

Run! Run!

by Jim Aikin

Jim Aikin's first fiction sale was to our magazine back in our Feb. 1981 issue. He went on to publish two more stories with us in the 1980s, as well as two novels, *Walk the Moons Road* and *The Wall at the Edge of the World*. In recent years, he has been writing for music technology magazines like *Mix*, *Keyboard*, *Electronic Musician*, and *Virtual Instruments*, and by his own description, he considered himself "an ex-fiction writer." His muse, however, had other plans for him—for which we thank her.

An adult unicorn is larger than a pony, though smaller than a horse. Its limbs are as lean and lithe as a deer's, its mane and tail equine, generous, and silky as spider-weave. The males have a goatee of the same hair, which gives them a contemplative look. All unicorns are pure white, but the horns of the males have a thin spiral of blue that runs from the base out to the tip, the females a spiral of gold. At night the horn of a unicorn glows faintly, with a cool unwavering light.

Unicorns have a distinctive odor, somewhere between cinnamon and candle wax. They will eat grass, but they prefer fresh flower petals. An adult can eat seven or eight pounds of flower petals a day, after which its droppings are a swirl of colors, a clotted rainbow.

My daughters know nothing about unicorns. As far as I know, they have never seen one. They may not even know the word. Certainly no one has ever told them about the unicorns their grandfather once kept on his farm outside of Elmira, New York. They never knew their grandfather, for that matter. I wonder—what should I tell them? How much should I tell them?

When I was their age (Cecile is eleven, Faith eight—how quickly they grow!), unicorns were a fact of our lives. We knew we mustn't talk about them, my sister Leonore and I, not to anybody, but they were always there, off in the south paddock nibbling on flower petals, which in the winter my father had flown in from Central America in large bales. I suppose the truck drivers might have wondered about those shipments, but my father had a way of putting people at ease without saying much. He was a quiet, comfortable man, and I miss him very much. My mother had died when I was only a baby and Leonore not much older, so I never knew her, and Father seldom spoke of her. Once in a while he would say, "Your mother's looking down from Heaven, and she's smiling"—or, if we were

misbehaving, “Your mother’s looking down from Heaven. Do you want her to see you doing that?” But he took good care of us, and our life on the farm seemed to me complete.

The south paddock was well screened from the road by a line of trees, and there was little traffic on the road. If the unicorns—there were usually seven or eight of them—were glimpsed from the road, they would have been thought horses. At night their horns, twinkling among the trees as they ran, might have been mistaken for boys chasing across the field with flashlights.

Father brought the first unicorn home the year before I was born. I suppose Mother must have thought he had gone mad, but he never spoke of that. The unicorn—I knew her, years later, as Sparky—was a foal, and had no horn yet, no more than a nub on her forehead. He found her at the edge of the woods, a trembling little thing. He thought at first the foal must be an albino deer, its mother shot by a hunter. Deer hunters were not uncommon in the woods around our farm, so he may have been right about the fate of the mother. When the foal failed to thrive on mare’s milk, I believe he brought the veterinarian in to look at her. The vet, Dr. Land, must have known at once what she was. In later years my father paid Dr. Land what he called a monthly retainer for his services, though by the time I was five or six we had no animals left other than the unicorns, an aging, arthritic spaniel, and an entirely self-sufficient cat. Dr. Land was a Godly man, and it would be a slander to say he took my father’s money to keep quiet about the unicorns, but I can’t think of any other explanation.

I was born in the seventh year after the Final Conversion of the Heathen. All the world at last was Christian, which must have set Satan gnashing his teeth! The Mohammedans, the Chinese Communists, even the Jews had converted, one and all, and been baptized. At last, after centuries of struggle, the United States was a Christian nation. Prayer was heard every morning in every school, every unborn child was safe in the womb, and not one soul would have dreamed of giving voice to the atheistic ideas that had once been so disgustingly common.

Or so it’s said. I’m a little hazy on what those atheistic ideas might have been, because no one repeats them anymore. Why should we?

What I hope my daughters would understand, if I were to tell them about the unicorns, was that their grandfather was a Godly man too. Perhaps not as fervent as some, but Leonore and I were taken faithfully to church every Sunday in Elmira, and on Wednesday nights to Bible study at the Christian center down the road. There was no evil in him, not that I ever

saw. But there is evil in all of us, I know it's true. I can't deny that Father strayed from the Word of the Lord.

The last summer when there were unicorns at the farm, I was fifteen and Leonore was seventeen. She had fallen very much in love with Timothy McFadden, the son of our local pastor. It was expected that Tim would follow in his father's footsteps and join the clergy. Poor Leonore! It was hardly to be expected that Tim would notice her, with so many girls vying for his attention.

She would have had an easier time of it if we lived closer to town, because she was pretty, and had truly accepted Jesus Christ into her heart. She would have made a wonderful wife for a minister! But Father had too much work to do on the farm to drive her to Monday night choir practice or to the Saturday youth picnics, which was where the boys and girls mainly had a chance to socialize. He had acreage in alfalfa, and apple orchards, and he never had quite enough hired hands to do the work. I don't know whether it was because he couldn't afford the hands—the unicorns must have been a constant drain on our finances—or whether he was worried that the hands would wander out to the south paddock and see something he didn't want them to see.

I never knew how the unicorns arrived on the farm, or when one would. They may have scented one another. One day there would be seven in the herd, the next day eight, the newcomer not hard to spot—burrs in his mane and tail, perhaps with a limp or scratches left by barbed wire, wild-eyed when Father approached, bolting to the far end of the paddock and not easily soothed.

How did a newcomer ever get into the paddock? I've often wondered that. Sometimes I think any of them could have leapt the fence at any time, that they stayed only because they wanted to. Sometimes I think they knew how to lift the latch of the gate using their horns, and let the newcomer in themselves. But I suppose it's possible that Father was part of a network of secret unicorn fanciers, and was known to be good with wild ones. Possibly a truck would pull up, well past midnight when Leonore and I were safely dreaming, and the animal would be unloaded and led out to the paddock.

Father never cajoled a newly arrived unicorn, or tried to coax. He just set out the feed, saw to the water, and let the beast get used to his presence in its own time. A month might pass before it would let him curry it. Occasionally they favored me instead of Father, especially as I got older. There was one male that I named Charger, who would always come close when I appeared at the fence. After I fed him, he would—sometimes, not

always—permit me to comb his silky mane with my fingers.

“Could I ride Charger?” I asked Father once. “Could we saddle him like a horse?”

Father shook his head. “A unicorn can never be saddled. They won’t stand for it. Years ago I heard it said you could possibly mount one and ride it bareback, but you wouldn’t want to, Mary.”

“Why not?”

“If you mount a unicorn, it will run off bearing you, swift as the wind. It will never tire and never stop, and you’ll never be able to dismount again. When at last Jesus calls the faithful up to sit beside Him in Heaven, you’ll still be astride the unicorn, and you’ll be left behind.”

I think he must have made that up, just to keep me from spooking Charger and possibly breaking my leg or my skull when I got thrown off. I don’t honestly know where he might have met anyone who could tell him a single thing about unicorns. He told me once about a thing called the Internet, which had flourished when he was younger. You could meet almost anyone on the Internet, he said, or read about no end of wicked, sinful things. But after the Final Conversion of the Heathen, Godless things like the Internet were no longer needed.

I think he would have found a way to take Leonore to choir practice and Saturday picnics, if I had wanted to go too. That’s why I have to shoulder some of the blame for what happened. I should have been more interested in socializing, but I had always been a shy, moody, awkward girl. I knew if we went, Leonore would get all the attention while I’d be left standing off in a corner by myself, a miserable lump. I much preferred to stay home and look after the unicorns. Not that they needed much looking after; but if I held out a handful of tulip petals, one would edge closer, curious but skittish, and eventually nibble daintily from my hand.

Sometimes I think Leonore was jealous. They would never eat from her hand, but then she never truly tried. She was always too impatient. She would twitch, or make some wry comment under her breath, and then the unicorn would bound away to the far side of the paddock, where it would gaze at her reproachfully or go back to cropping daisies.

But saying she was jealous isn’t fair to her. In truth, our father should not have had the unicorns in the first place. Reverend McFadden delivered several heartfelt sermons every year describing how Satan would tempt the

faithful with seeming miracles. Father sat there and listened to the sermons, and nodded and said, "Amen," but it was as if he never heard a word. So maybe Satan had entered into his heart. I don't like to think so, but Satan never rests. He's always looking for an opening. I know this.

Leonore would have done anything—well, almost anything—to get Tim McFadden to notice and approve of her. But Father and I were being no help. It was as if we had entered into a sort of pact and shut poor Leonore out. At the dinner table we would talk mostly about the unicorns. Was Sparky or Noble the faster runner? Would Desdemona foal this year? Leonore would sit there, poking at her food. Through gritted teeth she would say, "Could we please talk about something else?"

In the end, it was too much for such a good Christian soul to bear.

The first we knew about what she had done was when Reverend McFadden and four of five of the church elders appeared at our gate one Saturday morning. They wouldn't enter the property, but called out to Father: "We need to speak with you, Mr. Pritchard."

He went striding out to meet them. I had heard them drive up, and came out on the front porch to listen.

"We've received a disturbing report," Reverend McFadden said. He was a portly man, always well dressed, but his eyes were set close together, which made him look as if he was squinting even when he wasn't. "We understand you're harboring horned animals on the property."

"I don't know who would have told you that," my father said.

"Someone who is in a position to know. Can you tell us, then, on your word as a Christian, is it true or is it not?"

"If I tell you it's not, that's as good as calling another man a liar, am I right?"

"That would be one way of looking at it, I suppose."

"Well, I don't think I could do that," Father said. "If a man utters a falsehood, or says anything against me meaning to hurt me, it's between him and his God. It's not for me to judge him."

That set them back, but not by much. "Would it disturb you," Reverend McFadden went on, "if we were to come onto your property and

see for ourselves?”

“No!” I cried. “Don’t let them!”

Father never turned toward me. “Go into the house, Mary,” he said over his shoulder. “Let me deal with this.”

I slipped through the front door, and I think the screen banged a little, though I didn’t mean it to. My heart was skipping so fast I couldn’t breathe.

Leonore was standing at the foot of the stairs, her hand on the newel post. She was smirking.

“You!” I clenched my fist. “You told them!”

“What if I did?” she said archly. “There’s no place in God’s creation for devil-beasts. You’d know that perfectly well if you hadn’t been picking your nose all through Bible study. We’ll all be happier when they’re gone.”

I would like to think she truly believed that. I wouldn’t like to think she did it to hurt Father and me; she is far too pure and good ever to have let such a temptation into her heart. Of course she must have thought she would impress Tim McFadden with how upstanding a Christian she was, how vigilant against the wiles of Satan. That was the main reason.

I stomped past her up the stairs to my room, and threw the pillows across the room and wept. Out the window I saw Father leading the men toward the back paddock. They weren’t out there more than five minutes before they came back. Reverend McFadden was leading the way almost at a trot, as if he couldn’t wait to get off of our place. “Put them down, Mr. Pritchard,” he said. “Put them down! You have a rifle. Use it.”

Father went out to the front gate to see them off, and then came into the house. I heard him moving around downstairs, and then the awful creak of the rusty old hinges as he opened the gun cabinet.

I knew what I had to do. But when I burst out of my room, Leonore was standing in the hall right in front of me. “Where do you think you’re going, missy?” I tried to get past her to the back stairs, but she shifted to block my path. “Want to say good-bye to your precious Charger?” She laughed. “The sooner you forget about him the better.”

May God forgive me. I hit my sister with my fist and knocked her down. I think surprise showed in her eyes, but I was already past her,

leaping down the back stairs three at a time.

I raced out to the paddock. All the way, I kept looking over my shoulder, but I didn't see Father coming.

I threw open the gate, charged into the paddock, and ran at the unicorns, waving my arms. "Run! Run! You have to run!" They tried to stay away from me in the enclosed space, shy creatures that they were, so when I got to the far side of the paddock and circled back I was able to herd them out the gate, even that year's half-grown foal, Jewel.

Unicorns are much faster than horses, when they want to be. They can run like the wind itself. By the time Father came down from the house carrying his rifle, they had raced away. I could still hear their hoofbeats receding, or thought I could, but they had vanished from view. I was standing at the open gate hugging myself, shivering uncontrollably, though it was a warm day. "They're gone," I said.

"Did you open the gate, then?"

"No, it was open when I got here. I think those—the men from the church must have forgotten to latch it." I don't know why I lied. Was it because I didn't want Father to punish me? Or because I wanted the church elders to bear the blame for the unicorns being gone? Either way, it was a sin.

Father might have known I had lied, but he never said a word. He put his arm around my shoulders and led me back into the house.

It turned out I had split Leonore's lip when I hit her. She had bled all over the upstairs hall carpet, and Father had to drive her into town to get stitches. She wouldn't speak to me for a month, and I don't think she ever quite forgave me. Father never said a word about what had happened that afternoon, never again spoke about the unicorns at all. But it was like someone had switched off the light in his heart. After supper he would sit in the front room and not turn on a lamp or listen to the Gospel hour on the radio, just sit there in the dark all evening.

Once I walked in on him, sitting there in the dark, and saw he had the rifle cradled in his lap. That scared me a lot. But the next morning the rifle was locked up in the gun cabinet again, and later I found the key to the gun cabinet lying on my dresser. I hid it, which I guess was what he wanted me to do.

Leonore married a man named Howard Stith and they moved away to Indiana. She sends me Christmas greetings full of chatty news about her family, but we almost never talk on the phone. The year after she got married, Father died, and I closed up the farm and sold it. That was when I found the key to the gun cabinet, still tucked away in the bottom of my sock drawer. This was all a long time ago. I got married too, to a fine upstanding man, and now I have two daughters of my own. I wish they had known their grandfather, but I never talk about him. What would I say?

At night sometimes, as I lie in bed waiting for sleep to come, I think I hear, somewhere very far away, unicorns galloping, galloping like the wind. I imagine their manes and tails streaming out behind them as they run, the cool glow of their horns flickering among the trees like loose moonlight. I imagine what it would be like to ride one.