intended to love, smirked. “Try,” she said.

So I tried.

I had no idea how many variations of the myth might in fact exist, so I wasn’t about to try conjuring each one separately. Instead, after consulting a grimoire or two, I fished out an old umbrella stand. . . .

I should explain, perhaps, that I didn’t actually furnish the entire house piece by piece; instead I worked from photographs, conjuring up duplicates of rooms that caught my fancy. Anything I didn’t care for, once that was done, I threw into the workshop for use as raw material for future spells and transformations.

One such item was a large and ugly wicker umbrella stand

that had originally manifested itself in the Victorian conservatory at the back of the house.

I took this unsightly object and placed it horizontally on my workbench, gathered up a few relics and potions, and cast the enchantment Helen had requested.

Almost immediately, a whinny sounded from the umbrella stand, and the tip of a horn appeared, white and gleaming. A head appeared, then shoulders, forelegs, chest, and, a moment later, a unicorn stood on my workshop floor.

Just how something that size had emerged from the umbrella stand was something of a mystery, as it was very nearly the size of a full-grown horse—but then, it was *magic*.

Despite Helen's insistence that she wanted a real unicorn and would not be satisfied with a mere horned horse, this beast looked to me like just that—a rather small, unusually graceful white horse with a two-foot horn on its head.

Or rather, on *his* head; I had been knocked to the floor by his arrival, and found myself with a view of the creature that left no question of his sex.

The beast was rather confused by his surroundings; his eyes were wide and staring.

Helen, after the initial shock had faded somewhat, saw the animal's expression and started forward to comfort him.

He shied away, whinnying, just as the second unicorn's horn thrust out of the umbrella stand. That golden shaft pricked the first arrival's haunch, whereupon the beast panicked and charged out through the open door.

Helen watched it go, then turned quickly back to the second unicorn as it worked its way out the aperture. Golden hooves clattered out onto the floor of my workshop as the sound of breaking furniture reached us from elsewhere in the house.

The second unicorn was scarcely out of the umbrella stand when a third horn appeared; quickly, Helen stepped forward, once again intending to comfort the new arrival and lead it out of the way.

This beast did not merely shy away; it *screamed*, shrieked

with rage, and thrust at Helen with that gleaming golden horn.

Fortunately, she dodged; I had not yet troubled myself to learn any healing magic.

Of course, when I breathed a sigh of relief at Helen's escape, it occurred to me that unicorn horn was supposed to have healing properties—to be, in fact, a panacea.

In some versions of the story. Others accounted it an aphrodisiac, or a nostrum against poisons, or attributed to it various other properties.

There were rather a *lot* of variations on the unicorn myth, I realized.

And I had just summoned one of *each*. I frowned.

Another aspect struck me.

"Helen," I called, "forgive me for being indelicate—"

I was interrupted by the unicorn's second lunge, and the third unicorn's escape from the umbrella stand. The workshop was becoming rather crowded, with two people and two pseudoequines sharing space with all the customary clutter.

Helen managed to dodge safely, once again; I snatched up a wand, recalled a hasty incantation I had prepared for just such an eventuality, and cast a simple spell.

A trapdoor opened beneath Helen's feet; I had a quick glimpse of her astonishment before she vanished.

The third unicorn, a black beast with a bone-white horn, was eyeing me balefully, while a fourth had worked its head out of the umbrella stand; I repeated the spell.

The drop really *was* rather disconcerting.

We arrived unhurt in the basement, atop a pile of mattresses placed there for that purpose; a good magician *always* has an escape route prepared. Above us I could hear the stamping of several hooves; I winced at the sound of some large glass object shattering.

Helen was lying spread-eagled beside me, staring blankly at the floor-joists overhead. No sign remained of the trapdoors I had temporarily created; the heavy floorboards were unbroken. Light came from a pair of simple wall fixtures to one side.

"As I was saying," I said, "if you'll forgive me for being indelicate, unicorns—for the most part, anyway—are said to have a very decided preference for virgins. From the reactions of those two, my dear, I suspect you don't qualify."

She cast me a look I would prefer never to see again.

"Neither do I," I added hastily.

She scarcely seemed mollified by this, but at any rate she turned her attention back to the floor above us. Something large and heavy fell; a unicorn neighed loudly.

"I," she said, "am convinced. Either you've really learned magic, or we've both gone nuts."

She blinked, then added, "Or I'm dreaming."

I assured her that this was no dream.

"All right," she said, sitting up. "So I'm convinced. You can turn it off now, and send all those unicorns away."

I chewed on my lower lip as I considered the situation.

"Not from down here, I can't," I told her. "Come on."

Together we found the stairs and made our way up to the kitchen, where we discovered a unicorn eating the curtains. The creature shied and ran at the sight of us.

"Was that one we'd seen before?" Helen asked.

I shrugged. "Who knows?" I asked. "As far as I'm concerned, if you've seen one unicorn, you've seen them all."

She hit me on the arm; I suppose it was meant in fun, but it hurt, and I didn't reply.

The dining hall now held half a dozen of the mythological creatures, five white and one black; at our entrance, four of them fled, one seemed indifferent, and the last lowered its horn and prepared to charge. I waved my wand in an attempt to turn the creature to stone, and, as we dove for shelter behind the armoire, made a discovery.

Ordinary spells don't work on unicorns.

I suppose, having worked out the principles of magic long since, I should have *known* this, but the correct application of theory to fact is not always intuitively obvious.

I saw immediately what the situation was, though, as that

nasty little beast prodded at us with its horn, forcing us farther back into the corner; the unicorn was itself sufficiently magical to be immune to other magicks.

That was, to say the least, distressing.

The unicorn thrust forward again, the armoire swayed dangerously, and I used my wand again.

We missed the mattresses this time, or at any rate I did; Helen rolled down the side of the stack before landing on top of me. I knew I had just raised a fine crop of bruises, but thought no bones were broken.

We made our way up the stairs once again, moving far more cautiously this time; unicorns scattered before us, and fortunately we encountered no belligerent variants this time as we made our way back through the house.

I think we both marveled at the variety we saw. True, most were basically white horses adorned with horns—or technically, in most cases, antlers, since the supercranial shaft was usually bone—but there were some rather astonishing others. Those that stuck to the equine form came in every color of the rainbow and a good many hues not commonly seen, in spectra or elsewhere; sizes ranged from Clydesdale-scale down to miniatures I could have put in my hip pocket. Some had wings—feathered, leathery, or even dragonfly-fashion. And there were creatures that were scarcely equine at all—many, in fact, looked more like rhinoceri.

Or is it rhinoceroses?

I had never taken much interest in the taxonomy of monocerates, and this all came as a shock to me.

Perhaps the biggest surprise came in the foyer, where two naked girls sat upon the grand staircase, chatting cheerily.

For a moment I thought perhaps some remnant of my harem had been overlooked, but neither of these two was at all familiar in detail, though one beautiful woman may often look much like another at first glance.

These two were certainly beautiful. One was a golden blonde, while the other had hair of gleaming white that spilled

down the length of her seated body and pooled on the steps and floor around her. Both were young and fresh and perfect.

They looked up at the sound of our entrance.

"Hello," Helen called, "who are you?"

They looked at one another, then stood, and I noticed that the white-haired one had a horse's tail.

"We don't know," the other one said. "Not really, anyway."

"You're unicorns, aren't you?" I asked. "You came out of the . . . the thing in there." I gestured toward my workshop.

The one with the tail nodded. The other, however, hesitated.

"I think," she said slowly, "that I came out of a novel, originally. But I got *here* through the cornucopia, yes."

"A novel?" Once again, a fact I should have seen sooner struck me.

Had I asked for one of each variety of, say, ape, I'd have found myself with a representative of each species of gorilla, orangutan, chimpanzee, and so forth—perhaps each subspecies, as well. I would not, however, have summoned any of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *mangani*, because those never existed.

Unicorns, however, were *entirely* fictional, and the spell would make no distinction between fictional sources. To the powers of magic, a medieval bestiary is no more real than the newest and most derivative novel—or toy, or even a scrawled manuscript by some horse-besotted schoolgirl.

Thus, I had inadvertantly summoned *every* variety of unicorn ever imagined, from the travel reports of medieval scholars to the saccharine designs of the My Little Pony people.

The numbers would be staggering.

And what was worse, I now realized that I had no idea how to stop the spell before it was complete. Leaving Helen talking to the two girl-unicorns, I ran for my workshop.

Unicorns were spilling out the door at a gallop, little winged ones fluttering overhead; my parlor furniture had all been trampled into kindling, and the broad bay window at the front

of the house was smashed out completely, leaving a gaping hole through which unicorns poured in a shining stampede.

I tried fruitlessly to fight the current for a moment, but when half a dozen horns converged on my chest, I thought better of the notion.

When I made my way back up from the cellars this time, I found Helen sitting on the stairs, talking earnestly with the two unicorns; a third, equine in shape but speaking in clear, bell-like tones, stood nearby, taking part in the conversation.

The steady stream of unicorns charging through the parlor continued; I could see that the fine hardwood floor had long since lost its finish, and the sharp little hooves were now digging up splinters.

What would happen, I wondered, when the floor gave out entirely?

"Helen," I said, "my dear young visitors—I think it might be a good idea to leave."

The four of them looked at me questioningly. I pointed at the flying splinters. The parlor floor was vibrating visibly, and starting to sag.

"I believe the gentleman speaks wisely," the equiform unicorn said gravely.

The four of us exited through the front door, while the main body of unicorns continued to make use of the ruined bay window.

We were standing on the front lawn, watching, when the first police car pulled up.

"Al," Helen said, as the officers emerged from their vehicle, "*do something.*"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Send them away."

I blinked at her in surprise.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why? Because they're going to arrest us for turning loose all these unicorns!"

"Oh, nonsense," I said, as the police marched grimly across

the lawn toward us. "They can't possibly charge us with *that*."

They didn't, of course; they arrested us for indecent exposure, creating a public nuisance, and resisting arrest.

We had assigned the humaniform unicorns—the two arrested with us, that is; there were others—the names Cornelia and Una. It was Cornelia, the tailless blonde, who assumed equine form and exploded the roof off the squad car, freeing us.

After that, we fled into the park and watched from a safe distance as chaos spread.

It was shortly before dawn when my lovely house began to collapse in upon itself; by noon, nothing remained but ruins, and *still* unicorns were clambering from the wreckage.

By now, much of the town was awash in unicorns. A few had been captured and were being ridden by grinning young women; others roamed the streets as their fancy took them. The occasional wail of an ambulance siren implied that not everyone had avoided all those very sharp horns.

The police were far too busy to worry about *us*.

Helen kept asking me to do something, making suggestions, and I kept stalling.

"Why can't you stop that spell?" she demanded.

I sighed. "You have a computer, don't you, Helen?"

She conceded that she did.

"Have you ever had a program start running that you didn't want to finish, but it wouldn't accept a break command?"

"A couple of times," she admitted.

"Well, this is like that. There's no way to stop the spell without doing the equivalent of rebooting the whole system, and I can't do that with just this one little wand." I tried to smile. "Don't worry," I told her, "it can't go on forever."

She was not happy. After some thought, she began asking why I didn't do anything about all the *other* problems—why I didn't rebuild my house, why I didn't capture the unicorns, and so on.

I was reluctant to tell anyone just why, but finally, I admitted the truth.

“You remember,” I said, “that I told you magic was loose in the world once more?”

Helen nodded.

“And that I could use it to do anything I wanted?”

She nodded again.

“That was because,” I said, “nobody *else* was using it. But now they are.” I waved an arm at a small herd of unicorns grazing nearby. “*They* are. Unicorns are *magical*. And they’re *using up* all the magic. There isn’t enough left for me to do anything major. Not with just the wand.”

“Oh,” she said.

Eventually, we decided there was no point in watching any more; we made our way back to Helen’s apartment, put some clothes on Una and Cornelia, ate a hurried meal, and settled down to watch the news.

Thousands of unicorns were not something that could be ignored, and, sure enough, the story was reported, after a fashion. Theories ranged from alien invasions to Hollywood hoaxes; there was surprisingly little mention of the possibility of real, genuine, old-fashioned magic.

Three days later, finally, the spell completed its task, and the unicorns stopped appearing.

By then, the free-floating magical energy available had been reduced to nothing; I could not conjure so much as a spark with my wand. Those damned unicorns had absorbed every single trace of it!

I was not happy about this, not happy at all. All my dreams of glory were reduced to ash.

Still, I had foreseen this when I first realized that my spells did not work on unicorns. I had spent the intervening time in study and careful consideration of the situation. My own library, my own tools, were buried in the rubble of my mansion, trampled into uselessness by thousands of hooves, but the university library had a few useful texts, and, of course, I remembered all the basic principles involved.

It seemed to me that there would be a way to resolve this,

and restore my ability to work magic, while eliminating the plague of unicorns I had unleashed, the hundreds of beasts that were devouring every lawn and garden in town. If the unicorns were returned to the nothingness whence they came, the magical energy they had absorbed would be freed.

I merely needed the right spell, and, not long after the appearances ceased, I came upon the way of it. A certain word, a certain gesture, and then tap the unicorn with the wand . . .

Ah, *there* was the rub! Tap the unicorn with the wand. But the beasts had scattered to the four winds, flying or galloping in all directions.

I could, I suppose, have hired unicorn hunters, though there might be certain difficulties in establishing the qualifications of any volunteers. I could have waited while they traveled the world at my expense, picking off the silly creatures one by one. I would thus have gradually regained my arts—but what good would it have done?

After all, with a plague of unicorns on the evening news, even the dimmest would-be wizard must realize that magic was no longer quite as impossible as it used to be. I'd be in competition with half a hundred crazies and charlatans for every speck or spark of power.

And after the initial confusion, the creatures were giving no one any trouble; they had scattered quite thoroughly. And almost all the stories agreed that unicorns are shy, retiring beasts, rarely glimpsed by humans. Zapping them into non-existence would scarcely be doing humanity any great favor; in fact, were I to carry out such a pogrom, I knew I would be cordially hated by entire generations of young girls.

So there was no great good to be served; the only benefit would be a partial restoration of my wizardry.

Which, I realized, I didn't need.

After all, I had already decided that I didn't particularly crave power or recognition. I had my studies, and, shortly thereafter, I had my family, and that was all I really wanted.

So I paid all those vanished unicorns no further heed. And I am, I am pleased to say, quite happy.

Poor Helen, however, is *not*. She took it into her head to study unicorns, and ignored me when I pointed out that of all the herd that had emerged from my umbrella stand, no two were alike. Nor is she qualified to capture the poor beasts, so everything must be done by proxy.

I think it's a very good thing I had the sense to let Helen go, and to marry Cornelia instead.

The Black Horn

by
Jack Dann

Jack Dann is one of the most respected writer/editors of his generation. His books include the critically acclaimed novel The Man Who Melted, as well as Junction, Starhiker, and a collection of his short fiction, Timetipping. As an anthologist, he edited the well-known anthology Wandering Stars; his other anthologies include More Wandering Stars, Immortal, Faster Than Light (co-edited with George Zebrowski), and several fantasy anthologies co-edited with Gardner Dozois. His most recent book is the acclaimed Vietnam War anthology In the Field of Fire, co-edited with Jeanne Van Buren Dann. Upcoming are two new novels, High Steel (written with Jack C. Haldeman II), and The Path of Remembrance.

Here he tells a moving story about a man who learns the painful truth of that old saying, you can run, but you can't hide. . . .

* * *

From his oceanfront room on the tenth floor of the Hotel Casablanca, Judge Stephen Steiner saw the unicorn standing in the shallow end of the swimming pool below. It was almost four in the morning, and most of the Christmas tree lights of the gambling ships three miles out on the ocean had been turned off. The expanse of beach ahead was dark and ominous, except for a single light that burned to the left on the beach that belonged to the Fontainebleau Hotel. But the Casablanca pool was illuminated by green and red underwater lights, giving the breeze-blown surface of the water an almost luminary quality, as of melted, rippling gems.

The unicorn looked grayish in the light, although surely it was white, and large, at least eighteen hands high from poll to

hoof. Its mane was dark and shaggy; and at first Steiner thought it was a horse. But how strange to see a horse running loose on the beach at such an hour. There must be *laws* prohibiting animals from running loose, he thought. Miami Beach is a densely populated area . . . surely there must be a law. Perhaps this horse had run away from its owner . . . perhaps it was part of a road show . . . a circus.

My God, Steiner mused, how long has it been since *I've* been to a circus . . . ?

It was then that Steiner noticed that the horse had a horn protruding from its wide forehead. He hadn't noticed it before because the horn was black . . . and also perhaps he didn't see it because he'd *assumed* he was looking at a horse, and horses didn't have horns. But now Steiner could see that horn. It looked like black marble. It was long and fluted and would make a vicious weapon. The horn reflected the green and red light as if the light were oil flowing along its conchlike spirals.

The unicorn dipped its horn into the pool, as if to neutralize some chlorine poison in the water, and then drank.

Steiner reached for his glasses, although he didn't really need them for distance. It couldn't be, he thought, yet there it was. Perhaps it was some advertising gimmick, but Steiner discounted that thought immediately. No one would let an animal run loose at this time of night, horned or otherwise.

Then the animal raised its head, as if sensing that it was being watched. It blew air through its muzzle and looked up at the building, slowly turning its head, scanning the windows on one story, then going on to another, until finally it seemed that the unicorn had found him. It seemed to be looking right *at* him, and Steiner felt transfixed, even through the thick, protective pane of glass. The unicorn knew he was there.

It was looking at *him*.

Steiner felt drawn to it . . . it was as beautiful as a childhood fantasy. Yet there was something dangerous and even sinister about it; its very being challenged Steiner's reason, and Steiner himself. Steiner felt an almost uncontrol-

lable urge to smash through the window and jump . . . as if by some sort of television magic he'd be able to leap through the glass and land on the unicorn's back.

He found himself pressing dangerously hard against the plate-glass window as he stared down at the animal below that was still as stone, watching him.

Suddenly he *wanted* to jump.

"No!" he cried, feeling sudden, reeling terror, for he knew in that instant that if he could have jumped, he would have. It was as if he had glimpsed his own death deep in the eyes of that beautiful horned stallion staring up at him from the pool.

He turned away from the window and closed his eyes tightly, so tightly that everything turned purple for an instant. Then, slowly, he turned back toward the window. There was nothing there, just the metal lounge chairs situated around the illuminated pool, and the dark beach and ocean stretching into flat darkness. He looked to his left, toward the dimly lit Fontainebleau beach, but there was no sign of anything there, either.

Steiner closed the curtains and sat down on his uncomfortable double bed. His hands were shaking. He reached for a bottle of kosher brandy on the nightstand beside him and took a shot right out of the tinted green bottle. The stuff tasted like hell; it was coarse, not made as well as in the past—or perhaps he just remembered the past as being better in all respects.

He suddenly thought of his wife, Grace, who had died six months ago, God rest her sweet soul. Although he had been separated from her for over ten years, she had waited . . . waited for him to come back home. But he just couldn't have gone back. Grace would have been a constant reminder of everything Steiner feared. He needed younger women to feed his ego . . . to be in awe of him. They all probably thought he had money, but they were his only barricade against the fustiness of old age . . . against death itself. They kept him feeling young.

He felt the old guilt weighing down upon him. Grace, I'm sorry. . . .

The air-conditioner was on; it suddenly felt cold in the room. The graft on Steiner's back, where he had had a melanoma removed, hurt him tonight.

He'd inquire tomorrow at the desk whether there were any reports of a horse running loose. It *was* a horse, Steiner told himself, as he laid his head against the lumpy, overlarge pillow.

But he couldn't fall back to sleep.

After morning prayers in the makeshift synagogue on the fourth floor of the hotel, Steiner met his three sisters for breakfast. He escorted them to their table on the eastern side of the grand old dining room, which overlooked the beach and the perfectly blue ocean beyond. The table was prepared, and their waitress was waiting to attend them. Behind each setting was a glass of borsch mixed with sour cream. An unopened box of egg matzoth stood in the center of the table, as prominent as a bouquet of freshly cut flowers.

Steiner seated each of his sisters and then himself.

It was Passover, and Cele and Kate and Mollie had decided it would be better for Steiner if they all spent the holiday together at a hotel. Steiner could not disappoint them . . . somehow he would get through it. Although Cele was quite well off, she lived with her two sisters in Flatbush. Those two counted their pennies as if they were all being chased by the specter of relief. But Cele would spend her money for a good cause, especially if it involved family and religion . . . so this was a real vacation for them. And who knew how long Steiner might have them, anyway? Cele was the youngest, and she was seventy-seven.

Steiner was five years her junior. . . .

"It's another *beautiful* day," Cele said brightly, placing her green linen napkin on her lap. She wore a crisp red flowerpot hat that matched her square-shouldered jacket with patch pockets. It was as if she had never left the 1940s. Her dyed blonde hair was combed down smoothly, and tightly rolled up at the ends, and she was growing a bit thin on top. She had a

long, oval face with great blue eyes, the same lively eyes that used to tease Steiner sixty years ago. Cele was going to make the best of her vacation in the sun. "Don't you think so, Stephen? Isn't it a beautiful day? Of course, you *live* in Florida, so sunshine is probably old hat to you."

Steiner managed a smile, but he was in a disagreeable mood. Two hours of sitting and standing and praying with a congregation of evil-smelling, doddering old men had sapped him of all *joie de vivre* . . . had soured his morning. Although Steiner had always prided himself on being a religious man—he donned his prayer shawl and phylacteries every morning to pray toward the east, and it was to just that habit that he attributed what wealth and fame and good fortune he had acquired over the years—he couldn't *stand* being around old people. It was as simple as that. Steiner glanced uncomfortably around the room. Just sitting in the dining room made his flesh crawl—this entire hotel seemed to be filled with the most Orthodox and the oldest Jews. Association could kill you . . . *would* kill you. Make your flesh shrivel right up. That was another reason why Steiner had never gone back home; even before his beloved Grace had died, she smelled of the grave. Her skin had turned wrinkled and dry, and she exuded an odor that could not be concealed by even the most expensive perfume.

He turned to Mariana, his waitress, who was ready to take their orders. Her very presence lightened his mood. She was Brazilian, dark, strong-featured, with full lips and tilted green eyes; her wiry black hair, though disguised in a bun, was long. She couldn't be more than twenty-one, the epitome of youth itself. Steiner flashed her a smile and ordered breakfast for his sisters and himself. He felt as if he were swelling up, regaining everything he had lost upstairs in the synagogue; and he heard a pompous affectation come into his voice, which was rather loud and bombastic, but he couldn't help himself . . . and anyway, a fine, articulated sentence had *always* impressed the young ladies.

When Mariana left and the busboy was out of earshot, Steiner's sister Kate said, "You know, Stephen, you make a fool out of yourself talking like that to the waitress." Kate was two years older than Cele, and she seemed to bear a grudge against any woman under sixty . . . or so Steiner thought. Kate had once been beautiful, high-breasted and thin-waisted, but now she had become puffy. She dyed her hair orange-red. Steiner nicknamed her "the Flying Nun" because she wrapped paper around her hair every night so it wouldn't muss.

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, ma'am," Steiner said stiffly, still using the artificial inflection he used with people he wished to impress. Cele gave Kate a nasty look and shook her head. Mollie, who was the oldest, didn't seem to be listening; instead she began talking about her children, who were supposed to visit her the week after Passover.

"Well, he *does* make a fool out of himself," Kate said to Cele.

"Stephen's right," Cele said, speaking sharply but in a low voice. "Mind your business."

"We can't even talk to each other around here," Kate said petulantly, as she smoothed out the napkin on her lap. Kate was overdressed in a silk gauze summer dress trimmed with black; she also wore a small pillbox hat with a veil.

"Why are you wearing a veil this morning?" Steiner asked. "You look like you're still in mourning."

"Well, I am . . . and you should be, too!" Then she caught herself. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I'm just not myself this morning—"

"On the contrary, you're very much yourself this morning," Mollie interrupted. Mollie wore a tan suit and blouse. Her hair was gray and frizzy, and she had a crinkly, Irish-looking face.

"Mollie, shut up," Kate said, and then continued talking to Steiner. "I didn't sleep well last night at all. I have a canker sore or something in my mouth, and my whole jaw's killing me. I don't even think I'll be able to eat."

"Oh, she'll eat," Mollie said sarcastically.

“And for your information”—Kate was still talking to Steiner—“I’m wearing a hat because this is a religious hotel, and religious women are supposed to wear hats. I can’t help it if the hat has a veil.”

“She’s right, Stephen,” Cele said. “Look around, all the women are wearing hats.” She self-consciously adjusted her own hat.

“Of course I’m right,” Kate said softly, indicating by her tone of voice that she was willing to drop the argument.

Mariana brought the food, purposely serving Stephen first, which stimulated a *tssing* from Kate. Steiner teased the waitress by telling her how beautiful she looked, and she blushed and backed away.

Cele changed the subject by saying, “I think we should all sit by the pool when we’re finished with breakfast. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m going upstairs,” Kate said. “I’m not feeling at all well.”

“Kitty, you can take me upstairs with you,” Mollie said. She was slightly infirm, and had trouble navigating stairs by herself.

“I think we should *all* spend at least a few minutes together in the sun,” Cele said firmly—although she was the youngest, except for Steiner, *she* made all the decisions for her sisters.

“He shouldn’t be out in the sun with his cancer,” Kate said petulantly.

“You see, there she goes again,” Mollie said to Cele. “Always starting *something*.”

Cele flashed Kate a nasty look, and Mollie seemed pleased with herself. Then Cele said in a calm, quiet voice, “The morning sun is not dangerous, I’m told . . . it’s the afternoon sun that has the dangerous rays.”

Steiner nodded without paying much attention, but he always sided with Cele. She had enough of a cross to bear, living with and supporting her two sisters. He looked up and smiled generously at Mariana as she cleared the table. He could

see the tiny dark hairs bristling on her arms, and could smell her slightly pungent, musk-like odor. She returned his smile, her cheeks dimpling, and for an instant their eyes met. Steiner felt his heart pump faster . . . felt his glands open up. He imagined making love to her . . . imagined her naked and holding him like a baby in a dimly lit bedroom. She would be beautiful naked, he thought, daydreaming about how she would look with her hair undone and hanging loose down her bare back. She would look like a wild animal. . . .

She's a perfect madonna, he thought . . . but then he had thought that about every waitress and shop clerk and hatcheck and typist he had ever dated. Perhaps later, when his sisters went upstairs for their afternoon nap, he'd work up the courage to go into the hotel kitchen and ask her out. He could buy her a tall, lemony drink by the pool, talk to her in whispers, caress her, and then take her back to her apartment. . . .

That thought alone gave him the strength to take his sisters outside to the pool, where they could gab and complain and gossip in Yiddish with their newfound octogenarian friends and neighbors.

Steiner did not go upstairs with his sisters, but made the excuse that he wished to take some more sun and maybe a walk before going inside. Cele seemed a bit agitated that he would get sick from *too* much sun, but he promised to sit in the shade near the cabanas. Steiner felt nothing but claustrophobic in the presence of his sisters.

"I wouldn't mind taking a walk myself," Cele said, standing over him and looking forlornly out to sea. "Come, we'll take a walk now down Collins Avenue, and then you can sit in the sun if you really want to."

"Well, *I* have to go upstairs," Mollie said. "My feet are *killing* me."

Kate, who had wanted to go upstairs earlier, now said, "I wouldn't mind taking a walk and doing some window-

shopping. It might be good for me, make me forget how much my jaw is aching me.”

“Well, I can take Mollie upstairs and—” Cele said, but she gave up in mid-sentence, accepting her responsibility to her sisters. Steiner could see the trapped frustration in her face. “All right,” she said resignedly, “I suppose we should just go upstairs. . . .”

“I’ll take a walk with you, Stephen,” Kate said.

“Either we’ll *all* take a walk or we’ll all go upstairs together,” Cele said, her hands gently shaking, whether from age or anger, Steiner didn’t know. But he felt guilty, for he had sacrificed Cele to them just so he could be alone . . . Cele deserved better than that. The poor old girl. . . .

But Steiner was on his feet as soon as his sisters disappeared into the side entrance of the hotel. It’s too hot out here anyway, he told himself, sweating under his polyester powder-blue shirt and matching slacks. He wore a white jacket and white loafers. As he passed, the gossips and wrinkled sunbathers nodded to him and said, “Good morning, Judge.”

Steiner hadn’t been a judge for thirty years, and even then had served only one term. But Steiner liked the title—it opened “doors” for him. Everyone called him “Judge” at the very exclusive Boca Club, where he was a member. In fact, he had had the heraldic blue and white and gold emblem sewed on all his sports jackets. Of course, he didn’t attend very many functions there, as they were very expensive. But he had been known to take his dates to the club for swanky luncheons. Perhaps Mariana would visit him at his home in Fort Lauderdale, and he could take her, too. . . .

He was immersed in that daydream as he stepped through the coffee shop beside the pool area and into the large kitchen behind. There were busboys and waiters and waitresses bustling around, carrying large aluminum trays in and out of the two wide swinging doors that led into the dining area. Cooks and helpers were working at sinks and long wooden tables.

Squashed prunes and apples and matzo brie and puddles of soup and juice and coffee discolored the white tile floor.

Mariana stepped backward into the kitchen, pushing the door open. She was holding a tray filled with glasses and dishes and silverware.

“Mariana!” Steiner said, overly loud. She turned to him, looking surprised, but no one else seemed to notice his presence . . . or care.

She put the heavy tray down on one of the tables and said, “Yes, Judge? Is something wrong?” She tilted her head in a most attractive manner, Steiner thought.

“Yes . . . I just thought—” and suddenly the words left him. He felt awkward and foolish . . . and suddenly paranoid that she would think he was a “dirty old man.” But that was plain stupid! he told himself. She doesn’t even know why I’m here yet. “Do you have any plans for this evening?” he blurted out. But even as he spoke, he realized that he had lost the advantage entirely . . . that now *she* was in the position of power.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Judge,” she said, looking uncomfortable. “I’ll be taking care of your table tonight, is that—”

“No . . . I mean, would you care to have a drink with me *after* dinner, after you’ve finished working. Perhaps we could meet at the Fontainebleau . . . by the bar. It’s very nice there.”

“Well . . . I don’t know.” She was actually blushing. *That’s a good sign.*

“I’ll be waiting for you at poolside at ten o’clock,” Steiner said with authority, feeling much better about the venture now.

“I’m really not supposed to be going out with the guests,” she said coyly, her eyes averted from his. “I could get fired, and—”

“Well . . . *I’ll* be waiting for you at”—Steiner looked at his thin gold watch for effect—“ten o’clock sharp.”

“I’ve really got to get back to work, please. . . .”

"Ten o'clock," Steiner said smartly, using his best judicial tone. Mariana nodded once, shyly, her eyes still averted from his.

Steiner turned heel back to the pool area.

Once outside, back in the sun, he felt relieved and full of nervous energy. He felt like a schoolboy dreaming about the girl he was going to take to the senior prom. He couldn't stand the thought of going back to his room or sitting in the hotel lobby, which smelled of old age and was filled with urns of fake flowers and plants. He couldn't bear to look at another old man or woman. He couldn't sleep, and he had just eaten.

He just wanted to be alone and daydream. . . .

He found himself walking along the sand toward the ocean. Perhaps he'd walk along the beach to the Fontainebleau, have a drink, and then return down Collins Avenue, thus making a circle. But once he reached the Fontainebleau and saw the pool and bar to his left, he just didn't feel like stopping. He was too filled with energy to stop and sit, so he continued walking, enjoying the brisk breeze coming off the ocean, the healthy smell of the salt air, and the pounding of the surf just inches away from his sand-encrusted white loafers. He dreamed about Mariana . . . and imagined himself as a young man courting her, a young man with thick black hair and a strong, handsome face. A strong man eyed by every bikini-clad woman he passed. . . .

But Steiner was beginning to swelter in the afternoon heat. The sun was unbearable, and Steiner had misjudged how much of it he could take. The ocean breeze, which was at first cool and refreshing, now felt hot and muggy. He turned around and started back to his hotel.

Thank goodness he didn't have far to go.

Steiner wouldn't have seen the unicorn if it hadn't made a snorting noise as he passed. It stood behind a dozen one-man red and white sailboats leaning against an old pier that was in disrepair. It stood in the shadows, as if to cool off.

The unicorn carefully stepped out from the boats and gazed at Steiner with its ocean-blue eyes. It pawed the sand with its heel, sending ribbons of sand into the air to be carried away on the wind.

Steiner stopped, transfixed again by the unicorn. He broke out in a sweat, but it was cold sweat, and from fear rather than heat. "What do you *want*?" he asked, feeling foolish talking to an animal like this, but he had to break the spell with *something* . . . a word, the sound of his voice. Suddenly Steiner was aware of a myriad of tiny details: the soft pinkness of the unicorn's muzzle; the white whiskers growing out of its chin and nostrils; its cloven hooves worn from the sand; and the strange, ridged black horn that looked as if it had somehow erupted from the animal's forehead. In fact, it looked glassy, as if it might have indeed been formed from lava. In the bright sunlight it took on a reddish sheen, which seemed to deepen at the tip. Steiner was acutely aware of the splashing and gurgling of the surf, but he couldn't make out any *human* sounds, except for his own quickened breathing. This was an empty stretch of beach. Steiner was shaking, and he felt weak. The animal was so *large*. It looked like a huge Morgan, with its muscular back, strong neck, and large head. It stood square, its legs right under its shoulders. The unicorn was overpowering . . . yet it *seemed* to be gentle. It didn't move, but seemed to be made of porcelain and coal. It just stared at Steiner; and it was as if the unicorn's eyes were blue magnets pulling him closer . . . and Steiner imagined how it would be to ride this great beast, to feel its bulk beneath him and the wind whistling in his ears and the salt spray biting his chest and face. He could ride it along the beach . . . along the ocean.

The unicorn took a cautious step toward Steiner.

Suddenly Steiner remembered last night and broke the reverie. He stepped back in terror, almost falling over his own feet. The unicorn took on an entirely different guise as Steiner remembered how he had wanted to jump from his window at the mere sight of the beast. The unicorn—as if reading

Steiner's thoughts—whinnied and pawed the sand. Then, ready to charge, it lowered its head.

The sharp black horn was pointed directly at Steiner.

And Steiner saw the unicorn for what it was: death. Death in its simplest, most beautiful guise. "No," he whispered to the beast. "No!" he screamed, hating it. He turned from the unicorn and ran, his narrow-toed Italian white loafers heeling into the soft sand. His eyes burned and seemed to go out of focus as he ran. His heart felt as if it were pounding in his throat. He could *hear* the unicorn behind him. He could *feel* the unicorn's horn at his back, ready to slash him wide open.

But Steiner wasn't ready for death. He wanted to live. He *had* to live. If death was going to take him, it would have to take him on the run. Steiner wasn't going to make it easy. He wasn't going to slip into any eternal slumber with a toothless good-bye. Not Steiner.

He ran as hard as he could, the blood pulsing in his chest and head, making him dizzy, until he tripped over a tangled, polished piece of driftwood and fell headlong into the sand. He turned backward, resolved to face death with his eyes open.

But the unicorn was gone . . . disappeared. There were no tracks, except for his own, no outline of equine heel or bar or furrow in the soft white sand. Steiner tried to catch his breath. He felt at once relieved and anxious. He *had* been chased by something. His breathing began to return to normal, but he had a flash of searing pain in his abdomen, and his arms and shoulders felt heavy and began to ache. He broke out into a cold sweat. He felt clammy and chilled and nauseated. It was the fall, he told himself . . . and the exercise. He hadn't run like that in forty years.

But one thing was certain: he *had* seen a horse with a horn. It might have been some sort of publicity trick, but it was no hallucination. Steiner wasn't the type to hallucinate. He might have had some crazy thoughts when the beast was chasing him, but then, who wouldn't? He felt foolish, running as he had. The damned thing obviously hadn't been chasing him, or he would

have seen it when he had turned around. Actually, if it had *really* been chasing him it would have run him through with that horn in no time flat.

Still . . . it *had* to be some sort of publicity stunt, Steiner thought.

Steiner told his sisters he wasn't feeling very well and stayed in his room. He forced himself to take a swallow of brandy and tried to sleep, but he felt feverish. Frenzied, unconnected thoughts flashed through his mind. He tucked himself under the covers. The pain seemed to lift.

I'm *not* crazy, he thought, raising himself up on his right elbow to gaze below. The ocean was turquoise green in the shallows and deep cyan blue farther out. The sun was bright and warm and reassuring. Although no one was swimming in the pool, there were over thirty people sitting in deck chairs and chatting while others walked about. Everything was perfectly all right, exactly as it should be, as ordinary as bread.

Then Steiner saw the unicorn lift its head out of the ocean.

At first, he thought he was seeing a wave, a distant whitecap, but there was no mistaking that black fluted horn. There were those blue eyes and thick white mane and muscular neck. The unicorn rose out of the water, revealing itself little by little as it moved into the shallows, until the water was only up to its knees and it walked forward, kicking, lifting its long legs out of the water, onto the beach. The unicorn was dripping wet and as big as life. It stood on the edge of the empty beach and looked up at Steiner, as foamy water purred past its hooves. It *knew* Steiner was there. It had come for him again.

"Go away!" he shouted, as he shakily got up from his bed. As the pain began to radiate into his shoulders and arms and chest, he pulled the curtains closed.

But he knew the unicorn was still out there, waiting. . . .

Steiner felt much better by dinnertime. He had rested, and the aching in his arms and chest was gone, as were the sweats and

fever. Steiner was prone to night sweats, anyway. He was apprehensive about opening the heavy curtains, so he left well enough alone . . . he had had enough excitement for one day.

He dressed informally in tan shirt and slacks and went downstairs to pick up a newspaper in the lobby. He leafed through it outside the shabby hotel shop that sold magazines, newspapers, aspirin, suntan lotions, cheap trinkets, and sunglasses. He was disappointed—there wasn't even a mention of a circus, or a carnival, or a runaway horse . . . or a unicorn. Well, *someone* must have seen the damn thing, too, he thought. Surely, it will be in *tomorrow's* papers.

He put the newspaper back on the rack and met his sisters for dinner in the dining room. He felt a bit hesitant about seeing Mariana before their forthcoming tryst at the Fontainebleau, but it couldn't be avoided. If he *didn't* show up for dinner, she might think he was ill or not interested, and she might not meet him later. Still, he felt uncomfortable. But when she took his order, and Steiner smiled at her, she returned it. She even blushed. That made Steiner feel very good indeed.

Everything else went along as it had for the past five days. Cele and Kate and Mollie discussed the menu and chose each dish with care, but when the food actually came, each one complained bitterly that she should have ordered a different entrée. Kate complained about her sore mouth. Mollie talked about her children and "the grandkids" and told Cele that the veal was the wrong color.

After dinner and a wink at Mariana, Steiner accompanied his sisters to the obligatory 7:30 show in the ballroom, where the hotel rabbi—a slick stand-up comedian, who had made records and played the Catskills every year—was performing. Steiner didn't listen to the stale jokes. He kept glancing at his watch. After the show, he kissed his sisters good night and went to his room to change into fresh, more formal clothes for his date with Mariana. He felt a bit weak and dizzy, but he was determined to go out tonight, as if he had to prove something to himself.

As he entered the room, he examined himself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. He had a shock of white hair, which was yellowed a bit in the back; deep brown eyes; a thin nose; and a full, sensual mouth—it was a strong, angular face that had loosened with age. Although the face-lift two years ago had helped, lines still mapped his face. But he certainly didn't look his age.

He began to feel anxious here in the room, but he made a point of not going near the closed curtains. He could hear the faint murmur of the surf; it was like gentle white noise. He wondered if the unicorn was still out there as he changed into a smart-looking chocolate brown suit with a matching tie and a white-on-white shirt. His brogues were a bit scuffed; he reminded himself to buy polish. He concentrated on small details.

But he couldn't leave the room this time without finding out if the unicorn was still out there. He pulled open the drapes and looked out the salt-stained window . . . he looked by the pool and on the beaches . . . he looked at the white-crested black waves of the ocean.

The pool area and the beach were empty.

There was not a unicorn to be seen.

Steiner took a small table in front of the enclosed driftwood bar poolside at the Fontainebleau. The pool was huge and kidney-shaped, and Steiner enjoyed a tall whiskey and soda while he watched floodlit water cascading down a stonework waterfall into the pool. Palms were spaced around the pool area, and green and blue lights gave the place a festive, romantic atmosphere. To his left were the glass doors that led into the Fontainebleau shopping center; to his right, across an expanse of lawn, was the new ten-story addition to the hotel. Cozy paths wound their way between palmettos and hibiscuses, and the ocean was a dull, dark pounding behind him. Guests in evening clothes, in jeans and tubetops, in bathing suits and clogs, in gaudy slacks and Hawaiian shirts promenaded past him. Two

callow-looking, teenaged lovers walked by, hand in hand, followed by a small group of executives and their wives. The whole world seemed to be carved into *twos*. But Steiner felt strong with excitement and anticipation; he felt dashing, good-looking, if just a trifle tired.

As he sat, waiting, two women who looked to be in their late thirties sat down at the wooden table beside him. One was dumpy-looking and plump; she wore clogs, white Bermuda shorts that were too tight for her, and a very revealing pink halter top. Her hair was blonde and coarse, obviously bleached. Her companion, in contrast, looked quite demure. She was tall and skinny, with short-cropped brown hair and a long, hollow-cheeked face. She wore a blue outfit—a blue blazer and a pleated white and blue skirt—which was actually quite stylish. But she had the worst teeth that Steiner had ever seen. Her two front teeth were long and crooked and widely spaced, and one protruded beyond the other. Obviously, they should have been pulled long ago. She must be a country girl, Steiner thought. Country people don't take care of their teeth . . . they hate dentists.

Steiner ignored the women and waited for Mariana. He gazed at the path that led from the shopping center: the direction that Mariana should be coming from. He sipped his drink and eavesdropped on the conversation of the men at the bar. From what he could overhear, they were microprocessor executives from Atlanta here on a convention. They talked mostly about getting laid.

The blonde woman kept smiling at the men at the bar. To Steiner's surprise, the ploy worked, because when the waitress came to take her order, one of the men insisted on buying the blonde woman a drink. He was rather good-looking in an athletic sort of way . . . what the hell would he want with someone like *that*? Steiner mused. Steiner couldn't help but stare. The man sat down, winked at his friends at the bar, and put his arm around the back of the blonde woman's chair. She was cooing and shifting about, smiling and nuzzling closer to

the man as introductions were made. The other woman craned her long neck slightly to join in the conversation, but she looked uncomfortable. Steiner watched the executive lean forward to get a better look at the blonde's breasts; but Steiner was caught staring by the tall woman, who was looking directly at him. She smiled at him without revealing her teeth. Steiner nodded curtly and turned away.

That's *all* I need, he told himself. But he was getting anxious. Where *was* Mariana, anyway? It's ten o'clock already. I was a fool not to have gotten her home phone number. Dammit! Perhaps I can call the hotel . . . she just might be working late. Steiner called from the bar, where the rest of the men were taking bets on whether their friend would get laid or not. Steiner watched the burly executive making his pass at the blonde. Then Mr. Lareina, the *maître d'*, came to the phone and told Steiner that Mariana had left shortly after nine. "All right, thanks," Steiner said and hung up. He wasn't going to abase himself by asking for her home phone—Lareina wouldn't give it out, anyway.

Steiner sat back down at his table. He felt dazed. He brooded and stared out at the pastel-lit path leading to the Fontaine-bleau. Perhaps Mariana went home first to change.

Then he saw her. He straightened up in his chair, and waved excitedly to the dark-haired woman approaching the pool area. She was walking quickly on high heels, as if late for an appointment. Steiner felt a warm rush of anticipation. He started to get up as she approached . . . and only then realized that she *wasn't* Mariana. Up close, she didn't look like Mariana at all. She looked quizzically at Steiner, who was half out of his chair.

Steiner was mortified. He sat down reflexively. How could I have made such a mistake? he asked himself. He thought about going home, slinking away, crawling into his cool, uncomfortable bed, but he just *couldn't* leave. Mariana *had* to show. He *wouldn't* be stood up! Pain began to radiate once

again throughout his arms and shoulders, then down into his chest.

"Girl troubles?" asked the skinny woman sitting at the table beside Steiner. She had a thin, reedy voice.

Steiner turned toward her. "I *beg* your pardon," he said, annoyed.

The woman tried to smile without revealing her teeth. "Your friend . . . she might just be late, that's all," she said nervously. But she was persistent. "Why don't you have a drink with *us*? We'll cheer you up, we're good company . . . and here I am a third wheel. Help us out."

"Thank you kindly, but I don't think so," Steiner said. The skinny woman pouted, an exaggerated moue.

"Oh, c'mon buddy, *I'll* buy you a drink," the executive said as he self-consciously ran his hand through his short-cropped hair. But Steiner knew his type, all right. He had probably been a bully when he was a kid, and an ROTC lieutenant in the army, and now he's some sort of zipperhead IBM-type manager who makes life hell for everyone under him. He was obviously looking for a way to cut the blonde away from her friend, and he was trying to use Steiner as a foil. "C'mon, what the hell," the man said, flashing a boyish smile, and he jumped his chair toward Steiner and then pulled his table over until it was touching Steiner's. The blonde woman laughed when the drinks spilled, and then she and her friend moved their chairs closer, too. Steiner was too embarrassed to do anything but accept the situation. He felt even more uncomfortable with the skinny woman pressing close to his elbow.

The executive waved down the waitress, and Steiner ordered another drink, which he didn't need . . . he was achy and dizzy as it was, and his right arm felt numb. "So, friend, where do you hail from?" the man asked Steiner as he massaged the blonde's arm, purposely letting his fingers brush against her breast. The skinny woman leaned closer to Steiner, as if expecting him to answer in a whisper.

"I'm from upstate New York," Steiner said. "Bingham-

ton." He felt his skin crawl. The woman was *too* close to him. She smelled of cheap perfume, and she had chicken skin. God . . . he could imagine what she *really* smelled like.

"Is that so," the skinny woman said. "I've been through there. I used to live in Milford, Pennsylvania. Small world, isn't it?"

Steiner didn't have anything to say to that; he just leaned away from her and nodded glumly.

"I'm from Detroit," the executive said. "I'm in systems management . . . mostly consultation work for engineering firms. What's your line?"

"I'm a judge . . . was a judge, I'm retired now," Steiner replied.

"A *judge!*" the skinny woman said, brightening. "Jeeze, we don't have *any* manners here at this table. I'm Joline, and my friend here is Sandy, and he's . . . *oops!*"—she said, turning to the man from Detroit—"I've forgotten your name."

"Frank," the man said, paying the waitress for the new round of drinks.

"I'll take care of that," Steiner said stiffly, automatically, but Frank wouldn't hear of it.

"You haven't told us *your* name," Joline said.

God, she has a chalkboard voice, Steiner thought. "Stephen," he mumbled.

"That's a very nice name," Joline said, warming to her role as Steiner's new companion. "It fits you, somehow."

Stephen felt trapped at his own table. He began to perspire. Joline primly sipped her drink—something white and frothy in a tall, frosted glass—through two short narrow cocktail straws. Steiner was of the opinion that sipping a drink through those straws, which were made for decoration, was like drinking coffee out of a cup without removing the spoon. Joline wriggled toward him. Every one of her movements seemed exaggerated. "I think you take life very seriously," she said, looking at him intently, as if she were working her way into something profound.

I've got to get out of here! Steiner thought. He looked at his watch, making it very apparent that he had other things to do. Frank and Sandy certainly didn't take any notice; they were kissing each other right there at the table like two high school kids on a bench at a roller-skating rink. I *can't* be seen with these people, Steiner told himself. Jesus Christ. . . . He glanced at Joline, who smiled and blushed a little and then firmly pressed her leg against his. She looked somehow limp, as if waiting to be embraced. Oh, Jesus . . . Steiner thought.

Frank whispered something to Sandy and then said to Steiner: "Steve, if you've no objections, we're going to take a little walk . . . we'll be right back. Give you two a chance to talk. Nice meeting you."

"See you soon, honey," Sandy said to Joline, smiling warmly as she stood up.

"We'll hold down the fort," Joline said shyly, her knee still wedged woodenly against Steiner's.

"Would you care for another drink?" Steiner asked Joline after the others had left. He had to say *something* to her. Her silence was oppressive, and he was uncomfortable enough as it was.

"Yes . . . thank you." Joline didn't seem to be able to look at Steiner now that her friend had left, but she leaned against him until he said, "Excuse me," and tried to disengage himself.

"You aren't going to leave me here alone, are you?" Joline asked. There was a pleading in her voice, and suddenly Steiner felt sorry for her . . . she was lonely and ugly and past her prime. He felt both loathing and pity. "No . . . I'll be right back," he said as he stood up.

"Promise?" Joline asked coyly, trying to smile again without revealing her crooked teeth.

"I promise," Steiner said. Jesus, Mary . . . he thought as he walked away. Is *that* the way Mariana saw *me* . . . the way I see that poor old girl at the table? Could I be *that* repulsive to her? He knew the answer . . . he was an old man wearing old

man's pastel clothes. He was an old man carrying a Jewish bankroll. No! he insisted. His skin might be like old clothes, but *he* wasn't old. Suddenly he understood why his wife, Grace, may she rest in peace, had become obsessed with butterflies. She had *filled* her house with butterfly-shaped bric-a-brac before she died.

He walked to the far end of the bar, as if he were going to the men's room, then ducked under the rope that separated deck from beach. Joline would be sitting back there alone, waiting. But I *can't* go back, he thought. He shivered at the thought of kissing that mouth . . . feeling that long, protruding tooth with the tip of his tongue . . . smelling her odor.

He walked along surf's edge, shoes squishing in the wet sand, and he became lost to the sound of waves pummeling the shell-strewn beach . . . lost to the waiting darkness ahead . . . lost below the clear sky filled with clusters of silent stars.

He passed a small hotel, which had one beachlamp on overhead, and standing upon the shadow line was the unicorn. It had been waiting for Steiner. It stood tall and gazed at him, only its great horned head clearly visible. The unicorn's blue eyes seemed to glow, the same melting, beautiful color of the water in the Blue Grotto in Capri. Steiner stopped, and suddenly remembered being in Europe as a young man, suddenly felt the selfsame awe of the world he had once felt. He also felt lost and empty. He grieved for himself and for the poor woman waiting for him at the Fontainebleau. What would she tell her friends when they returned? Would she, indeed, even wait for them?

Steiner gazed back at the unicorn, trying to make certain it was real and not just the play of shadows, or his imagination. It was *not* his imagination, he told himself. Staring into the unicorn's eyes seemed to stimulate memories he had forgotten for years:

He remembered swimming in the Mediterranean. He remembered a two-week vacation in Atlantic City with Grace and his two sons. He remembered riding bicycles on the

boardwalk with his family. He remembered cooking eggs at four o'clock in the morning after a party and permitting the kids to come down and eat, too. He remembered his first trial . . . as a lawyer and as a judge. He remembered uneventful days with Grace . . . beautiful, precious, never-to-be-recovered days. He remembered coming home to problems with the boys and sharing dinnertime conversation across the table with Grace.

And he suddenly, desperately missed it all. He wanted the days back!

He also remembered the nameless women, and how Grace had begged him to come back. She had waited, but couldn't wait long enough. He wanted to go home . . . to Grace. He looked into the unicorn's sad eyes and saw himself, as if in a mirror. He was an empty old man who had lost his life to foolishness. He had wasted all of Grace's love . . . and now it was too late to make reparation.

Tears trembled and worked their way down his face, and the unicorn stepped toward him. It walked slowly, as if not to frighten him. Steiner stepped to the side, but did not try to run. The beast lay down beside him and rested its head in the sand, a gesture of submission. Steiner nervously extended his hand toward the unicorn's muzzle. The unicorn didn't flinch or move, and Steiner stroked its forehead. He touched its fluted black horn and saw that its tip looked red, as if dipped in blood.

He felt a contentment radiate through him as he stroked the unicorn. He also felt the throbbing return of the pain in his chest and arms, yet as the pain became greater, so did his sense of being removed from it. As he rested against the unicorn, he felt it quiver, then begin to move. It raised its head, all the while watching Steiner, but before it stood up, Steiner pulled himself upon its back. *I can ride the beast*, Steiner thought as he held onto its coarse mane as the unicorn brought itself to full height.

"Come on, boy," Steiner whispered, feeling an almost forgotten heart-pounding joy. The unicorn sensed it, too,

because it broke into a playful canter. It shook its head, as if miming laughter, and kicked its hind legs into the air. Steiner held the horse tightly with his legs. He felt his youthful strength returning. He felt at one with the unicorn. The unicorn jumped, galloped, and stopped short, only to sprint forward again. It ran full-out, edging closer to the sea, until it was splashing *in* the water. Steiner was shouting and laughing, unmindful of anything but the perfect joy of the moment. Steiner felt wonderful. For the first time in his life, everything was *right*. He felt he could do *anything*. He was at one with the world . . . and he rode and balanced on the back of the unicorn as if he had spent the past forty years of his life riding the wind.

Suddenly the unicorn turned and headed straight out into the ocean. Waves broke against its knees and chest. Steiner's legs were immersed in water. "What are you *doing*?" Steiner shouted joyfully, unafraid but holding on tightly to its neck. The unicorn walked deeper into the sea, past the breakers, until it was swimming smoothly and quickly through the warm, salty water. The sea was like a sheet of black glass, made of the same stuff as the unicorn's horn. It seemed to go on forever.

As the dark water rose over Steiner, he finally accepted the wreck of his life.

The unicorn lifted its great head as it descended into the sea. Steiner took hold of its red-tipped horn, and the unicorn carried him gently down into the ocean's cool, waiting depths.

The Hole in Edgar's Hillside

by
Gregory Frost

Here's a sprightly little story about an ordinary suburban couple who find a small enigma deposited, literally, on their doorstep . . . and who also find a good deal more trouble than they bargained for when they try to investigate it!

Gregory Frost has made an enviable reputation for himself in three genres—fantasy, science fiction, and humor—and, when last consulted, was planning to branch out into mysteries as well. His short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Whispers, The Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Liavek, Faery, and in many of today's best horror anthologies. His novels include Lyrec, Tain, and Remscela. His most recent novel is The Pure Cold Light. Born in Des Moines, Iowa, Frost now lives in Philadelphia with a twenty-pound cat named "Poot," who steadfastly denies any resemblance between himself and Edgar the Cat from the story that follows.

* * *

"I think the cat's caught something again."

"What?"

"A mouse, I think."

"Well, open the door and see."

She had been looking through the window in the storm door. Not wishing to have a mouse dragged through the living room, she opened the door just an inch or two.

The sky outside threatened rain.

"No, it's not a mouse, it's—" She stopped, crouched down. The cat was sitting on the small concrete porch, triumphant

over his prey. "Oh, my God! Honey—Ted, I think you'd better come here."

The newspaper rattled. Making grumbling noises, her husband walked down the steps to the landing. "All right, what?"

"Here, look."

He knelt beside her, groaning slightly at the effort. "Where?" She edged out of the way to let him see through the crack in the door. The first thing he saw was Edgar, the cat, squatting on the concrete with eyes hugely black, wild, and crazy. He had to reach past his wife and push the door further open to see the other thing.

At first he doubted his own eyes. Then he figured out that the cat had picked up a piece from some neighbor kid's playset. "It's just a *toy*," he said annoyedly, and reached out. The cat growled, and he drew his hand back.

Esther said, "Wait, I'll take care of him." She opened the door wide and stepped out. "Good kitty! Oh, *good* boy!" She stroked Edgar's head. He stood, raising his tail, mincing in place, proud and happy to be made a fuss over. After all, he'd brought his kill all the way home just for *them*. "Let's give you some food, monster," and she swept the fifteen-pound tabby up in her arms. He glanced back worriedly at his abandoned kill as she carried him inside.

Ted put one foot out onto the stoop to prop the door open while he scooped up the unicorn. The instant he touched it, he almost flung it away in disgust. "Ugh," he said. He overcame his revulsion, and brought it closer.

The unicorn was very dead. It had bled from puncture wounds at its throat, and its neck appeared to be broken. It was still warm. Ted took one finger and nudged its legs, noting its unshod hooves, its tufted fetlocks. He prodded its tiny muzzle with his pinkie, pushing up the lip to see its very real teeth and lolling tongue. Carefully, he pressed at the tip of the spiraled golden horn. "Esther, . . ." he said, then realized he'd barely made a sound, cleared his throat and shouted, "Esther, come here!"

"Just a second," she replied, "I'm giving him his treat."

That second lasted a million minutes for Ted. Crazy thoughts banged around in his head like BBs in an engine, tearing up the works.

"All right," she said, "what?"

He showed her.

They sat on the couch, both hunched over the little corpse, which lay on a china plate on the coffee table. "What if he's the last one?" she asked, breaking the silence. Ted frowned at her. "Well," she said. "We haven't exactly seen a thousand of the little things prancing around, have we? It *could* have been the last of its kind."

"We'll have to call the Smithsonian."

"I'll pay to hear *that* call. 'Hello, Smithsonian? My name's Ted Heubler, and I have this unicorn lying on my coffee table.' Remember what happened in the Thurber story?"

He remained silent, mulling over the term "booby-hatch."

"Okay, suppose it *isn't* the last one," she suggested. "What if there's a whole herd of 'my little ponies' out there? What are we going to do about Edgar?"

"Edgar?" He glanced at the cat, who solemnly met his gaze, having heard his name. They traded judgmental looks.

"He's going to keep hunting them," she explained.

Ted pursed his lips. All of a sudden, he smiled. "That's *right*," he said. "That's right, he will. He *will*. Won't you, you *good* kitty?" He reached over and patted the cat's head. His wife stared at him as if he'd gone mad; he never talked to the cat like that. "*Good* kitty," he said again. He grinned at her. "All we have to do is *follow* him, don't you see? The next time he goes out? He's going to go hunt in the woods again, and we just follow him, right to where he caught this critter." She blinked. He repeated, "He's going to keep hunting them." He stood. "I'll go get our coats."

"What if he doesn't want to go out?" she asked, but the cat, anticipating things, bounded out of the room and down the

stairs to the front door. Esther looked over the railing at him making figure eights on the landing. "Okay, get our coats. I'd better get my hiking boots, too. God knows where we're going."

Rain drizzled erratically out of the gray sky. She wore a green vinyl poncho, and he wore an oilcloth coat from Australia that he loved, even though he had to treat it periodically and it made the rest of his coats smell like a dock.

The cat drove them crazy, checking out every piece of ground, every bush, on his trek across the various front lawns. "He thinks he owns the whole damn development," Ted grumbled. At one point, a raindrop must have nailed Edgar, because he suddenly bolted as if he'd been electrified, and ran for the hills.

The houses edged a large wooded area that wrapped around the hillside. They felt fortunate that it hadn't been cleared in the traditional manner when the development had been erected. At first they'd speculated that the developers might have been ecologically conscious, but one of the other neighbors cleared the matter up, explaining that a farmer who ran a dairy on the far side of the hill owned the stretch of woods, and that he'd flatly refused to sell. Esther and Ted were glad of it, frankly, since there was nothing they liked more than the smell from those pines wafting through the windows on a breezy night.

The cat prowled slowly, errantly, pausing to sniff at leaves. At one point, they stood around while he dug himself a little toilet in the loose detritus. He pretended all the while that he didn't see them, just as they pretended not to be there.

He took them through rusted and forgotten barbed wire fences, strung like a wicked trap in the dimness of the deeper woods. The trees on the hillside were enormous, without branches for a good twelve feet overhead, and seemed to absorb the sound of their footsteps. The air was full of pine and earth.

After awhile, Ted muttered, "I didn't know he went *this* far."

"I didn't think the woods did, either."

They came to where the forest floor leveled off in a narrow valley covered mostly by short, broad-leafed green vegetation. The cat stopped suddenly. He crouched down low, ears flattened. Like two secret agents, his owners ducked back to press themselves against two trees. "What's he got?" she hissed.

"I don't see anything . . ."

Edgar's hind end pistoned furiously, and then he pounced. He ripped through the plants at full speed. Something ahead of him ran for its life in a flash of tan. Spying it, they jumped from hiding and sprinted to keep up. The cat looked like a leopard in a documentary. His prey turned, bounding into view for a second; it was another unicorn all right. Edgar agilely cut back, too, right on the unicorn's heels. Esther couldn't believe the gracefulness with which he maneuvered his bulk, the ripple of muscles in his back.

The race led right up against an outcropping of rock. By the time Ted and Esther got there, the cat and his prey had disappeared. They searched the face of the rock, which was sharp, layered, and black, like an exposed bed of shale. No cat. Ted ran around the side and climbed up on top. No cat.

It was Esther who finally made the discovery. She got down among the ground cover and found the opening. "Ted!" she cried, and the urgency in her voice brought him sliding down on his rear.

He crawled up beside her and looked. At the base of the outcropping, there was a hole. It was much like the entrance to a small animal's den, except that light was pouring out of it.

"What *is* this?" Ted asked incredulously. He scooped up on his soggy knees and pressed his face against the rock.

Through the hole, he could see a broad rolling field of grass, and a beautiful blue sky, and, way off in the distance, a castle.

Withdrawing, he looked at Esther and laughed.

"I know," she said. "I don't believe it either." She leaned in for another look, and yanked her head back with a cry as the cat came shooting out of the hole. He blasted off through the woods, his tail stiff and big as a boa.

"At least we know where he went," Ted observed.

Esther was about to lean back down, when the sharp-pointed striped tip of a long stick emerged from the hole, followed a heartbeat later by a miniature galloping destrier and armored knight. The knight reined in the horse and lowered his lance. "Whit ha'e, that's vanquished the beastie!" he said, with satisfaction. He pushed up his visor and looked around. "Odd's bollocks, now! Whit manner of place be this?" His attention was caught by Esther's flannel sleeve rising up out of the leaves, and he followed it with his eyes, tilting his head, until he was staring up into *her* eyes, which must have seemed the size of dinner plates from his perspective. His face went pale as milk. His lips trembled. Gently, he jiggled on the reins to turn his horse; surreptitiously raised his lance till it rested against the rondel on his breastplate. "Methinks we'll gae back inside now, Averil," he announced to his mount, "before we give the impression that we're trespassing, which we're *definitely not*, gracious, *no*."

Ted leaned down. "Wait a second," he said.

"Ted!" Esther snapped.

The knight shrieked, "Ah, God save me!" and kicked his horse into a panicked gallop as the giant made a grab for him. Lance, horse, and rider shot back into the hole.

"Damn it!" Ted cursed. He had caught only a fistful of dirt.

"Nice going, dear."

"Well, you would have let him turn around and get away."

"He *did* turn around and get away," she said acidly.

Muttering, Ted stared with her into the hole. A horde of people were approaching in strange clothes. The knight rode back to them, then dismounted and began talking frantically to a bearded old man in the lead, while gesturing back toward the hole. More circumspectly thereafter, the crowd drew near the

entrance. The bearded leader came forward alone, scowling. He studied the edges of the hole, but seemed unaware of Ted and Esther watching from the other side.

"I see," said the bearded little man. "Do we have your Megistus among us today?"

After some mumbling among them, the crowd pushed forward a skinny, pimply young man wearing tights and a red leather jerkin.

"*You* did this, didn't you?" accused the old man. "You stole my book and broached the sky, *didn't* you, you walking pottage?"

Megistus put a bold face on it. "Yeah, as I'm apprenticed, ain't I?"

"Apprenticed? You recreant, the only thing *you're* good for is test ammunition for a ballista!" Almost nonchalantly, while he spoke, the old man made a few peculiar gestures with his hands, the shapes of which hung in the air like clouds. Then the clouds began to expand. A few pebbles trickled down the face of the outcropping; one bounced off Ted's skull. He drew back, saw what was happening, and snatched Esther away just as the whole trembling, sparkling face of rock cracked and thunderously collapsed. The entire hillside flashed with a light like a hundred flashbulbs going off, the glare sizzling up the trees and into the sky like inverted lightning. Shadows shot through the woods. A booming echo rolled through the hills.

"Oh, no!" Esther cried and attempted to scramble back, but Ted wouldn't let her go until the last bits of rock had stopped falling. The hole had disappeared. Whole slices of shale had slid out like shelves and buried it. Esther wanted to get picks and shovels. Ted told her she was wasting her time.

"It won't be there anymore, no matter how far you dig. It's gone." She said nothing. Of course he was right. The old man was a magician, and he had repaired whatever rent in space the boy had caused. She got up and hugged her husband.

"I'm glad I didn't see it alone. You'd never have believed me."

"Let's try to find Edgar," he said.

"All right."

They tramped home in a light rain. The woods seemed to thicken at the approach of evening. A thin mist curled in the valley, but they soon outdistanced it. They came within sight of their home without a sign of Edgar.

Ted started chuckling. "I can't help it," he said when she stared at him, "I'm forever going to see that stupid cat coming tearing out of that hole with his fur standing up and that teeny little knight chasing after him."

Esther thought about it and started laughing too. "He probably ran right through the kitty door in the garage and into the house."

"Lucky we *had* one, or he might have gone straight through the wall." They laughed a little more.

Once inside, they called his name, but Edgar didn't come out. Without removing her coat, Esther went in search of him. Ted fixed himself a drink. "Well," he crowed, "at least we've got ourselves a real live—well, *dead*—unicorn. "We've got *proof*." He took his drink into the living room. "Yessir, we've got that."

He sat on the couch. For a few moments he just stared at the plate and blinked. Then his face swelled with rage. "Where's that cat?" he yelled, standing again. "You find him? I'm going to *kill* him!"

She poked her head out of the den. "What's wrong now?"

He picked up the plate and carried it to her. "*This* is what's wrong. Look!"

All that remained on the plate were four little hooves and a small golden horn, and a tail. "Oh," she said.

"He'd *better* hide, the little sonofabitch. I get my hands on him, I'll—"

"We left it out on the table. It's not *his* fault. Besides, we don't know he ate it—maybe it just disintegrated.

"Why do you always take the cat's side?"

"He can't defend himself."

“Oh, so you’re the Perry Mason of the furball set?”

She knew his mood—there was nothing to gain by trying to reason with him. She searched for the cat some more, but he was nowhere to be found. It was as if he’d disappeared along with the unicorn.

Ted rolled over. The light on Esther’s night-table glared at him. His wife lay propped up beside him, neither reading nor trying to disguise the concern tormenting her. He was exasperated with the cat, but knew better than to express it. Instead, he said tenderly, “He’ll come back.”

She wouldn’t look at him, but she replied, “The *woods* got him. When the big light flashed, it *got* him.”

“Kind of a leap in intuition, isn’t that?”

“I don’t care. I know.”

He opened his mouth to reply when there came a heavy pounding at the front door. “What was that?” he muttered. They traded looks. The pounding returned, hard enough to shake the foundations.

Ted sat up, grabbed his robe from the chair beside the bed, and stuck his feet in his slippers. “Somebody’s at the door,” he said, declaring the obvious.

He shuffled down the hall, Esther following him, and down the stairs to the split-level landing. Cautiously, he peered out through one side window while Ester peered out the other. Neither could see a thing, even after Ted switched on the yard light. Warily, he unlocked the door and opened it a crack. “There’s nobody there,” he said, although there was something odd about the trees across the yard that he couldn’t quite place. He stuck his head out.

“Excuse me,” a voice called. It was a big, *deep* voice, like rocks grinding together in an avalanche. The thing about it was, it seemed to be coming from the *roof*.

Together, the two of them stepped out onto the stoop, and looked up.

An enormous, bearded face, bigger than the moon, stared

down at them. The moonlight outlined the shoulder and the bent back, which they traced down through the dark to the legs, which looked like a pair of extra trees—which, of course, was what Ted had seen but not comprehended. He tried fruitlessly to speak.

The giant said, "I brung ya back the littul kit-te." He lowered his hand, unfolded log-sized fingers, and Edgar jumped down and fled for his life between Ted and Esther into the house. "I didn't want he should get lost, ya know?"

"Thank you," Ted squeaked.

"Yes, thank you very much," Esther whispered. "We were worried about him. It won't—won't happen again."

"Oh, youse are very welcome, I'm sure." The giant straightened up, his head vanishing into the sky. His feet emerged from behind the trees and he tramped off across the lawn, leaving wading-pool-size depressions in the sodden turf.

Like a fairy couple enclosed in a cocoon of floodlight, Ted and Esther watched as the giant picked his way gingerly between the other houses, then merged into the blackness of the woods. A moment later, the trees lit up in a bright silent flash that soared into the sky like an aurora and was gone.

The Hunting of Death: The Unicorn

by
Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee is one of the best known and most prolific of modern fantasists, with over forty books to her credit, including (among many others) The Birth Grave, Drinking Sapphire Wine, Don't Bite the Sun, Night's Master, The Storm Lord, Sung in Shadow, Volkhavaar, Anackire, Night Sorceries, and the collections Tamastara, The Gorgon, and Dreams of Dark and Light. Her short story "Elle Est Trois (La Mort)" won a World Fantasy Award in 1984, and her brilliant collection of retold folk tales, Red as Blood, was also a finalist that year, in the Best Collection category. Her most recent books are the novel The Blood of Roses and the collection The Forests of the Night.

Here, in one of the most powerful stories ever written about the hunting of the unicorn, she leads us with style and grace through the steps of an intricate pavane of identity and passion . . . and death.

* * *

One: The Hunting

In the first life, Lasephun was a young man.

He was reasonably tall, of slender, active build, and auburn-haired. His skin, which was to be a feature of all this group of lives, was extremely pale, and lent him an air of great intensity. By nature, the being of Lasephun was obsessive. Charged with fleshly shape, the obsessiveness took several forms, each loosely linked. The first life, the young man, who was called Lauro, became obsessed with those things which were unobtainable, and hungered for them with a mysterious, gnawing hunger.

Firstly then, the motive force, which was creative and sought an outlet, drove him from place to place. In one, he would find a forest, and in the forest a shaft of light like golden rain, and the sight of this would expand in him like anguish. In a city, he would see a high wall, and over the wall the tops of crenellated towers, and beyond the towers the sky with thunder clouds, and somewhere a bell would slowly ring and a woman would go by picking up the whispering debris from the gutter. These images and these sounds would stay with him. He did not know what to do with them. Sometimes, like some intangible, unnamed scent, there would be only a feeling within him that seemed to have no cause, a deep swirling, disturbing and possessing him, which could neither be dismissed nor conjured into anything real.

At length, he learned how to make music on the twenty-two strings of the lutelin, and how to fashion songs, and he sang these in markets, inns, and on the steps of cathedrals for cash, or alone on the billowing roads and the sky-dashed face of the land for nothing—or for himself. But his songs and his music filled him with blunted anger. And as he grew, by mere habit, more polished, his anger also grew. For what he could make never matched the essence of what he felt. The creation was like a mockery of the stirring and dreaming within him. He almost hated himself, he almost hated the gift of music.

To others, he was a cause of some fascination. To others he was attractive, phantasmal, like a moving light. They would come to him, and sometimes even follow him a short distance, before they perceived he no longer saw them. He never stayed long in any one place. As if he felt the movement of the earth under him, he travelled, trying to keep pace with it.

Proceeding in this way, it occurred to him one night that he himself did not move at all, but simply paced in one spot, while the landscape slid towards him and away behind him, bringing him now a dark wood, and now a pool dippered by stars, and now a town on a high rock where wild trees poured down like hanging gardens.

It was well past midnight. The morning, disguised as the night, was already evident on the faces of any clocks the town might hold. Lauro leaned on a tree in the vale below the town, not far from the pool which glittered and the dark wood which had gathered all the darkness to itself as if to be cool.

Was a world so beautiful, so unfathomable, also a disappointment to its Creator? Had the world failed to match the vision of the god who devised it? On his seventh day, not resting but lamenting, had he gone away and left his work unfinished, and somewhere else did some other world exist, like but unlike, in which had been captured the creative impulse entire and perfect?

Lauro touched the lutelin and the strings spoke as softly as the falling of a leaf.

And in that moment a white leaf blew out of the dark wood and flickered to the edge of the pool.

Lauro stared. He saw a shape, which was not like the shape of a horse, but more like that of a huge greyhound, and all of one unvariegated paleness so absolute it seemed to glow. He saw a long head, also more like that of some enormous dog, a head chiselled and lean, with folded glimmering eyes. And from the forehead, like the rising of a comet, frozen, the tapering crystalline finger of the fearful horn. And the horn lowered and lowered to meet the horn of another in the pool. Where the two horns met each other, a ring of silver opened and fled away. Then the mouth cupped the water and the creature drank.

As the unicorn was drinking, Lauro only watched it. To him it would have seemed, if he considered it at all, that the unicorn was not drinking, but only carrying out some ethereal custom special to its kind. For the unicorn was unearthly and therefore did not need to accomplish earthly things. The unicorn had strayed into this world, the second creation God had made, when the form had finally matched the vision.

So Lauro watched and did not move, probably did not even blink, his back against the tree's trunk, his hands spread on the

strings of his lutelin. But then the unicorn raised his head from the pool, and turned a little, and began to come towards him.

All creative beings are capable of seeing in symbols, and each will seek analogy and omen, even if they deny the fact. Embryonic though Lauro's creative gift might be, his beautiful voice unrefined and his song-making erratic, uneven, and a source of rage to him, still, presented with this unique symbol, he recognised it. The sorcerous quality of the unicorn was inevitably to be felt. No one, however dull, could have mistaken that, and Lauro was not dull at all, but, if anything, too aware and too sensitised. The sight of the unicorn touched him and he resonated to the touch as the strings of the lutelin had resonated. It was not a voice which spoke to him, and there were no words uttered either in the darkness or within his own heart or brain, yet it was as if something said plainly to him: *Here it is, here it approaches you, that which you require, that which for ever and ever you have pursued, not knowing it. The wellspring within yourself you cannot tap, the jewel in your mind you cannot uncover.* And in that moment the miracle of the unicorn seemed to be that if he could only lay his skin against the skin of it, even so small an area of skin as a finger's tip, everything that burned and smoked within him would be, at last, his to use. He, too, laying hands on this creature of the second perfect world, would gain the power of perfect creation. But maybe also there was a part of him which recognised the unicorn in another way, as that thing which must always *be* pursued and *never* taken, the inconsolable hunger, the mirage which runs before and can never be come up with, since the consolation of hunger is satiety, and the end of the chase is stillness and death.

And so, for one reason or another, as the unicorn moved towards him, Lauro broke from his trance and moved forward one step in answer.

At which the unicorn, perhaps seeing him for the first time, stopped.

At which Lauro took another step.

At which the unicorn became the single blink of a white lid on the night, and was gone.

Nothing natural could have moved so very fast. It had not even seemed to turn, but just to wink out like a flame. Nevertheless, Lauro knew it had gone back into the wood, which must be its habitation. A vague succession of stories came to him which explained how a unicorn's wood might be beset by perils, by phantoms, by disasters. These did not stop him. He ran at the wood and straight into it.

It was like falling off the edge of the night into a black pit. The pit was barred over by raucous branches which slashed his face and slammed across his body, full of earth which gave way under his feet and the tall columns of the trees which met his body with their own. He fell many times, and once he was almost blinded when an antler of branches stabbed into his face. But presently he glimpsed a white gleam ahead of him, and knew it for the unicorn, and he shouted with fury and joy. And then he fell a long way down, as it seemed into the black soul of the wood, and lying there on the black soul's floor where there were decayed leaves like old parchment, and some tiny flowers that shone in the darkness, he dazedly saw the white light coming back to him. This time for sure the unicorn might savage him. He thought of this with awe but not terror. The touch that would unlock the genius within himself could not kill. Whatever wound there was, he would be healed of it. The fall had stunned him, and he was conscious that the neck of the lutelin was snapped off from the body.

Then the unicorn came between the trees, and it was only the moon.

Lauro knew despair then, and a sort of anger he had never felt before. He lay watching the moon, its light making his face into a bone in the black cavity of the wood.

When the day came, he was able to climb out of the cavity, which had not seemed possible before, although conceivably it had been possible. He put the broken lutelin into his pack, and

walked out of the trees. By day, the wood had a different appearance. It was very green, but the green of undisturbed deep water. On all sides the trees, though struck by sunlight, seemed impenetrable.

It was silent. No birds, no winds moved in the unicorn wood.

A while before noon, Lauro entered the town on the rock.

It was like many other towns, and he scarcely looked about him. Others looked at him, and he felt their eyes on him. This was because he was a stranger, but also because he was himself and there was that quality to him of the fire, or the moving light, a quality in fact curiously like that he had noted in the unicorn.

And today, besides, his obsessive intensity was very great. It was like a wave banked up behind his eyes. And when he sat on the steps of the stone church, under the high doors and their carvings of martyrs and demons, his face was like these stone faces, with the reddish autumnal hair falling leadenly round it. His hands were stiffly clasped, without even the lutelin now to lend them life.

After a while, a woman came to him and offered him bread from a basket, and he would not take it, and later another offered him fish and he refused this too. Then a priest came out, and offered him holy comfort, and Lauro laughed, high, and pitched as if he sang. There were others, all eager in their timid solicitous ways to aid him, for they sensed his pain, and they came to him and the cold fire of his pain, like moths to the candle. He refused them all. They could not help him. They knew it and they went away. Even the child who tugged on his sleeve, looking up into his eyes and their black centres, even the child, at whom he briefly smiled, ran away.

The day gathered in the town until it was the colour of strawberries, and the rays of the sunset fell through the church windows from within and out upon the steps, and upon the face of Lauro. He could not play or sing what he had known, could only speak it, and had not been able to.

He had been there seven hours when the Lord of the town came riding to Mass in the church, a thing he did not generally do. The strawberry sky was behind him and behind the eight dark horses and the dark forms of the men who rode on them. The horses were not remotely like the unicorn. Even if they had been given crystalline horns that flamed in the sunset, they would not have been like. Someone had told the Lord of the stranger with the lank red hair and the frozen face and hands. They had reported him as a seer or a poet, one who has witnessed some portentous thing; and so he had.

The Lord reined in his horse at the foot of the stair.

He looked at the stranger with his Lord's proud and self-blind eyes, and suddenly the stranger looked back at him with eyes that had seen far too much.

'You,' the Lord said. 'Why are you sitting there? What do you want?'

Lauro said, 'There is a unicorn in your wood.'

'A unicorn,' said the Lord. 'Who reckons so?'

'I do.'

'You may be mistaken. You may be drunk or mad. Or a liar. You. What are you?'

'I forget,' said Lauro. 'I forget who I am. I forgot in the moment I saw the unicorn.'

The Lord smiled. He glanced about. His men smiled to demonstrate they were of one mind with him. The townspeople smiled, or else lowered their eyes.

'Perhaps,' said the Lord, 'I do not believe in unicorns. A fable for children. Describe what you saw. Probably it was a wild horse.'

Lauro got to his feet, slowly. His eyes were now wise and looked quite devilish. This was because he did not know any more what to do. He turned and walked, without another word, up the steps and in at the church doors.

The Lord of the town was unused to men with devil's eyes who turned and walked wordlessly away from him. The Lord gestured two of his men from their mounts.

'Go after him. Tell him to come back.'

'If he will not obey, my Lord?'

The Lord frowned, visualising a scuffle in the precincts of the church, damaging to his reputation. He dismounted suddenly. The Lord himself, with his two men at his back, strode up the steps into the church after the stranger.

Lauro was standing at the church's remotest end, in shadow before the darkened window. His hands hung at his sides and his head was bowed. The Lord gripped him by the shoulder, and Lauro wheeled round with a vicious oath. Lauro had been in the other, second world, aeons away, where the unicorn was. His eyes flared up and dazzled, luminous as a cat's, and the Lord hastily gave ground.

'Swear to me, on God's altar,' said the Lord.

'Swear to what?'

'The unicorn.'

'An hallucination,' said Lauro. 'I am a liar. Or drunk. Or mad.'

'Swear to me,' said the Lord.

Lauro grinned, with his long mouth closed, a narrow sickle.

'What will you do if you believe me?'

'There were stories before,' said the Lord, 'when I was a boy. Years ago. I dreamed then I should hunt such a beast, and capture it, and possess it.'

Lauro put back his head and laughed. When he laughed, he looked like a wolf. Laughing, the wolf went to the altar and placed his hand on it.

'I swear by God and the angels of God and the Will and Works of God, that there is a unicorn in your wood. And God knows too, you will never take, capture, or possess a unicorn.'

The Lord said:

'Come to my stone house with me. Eat and drink. Tomorrow you shall ride with us and see.'

So Lauro lay that night in the Lord's stone house with its three dog-toothed towers. Sometimes before he had lain in the

houses of lords. His envy and his ambition were not exacerbated by anything of theirs.

Preparations for the hunting of the unicorn had begun almost at once. It occurred to Lauro that the Lord wished to credit the unicorn's existence, that on some very personal level the reality of the legend was highly important to him. But Lauro cared nothing for the desires and dreams of the Lord. The hunt was less convincing to Lauro than the memory of the unicorn itself which had now become ghostly. He believed in the unicorn rather less than the Lord believed, and yet he knew he had beheld it, knew that it waited for him in the wood. If it was possible to come at the unicorn by means of dogs and horses and snares, then he would accompany the hunt. But he did not believe in this, either, as he had said. It had come to be that what he believed credible was useless to him, and that what he did not believe could happen at all he believed *would* happen—since it had already happened once, and because it was essential to him. Actually, the hunt was as his song-making had been, a needful but flawed expression, inadequate but unavoidable. So he lay in the house, but did not sleep.

In the morning, the Lord's underlings brought Lauro down again into the hall. People hastened about there with a lot of noise, and food was piled high on platters and wine stood by, just as on the night before. The dogs were out in the yard, a sea of brown and white that came and went in tides past the open door.

Presently a girl was conducted in at the door. She was fair-skinned, and this skin had been dressed in a long green gown. Her hair and her eyes were both dark as the wood, and Lauro, looking at her as she curtsied for the Lord, knew her purpose. She knew it too. She was very solemn, and her eyes were strangely impenetrable, as if the lids were invisibly closed not over, but behind them.

The Lord came to Lauro eventually.

'I have only to give the word, now. Are you ready?'

'Are you?' asked Lauro.

'You show me no respect,' said the Lord peevishly. 'I do not trust you.'

'Did I say you should trust me?'

'You have nervous hands,' said the Lord. 'I would think you were a musician, but you have no instrument with you. Walk with the grooms, in front of me. I want you in sight.'

Lauro shrugged. He was not really aware he did so.

They went out into the courtyard, and the dogs began to bark. Overhead the sky was clear, and all around the air was sweet. The girl in green was put on a horse, which she rode with both her legs on one side, in the manner of a lady. Because it was the custom of the legends and stories, she had been set at the head of the hunt, and the dogs, which were leashed, tumbled after the tasselled hoofs of her horse. Lauro walked with the grooms, behind the dogs and before the horses. The hunt-master, and the Lord and his men, each with their swords and knives, came clanking on. There were three bowmen, and two boys to sound the horns. The hunt-master himself carried a long blade in an ornate scabbard, but he was frowning, angry or unnerved.

The townspeople stood watching in the streets, and they scarcely made a sound, though some of them indicated Lauro to others who had not seen him previously.

As the hunt left the town and began to pick a way down the rock, with the dogs whining impatiently and the green-clad virgin riding sidesaddle before them all, everything became, for Lauro, measured as a planned and stately dance. The falling verdure of the trees that flooded round the track as they descended, meshed with the sun and confused his eyes, so he partly closed them, and the noises of the dogs and the metal noises of the men made his ears sing, so he ceased mostly to listen.

Apart from the girl, it was like any other hunt, for meat or sport. He knew, when they reached the wood—day-green and opaque—they would not find the unicorn. The wood was like

a curtain or a tapestry. It was possible to thrust through to its other side, but not to discover any substance in it.

They entered the vale under the town. They rode through the vale, between the solitary trees with their caps of sunlight, and over the long rivers of their shadows. The pool appeared, a shallow rent in the fabric of the land, with the sky apparently beneath and showing through it. At this sky-pool, the unicorn had drunk, or performed its ritual of drinking. Behind lay the wood like a low cloud balanced against the earth and the horizon. He remembered the wood and the pool as if he had lived in this spot since childhood, he who had always been wandering. But then, these also had become figments of the second perfect world which, in some esoteric way, he had indeed always known.

The girl cast one glance behind her before she rode among the trees. As she lowered her eyes, they met Lauro's; then she turned away again.

The hunt trotted into the wood about twenty paces, and then stopped still, while the hunt-master ordered his men ahead to search for droppings and other indications of the presence of a large beast. Lauro moved aside and leaned on a tree, and smiled coldly at the ground. A unicorn could not be taken in such a fashion. His mind seemed to drift out into the wood, searching and searching itself for some permissible, ethereal trace, like an echo, of the unicorn, but the greenness was a labyrinth where his mind soon lost itself. He sensed the girl had moved ahead alone. He closed his eyes, and all of them were gone.

Then—he did not see or sense it, he *knew* it—then the unicorn came, as if from nothingness, and stepped across the turf, ignoring the hunt, the dogs, the girl, looking at him. And Lauro felt the shadow of the unicorn wash over him, like a faint breeze.

Lauro opened his eyes. There was nothing there, where he was gazing. But something was happening to the Lord's men, a susurrations not of noise but of silence. There was a great heat in the wood.

The girl had indeed moved forward alone, and she had dismounted or been lifted down. She stood between two trees, and the unicorn stood beyond her. It was like a statue, immobile. It did not look real.

There was nothing to be done. The creature did not move. If the men should move, the unicorn would run. So much was obvious. But the hunt-master, used to his craft, to the unsupernatural deer and starting, panic-swift hares, signalled to one of the boys who carried a hunting horn, and the boy, his eyes bursting, blew the horn—since he had always done so—and the men by the hounds slipped their leashes, again from habit.

The pack flung itself forward and the surge of it hit the girl as she stood there before the unicorn. She was tossed sideways, and would have gone down, but one of the grooms snatched her up and away out of the foam of dogs.

Everyone seemed taken by surprise at his own actions. The unicorn, for an instant, seemed surprised, too. But Lauro laughed again, as he had in the church. He was dubiously glad the hunt had come to defile the unicorn's sanctity and purity and solitude. Glad for the yelping and shouting, and the blundering of hoofs. Yet he did not suppose any true defilement was likely.

But the unicorn ran, and the dogs belled and swirled after it. Men and horses rushed by.

There was a long aisle between the trees, tenuously barricaded at intervals by screens and sheer sloping walls of blinding sunlight. Down this aisle the unicorn ran. And suddenly Lauro realised he could see the unicorn running, that it was perceptible to him. Before, the speed and articulation of the unicorn had been quite invisible.

As he noticed this, with a kind of slow searing shock, one of the bowmen let fly an arrow.

The unicorn was so white, so luminescent even by day that it seemed the shaft was drawn after it by magic, magnetised to the shining skin.

Lauro saw, or thought he saw, the arrow penetrate the right

flank of the unicorn. It seemed to stumble. It was like a star clumsily reeling in its smooth and faultless flight. Lauro could not now believe what he saw. The unicorn had become a deer, a white stag, nothing more. Lauro was running, with the rest. So he beheld the foremost handful of dogs catch up to and leap on their prey.

The unicorn fell. It was very sudden, and the dogs gushed over it. He saw teeth meeting in the sorcerous skin. And then, something more terrible. The unicorn, like almost anything at bay and pulled down, began to fight. First one dog was spitted, screaming and lathering on the slender tower of the impossible horn, and then another. Each, as it was impaled, was thrown away, its entrails loose as ribbons. And the fabulous horn was red.

A man raced forward shouting, laughing or appearing to laugh. He thrust the tip of his short knife into the unicorn's side. Another was driving a blade in the arching throat. The blood of the unicorn just like that of the dogs, was only red.

Lauro dropped to his knees, and the hunt went by him and covered the sight of the fallen unicorn which was only a white stag. It had not made a single sound.

Someone dashing by, kicked Lauro. He felt the blow from a distance of many miles. No blow, no pain, no warmth could come at the cold thing inside him.

The horns were winded, and the hunt-master swore in a business-like way. They had hunted the unicorn, wounded it, bound it. It was taken. The whole event had been very quick.

Lauro continued to kneel, as if he prayed, on the trampled turf.

At some juncture, he was offered payment. This was after he had followed the hunt back into the town. He had walked a quarter of a mile behind them, then a mile, two miles. He had not seen what had happened as they entered the town, but when he came there the streets were empty. It had begun to rain, gently at first, but with increasing violence. If blood had

trickled into the streets from the unicorn's wounds, it had been washed away. The people, too.

If any had watched the hunt's return, they would have seen an animal, slung between staves, its feet obscurely roped, its head hanging down. It had looked dead, dead and bloody and of a surpassing, horrid ordinariness.

But the slung carcass of the unicorn was not dead.

Lauro himself had not looked at it.

Somehow, however, he had followed them all, and come in the end to the three-towered house, and at the door men had been waiting and taken him in.

The Lord sat in a carved chair and drank wine. He was rain-wet, and his clothing steamed. The hall was full of such steam, and the yard full of the steaming, snarling hounds, who had tasted blood and been given no portion of a slain beast to devour.

The Lord stared at Lauro. The Lord was gross and ruddy.

'Well. You will wish to be paid. I have gained a rare animal. I may henceforward collect such oddities. It might amuse me to do so. What price do you ask for your information?' And when Lauro said nothing, staring back with his cold inhuman eyes, the Lord said: 'It was worth something, and you know it. I had heard rumours, from my boyhood. Many heard these tales. But it took you, stranger and vagabond, to suss the creature out for me.'

'For you,' Lauro said.

'For me. What price then?'

Lauro said, 'Where do you mean to keep it?'

'Penned. On grass, under trees. A pavilion. Something pretty. The ladies shall tame it. In three months it will eat from my hand, like a lapdog.'

Lauro looked right through the Lord and his hall, and saw a pavilion on grass, and the unicorn gambolling. It occurred to him, with an uncanny frightening certainty, that since the unicorn had only been a legend before, he himself, by his desire

and his desperation, had somehow conjured it. Conjured, witnessed, and betrayed.

'By the Christ,' said the Lord, growing furious all at once, 'name your price, you insolent devil.'

The thoughts and the words combined. Lauro smiled.

'Thirty pieces of silver,' he said.

With a curse or two, and a clinking of coins like curses, they paid him. Afterwards, he went outside, and around the wall of the Lord's house, from sight. He sat down by the wall, in the rain. He could think of nothing, yet the image of the unicorn remained. After a time, deep within himself, he felt the mysterious formless stirring which tortured him, as always, unable to find its expression. He understood that this occasion was no different. But he was now like a dumb man in enormous pain who could not cry out.

At some point he slept under the blanket of the rain.

When he woke, there were warm and fluttering lights in certain high windows of the house. He wondered where the unicorn was, in some stable or outhouse, perhaps, and he wondered if it would die, but it did not seem to him it had lived. He slept again, and on the second awakening the lights in the house were out. He got to his feet and rain fell from him like water from a bucket. He began to move around the wall, searching for something, at first not comprehending his search. Eventually, he became conscious that he was seeking a secretive way back in, a way to reach the unicorn. But he did not know why he did so, or what use it might be. He did not even know where the unicorn had been imprisoned.

He came to a part of the wall which seemed, even in the wet darkness, to be different. He could not tell what it was. But then the notion began to grow that it was different in some mode of the spirit, because it was connected to his purpose. Almost immediately he found a thin wooden door. He rapped on the door, and received no answer. There were rotted timbers in the door, that sagged when his knuckles met them.

For maybe an hour he worked at the rotten wood, and when

some of it gave way, he worked on the rusty bar within. Ivy clung to the bar and insects skittered away from his probing, wrenching hands. The joints of his shoulders jarred in their sockets and sweat ran down his back and across his breast, turning icy cold when it touched the heavy rain in his clothes.

When the door opened he no longer thought it would, and had been working on it from mere momentum, as if hypnotised.

Inside the door was an obscure stone-arched walk. Lauro went into it, and through it, and came out in an old yard framed by the tall blank walls of the house. Another door, this one unbarred, led into a little garden. Beyond the garden, still inside the precinct of the house, was a patch of muddy ground. Distantly a tower loomed up, before the tower several cumulous-like trees rose in a bank of shadow. A lamp burned, showing two men asleep under an awning, an empty wine-skin between them. These things were like messages inscribed on the stones, the earth, the dark. In the very centre of the dark, far beyond the scope of the lamp, against the trees, was a dim low smoulder, like a dying fire, except it was white. It was the unicorn.

A fading ember, a candle guttering. The flame of the unicorn dying down, put out by rain and blood.

Lauro went forward, past the drunken sleepers, out of the light. He padded across the grass, and came under the rustling, dripping trees. The rain eased as he did so, and then stopped. He saw the unicorn clearly.

It was seated, with its forelegs tucked under it, like a lamb or a foal. The fringe of its mane was sombre with water. Its head was lowered, the horn pointing directly before it. And the horn was dull. It looked unburnished, ugly, *natural*, like a huge nail-paring. He could not see its eyes. Though they were open, they were glazed; they had paled to match the darkening of its flesh until the two things were one.

There was no protection for the unicorn from the elements, but then, it had lived in the wild wood. What held it penned was a fence of gilded posts, no more. They were not even high

enough that it could not have jumped over them. What truly held it was the collar of iron at its neck, and the chain that ran from the collar to an iron stake in the ground.

Something glittered in the mud, more brilliantly than the unicorn now glittered. As Lauro came nearer, he saw there were small gems and coins lying all about the unicorn. A ruby winked like a drop of wine. Some man had thrown a jewelled dagger, some woman a wristlet of pearls.

Bemused, Lauro stood about five paces from the gilded fence. There had been no emotion in him he could identify, until now. But now an emotion came. It was disgust, mingled with hatred.

He approached two more paces, and hated the unicorn.

He hated it because it had failed him. It had proved attainable, and vulnerable. It had let itself be dirtied. It was inadequate, as he was.

Its wounds, of course, marred it. There would always be scars, now from the teeth of the dogs, the arrow, the knives. But its fading was not due to these alone.

He had reached the fence. He waited, in an appalled foreknowing, for the beast to turn to him, to plead with him by means of its lustreless eyes. If it did so, he might kill it. For he knew, at last, it too was mortal, and could die. It had never existed in a second world of perfection at all. His mistake.

It lay like a sick dog and did not look at him, while the night murmured with the aftermath of the rain. Some minutes elapsed before Lauro leaned in across the gilded posts and stretched down to take the rich man's dagger from the mud.

An hour later, when his limbs were numb from standing rigidly in one place so long, and his spine ached and his head and his very brain ached, and the moon appeared over the trees and the unicorn had not looked at him, Lauro threw the dagger at the unicorn.

As he did so a cry burst from him. There were no words in it. Then the dagger struck the unicorn in the neck, or rather, it

struck against the area where the chain had been locked to the collar.

Something happened. Something snapped inside the case of the lock. The lock mouthed open, and the chains snaked away and lay coiled on the mud among the scattered jewels. The collar spun from the neck of the unicorn as if propelled.

Lauro took a step backward. Then many more steps.

What had freed the unicorn seemed to be an act of magic, perpetrated through him, and through what had been intended as an act of malicious harm. A theory that the force and angle of the blow might simply have sprung the crude mechanism of the lock did not temper Lauro's reaction. As he stepped back, he examined the fence of posts, expecting it to dissolve or collapse. This did not happen.

Nor did the unicorn respond to its freedom for some moments. It seemed almost to consider, to debate within itself. Then, when the response came, it was complete. It sprang up, deftly, and the night seemed to slough from its body like a skin.

Set loose from this skin, as from the chain, the unicorn began to glow. It altered. Its eyes filled as if from a ewer and were charged again with depth and nameless colour. The wounds glared, changed also like peculiar eyes, shot with incandescence—its new skin, or the skin beneath, was white again.

Lightly, and with no preliminary, it leapt the posts of the pen. And then once more, it halted.

Lauro was closer now to the unicorn, or the fantasy which was the unicorn, than he had ever been. He was not afraid, and no longer was he consumed with hatred and disgust or disappointment in it. These also had been sloughed. The unicorn was renascent, beautifully and totally. The wet mane was like silver. The horn of its head was translucent and the night showed through it faintly, and there seemed to be stars trapped within the horn.

Lauro waited, like a lover who is willing to permit an old love to resume its mislaid power upon him. He waited for his belief in the miracle of the unicorn to come back. And slowly

and irresistibly it did come back, flowing in, touching him as before, so he felt the certainty of it in his bones, sounding them like a chord.

The unicorn began to move again. Its head was slightly tilted sideways. It looked at Lauro with one eye which had grown denser than the night.

He had believed in it, betrayed it, freed it. This time, he knew, the unicorn must acknowledge him. Lauro's awareness was unarguable. It was a fact for him. Perhaps it was his sureness itself which would cause the unicorn to do so.

The unicorn hesitated yet again. Lauro gripped the air and the darkness in each of his hands. He tried to memorise the image of the unicorn. Soon, it would be gone. Only the unlocking it would give to him, only this would remain. Twinned, bonded, they would have freed each other of their separate chains. That must last a lifetime. It would.

Then the unicorn moved. It raced towards the little garden and the walk beyond, unerringly seeking the environs outside the house. And, for a frantic instant, he thought it would avoid him. But as it passed Lauro, it turned its head once more. The silken, star-containing spike of the horn drove forward and to one side, laying Lauro's breast open, cloth and flesh and tissue peeled away, the beating heart itself revealed, and ceasing to beat.

As the ultimate inaudible leaf-sounds of the unicorn's feet died in his ears, Lauro, lying on a bed of blood and hair and mud and rain, understood at last the rhythms and the means of his expression. The feeling like pain, like a death wound, swelled inside him, carrying him upward, and he was able, finally, to give it utterance. His lips parted to speak the glowing exactitude of the words which came. His lips stayed open, and when the rain began again, it fell into his mouth.

Two: Of Death

But in the second life, Lasephun was a young girl.

She was small in stature and slim. The pale skin was now in

her almost white. Her hair was long and very dark, falling to her waist in black, shining streamers. The character of the being Lasephun's obsessiveness, in this, the second life, was muted and quiescent, although still in evidence in particular ways. But this life, a girl of sixteen who was called Sephaina, had been cared for in a unique manner, grown almost like a cherished plant. She had not yet had occasion to seek within herself, and so to be astonished, or to become dissatisfied.

Where Sephaina had been born she did not know, neither her parentage. These things did not matter to her. They had no relevance. Sephaina's awareness had begun in a slate-blue house, moated by brown water. Lillaceous willows let down their nets into the moat, and birds flew by the narrow windows with which the walls were pierced. Such pictures were set like stained glass into each of her days. The calm of the house, certain architectures, certain lights and shades incorporated in its geography, these were the balm in which the years of Sephaina floated. Her companions were several, and choice. The women who firstly cared for and then waited on her, were kind and elegant. The girl children who played with her grew up into beautiful maidens. Nothing ugly came in her way, and nothing more distressful than the death of a bird or a small animal from the meadows beyond the high walls of the house.

Within, the house was a puzzle of rooms bound by winding stairs and carven doors. From its tallest turrets the meadows, pale golden with summer and pale blue with flowers, might be seen stretching away to a sort of interesting nothingness, which was the edge of vision. Sephaina had seldom entered the meadows, then only to picnic beneath a tree, her girl companions spread about her, birdsong and the notes of mandolettes mingling. For Sephaina, the world was no more than these things. She had never been sick, or truly sad. The only melancholy she had known had been slight, and bitter-sweet. She was surrounded by love and devotion, and it was in the nature of this life to accept these gifts, and dulcetly reflect them. To be valued was as integral to her days as her curious

adopted state. For she understood that others did not live as she did, while never questioning how she lived. From her first awareness, a sense of her own purpose, though unexplained, had been communicated to her.

Not, however, until the day preceding her sixteenth birthday was her destiny announced, and placed before her like a newly opened flower.

Shortly after noon, as Sephaina sat quietly with two of her women, a priest entered the room, and a group of men with them. Sephaina had, of course, seen and conversed with men, but never with so many at once. She was not shy with them, but she guessed instantly, and faultlessly, that something of great import was about to happen.

The priest addressed her without preamble.

'Tomorrow you will be sixteen years of age, and on that day your fate, which has always been with you, governing your existence—although unknown—will be fulfilled.'

Then he extended his holy ring to her, and Sephaina kissed it.

The men nodded. None of them spoke.

The priest said to her: 'Follow then, and learn what your fate is.'

So she rose, and the priest went from the room, up a winding stairway and into one of the turrets. Sephaina followed him, with her women, and the men walked after, the heavy brocade of their garments making a syrupy, sweeping noise on the steps.

If Sephaina had entered this turret before, she was uncertain. If she had ever come there, then the turret had since been much changed. There was a long and exotic tapestry worked in a multitude of colours, which covered every wall. A candle-branch burned in the middle of the floor, flickering somewhat, so the figures in the tapestry seemed to quiver and to breathe.

The subject of the tapestry was a great hunt, which pursued a white beast with a single horn through the glades of a wood, until a girl was found in its way, seated on the grass, and the

beast lay down and put its head in her lap. At which the hunt drew close and with dogs and bows at first, and thereafter with knives and spears, appeared to kill the creature. It bled from many wounds but the blood did not reach the grass, which was starred instead by rainbow blossoms.

Sephaina looked at these scenes of cruelty, deceit and death, and she wept a moment, as at any of the few deaths she had seen. But her tears ended almost immediately. She was perturbed, and turned to the priest for his answer. He gave it.

The creature in the tapestry was a unicorn. A thing part fabulous and partly earthbound. It was not necessary that one either believe or disbelieve in it. There had been an era when the unicorn had been hunted, had been slain or captured, cut and roped, demeaned, used to increase some lord's vainglory or pride of acquisition, or bloodlust. But the death of the unicorn was, in fact, largely inconsequential. It was conceivable only a single beast had ever been killed, or that none had been killed. Or that all the unicorns then extant in the world at that time had died—only a dream left behind them capable of seeming life, or that they had been reprocreated by mystical means from some eerie quickening between foam and shore, cirrus and mountain-top. Neither did truth or falsehood rate very highly in this case. The core of the story of the unicorn, its humiliation, in some ways paralleled the history of the Christ and might be said to represent it. And now, as the debasement of Christ had been raised to worship, so the unicorn, ghost or truth or simply dream, was propitiated and adored. The clue to existence was the protean ability of man to alter things. To balance the ignominy of the unicorn's death, whether false or actual, the ritual of the hunt had transformed into a festival of love.

They would advance into the trees of the wood, not with horses, dogs and weapons, but now on foot, unarmed, with flowers and fruit and wine. And to lead the procession there must be a maiden, who would charm by the magic force of her virginity, not in order to betray, but in order that they might do homage. And if it should come to her, laying its long head,

horned as if with polished salt, in her lap, then the offerings could be made to it. Or if not, still the beauty of the tradition had been honoured, and the spirit of the unicorn with it.

'And you,' the priest said to Sephaina as she stood between him and the circling tapestry, 'you have been reared in perfect harmony and happiness to be that maiden who will lead the procession into the wood. Your years have been kept lovely in order that you be wholly lovely for him, the white one, so he will wish to come to you and give his blessing to what we do, and his forgiveness of what has been done. Every sixteen years, this is the custom. You are very special. You were chosen. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' she said. The men behind the priest murmured then.

Sephaina lowered her eyes and saw the unicorn imprinted on the floor. It was different from the entity in the tapestry. It glowed, and its horn had a light within it like that of burning phosphorous. In some strange way, she remembered the unicorn. To be told of it was no amazement to her. That it might dwell in the world, that it might come to her indeed, did not seem incredible. But, for the first time also, something twisted inside her, a feeling very old, though new to her: it was fear.

They showed her the gown she was to wear. It was the palest green, sewn with flora of blue thread. They showed her the oils and perfumes they would use for her skin and hair, and these were scented like a forest and the most delicious plants that might be discovered there.

Sephaina walked through the house, gazing at everything in it. She had a feeling of loss, as if she could never come back there. No one had told her if she would. Something had prevented her asking.

As the sun began to set, something odd happened in the meadows beyond the house. There began to be fire-flies, dozens of them, scores of them, and then hundreds upon hundreds. They were not, of course, fire-flies, but the flames of

torches and of lamps. The meadows, from the far distance to the edge of the moat, were dark with people, and on fire with lights. Bizarre shifting patterns, like those in a weird mosaic, formed and fell apart. Sephaina watched the lights, knowing why people gathered about the house. She had never known her power before, though she had, at some oblique station of her heart and mind, accepted her rarity long ago. To see the demonstration of her power, her influence, her emblematic worth, stunned her.

She brooded on it, pausing for long minutes, transfixed at one after another of the high windows. She wondered if they saw her, the ones who waited in the meadows. She imagined that perhaps they did, although not with their eyes.

Eventually her women persuaded her to the bedchamber where she had always slept. They washed and braided her hair with herbs, ready for the morning. When she lay down, they drew the covers over her. One read her a passage from a beautiful book which told of enchanting and lustrous things, towers built upon water, boats sailing the air, lovers who loved and lost and refound each other at the brink of violent seas where birds spoke in human voices. Then, her ladies and her maidens kissed Sephaina, and they went away to the antechamber beyond her door. Here, two of them would sleep each night, in case she should want something and call out. This had not happened since she was a little child.

Sephaina lay in the familiar bed, and watched the bedroom in the mild irradiation of a single low lamp. She remembered nights of her childhood, and how the shadows fell at different seasons, or when the moon was full, and how the room would be when the sun rose again. Her window was sheltered, however, by the ascension of the wall, from the vantage of the meadows, and so from the lights of those who stood about the house. And she wondered all at once if this room, whose window, unlike all the other upper windows of the house, was shielded from the meadows, was always given to the chosen

maiden for just this reason: to allow her peace on this one night of her life, the eve of her sixteenth birthday.

The words of the priest came and went in her head all this time, behind every one of her other thoughts.

She had only seen depictions of woods, she had never seen a real one. The wood in the tapestry had been very dense, very darkly green, with slender tree-trunks stitched on it, and with blossoms thick on the grass, and yet there had seemed no way to go through the wood. And the unicorn. How would it be to wait for it to come to her, how would it be to know she herself was the magic thing which drew the magic thing towards her? It was curious. It was as if all this had happened to her before, yet in some other distorted way . . .

Sephaina closed her eyes, and was startled that two tears ran from under her lids.

But she had been trained by serenity to sleep easily and deeply, and already her mind moved forward from the shore, slipping into the smooth currents of unconsciousness. A dream rose from the threshold, and greeted her. She beheld a drinking cup of crystal and a long and fluted stem. The drink in the cup was very dark. She stared, and saw the wood and the unicorn inside the drink, inside the cup. Then she swam by the dream into the depths of sleep.

Sephaina woke to a huge silence that was uncanny. It was an actual presence in the room filling and congesting it. It might have been that her own heart had stopped beating. Or it might have been the heart of time which had stopped, every clock in the house, or the world, stilled. Yet she breathed, was capable of movement; her heart sounded. These things she discovered by cautiously testing them.

At length she sat up, the ultimate test, and so she saw that a shape crouched in the embrasure of her sheltered window, between the room and the starry night.

Fear has many forms. Sephaina's fear burned low as the low-burning of the lamp, yet, like the lamp, pervaded the

chamber. Fear was also so novel to her that it seemed quite alien. She could barely control it. The twisting she had felt within herself when they had told her of her destiny, the ebbing and swelling flow of unease and isolation that had mounted as she watched those hundreds of lights swarm upon the meadows, now gained a quiet and terrible dominion over her.

She could not have cried out, even if she thought to do so, and somehow the ambience of her fear prevented her from thinking of it. She was alone, on the whole earth, with the shape, whatever it should be, which had manifested between light and night.

Then the shape altered, melted upward. It slid from the embrasure, and began to come towards her, gliding, taking no steps. The lamp did not in any way describe it, except that, with no warning, its eyes flashed, cat-like and appalling. And in the very same second, dry summer lightning also flashed. It shattered the window and the room together. By means of this freak illumination, she saw the outline of the invading demon. It had now assumed, or perhaps had consistently possessed, the structure of a man, rather tall, physically agile and long-haired.

It seemed to her he addressed her. In the dreadful silence, she replied.

He said: 'Would you see me?'

She replied: 'No.'

At that he laughed. She was sure enough of the laugh. He sung it to her, and it was very cruel. Just then the tinderish lightning ignited again in through the window, and he seemed to catch flame from it, absorbing, vampire-like, colours and equilibrium. She knew him instantly, the demon. His hair was red as rust, his eyes were bleak, and his face like a bone. Across his breast a flap of cloth hung loose and ragged. Under this rent was an incoherent darkness that evaded or tricked her gaze.

She knew him. The knowledge was a facet of her fear.

At last she said: 'What must I do to be rid of you?'

'Nothing, yet. I shall step from your window, in the same way I stepped up here. You will come with me.'

Sephaina visualised the drop from the window to the moat below.

'You mean to kill me.'

'No. Why not put your trust in me? You are willing to trust all others—your servants, your friends, the priest. The unicorn.'

Sephaina stared. She began to pray, and fell quiet.

The demon only said, 'Give me your hand.'

At which Sephaina, without knowing why, gave him her hand.

Immediately she was weightless. The covers of the bed drifted away from her. Linked to the demon, she too now glided across the room, her feet half the height of her own body from the ground. Seeing which, she would have let go of him, but her hand would not leave go.

'Why fear this?' he inquired of her, almost with irritation. 'There are other things you should fear.'

And even as he spoke, he passed through the window and out onto the broad cool highway of the night sky, and she was taken with him.

The roofs of the house lay below, uncertainly gleaming, like tarnished pearl. The moat had become a circle of mist. The meadows were a great fire which had burned down to embers, for only here and there were the lamps still lit, and these looked very small to one who moved through the air, as if they no longer had any significance for her.

How was it possible to travel in this way? It occurred to Sephaina that maybe she had left her body behind. Yet her form was opaque, though weightless as a feather. The demon, too, appeared physical rather than astral, and as they clove the dark air, sometimes strands of his hair would blow across her face, stinging her cheeks: both things had substance and were real.

The arc of the sky, like a glorious cathedral ceiling, benighted, swung and dipped above them.

The land below sheered away, amalgamated and no longer

discernible. Sephaina, who all her days, as he said, had been able to trust—and so was in the habit of trusting—commenced trusting her devilish guide somewhat. She was not afraid of being suspended in space. In her limited experience so many things were miraculous. Anything different was a wonder. A wonder, therefore, eventually seemed merely different. And besides, she knew him. Of course, one life ago she had been him, or she had been what he appeared to be. She became relaxed, and it made her impatient that she could not tell what the landscape was that unfolded below them. She wanted to see it; she had seen so little, save in books.

Then the flowing abstract knit together. Sephaina saw they hovered like two birds above an ebony cloud, which as they sank lower grew gilded veins and smoky fissures. A waterfall of leaves brushed her face. They had come to a wood.

Inside the upper levels of the trees they moved with a darting precision, like that of fish. There was an opening, a glade like a bubble, and the demon drew her into it. They rested on invisible nothingness.

‘Look down,’ he said to her. ‘Look about. What do you see now?’

Sephaina looked into the slightly luminous black heart of the glade. Enormous sallow flowers dimly shone back into her eyes.

At last he said, ‘Did you never see bones, before?’

‘Yes—the bones of a bird—once.’

‘These are the bones of other things,’ he said.

They dipped again, and the grass-heads met their feet. She stood a few inches above the carpet of the glade, and she recalled irresistibly the tapestry of the unicorn, where the ground was strewn by blossoms. Here, bones lay thick as snow.

He led her. They spun over the glade. She was glad she need not walk on the bones. So she looked into the sockets of skulls and of pelvises. The demon drew a thigh-bone from the grass. He examined it and threw it aside with the contempt of some

great inner pain. The form of this long bone, as it fell, reminded Sephaina of the spike on the unicorn's forehead.

They came into a second glade, adjacent to the first. Here too there were bones, but fewer of them. In a third glade, the bones were scarce and mostly concealed among the tree-roots, or in the tangle of the undergrowth. Some of the bones were smudged with moss.

'And who do you suppose left their skeletons here?'

'Are the . . . ' she whispered, 'are these the bones of unicorns?'

'These are the bones of countless young girls that unicorns have killed.'

Although she did not want to, Sephaina raised her head and looked into his eyes. His eyes were unkind and clever, and exceedingly honest.

She did not question him. Presently he said, 'In reparation for the ancient hunting, for capture and for death. A sacrifice. The maiden is perfect and her life is also without blemish. No disease. No sorrow. They have told you, you will wait, and the unicorn will come to lay its head in your lap. That is true enough.'

He continued to speak to her, and after a moment Sephaina screamed.

He was a demon. He told her lies. Yet behind her lay the snow of glistening bones. The bones of the young girls who had been pegged out, naked and spread-eagled, awaiting the supernatural beast from the wood. Which, scenting them, did indeed come, and did indeed lay its head in the lap of each—breaching her virginity and impaling her womb upon the blade of its monstrous horn.

The chosen sacrifice, brought to death by those she loved. Judas' kiss. The crucifical nailing. A reversal of the image of Christ and of the unicorn. Animal for god, the female for the male. The lore of the wood. Of death.

Her hand was still moulded to the hand of the demon. When she cried out, she felt the cry pass into him.

'You think you do not credit what I say. But what I say is the truth, as the unicorn is also truth.'

'No,' Sephaina said.

So he made her go back, back through the glades, and he made her see, again and again, the bones of dead women. Again and again he murmured to her of how it had been, how it was. Tomorrow she, like the rest, would lie on the floor of the wood, and next year, on her seventeenth birthday, she too would be bones.

At last he drew her away, back up into the night, where the stars hung, brooding on their longevity. She saw the stars, and the world below. They meant nothing to her. This fresh miracle, the miracle of betrayal and horror, she had also accepted, or so it seemed.

'Now you believe,' he said to her, 'I will tell you how you may evade your destiny. Would you like to hear?'

'Is there a way?' she asked.

'More than one. I can set you down in the meadows beyond the house. There any able man, ignorant of who you are, can deprive you of your virginity. Without this ceremonial enticement, the unicorn will not seek you out. Or I can carry you to some far-off country where no one will think to search for you.'

'But you are a demon,' she said. 'And this is a dream. Wherever you took me, I should wake in the house.'

'Should you? Then do only this: approach those who come for you tomorrow. Reveal your knowledge and your reluctance. They will not press you, for the sacrifice must go willingly. You will, of course, be cast from the house, and will become an exile. No one, any more, will care for you, and few will offer you love. But you will avoid the agony and death of the sacrifice.'

Sephaina gazed at the stars, which lived for ever, or very nearly.

She beheld the land below, so distant it did not seem she need ever return to it.

'I do not know,' she said. 'Tell me what I must do.'

'No,' he said, 'my part is played out. I will tell you nothing more.'

Sephaina shivered. Her hand in his was changing into ice.

'Then let me go. Let me go back and wake.'

'This is no dream,' he said. He smiled. His mouth was a crescent, his eyes were colder than her hand.

Then the night was emptied away. Winds and stars and darkness and the earth, all emptied at a vast and improbable speed, through her eyes and in through her window.

The last thing she was aware of was the separation of their icy fingers, his dead, hers merely frozen.

She did not sleep after that, but rather she ceased temporarily to exist. When once more she grew to a consciousness of her surroundings, the dream remained vivid and actual, as if it lay in shards about the room. She had only to take up these shards, examine them, bring them together. She did so, trembling. She lived again each minute of her flight and her time in the wood of bones. Very little was missing. And she knew it was not a dream, as in the dream she had known it was not.

When this had been accomplished, Sephaina lay like a stone, and gradually the window, where stars had framed the demon, began to pale and greyly glow.

Soon the sun would rise, and they would come for her. They would bathe her and anoint her and dress her in the green gown embroidered with blue and heavenly flowers. They would take her among the trees of the wood. They would strip her and chain her and death would come, white as the moon, with starlight caught even by day inside its killing horn.

Sephaina lay, and she considered how the demon had offered her freedom from this death, and how she had not allowed him to help her, and she wondered if he would have helped her.

To lie with a man—she could not have done that. She had been nurtured in a certain way, and was quite innocent. Never having thought of the sexual union between man and woman,

as if knowing she must die a virgin, such an act was now like a myth, and useless to her. But to be carried to safety in some other place, far from the house, the moat, the meadows. How would she live there? And lastly, if she herself were to deny her fate to her attendants, to the priests—crying out when they came to her that she had learned they meant to give her to death—if she did that, pleaded for her survival, won it . . . How should she fare on the raw face of the world, untutored, unguided? She who had always been cherished and trained to find her cherishing natural, therefore necessary.

Yet to live, to evade pain and horror, and whatever abyss or ascent, hellish, supernal, stood beyond mortality. Surely to escape this was worth all exile, despair and loneliness.

Then she thought in bewilderment of those she loved, and how they had always intended to destroy her. The very shock of it made her, somehow, certain that it was so. Such a thing as this could not have been invented.

But neither had their love been false.

With puzzled wonder, she considered this final absurdity. Love her they did. Simple instinct reaffirmed her belief in their sincerity, just as the same instinct had believed the warning of the demon.

As the warmth of dawn started to powder the greyness, she rose and stood at her window. She watched the birds begin to fly upwards, and the light begin to hang the heads of the willows beyond the wall with thin chains of greenish gold.

When the sun lifted, the sky flushed, blushed with joy. Sephaina felt her own heart lift, despite herself. She felt herself to resemble the sky. She had been cultivated to openness and beauty, and she knew a sudden extraordinary happiness. It dazzled her. She sought for reasons. It had come to her, she was an atom of the whole creative, created landscape, of the air, of the sun. Her course, too, had been fixed: to rise and to go down. For this lovely and poignant day she had been bred. Because of her value on this day, she had been loved. She was the sacrifice by means of which earth and heaven might touch. The hands of

the clock might not terminate their progress. The shadow on the sundial could not hide itself. Some things must be.

With a sigh that was like the loss of blood, and yet also like the loss of poison, Sephaina bowed her head. She would not step aside. She would say nothing. If it must be she would be hurt and she would die. But not in negation, not from fear of other things, not out of slavish acquiescence and blindness. She saw within herself, as if in a dawn pool, the reflection of all her years. It had been impossible to think of her life drastically changed, continuing elsewhere, not because she was ill-equipped to live it in such a way, but because her whole life had been a building towards this end. Her death, the last stitch in the tapestry, upon which all other stitches rested. She could not break the thread. Harmony was her familiar. Harmony she recognised, and must yield to.

She remembered the lamps burning out in the meadows. She thought of the burning lamp of faith, contained in herself. Sephaina shuddered. She had thought of bones. But her resolution did not slip away.

When the gentle rap came on the door, the early sunshine had overbrimmed the window and lay across Sephaina's body. When her attendants entered, she saw their faces in this silken light. Anguish and pleasure were mixed in each face, and a calm, saddened hope.

She was not afraid of them. She could not hate them. *She* was their hope, and her death was what had saddened them. Their hands touched her with love, as if she were very precious. She would not cry out at them. She touched them as carefully as they touched her.

There was a stillness in her, like death already. Yet it was warm.

So they took her through the meadows where the people kneeled, and along a narrow road, and through a valley, and came to the wood. They entered the wood, entered its hot, green essence where the sunlight dripped down and the

shadows spun like spiders. There were no bones in the grass, and neither any flowers.

They brought her a crystal cup with a dark drink in it, but she put the cup aside. She had already begun to cry, but softly, almost unobtrusively. Her maidens kissed her hands, the priests blessed her. The older women took her away, and drew off her garments, concealing her with their bodies. No one explained to her what they did. Sephaina did not question or protest. Her tears fell noiselessly down onto her own skin.

She lay on the ground between the margins of her black hair. The women put the bracelets of the shackles, which were light and delicate and did not chafe her, on her wrists and ankles. With great decorum, circumspectly, they arranged her limbs, until she was a white cross on the grass. Men pegged the ends of the shackles into the ground, some distance from her, their faces averted so they should not shame her by looking at her nakedness.

Then, everyone of them left her.

Through the scent of her own tears, Sephaina could smell the fermentations of the wood, like the perfumes with which they had dressed her. She heard the faintest whispering, also, that might have been the wings of insects, or the leaves brushing one another as they grew. Above, the green roof was burnished by the sun. Rays of sun leaned like spears all about her. Like a fence of gilded posts. It was peaceful. These instants seemed timeless, and might go on for ever, and while they did so, she was secure. Then she heard something step through the grass towards her, and the sound was scarcely discernible, not remotely human.

The unicorn leaned over her like a tower.

It was dark against the flaring leaves above, its whiteness curbed. It seemed the largest single entity in the world. The horn on its head was like another shaft of sun.

Sephaina clenched her whole body, but she could not shut her eyes, she could not look away from the unicorn. When it

touched her, she would die, in terrible agony, and beyond the agony an unknown whirlpool gaped.

There was a pause. She gazed at the mask of death, and felt a stasis, an unconscionable waiting. And then the birdlike soaring sense of rightness, in fact of perfection, came to her again, even in her fear. Her entire body quickened, seemed elevated. She knew pain could not hurt her, and she smiled, in welcome. The unicorn seemed to read her mind. He swung his gigantic head and the blazing spike of the horn ran down.

There was a rending. Feeling nothing at all, she was confused. Then the rending came again, and twice more, and the ropes of grass which had bound her wrists and ankles lay dismembered. The unicorn stepped across her body, laving it with shadow. The curtain of the trees drew back and the unicorn re-entered the deep of the wood. There was a flash of whiteness, the curtain fell and the unicorn was gone.

Out of the green space, women came and clothed her, and lifted her. A priest came and took her hands. They were ghosts, but the ghostly priest talked to her.

'It is always done in this way,' said the priest to Sephaina, under the sun-broken trees. 'There is a warning given. For each, it will be unique; the demon within arises. It may take any form, that of some secret misgiving, perhaps, or some awful memory. It speaks the words of death and nightmare. Many of our daughters cannot endure the thought of what lies before them. They are shown the bones, bedded deep in the wood. The bones, you must understand, do not exist, but seem most real, as you recall. Those young women who cannot bear their fate fly to the meadows or the lands beyond, or else fall to their knees before us, begging us to release them. This too is always done, they are sent away, and thereafter without true happiness and without sanctity we must live, until the next sacrifice is due. For almost fifty years, Sephaina, the sacrifice has failed. For she must accept her death, and go consenting, to set the balance right. But to consent is *all*. Then death is not needful. You live, and we are holy, because of you.'

Sephaina said, like one waking from a dream, 'What now, then?'

And he told her now she would live in honour and luxury in the house, among the women she had always known, who had tended her. And that when the next chosen came to them, a little child, she too would help to care for it and rear it to its purpose, as she had been cared for and as she had been reared.

They carried her back to the slate-blue house, singing, with garlands, wine and laughter. The people in the meadows also sang, and gave her gifts. For today at least she remained wholly special.

But after today . . .

Seeing the house she had not expected to see again, the flowers, the lilies on the polished moat, Sephaina knew disillusion in her rescue as she had known a wild elation in her fear. The shining building of her years had collapsed. She had met death, who had turned aside. Her sunset went unrequired, though like the sun her glory faded. She was to be an attendant. She was to wait upon another. She was no longer the chosen one. Another would be that.

After the vision and the vision's ending, how drained and commonplace and far away the world seemed. A collection of plants and stones and random flesh, now only paintings in another book.

It was true, they had not killed her, but she might still die. Of boredom.

Three: The Unicorn

And in the third life, Lasephun was the unicorn.

In the beginning there had been only something white, white and gleaming as the centre of a flame. It moved like marsh gas, a disembodied, cool fire, or a breath of opaline wind. It entranced things to pursue it, may-flies, doves, fawns, but it did not consume them. Nor were they able to pass through it. Sometimes it rested, at others it ran. Its speed seemed depen-

dent upon nothing, not even itself. Its repose was similar. It neither fed nor expelled any waste matter. It was not embryonic. It did not take on the forms of other things. At night, faintly, it emanated a pale, unimaginable glow. It was like the soul of a star, fallen in the wood.

One day, this luminous uncreature drifted from the wood, and skimmed over the surface of a pool. The pool faithfully reflected it for several moments, and then ceased to reflect it. The pool began to show instead another reflection, of something which had once been there, drunk from the pool, and spirited itself away.

This thing in the mirror of the pool touched its long slim horn to the wafting formless whiteness. When the white thing reached the other edge of the pool, it let down slender legs into the grass. A canine beautiful head emerged, an arching body. The starry spike broke from its forehead.

It had no particular memory, the unicorn. It did not know, therefore, it had been dead and had then existed as a spirit or a fable, or if now it was reborn. The pool had refashioned it in a partially earthly shape, as the eyes of a man would have done. Water, and human eyes, possessed this sorcerous ability.

The unicorn touched the earth with its feet.

The earth knew the feet of a live thing.

The trees, the air, knew it.

The recognition of presences about it solidified the presence of the unicorn. The unicorn was now solid, and externally actual. Inside itself, however, it remained phantasmal and fantastic.

The nature of the unicorn was like a prism, composed of almost countless facets. Each thought was a new dimension. The intensity of Lasephun, the obsessiveness, was demonstrated by the unicorn's adherence to each of these facets as it explored within itself.

Its life became and was self-exploration. It had no other function. It lived *within*, and where the external world brushed it—the scents of the wood, the play of light and shade, day and

night, the occasional wish to drink from the pool, it explored these sensations within itself and its reaction to them. It had no gender, no creative or procreative urge. It was timeless, knowing neither birth nor death. It was refined like the purest distillation, and it was totally self-absorbed. So it lived and was happy, learning itself, finding always new aspects of itself and its relation to the objects around it. It was seldom seen, and never disturbed. Possibly a hundred years went by.

One dawn, the unicorn came from the wood as the sun was coming from the horizon. The world was all one contemplative and idyllic pinkness. Pink seemed in that instant the shade of all things lovely, ethereal and divine. As the unicorn lowered its head towards the spangling water of the pool, it sensed, for the first time it could ever remember, an expression of life nearby.

Startled, the unicorn raised its head, and water-beads glistened from its brow as if the horn wept tears of fire.

The startlement might have resembled that of a deer alarmed at its drinking, but was not of this order. Never before had it encountered a corresponding life signal from anything about it. It had never known that such a note was capable of being sounded.

After a moment, confused and fascinated, the unicorn moved away from the pool, and glanced around itself.

Above the valley, a ruined town rotted graciously on a rock. Some way off in another direction, a slate-blue house sank in a dry moat: this was not visible from the pool. Beyond the pool another way lay the wood, while in the valley there were several trees. Beneath one of these a young girl lay asleep. Presently the unicorn came on her and paused.

Her long dark hair ribboned about her, her skin was white as cream, save where the freckling of leaf-shadows patterned it. A pannier lay beside her; she had been gathering roots and plants perhaps for use in some simple witchcraft.

The unicorn recognised her at some basic inexplicable level, and a fresh facet leapt into being in the prism of its awareness.

Decades and decades before, the unicorn had been human and a girl rather like this one. Yet there was more. The girl asleep under the tree was very young, and she was a virgin.

The magic of virginity—for magic it was—was quite straightforward. Its sorcerous value was that of energy stored, and was accordingly at its most powerful not in the celibate, but in the celibate who had never yet relinquished celibacy, and better still in one who had not even known himself. This, as it happened, the girl had not. Her life, just as the unicorn's had been lived inwardly, had been lived outwardly. Her meditation and her senses turning always outwards, she had not yet found herself, knew herself neither in the spirit, nor in the body. In this manner she was strangely asexual, as the unicorn was. While her extreme youth lent her also, briefly, an air of the ethereal. Her birth was close enough she had overlooked it, her death far enough away she had not considered it. Life and death and sex were, for this time, beyond the periphery of her sphere—yet only just. However, for this short season, the sounding note of her existence had paralleled the unicorn's own.

Aside from the sounding note, and despite recognition, the unicorn did not see the girl as what she was, but only as another external object, like a stone or a flower.

After it had observed her for some time, the unicorn pawed the turf a little. The gesture was reflexive, physical, a mere exercise of the muscles which now must be used. It looked nevertheless ferocious and dangerous, and it wakened the girl, who sat up, bewildered and staring, her hand to her mouth in fear.

It seemed she had heard old stories of what a unicorn was. She did not appear to be in doubt, only in amazement and fright. Then these emotions visibly faded.

When she spoke aloud, the unicorn, having no longer any knowledge of the human vernacular, did not understand her. Nor did it seek to understand. It sensed exultation in her voice. It sensed itself the cause of this exultation—and not the

cause. What in fact she had said amounted to the words: 'You are my sign from God. Now I know the one I love will come also to love me.' For in fact the very innocence of her meditation had already, through itself, brought itself to an end. She loved.

The unicorn had forgotten almost altogether the aspirations and the inner processes of men and women. It looked, with its shadowy, gleaming eyes, that were like burned yet burning violets. It watched as the girl obeised herself before the unicorn which had become her omen of love. As she did so, the unicorn felt itself harden once more inside the shell of its physical existence. So all things may be fixed by the regard of others.

But before she could try to touch it—it had some dim memory, perhaps a race-memory of its kind, of such touchings—the unicorn drew away and vanished in the wood.

Then from the wood's edge, its eyes piercing through the foliage which was like curious jewellery, the unicorn continued to watch. Rising and picking up her pannier, with a strange half-weeping sigh, yet smiling, the girl moved away across the valley. She began to climb towards the ruined town, and the unicorn watched.

A village leaned against the walls of the town. The unicorn saw the girl enter the village. It saw her step into a little hovel with a roof of golden thatch. She sat down at a spinning wheel. The wheel spun. The girl whispered dreamily. Magic as well as thread was unfolded from the primitive machine. By now the unicorn felt as much as it saw. It had ceased to view with its eyes alone. Some aspect of itself, still fluid and supernatural, had followed the girl and now hung against a wall. It was reminiscent of a cobweb, pale and luminous, unobserved.

Dusk seemed to enter the room suddenly, like smoke. A moment after, the girl raised her head and her face lost all its faint colour. A shadow, intensely blue in the evening light, fell across the room, the spinning wheel. It was the shadow of a young man. Even in the gathering darkness, the colour of his hair was apparent. It was auburn, as the hair of Lauro had been. The phantasmal cobweb that lay against the wall, the percep-

tion of the being which had become a unicorn, clung again itself. It had now recognised, without recognition, the two lives which it had formerly been. The purpose of this representation, its earthly male and female states, filled it with strange longings, a sort of nostalgia for mortality it did not comprehend.

The young man spoke. Then the young girl.

The cobweb essence of the creature which had become a unicorn listened. It began, at last, by some uncanny osmosis of thought—telepathy, perhaps—to distinguish the gist of the conversation.

‘I have thought of you all day,’ the young man said. ‘I do not know why.’

‘You are uncivil to say this. Am I not worth recalling?’ And the wheel spun, as if it, not she, were hurt, excited and unsure.

‘I think you are a witch, and put a spell on me.’ But he laughed. His laugh was Lauro’s. In this way the unicorn had laughed, long, long ago.

‘So I might. So I meant to.’

‘And why?’

‘To test my skill. Another man would have done as well. You are nothing to me.’

‘If I am nothing to you, why do you sit and gaze at me in church?’

‘Who told you that I did?’

‘Your own face, which is red as a rose.’

‘It is my anger,’ she said.

But he went close to her and sat beside her, following the wheel with Lauro’s eyes, as she followed it with Sephaina’s.

The light faded, and at last he said: ‘Shall I light the lamp for you?’

‘You are too kind. Yes, light the lamp, before you go to your own house.’

‘May I not stay, then, in your house?’

‘If you stay,’ she said above the flying wheel, ‘the village will remark it. I have neither father nor mother, nor any kin. If

you stay, you must wed me, they will all say. And the priest will demand it.'

'The priest already knows I am here. I took care that he should.'

Then the wheel was left to itself and whirled itself to a standstill.

The cobweb clinging to the wall beheld itself embrace itself, the two it had been as one. But the anguish and the urgency of love it did not pause to examine, for some noiseless clamour drove it abruptly away.

As the lovers twined in the hovel, therefore, the unicorn walked delicately to the pool in the valley. It touched the tip of its unbelievable horn to the reflection there. Its calm eyes were two purple globes, shining, and its whiteness was like summer rain.

A human would have been thinking: Ah, I must consider this. I must *know* this. But the unicorn only considered, only *knew*. It returned to the black wood, wrapping itself in the blackness, fold on fold, until it was utterly invisible, even to itself.

The brief mortal kindling it had witnessed—or possibly imagined that it witnessed—held its awareness as its own life and the manifestations of life had formerly held it, and nourished it. It turned about within itself the images of the perfectly commonplace coupling, the commonplace wishes and desires which had heralded it. It turned them about like rare gems to catch the light of the rising moon.

The unicorn lay down in the blackness of the forest. It drank from its own brain.

Sometimes the blackness of the wood grew green or gold or rose. Sometimes there were faraway voices, or thunder, or the velvet sound of falling snow. Flowers burst out or withered under the body of the unicorn, which was no longer perceptible as anything like a body.

The magic of virginity, which had drawn the symbol of the unicorn on the air, both for the virgin and for itself, a virginity

ironically almost instantly given up, drifted like a spring leaf on water. Then down and down through the unicorn's prismatic awareness.

At last this floating leaf, a green mote, struck the floor of the unicorn's intellect. It felt a cry within itself, a terrible cry, aching and raging, and full of inhuman human despair.

What was the meaning of *this*?

The unicorn did not know it, but time was also like the wood. As the wood had grown tall and tangled and old, so time had grown, hedging the unicorn round as if with high reeds, or a fence of gilded posts.

When it ran lightly over the pool, it did not notice it ran across water, as in the beginning.

The trees on the rock had also grown old. The unicorn passed through them, unimpeded, like fluid. The throbbing centre of the pain which had somehow reached the unicorn was to be found on the track that ran through the middle of the village.

Under the broken ancient wall of the town, an elderly woman was crying and lamenting, not loudly, but with a desperate intensity. To the human eye, her trouble was immediately quite plain. Two men had between them a covered figure on a bier. One hand, like a parcel of bones, stuck out, and this the woman held and fondled. A man was dead and due for burying, and the old woman, probably his wife, overcome at the final undeniable fact of parting, had halted the proceedings with this eruption of passionate grief. All around, others stood, trying to comfort or dissuade.

To the unicorn, only the outcry and the anguish were decipherable. They needed no explanation. And then it saw auburn hair and black, and recognised, or so it seemed, the lovers from the earlier night.

The unicorn moved closer. It stepped across the broken sunlight and the shadows and drew near to the old woman who wept and softly cried out, endeavouring to distinguish the

young man and the young woman who were, in their physical forms, its own self from two other ages.

Then came a separation, of persons, of thought. The young man who resembled Lauro was younger than he had been when last the unicorn looked at him, and his hair was blacker than a coal. It was the girl, older than remembered, older than Sephaina, whose hair hung red as rust all down her back as she held the weeping woman and took her hand from the dead hand on the bier.

'Mother, my mother,' said the girl, 'my father is dead and we must let him go to his rest. Has he not earned his rest?' said the girl, gently, calmly, and it was the young man now who began to weep. 'Let him be on his way.'

The old woman allowed her hand to be removed from the stick-like fingers. She stood in the street, sunken and soulless, staring as the men with the bier moved off from her.

The unicorn sighed.

It had seemed only yesterday, or seven days before, or maybe at most a month, or a season ago, that it had left them, embracing and new and brimmed with life and trust beyond the spinning wheel. But summers had come and gone, winters, years and decades. Their children had grown. The son had his mother's hair, the girl her father's. And the maiden who had slept under the tree was gnarled and bent like a dehydrated stem, and the young man who had wooed her was an empty sack of flesh, its motive force spilled out.

'No,' said the old woman tiredly. 'How am I to live, how am I to be, now, alone?'

The unbeautiful, incoherent words conveyed her desolation exactly. She was rooted to the track. She saw no need to go on, or to return. Meaningless and stark and horrible, the world leaned all about her, a ruin, shelterless. Her poor face, haggard and puckered. The filmy eyes that had been dark as the pool beside the wood, all of her flaccid as the dead man carried away from her. Her mouth continued to make the shape of crying, but now even the tears would not come. She had reached the ulti-

mate lethargy of wretchedness. And tug at her arm as the red-haired daughter might, or try to steel and support her as the black-haired son did, the old woman, who had been young and a virgin, stood on the track and saw her wasted life and the bitter blows of life, and all of its little, little sweetness, now snatched from her for ever.

And then something changed behind the dull lenses of her vision. Something seemed to open, some inner eye.

She had seen the unicorn standing not three paces from her.

'Mother—Mother, what is it now?' the girl asked anxiously.

'Hush,' said the old woman. She was apparently aware her daughter could not see the silver beast with its greyhound's head, its amethystine eyes, its body like a moonburst, its single horn like a cone of stars—that no one could see the unicorn but she. 'Hush. Let me listen.'

'But what are you hearing?'

'Hush.'

So they fell silent in the street. The men and women looked at each other, fearing for the wits of this one of their number. Yet, politely, they waited.

The unicorn stood, a few inches from the ground, visible only to one, fixing her first with this lambent eye, then with that. The unicorn, of course, did not speak. It had no speech. But lowering its neck, it set the tip of its horn, like a silver pin, to the old woman's forehead.

There is no death. Beyond life, is life. Whatever suffering and whatever disappointment, whatever joy, whatever bewilderment, there is more time than can be measured to learn, and to be comforted. Blindly to demand, meekly to consent, inwardly to know, these are the stages of existence. But beyond all knowledge is another, unknown knowledge. And beyond that unknown knowledge, another. Progression is endless. And to be alone is the only truth and the only falsehood.

The unicorn vanished on this occasion like a melting of spring snow. The old woman noted it, and she smiled. She walked firmly after the bier, crying still somewhat, from habit.

She was to live to a great age. One evening in the future, she would tell her daughter—then rocking her own child in the firelight—‘On the day of your father’s burying, I saw the Christ. He wore the shape of a white unicorn. He promised life everlasting.’

But that was far away, and now the unicorn ran, like the wind, and as it ran it left humanity behind itself for ever. It dissolved and was a burning light.

The light asked nothing of itself, it was content to blaze, which also, surely, was another truth.

The being of Lasephun was presently transmuted, passing into some further, extraordinary stage, the name of which creature is unknown, here.

Stalking the Unicorn With Gun and Camera

by
Mike Resnick

Here's a look at the body of lore involved with the hunting of the Unicorn that's just a bit more irreverent than the previous one. . . .

Mike Resnick is one of the best selling authors in science fiction, and one of the most prolific. His many novels include The Dark Lady, Stalking the Unicorn, Paradise, Santiago, and Ivory. His most recent novels are Soothsayer and Oracle. His well-known story "Kirinyaga" won the Hugo Award in 1989, and was one of the year's most critically acclaimed, and controversial, stories. He won another Hugo Award in 1990 for a sequel to "Kirinyaga," called "The Manamouki." He lives with his family, a whole bunch of dogs—he and his wife run a kennel—and at least one computer in Cincinnati, Ohio.

* * *

When she got to within two hundred yards of the herd of Southern Savannah unicorns she had been tracking for four days, Rheela of the Seven Stars made her obeisance to Quatr Mane, God of the Hunt, then donned the amulet of Kobassen, tested the breeze to make sure that she was still downwind of the herd, and began approaching them, camera in hand.

But Rheela of the Seven Stars had made one mistake—a mistake of *carelessness*—and thirty seconds later she was dead, brutally impaled upon the horn of a bull unicorn.

Hotack the Beastlayer cautiously made his way up the lower slopes of the Mountain of the Nameless One. He was a skilled tracker, a fearless hunter, and a crack shot. He picked out the

trophy he wanted, got the beast within his sights, and hurled his killing club. It flew straight and true to its mark.

And yet, less than a minute later, Hotack, his left leg badly gored, was barely able to pull himself to safety in the branches of a nearby Rainbow Tree. He, too, had made a mistake—a mistake of *ignorance*.

Bort the Pure had had a successful safari. He had taken three chimeras, a gorgon, and a beautifully matched pair of griffins. While his trolls were skinning the gorgon, he spotted a unicorn bearing a near-record horn, and, weapon in hand, he began pursuing it. The terrain gradually changed, and suddenly Bort found himself in shoulder-high kraken grass. Undaunted, he followed the trail into the dense vegetation.

But Bort the Pure, too, had made a mistake—a mistake of foolishness. His trolls found what very little remained of him some six hours later.

Carelessness, ignorance, foolishness—together they account for more deaths among unicorn hunters than all other factors combined.

Take our examples, for instance. All three hunters—Rheela, Hotack, and Bort—were experienced safari hands. They were used to extremes of temperature and terrain, they didn't object to finding insects in their ale or banshees in their tents, they knew they were going after deadly game and took all reasonable precautions before setting out.

And yet two of them died, and the third was badly maimed.

Let's examine their mistakes, and see what we can learn from them.

Rheela of the Seven Stars assimilated everything her personal wizard could tell her about unicorns, purchased the very finest photographic equipment, hired a native guide who had been on many unicorn hunts, and had a local witch doctor bless her Amulet of Kobassen. And yet, when the charge came, the amulet was of no use to her, for she had failed to properly identify the particular sub-species of unicorn before her—and,

as I am continually pointing out during my lecture tours, the Amulet of Kobassen is potent only against the rare and almost-extinct Forest unicorn. Against the Southern Savannah unicorn, the *only* effective charm is the Talisman of Triconis. *Carelessness.*

Hotack the Beastslayer, on the other hand, disdained all forms of supernatural protection. To him, the essence of the hunt was to pit himself in physical combat against his chosen prey. His killing club, a beautifully wrought and finely balanced instrument of destruction, had brought down simurghs, humbabas, and even a dreaded wooly hydra. He elected to go for the head shot, and the club flew to within a millimeter of where he had aimed it. But he hadn't counted on the unicorn's phenomenal sense of smell, nor the speed with which these surly brutes can move. Alerted to Hotack's presence, the unicorn turned its head to seek out its predator—and the killing club bounced harmlessly off its horn. Had Hotack spoken to almost any old-time unicorn hunter, he would have realized that head shots are almost impossible, and would have gone for a crippling knee shot. *Ignorance.*

Bort the Pure was aware of the unique advantages accruing to a virgin who hunts the wild unicorn, and so he had practiced sexual abstinence since he was old enough to know what the term meant. And yet he naively believed that because his virginity allowed him to approach the unicorn more easily than other hunters, the unicorn would somehow become placid and make no attempt to defend itself—and so he followed a vicious animal that was compelled to let him approach it, and entered a patch of high grass that allowed him no maneuvering room during the inevitable charge. *Foolishness.*

Every year hundreds of hopeful hunters go out in search of the unicorn, and every year all but a handful come back empty-handed—if they come back at all. And yet the unicorn can be safely stalked and successfully hunted, if only the stalkers and hunters will take the time to study their quarry.

When all is said and done, the unicorn is a relatively docile

beast (except when enraged). It is a creature of habit, and once those habits have been learned by the hopeful photographer or trophy hunter, bringing home that picture or that horn is really no more dangerous than, say, slaying an Eight-Forked Dragon—and it's certainly easier than lassoing wild minotaurs, a sport that has become all the rage these days among the smart set on the Platinum Plains.

However, before you can photograph or kill a unicorn, you have to find it—and by far the easiest way to make contact with a unicorn herd is to follow the families of smerps that track the great game migrations. The smerps, of course, have no natural enemies except for the rafsheen and the zumakin, and consequently will allow a human (or preternatural) being to approach them quite closely.

A word of warning about the smerp: with its long ears and cute, fuzzy body, it resembles nothing more than an oversized rabbit—but calling a smerp a rabbit doesn't make it one, and you would be ill-advised to underestimate the strength of these nasty little scavengers. Although they generally hunt in packs of from ten to twenty, I have more than once seen a single smerp, its aura flowing with savage strength, pull down a half-grown unicorn. Smerps are poor eating, their pelts are worthless because of the difficulty of curing and tanning the auras, and they make pretty unimpressive trophies unless you can come up with one possessing a truly magnificent set of ears—in fact, in many areas they're still classified as vermin—but the wise unicorn hunter can save himself a lot of time and effort by simply letting the smerps lead him to his prey.

With the onset of poaching, the legendary unicorn herds numbering upwards of a thousand members no longer exist, and you'll find that the typical herd today consists of from fifty to seventy-five individuals. The days when a photographer, safe and secure in a blind by a water hole could preserve on film an endless stream of the brutes coming down to drink are gone forever—and it is absolutely shocking to contemplate the number of unicorns that have died simply so their horns could

be sold on the black market. In fact, I find it appalling that anyone in this enlightened day and age still believes that a powdered unicorn horn can act as an aphrodisiac.

(Indeed, as any magus can tell you, you treat the unicorn horn with essence of grach and then boil it slowly in a solution of sphinx blood. Now *that's* an aphrodisiac!)

But I digress.

The unicorn, being a nondiscriminating browser that is equally content to feed upon grasses, leaves, fruits, and an occasional small fern tree, occurs in a wide variety of habitats, often in the company of grazers such as centaurs and the pegasus.

Once you have spotted the unicorn herd, it must be approached with great care and caution. The unicorn may have poor eyesight, and its sense of hearing may not be much better, but it has an excellent sense of smell and an absolutely awesome sense of *grimsch*, about which so much has been written that there is no point in my belaboring the subject yet again.

If you are on a camera safari, I would strongly advise against trying to get closer than one hundred yards to even a solitary beast—that sense of *grimsch* again—and most of the photographers I know swear by an 85/350mm automatic-focus zoom lens, providing, of course, that it has been blessed by a Warlock of the Third Order. If you haven't got the shots you want by sunset, my best advice is to pack it in for the day and return the next morning. Flash photography is possible, of course, but it does tend to attract golem and other even more bothersome nocturnal predators.

One final note to the camera buff: for reasons our alchemists have not yet determined, no unicorn has ever been photographed with normal emulsified film of any speed, so make sure that you use one of the more popular infra-red brands. It would be a shame to spend weeks on safari, paying for your guide, cook, and trolls, only to come away a series of photos of

the forest that you thought was merely the background to your pictures.

As for hunting the brutes, the main thing to remember is that they are as close to you as you are to them. For this reason, while I don't disdain blood sacrifices, amulets, talismans, and blessings, all of which have their proper place, I for one always feel more confident with a .550 Nitro Express in my hands. A little extra stopping power can give a hunter quite a feeling of security.

You'll want a bull unicorn, of course; they tend to have more spectacular horns than cows—and by the time a bull's horn is long enough to be worth taking, he's probably too old to be in the herd's breeding program anyway.

The head shot, for reasons explained earlier, is never a wise option. And unless your wizard teaches you the Rune of Mamhotet, thus enabling you to approach close enough to pour salt on the beast's tail and thereby pin him to the spot where he's standing, I recommend the heart shot (either heart will do—and if you have a double-barreled gun, you might try to hit both of them, just to be on the safe side).

If you have the bad fortune to merely wound the beast, he'll immediately make off for the trees or the high grass, which puts you at an enormous disadvantage. Some hunters, faced with such a situation, merely stand back and allow the smerps to finish the job for them—after all, smerps rarely devour the horn unless they're completely famished—but this is hardly sporting. The decent, honorable hunter, well aware of the unwritten rules of blood sports, will go after the unicorn himself.

The trick, of course, is to meet him on fairly open terrain. Once the unicorn lowers his head to charge, he's virtually blind, and all you need do is dance nimbly out of the way and take another shot at him—or, if you are not in possession of the Rune of Mamhotet, this would be an ideal time to get out that salt and try to sprinkle some on his tail as he races by.

When the unicorn dictates the rules of the game, you've got a much more serious situation. He'll usually double back and lie in the tall grasses beside his spoor, waiting for you to pass by, and then attempt to gore you from behind.

It is at this time that the hunter must have all his wits about him. Probably the best sign to look for is the presence of Fire-Breathing Dragonflies. These noxious little insects frequently live in symbiosis with the unicorn, cleansing his ears of parasites, and their presence usually means that the unicorn isn't far off. Yet another sign that your prey is nearby will be the flocks of hungry harpies circling overhead, waiting to swoop down and feed upon the remains of your kill; and, of course, the surest sign of all is when you hear a grunt of rage and find yourself staring into the bloodshot, beady little eyes of a wounded bull unicorn from a distance of ten feet or less. It's moments like that that make you feel truly alive, especially when you suddenly realize that this isn't necessarily a permanent condition.

All right. Let's assume that your hunt is successful. What then?

Well, your trolls will skin the beast, of course, and take special care in removing and preserving the horn. If they've been properly trained, they'll also turn the pelt into a rug, the hooves into ashtrays, the teeth into a necklace, the tail into a flyswatter, and the scrotum into a tobacco pouch. My own feeling is that you should settle for nothing less, since it goes a long way toward showing the bleeding-heart preservationists that a unicorn can supply a hunter with a lot more than just a few minutes of pleasurable sport and a horn.

And while I'm on the subject of what the unicorn can supply, let me strongly suggest that you would be missing a truly memorable experience if you were to come home from safari without having eaten unicorn meat at least once. There's nothing quite like unicorn cooked over an open campfire to top off a successful hunt. (And do remember to leave something

out for the smerps, or they might well decide that hunter is every bit as tasty as unicorn.)

So get out those amulets and talismans, visit those wizards and warlocks, pack those cameras and weapons—and good hunting to you!

The Boy Who Drew Unicorns

by
Jane Yolen

Unicorns are known for their powers of healing, but, as the bittersweet story that follows demonstrates, there are many kinds of healing, and many kinds of wounds. . . .

One of the most distinguished of modern fantasists, Jane Yolen has been compared to writers such as Oscar Wilde and Charles Perrault, and has been called the "Hans Christian Anderson of the twentieth century." Primarily known for her work for children and young adults, Yolen has produced more than sixty books, including novels, collections of short stories, poetry collections, picture books, biographies, and a book of essays on folklore and fairy tales. She has received the Golden Kite Award and the World Fantasy Award, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award. In recent years, she has also been writing more adult-oriented fantasy, work which has appeared in collections such as Tales of Wonder, Neptune Rising: Songs and Tales of the Undersea Folk, Dragonfield and Other Stories, and Merlin's Booke, and novels such as Cards of Grief, Sister Light, Sister Dark, and White Jenna. She lives with her family in Massachusetts.

* * *

There was once a boy who drew unicorns. Even before he knew their names, he caught them mane and hoof and horn on his paper. And they were white beasts and gray, black beasts and brown, galloping across the brown supermarket bags. He didn't know what to call them at first, but he knew what they called him: Phillip, a lover of horses, Philly, Phil.

Now, children, there is going to be a new boy in class today. His name is Philadelphia Carew.

Philadelphia? That's a city name not a kid's name.

Hey, my name is New York.

Call me Chicago.

I got a cousin named India, does that count?

Enough, children. This young man is very special. You must try to be kind to him. He'll be very shy. And he's had a lot of family problems.

I got family problems too, Ms. Wynne. I got a brother and he's a big problem.

Joseph, that's enough.

He's six feet tall. That's a very big problem.

Now you may all think you have problems, but this young man has more than most. You see, he doesn't talk.

Not ever?

No. Not now. Not for several years. That's close enough to ever, I think.

Bet you'd like it if we didn't talk. Not for several years.

No, I wouldn't like that at all, though if I could shut you up for several hours, Joseph . . .

Ooooooh, Joey, she's got you!

“What is the good of such drawing, Philadelphia?” his mother said. “If you have to draw, draw something useful. Draw me some money or some groceries or a new man, one who doesn't beat us. Draw us some better clothes or a bed for yourself. Draw me a job.”

But he drew only unicorns: horse-like, goat-like, deer-like, lamb-like, bull-like, things he had seen in books. Four-footed, silken swift, with the single golden horn. His corner of the apartment was papered with them.

When's he coming, Ms. Wynne?

Today. After lunch.

Does he look weird, too?

He's not weird, Joseph. He's special. And I expect you—all of you—to act special.

She means we shouldn't talk.

No, Joseph, I mean you need to think before you talk. Think what it must be like not to be able to express yourself.

I'd use my hands.

Does he use his hands, Ms. Wynne?

I don't know.

Stupid, only deaf people do that. Is he deaf?

No.

Is there something wrong with his tongue?

No.

Why doesn't he talk, then?

Why do you think?

Maybe he likes being special.

That's a very interesting idea, Joseph.

Maybe he's afraid.

Afraid to talk? Don't be dumb.

Now, Joseph, that's another interesting idea, too. What are you afraid of, children?

Snakes, Ms. Wynne.

I hate spiders.

I'm not afraid of anything!

Nothing at all, Joseph?

Maybe my big brother. When he's mad.

In school he drew unicorns down the notebook page, next to all his answers. He drew them on his test papers. On the bathroom walls. They needed no signature. Everyone knew he had made them. They were his thumbprints. They were his heartbeats. They were his scars.

Ooooooh, he's drawing them things again.

Don't you mess up my paper, Mr. Philadelphia Carew.

Leave him alone. He's just a dummy.

Horses don't have horns, dummy.

Here comes Ms. Wynne.

If you children will get back in your seats and stop crowding

around Philly. You've all seen him draw unicorns before. Now listen to me, I mean you, too, Joseph. Fold your hands and lift those shining faces to me. Good. We are going on a field trip this afternoon. Joseph, sit in your seat properly and leave Philly's paper alone. A field trip to Chevril Park. Not now, Joseph, get back in your seat. We will be going after lunch. And after your spelling test.

Ooooh, what test, Ms. Wynne?

You didn't say there was going to be a test.

The park was a place of green glades. It had trees shaped like popsicles with the chocolate running down the sides. It had trees like umbrellas that moved mysteriously in the wind. There were hidden ponds and secret streams and moist pathways between, lined with rings of white toadstools and trillium the color of blood. Cooing pigeons walked boldly on the pavement. But in the quiet underbrush hopped little brown birds with white throats. Silent throats.

From far away came a strange, magical song. It sounded like a melody mixed with a gargle, a tune touched by a laugh. It creaked, it hesitated, then it sang again. He had never heard anything like it before.

I hear it, Ms Wynne. I hear the merry-go-round.

And what does it sound like, children?

It sounds lumpy.

Don't be dumb. It sounds upsy-downsy.

It sounds happy and sad.

Joseph, what do you think it sounds like?

Like another country. Like "The Twilight Zone."

Very good, Joseph. And see, Philly is agreeing with you. And strangely, Joseph, you are right. Merry-go-rounds or carousels are from another country, another world. The first ones were built in France in the late 1700s. The best hand-carved animals still are made in Europe. What kind of animals do you think you'll see on this merry-go-round?

Horses.

Lions.

Tigers.

Camels.

Don't be dumb—camels.

There are too! I been here before. And elephants.

He saw unicorns, galloping around and around, a whole herd of them. And now he saw his mistake. They were not like horses or goats or deer or lambs or bulls. They were like—themselves. And with the sun slanting on them from beyond the trees, they were like rainbows, all colors and no colors at all.

Their mouths were open and they were calling. That was the magical song he had heard before. A strange, shimmery kind of cry, not like horses or goats or deer or lambs or bulls; more musical, with a strange rise and fall to each phrase.

He tried to count them as they ran past. Seven, fifteen, twenty-one . . . he couldn't contain them all. Sometimes they doubled back and he was forced to count them again. And again. He settled for the fact that it was a herd of unicorns. No. *Herd* was too ordinary a word for what they were. Horses came in herds. And cows. But unicorns—there had to be a special word for them all together. Suddenly he knew what it was, as if they had told him so in their wavery song. He was watching a *surprise* of unicorns.

Look at old weird Philly. He's just staring at the merry-go-round. Come on, Mr. Philadelphia Chicago New York L.A. Carew. Go on up and ride. They won't bite.

Joseph, keep your mouth shut and you might be able to hear something.

What, Ms. Wynne?

You might hear the heart's music, Joseph. That's a lot more interesting than the flapping of one's own mouth.

What does that mean, Ms. Wynne?

It means shut up, Joseph.

Ooooh, she got you, Joey.

It means shuts up, Denise, too, I bet.

All of you, mouths shut, ears open. We're going for a ride.

We don't have any money, Ms. Wynne.

That's all taken care of. Everyone pick out a horse or a whatever. Mr. Frangipanni, the owner of this carousel, can't wait all day.

Dibs on the red horse.

I got the gray elephant.

Mine's the white horse.

No, Joseph, can't you see Philly has already chosen that one.

But heroes always ride the white horse. And he isn't any kind of hero.

Choose another one, Joseph.

Aaaah, Ms. Wynne, that's not fair.

Why not take the white elephant, Joseph. Hannibal, a great hero of history, marched across the high Alps on elephants to capture Rome.

Wow—did he really?

Really, Joseph.

Okay. Where's Rome?

Who knows where Rome is? I bet Mr. Frangipanni does.

Then ask Mr. Frangipanni!

Italy, Ms. Wynne.

Italy is right. Time to mount up. That's it. We're all ready, Mr. Frangipanni.

The white flank scarcely trembled, but he saw it. "Do not be afraid," he thought. "I couldn't ever hurt you." He placed his hand gently on the tremor and it stopped.

Moving up along the length of the velvety beast, he saw the arched neck ahead of him, its blue veins like tiny rivers branching under the angel-hair mane.

One swift leap and he was on its back. The unicorn turned its head to stare at him with its amber eyes. The horn almost

touched his knee. He flinched, pulling his knee up close to his chest. The unicorn turned its head back and looked into the distance.

He could feel it move beneath him, the muscles bunching and flattening as it walked. Then with that strange wild cry, the unicorn leaped forward and began to gallop around and around the glade.

He could sense others near him, catching movement out of the corners of his eyes. Leaning down, he clung to the unicorn's mane. They ran through day and into the middle of night till the stars fell like snow behind them. He heard a great singing in his head and heart and he suddenly felt as if the strength of old kings were running in his blood. He threw his head back and laughed aloud.

Boy, am I dizzy.

My elephant was the best.

I had a red pony. Wow, did we fly!

Everyone dismounted? Now, tell me how you felt.

He slid off the silken side, feeling the solid earth beneath his feet. There was a buzz of voices around him, but he ignored them all. Instead, he turned back to the unicorn and walked toward its head. Standing still, he reached up and brought its horn down until the point rested on his chest. The golden whorls were hard and cold beneath his fingers. And if his fingers seemed to tremble ever so slightly, it was no more than how the unicorn's flesh had shuddered once under the fragile shield of its skin.

He stared into the unicorn's eyes, eyes of antique gold so old, he wondered if they had first looked on the garden where the original thrush had sung the first notes from a hand-painted bush.

Taking his right hand off the horn, he sketched a unicorn in the air between them.

As if that were all the permission it needed, the unicorn

nodded its head. The horn ripped his light shirt, right over the heart. He put his left palm over the rip. The right he held out to the unicorn. It nuzzled his hand and its breath was moist and warm.

Look, look at Philly's shirt.

Ooooh, there's blood.

Let me through, children. Thank you, Joseph, for helping him get down. Are you hurt, Philly? Now don't be afraid. Let me see. I could never hurt you. Why, I think there's a cut there. Mr. Frangipanni, come quick. Have you any bandages? The boy is hurt. It's a tiny wound but there's lots of blood so it may be very deep. Does it hurt, dear?

No.

Brave boy. Now be still till Mr. Frangipanni comes.

He spoke, Ms. Wynne. Philly spoke.

Joseph, do be still, I have enough trouble without you . . .

But he spoke, Ms. Wynne. He said "no."

Don't be silly, Joseph.

But he did. He spoke. Didn't you, Philly?

Yes.

Yes.

He turned and looked.

The unicorn nodded its head once and spoke in that high, wavering magical voice. "THE HORN HEALS."

He repeated it.

Yes. The horn heals.

He spoke! He spoke!

I'll just clean this wound, Philly, don't move. Why—that's strange. There's some blood, but only an old scar. Are you sure you're all right, dear?

Yes.

* * *

Yes.

As he watched, the unicorn dipped its horn to him once, then whirled away, disappearing into the dappled light of the trees. He wondered if he would ever capture it right on paper. It was nothing like the sketches he had drawn before. Nothing. But he would try.

Yes, Ms. Wynne, an old scar healed. I'm sure.

Ghost Town

by
Jack C. Haldeman II

Here's a compelling story about a man who is forced to make some very hard choices—choices that will shape the rest of his life. . . .

Jack C. Haldeman II has worked as a research scientist in parasitology and veterinary medicine, spent three years as part of a research team investigating the greenhouse effect for the United States Department of Agriculture, and conducted field studies of whales in the Canadian Arctic. Sometime in the 1970s, he threw all these careers over and became a full-time writer, since when he has written ten novels and over 100 short stories. His short work has appeared in Omni, Analog, Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and in many anthologies. His novels include Vector Analysis, There Is No Darkness (written in collaboration with his brother, Joe Haldeman), and Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Zombie Vampires (written in collaboration with Harry Harrison). Coming up is a novel written in collaboration with Jack Dann, High Steel. Haldeman lives with his family in Gainesville, Florida.

* * *

The clapped-out pickup almost made it to the gas station. I had to get out and push it the last fifty yards. It had been making suspiciously fatal sounds for the last couple of days, and the trail of oil it was leaving in the dusty road was not reassuring.

That I was broke and hadn't pulled a con in almost a week didn't improve my frame of mind as I huffed and sweated the piece of junk off the road and onto the hard-packed dirt of the gas station lot. A man sitting in a rocker on the station's porch watched me without moving to help. He was wearing faded

jeans and a beat-up straw hat. His eyes showed no interest in me one way or another.

I leaned against the hood, catching my breath. What a dismal place to break down, stuck in the wilds of Arizona or maybe New Mexico. I wasn't sure exactly where I was. It all looked the same to me: hot, dusty, and not a civilized thing in sight.

The town didn't even rate a stop light. It was just a crossroads in the middle of a desert nowhere; one gas station with a whole lot of junked cars out back, a feed store, a place that looked like it was a combination grocery, restaurant, and bar. There were a few other buildings, but they were mostly boarded up and abandoned. The empty buildings didn't look much better than the occupied ones. Everything in sight was tilted one way or another, with sagging roofs and collapsing porches.

A faint breeze lifted a loose corner on the tin roof of the gas station. It slapped sharply again and again, echoing out over the desert quiet, but the man on the porch didn't seem to notice or care.

I walked over and climbed the warped wooden steps. There was a waist-high metal drink cooler at one end of the porch. I opened it, and the water was dark and cold, with large chunks of ice floating in it along with cans of soft drinks. I pulled out my handkerchief, soaked it in the ice-cold water, and wiped my face. Then I grabbed a can of Dr. Pepper and cracked the top.

"Fifty cents," said the man.

I turned to him, and he still wasn't looking at me, just staring down the road that ran dusty and straight from here to forever without a turn. He might have been thirty, he might have been sixty. His face was as dry and parched as the land I'd been sputtering through for the last few days.

"In the can," he said.

Next to the cooler, an old coffee can had been nailed to the wall. There were maybe ten quarters in the bottom. I added two more, leaving me roughly six dollars to my name, and went

over, leaned against the porch railing directly in front of the man, and took two long pulls on the soda.

He had to look up at me, and he did. His eyes were deep blue, and he had the look of a man who shaved with a cheap razor. He didn't say anything, just looked. I finished my drink. He still hadn't said anything.

"Busted down," I said. He didn't reply.

"Quit on me," I added.

He nodded, but otherwise didn't move.

"Think you could take a look?" I asked.

"I suppose," he said. When he got up, I wasn't sure if it was him or the chair creaking. He walked slowly to the truck and popped the hood.

"This here is a dead truck," he said. "Thrown a rod through the engine block you did. Look right down here."

I looked, but I couldn't tell anything. It was just engine pieces and oil. All I know about cars is how to scam people out of the titles, which key to put in the dash, and where the gas goes.

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

He snorted and shook his head. "Said it was *dead*, I did, and I mean what I say."

Things looked bad, but the truck was no great loss. I'd only had it a couple of months. Conned it off a widow-woman someplace in West Texas. Got her name out of the local paper, and all it took was a fake smile and the old Bible switch. I kicked the tires.

"Let you have it for two thousand," I said. "Don't feel like messing with it anymore. I'm a busy man, and ain't got time for automotive problems."

"Not interested," he said, slamming the hood.

"Fifteen hundred," I said. "You could part it out for that, easy."

He looked in the driver's window. "Cheap AM radio," he said. "No FM, no tape, no a/c. Give you ten dollars."

"An even thousand," I said. "Look at the tires."

Twenty minutes later, as I pulled my duffel bag out of the back, he had the title to the truck, and I had fifty dollars.

"You look like a man of taste," I lied. "A man like you ought to have a good watch. I've got my father's Rolex in my bag. Give you a good price on it."

He just snorted and went back to his chair on the porch. I crossed the street in search of a cold beer.

It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dark bar, which was simply two large rooms, one a restaurant and the other a lounge of sorts, attached to the general store. I use the word *lounge* loosely, as it was mostly a collection of odd clutter, a few booths, two overstuffed sofas, a beat-up bar with mismatched stools along one end, and a distinct lack of illumination. Well, I'd been in a lot worse. I dropped my bag on the floor by the bar and took one of the stools.

A young man was playing rotation pool by himself, and two men and a woman were sitting in a booth, nursing glasses of draft beer. The shelves behind the bar were littered with junk. Odd rusted farming tools sat next to katchina dolls and masks covered with feathers. A polar bear carved out of ivory sat between a ceramic Buddha and what appeared to be an African tribal mask. Not exactly the kind of junk I'd expected in a nowhere place like this.

The barmaid came out of the kitchen in back, wiping her hands on a towel. She was tall and slender, with blue eyes, and dark hair that seemed to be going in a thousand directions all at once. A few braided strands fell to each side of her face, tightly encased within beads of stone and silver.

"Hi," she said, with a friendly smile. "What can I get you?"

"Draft beer," I said. "It's dry out there."

"Oh, you get used to it," she said as she pulled the tap. "It's not so bad. You just passing through?"

"Guess so," I said. She was wearing a sleeveless tank top and a necklace with about a thousand little things hanging from it. Amid the general clutter, I could see a turquoise bear, an

arrowhead, and a small silver unicorn. She drew the beer the way I like it, without much head, and as I set a five-dollar bill on the counter and took that first cold sip, she drew up a stool on the other side of the bar and sat down.

"Not much here to hold a person," I said. "All I've seen for the last three or four days is dust, cactus, and mountains that seem to hang on the horizon and never get any nearer."

"Oh, it's beautiful country," she said, fingering a small crystal of quartz that hung from her necklace. "And those mountains are sacred, you know; at least to some people."

"Couldn't prove it by me," I said. "They just look like something that's between me and where I want to be."

"And what place would that be?" she asked, with a smile. "Where would a man like you be headed?"

"Someplace else," I said, taking another hit of beer. "Where the action is."

"There's action here," she said. "Though probably not what you're looking for."

"I don't know what I'm looking for," I said honestly, finishing my beer and waiting while she drew another. "But I'm pretty sure it's not *here*." Her bracelets flashed as she pulled the beer. She wore several. Some were silver and turquoise, one was a simple copper band, others were strings of beadwork.

She set my beer down and locked her blue eyes with mine. "My name's Joline," she said. "Most people call me Jo. What's yours?"

"Mark Rogers," I said automatically, for some reason giving her my *real* name, something I never do with passing strangers. Dumb move.

I was rattled by the slip, and looked away. A good con man doesn't leave tracks like that.

"You seem to be a woman who appreciates fine jewelry, Jo," I said. "I've got a nice Rolex watch that used to belong to my dad. He left it for me in his will, but I've got no use for something so fancy. I could give you a good price on it."

I pulled one of the cheap imitations out of my duffel and set it between us. She gave me a hard look.

"It'd make a fine present for that special man in your life," I said, giving her my best fake smile.

She picked the five-dollar bill up off the counter and made change for the two beers, pushing it toward me and leaning back.

"No special man," she said, still looking hard. Then she cracked the slightest of smiles. "So, where'd you *really* get that watch, Mark?"

"Mexico," I said. "Bought twenty of them off a man in Tijuana. He wanted fifteen bucks apiece. We haggled. I was going to go five, but we settled on five-fifty. He said the extra fifty cents was for his kids."

"Did you believe him?" she asked. "About the kids?"

"Yes," I said, blushing. For a man who's pulled so many scams, you'd think I wouldn't have been pulled in by such an obvious ploy. But there'd been something about him; I don't know, but I *did* believe him. What a sucker!

She looked at me for a second, then turned and cracked the top on a tall can of beer. Handed it to me. "Let's take a walk," she said.

I reached to pick up my duffel bag. "You can leave that," she said.

"I'll carry it," I said, slinging the strap over my shoulder. A man like me can't be leaving sixteen imitation Rolex watches around where someone could steal his livelihood. I reached for my change on the bar.

"That'll be safe," she said firmly. I nodded and left it where it was.

"I'll watch the till," said the kid at the pool table as he sank the eleven ball. "I anticipate a real rush of customers," he added with a laugh, taking aim on the twelve.

"Thanks, Mike," Jo said. "This way."

I followed her through the kitchen, heavy with the smell of chilis, fried meat, and freshly baked bread. She gave one pot a

stir, tasted the spoon, and turned down the gas. The screen door slammed behind us, and I was looking at a scene straight out of the '60s.

A wide dirt path, or maybe it had once been a narrow road, curved out from the back steps. It was heavily rutted and scarred. But what flashed me back were all the mismatched dwellings that lined the path.

I hadn't seen such a mishmash of funkied-out, burned-out architecture since *Life* magazine, or maybe it was *People*, ran a photo spread on hippie communes back when I was a kid. No two places looked alike. The only thing they had in common was that they were all deserted and all falling apart. That didn't stop crazy Jo from *waving* at them as we walked down the path, her bracelets and—I now noticed—anklets, flashing in the late afternoon sun.

There were wrecked adobe houses and ruined log cabins. They sat beside disintegrating geodesic domes and caved-in sod huts that were nestled up next to rotting frame shanties and rusting travel trailers. A collapsed teepee leaned against something unidentifiable, apparently a home of sorts once made out of mud and sticks. All the hollow windows stared at us like the eyes of blind men, and it gave me the creeps. Jo didn't seem to mind, and she whistled and waved to them as she led me down the path, as though the empty windows were full of friends she was greeting. I was following a bedbug crazy woman, for sure.

At the end of the path was a small corral; hard-packed dirt with a few struggling weeds, surrounded by a collapsed fence of weathered junk lumber and dried tree limbs. Tumbleweeds were caught in the fence, and there was a pitiful swaybacked burro in the middle, pawing at the dirt and brushing flies off with its tail.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Jo asked, sitting on a rock. "This is my favorite place in the world."

I didn't know what to say, so I just shook my head. It looked like a dump to me.

"This place is magic," she said. "There are legends

surrounding this area that go back to the beginning of time. The Indians considered it sacred ground. The Spanish built a mission here. It's a touchpoint to the spirit world. Can you feel it?"

"No," I said truthfully.

She smiled, fingering the unicorn around her neck. "It takes time," she said. "If the time is right, you will see. Your heart must be ready."

I could *see* all right, but what I *saw* was a mangy animal, a lot of desert, and some barren mountains off in the distance.

"So tell me about your father," she said. "The one that didn't leave you that fake Rolex in his will."

Which story to tell? I had several, all lies. In one, my father was a war hero. In another, he played baseball for the New York Yankees. Or he was a stock car driver, a successful surgeon, a missionary in Africa, it all depended on the situation.

"He died in prison," I said, and couldn't believe that the words were coming out of my mouth. "A riot or something. I was, I guess, about fifteen. He robbed gas stations, and sometimes liquor stores. I never got to see much of him. He was either traveling or in jail."

The burro had come over, and she was petting the sorry beast.

"My mother split when I was two. Mostly I was raised by my aunt and uncle. My Uncle Dan did occasional second-story work, stealing jewelry and cash, stuff like that. He hardly ever got caught, and he had a good lawyer. My aunt was into welfare fraud. She got about ten checks a month under different names. They treated me okay as long as I kept running scams and bringing in some cash. I mean, they didn't beat me all that much."

I looked away from Jo. How could I be saying this? The truth was a door I thought I'd closed a long time ago. I focused on the mountains in the distance. If I squinted just a bit, one of them looked a little like an eagle half turned away from us.

“You ever been married, Mark?” she asked.

“Twice,” I said. “Not very long either time. The first was a big mistake; we were too young. The second—Mary was her name—well, I was just bad to her. She was okay and tried hard, but I just didn’t have it in me.”

“What didn’t you have in you?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Love, compassion; whatever you want to call it, I fell short. She needed a stable life, and I had a bad case of the wanders. She was good to me, though. Better than I deserved.”

“Life started in a place like this,” she said, reaching down for a handful of sand and letting it trickle slowly through her fingers.

“Pardon?”

“Africa,” she said, looking off into the distance. “Probably wasn’t too different from this place. It was a harsh beginning, but we’ve come a long way since then. I think the heat’s elemental, kind of like we were forged in some big furnace. Eventually we all come back. I think that once in our lives we find a place like this, and if our heart is clean, we’ll see the magic. Do you still love her?”

“Mary?” The shift caught me unawares. For some reason, I’d been thinking about lions. “I guess I do. I don’t know. She’s somewhere in California, last I heard. Bakersfield. I try not to think about her too much. It was a long time ago, and we were different people.”

“Some Indian tribes think we came from a spirit world. Some say it was from a cave not far from here. Others say we came from the sky. I like legends. Mostly I like them because they can *all* be true. It’s a vast universe, and there’s room for all kinds of things. What’s important is what is in your *heart*. Did you always want to be a con man?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s what I know, I guess. Oh, I finished high school all right, and even sat in on a couple of junior college classes. Mostly art classes. But my uncle, he

didn't see much use for that, and as long as I was staying at his house, I had to pull my own weight. I did okay."

"It gets cold here, too," she said. "Bitter cold. That's elemental, too. The Inuits believe that all animals have spirits and should be treated with respect, even when it is necessary to kill them for food. Are you hungry?"

Polar bears. Walrus. Flat tundra, harsh and cold.

"I guess I am," I said.

"Good," she said, hopping off the rock. "I'll put you to work and you can earn your dinner."

Walking back down the path to the restaurant, I was embarrassed at having told Jo so much. It wasn't like me at all to reveal so much of myself to anyone, much less to someone I hardly knew. My duffel bag was getting heavier. I wished I'd left it.

Someone must have been working on the lawns in front of the broken-down houses while we were at the corral. They looked a lot neater. It was only after we walked in the back door to the restaurant that I realized that I hadn't seen the buildings when I'd come into town.

Jo put me to work scrubbing pots and doing dishes. For a nowhere place, they served a lot of dinners. I didn't see most of the customers, since I was working in back, but once in a while someone would wander through the kitchen and talk to Jo or me. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. It was like a neighborhood bar and restaurant, except that there was no neighborhood.

There was no shortage of kids, though. It seemed like there were always one or two underfoot. They didn't seem to bother Jo, and she chatted with them as she cooked. They seemed to like her a lot.

One of the kids, her name was Donna, took a real interest in my rose tattoo. She was shy about it at first, but then I showed her how I could flex my arm and make the stem move. She thought that was great fun, and kept bringing her friends back into the kitchen to see it.

We kept busy all night. I enjoyed the work, and the chili Jo made was outstanding. The easy friendliness of the people coming back into the kitchen to visit made it seem like one big family. The time passed quickly, and I was surprised when Jo started closing down.

We sat in the quiet bar and talked for what seemed like hours. I told her things I'd never told anyone else. I even showed her my sketch book and she didn't laugh.

She said I had a lot of natural talent, and, with a little training, I could be a professional-level artist. I was embarrassed, but secretly pleased.

It wasn't like I was just jabbering. She really *listened* to what I said, like it was important. Not that is *was*, really; I was just telling her about how I grew up.

Jo said I could sleep on one of the sofas in the bar, and she brought in some sheets and a pillow. After she had gone, I looked in the cash register. It was full of money. She trusted me more than I trusted myself.

I closed the register and fell asleep, surrounded by all the ghostly artifacts that lined the walls of the bar.

The next morning, I followed my nose into the kitchen, where a pot of coffee was brewing. There was a note from Jo, saying that she'd gone to help a neighbor whose cow was having a difficult delivery. I poured a cup of coffee and went out the back door. I expected to feel bad for having said so much about myself the night before, but the truth was, I felt fine.

It was cool outside, the air was clear and sharp. As I walked down the path to check out that moth-eaten burro, the row of buildings didn't seem nearly as broken-down as they had the day before. I guess I was getting used to them.

I stopped short at the end of the path. The corral was gone, and in its place was a lush green field. A beautiful chestnut stallion was grazing in the middle, and looked up curiously when I dropped my coffee cup. He came over, stopping about three feet away from me.

Impossible! I reached out to touch him, and he casually stepped aside. I bent down and pulled up several sprigs of grass. They seemed real enough. I chewed on one, and it *tasted* like grass. It was all too strange. I put the grass in my shirt pocket.

As I hurried back down the path, I thought I saw a shadow move in a window of one of the adobe houses.

Jo had not returned, and I was the only one around. All the junk in the bar suddenly seemed ominous, as if each piece had a sinister story attached to it, and I started thinking about all the horror stories I'd read and all the *Twilight Zones* I'd watched on T.V. I was looking at my duffel bag and thinking about getting *out* of this crazy place before something horrible happened, when someone knocked on the door to the general store part of the building.

A man and a woman with three children stood outside the door. Their car was behind them, a rusted-out wreck loaded down with what must have been all their worldly belongings. Mattresses and a rocking chair were strapped to the roof.

"Sorry, we're closed," I said.

"Please, sir," said the man. "Milk for the children. I have one dollar." He slowly unbuttoned the front pocket on his frayed jeans jacket and pulled out a carefully folded dollar bill. He held it out for me to see.

I opened the door.

The man went over to the double glass doors where the drinks were kept. For one dollar, he might be able to get two small cartons of milk. I wondered how far that would get him. As he read the prices on the milk, the woman and their three kids—a boy and two girls—stood by the register.

"Daddy's got work in Mesilla," said the young boy proudly. "We're going to live in a real house this time."

"Hush, Danny," said the woman. "Don't bother the man." She looked up at me and smiled shyly. "Kids . . ." she said.

The woman was dressed plainly, in old, but neat and clean,

clothes. A scarf around her neck was held in place by a beadwork pin, decorated with small feathers.

"That's a nice pin," I said.

"I made it for Mama," said one of the girls, holding the woman's hand tightly. "The last school we went to had an art class. It was fun, but we had to leave."

"I do like that pin," I said. "I couldn't talk you into trading it for some groceries, could I?"

I saw hope flash through the woman's face, but she covered it well, and looked down at her daughter. "That would have to be Lisa's decision," she said. "I can't trade a gift."

"Would it be enough for a jar of peanut butter and some crackers?" the girl asked.

I nodded. "And a little more," I said.

"Give him the pin, Mama. I can make you *another* one now that I know how. And they'll probably have an art class at the school in Mesilla. It's a big place, and I *love* peanut butter."

I had to send them back three times to get more groceries. It filled four bags, and I slipped a twenty-dollar bill down in the bottom of one of the bags, so that they wouldn't find it until later. When they left, I put the Closed sign back in the window and went into the dark bar.

The pin looked good on a shelf next to a carved piece of driftwood. I picked up my duffel bag.

"Some con man *you* are," said Jo, with a gentle laugh, from the darkness. "Five cents' worth of beads and a few chicken feathers for all that food!"

"I was going to leave you money for it," I said. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough. And you know I don't care about the money."

"I was fixing to leave," I said. "This place does strange things to me."

"It does nothing but bring out what is *already* there," she said. "And I want to show you something before you go."

She turned and went through the kitchen. I set my duffel bag down and followed her out the back door.

There was magic in the air. The houses along the path shimmered and shifted as we walked past them. I held out the blades of grass."

"I found these," I said.

"You found more than that," she said. "Look."

We had reached the end of the path. An impossibly white unicorn stood in the middle of a field lush with wildflowers. It walked up to Jo and nuzzled her hair. She turned to me and smiled.

"Everyone comes to a place like this once in their lives," she said. "If your heart is right, you will recognize it for what it is. If your soul is hardened, you will pass it by and never know."

She walked over to me and kissed my cheek. Then she went back to the unicorn, and, with a fluid movement, pulled herself onto its back. They looked perfect together, as if they were one animal.

"Gook luck, Mark Rogers," she said. "You have found your path. To walk it or not is *your* decision."

She nudged the unicorn, and it turned to the right, rearing up slightly and then breaking into a gallop across the lush field of grass, which now seemed to stretch unbroken all the way to the distant mountains.

Smoke was curling from the first adobe house I passed on my way back. An old couple sat on the front porch. They waved to me and called my name. I waved back to them, as I did to all the others who lived in this place of spirits.

I got a ride with the first car passing through, driven by a heavyset man with a red beard. The back seat was full of sample cases, so I crammed my duffel down at my feet.

"Thanks," I said, settling in.

"No problem," he said, putting the car in gear. "I like to have someone to talk to. Besides, that looks like a nowhere place to be stuck looking for a ride."

"It has its good points," I said.

"Not for me. I'm a traveling salesman, and I've seen a thousand one-horse towns like that. Not worth bothering with. No profit there. What do you do when you're not hitching rides?"

"I'm studying to be an artist," I said. I looked back over my shoulder, and, as I watched, the houses behind the restaurant wavered and faded from view. The pasture was gone. Nothing but sand.

"Say, fellow, you don't have the time, do you? I've got an appointment scheduled in Flagstaff and my watch is broke."

I reached down into my duffel and pulled out one of the watches. The battery was still good, and it was keeping time. I passed it to him.

"Nice watch," he said. "Rolex, isn't it? Wish I had one, but I bet they cost a bundle."

I paused for a moment.

"No," I said. "It's just a cheap imitation. Keep it. I appreciate the ride."

Somewhere I could feel doors slamming. But, at the same time, other doors were opening.

"Thanks," he said. "So, how far are you going?"

"Bakersfield," I said, after a moment. "I'm going all the way to Bakersfield."

The Stray

by
Susan Casper
and Gardner Dozois

Here's a wry story about a woman who, when she set out from home that day, was very sure that she did not want a pet. . . .

Susan Casper has sold fiction to Playboy, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, The Twilight Zone Magazine, and to many original horror anthologies. She is co-editor, with Gardner Dozois, of the horror anthology Ripper! and has just completed her first novel, The Red Carnival.

Gardner Dozois has won two Nebula awards for his short fiction and four Hugo awards as the year's Best Editor. He is the editor of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and the annual anthology series The Year's Best Science Fiction.

* * *

You always think of a unicorn as a horse with a horn, I reflected as it galloped past my window, and this *did* look quite a bit like a horse, but in some odd indefinable way it also looked just as much like a giant cat, or an otter, or a fox, or like any other sleek, smooth-furred, swift-moving, graceful creature. I opened the window, and leaned out for a better look. Yes, it was a unicorn, all right. It was silver (silver, not gray—there was a definite metallic sheen to its coat), with a cream-colored mane and tail. The single horn was gleaming white, and spiraled, and very long. In spite of the Unicorn Tapestry pictures, it had no fringy little billygoat beard—in fact, a goat was one of the few sorts of creatures it *didn't* look like.

I didn't waste a minute thinking that I was crazy. The natural

assumption was that someone was making a movie outside, and that this was something whomped-up by the Special Effects Department, like those poor elephants that had to stand around wearing fur overcoats in *Star Wars*. Or perhaps it was a publicity stunt. It probably said EAT AT JOE'S in huge neon letters on the other side.

I had some shopping to do anyway, and so this seemed like the perfect time to go out. I grabbed my purse and let myself out the front door. The unicorn was just cantering back down the block, returning in the direction from which it had come. *Too bad Jenny goes over to Stacey's house on Sundays*, I thought, watching it run gracefully along. She was six, and she would have loved this. Then the unicorn saw me, and stopped. It daintily raised one foot, like a setter pointing, and then it tilted its head back and flared its nostrils. It was smelling me, catching my scent on the breeze.

Then it looked at me, right at me, and, still staring at me, pawed impatiently at the ground with one silver hoof, as if it were waiting for something.

As if it were waiting for *me*.

Its movements were flowing, graceful, completely natural. A pretty damn good mockup, I thought, feeling the first pangs of doubt. There didn't seem to be any cameraman in evidence—in fact, there was no one around at all this time of the morning. So, at the risk of ruining somebody's long shot, I started walking toward him. He snorted, tossed his head, and shuffled his front legs nervously. I stopped, startled, less sure by the second that this was a publicity stunt or a movie gimmick, but he wasn't running away, and didn't really *look* very dangerous—he was still staring at me gravely, with bright, intelligent eyes—and so, hesitantly, I started walking toward him again.

He snorted again when I was a few steps away, softly, a gentle whickering sound, and then I was beside him, gingerly stretching out my hand, and then I was *touching* him.

He was covered with some sort of thick silky hair or

fine-grained fur, and he was softer than anything I had ever touched, softer than the finest Angora. He was warm to the touch, and I could feel muscles twitch under his coat from time to time as he shifted position slightly. This close to him, I could hear him breathing, a deep, rhythmical sound, and I could smell him—a warm, spicy odor, not at all horselike, not at all unpleasant. I could feel his warm breath on my face. There could be no doubt anymore. This was no mechanical mockup—this was real.

Bemused, I stroked him, rubbing my hand through his thick mane, patting the graceful arch of his neck. He made a sighing sound of contentment and leaned into my fingers. We were almost eye to eye now, and his eyes watched me steadily and thoughtfully as I patted him—his eyes were large and liquid and extraordinarily beautiful, silver on ebony, flecked with specks of molten gold, like no eyes I had ever seen. I scratched his head, and then, gingerly, I brushed at the base of his horn with my fingers, but I could find no seam or junction; as far as I could tell, it grew naturally out of his forehead. Surely it would be more obvious than that if the horn had been grafted on surgically, and besides, grafted onto *what*? I knew of no breed of horse in the world that was even remotely like this—if it even *was* a horse in the first place. Right now it seemed to be purring, a decidedly unhorselike thing to do.

I had been right the first time: it was a unicorn. Plain and simple as that—nothing else but exactly what it was. I kept stroking him, and he nuzzled against my hand in a way that made me wish I had a carrot to give him. “I thought you guys were only supposed to let virgins touch you,” I said ruefully, ruffling his mane. “Well,” I continued, “I hate to tell you this, but this time you blew it. A virgin I am not. You’re too late. By about fifteen years, too late. You should have come around while I was still at Swarthmore.” But the dumb beast didn’t seem to care. He whickered and butted his nose against my shoulder, and I took this for my cue to scratch him behind the ears—which indeed it seemed to be, for he bent his neck and

sighed with pleasure. I kept scratching. He rested his head lightly on my shoulder, rolling his huge eyes and looking soulfully up at me, and then he licked me on the cheek.

I kept on patting the unicorn for what seemed like hours—and perhaps it was. But at last I began to become aware of the passage of time again. It was getting on toward afternoon, and I had things to do before Jenny got home.

I had found a unicorn, but unicorn or no unicorn, I still had to go to the Pathmark.

I stepped back away from him, and he stepped right after me, nuzzling at my hands. "Well . . ." I said. "Well, it's been lovely . . . but I have to go now. I've got shopping. . . ." He was staring at me, his eyes still bright and soulful, and suddenly I felt like a fool, standing there making polite social excuses to a mythological creature. "Okay, then," I said briskly, and I gave him one last solid pat on the neck in farewell. "Gotta go now. Goodbye!" And I turned, briskly, and briskly walked away.

I hadn't gotten very far when I heard clopping footsteps behind me, and looked around. He was following me. I stopped, feeling a trace of uneasiness. "Sorry, boy," I said firmly. "I've got to go now." He came up and nuzzled me again, and I made shooing motions at him. "Go away, now! Go on—git! Shoo!" But he didn't shoo—he just stood there and stared at me, his eyes sad and wet.

Exasperated, I turned and walked away again, walking much faster this time, but, sure enough, he kept following me. I began to run, and behind me I could hear him break into a trot. No way I was going to outrun that great beast, but fortunately I knew an easy way to lose him. A bit breathless—I'm not the jogging type, generally—I reached the place where my car was parked, and climbed into it, slamming the door behind me. Quickly, I started the car and drove away. I could see the unicorn in the rear-view mirror—he was standing by the curb and staring after me, craning his neck, looking faintly puzzled.

I felt a pang of sadness, and hoped that he would find his way home again, wherever home was. . . .

The supermarket was a madhouse, as usual, and by the time I got out of there I was tired and irritable, and the encounter with the unicorn was already beginning to seem like some strange waking dream, the vivid colors of it leached away by the world's petty gray routine.

I thought about it all the way home, wondering now if it had happened at all. I had just about decided it could not have happened, when I got out of the car and saw the unicorn again.

Not only was he still waiting there patiently for me, but my daughter Jenny was actually sitting on his back, drumming her little heels gleefully against his shaggy ribs.

My heart lurched; surprise, a momentary touch of fear that quickly faded, dismay, irritation—and a strange kind of relief, a guilty joy at seeing him again.

My daughter waved. She jumped down from the unicorn's back and rushed toward me like a small excited whirlwind, hugging me, spinning around me wildly, nearly knocking me over. "Mommy!" she yelled. "Mommy, *can we keep it?*"

"We most certainly can *not*," I said indignantly, but Jenny had already scooted back to the unicorn, and was doing a sort of mad little dance of joy around it, whining in excitement, like a puppy. "Jenny!" I called sternly. "We *can not* keep it!" The unicorn whickered softly in greeting me as I came slowly up to it, and reached out to nuzzle my hands. "None of *that*," I said grumpily. I glanced at my wildly capering daughter, and then leaned forward to whisper exasperatedly into the unicorn's ear. "Listen! Let me tell you *again*. I am *not* a virgin, understand? *Not*. There was Steve, and Robbie, and Sam, and Trevor, and Herbie, that slimy little toad. . . ." The unicorn licked my face, a touch as soft as a falling leaf. "You've made some kind of mistake," I continued doggedly. "You shouldn't be here, not with *me*. Find somebody else. Or go back to whatever fairy tale you galloped out of. . . ." The unicorn looked at me reproachfully, and my voice faltered to a stop.

My daughter had gotten tired of dancing. She had buried her face in the unicorn's mane, and was hugging him tightly; he nuzzled her hair, and licked her on the ear. "Oh, Mommy," she whispered. "He's *wonderful*. He's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. . . ."

"Well, we can't keep him," I said weakly. "So don't get too attached to him."

But already it was starting to rain, a sooty city rain that left streaks along the unicorn's shining silver flanks. The unicorn was staring at me with his great sad eyes, and I felt myself beginning to melt.

"Oh, Mommy, it's *raining*. We can't leave him out in the *rain*—"

The garage door was big enough to get him inside with no problem. At first I'd meant to make him stay in the garage, but Jenny pointed out that the door into the basement floor was almost as large as the garage door itself, and after a while I relented, and let the unicorn squeeze himself through that door too. There were only a couple of interconnected rumpus rooms down there, and the only thing of any value was Herbie's pool table, unused since the divorce, and *that* the unicorn could smash to flinders for all I cared.

"All right, Jenny, but remember, it's only for tonight. . . ."

Of course, we kept him.

Actually, he turned out to be remarkably little trouble. He seemed content to stay downstairs most of the time, as long as we visited him frequently and patted him a lot, and after a while we noticed that he didn't seem to either eat or eliminate, so two of the major problems that would have arisen if we'd been keeping an ordinary horse in our rumpus room never came up at all. To my relief, he didn't insist on trying to follow me to work on Monday, and although I half-hoped that when I came back from the office that evening, he'd be gone, I was also a bit more than half-glad when I came down the basement steps and heard him whinny to me in greeting.

Some of my friends adjusted with amazing ease to the fact

that I now had a unicorn living in the basement, and those who *couldn't* adjust soon stopped coming around at all. One of those who couldn't adjust was Ralph, the guy I was seeing at the time, and I was broken up about that for a day or two, but the unicorn snorted and gave me a look that seemed to say, *him* you're better off without, you can do better than *that*, and after a while I came to agree with him.

Jenny and I spent many evenings brushing the unicorn's beautiful coat and trying to think of a name for him, but although we made up list after list, none of the names seemed to fit. Mythological creatures are so intensely *themselves* that names are superfluous, I guess. "The unicorn" was all the name he needed.

So we settled down together, the months went by, and we had our first dusting of snow.

I was making tuna salad one frosty winter morning when Jenny came running excitedly into the kitchen. "Mommy!" she said breathlessly. "Mommy, the unicorn went into the closet!"

"That's nice," I said, continuing to dice an onion.

"And he's making a *nest* in there, and everything!"

"Uh-oh," I said. I put down the knife and rushed out of the room, Jenny scampering at my heels.

It was the large walk-in storage closet in the basement, but it was still a closet, and the unicorn had made a nest in there all right, pulling down old coats and dresses and treading and pawing them all into a nice fluffy mound. I leaned wearily against the doorjamb—I had been through this before with innumerable tabby cats, and knew what to expect, but Jenny was peeking timidly around my hip and saying in a hushed little voice, "Mommy, what *is* it?" and so I sighed, and knelt, and peered more closely myself.

Inside the warm semi-darkness of the storage closet, the unicorn softly whickered. She looked tired and rumped and very proud of herself.

Of course, she had kittens in there. Kittens, colts, foals, whatever you want to call them. Babies. Baby unicorns.

There were five of them white as snow and about the size of cocker spaniels, nuzzling up against their mother's side. Their stubby little horns were still covered with furry velvet, and except for the fact that they were squirming and moving about, they looked just like the unicorn plush toys you sometimes see in the more imaginative gift shops.

"Funny," I said, "you didn't *look* pregnant." I met the unicorn's liquid eyes, and she stared back at me serenely and guilelessly. "So, old girl," I said ruefully. "You weren't a virgin either, were you? No wonder you didn't care."

The unicorn whickered again and blew out its lips with a soft snorting sound, and I sighed. I thought of the snow that was gusting around outside. No wonder you wanted a place to live—you might not be so hot at recognizing virgins, but you sure knew a sucker when you saw one. The unicorn rested her head in my lap, staring lovingly up at me out of her enormous eyes, and gently licked my hand with her velvet tongue.

Jenny was leaning by me now, her eyes as wide as saucers, her face soft with wonder. "Oh, *Mommy* . . ." she breathed. "Oh, *Mommy*, they're so *pretty*—"

The babies were squeaking and squirming about, making little mewling noises, and one of them nuzzled its mole-soft nose trustingly into my hand, searching blindly for milk, gently nibbling me with its soft little lips. . . .

I sighed again.

So this week I put an ad in the paper:

UNICORNS—FREE TO GOOD HOMES.

But somehow I don't think we're going to get many replies.

The Shade of Lo Man Gong

by
William F. Wu

William F. Wu is a popular young author who has been a frequent contributor to Analog and Pulphouse, as well as to such markets as Omni and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. His well-received series of stories about the supernatural adventures of Jack Hong, to which the story that follows belongs, will be reprinted in chronological order by Pulphouse Publishing as part of their "Short Story Paperback" line. His novels include Hong on the Range, MasterPlay, and The Second Book of Chaos. His most recent novel is The Robin Hood Ambush. He lives in El Mirage, California.

Here he shows us that even the longest journey must begin with just a single step. . . .

* * *

I was standing on Main Street in the fading darkness of early morning, ready to stick my thumb out, walking backward down the sidewalk. The only lights, though, came from streetlights and locked-up storefronts. The city was still asleep.

I needed direction in my life.

On the graveyard shift, lunchtime should have fallen around four in the morning. I waited until six every day, though, so I could eat breakfast in the Canton Forever, a greasy little Chinese diner that served congee in the morning. Every day, just as alarm clocks were buzzing and ringing all over town, I walked there from whatever supermarket I had been gracing with my janitorial expertise that night.

I worked for a string of six supermarkets and rotated six nights a week, filling in for the regular janitor on his night off.

It was the most creative, challenging field I had ever worked in.

"Cuh *ming*, Mistah Hong," said the proprietor. He was trying to say "Come in." As I entered, he held the door and gave me his usual broad, phony smile and jerky nods. Then he reversed the sign to "Open."

"Cuh *ming*," he repeated, still smiling. He was a short, muscular immigrant with permanently uncombed hair, anywhere between twenty-five and forty years old. Maybe. He wore baggy gray flannel pants and a white undershirt he called a singlet.

I slid into my usual booth.

The little diner had a perpetually dingy look to its black and white linoleum tiles, white formica tables, and torn fake-leather booths. It looked like a set for a cheap biker movie. Still, the food was good and it was hot.

"Goo moing," said the guy's wife. It was her version of "good morning." She was short and chubby, with a pleasant smile. Then she set down a big bowl of hot, steaming congee—a thick rice gruel with vegetables and meat in it, plus a little plate of other stuff I could drop in it. I liked it all, but I didn't know what most of it was.

"Hi." I leaned forward to smell the steam and reached for the soy sauce.

She poured tea for me and left the metal pot. After I had ordered the same breakfast six mornings a week for two weeks, she had quit taking my order and now just brought it out to me. I had been coming for two years.

Other people began drifting in, most of them regulars. Traffic picked up outside. A rowdy bunch of guys, dirty and sweaty and red-eyed, wearing ratty T-shirts cut off over the waist and baggy, stained pants and work boots, crowded into one booth. They had the nervous energy and raucous laughter of people who had stayed up all night without planning to.

I ate with a porcelain Chinese spoon, watching the kitchen door as I did every day. Every so often, the couple's daughter, who appeared to be about four, would peek out and look at me.

If I smiled at her, she ran away in terror. However, if I concentrated on my congee, she would watch me until her mother yelled at her.

I sat there blowing on the congee and pondering the directionless state of my existence. That was another morning ritual. I had expected more than brooms and mops out of life, but was now unburdened of that fallacy.

Working alone every night, six nights out of seven, gave me a strange isolated routine. I had no friends in town, only acquaintances, and had somehow lost the drive for close companionship. Still, I did nothing to fight the situation; I had no more rebelliousness than the dried brown fluffy stuff and the green shiny pickled stuff I was drowning in the congee.

The kitchen door creaked open a few inches. I looked away, into my bowl, and watched one black pigtail in a red ribbon appear in the corner of my eye. A second later, two small dark eyes peered at me intently out of a chubby face.

Smiley came out to bring tea to the guys who had been up all night. He took a long time getting their orders, since they kept giggling and yelling at each other. Finally, though, he gave them one more idiot smile and returned to the kitchen.

I scraped the bottom of the bowl for the end of the congee and sat back, gazing blankly at the empty seat across from me. The rut I was in took me in a circle, rotating from supermarket to supermarket without meeting anyone new or finding any breaks in the routine. My mind knew there was more to life, but I didn't feel there was. The seat had dried mustard on it. So what?

"Hi, sweetie," called one of the rowdy guys.

I turned to look. The little girl had been peeking out of the kitchen. She started to duck back, but her father came out with several pieces of sausage and eggs and she had to dart forward, to hide among the tables and chairs.

I sipped my tea. It was hard to believe I had been a janitor for two years, but in the beginning it had been hard to believe

I was going to do it at all. Well, so much for deep reflective self-analysis.

“Say ‘hi,’ kid.”

The little girl cowered against a chair, but she didn't run. One of the guys rose and picked her up. She stared at him, wide-eyed, without making any noise.

“What's your name?” Still holding her, the guy returned to the booth. Some of his friends started talking to her, but she was too scared to respond. They meant to be nice, actually, but they were strangers to her and loud and rough.

I looked at the kitchen door. Her mother and father were talking inside as they prepared the orders of other patrons. “Uh . . . wait a minute.” My voice was not loud enough, and wavered uncertainly.

I didn't do things like this. Solitude and isolation defined my life.

“Hi, honey. Say ‘hi.’” The guy holding her laughed and held her up to a friend, who tried to tickle her. All of them guffawed and petted her on the top of her head, or on her cheeks and shoulders. She started to sniffle.

I glanced back at the kitchen again, but Smiley and his wife were still busy back there. With a deep breath, I got up and walked slowly over to the table, hoping they would put the kid down before I got there.

They didn't, though.

They looked up at me, expectantly.

“Could I, uh, have her? We're, uh, old friends.”

“Aw, we aren't hurtin' her.” One of them laughed, showing multicolored teeth, all shades of brown and green.

“Yeah, she likes me,” said the one holding her. He lifted her up and nuzzled her with a day's growth of beard.

She sniffled harder. They weren't going to hurt her, but they weren't too sensitive, either. On the other hand, I had no clear idea of what I was doing.

“I'll take her,” I said firmly.

“Oh, yeah?” The one in front of me laughed, stood up, and

gave me a casual shove on the chest. I batted his hand away, folded my stomach over his fists, and then rammed the side of my head onto a metal teapot lifted, no doubt ceremoniously, by one of the others.

This was not the direction I was looking for.

I grabbed all six of them by the shirt front and yanked them down on top of me on the floor, which bounced twice against the back of my head. I heard the kid screaming, and a lot of people shouting, as I drifted off to sleep.

The screams woke me up. I bolted upright in the darkness, still screaming, panicked by the noise. The screams echoed in my skull and scorched my throat. I threw myself shoulder-first off the narrow bunk and fell screaming through the shaft of moonlight from a window crisscrossed by heavy wire.

The impact shut me up. I gathered my wits and myself off the floor and returned to my bunk just before the men in blue came running in. They flashed lights around the dorm, muttered to themselves, and walked away reluctantly. When dawn arrived, I woke up like everyone else.

Dormitory Two was just a big room in the one-story building, as opposed to Dormitory One, which was another room in the same building. From our regimented walks down the hall at prescribed times, the only difference I could see was in the signs. Dormitory One had a sign saying "1." Dormitory Two had a sign saying "No Smoking in Hallway."

The room had five rows of beds, fifteen deep, made of molded plastic with little walls separating the beds and thin little mattresses.

A big tv, turned off, sat bolted to a high shelf at the front of the room. A trustee, wearing white, swept patiently around the room, rarely looking up. After a while, the men in blue trooped down the hall toward us, visible through the solid glass on the upper half of the interior wall. The outside walls had no windows. They unlocked the door and led us out to breakfast at the mess hall.

I tried to lose myself in the middle of the crowd, straightening my new two-piece suit of institutional green as I went. It fit like a pillowcase on a rabbit. We went up the hall past the guard station, the showers, and Dormitory One to the door of the building. Outside, I squinted in the sunny April afternoon. I had seen very few sunny afternoons since taking over the graveyard shift.

Breakfast in the mess hall was much like my own cooking, gray and tasteless. Just as I turned my used tray in at the window, one of the men in blue came up and motioned for me to go with him.

“Hong,” was all he said.

I followed him, outside and up a little sidewalk to the main building. The man in blue walked with his hands in his pockets and just glanced over his shoulder occasionally to make sure I was still behind him.

And he considered himself a lawman.

All around us, guys in green were working on the grounds. One was driving a small tractor with a wide mower hitched to the back. Two guys with rakes ran around chasing the clippings. I could hear the banging of hammers and the rhythmic buzzing of a hand saw, but I didn't see them anywhere. This was a minimum security place. The inmates kept the County Farm functioning; in a sense, we were all trustees.

I followed the man in blue into the back of the main building, giving one curious glance toward the women's building before I went in. None of them was in sight. That was no surprise.

The main building was mostly offices, but it also housed the medical facilities. They were completely sealed off from the rest of the building, accessible only through a heavy metal door. Inside, everything was different.

The man in blue turned me over to a nurse and then left.

“Mr. Hong?” She smiled pleasantly. “I'm Marian. I received your card, volunteering your services.”

“Hi,” I said cautiously. She was about forty and extremely pretty. Her most notable feature was lavender eye shadow. She was tall and big-boned, with a solid, efficient look. I had been looking exclusively at men in blue and men in green or white for some time.

“Come into the office.” She turned, and I followed her into a small room, studying her snug nurse’s uniform.

The room had been set up as a neat and clean little office, though it was extremely cramped. It smelled like a bottle of cologne had been broken in there recently. A guy with a pointy face and baggy clothes was writing at a desk. He looked like a rat in a zoot suit.

“Andy,” said Marian. “This is Mr. Hong. Jack, this is Mr. Sand.”

“All right,” said the guy, looking up. “You’ll be with us fourteen days, correct?”

“Yes.” I’d been given thirty, with credit for the fifteen I had done at the County Jail before anyone had given me any.

“Well, we only have one study to put you on right now. A malaria study began yesterday. Can you read?”

“Yeah. I also go to the bathroom alone and cut my own toenails.” That, or something like it, was from a movie I had seen once.

Marian laughed, but Sand ignored me.

“Here,” he said. “This is the contract.”

He handed me a single sheet of paper. If I signed it, they would inject me with malaria and then keep me in the infirmary until they cured it. I would get one hundred fifty dollars from them, in addition to malaria, the money payable when I was released less any purchases I made at the commissary. They had three strains of malaria, of varying strengths and several cures. Also, if I developed malaria any time in the rest of my life, I could enter a hospital anywhere in this country to be cured at the expense of this natty rodent.

“My name’s cheap; I’ll sign.” I took the pen the guy held out and wrote my name. They were confident they could cure

me; most likely, they were testing their cures for side effects, like to see if curing malaria made my feet jettison my toes or something.

I spent the rest of the day getting acquainted with my new surroundings. Outside the rat's office, Marian led me down another long rectangular room to the far end. The near half was the regular infirmary of twelve beds, where they kept inmates who were contagious but not sick enough for a hospital. It was empty now, and the overhead lights were out.

The far half was the research unit. One portion of it was also empty of people, though the beds were full of strange elaborate contraptions made of clear plastic tubes and cubes and swirly shapes. The area against the far wall was lit up.

This section had four beds facing the wall so the occupants could see a small black and white tv. Another two beds were placed alongside the tv. To the left stood a desk with an old manual typewriter and a telephone. Marian pointed out my bed, against one of the far walls, and left.

I sat down and looked around. The three other beds in my row were full, and all three guys were asleep. One, however—despite being asleep or maybe delirious—kept rolling around and sitting up. He was in his thirties and glistened with a layer of sweat, like a roasting duck. Every time he rolled my way, he gave out a stare that clearly saw nothing this side of dreamland. The guy in the middle was black and lay face down on the mattress as motionless as the bed itself. The bed next to me held another white guy who seemed to be sleeping normally.

I didn't have much to do. After a moment, I got up and turned on the tv, and spent the morning watching game shows. Marian came in and gave me a shot as I observed a young blonde housewife decide whether to accept three hundred dollars and go home, or risk it all by continuing to play. As Marian eased any number of tiny malaria bugs into my bloodstream, the contestant won another seventy-five dollars by agreeing to have two live frogs dropped into her halter top. Between the two of us, I suspected she had the better deal.

Marian brought me lunch on one of the metal trays and I watched an old black-and-white horror movie. None of my companions in experimentation woke up.

Marian glanced at the movie on tv as she breezed through to collect my lunch tray. "Looks like the malaria unit, here."

I watched her go, then looked back at the movie.

On the screen, a German doctor in a long white coat was giving injections to a bunch of people strapped down on narrow cots, all in a row. Except for the straps, they looked very much like my snoozing partners and I. As I watched, one of them raised his palm and started screaming in horror when he saw fur growing on it.

I looked at my own palm. It was sweaty, but not hirsute.

Yet.

The movie was dull, and my eyes kept closing. So, I had awakened screaming again last night. That kept happening. I didn't remember my dreams—nightmares, really—but I knew what they were about. After all, what was I doing in jail, anyhow? Then again, it was easier than sweeping grocery stores, a position from which I had no doubt been cashiered.

I drifted off to sleep once again, with the sound of muffled shrieks and whimpers emanating from the little tv. One guy had stolen a straight razor, either to escape or to shave his palms. This room was homey, and better than a dormitory full of men talking.

I woke up to the sensation of a cool thermometer sliding between my teeth. I squinted my eyes open and gazed at Marian as she also held my wrist and studied her watch. Painfully bright streaks of sunlight slanted severely through the windows, set high on the walls. Apparently dinner time was approaching. I could feel that I had a fever, but it didn't seem too bad. Yet.

When Marian began shaking down the mercury, I asked, "What'd it say?"

"I'll get you some aspirin."

I tried to make a joke about a talking thermometer, but she turned away too soon.

Marian gave me the aspirin, brought me dinner, and went off duty. A smaller, younger nurse with dirty-blonde hair came on, but I floated back to sleep before I heard her speak.

The dream was a vision:

A hand gripped the sword handle, and hard muscles tensed along the forearm.

I.

I.

I am.

I am.

I am the law.

The law is mine.

I am the law.

The clash of steel in the night, the swirl of robes, and the screaming of horses faded away in spinning moonbeams.

I awakened suddenly, comfortably cool in the darkened infirmary. My diseased comrades were all still breathing, from what I could tell. I supposed one or two of them had awakened occasionally when I was sleeping. For their sake, I hoped so. I turned to one side, where the gentle moonlight streaked in through the windows. A heavy-set elderly man sat fused with the light, up on the high windowsill of yellow cinder blocks.

Discounting the sight, I closed my eyes to go back to sleep. Though the aspirin had taken my fever down, I was still sick and needed rest. Yet . . .

I looked again. The strange shape was still there, a kind of shade against the moonlight, translucent but sharply defined. It was an old man, Chinese by race and heritage, wearing a rumpled baggy black suit and a battered brown felt hat with

a broad brim. It might have been a '20s snapbrim, back when it still had some firmness.

"You see me, eh, Chinaman?" His voice was gentle, hoarse, and accented. The outline of his hat and head had changed; he had turned to face me.

Delirious, I thought to myself, and closed my eyes again.

Then again . . .

I looked once more. He was still there, an old man perched up high, with moonlight glowing through his form.

"Why are you here, Chinaman?"

No one else was awake here. If I talked to a window for a little while, no one else would know.

"Judge gave me a little time." I cleared my throat, which was hoarse from disuse. "Disturbing the peace, vandalism, assault . . . I forget exactly what."

"You do it?"

"No! I mean, I did, but I didn't do anything wrong. I was trying to help. Only, the owners of this place—this little restaurant—called the cops and had *me* thrown in jail. Not the guys who were pestering their kid."

"Why they do that?"

"I . . . I'm not sure."

"You don't know why they do that?"

"I said *no*," I answered with anger, but was too tired to project my voice any. Besides, getting mad at a hallucination was silly. I was just sick enough not to care if he was real or not.

"You good boy; that's good." He nodded to himself. "Who you?"

"I'm Jack Hong. Who are you?"

He smiled, slowly and wearily. "Nobody care me. You call me, ah, Lo Man Gong. Okay?"

Lo Man Gong, the slang term for the old men of Chinatown in earlier times. A general term he was taking for a name.

"Okay," I said aloud.

"You like me."

"Huh? I guess so."

"No, no. You like me."

"Sure. I like you."

He shook his head. "No, I mean, you and me, alla same."

"Mm—oh. We're alike?"

"Yah, we alike." He nodded sharply, his hat exaggerating the movement. "We *Tong yun*."

Tong yun, people of Tang. It was an old slang term for people from Guangdong Province, who still spoke the language of the Golden Age of China under the Tang Dynasty. I knew just a little about that sort of thing, stuff I had picked up here and there.

He confirmed it for me. "*Tong yun*, yah. We are *Guangdong yun*. Not the effete Song, or the slaves of Yan, or the hidebound Ming. Not the weaklings under Qing. We are people of Tang, the glory of China, masters of our world."

I was surprised. In English, he shifted dialects, and used Mandarin names, not the See Yup dialect he used with Chinese phrases. "I'm no master of anything."

"Your life is your world, same as anyone else. You *Tong yun*, you make your own life. Your own laws."

I shook my head. "I'm no criminal. I'm a law-abiding citizen. We can't all go making our own laws; then there wouldn't be any law at all." I sounded like a schoolmarm.

He lowered his head and shook it. "Not outlaw, not lawless. Your own law. You live by the laws you make. Your principles, your life, your law to live by."

So I got it, finally. He meant a way of life, and I did need something like that.

"You like me. I was like you. I come over here as teacher, many year ago. Work laundry, gamble some. Work restaurant, sweep floor. Now longtime Californ', dead many year. Back then, Chinaman don't teach much; they don't allow." He raised his head slightly. "Nobody teach you, eh?"

"I went to college . . ."

“‘Goo’ boy, goo’ boy. You go college, okay. But nobody teach you, eh?”

I didn’t say anything. First, I wasn’t sure what he meant, and second, I wasn’t sure he was there at all. I was sleepy and ill with malaria. With no more than a closing of my eyes, I shut him out and went to sleep.

The malaria really took hold the next day. I slept until the room was bright with sunshine, and awakened only long enough for Marian to give me more aspirin. At some point, she would start giving me the cure, whatever it was. Until then, I would sleep, take aspirin, and feel my fever go up and down. Sometimes, I was just barely aware of shots and thermometers.

The fever broke just before mealtimes, and I ate some lunch and dinner. After each one, I stared unthinkingly at the black and white tv until I eased back to sleep again. I thrashed a lot, trying to avoid the heat I was generating, but if I dreamed again, I never remembered it.

Directionless, I had been directionless for years. That dream about the hand on the sword, I recognized that in one of my half-waking fevered states: it was the written character for “I,” the personal pronoun, in Chinese. I.

To become an “I,” I needed my hand on my sword—needed my own laws to live by.

That’s what I had done in the restaurant, of course. Of course.

My fever broke again in the dead of night. This time I really did feel better, and suspected that Marian had been giving me doses of their experimental cure during the previous day. If so, it had worked well. Since they knew I only had two weeks here, they had probably given me the weakest strain of malaria and the most effective cure. Now, they would continue checking my vital signs and skin pigmentation for side effects as my recovery progressed.

The moonlight was still strong, and Lo Man Gong still sat up on the overhead window, where few people and no old men could ever get.

"Feel better, Chinaman?" he asked mildly.

The night before, my resistance had been low, and his presence had seemed tolerable, if not rational. Now I was more clear headed . . . yet he was still here. I didn't like him as much.

I let my eyes drop closed again. Once I was cured of malaria, I'd be free of him. I had eaten twice today; now, if I slept well, I'd be in sound shape pretty soon.

"You know the *kei-lin*, Chinaman Jack?"

That was the Chinese unicorn, a mystical animal whose rare appearances were highly auspicious. In the Cantonese I normally heard, it was pronounced "*kei-lun*." It wasn't like European ones, though. This unicorn had the body of a deer, the hooves of a horse, the tail of an ox, and a fleshy horn. I knew that much.

"The unicorn?" I opened my eyes and looked at him. As before the moonlight glowed through his shape.

"Ah, you know the *kei-lin*." He smiled and nodded thoughtfully. "The *kei-lin* means good things happen. It's very powerful."

I watched him silently.

After a while, he looked into my eyes again. "Nobody remember me, Jack. Some people remember some of my friend. A few of them. Most, nobody remember at all. No children, no relative. You, Jack. You like me. Unless you change."

Yes, I knew that. I had already come to understand that. And I knew that he had come for me, here in the middle of the country, away from his home as longtime Californian. But I didn't know why.

"Who you, Jack?"

I shrugged. "Just Jack Hong."

"No. You Jack Ng."

"No, no. Hong. H-o-n-g."

He shook his head firmly.

"You Jack Ng. I know. Long time ago, when I was still

alive, I have friend come over. His name Ng Wen-lim, come over from Toisan like me. You know Toisan?"

I nodded. "My family was Toisanese."

"So, Ng Wen-lim can't come in here. Not allowed by 'Merican law. So, he changed his name to Hong, come in as son of fella already here. Pay money to be his son. You understand?"

I was chilled to the bone, literally, as my joints and spine ached with confusion and malaria.

"I never found wife. No China girl allowed here in those days, or not enough. By law. Chinaman can't marry other kind girl then, either, most states. You descend my old friend, but you don't know who you are."

"Ng? Jack Ng?"

"You descend from Ng, but you, yah, you Jack Hong."

"Yeah . . . yeah, okay." I nodded slowly, sideways on the pillow. "I see that. No matter what the name was before, I've always been Jack Hong. I still am."

"Don't want to be like me. You like me, you no life forever. Don't be like me."

I watched him, letting that sink in.

"C'mere, Jack."

That surprised me, but I slowly drew back the covers and stood up on the cold floor, barefoot. I was glad I had used the bathroom the last time I'd been awake. With my arms out for balance, and still light-headed, I made my way to the wall. The sill on which the shade of Lo Man Gong sat was at the height of my nose.

"Look outside," he whispered.

I rose up on tiptoe, leaning against the sill. At first, I couldn't see anything but the lawn, some trees, and of course the chainlink fence, topped with six rows of barbed wire. All were pale and inviting in the strong light of the moon.

"Through the fence," he whispered.

I searched for a moment, and then saw it. The oxtail flicked gently back and forth as it moved primly on its horse's hooves

over a concrete curb. The *kei-lin* would not step on any living thing, not even plants. As I watched it swung its head upward for a moment into a clear profile. The single horn shone slightly in the moonlight.

"Your clothes locker is unlock," whispered the shade at my side. "When the man in blue put your stuff away, he thought he saw a little something scary, and got careless. He hurry away too fast."

I turned slowly to look up at him. The brim of his hat hid most of his face.

"The window not lock. No wire here. The woman in white opened it to wash here, and she saw something, too. Forgot to lock again." He chuckled softly, in a dry voice. "She got spook."

I was a good little boy, a law-abiding citizen. Nor did I believe in ghosts. I was just sick and probably delirious. Or maybe this was one of the side-effects Marian was testing for.

Actually, I didn't feel very sick anymore, or delirious at all. My dreams had been vague and confused and mysterious, but Lo Man Gong and the *kei-lin* were as clear as the cool windowsill and the cold floor.

"Do you know why they did it?" I asked quietly.

"Your restaurant frien's. No, I don't know why. Or maybe I do. Maybe Chinaman customer take for granted, 'Merican boy customer more important. But the *kei-lin* has come for you. Come very rare, maybe hundred, thousand year apart. Very auspicious. Maybe *kei-lin* know why they put you in jail, not the others. But maybe, it don't care."

"I don't suppose it does." I watched it, moving about slightly by the fence. It was waiting for me now, but I doubted it would wait long. I had twelve days left to do. I could go to the *kei-lin* now, or wait to get well and serve out my time. If I waited, I would just have to figure I was delirious. The *kei-lin* and Lo Man Gong were just figments out of disease, to be long forgotten in the sunlight of a normal day.

Instead, I reached for my sword.

Quickly, I walked to the lockers and extracted my clothes. I needed a shower and something more to eat, but those were impossible. Once I was dressed, I put my hands on the windowsill and started to pull and squirm up the wall. In my weakened condition, it was harder than it should have been. I stopped when I happened to glimpse the rows of barbed wire strung over the fence.

“Blanket,” said Lo Man Gong, in his dry, raspy voice.

I dropped to the floor and stripped the blanket off my bed. A minute later, I was scaling the wall again, with the folded blanket draped across my shoulders like an obese towel.

From the windowsill, I was able to open the window with some effort. Then, with a sudden thrill of excitement, I climbed through the opening and dropped to the dewy grass below. I was an escaped convict now, with three months automatically added to my time if I was caught.

I trotted quickly across the lawn. This was a minimum security facility, I repeated to myself, and I had heard on my first day that a number of inmates escaped every so often. Most were vagrants who were easily picked up again later, especially visible in their green institutional suits.

I hadn't climbed a chainlink fence since I was little. My feet were a lot bigger now, of course, but the climb was no different. The black boots I wore had a slightly narrow, rounded toe that fit right into the openings. When I reached the top, I carefully arranged the blanket over the barbed wire. Then, gingerly, I put my hands on the blanket and began to shift my weight.

I was just swinging one leg over the blanketed wires when it slipped. The pale night spun in my eyes as my legs flung around, the blanket flipped over the moon, and I landed hard on the damp grass. I lay motionless, stunned.

After a moment, the bright round moon came back into focus. I heard the wind rustling the leaves of the tree overhead. Slowly, I rolled to one side and got to my feet. I was hurting, mostly where I'd been banged up in the restaurant.

The *kei-lin* had turned to look at me with one glistening eye. Then it swung around and began to walk away, up the driveway. I started after it.

As I went, I took one look back at the window. The shade of Lo Man Gong was still sitting motionless on the sill, his hat brim pulled low. As I watched, he suddenly just wasn't there anymore.

Ahead of me, the *kei-lin* went into a canter and moved smoothly through the darkness, down the deserted street. I ran after it clumsily in my boots.

"I'm coming," I said softly after it. "I'm coming—Jack Ng, Jack Hong. I."

The Princess, the Cat, and the Unicorn

by

Patricia C. Wrede

Patricia C. Wrede is one of today's most popular young fantasists. Her novels include Shadow Magic, The Seven Towers, The Daughter of Witches, The Harp of I Mach Thysell, Sorcery and Cecelia (with Caroline Stevermer), Snow White and Roses Red, and the popular Talking to Dragons. Her most recent novel is Searching for Dragons. She is also a co-creator of the Liavek fantasy anthology series, which is edited by Will Shetterly and Emma Bull. She lives in Edina, Minnesota.

Here she spins a charming variation on the traditional fairy tale . . . with a few updated surprises.

* * *

Princess Elyssa and her sisters lived in the tiny, comfortable kingdom of Oslett, where nothing ever seemed to go quite the way it was supposed to. The castle garden grew splendid dandelions, but refused to produce either columbine or deadly nightshade. The magic carpet had a bad case of moths and the King's prized seven-league boots only went five-and-a-half leagues at a step (six leagues, with a good tail wind).

There were, of course, compensations. None of the fairies lived close enough to come to the Princesses' christenings (though they were all most carefully invited) so there were no evil enchantments laid on any of the three Princesses. The King's second wife was neither a wicked witch nor an ogress, but a plump, motherly woman who was very fond of her stepdaughters. And the only giant in the neighborhood was a kind and elderly Frost Giant who was always invited to the

castle during the hottest part of the summer (his presence cooled things off wonderfully, and he rather liked being useful).

The King's councillors, however, complained bitterly about the situation. They felt it was beneath their dignity to run a kingdom where nothing ever behaved quite as it should. They grumbled about the moths and dandelions, muttered about the five-and-a-half-league boots and remonstrated with the Queen and the three Princesses about their duties.

Elyssa was the middle Princess, and as far as the King's councillors were concerned she was the most unsatisfactory of all. Her hair was not black, like her elder sister Orand's, nor a golden corn color, like her younger sister Dacia's. Elyssa's hair was mouse-brown. Her eyes were brown, too, and her chin was the sort usually described as "determined." She was also rather short, and she had a distressing tendency to freckle.

"It's all very well for a middle Princess to be ordinary," the chief of the King's councillors told her in exasperation. "But this is going too far!"

"It was only the second-best teapot," said Elyssa, who had just broken it. "And I did say I was sorry."

"If you'd only pay more attention to your duties, things like this wouldn't happen!" the councillor huffed.

"I dusted under the throne just this morning," said Elyssa indignantly. "And it's Orand's turn to polish the crown!"

"I don't mean those duties!" the councillor snapped. "I mean the duties of your position. For instance, you and Orand ought to be fearfully jealous of Dacia, but are you? No! You won't even try."

"I should think not!" Elyssa said. "Why on earth should I be jealous of Dacia?"

"She's beautiful and accomplished and your father's favorite, and—and elder Princesses are *supposed* to dislike their younger sisters," the councillor said.

"No one could dislike Dacia," Elyssa said. "And besides, Papa wouldn't like it."

The councillor sighed, for this was undoubtedly true. "Couldn't you and Orand steal a magic ring from her?" he pleaded. "Just for form's sake?"

"Absolutely not," Elyssa said firmly, and left to get a broom to sweep up the remains of the teapot.

But the councillors refused to give up. They badgered and pestered and hounded poor Elyssa until she simply could not bear it anymore. Finally she went to her stepmother, the Queen, and complained.

"Hmmpf," said the Queen. "They're being ridiculous, as usual. I could have your father talk to them, if you wish."

"It won't do any good," Elyssa said.

"You're probably right," the Queen agreed, and they sat for a moment in gloomy silence.

"I wish I could just run off to seek my fortune," Elyssa said with a sigh.

Her stepmother straightened up suddenly. "Of course! The very thing. Why didn't I think of that?"

"But I'm the *middle* Princess," Elyssa said. "It's youngest Princesses who go off to seek their fortunes."

"You've been listening to those councillors too much," the Queen said. "They won't like it, of course, but that will be good for them." The Queen was not at all fond of the councillors, because they kept trying to persuade her to turn her stepdaughters into swans or throw them out of the castle while the King was away.

"It would be fun to try," Elyssa said in a wistful tone. She had always liked the idea of running off to seek her fortune, even if most of the stories did make it sound rather uncomfortable.

"It's the perfect solution," the Queen assured her. "I'll arrange with your father to leave the East Gate unlocked tomorrow night, so you can get out. Orand and Dacia can help you pack. And I'll write you a reference to Queen Hildegard from two kingdoms over, so you'll be able to find a nice job as

a kitchen maid. We won't tell the councillors a thing until after you've left."

To Elyssa's surprise, the entire Royal Family was positively enthusiastic about the scheme. Orand and Dacia had a long, happy argument about just what Elyssa ought to carry in her little bundle. The King kissed her cheek and told her she was a good girl and he hoped she would give the councillors one in the eye. And the Queen offered Elyssa the magic ring she had worn when *she* was a girl going off on adventures. (The ring turned out to have been swallowed by the castle cat, so Elyssa didn't get to take it with her after all. Still, as she told her stepmother, it was the thought that counted.) All in all, by the time Elyssa slipped out of the postern door and set off into the darkness, she was downright happy to be getting away.

As she tiptoed across the drawbridge, Elyssa stepped on something that gave a loud yowl. Hastily, she pulled her foot back and crouched down, hoping none of the councillors had heard. She could just make out the shape of the castle cat, staring at her with glowing, reproachful eyes.

"Shhhh," she said. "Poor puss! Shhh. It's all right."

"It is not all right," said the cat crossly. "How would you like to have your tail stepped on?"

"I don't have a tail," Elyssa said, considerably startled. "And if you hadn't been lying in front of me, I wouldn't have stepped on you."

"Cat's privilege," said the cat, and began furiously washing his injured tail.

"Well, I'm very sorry," Elyssa said. "But I really must be going." She stood up and picked up her bundle again.

"I don't know how you expect to get anywhere when you can't see where you're going," said the cat.

"I certainly won't get anywhere if I stay here waiting for the sun to come up," Elyssa said sharply. "Or do you have some other suggestion?"

"You could carry me on your shoulder, and I could tell you

which way to go," the cat replied. "I can see in the dark," he added smugly.

"All right," Elyssa said, and the cat jumped up on her shoulder.

"That way, Princess," the cat said, and Elyssa started walking.

"How is it you can talk?" she asked, as she picked her way carefully through the darkness according to the cat's directions. "You never did before."

"I think it was that ring of your mother's I swallowed yesterday," the cat said. He sounded uneasy and uncomfortable, as if he really didn't want to discuss the matter. So, having been well brought up, Elyssa changed the subject. They chatted comfortably about the castle cooks and the King's councillors as they walked, and periodically the cat would pat Elyssa's cheek with one velvet paw and tell her to turn this way or that way. Finally the cat announced that they had come far enough for one night, and they settled down to sleep in a little hollow.

When she awoke next morning, the first thing Elyssa noticed were the trees. They were huge; the smallest branches she could see were three times the size of her waist, and she couldn't begin to reach around the trunks themselves. The ground was covered with green, spongy moss, and the little flowers growing out of it looked like faces. Elyssa glanced around for the cat. He was sitting in a patch of sunlight with his tail curled around his front paws, staring at her.

"This is the Enchanted Forest, isn't it?" she said accusingly.

"Right the first time, Princess," said the cat.

Elyssa frowned. She knew enough about the Enchanted Forest to be very uncomfortable about wandering around in it. It lay a little to the east of the kingdom of Oslett, and the castle had permanently mislaid at least two milkmaids and a wood-cutter's son who had carelessly wandered too far in that direction. The Enchanted Forest was one of those places that is very easy to get into, but very hard to get out of again.

"But I was supposed to go to Queen Hildegard!" Elyssa said at last.

"You wouldn't have liked Hildegard at all," the cat said seriously. "She's fat and bossy, and she has a bad-tempered, unattractive daughter to provide for. She'd be worse than the King's chief councillor, in fact."

"I don't believe you," Elyssa said. "Stepmama wouldn't send me to a person like that."

"Your stepmother hasn't seen Queen Hildegard since they were at school together twenty-some years ago," said the cat. "You're much better off here. Believe me, I know."

Elyssa was very annoyed, but it was much too late to do anything about the situation. So she picked up her bundle and set off in search of something to eat, leaving the cat to wash his back. After a little while, Elyssa found a bush with dark green leaves and bright purple berries. The berries looked very good, despite their unusual color, and she leaned forward to pick a few for breakfast.

"Don't do that, Princess," said the cat.

"Where did you come from?" Elyssa demanded crossly.

"I followed you," the cat answered. "And I wouldn't eat any of those berries, if I were you. They'll turn you into a rabbit."

Elyssa hastily dropped the berry she was holding and wiped her hand on her skirt. "Thank you for warning me," she said. "I don't suppose you know of anything around here that I *can* eat? Or at least drink? I'm very thirsty."

"As a matter of fact, there's a pool over this way," said the cat. "Follow me."

The cat led her through the trees in a winding route that Elyssa was sure would bring them right back to where they had started. She was about to say as much when she came around the bole of a tree into a moss-lined hollow. Green light filtered through the canopy of leaves onto the dark moss. In the center of the hollow, a ring of star-shaped white flowers

surrounded a still, silent, mirror-dark pool of crystal-clear water.

“How lovely!” Elyssa whispered.

“I thought you were thirsty,” said the cat. His tail twitched nervously as he spoke.

“I am,” Elyssa said. “But—oh, never mind.” She knelt down beside the pool and scooped up a little of the water in her cupped hands.

“Who steals the water from the unicorn’s pool?” demanded a voice like chiming bells.

Elyssa started, spilling the water down the front of her dress. “Drat!” she said. “Now look what you’ve made me do!”

As she spoke, she looked up, expecting to see the person who had spoken. There was no one there, but the chiming voice spoke again, in stern accents. “Who steals the water from the unicorn’s pool?”

Elyssa wiped her hands on the dry portion of her skirt and cast a reproachful look at the cat. “I am Elyssa, Princess of Oslett, and I’m very thirsty,” she said in her best royal voice. “So if you don’t mind—”

“A Princess?” said the chiming voice. “Really! Well, it’s about time. Let me get a look at you.”

A breath of air, scented with violets and cinnamon, touched Elyssa’s face. An instant later, a unicorn stepped delicately out of the woods. It halted on the other side of the pool and stood poised, its head raised to display the sharp, shining ivory horn, its mane flowing in perfect waves along its neck. Its eyes shone like sapphires, and its coat made Elyssa think of the white silk her stepmother was saving for Dacia’s wedding dress.

“Gracious!” Elyssa said.

“Yes, I am, aren’t I?” said the unicorn complacently. It lowered its head slightly and studied Elyssa. An expression very like dismay came into its sapphire eyes. “You’re a Princess? Are you quite sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Elyssa replied, nettled. “I’m the

second daughter of King Callwil of Oslett; ask anybody. Ask him." She waved at the cat.

The unicorn scowled. "I should hope I would never need to ask a cat for anything," it said loftily.

"Overgrown, stuck-up goat," muttered the cat.

"What did you say?" demanded the unicorn.

"Nothing that would interest you," said the cat.

"You may go, then," the unicorn said grandly.

"I'm quite happy right here," the cat said. "Or I was until you came stomping in with your silly questions."

"How dare—Princess Elyssa! What are you doing?" said the unicorn.

Elyssa took a last gulp of water and let the rest dribble through her fingers and back into the pool. "Having a drink," she said. She really *had* been very thirsty, and she had taken advantage of the argument between the cat and the unicorn to scoop up another handful of water.

"Well, I suppose it's all right, since you're a Princess," the unicorn said. Its chiming voice sounded positively sulky.

"Thank you," said Elyssa. She stood up and shook droplets from her fingers. "It's very good water."

"Of course it's good water!" the unicorn said. "A unicorn's pool is always pure and sweet and crystal clear and—"

"Yes, yes," said the cat. "But it's time we were going. Princess Elyssa has to seek her fortune, you know."

"Leave?" said the unicorn. It lifted its head in a regal gesture, and light flashed on the point of its horn. "Oh no, you can't leave. Not the Princess, anyway."

"What?" Elyssa said, considerably taken aback. "Why not?"

"Why, because you're a Princess and I'm a unicorn," the unicorn said.

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Elyssa said.

"You will gather trefoils and buttercups and pinks for me, and plait them into garlands for my neck," the unicorn went on dreamily, as if Elyssa hadn't said anything at all. "I will rest

my head in your lap, and you will polish my horn and comb my mane."

"Sounds like an exciting life," said the cat.

"Your mane doesn't need combing," Elyssa told the unicorn crossly. "And your horn doesn't need polishing. As for flowers, I'll be happy to have Stepmama send you some dandelions from the garden at home. But I'm not interested in staying here for goodness knows how long just to plait them into garlands."

"Nonsense," said the unicorn. "You're a Princess. All Princesses adore unicorns."

"Well, I don't," Elyssa said firmly. "And I'm not staying."

The cat lashed his tail in agreement, and gave the unicorn a dark look.

"You don't have a choice," the unicorn said calmly. "You're not much of a Princess, but you're better than nothing, and I'm not letting you go. I've been stuck out here on the far edge of the Enchanted Forest for years and years, with no one to sing songs about me or appreciate my beauty, and I deserve some consideration."

"Not from me, you don't," Elyssa muttered. She decided that the cat had been right to call the unicorn a stuck-up goat. "I'm sorry, but we really must leave," she said in a louder tone. "Good-bye, unicorn." She picked up her bundle and started for the edge of the hollow.

The unicorn watched with glittering eyes, but it made no move to stop her. "I don't like this," the cat said as he and Elyssa left the hollow.

"You're the one who found that pool in the first place," Elyssa pointed out.

The cat ducked its head. "I know," he said uncomfortably. "But—"

He broke off abruptly as they came around one of the huge trees and found themselves at the edge of the hollow once more. The unicorn was watching them with a smug, sardonic expression from the other side of the pool.

"We must have gotten turned around in the woods," Elyssa said doubtfully.

The cat did not reply. They turned and started into the woods again. This time they walked very slowly, to be certain they did not go in a circle. In a few minutes, they were back at the hollow.

"Had enough?" said the unicorn.

"Third time lucky," said the cat. "Come on, Princess."

They turned their backs on the unicorn and walked into the woods. Elyssa concentrated very hard, and kept a careful eye on the trees.

"I think we're going to make it this time," she said after a little. "Cat? Cat, where are—oh, dear." She was standing at the edge of the hollow, looking across the pool at the unicorn.

"The cat is gone for good," the unicorn informed her in a satisfied tone.

Elyssa felt a pang of worry about her friend. "What did you do to him?" she demanded.

"I got rid of him," the unicorn said. "I don't want a cat; I want a Princess. Someone to comb my mane, and polish my horn—"

"—and make your garlands, I know," Elyssa said. "Well, I won't do it."

"No?" said the unicorn.

"No," Elyssa said firmly. "So you might as well just let me go."

"I don't think so," the unicorn said. "You'll change your mind after a while, you'll see. I'm much too beautiful to resist. And I expect that with a little work you'll improve a great deal."

"Elyssa doesn't need your kind of improvement," said the cat's voice from just above Elyssa's head.

Elyssa looked up. The cat was perched in the lowest fork of the enormous tree beside her. "You came back!" she said.

"Did you really think I wouldn't, Princess?" said the cat. "I'd have gotten here sooner, but I wanted to make sure of the

way out. Just in case you've had enough of our conceited friend."

"You're bluffing, cat," said the unicorn. "Princess Elyssa can't get out unless I let her, and I won't."

"That's what you think," said the cat. "Shall we go, Princess?"

"Yes, *please*," said Elyssa.

"Put your hand on my back, then, and don't let go," said the cat.

Elyssa bent over and put her hand on the cat's back, just below his neck. It was a very awkward and uncomfortable way to walk, and she was sure she looked quite silly. She had to concentrate very hard to keep from falling or tripping and losing her hold as she sidled along. "How much farther?" she asked after what seemed a long time.

"Not far," said the cat. Elyssa thought he sounded tired. A few moments later they entered a large clearing (which contained neither a pool nor a unicorn), and the cat stopped. "All right, Princess," the cat said. "You can let go now."

Elyssa took her hand off the cat's back and straightened up. It felt very good to stretch again. When she looked down, the cat was lowering himself to the ground in a stiff and clumsy fashion that was quite unlike his usual grace.

"Oh, dear," said Elyssa. She dropped to her knees beside the cat and stroked his fur, very gently. "Are you all right, cat?" she asked, because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

The cat did not answer. Elyssa remembered all the stories she had ever heard about animals who had been gravely injured or even killed getting their masters or mistresses out of trouble, and she began to be very much afraid. "Please be all right, cat," she said, and leaned over and kissed him on the nose.

The air shimmered, and then it rippled, and then it exploded into brightness right in front of Elyssa's eyes. She blinked. An exceedingly handsome man dressed in brown velvet lay

sprawled on the moss in front of her, right where the cat had been.

Elyssa blinked again. The man propped his head on one elbow and looked up at her. "Very nice, Princess," he said. "But I wouldn't mind if you tried again a little lower down."

"You're the cat, aren't you?" Elyssa said.

"I was," the man admitted. He sat up and smiled at her. "You don't object to the change, do you?"

"No," said Elyssa. "But who are you now, please?"

"Prince Riddle of Amonhill," the man said. He bowed to her even though he was still sitting down, which proved he was a Prince. "I made the mistake of stopping at Queen Hildegard's castle some time ago, and she changed me into a cat when I refused to marry her dreadful daughter."

"Queen Hildegard? But I was supposed to go see her!" Elyssa exclaimed.

"I know. I told you you wouldn't like her," Prince Riddle said. "She condemned me to be a cat until I was kissed by a Princess who had drunk the water from a unicorn's pool. Her daughter was the only Princess the Queen knew of who had tasted the water. If she had also managed to kiss me I'd have had to marry her." He shuddered.

"I see," said Elyssa slowly. "So that's why you brought me to the Enchanted Forest and then found the unicorn's pool."

Riddle looked a little shamefaced. "Yes. I didn't expect to have any trouble with the unicorn; they usually aren't around much. I'm sorry."

"It's quite all right," Elyssa said hastily. "It was very interesting. And I'm glad I could help you. And—and you don't need to think that you have to marry me just because I disenchant you."

"It *is* traditional, you know," Riddle said, with a sidelong glance that reminded Elyssa very strongly of the cat.

"Well, I think it's a silly tradition!" Elyssa said in an emphatic tone. "What if you didn't like the Princess who broke the spell?"

Riddle smiled warmly. "But I do like you, Princess."

"Oh," said Elyssa.

"You were always very nice to me when I was a cat."

"Yes," said Elyssa.

"And I like the idea of marrying you." Riddle looked at her a little uncertainly. "That is, if you wouldn't mind marrying me."

"Actually," said Elyssa, "I'd like it very much."

So Elyssa and Riddle went back to the castle to be married. Elyssa's family was delighted. Her papa kissed her cheek and clapped Riddle on the back. Her stepmama cried with joy and then was happily scandalized to hear about the doings of her old school friend Queen Hildegard. And both of Elyssa's sisters agreed to be bridesmaids (much to the dismay of the King's councillors, who felt that it was bad enough for a middle Princess to be married first without emphasizing the fact by having her sisters stand up for her).

The wedding was a grand affair, with all the neighboring Kings and Queens in attendance. There were even a couple of fairies present, which made the King's councillors more cross than ever. (Fairies, according to the chief councillor, were supposed to come to christenings, not to weddings.) After the wedding, Elyssa had her stepmama send a special note to Queen Hildegard. A few days later, Queen Hildegard's daughter disappeared into the Enchanted Forest, and shortly thereafter rumors began circulating that the unicorn had found a handmaiden even more conceited than it was.

And so they all lived happily for the rest of their lives, except the King's councillors, who never would stop trying to make things go the way they thought things ought to be.

Naked Wish-Fulfillment

by
Janet Kagan

The stories in this anthology so far have presented unicorns in many unusual surroundings, from Miami Beach to a suburban neighborhood to a Ute Indian reservation, but the story that follows, one of the finest of modern unicorn stories, shows us a unicorn in the most unlikely location of them all—on the set of a pornographic movie!

Although she has only been selling for a few years, Janet Kagan is rapidly building a large and enthusiastic audience for her work, and may well become a figure of note in the '90s. Her first novel, a Star Trek novel called Uhura's Song, was a nationwide bestseller, and her second novel, Hellspark (not a Star Trek novel), was greeted with similar warmth and enthusiasm. Her new novel, Mirabile, was just released to wide critical acclaim. She is a frequent contributor to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, where two of her popular "Mama Jason" stories have won the IAsfm Reader's Award Poll by a large margin in successive years. She has also sold to Pulphouse and Analog. She lives in Lincoln Park, New Jersey, with her husband, Ricky, several computers, and lots of cats . . . but no unicorns (as far as we know, anyway!).

* * *

After the first twenty minutes, you don't notice who's dressed and who isn't—but it had taken Barbara some twenty minutes longer to notice that she no longer noticed. When she did, she opened her notebook and tried to put the effect into words. The result was disappointing.

She sighed deeply and returned to the equally frustrating task of cutting Dick's dialogue to a level he could handle. The most believable thing he'd said all morning was, "Hey, baby—

wanna fuck?" and that had been to Barbara, not to one of the actresses. So much for all her hard-won comic dialogue . . .

By the time she had finished reworking the next scene on the shooting schedule, she became aware that Tom had called, "Cut! Take fifteen, people. Rick—let's get these lights moved. Suzy, not you. I need somebody to light. That's good, just lie there." Then he laughed, and Barbara pushed up the brim of her hat for a look.

Suzy had Bruppy the teddy bear's muzzle in her crotch and was writhing in mock orgasm. Tom caught Barbara's glance and her suppressed smile. "If you tell my wife where her daughter's teddy bear has been, I'll . . ."

"You'll have to buy her a new one," Barbara finished for him, her smile no longer suppressed.

Tom peered through the camera's aperture, fiddled with the light, peered again. "Lend me your hat, Barbara."

"No way," said Barbara, dropping her pen to clamp the hat to her head. "I've seen what you do with borrowed props. I lend you the hat you'll use it for water sports."

Across the room, Dick brightened visibly at the suggestion.

"Not with my hat you don't, Dick." She tightened her hold. "Next time I'll write you something special, but it won't include my hat." From under the brim, she raised an eyebrow at him suggestively.

"With whips?" Dick threw himself backward, arching his body until its highest point was the tip of his cock. "Flay me, baby!"

"No whips," she said, "but you do all your sex scenes upside-down, under water."

Beside her, Harry guffawed, but Dick came up off the couch, looking interested. "Yeah!" he said, "all *right!*"

"Hat," said Tom, prying loose her fingers and taking it. "Just to shade the light, dammit, Barbara."

Barbara handed him her copy of the script as well. "New lines for Dick," she said. "If you want, you can tell him I made him more macho."

“Right,” said Tommy. He skimmed the scene. “Yeah,” he said, “that should help.” And for the third time since he’d learned what Dick considered acting, he said, “Sorry, Barbara. He came highly recommended.”

“Not your fault,” she said. “You had no way of knowing all they meant is Dick can it get up and off on cue.” Then, finding herself a bit puzzled, she sought the source of the inconsistency and added, “I’d’ve thought he’d give a better cum shot.” Any tomcat (though it was ER that came to mind) would put Dick to shame. “He just sort of dribbles on his hand . . . I expected something splashier.”

“That too,” said Tommy unhappily. Then he held up the hat and said, “Thanks, ” as if he meant for the loan. Stripping gaffer’s tape from the roll hung over the buck knife on his belt, he taped the hat to shade the right-hand light. Then he went back to his camera.

Barbara rolled her eyes at the nearest sympathetic face, in this case, Harry’s. Not only was it sympathetic but (she had to admit) it was one of the best she’d seen on a male in years. The rest of him was just as good: tall, slim, dark-haired—every inch the romantic hero—except for the bright pink bow he was wearing on his dong.

Harry’s specialty was burlesque, for this film at least. Barbara was grateful; she’d been able to expand his speeches to compensate for Dick’s.

“Author!” he said, flopping his xeroxed copy of the script at her, “Oh, author!”

Now he was being Earnest Young Actor, and Barbara did her best to match him earnestness for earnestness. “Yes, Harry?”

“Tell me, please. What’s my motivation for this line?”

With effort, she kept her face straight as she read through the scene he indicated. “Your motivation in this scene,” she said, as she returned his script with a finger pointing to one of the more obvious double entendres, “is that you’re horny.”

Harry considered her gravely. Just as gravely he re-read the

scene, paying special attention to the line at her fingertip. When he had finished, he met her eyes and said solemnly, "Yes, I understand. I can find that within me. Thank you."

Barbara held her laughter for a long moment only by holding her breath, then breath and laughter burst out at once. Harry grinned and nodded, the nod a bow acknowledging her laughter as the applause due him.

When she finally caught her breath, still chuckling, she said, "Okay, I give up. I promised myself I wouldn't make a nuisance running around asking people—"

Harry's grin broadened. "What's a nice boy like me doing in a place like this?"

Barbara found herself coloring. "Sorry," she said, "but, yes, exactly."

"Good practice." He raised a brow to the precise angle that made the line suggestive, but she understood he meant the acting, not the sex.

She jerked her chin in Dick's direction just as he stuck his fingers up Mary's ass and got his hand slapped for it. "All of you, do you think?"

"No," said Harry, amused, "not all of us. So I haven't spared you from asking the rest . . . or spared them from being asked." He leaned nearer and said sotto voce, "If Dick's answer is any different from what we both expect, let me know, will you?"

John, the DP, flung a finger at one of the PAs. "Nooky light," he commanded and, distracted by the words, Barbara only nodded response to Harry. The "nooky light" was nothing more exotic than the one on the two-inch-high stand, but Barbara grinned at the coinage and collected it in her notebook.

Tommy shook his head as if saddened by it all: "Blinding teddy bears . . . I'm ashamed of you, John." John cackled and switched on the light. Then he held a light meter to Suzy's crotch and said with great satisfaction, "Got that little bugger."

The soundman, who claimed she was a Korean orphan and went by the wonderful pornonym (that was Harry's coinage, also collected) of "Kim Chee," rose from behind her pile of equipment and nodded at Tommy. He raised his voice to carry throughout the living room: "All right, people! Quiet for sound check!"

Kim pulled on her huge earphones and stepped into the circle of lights. She clapped her hands sharply, twice, at each of the walls. Then she swung the boom mike a fraction of an inch to the right and repeated the ritual.

The ripple of Kim's waist-length black hair put the finishing touch to Barbara's sense of reality and despite all her promises to keep out of the way Barbara found herself tagging along behind.

A few hand-claps later, Kim said, "I need a sound-blanket there, Tom." She pointed her *there*, rounded without warning on Barbara and said "Writers . . . !" Then, grinning, she peeled off her earphones and positioned them over Barbara's ears. "Clap your hands and listen for the echoes."

Feeling like the sorcerer's apprentice, Barbara did as she was told and learned to her wonder that she could hear an odd but very distinct boing-boing in response to her claps in that position. As Tommy and one of the PAs taped a thick quilted blanket across the corner the boing disappeared, to be replaced by a still odder sound.

She twisted to place it, then realized that she had to place it in reference to the mike. It was outside the house, but coming closer.

Once, in a hotel room in Amsterdam, she'd heard something similar coming from the street below. Sure she was imagining things, she had nonetheless gone to the balcony to look—and had been rewarded by the sight of eight draft horses pulling a beer wagon. Advertisement it might have been, but she'd ordered their beer that very evening for the sake of those magnificent horses and their feathered hooves.

Puzzled, she frowned at Kim, who said, "Still a problem?"

and held out her hand for the return of the earphones. After listening intently for a few hand-claps, Kim nodded at Tommy. "That's got it," she said, of the sound-blanket.

That deepened Barbara's puzzlement. Even without the earphones, she could still hear it, clip-clopping around the outside of the house in the direction of her kitchen. More distinct now, the sound had lost the metallic sharpness of hoofbeats. Oblivious to it, Kim returned to her equipment.

Barbara, still remembering Amsterdam, followed the sound toward the kitchen, just in case it led to something as interesting as the previous occasion had.

In the hallway, the sound was muffled by book-lined walls, but it sharpened again as Barbara opened the door to the kitchen. At the kitchen table, the brunette—what was her pornonym? "Glinda Goodwitch," that was it—sat wrapped against the morning chill in a faded chintz housecoat. She was so utterly absorbed in a fantasy paperback that she heard neither Barbara nor the hoofbeats and, not wishing to disturb her, Barbara moved on tiptoe to the window overlooking the front yard.

There *was* something there. Barbara pressed her nose to the glass and caught a glimpse of its brilliant white hindquarters through the branches of the weeping willow.

Unicorn, she thought, identifying it from the flick of its lion-like tail and the parting kick of a classic cloven hoof as richly feathered as the heels of those Dutch draft horses. Ah! That explained the difference in sound . . . *unshod* cloven hoof. Then she thought, Oh, *god*, do I need coffee.

The unicorn vanished as if it had never been there.

She turned from the window, to find Glinda staring at her. Realizing she'd spoken aloud, Barbara said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you!" even before she saw the glint of tears. Barbara took two steps toward her. "Glinda . . . are you okay?"

Glinda blinked and, for the first time, focused on Barbara.

“Okay?” she echoed. “Oh!” She laid aside her book to swipe at her eyes and said, “It’s the story that’s making me cry.”

Relieved, Barbara angled her head for a look at the title. She’d read it—a fairly standard Celtic fantasy, competent writing but nothing inspired. The author got points for his unicorn, though it was hardly on a par with the one in the willow branches. That reminded her. “I’m putting up some water. Want some coffee? tea?”

“Coffee, thanks.”

As Barbara waited for the water to boil, she borrowed Glinda’s copy of the script and ruthlessly changed Dick’s character altogether. Given a little luck and a lot of Harry’s gift for farce, the film might still be passable.

It was Glinda who brought the coffee. “Thanks,” said Barbara. Accepting the hot cup gingerly, she pushed aside the script. As she spooned sugar into the coffee and lit a cigarette, Glinda leafed through the script. “I didn’t have to change any of your dialogue,” Barbara said hastily.

“Yeah, I see,” Glinda said, then she smiled sympathetically and added, “I bet writing’s easier without actors.”

Barbara shook her head. “I wish it were, but—I wrote a fantasy novel—that was just me and the page, and it’s not the least bit easier.”

After a long moment, Glinda said, “You have the oddest expression . . . Are you okay?”

Barbara realized she’d been staring and blushed. “May I ask you a question? You don’t have to answer it. In fact, I promised myself I wouldn’t ask it but now I find I can’t not ask it. Just slug me if I’m out of line, will you?” After the tumble of words, she suddenly found herself without anything more to say and closed her mouth, blushing a deeper red still.

“You want to know what it’s like?”

That surprised Barbara. “Oh, no! I can *see* what it’s like: it’s a lot of hard work for very little return. And the guys might be in it for the sex but the women aren’t—I haven’t seen one of you actually get off on the sex yet. The way you’re positioned

for the camera doesn't allow it. Mary's pretty good at faking it but . . ."

Glinda grinned. "So what's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?"

Barbara closed her eyes. "Go ahead. Hit me. That's the question. I was trying to think of a way to ask without sounding incredibly stupid. Why this profession, when it's so looked-down-on? Why not something . . . I don't know quite how to put this . . . with a little more prestige?"

Glinda took a sip of her coffee, set the cup aside, and considered Barbara for a long moment. Barbara was about to apologize again, prepared to drop the subject completely, when Glinda said, "I was a nurse—a surgical nurse. Do you know what that is?"

"The one who slaps the scalpel into the doctor's outstretched hand."

"Yes. Only the doctor was so drunk he dropped the scalpel." Glinda's face changed, darkened. "Among other things. The patient died. I was the one who was fired." What the plainness of her words could not express, her eyes did: anger and hurt and impotence.

Barbara's throat tightened in response. Although she knew what the answer would be, she asked anyway, forcing the words out—"There wasn't anything you could do about it?"

"In the end, no. I tried until I was exhausted. In the end, there wasn't anything I could do about it."

"In the end," Barbara said darkly, "you could only get as far away from nursing as you could."

Glinda nodded. "So I wanted to be in the movies—wide screen fantasies. Only you know what the movies are like, you said it yourself: hard work for very little return. I make fantasies for other people, not for me—" Glinda touched a finger to her paperback and her face brightened a little. "I need somebody else to make fantasies for me."

Barbara, welcoming the chance to look away from what hurt and anger remained, followed her pointing finger to the cover,

where a hugely-muscled, empty-faced hero and a handful of lumpy elves protected the usual limp but big-breasted princess from the prospective reader. "I wouldn't eat that if you paid me," she said involuntarily, "no self-respecting dragon would." Even before the comment was completely out of her mouth, she realized how it might be misinterpreted in the context of a porn shot. "I mean . . ." she said, looking up at Glinda.

"It's a lousy cover," Glinda agreed. "I try not to look at the covers. They only get in the way. The words I can *see* in my head. That's not really his unicorn you see—it's yours."

"My unicorn . . . !" Glinda breathed it out and gave Barbara such a look of wonder that Barbara suddenly felt like some mythical beast herself.

Thoroughly disconcerted, Barbara thought, maybe it was *her* unicorn I saw! Intrigued by the idea, Barbara flipped open her notebook to jot it down. When she looked up again, she found Glinda still staring at her. "It's a good idea for a story," she explained. "I don't want to forget it."

"Oh," said Glinda, and inexplicably her face saddened, "then someone else will get the unicorn." Puzzled, Barbara frowned, and Glinda said, with half a smile, "Well, I'm hardly the type who winds up with the unicorn."

Still frowning, Barbara thought about that for a long moment. "Oh," she said at last, "you're thinking of all those silly damned virgins, aren't you?" When Glinda nodded ruefully, Barbara said, "But you're wrong!"

Delighted by her own discovery, Barbara went on, "All those silly damned virgins trapped the unicorns so they could be slaughtered for their horns. *You* wouldn't do that."

"No, of course not!" said Glinda, shocked by the very suggestion.

"You see?" Barbara said, with a sweep of her hand, "You're the ideal person to have a unicorn! You'd *protect* him, just by being who you are."

This pronouncement earned her another of Glinda's wide-

eyed stares of wonder, but this time Barbara was pleased enough by her own invention to bear it without being disconcerted. Sometimes, she thought, I get something *right*. I only wish it would work that way on paper.

The two of them smiled at each other for a long moment—until the mood was shattered by a long drawn-out shriek from the living room.

Barbara jumped to her feet in alarm, but Glinda caught her before she could reach the door and said, "It's just Dick, Barbara. It's nothing to worry about, honestly."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I've worked with him before. I recognize that shriek. Whatever he's doing, he's loving it." Glinda paused, then added, "You only have to worry if you hear a *female* shriek when Dick's in the same room."

Barbara, not wholly convinced, hovered halfway between the table and the door. It opened to frame a broadly grinning Harry.

At the sight of her, Harry sobered instantly. Clearing his throat, he straightened and—for all that he was stark naked—became the maitre d'hotel.

The towel that draped his forearm was silver tabby. "Your cat, modom," he announced, lifting his arm to present the utterly complacent ER.

"Oh, lord," said Barbara, much relieved. "I have a feeling that explains the shriek." ER turned his rumbling purr up a notch or two and stretched to meet her hand in mutual caress. "ER, I thought you were outside."

"Modom, I assure you, Mr. Dick wishes your assumption had been correct . . ." With a laugh, Harry broke character and finished, "Dick's going to need butt makeup for the rest of the film."

ER poured himself into Barbara's arms, still rumbling with pleasure, and she resumed her seat at the kitchen table.

So did Glinda, eyeing them both askance. "You named that gorgeous thing 'Emergency Room'?"

“No, no,” said Barbara, “it’s short for ‘Edgar Rice.’”

“Edgar Rice?” Harry echoed—proving himself as good a straight man as anyone could have wished.

“He burrows,” said Barbara, dead-pan.

“Of course,” said Glinda, and Harry rewarded her with a perfect comic double-take.

Barbara waited until he was done then, still chuckling appreciatively, said, “Now, tell me what he did.” ER rubbed her chin with his forehead.

“He jumped from the top of the speaker into the sex scene between Suzy and Dick,” Harry said, “and rode Dick’s hip right through the cum shot.” He inclined his head at ER, who looked aggrieved (but only because of Barbara’s laughter), and added, “I don’t blame you for putting out your claws. That was some rough ride!”

“Oh, dear,” said Barbara, through her laughter. “I wish I’d seen *that!*”

“You will. Tom kept the camera rolling and it’s all on film. Dick, I’m sorry to report, loved every minute of it.”

“Oh, well,” Barbara said to the cat, “thanks for trying, anyway.” Gathering him up in her arms, she rose. “I suppose you’ll have to go outside now. I’ve got to check these changes with Tommy and you obviously can’t be trusted alone.”

But ER had other ideas. As Barbara bent for the script he poured from her arms onto Glinda’s thigh, where he peered into the housecoat’s neckline and butted her bare breast with the flat of his head, his purr echoing Glinda’s giggle. “Tom-cats,” said Barbara, and reached to retrieve him before he could embarrass her further.

“It’s all right,” said Glinda, stroking the cat and getting a louder purr for her efforts. “I think he’s sexy too. I’ll look after him if you like.” She grinned suddenly and added, “Don’t worry—I’m not into bestiality.”

“He is,” said Barbara. At Glinda’s surprised look, she explained, “He’ll hump your arm—that’s bestiality from his

point of view, isn't it?—either that or just a good day for fucking.”

Harry laughed. “Don't tell John,” he said, “he'll want it on film.”

Barbara looked at Harry, then at ER—who insinuated himself inside Glinda's housecoat to settle with smug content. She sighed and said, “He'd get a better cum shot than he does from Dick. ER goes off like Vesuvius.” She stubbed out the cigarette she'd left burning in the ashtray. “Okay, Glinda—but if he gives you a hard time, and you can take that however you want, just chuck him out the door.”

“Okay.” Glinda settled back and picked up her book. Clearly she had no intention of chucking ER anywhere.

Harry, once again maitre d', held the door for Barbara. Once it had closed behind them however he caught her eye and, dead-pan, turned her own question back on her: “And what's a nice girl like you doing in joint like this?”

Barbara blushed. “Tommy asked me if I could write him a porno script. In a moment of bravado, I said I could write anything I could see three of. I sat through a triple feature at our local triple-X emporium, doing ‘research’—you were in two of them!” She grinned up at him. “It was a gag. At least, I thought it was. I never for a moment believed he'd film it!”

“So the joke's on you.”

“I'm not slumming, if that's what you think. The ones I saw were so badly written, I had to write one that would be . . . a real movie.”

“Good practice,” he said. “Now I understand why you want to break Dick's legs. Suzy may be a bitch but you get on fine with her because she knows her job and does it. Dick—”

Barbara turned away, shocked to find tears of frustration starting from her eyes. She took a deep breath and said, “I'm not naive, Harry. I knew the actors Tommy hired wouldn't have the same faces I saw in my mind's eye . . .”

He was watching too closely and much too sympathetically. “All right,” she said angrily, “I *am* naive. I did my damndest

to make it a good script—funny, even a little bit inventive—but I didn't count on somebody who couldn't shout 'Fire!' convincingly if you lit his eyebrows." She raised her hand, brandishing the rolled script like a bludgeon. Stupid, she thought with a guilty start, to be so upset over something so trivial. Glinda has cause for tears, and *she* isn't crying—she's just looking for a believable unicorn. More disgusted with herself than with Dick, Barbara dropped the script to her side and said, "Dick is ruining my fantasy."

Harry put his hands on her shoulders, and Barbara looked up, met his eyes and surprised herself by saying, "All I want is to be able to make someone *see* it."

"I'll do my best for you. I promise."

"Thanks, Harry." She'd meant anything she wrote—not the film specifically—but if Harry was willing to try, handicapped as he was by Dick, the least she could do was track down the right unicorn for Glinda. Which, she decided on the spot, should be very much like Harry. The thought *that* led to made her giggle.

"What?" asked Harry, smiling.

"Oh, Harry, don't be mad—it gets a little weird in here sometimes." She tapped her temple. "You're being strong and sympathetic and reassuring and . . ."

"And?" he said, wary now.

"*And*, in case you haven't noticed—you're stark naked and wearing a pink bow on your prick. So why is it *I'm* the one who's feeling vulnerable?"

He scrutinized her from head to toe, then himself. Discovering that she was right in all cases, he treated her to a double-take of heroic proportion.

". . . Because you don't have a pink bow?" he suggested and, peeling the bow from his skin with extreme care (and a burlesque wince that made Barbara wince in sympathy), he pressed it to her shirt as if conferring a medal on her.

"There," he said, admiring his own handiwork, "don't you feel better already?"

She did and as soon as she could catch her breath she told him so.

True to his promise, Harry did his very best for her, even to strengthening one of her weaker scenes with a case of nervous hiccups that made the crew—once Tommy had called, “Cut! Print!”—laugh and applaud the take. Both of his scenes with Glinda went perfectly.

Then came the next of the scenes with Dick. Barbara, disappointed all over again, pulled down the brim of her hat and narrowed her field of vision to exclude Dick. She lounged back on the floor, pretending that only John and his camera existed, as they circled the couple on the couch with the grace of a pair of ballroom dancers. John was trying to compensate for Dick in his own way, by distracting the audience with an unusual shot.

There was a flicker of movement at the window behind him and Barbara lifted a hand, ready to warn John there'd be clutter in his shot when he completed his circle. The warning caught in her throat.

She was imagining all this, the naked couple on her couch, Tommy raising the boom mike like a drawbridge to let the dancers slide under it . . . *Most* certainly she was imagining the unicorn that fixed a cold silver eye at them all through the window, but she popped up the brim of her hat to get a better look.

It was the same unicorn whose rear-view she'd so vividly imagined earlier in the day. If anything, this end of it was even more spectacular, all white and wild. Though something about the horn struck her wrong . . . Trying to figure out what, Barbara sat up, pushing her hat completely back as she did.

The unicorn was still there.

Looking for Glinda, Barbara thought and involuntarily raised her hand and pointed—not at the unicorn—but to the kitchen, where Glinda no doubt had gone back to her book.

The unicorn gave a disdainful snort, shockingly loud. It cut through Dick's dialogue like a Bronx cheer.

"Cut!" said a female voice beside Barbara. Kim took off her earphones and said, "Tom, I've got extraneous noise on that take."

"Hell," said Tommy, "I don't hear anything."

Kim held out the earphones: "Come listen."

Horn-first, like a thumb-tack through the sole of a shoe, the unicorn holed its way into the living room. The wall, Barbara was relieved to note, seemed no worse for the wear.

The unicorn made its way, now passing around or over obstacles as fastidiously as ER would, across the room. It paused beside the couch to lower its head and snicker in a very horse-like fashion at Dick. Then it trotted on past, aiming for the wall between the living room and the kitchen.

Half-vanished, it lashed out with its sinuous tail, catching Dick on the butt with a slap of thunder-clap proportion.

"Ow!" Dick jumped up, rubbing his ass and glaring about for the source of the swat.

Vivid but *prissy* unicorn, Barbara thought. Not Glinda's type at all.

"All right, who did that?" Dick demanded.

Simultaneously, his ear to the earphone, Tommy said to Kim, "What *is* that?"

"Unicorn," said Barbara, answering both.

Dick glared harder, this time at Barbara. Tommy said, "Yeah, right Barbara. Well, we'll have to reshoot."

From across the room, Harry grinned at her. "Day-dreaming unicorns on a porn shoot," he said. "Barbara, I know an analyst who'd love to meet *you!*"

Barbara clapped a hand to her mouth, trying to force the word back and unsaid. *They hadn't seen it!*

"Somebody farted," said Tommy, glaring at Dick. "That's what the mike picked up."

Dick ignored his accusation, stalking Barbara with a differ-

ent gleam in his eye. "Hey baby . . . Spend ten minutes with me and that'll be the end of unicorns for you!"

At that Barbara uncovered her mouth and rose to her feet to meet him prepared. "I'm not a virgin, Dick—I'm just choosy." At the door, she paused on the threshold and added, over her shoulder, "and anybody who does it in ten minutes ain't worth doin' it with." With that, she closed the door firmly behind her.

"*Good exit!*" she heard Harry call after her, and she walked the length of the hall in heady triumph.

But her pleasure vanished the moment her hand touched the kitchen door. The unicorn had come this way. *She'd* seen it, even if no one else had. She didn't know which would be worse, not finding it or *finding* it.

Cautiously, she pushed the door ajar and peered in, just in time to see Glinda lay aside her book—finished—and reach for a tissue.

No unicorn. Just ER on tiptoe, rubbing his cheek against Glinda's. That was nothing out of the ordinary: ER couldn't bear to see anyone cry, especially over a book.

Reassured or disappointed, she wasn't sure which, Barbara waited until ER had successfully concluded his jollying before she entered. No, no unicorn—and she was disappointed.

ER chirred her a greeting and swaggered across the table to push his head into her outstretched hand as she sat. Glinda said, "He's got a better swagger than Dick, too."

ER, who knew a compliment when he heard one, swaggered back to Glinda, hips rolling in the tomcat walk that displayed his balls for Barbara. "He has more to swagger about," she said. "Of course, any tomcat does."

Barbara hesitated, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. What could she say? . . . Glinda, did you by any chance see a unicorn come in here? "Uh, how was the book?"

"It's a good book. I liked it a lot—" she hesitated, her disappointment clear in the set of her mouth—"but it's not my kind of unicorn. I liked yours better."

Not mine, thought Barbara and, reminded, she said shyly, "Glinda, would it be okay if I used you as a character sometime? I wouldn't name her Glinda; that's been done, after all."

Glinda took a deep breath, as if gathering courage, then she said, "You wrote *Sloppy Possum Potions*, didn't you? I've read it five times—it's wonderful!"

"Yes," said Barbara with a guilty start—*Possum* was anything *but* 'wonderful,' as far as she was concerned.

Glinda, misunderstanding Barbara's reaction, said quickly, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize your name. It's not that I didn't remember it—it's that I never expected to meet you!" She leaned closer, giving ER the perfect opportunity to head-bump her chin.

"My name's Janie. You can use that—any time you like." She paused a moment to rub ER's ears, then added, "Though I'd really rather not be the stupid virgin who traps the unicorn."

"No chance of that," said Barbara. "*That* we already decided."

When the shoot had wrapped for the evening, two images remained bright in Barbara's mind, the first being all three couples humping away—at John's suggestion—in unison (it even now made her giggle), the second being the unicorn. So while Tommy set the PAs (who were little more than glorified gofers) to cleaning her apartment, Barbara pulled the brim of her hat down low enough to silence the hubbub around her and focused only on the sheaf of paper before her.

She didn't emerge until some kind person set a cup of hot coffee beside her. Popping the brim of her hat with one finger, she looked out to give grateful thanks. The kind person turned out to be Harry. "I thought you were a *star*," she said. "Since when are you on gofer duty?"

"Since everybody else has gone home for the evening."

Barbara glanced about her. It was true. She looked again at Harry. "And you're dressed, too."

"Once you wrap for the evening, you wrap for the evening. It wouldn't do for me to be found lurking about your apartment in nothing at all, now would it?"

"What are you doing lurking about my apartment in blue jeans and a T-shirt then?"

Wrapping for the evening hadn't changed his proclivity for comedic over-reaction . . . He raised his hands high: Caught! Red-handed! "Don't shoot!" he said, "I'll go quietly." Then, lowering them to frame her face, he added, "I was watching A Writer at Work."

Barbara grinned. "Well, I suppose turnabout's fair play, isn't it?" She slid the sheaf of papers to one side and gulped coffee with relief. "It's a good thing you didn't tell me that earlier. I'm not sure I could have kept going with somebody watching over my shoulder." She eased off her chair, learning to her own surprise how stiff her muscles were. Stretching out the kinks, she brought her wristwatch to eye level. "Good god! It's eight o'clock! No wonder I'm famished!" She cocked an eye at him. "Want to come watch a writer eat Chinese food?"

"I thought you'd never ask . . ."

Barbara couldn't help it; she guffawed. "*You* could have."

He itemized on the tips of long fingers. "One: I didn't want to disturb your work. Two: I wasn't sure how you'd take an invitation to dinner when you've seen me at work all day."

She tapped each fingertip in answer. "One: I'm glad you didn't disturb my work. Two: I wouldn't take an invitation to dinner with Dick."

"Poor Dick! He's madly in love with you, you know."

Barbara snorted. "Madly in lust, maybe. And only because I won't play. If I did, I wouldn't be fantasy anymore." She was pleased to find Dick's bungling no longer annoyed her. How could she take him seriously when she'd seen a unicorn slap his butt? "Damned if I know whose fantasy he is, Harry—

certainly not mine.” Then, shooing him toward the door, she said, “Food!”

It wasn't until she had finished her second helping of steamed bass that Barbara revived sufficiently to gather her nerve and ask Harry about the unicorn. Even then she couldn't bring herself to ask straight out. “Harry, remember when Dick acted like somebody swatted his ass? Did you—you didn't see anything, well, out of the ordinary?”

“Ordinarily Dick would have been overjoyed to have his ass slapped . . . that was peculiar, now that you mention it. After all, he enjoyed ER's claws.”

“What if I told you the unicorn slapped his ass with its tail?” She made a swatting motion with her free hand, both to demonstrate and to keep her tone light.

He gave this thoughtful consideration, then shook his head. “I don't believe it. I've been flicked by a horse tail and it didn't make me jump—not the way Dick did.”

He hadn't seen it. Barbara said, “Unicorns don't have horse tails. They have lion tails.”

“If you say so.” He raised his wine glass. “I like it, the unicorn slapping the porn actor with its tail. But it's not *easy* to picture a unicorn on a porn set.”

“Harry, I assure you the unicorn was as believable as anything else that went on in my living room this afternoon,” she said, grinning again as she recalled the synchronized humping, “but a bit prissier.”

“Then keep it away from Dick—he'd try to fuck it. He does bestiality.”

“Why am I not surprised to hear that?”

“Hey, you're the one who saw a unicorn on a porn shoot. I don't find Dick half as surprising as I find you.”

Barbara eyed him wearily. He smiled and said, “I'd give anything to know what was going on under that hat of yours when you gave me and Dick each that long up-and-down this afternoon. If we'd been dressed, I'd have taken it for ogling—

Dick assumed you were comparing our equipment—but it wasn't that at all. It was delighted discovery." He demonstrated, face full of innocent wonder.

"Oh," said Barbara, "fur patterns! The hair around your navel goes clockwise. Around Dick's, it goes counterclockwise. I'd just never noticed that people have patterns to their body hair before—like cats."

Harry considered the hair on his forearm. "I rest my case," he said. "Dick's not half as surprising as you are."

"Thanks, I think."

He laughed. "Barbara, most people bring such expectations to a porn shoot that they never see past them. You don't. You see what's actually happening—" he glanced again at his forearm—"better than I do." Then he grinned again. "Now I'm wondering about that unicorn."

"I never get what I expect, not even when I write. I'd miss all the interesting stuff if I only looked at what I expect. Maybe that's why I saw the unicorn and you didn't. Glinda saw it too, I think, but it wasn't *her* unicorn. Something about the classic unicorn that . . ."

Suddenly she had it. "Of course! That's what's wrong with its horn! Nothing's got a horn like that! Look, Harry, males—male gazelles, male moose, male you-name-its—just want to bluff. At most they want to give each other a crashing headache. They *don't* want to skewer each other! Even those little bitty things on the noses of rhinos—!" She curled her index finger to demonstrate and finished triumphantly, "even *they* curve back toward the rhino's head!"

"Damned if I know what you're talking about."

"Writer at work," she said, waving to a waiter for the check. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I gotta go—I have to get home to my typewriter."

It wasn't until she reached the door to her apartment that she remembered his presence and that only when he said in shocked tones, "Mercy me, Miss Barbara! What kind of a boy do you take me for?"

“Oh,” she said, realizing with a start that she had absently invited him in. “Oh, sorry! Offer withdrawn. I really do have to work tonight.”

“Shall I pick you up in the morning to see the rushes?”

“Oh, yes!” She’d never seen rushes. “Uh, you may have to roust me. I don’t know how late I’ll be up. Phone before you come—” she scribbled the number on a page of her notebook and handed it to him—“and I’ll be ready by the time you get here.”

He folded the paper and tucked it into the watch pocket of his jeans, then he bent and kissed her on the forehead and was off down the stairs before his gentleness had even registered. She called after him the first thing that came to mind: “I want you to see *my* unicorn, Harry!”

She finished the draft of the story at three in the morning. Some of it wasn’t bad—much of it was, of course—that was the frustration of it all. She scrolled the final page out of the typewriter and reached for the rest, intending to read the story through.

ER beat her to the stack, with a dive and burrow that scattered fifty-eight pages across the desk and onto the floor. In the midst of this disaster, he rolled ecstatically, enticing her to join him. “Aw, cat,” she said. He eyed her coyly from beneath page fifteen as he chewed page twenty-one.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m too damn tired to read it tonight. I’ll hate it.” She bent to gather up the pages.

Having enticed her into his game, ER turned his purr up full and attempted to put his mark, tooth or claw, on each page as she retrieved it. She fought the last few pages from his clutches and thrust them, still disordered, into a drawer. “Bed,” she told him.

Once when she dreamed of the unicorn, she woke to find ER humping her elbow with all the eagerness of Harry’s Earnest Young Actor. “Your fantasy, not mine,” she grumbled at him and went back to sleep.

* * *

It wasn't until she was sitting in the tiny darkened theater that Barbara wondered why Harry had come to see the rushes—surely he'd seen rushes before? Ah, she thought, he's probably here to see how his work stands up on film. Then she groaned mentally at her own choice of expression; during a porno shoot, *everything* became double entendre. That reading (as Harry would have called it) probably did explain why Dick had come. Barbara groaned a second time and told her subconscious firmly to cut the bad jokes and concentrate on the screen.

Somebody, probably John, had slated the unison humping as "The Anvil Chorus/take 2." Barbara laughed. Even though there was no sound with the footage, she could almost hear the music as she watched.

Like the writing itself, only parts of the film worked that well. Odd to see the scenes jumbled out of order, and each replayed from two or three separate camera angles. Piecing them together in her head like a jigsaw puzzle, Barbara almost saw a way to do without Dick's footage altogether. No, not quite. Damn him, anyhow—he'd ruined two of her best-written scenes; she didn't need sound to tell her that.

On the other hand . . . She watched the last of the footage between Harry and Suzy with widening eyes and growing wonder. Mentally she patched it together in proper sequence; heat rose to her cheeks. When the lights came on, she turned to Harry in open-mouthed astonishment.

Her pleasure vanished before his scowl. "Harry . . . ?"

"I'm sorry, Barbara. Damn! Just that much off the timing"—he held up thumb and forefinger, fractionally apart—"and I blew it. I knew we should have done another take."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"That scene between me and Suzy—"

His distress was genuine, but, to Barbara, inexplicable. He thought he'd ruined the one scene she found most remarkable! On impulse, she caught his hand and squeezed it. "Do shut up,

Harry. You do better than you know. That was lovely, that scene. It didn't work in the writing, but you and Suzy made it work on screen beautifully."

He eyed her unconvinced. "Stubborn man," she told him. "That's the only scene in the film that's genuinely erotic. Not only does Suzy actually look like she gets off but—" Barbara felt her face heat all over again—"then you kissed her, so gently, so tenderly, that— Oh, hell." She looked down at the floor. "I felt like a voyeur, but I couldn't look away because it was so pretty."

"Pretty!" His laughter came so suddenly as to startle her, but it was genuine pleasure. "Damned if I've ever heard a hard-core sex scene described as pretty before!" He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckle in the fashion prescribed for gentlemen of the Old School. "I'm still sorry I didn't give you better, Barbara, but I'm glad what I did was good enough to please you."

"Oh, yes—"

"Well," said Dick, "will you look at these two? What's going, Harry? A bit of non-union union?"

Still smiling at Harry, Barbara said, "Dick, this is between an author and her character. Go fuck yourself, preferably where no one has to watch."

"So give up the dope, Harry—how's she compare to Suzy and Glinda?" He elbowed Barbara. "Bet you never had it so hot, girl. Let me know when you're ready for the Major League."

He meant himself, of course. Barbara couldn't help but sigh. In her hand, Harry's tensed with anger. Afraid to look up at his face, she did anyhow—and saw none of the anger there.

But as she watched he shifted his stance, thrusting out a hip. His wrists went limp. "Oh, Dick," he said, his voice pitched just a trifle higher than normal. "You're *such* a delight! So . . . so *masculine!* Do call me soon, won't you? Barbara won't mind, will you, dear? We are, perforce, just good friends . . ."

His free hand brushed Dick's chest, barely touching, and Dick took a startled step backwards, staring at him in horror. Then, without another word, Dick turned and strode across the room. Reaching Suzy, he threw his arm about her—at the perfect height to clasp her right boob in his hand—and glared at Harry from behind the ramparts. Suzy ignored him.

Barbara turned away to hide her laughter. "Oh, well-played, sir!" she said to Harry. "Not what I'd call subtle, but then Dick wouldn't have seen subtle!"

Then she had a horrified thought that wiped all the amusement from her face. "Oh, lord! What have you done to your reputation?"

"Not a thing." His sweeping gesture dismissed any possibility of problem. "Anybody who knows Dick also knows that Dick thinks any guy who doesn't grab a girl's tit on first introduction is a flaming faggot." He grinned in Tommy's direction and got a broader grin in return. "You see?" he said. "Tom got the joke."

"Boy, am I glad I don't live in Dick's fantasy world."

"That makes two of us."

But later that morning the shooting schedule forced them to do just that. Barbara stuck it out through two of the scenes, but, when it came to the third, she gave up and settled in the kitchen, with ER and a cup of coffee, to read through her manuscript. That, at least, gave her the feeling she was accomplishing something.

By the last page, she was no longer sure of that: the story wasn't good enough. It had its moments—the outrageously horny unicorn was not bad—but as a whole it failed to do what she wanted it to do. For the thousandth time, she wished she'd never gotten hooked on writing.

She was still scrawling changes and scowling at the results when Harry flung open the kitchen door and commanded: "Go watch Glinda and Suzy. They're doing a bang-up job of your 'The hell with men' scene." Glad for the break, she obeyed.

He was right. Suzy and Glinda played the exchange as

broadly as she'd intended it and with just the right touch of acid. It was so well done, in fact, that when Tommy yelled "Cut! Print it!" he followed it by joining the rest of the crew in applause for the two.

While the gaffer shifted lights, Barbara went over to the actresses where they lay. "Thanks!" she said. "That was great!" She sat down beside them on the floor, offering her cigarette pack and ashtray.

"The way you wrote it," Glinda said, "I could *see* it."

Suzy, to Barbara's surprise, nodded and said, "Yeah, it's not often we get a decent script." She took a cigarette, paused to light it, then added, "Even then, we get Dick. Your weirdo cat would be better in the part."

She stabbed her cigarette toward the sofa and called out, "Hey, John! If you've still got some film in that camera, shoot him—he gives a better cum shot than Dick—I've seen it."

John followed her point. ER had propped himself against the arm of the sofa, his hind legs and tail straight out before him, his back bent double in an elegant curve: he was fellating himself. Barbara closed her eyes in exasperation.

When she opened them again John had raised his camera and was moving slowly in on the cat for a close-up. ER glanced up, briefly annoyed by the light Tommy had turned on him, then adjusted his feline indifference up a notch and went back to the business at tongue.

Moments later—business finished—ER softened his curve into the more traditional prose of the feline, all the elegance and hauteur of a library lion, to survey his kingdom. Even the snap of Tommy's end-slate could not ruffle such regal equanimity.

"Thanks, Suzy," John called, "you're absolutely right about his cum shots." He took the lens off his camera and peered through it. "Splattered the damn lens. Shit, I wish I'd had the slo-mo ready!"

"Barbara, get the hell out of the scene." That was Tommy. "John, get me a master of Suzy and Glinda and the cat

watching them from the sofa. If we intercut the girl-on-girl with the tomcat, we'll have 'em in stitches."

Barbara got the hell out but by the time John had set up the shot ER had remembered an urgent appointment. He hopped off the couch and headed for the door. "Sorry," said Barbara, "I guess he likes to keep his fantasies to himself."

"Maybe we'll catch him later," Tommy said. "Print the cat cum shot anyway. We'll figure out a way to use it."

They reset the lights for the graphic close-ups. Glinda winced as Kim peeled the mike off her ass and rubbed the spot to smooth away the marks of the tape. "MOS," said Tommy, then he grinned at Barbara and translated, "'mitout sound.'" Barbara cast a suspicious eye at him. "All the early directors were German," he said. "Kim'll pick up the wild sound later."

"Heavy breathing, groans and moans, slapping flesh," Kim said, relishing the words as she catalogued them—Suzy yelped as Kim ripped the mike from her thigh—"shrieks," finished Kim.

With no need for quiet in the room, there wasn't, except for the silent intensity between Suzy and Glinda. How they could concentrate so lovingly on each other—with Tommy calling out directions and rearranging them every other minute, with John literally crawling between them for close-ups of various orifices—was beyond Barbara. She could only marvel.

There was a loud disparaging snort from the other side of the room. Barbara, much put out by the tone of it, looked up to see just who could fail to be impressed by Suzy and Glinda. It was the unicorn again.

And its manners had worsened, however beautiful it might be. Through the window, it fixed a baleful silver eye on Glinda, its expression that of a parent whose only child had just told a dirty joke to company.

With a second snort of disgust, it pierced the wall with that utterly wrong horn and bounded through—at Glinda. "Cut!" yelled Tommy. The snap of the end-slate coincided with the

thump of the unicorn's hooves on the living room floor—and then it was gone. Vanished.

Tommy switched film packs and resumed shooting. For a long moment Barbara stared into the empty spot where the unicorn had been, then Suzy said sharply, "My face. Now." Barbara refocused her attention just as John turned his camera on Suzy's face.

Suzy's face contorted, her eyes closed and her mouth opened to loose a deep sob of pleasure. "All *right*," said Tommy enthusiastically, "go for it!" Suzy did.

By the time she was done, Barbara was ready to swear that Suzy had actually reached orgasm. Marvels and prodigies, Barbara thought, wrung out with vicarious emotion, that's what I get on three hours' sleep.

"Cut! Print," said Tommy. "Take a break, kids, you deserve it. *Good stuff!*"

Barbara got to wobbly knees and, picking up Suzy's robe, went to offer it. If she had intended to be nonchalant, she failed miserably; the words just tumbled out. "Suzy, that was *some* acting—I was absolutely convinced you got off!"

"Still Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, aren't you? I *did* get off. The acting comes earlier. I have to convince myself I'm the type of person who would get off with Glinda or Harry—or even Dick."

"But—how?"

"It's not them I'm fucking, not up here anyway." She tapped a finger to her temple. "I might consider fucking Harry, but I haven't fucked Dick yet, thank god." She directed that shot at Dick, whose mouth dropped open; then, with as much hauteur as ER at his finest, she strutted past him and into the bathroom.

"I've fucked you in six movies!" Dick called after her. "This is the seventh," he said, turning his glare on Barbara.

"That's your fantasy," Barbara said. "Obviously you're not hers."

"What the fuck would a fag-hag know." He turned his back

on her and walked away. In less than three steps, his swagger returned. Marvelling at his powers of rationalization, Barbara went to the kitchen for her notebook and a much-needed caffeine fix.

She was so absorbed in trying to capture everything she'd seen in words—Dick, Suzy, the unicorn, all of it—that she didn't realize what Harry was doing until he turned over the final page and tried to restack the sheaf of papers. He had to struggle, given the tooth and claw marks ER had left in her manuscript.

Her embarrassment must have shown on her face, for he looked instantly contrite. "I'm sorry, Barbara. I hope you don't really mind, but I was curious. Glinda thinks you're one hell of a writer, you know." He held out the sheaf of papers. "She's right."

Barbara shook her head. "It's a first draft. Stories read better in print. At least, well—better," she finished, meaning, *Never right*. "I don't usually let anyone read them until—I've given up on them." She took the pages from him and laid her notebook atop them to serve as a barrier.

When she was finally able to look up, she found him staring at her curiously. "You're apologizing, aren't you," he said; it was almost an accusation. "Why?"

"I—" she faltered, tried again—"it's not what I wanted."

"I'll tell you what *I* want—I want fifteen million dollars, the world's best special effects department, and this story. Have you any idea what a film this would make?"

He shook his head suddenly. "No, no. Wouldn't work. Even with the best special effects in the world they'd never get that unicorn right. God, Barbara, now I understand how you could see a unicorn on a porn set!" Then, grin spreading from ear to ear, he added, "ER should be flattered—I am."

"Uh—" she'd put more than a little of both of them into the unicorn and now her cheeks must be flaming—"People d-don't usually recognize themselves."

“Actors are more used to seeing themselves than people are. Glinda will love it—you’ve got her down perfectly.”

Barbara laid her hand on the manuscript and drew it closer.

“You aren’t going to let her read it?” Harry frowned at her, more concerned than disapproving. “That’s not fair, Barbara. You’re her favorite writer and that’s *her* unicorn . . . at least by right of the story.”

There was a certain logic to that, Barbara had to admit, but the manuscript remained clenched in her hand.

Without warning, Harry gave her a Groucho Marx leer and said, “Besides, if you *don’t* show it to her, I’ll tell my analyst friend you wrote me into a story as a unicorn.” His eyebrow waggled at her with a life of its own. “She’s a Freudian. Guess what she’ll make of that?”

Barbara smiled at the transparency of his tactics and slid the manuscript back to him. “You show it to Glinda,” she said. “I hate being around when somebody’s reading my stuff.” She had to peel her fingers off it one by one; that gave her an excuse not to meet his eyes. “It makes me feel like I’m naked.”

“Well,” said Harry brightly, “that makes two of us.”

By the third and last day of the shoot, there was no escape from Dick. Two of the PAs were in Barbara’s bedroom, co-opted into doing wild sound for Kim. Barbara hadn’t been able to watch: her laughter would have spoiled the take. Nor could she stay in the kitchen where Glinda, her scenes finished, waited—with Barbara’s manuscript for company—for a lift home from Roger.

Barbara wound up on set, next to Harry. His work too was finished but . . . “You never know what might come up,” he told Barbara, wagging an eyebrow.

“What’s the opposite of bowdlerize?” Barbara asked him. “Whatever it is, you do it with that eyebrow.”

He waggled the eyebrow again and went back to the catty commentary that made Dick’s performance almost tolerable. “Thank *heaven* they’re shooting MOS! Hearing Dick’s voice

just sets my toes all a-tingle," Harry's Gay Cavalier was saying. "He gives such *meaning* to 'Oh, baby, baby, baby!'" His imitation of Dick's delivery was deadly, and Barbara giggled.

Behind her there was a rich chortle of agreement. She craned around to see which of the PAs had been listening in and found herself face-to-face with a unicorn—not the prissy white unicorn of the days before, with its cold eyes and its lowering horn—but a *proper* unicorn!

She stared, drawing in her breath like an extended sigh. The horn . . . ! The horn was translucent like polished stone—onyx, obsidian, smoky quartz—all perfectly melded into one long spiral. It sprang from beneath a tangle of forelock to sweep up and *back* in the kind of breath-taking care she'd seen only in a cat's leap. Yes, thought Barbara, with immense satisfaction, that's *right!*

So was the rest of it. It had ER's tabby coat . . . gray and silver and gloriously shaggy. Matching stripes ran amok in its mane. Instead of a beard (and that was right, too—she'd always thought the beard a bit silly), a flourish of cat-whiskers ornamented its slender Arabian nose . . . and its eye-ridges as well, which added to its air of rakish good humor.

Its gold eyes sparkled with merriment. Barbara knew that in bright sunlight they'd narrow to slits just as ER's did, but now the pupils were wide, dark with interest in her. It chuckled again, pressed its warm whiskery muzzle to her shoulder and shoved, for all the world like ER's head-bump greeting. More emphatic though, for it pressed her into Harry, who said, "Barbara?"

"My unicorn's back," she said—not only did it feel as real and warm as Harry but she could even smell it, a happy combination of rain-spangled fur and cinnamon, like the day ER had gotten into the cinnamon doughnuts—"Will you do me a big favor and tell me just how good my imagination is?"

Before he could embarrass her by turning, the unicorn gave

another chortle-snort, crouched, and sprang, landing before them with a soft thump.

Barbara was surprised to see that it had the feet of a cat as well—and the curiosity. It padded softly forward, exploring. The swagger in its walk was pure tomcat: tail erect and sinuous, hips swinging side-to-side to flaunt a set of balls the size of grapefruits, richly furred charcoal gray for further emphasis—and to match the tuft at the end of its tail.

“Oh, god,” said Harry in a tone of awe. “It’s male.”

“No shit,” said Barbara, then shot him a side-long glance. *He could see it!* She looked wildly around the room but it was obvious only Harry shared her delusion.

The filming went on without so much as a murmur of astonishment, even though the unicorn had stepped closer to investigate the tangle of limbs that was Dick and Suzy and Carol and Roger.

It sat back on its haunches to thrust its neck out and sniff the tangle from one end to the other. “Cut that out,” giggled someone from within the tangle. “Quit tickling! Is that damn cat back?” Affronted, the unicorn drew back, glaring haughtily at the lens of John’s camera.

“No cat,” said John. “Keep your mind on business.”

“It’s not his *mind* you want on business,” came the reply.

“Dick,” said John, “can you stand Suzy against the wall behind you?” To Tommy, he explained, “It’ll liven up the composition.”

As Dick and Suzy rose, so did the unicorn. Warily, it circled the knot of actors and crew. Head low, ears slightly back, it reminded Barbara of ER stalking something unfamiliar . . .

Stalking *Dick!* Oh, god, thought Barbara, I overdid the cat part. “No, *don’t!*” She made a half-gesture to wave the unicorn away.

It turned aggrieved eyes on her. Not fun, its expression said. “Not fun for us, no. It’s *work* for us,” Barbara said, knowing only Harry and the unicorn could hear her, “making fun for other people.” The pupils narrowed to slits—dubious.

"I'm doing my best," Barbara said. "Most of us are." Beside her, Harry nodded vigorous agreement.

The unicorn eyed them both sympathetically, shook his head, and eyed Dick in quite a different manner. Dick had Suzy against the wall. As John knelt beside them for a good close-up of Dick's hard-on, the unicorn stretched delicately toward them and blew a noisy stream of breath directly onto Dick's prick. Dick wilted.

"Oh, hell," said Tommy.

"I'm still rolling," said John. "Trust me, it's a good shot and we can use it. Barbara can write it into the script."

Open-mouthed, Barbara nodded. Could she ever!—that was all she needed to cut all of Dick's speaking scenes! "One extra scene between Harry and Suzy," she called to Tommy. "Four lines—six, tops. You'll love it!" She turned to Harry, pleading, "You'll do another scene, won't you?"

The unicorn gracefully scratched the base of its horn with its hind leg, then it raised its head to leer at Harry, wagging its whiskery eye ridges in impersonation. Harry laughed. "I'll do it, with bells on."

"Shut up, Harry," said Dick. "Goddam faggot."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Dick, just pay attention and get it up again, will you?" John got several minutes of film of Dick's attempts to rise to the occasion. The unicorn meanwhile padded softly about, investigating the remainder of the cast and crew.

Having satisfied its curiosity, it padded back to bump Harry hard enough to rock him. Tail twitching, it settled before him, fixing him with a look of anticipation. When Harry did nothing, it made the same sound ER made when he wanted something, a kind of chuff of impatience, and head-bumped Harry again, this time into Barbara.

"I was just going to," said Harry, "when I was distracted by this unicorn . . ." He turned to Barbara and said, "Do you like George Bernard Shaw?"

"What?" Barbara stared at Harry in disbelief. The unicorn

nudged her and she blurted out, "Me? Uh, you mean the playwright? Yes, passionately."

The unicorn waggled an eyebrow at Harry. "Good," he said; he reached into his back pocket, drew out a bit of blue cardboard, and held it out to her. "I'm doing a showcase of *Arms and the Man* next weekend. I thought maybe you'd like to see me act in clothes. We could have a late dinner afterwards."

"I'd like that a lot, Harry." She took the ticket and tucked it into her hatband.

"That's settled, then," said Harry, and he turned to exchange smug looks with the unicorn.

Then the unicorn got to its feet. Making a noise halfway between a nicker and ER's chirrup of inquiry, it turned an earnest eye on Barbara. "Glinda," said Barbara, suddenly realizing, "he's here for Glinda." The unicorn chuffed at her, mildly annoyed. "Sorry—I mean *Janie*."

Not wanting to take her eyes off the creature, she rose—Harry rose with her—and gestured it toward the kitchen. It trotted beside them, half in, half out of walls and bookshelves. Barbara opened the kitchen door.

Glinda was just laying aside the final page of the manuscript. She looked up as they entered, but it was neither Barbara nor Harry that she saw.

"My unicorn," she said, as the unicorn swaggered toward her.

ER rose from his spot on the kitchen table—making as much of a production of it as Harry made of his double-takes—to intercept and greet it. The two touched noses. Whatever they found satisfied them both. With mutual smugness, they rubbed cheeks, then ER stepped back, granting it permission to greet Glinda.

With a sigh of content, the unicorn laid its huge head in Glinda's lap. Glinda's hand wavered over its nose, then lighted gently. "My unicorn," she said again and it raised its head to tickle her face with a whiskery muzzle.

Glinda wrapped her arms around the unicorn's neck. For a long moment, her forehead rested against the upswept horn. Then the unicorn shook himself loose to look into her eyes. "Yes," said Glinda, "oh, yes! Take me with you!"

The unicorn sat back on its haunches. Glinda came to straddle the striped back. "Warm," she said, delighting in the discovery. She caught a handful of mane and hugged again.

The unicorn rose carefully to its feet. Glinda teetered, then found her balance with a laugh that sang of sheer giddy pleasure. It swaggered once around the kitchen table to let Glinda get the hang of the gait (and to show off for an appreciative ER) . . . then it trotted toward the wall.

"No!" cried Barbara, her hand outstretched. "No, don't go!"

The unicorn wheeled, bowed once in her direction. From its back, Glinda—no, *Janie*—grinned broadly at her. "Oh, Barbara, *thank you!* We'll never forget you—I promise! 'Bye, Harry! You take care of Barbara, you hear?" And then the unicorn wheeled again and with a kick of its heels—even better to show off its balls—it bounded through the wall, carrying Janie with it.

Barbara ran to the window overlooking the lawn just in time to see Janie and the unicorn vanish into the willow garlands, Janie's laugh of joy still echoing in her ears. "Don't go," Barbara said again, her eyes stinging, but she knew they could no longer hear her.

Harry's arms closed warm around her, and Barbara, turning to bury her face against his chest, let the tears come. "I'm damned if I know what you're crying about," he said quietly. "It's not just anybody who can conjure up a unicorn for a porn star."

"I'm crying—" she sniffled and wiped her face on her sleeve—"because I couldn't conjure one up for me."

"Maybe," Harry began—but ER launched himself from the kitchen table to land on his shoulder—"Oh, cat!" From his new vantage point, ER comforted Barbara with a loud purr and

a prodding paw. "Maybe," Harry said over the purr, "it just takes practice."

Barbara's hat hit the floor. "D'you really think so, Harry?" She peeled ER carefully off Harry's shoulder and hugged the purr to her.

"Well, and some native talent. Which you've certainly got." Laughing, he gathered them both into his embrace and laid his cheek against her temple. "You showed me a unicorn, for god's sake . . . !"

"I did, didn't I?" Barbara drew back, just far enough to look up into his eyes. "That's something . . . That's *something!*"

ER bumped her hard in the chin, firmly approving her change of tone. "That's better," said Harry, equally approving.

"Now, what are we going to tell them about Glinda?"

He bent, picking up her fallen hat. Having assured himself the ticket was still in the hatband, he set it on her head and said, "You're the wizard. You think of something."

"We'll tell them exactly what happened . . ."

He looked at her aghast. "Barbara—!"

She grinned up at him. "We'll tell them I called a ride for her."

For Michael Swanwick—of course

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