

Esther M. Friesner

How To Make Unicorn Pie

Building up a high fluted rim, prepare in a 9-inch pie pan, baked flaky pastry
crust. Whisk in thoroughly

1 small New England town

2 searching hearts

1 astute observer

3 possibly-mythical animals

Fold in Esther Friesner's distinctive sense of humor, let simmer. Read at leisure and enjoy. Delicious!

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

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

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

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

UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN!

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

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

To the good folk of Bowman's Ridge, having a writer in their midst is rather like having a toothless, declawed cat in the chicken coop. The beastie may look harmless, logic may insist that in its present state sans fang and talon it is by fiat harmless, but the biddies still huddle together, clucking nervously, because... You never know.

I know what they are afraid of. It's the same fear that's always plagued small towns condemned to harbor the Pen Pushers from Planet Verbiage. It's the ultimate terror, which I first saw voiced by a secondary character in one of the Anne of Green Gables books when the heroine began to garner some small success as an author: What if she puts us in one of her stories? Not a direct quote, but it'll do.

Forget what you think you know about fame. Not everyone wants his or her allotted fifteen minutes' worth. The people of Bowman's Ridge want it even less than the people of Avonlea, or Peyton Place, or any other small town that had the poor judgment to allow writers to burrow into the wainscoting and nest for the winter. They are simple, honest, hardworking folk, who will take a simple, honest tire iron to your head if you so much as hint that you're going to make the outside world aware of their existence. (I think that the surplus of deferred fame-bites gets funneled into an offshore account where Donald Trump's ego, Michael Jackson's manhood, and Madonna's uterus spend much too much time making withdrawals. I could be wrong.)

It doesn't do me a lick of good to explain to my friends and neighbors that their fears are for naught. I write romances. Historical romances. Books with titles like *Druid's Desire* and *Millard Filmore, My Love*. The only way I'd write about anyone from Bowman's Ridge is if they were romantic, famous, and dead. Why, they could no more get into one of my books than a taxman into heaven, a linebacker into leotards, or a small, sharp sliver of unicorn horn into a nice big slice of Greta Marie Bowman's apple pie.

"Ow!"

It was a snoozy afternoon in mid-November and I was seated at the counter in the coffee shop when it happened. The coffee shop in Bowman's Ridge is the nexus for all manner of social interaction, from personal to political. I'm afraid my Transient heart doesn't get all revved up over the Planning and Zoning

Commission's latest bureaucratic brouhahaha or the Women's Club's plans for yet another authentic Colonial weekend to honor the memory of our own Captain James Resurrection Bowman C1717-1778). I go there because the coffee is good but the apple pie is downright fabulous.

Or so I thought, until I found the figurative needle in the Northern Spies.

Carefully I put three fingers into my mouth and drew out the thing that had stung me, tongue and palate. I pulled it between my lips to clean off any adhering fragments of cooked apple and flaky crust. I have no idea why I went to the trouble. Would it make any difference to my throbbing mouth if I got the barb clean before seeing what it was?

I might as well have saved myself the effort and simply spit it out. Even clean and wiped dry on a paper napkin, it was nothing I could put a name to. About as long as the first joint of my little finger and one-quarter as wide, it caught the light from the coffee shop overheads and shimmered like the inside of an abalone shell.

"Something wrong, dear?" Muriel's shadow fell over the object of my attention.

Muriel and her husband Hal own and run the Bowman's Ridge coffee shop. I like to think that they belong to some mystic fraternal order of interior decorators -- the Harmonic Knights of the Cosmic Balance, Fabric Swatch and Chowder Society -- for the way they keep the place charming without being cloying. Anyone who's

dallied in small town Vermont knows how easy it is for an eatery to sink into the La Brea Cute Pits. Either the management heaps on the prat-a-porter antiques, or wallows in frills and dimity, or worst of all, beats it with the Quaint stick until it catches a case of Terminal Rusticity from the knotty-pine paneling and dies.

Hal and Muriel just serve good food, never patch the vinyl counter stools with duct tape, adorn the place suitably for holidays, and periodically change the basic decor according to the grand, universal imperative of We Felt Like It. Oh! And they never shop at Everything Guernseys, thanks be to God, Jesus, Ben and Jerry.

Muriel has never treated me like a Transient and she sees to it that all the waitresses know how I take my coffee (black, two sugars) without my having to tell them every time. She even awarded me the supreme accolade, posting a Happy Birthday, Babs message on the whiteboard where they display the daily Specials. This privilege is as good as telling the world that I might not be a Bowman's Ridge Native, but I was one of the Transients they could take out of the attic on visiting days to show the neighbors. I like Muriel a lot.

So of course I lied to her. "Nuh-uh," I said, hastily clapping my hand over the extracted sliver. "Nothing's wrong, not a thing, great pie."

Muriel gave me a searching look, but all she said was, "Yes, Greta Marie said she's gotten some superior apples this season." Then one of the waitresses came up to tell her she was wanted in the kitchen and she was gone.

Left to myself once more, I uncovered the sliver and picked it up delicately between thumb and forefinger. It twinkled with all the hues of prism-shattered light, but it was made of no substance I could name. The man on the stool next to me cast a curious glance at it, but promptly went back to reading his newspaper. People in this town don't pry. Why bother, when every scrap of local news scoots around faster than a ferret on amphetamines? Sooner or later, everyone knows everything about everyone else.

Well, I thought, it's very attractive, whatever it is. I'll bring it home; maybe Rachel can make something out of it. Rachel is my teenaged daughter. She has discovered the Meaning of Life, which is to make jewelry out of any object you find lying around the house, yard, or municipal dump, and pierce another part of your body to hang it from. At least this object was pretty, and I always say that a good soak in Clorox will clean anything, up to and including Original Sin.

I was so fascinated by the way the light played off my little bit of found art that I didn't notice Muriel's return until I heard her say, "Uh-huh. Thought so."

Caught in the act, I tried to cover up my sorry attempt at willful misdirection by dropping the sliver onto the open pages of the magazine I'd brought into the coffee shop with me and slamming the glossy cover shut on it. Slapping my hand over the bare-chested male model on the cover, I gave Muriel a sickly smile.

"Dropped a contact," I said. "I don't want it to fall on the floor."

No dice. You can't fake out a woman who can tell good tuna salad from bad at fifty paces. "Honey, who are you trying to protect?" she said. "Greta Marie? You don't even know her."

That was true. Greta Marie Bowman belonged to the third and smallest segment of Bowman's Ridge society: Eccentrics. As my dear mother would say, an eccentric is what you call a lunatic who's got money. Mom was speaking from the jaded, materialistic perspective of big city tile, however. In places like Bowman's Ridge, we realize that money doesn't excuse abnormal behavior. You don't have to be rich and crazy to be classed as an eccentric; you can be poor and crazy, so long as you're also the scion of one of the town's oldest families. Or in Greta Marie Bowman's case, the scionette.

Yes, she was the descendant of that Bowman. And yes, she was living in what: the Victorians referred to as genteel poverty. Whatever mite of income she derived from her ancestors' surviving investments needs must be eked out by the sale of apple pies to the coffee shop. This was one of those cold, hard facts that everyone knew and no one mentioned. A Mafia don brought up to follow the steel-jacketed code of silence, omerta, is a harebrained blabbermouth next to a resident of Bowman's Ridge who's got something not to say.

"Look, it's nothing," I said. "I may not know her, but I certainly don't want to get her in w ,,

"Trouble?" Muriel finished for me. She sighed. "Babs, you want to know the meaning of the word? That thing you just found in your pie, what do you think would've happened if someone else had found it?"

"Not much. Everyone around here knows Greta Marie and no one would say anything that would--"

"Think that goes for the Summer People?"

Na-na-na-naaaaaah. Cue the sinister chords on the pipe organ. The only critters lower on the Bowman's Ridge food chain than Transients are Summer People. I don't know why the Natives despise them so. They are the single best thing to happen to the local economy since maple-leaf-shaped anything. They swarm up here every June, July and August, with a recurring infection come leaf-peeping time, and pay top dollar to stay in spare rooms that would otherwise be mold sanctuaries. They attend church bazaars and rummage sales, fighting to the death to buy the nameless tin and wicker doohickeys that the Natives clean out of Aunt Hattie's attic, taunt Hattie could never tell what the hell that bug-ugly objet al'awful was either.) And of course if you've got any piece of house-trash, no matter how old, no matter how dilapidated, all you have to do is stencil a pig or a sunflower or a black-and-white cow on it and it's outahere, courtesy of the Summer People.

On the other hand, serve them a slice of pie that's packing a concealed shiv and they'll bring the Board of Health down on your head faster than you can sell

them a busted butter churn.

"I see what you mean," I said. "But the season's over, the Summer People are all gone, and -- "

"Skiers," Muriel reminded me. "Snowmobilers."

"Oh." I'd forgotten that, like weasels, when winter came the Summer People changed their coats and returned to our little town in swarms.

"It really would be a kindness to tell her." Muriel patted my hand in a motherly way. "Won't you please?" "Ummmm. Why don't you?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" She laid her hands to her bosom. "She'd just simply fold up and die if I did. She doesn't take criticism too well, poor child." Only Muriel would refer to a spinster pushing fifty-five as poor child, bless her. "She'd stop baking pies for us altogether. She needs the money, though she'd never admit it. What would become of her then? It'd be plain awful."

In my heart I agreed with Muriel, though more out of my love for the pies than any concern for the pie-maker's welfare. "But if she doesn't take criticism well, how could I say- ?" I began.

Muriel pish-tushed me like a champion. "But it's different if it comes from you, Babs."

I didn't need to ask why. Wasn't it obvious? I was a Transient. My cautionary words concerning unidentified opalescent objects in the pastry wouldn't shame Greta Marie the way a Native's would. In fact, if I were to go to Greta Marie's place and accuse her of using the fat of unborn goats for piecrust shortening she could live it down. So I went.

Greta Marie lived out on the Old Toll Road. This was a stretch of highway so narrow, frost-heaved and godforsaken that the fact that someone had once collected real American money from travelers to allow them the privilege of breaking their axles in the ruts and potholes was a testimony to Yankee ingenuity, to say nothing of Yankee gall. There was hardly enough room for two cars to pass, unless one climbed up onto the shoulder at a forty-five degree angle, bumping over the gnarled roots of pine trees flanking the way. Luckily, the Old Toll Road had gone from being a throughway leading to Montpelier to a dead end leading to nowhere when the bridge over Bowman's Gorge collapsed in 1957. The town decided it would be a waste of money to rebuild it, since by then everyone took the State highway anyway, and that pretty much put an end to the two-way traffic problem.

That is, it did unless you happened to be heading up the road at the same time that Greta Marie Bowman was headed down it. She drove an old Rambler the color of mud with a crumpled fender and enough dings in the sides to make it look like the only car on the road suffering from cellulite. Wonderful to relate, she could actually get that bundle of battered tin up to considerable speeds, even over the humps and hollows of the Old Toll Road.

Wonderful to relate if you're safely out of the way, terrifying to tell if you're driving the car that's right in her path. Like a deer caught in the headlights, I spied the glitter of Greta Marie's Coke-bottle glasses and I froze. My hands spasmed tight to the steering wheel, my foot refused to move from the accelerator, and the only thing I could think was: Dear Lord, if I die, what the hell body part will Rachel pierce to commemorate the funeral?

I felt like a complete idiot when Greta Marie brought her vehicle to a ladylike stop with room to spare and nary the smallest squeal of brakes to be heard. She peered over the steering wheel like a marmot testing the first sniff of spring air, then dropped from sight behind the dashboard. One hefty car door swung wide and she was walking toward me, all smiles. I lowered the window to greet her and was nearly bowled into the next county by her preferred scent, Eau de Mothballs, but in the name of preserving the honor of all Transients, I managed to dig up a smile of my own and paste it to my face.

"You're that writer-person?" was how Greta Marie Bowman chose to say hello.

"Um, yes, I am."

"Oh, I knew you'd come! Really I did!" She clapped her hands together with girlish glee.

"You did?" This was news to me. I wasn't sure whether it was good news. In her oversized, out-at-elbows black cardigan, with her steel gray hair anchored to

the top of her head with at least three pairs of knitting needles, Greta Marie Bowman put me in mind of a large, amiable spider.

"My gracious, and when I think that we almost missed each other entirely -- !" She spoke in the chirpy, lockjawed accents of a young Katharine Hepburn. "Now you just follow me up to the house and we'll talk."

And then, as God is my witness, she gave me a roguish wink, went back to her car, and backed up at speed all the way to the ancestral Bowman property, which lay a good quarter mile or more up the Old Toll Road.

From what I had gathered in my quarter century of Bowman's Ridge residence, the Bowmans had always been farmers, but they made a better living selling off the land than tilling it. The hard soil of their property let a diligent man grow him a bumper crop of rocks, though only if he was willing to work for it.

The last male Bowman to inhabit the place had been Greta Marie's grandfather, dead to these many years. By the time he was under his native soil, he'd sold most of it. The only exceptions were the ancestral apple orchard, a swampy meadow beyond that, and the homestead plot. This latter supported a meager vegetable garden, a dilapidated chicken coop and poultry yard, the half of the old barn that was still standing, and the Bowman house proper. All of these flashed before my eyes as Greta Marie hauled me out of my car and into the front parlor where she assaulted me with tea.

"Now the important family papers are mostly safe in the attic," she said, pouring out some oolong strong enough to strip paint from metal. "I can let you have those today, but the best sources are Caroline Elspeth's notebooks, and they're over in Brattleboro at Cousin Victoria's house. She said she was going to do something with them, but everyone knows how far that got. Vicky never finished anything in her entire life except her husbands."

I took a sip of tea, set the cup aside, and stammered, "I -- I beg your pardon?",

Greta Marie slapped a wrinkled hand over her mouth and, as I hope for glory, tittered like a chipmunk. "Oh mercy, there I go again. I forgot: You're not from around here. You wouldn't know about Vicky." And with that, she proceeded to bring me up to speed on Cousin Victoria Bowman Randall Smith Chasen, her antecedents and her heirs. It was a lengthy recitation that left me knowing more about the Bowman family and any related Native families--which is to say everyone in town--than I'd ever wanted or needed to know.

When she was done, I gazed down at my now-frigid cuppa and murmured, "That was...very interesting, Miss Bowman, but I don't see --"

" -- how you can use all that for your book? Well, of course you can't use all of it," Greta Marie reassured me. "After all, I wouldn't be very bright if I gave away everything. I simply must reserve some of it for my own book as well. I'm sure you won't begrudge me that much? Mine won't be nearly as fascinating as yours, but then you've had so much more experience, you have connections, and as

Daddy always used to say, when you've got connections, who needs talent;"

Another giggle, this one ending in a snort. "All I want to write about is the branch of the family that settled near Brattleboro, old Zerusha Bowman's boys and that Martin woman -- you know, she swore she came from Boston, but everyone here just knew she was from New York." Pronounced Sodom.

It was then that the diaphanous phantom of Understanding tiptoed up and tapped me gently on the cranium with an iron mallet. To this day I couldn't tell you whether my subsequent spate of blather was more of an apology for not having come to use the generations of Bowmans past as raw material for my next book, or an explanation for why I had come.

"Oh," said Greta Marie, regarding the shining sliver I held out to her in my cupped hand. "I see." If she were at all disappointed, she bore it well and swallowed it whole. "That certainly was careless of me. Thank you so much for bringing it to my attention." She stood up from behind the tea things, which I assumed was my cue to scurry back into the Transient woodwork, duty done.

As it happened, I was wrong. No sooner had I risen to my feet, stammering some social pleasantries about having to go home now, I'd left the children on the stove, but Greta Marie raised one briary brow and inquired, "Then you'd prefer to come back another time to see the unicorns?"

Three minutes later, to the tick, I was outside the Bowman house with Greta Marie, leaning my elbows on the top of a drunken split-rail fence that marked

the boundaries of the meadow. And there, prancing and pawing the spongy ground and bounding hither and yon in matchless beauty at the slightest provocation, were the unicorns. There were three of them, all a luminous white so pure as to be almost ice-blue, with flossy manes the color of smoke glimpsed by moonlight. Even without the time-honored single: horn in the middle of the forehead, it would be impossible to confuse these entrancing beasts with the most thistledown-footed thoroughbred.

Which was a good thing, because...

"Their horns," I gasped. "Where are their horns?" I leaned farther over the fence, staring at the three dancing shapes in the meadow. "All they've got are these lumps."

"Lumps?" Greta Marie shaded her eyes, as if that gesture could hope to counteract a truly heroic case of myopia. She sighed. "Oh dear. It's happened again. Wait here." She left me teetering on the gateway to Wonderland as she trudged off to a nearby toolshed, to return with a small, bright hacksaw in hand. Setting two fingers to her lips, she blew a piercing whistle.

The unicorns heard and the effect was galvanic. They paused in their frolic, heads up, ears pricked forward, a pose of frozen loveliness so exquisite that it hurt my heart to see it. Then they broke from a standstill to a gallop, three clouds of lightning racing across the meadow. For an instant I was afraid that they meant to charge right through the fence--God knows, it didn't look strong enough to halt a stampede of bunny-rabbits -- but I needn't have worried. Dainty

cloven hooves planted themselves hard and decidedly in the earth just a handspan from the fence, bright garnet eyes twinkling with amusement. I could have sworn that the critters were laughing at me.

Just so I wouldn't make that mistake in future, the largest of the three curled his lips back from a double row of nastily pointed teeth and did laugh at me. It was a sound birthed at the junction of a horse's whinny, a stag's belled challenge, and a diva's scorn. He did it loudly and at length, giving me more than enough time to study him.

His eyes were, as I've mentioned, a deep, gem-like crimson, very large, highly intelligent, and possessed of an almost human capacity for malice. And yes, there in the place where tradition dictates the horn must be, there sprouted a pearly lump. Small as it was, I could see that it wasn't to grow into the sleek pool-cue object some folks fancied, nor was it the twisty narwhal tusk others preferred their unicorns to sport. It was multisided, multi-edged, and the edges thereof fuzzy with the added menace of minute, vicious serrations, almost barbs. At full growth it would be deadly, and not an easy death either. Just looking at it made my skin go cold.

The unicorn cocked his head at me as if to say, Seen enough, tube? Take a picture; it lasts longer. Then he swung his muzzle away to plant a long, snuffly kiss on Greta Marie's withered jowl.

"There's a good boy, there's a fine fellow." Greta Marie stroked the slab of

silky white cheek. "Now just hold still, this won't hurt a bit." Placing one hand on the unicorn's nose, she used the other to ply the hacksaw. The steel blade bit into the base of the resurgent horn, which made a frightful screeching as it was severed. The unicorn submitted to the operation with that air of gallant indifference popularized by the better class of 18th century highwaymen about to swing at Tyburn Tree. Greta Marie worked quickly. There was a dull plop as the horn-nub hit the dirt.

"There," said Greta Marie. She fluffed up a little fur to cover the newly raw spot on the unicorn's forehead and announced, "Next!"

I watched with a combination of fascination and revulsion as she proceeded to treat the two remaining miracles as if they were parlor cats getting their claws clipped. When the third shining stub fell to earth, she sighed with satisfaction, then shouted, "Shoo!" Spooked like a flock of buff Orpingtons, the unicorns took off for the far end of the meadow, the place where boggy grassland melted into a small patch of wildwood. They flickered under the shadows of the leafless branches, then turned to fog and were gone from sight.

"Well, we won't be seeing any more of them today," Greta Marie declared, stooping to gather the fallen nubbins. Still dumbfounded, I followed her back into the house where I watched her set the horn-nubs on a butcher's block cutting board and whack them to flinders with a cleaver. Using the flat of the blade, she scraped the resulting pile of iridescent toothpicks into an old stoneware crock marked Garlic.

"You...save them?" I asked. She gave me a look that as good as accused me of Wastefulness, chief among the Seven Deadly Sins of Transients.

"I use them," she replied.

"Er, how?" Visions of an alchemist's lab hidden in the old Bowman root cellar taunted me. I pictured Greta Marie huddled over her bubbling alembics, a stuffed corkindrill suspended above her head while she added a pinch of unicorn's horn to her latest batch of hellbroth.

"Why, I simply -- Never mind, it would be easier to show you. Do you have a minute to spare? Several?" And with that she opened a cabinet and donned not the wizard's pointed hat, but the cook's muslin apron. Still without waiting for my yea or nay, she proceeded to favor me with the privilege of witnessing the process by which Greta Marie Bowman took plain apples, sugar, spice, and pastry, and confected them into the food of the gods.

When at last she dropped the top crust into place over the mounded fruit filling and fluted the edges, she turned to me and commanded, "Watch." From the Garlic cannister she took one splinter of unicorn's horn and with five deft jabs opened steam slits in the piecrust. "There. That's how I use them."

She cleaned off the sliver and dropped it into a jelly jar on the windowsill above her sink before popping the pie into the oven. "You can get about three perfect pies out of each one," she informed me. "After that they crumble into

dust -- the horns, not the pies. But the dust makes a wonderful scouring powder-- gets out every stain you can think of and a few you can't -- so I don't feel too bad about getting so little use out of them. And the critters are always growing new ones."

She removed her apron and folded it over the back of a kitchen chair. "I can't imagine where my mind was when I let that splinter you found slip into the pie. Oh wait, yes I can. That must've been the day I was in such a terrible hurry, and it seemed like every time I turned around, the phone was ringing itself off the hook. No wonder I got all muddled, between trying to get the Congregational Church bazaar organized and all that baking and baking -- ! Ed Franklin had come by that week to bring me three extra bushels of Cortlands -- he's had a bumper crop this year. I know he meant it to be kind, but I had my own apples to use and I knew that if I didn't get his Cortlands baked up they were going to go bad on me. Not that it matters anymore -- I could use rotten apples in my pies and the horn would turn them to nectar, just nectar-- but old habits do die hard. My mother raised me to bake a decent apple pie and I can't do any less." She finally paused for breath, plucked the kettle from the stove, and beamed at me. "More tea?"

I left her house about an hour later, burdened with the apple pie, the Bowman family papers, the promise to at least try to write *fire Bowman's Woman*, and a vow of silence: Under no circumstances was I to tell a single, living soul about the presence of the unicorns on the Bowman property. As Greta Marie herself told me, the only reason she went to all the trouble of sawing off the creatures' telltale horns was so that unexpected callers who caught sight of them would

assume they were only horses.

"But if you want to keep them a secret, why did you show them to me?" I'd asked.

"Oh, you're different," Greta Marie reassured me. "It doesn't matter if you know about them." Right. Sic semper Transientis, or however you'd say Transients Don't Count in Latin.

I went back to the coffee shop to make my Mission Accomplished report to Muriel.

I was promptly rewarded with a cup of coffee, a glazed donut, and the question:

"So which one of the unicorns is your favorite?"

"Nurk?" I replied, mouth stuffed with a chunk of donut that bid fair to wedge itself in my throat if I let shock get the better of me. I chewed vigorously, swallowed, then leaned across the counter like a comic strip anarchist to whisper, "You know?"

Muriel chuckled. "Bless your heart, Babs, everyone knows. Only no one says anything. You know, I can't say we were at all surprised when the first one showed up, oh, maybe ten, twelve years ago. It was the middle of winter, long about Christmas time, when we have the Pinecone Handcrafts Fair at the firehouse; you know. Greta Marie's car was in the shop so Sally Norton and her boy Ron offered to drive up the Old Toll Road to fetch Greta Marie there and back. They pulled up into her yard and that's when they saw her and it. She'd already sawed the creature's horn clean off, but even so, even in the nighttime

with no more light to see by than the spill off that old kerosene lantern she leaves burning near the gatepost, there was no way a sighted person could ever believe that was a horse! Of course Sally and Ron never said that to Greta Marie."

"Of course not," I mumbled.

"And if you ask me, it was that natural when the other two joined the first one. Frankly I'm kind of puzzled that there aren't more than three haunting the Bowman place. Maybe three unicorns are all that's left in this part of the state, and it's no wonder they've all come to roost with Greta Marie."

"It is?"

"Of course it is! Lord love you, Babs, don't tell me that an educated city woman like you doesn't know what it takes to attract a unicorn?"

City woman? Twenty-five years ago, maybe. Which translates into Bowman's Ridge-ese as yesterday.

And I did know what it takes to attract a unicorn.

"Oh, come on, Muriel!" I protested. "Don't you stand there and try to tell me that Greta Marie is the one and only virgin in this whole town!"

Muriel's eyes twinkled. "All right, I won't. Wouldn't be true, anyhow. But how

long does your average virgin last, these days? Sixteen, seventeen years at most, and that's like an eyeblink of time to a unicorn. They're immortal, you know," she confided. "I may belong to a different generation, but I'm not blind or stupid. We all know what goes on with our young people, especially since the government's been making them go to that regional high school at Miller's Falls." Pronounced Sodom again, and no matter that the government redistricting edict was handed down in 1953, when even Vegas was wholesome.

"You see," Muriel went on, "it's not just that Greta Marie's a virgin, it's that she's so damn good at it. Pardon my French."

"So everyone knows and no one objects?" I asked.

"Why should they? She's a respectable member of this town and if she wants to raise mythical beasts on her own property that's her own business as long as she keeps them under proper control at all times and they don't pose any threat to the community."

"That's comforting to know," I said with a merry chuckle that didn't become me at all. (The glazed donut had gone straight to my brain and the sugar rush convinced me I could try my hand at wit.) "You see, I found this darling little dragon's egg on my lawn last Easter and I was worried that if I hatched it, people would talk."

Muriel stared at me blankly for the count of three, then said, "You writers,"

and took off as if the kitchen had caught fire.

I was left alone at the counter, Dorothy Parker manque, with nothing to hide my blushes save my coffee cup and my copy of *With Pen and Passion*. The cup being empty, I chose to go to ground behind the cover of the very magazine between whose pages I had dropped the original sliver of unicorn horn.

This might be the best place to mention that *With Pen and Passion* is one of the many fine periodicals to which I subscribe as part of my career as a romance writer. *WiPP*, as we in the trade call it, is a slick monthly whose chief allure is the book review column. That is to say, whose chief allure had been the book review column.

As long as we're opening narrative parentheses, let the worst now be revealed: His name was Wellcome Fisher and he was my own damned fault.

I'd met him at a romance writers' convention in New York City about ten years ago. He was an aspiring author, scion of a proud old New England family, almost attractive in a tweedier-than-thou kind of way, well-bred, well-read, pumped full of the Wisdom of the Ancients at the ivy-covered tit of Mother Princeton, raring to put pen to word processor and make his genius known to the fortunate masses. There was just one little thing standing in the way of his brilliant career: He couldn't write for toffee.

Of course I didn't know this from the start. He seemed like such a nice man.

Many successful romance writers are male, you know. They all write under female

pseudonyms unless they're Fabio or churning out mainstream lunchblowers like *The Bridges of Madison County*.) He introduced himself, said how much he admired my work, and asked if he could buy me a drink.

He bought me several. It was all strictly professional. We had a lovely, long chat about the importance of research in writing historical romance. He told me that he was always extremely punctilious about his research, and he didn't understand why the one book he had managed to sell was doing so poorly.

"I don't merely say 'Gwendolyn stood before her mirror wearing a velvet gown,'" he told me. "I put in details." And he gave me an autographed copy of *Lady Gwendolyn's Gallant* so that I could see for myself.

I did, once I got it home. Wellcome had done his research, all right. His book gave me a painfully thorough education about the provenance of food, clothing, furniture, music, and transportation in Regency England. It told me who ate what and how much of it, who slept where and for how long, and who used which finger to excavate whose nostril. In fact, it told me everything except an entertaining story.

We had exchanged telephone numbers, so when the inevitable happened and he called to ask my opinion of his work, I found myself in a bit of a quandary. I don't like to lie, I just do it for a living. However, neither do I like to tell someone that his book, his effort, his hardbound baby, stinks like a gopher's armpit. For one thing, it's cruel. For another, it's dangerous. Alas for the

world, we now no longer know which eager young writer will take constructive criticism as an invitation to assassination.

So I hedged. I evaded all direct questions about the book itself. I chattered and gobbled and blithered about a plethora of other subjects in an attempt to divert Wellcome Fisher from the original aim of his call.

Unfortunately, one of the subjects on which I blithered was the fact that WiPP was looking for a few good book reviewers. Wellcome heard, applied, and the rest was history, much like the Hindenberg, the Titanic, and the Reagan Years. From the moment he got the job, he announced that he would now devote his fair young life to the aesthetic improvement of the Romance genre. It was a noble aim, in theory.

In practice he appeared to have slapped on a pair of six-shooters and gone out gunning for authors whose work had committed the unpardonable sin of having a better track record than his. [Which is to say, everybody and Cain's dog.] He implemented this game plan by reducing any book he reviewed to a pitiful clutch of execrables, derivatives, pathetics, and don't bothers.

Any book, including mine. Though we remained on social terms, Wellcome was quick to inform me that he would not let our acquaintanceship sway his critical judgment, and he proved this by a scathing review of Raleigh, Truly [Sixth in my ever-popular Elizabethan series). Furthermore, said he, I ought to be grateful. He was only being honest.

I, in turn, informed him that I thought his critical judgment consisted entirely of bloodyminded revenge on writers who, unlike himself, had managed to create something people wanted to read. What was more, he might call it honesty, but anyone with half a glass eye could see that he had more axes to grind than Paul Bunyan. The rest of our interview is clouded in my mind, but I believe that a condescending remark on his part, a bowl of extra-chunky salsa on mine, and a dry-cleaning bill for a man's suit figure in it somewhere.

If only the chunks had been larger! Wellcome sustained no permanent injuries from the episode. He wrote on, his pen unblunted and his bile unmitigated, an Alexander Woollcott wannabe in full flower (Deadly nightshade, since you asked). As a matter of fact, the very issue of WiPP into which I had slipped the odd finding from my apple pie likewise contained Wellcome's review of my latest novel, *Beloved Babylonian*. I'd been waiting to read it until I was sure we were all out of razors.

Why did I let his reviews do this to me? Even though I knew he trashed everyone's books equally, even though I knew he wrote solely out of envy and spleen, his words still had the power to wound, or at least to give me the stray twinge in the coccyx. When he wrote romances, he bludgeoned whole chapters to death with a stack of research books as high as it was dry, but when he wrote reviews, he was the undefeated master of a myriad barbed bitches. We writers claim to be indifferent to any voice save that of our Muse, but we writers lie.

Living among the stoic folk of Bowman's Ridge for twenty-five years had not

helped to harden my skin or toughen my ego. However, it had taught me the simple, rock-ribbed lesson most hardscrabble folk learn early: Get the worst out of the way first. I decided to read Wellcome's review, swallow his abuse, question his masculinity and curse his name, all so that I'd be able to enjoy the rest of the magazine in peace afterward.

Fans of Barbara Barclay's stunning Elizabethan series will rejoice to learn that the justly praised First Lady of the Torrid Quill is now also the Queen of Sizzling Cuneiform. Beloved Babylonian takes you on a breathless, breakneck, no-holds-barred roller coaster ride of ecstasy through the reign of that hottest of historic hunks, Hammurabi himself. No wonder they called it the Fertile Crescent! If you want to read the best and the brightest that this field has to offer, then I urge you to run, don't walk, to your local prosemonger and buy your copy now! If these books don't fly off the shelves, they'll set them on fire.

"Babs? Babs, honey?" Muriel shook me gently by the shoulder. "You've just been sitting here for the past ten minutes staring off at nothing. You all right?"

"Uhhhh, sure," I said, and clutching my copy of WiPP to my heaving bosom, I fled. I didn't stop fleeing until I was safe at home, up in my office, with the door shut and the cat banished. I didn't like doing the latter. Like many another writer's cat, my gray tabby Gorbuduc has aided my career immeasurably by critiquing all my manuscripts with her asshole. It was the only thing that she and Wellcome Fisher ever had in common.

Until now. I read the other reviews. Each was as glowing and brimming with bouquets as the love-feast he'd laid out for Beloved Babylonian. I put down the magazine, unable to move, unable to speak, and more than a little inclined to scream. I'm a flexible sort, but to accept the fact that Wellcome Fisher would ever write an all-rave review column required my mind to acquire the elasticity of a boneless belly-dancer. Wellcome's abandonment of acrimony was the apocalyptic harbinger that St. John missed, the Unlisted Number of the Beast. I don't like it when my whole world pitches itself tush over titties without a word of warning. It frightens me.

"What's happened to that man?" I mused aloud. "Is he sick? Is he insane? He couldn't have gone nice on us spontaneously. What could put him in a charitable mood? Oh God. Oh no. Oh please don't let it be that he's actually gone and sold another of his books! Even vanity presses couldn't be that unprincipled. No, it can't be that. It's too horrible to contemplate. He must be up to something else, and it's something big and nasty or he wouldn't be trying to put us off guard with a few kind words."

I re-read his review column and my hands went damp and cold. "Jesus, to counterbalance something like this it's going to have to be something really big, and really, really nasty." I shuddered to think what that something might be. Wellcome Fisher had little talent, but like the Spanish inquisition's primo torturer he was a man of bottomless invention, mostly vindictive. This was not going to be pretty.

Existential fear is one thing, dinner's another. Every writer is allowed only so much time to wallow in the great trough of emotional resonance, with all-day privileges extended solely to those of us foresighted enough to be born male and to have obtained that handy labor-saving device, a wife. This was not the case for me, and while my husband is a dear who "helps with the housework" (Translation: "Where do we keep the butter? Where's the frying pan? Are you sure we have a potato peeler?") he was out of town on yet another of his ever-recurring business trips, (Alas, the darling of my heart is in Sales, and I am left forlorn. Not all single parents are divorced or unmarried, you know.) A glance at my desk clock told me that time and frozen fish-sticks wait for no man and so, using that wonderful human survival skill called If I stop thinking about it, it will go away, I purposely put Wellcome Fisher's aberrant reviews from my mind and hied myself downstairs to the kitchen.

The plates were on the table, Grace was said, and Rachel had just informed me that squash was Politically Incorrect (and gross), when the telephone rang. I scowled -- first at the phone, then at Rachel -- and announced, "If that's one of your friends, they know very well that it's the dinner hour and I'm going to tell them they can just call back later." This said, I picked up the receiver.

"What is the meaning of this flagrant violation of my Constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, you pandering troll?" a voice boomed in my ear.

"Oh. Hello, Wellcome," I replied.

"You can tell your friend to call back later, too, Mom!" Rachel called out joyously. (When did any daughter of mine develop such a provoking smirk, I'd like to know?)

"It's all right, dear, it's no friend of mine; it's a critic," I replied, not bothering to cover the mouthpiece.

"Eeeuuwww." Rachel made a face even more contorted by revulsion than when I'd served her squash. Truly I had raised her well.

I returned my attention to my caller: "All right, Fisher, what are you yapping about?"

"You know damned well that to which I refer, Barbara Barclay, you sorry hack. I call your attention to the December issue of *With Pen and Passion*, my review column in particular."

"I've seen it," I told him. "Really, Wellcome, you were much too kind. Much."

I could almost see the apoplectic color rising in his face when he spluttered out, "You're damned well right I was much too kind! If I weren't so fornicating kind you'd be getting this call from my lawyer!"

"Of course I would," I replied serenely. At last I had my answer: He was insane. Multiple personality disorder at the very least. He must've written those

reviews under the brief influence of the Good Wellcome Fisher, and now that Evil Wellcome had reasserted sovereignty, he wanted to shift the blame.

"Don't condescend to me, jade. And don't try to convince me that this is none of your doing. I know exactly what I wrote about that hideous mound of toxic verbiage you call Beloved Babylonian, and this review is not it! Nor are any of the others printed therewith the work of my pen. Oh, you'll pay for this effrontery, Barbara. J'accuse!"

It had been ages since Rachel was a bratty two-year-old, but it was remarkable how quickly I recovered the patient, measured tone of voice necessary for dealing with tantrums. "Wellcome, dear, before I put in a long-distance call to the wacko-wagon down in your neck of the woods, would you mind telling me how you think I managed to change your precious spew -- I mean, reviews?"

"Ha! As if you didn't know. Thanks to a barbarous mob of so-called readers whose vulgar tastes are directly responsible for the imminent fall of Western Civilization, you are an author who is w who is not without--" Something was sticking in his craw, but he made the effort and horked up: "-- who is not without some influence in the publishing world."

Ah, so he'd built his palace of paranoia on that little patch of quicksand, I was a Name in the field of Romance, therefore I could prevail upon the publishers of WiPP to delete Wellcome's real reviews and insert some of my own creation. Sure, I could. Now that I saw whither his twisted thoughts tended, I didn't know whether to laugh out loud or pity the naivete that believed genre

authors could influence anything except their editors' drinking problems.

"Look, Wellcome, I'm telling you that I didn't have anything to do with --" I began. Then a stray thought struck me. "Could you hold the line a sec !"

Without waiting for his answer, I put down the phone and fetched my copy of WiPP, opening it to the reviews. Something was nagging at me, worrying the corners of my mind. It was a scrap of legendary lore that I'd acquired years ago, back in college, when Lord of the Rings held all the secrets of the Universe and my holiest desire was to get an elf greased up, buck naked, and ready to rock `n' roll. But when I wasn't dreaming of more unorthodox uses for pointed ears, I read a lot, everything from trilogies to treatises on myth and folklore. After all, when you just know you're going to be the Queen of Elfland (or at least the Love-Slave) you don't want to make the gaffe of addressing a troll as if he were a dwarf, or calling a boggart a bogle.

From out of the mists of those damned embarrassing memories, a graceful white creature stepped. It printed the grass of an emerald meadow with its cloven hooves and knelt beside a tainted fountain. It touched the poisoned waters once with its horn. Once was all it took. The waters bubbled up bright and clean, free of all contamination.

Carefully I ran my fingers along the inner spine of the magazine until they encountered the faint trace of stickiness I had been half expecting. No matter how carefully you lick a batter spoon clean, some residual goo will cling to it

until it's properly washed, and no matter how painstaking you are about getting all the apple filling off a sliver of unicorn's horn before you drop it between the pages of your magazine...

"Wellcome," I said wearily, picking up the phone again, "I confess. I did it. I used my amazing professional influence to force the publishers of *With Pen and Passion* to drop your original reviews and substitute mine, but it wasn't supposed to happen until the April issue, as a prank. I'll be happy to contact them ASAP with a full retraction. Good enough? Good boy. Good-bye."

I didn't wait for him to answer. I hung up the phone but it took a while before I could unclench my hand from the receiver. I stood there for some time, silently cursing the incredible-but-true reason behind the metamorphosis Wellcome's vitriolic rants had undergone along with the promise of confidentiality I'd made to Greta Marie.

As if you needed to be sworn to secrecy! I thought. Outside of Bowman's Ridge, who the hell would believe you if you did talk about the unicorns?

I finally got a grip on my emotions and sat down to dinner. I was pleased to see that Rachel had cleaned her plate while I'd been on the phone with Wellcome. It wasn't until she'd scooted upstairs to do her homework that I noticed a double heap of mashed squash covering my fish-sticks. I molded a tiny little voodoo doll of Wellcome Fisher out of the surplus squash, drove a fish-stick through its heart, and enjoyed my dinner in peace.

Peace is precious because, like chocolate, it never lasts long enough to suit me. Wellcome Fisher took the next bus to Montpelier, rented a car, and showed up at my house the following afternoon, without benefit of invitation. I would have set the dogs on him, but we don't have any dogs and Gorbuduc wasn't in the mood.

His first words to me when he stepped out of the car were, "I don't believe you, you shameless Machiavellian magsman!"

"Fine, thanks, and you?" I muttered. I have nothing against reality save the fact that there is no way -- short of small arms fire, a Doberman, or a dimensional trapdoor -- that you can hang up on a face-to-face encounter with a petty-minded twit like Wellcome.

"I have here in my hand certain documents--" he began, wagging a clutch of papers at me as he advanced like grim Pedantry "-- that prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that your confession is as full of holes as your plots. Behold the galleys of those same reviews which you claim to have removed and replaced! They are precisely identical to the versions published."

I frowned. "So what's the problem? Of course they'd be identical. That's how galleys work, you know. Who gave you those?"

"They were given to me by the editor of *With Pen and Passion* approximately three months ago, as is the usual procedure for production of all of my columns.

According to my wont, I Faxed back the typographical errors and kept the galleys

themselves for my library. The problem, as you so infelicitously put it --"

(Here a needle-toothed leer spread itself over Wellcome's face, a grimace for a dyspeptic possum to envy.) "The problem is that when I filed these galleys they were my reviews as originally written, but when I took them out for inspection yesterday, after our delightful conversation, they had somehow become yours."

(The unicorn bends his head over the polluted stream and touches it once with his horn. The magical powers of purification act immediately, but they can't distinguish one drop of water from another. Unicorns don't do partial cures or managed care. It's all or nothing.)

"Tell me the truth, Barbara," Wellcome was saying. "Tell me how you managed to accomplish this, short of hiring cat-burglars to infiltrate my domicile."

"I can't tell you."

"Then perhaps you can tell my attorney."

"You wouldn't believe me and neither would he."

"Faugh!" (The man actually said Faugh!)

"It's a long story and parts of it are pretty far-fetched."

"You're not scaring me, Barbara; I've read your Elizabethan series."

I held onto my temper by counting the bristly ginger hairs springing from Wellcome's ears, then said, "If it were up to me, I'd tell you straight out, devil take the hindmost. It's not. It involves someone else, a respected and respectable person who lives in this town. I'd like to keep living in this town too, so I'm not going to tell you dick without this other person's permission, and I don't care if you sue my ass off."

"And if this person gives consent?" Wellcome's pudgy lips drew themselves into a moue of anticipation.

"Then I'll tell you everything."

"Hmph. Very well. Let us be on our way." He pivoted on one battered loafer and headed for his rental car. When I neglected to come bounding after, he paused and in tones of the highest snittery commanded, "Well, get in. You say the person you must consult likewise lives in this dainty suburb of Ultima Thule? Fine. You shall play Virgil to my Dante and bring about a meeting without delay."

I decided that some battles aren't worth fighting: Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas, and that includes getting down to word-wrestling with this pedigreed s.o.b. I got into the car and directed him back to the center of town where I led him straight into the coffee shop.

"And what do we call this fallen temple of Epicurus?" Wellcome inquired loudly

as we walked through the door. It was past the breakfast rush and before the lunchtime crowd, a few minutes short of eleven, for which I gave thanks. The only witnesses to my mortification were the three waitresses, two young mothers preoccupied with keeping their toddlers from shoving toast into each others' ears, and Muriel.

"We don't need to call it anything; it's the town coffee shop," I gritted.

"Ah. How delightfully self-referential. And what unspeakable offense against human society have I committed that entails even temporary incarceration here as my punishment?"

"That's what I've always admired about you, Wellcome," I said. "Your simple yet elegant style. I brought you here because this is where we've got the best chance of meeting the person we're after. Now can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'm assuming a decent cappucino is out of the question. I'll settle for a clean cup." He sniffed, wrinkled up his nose dramatically, and made a great business out of whisking off the immaculate surface of one of the counter stools with his handkerchief. Muriel saw him do this, her expression unreadable. I performed the usual pantomime of those forced to keep company with chowderheads: Sickly smile, shrug of shoulders, silent mouthing of It's-not-my-fault. Muriel pressed her lips together and went into the kitchen. While I writhed, our waitress came over and Wellcome asked her what was the ptomaine du jour in a voice so carrying that even the young mothers took note of us.

Oh, for a cloak of invisibility! or even just an Acme anvil to fall from the ceiling and squoosh Wellcome into clod-butter. I placed my order, though I had precious little appetite for anything except a certain critic's head on a platter.

It was while Wellcome was ingratiating himself with the waitress by staring at her breasts that Greta Marie arrived. My sense of timing had been impeccable: She always made her delivery at around eleven o'clock. She backed in through the door, an apple pie balanced on either hand, a look of intense concentration on her face. I hailed her by name and she startled like a duchess dry-gulched by a whoopee cushion, then recovered and smiled.

It took me a while before I realized that she wasn't smiling at me.

"You're Wellcome Fisher!" she gasped, rushing forward, still bearing pies. I couldn't say whether her bosom was heaving with the strain of unbridled passion, but the front of her tatty old Navy pea coat was imitating a bellows pretty well. "The flyleaf photo just doesn't do you justice. Oh my! Babs never told me that you were one of her writer-friends. This is such an honor! I simply adored Lady Gwendolyn's Gallant! So rich! So detailed! So -- "

Forty minutes later, I walked myself back home. If Wellcome noticed me leave, he made no demur, and as for Greta Marie, she'd scarcely noticed my presence to begin with. I left the two of them seated at the counter, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, Greta Marie telling Wellcome how wonderful his book was and

Wellcome telling Greta Marie that she was so very, very right.

That was the last I heard of Wellcome Fisher for weeks thereafter. WiPP made no inquiry into the unique eruption of sweetness and light in Wellcome's reviews, and the man himself seemed to have dropped the matter. He also seemed to have become a regular fixture in Bowman's Ridge, motoring up whenever he had the time, just to be with Greta Marie. Townsfolk saw them walking hand-in-hand down Main Street, a public display of affection that was the Bowman's Ridge equivalent of indulging in the love that dare not bleat its name on the church lawn. Eyebrows lifted, tongues clicked, and whoever coined the phrase "No fool like an old fool" must've been raking in the residuals for all the times the good Natives muttered those very words under their collective breath. If Greta Marie overheard, she didn't care. She was happy.

I suppose I should've been happy too. I suppose that as a Romance writer I should've sat back and enjoyed such a picturebook-perfect ending, cue violins and soft-focus fadeout. Unfortunately, just because I write the stuff doesn't mean I believe it. My outlook on life would be so much serener if I did. It's impossible to enjoy a front row seat for Happily Ever After when you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, and if I knew Wellcome, it was going to be a brogan.

So I waited, and Thanksgiving came and went. I waited, and the Christmas decorations went up all over town. I waited, and Bobo Riley stuffed two pillows down the front of his old red union suit, slapped on a cotton batting beard, and passed out candy canes to all the kids who came into his hardware store with their folks. But as for Greta Marie and Wellcome -- ? Nothing. Not even a rumor

of trouble in paradise. It was just too good to be true.

Muriel agreed. "I don't know what's gotten into the girl," she said to me. (In this town you're a girl until you become the charge of your husband or the undertaker.) "She's all atwitter, can't find her head using both hands and a roadmap, most days, and irresponsible -- ? I don't like to say how many days she's skipped bringing in the pies, and when she does, the quality's fallen off something terrible. When I think how good those pies used to be, I could just weep. Not that I'd ever mention it to her. Poor child would die. On the other hand, she really ought to know. I don't suppose you'd consider -- ?"

Which is how I came to be driving up the Old Toll Road to the Bowman place in the snow. I'd taken the precaution of calling ahead. No way was I going to risk my neck jouncing over ice-filled ruts for nothing. Greta Marie told me how much she'd be looking forward to my visit, and then:

"Dear Babs,

So sorry I missed you. Got a call from the postmaster that there's a registered letter for me down town from my Wellcome. Let's make it another time.

Very truly yours,

Miss Greta Marie Bowman"

I tore the note off the front door and stuffed it in my pocket, then went stomping back to the car, thinking bloody red thoughts. Just as my gloved hand

touched the handle, I heard a loud trumpeting sound, the singular, strange, fascinating cry of the unicorn. I looked back at the house and saw one come walking around the corner in stately beauty.

It was the largest of the three, the one who'd given me that contemptuous stare the first time I saw the critters. He'd changed; his horn was back, grown almost to full length. It shone with its own pale phosphorescence, a flickering blue-green flame. The beast held his head high and seemed to be in the best of spirits. Maybe animals can't smile, as we humans understand the grimace, but they do have their ways of letting the world know they're happy, and this was definitely one happy unicorn.

Was, that is, until he saw it was only me. I could mark the exact moment when recognition struck him right where the horn grew. His feathery tail, once flaunted high as a battle-flag, now drooped with disappointment. His whole demeanor seemed to say, I was expecting someone else. A spark of anger kindled from dashed hopes turned his eyes a dangerous scarlet. How dare I be anyone but the woman he was waiting for? He lowered that long, razor-edged horn in a manner that made my heart do a drumroll of dread. I'd seen how fast he could run and I knew that there was no chance of my getting inside the car before he reached me. I wondered whether it was going to hurt when he skewered me for the heinous crime of not being Greta Marie.

Then his head bent even lower, so low that the tip of his horn came within an inch of the ground. A dull gray film obscured its glorious fire. Sorrow had conquered anger. He let out a little whicker of misery that wrung my heart with

pity.

I went up to him and threw my arms around his neck, crooning words of comfort.

Yes, I talked to him as if he were a despondent collie pup. Yes, I voluntarily brought myself within easy stabbing distance of the horn. Yes, I'm an idiot, I admit it, it says so on my driver's license. If you want proof-positive of my stupidity then consider the fact that I went into writing because I wanted a high-paying, glamorous job where everyone respected me and internecine mudslinging just wasn't the Done Thing. But I couldn't turn my back on the poor creature.

"There, there," I said, running my hands through his flossy mane. "She'll be back, you'll see. It's just that she's a little sippy now. Love makes you temporarily brain-dead."

The unicorn looked me in the eye, his gaze eloquent. Don't sugar-coat it, my lady, he seemed to say. You and I both know what love leads to. She may be back, but she won't be the same, and where are we going to find another virgin at this time of year? Those Christmas parties are hell on maidenheads.

"You mean that Greta Marie and Wellcome have -- ?" Curse my imagination! The very thought of Wellcome al fresco and taking care of business was enough to purge a catfish. My conscious mind immediately tacked up wall-to-wall signs reading Don't Go There, Girlfriend. Don't Buy the Ticket, Don't Even Ask to See the Full-Color Brochures.

The unicorn flared his nostrils, scorning the whole hideous idea. Ah, true, true: Would he still be hanging around the property if Greta Marie had done the dire deed with Wellcome already? But to judge by his hangdog expression, he figured it was only a matter of time.

"Look, I'm sorry, but what can I do about it!" I told him. "Greta Marie's happy. I realize she's been neglecting you, but --"

The unicorn snorted again and tossed his head, casting off my paltry attempts at consolation. I watched as he picked his way across the farmyard, heading toward the straggle of apple trees. I thought I glimpsed the images of his two companions in the distance, under the spindly shadow of the branches, but that might have been a trick of light on snow.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "Don't give up!" I called. "Please don't just walk away! Even if she and Wellcome Fisher do get nasty, it's never going to last. Greta Marie's not stupid and she's not desperate: one day she'll see him for the ego-leech he is, unless he slaps her in the face with it first. That's when she'll really need you. She's been good to you for God knows how many years; you owe it to her to stick around. Nice unicorns. Good unicorns. Sit! Stay!"

I was babbling, but it got their attention. Three shivery streaks of marine light lifted beneath the barren orchard boughs, three pairs of glowing garnet eyes winked at me once before vanishing.

I drove back to town alone.

Greta Marie was in the coffee shop, seated on one of the stools at the counter nearest the big display window up front, reading her registered letter over a steaming cup of Muriel's best brew. It was a wonder she could make out the words for all the stars in her eyes. When she saw me come in, she broke from covert in a whirl of bliss.

"Babs, it's so wonderful! I do hope you forgive me for not being at home when you called, but it was such a good thing I came to town and got this letter.

Darling Wellcome! I know he meant to give me a few days' notice, but when one is as significant a figure in the field of belles lettres as he, sometimes it's simply impossible to take time for personal matters until the demands of one's career have been met."

Belles lettres? Wellcome? The only demand ever attached to his career was "Please, please, please, don't write another book!" As I seated myself on the stool beside hers, I did a rapid mental translation of Greta Marie's words, allowing for drift, wind resistance, drag, and converting from the Stupid-in-Love scale.

"There's something vitally important in there and he didn't bother mailing it until the last minute?" I presumed, nodding at the letter. Muriel brought me my own cup of coffee, glanced at Greta Marie, then looked at me and raised her

eyebrows in a manner that said Lost Cause.

"Oh, I don't mind," Greta Marie chirped, pressing the unfolded sheets of spiral notebook paper to her heart. Wellcome might waste words, ut never stationery.

"He says he's coming up today, and that I'm to meet him here because there's no sense in him driving all the way out to my place and then all the way back into town to the travel agent." She pronounced those last two words as if they'd been Holy Grail, fraught and freighted with a deeper meaning than was given mere mortals like me to know.

"Planning a little trip, hm?" I asked, striving to keep it casual.

"A very special sort of trip, Babs dear." She blushed. "I do think he's coming up to ask me...to ask me if I would consent to become...if I would consent to become his --"

"There you are!" Wellcome Fisher burst into the coffee shop with the elan of a juggernaut. He shouldered his way between us, nearly shoving me off my stool without so much as a word of greeting. Usually it is a fair treat to be ignored by Wellcome Fisher, but not when it means you've been relegated to the role of superfluous stage-dressing. I was miffed. I got up and moved, taking my cup with me.

Wellcome slithered onto the stool I had vacated. He looked Greta Marie up and down, his gaze severe and judgmental. "You're not prepared," he accused.

"Prepared, dear?" It was sickening to see the way Greta Marie went into mouse-mode at the sound of her master's voice. "But -- but I'm here. You did say to meet you here, didn't y -- ?"

"Ye gods, and was that all I said?"

Greta Marie cringed, but she summoned up the gumption to reply, "Well...yes. That and the part about going to the travel agent." She extended the letter for his inspection and added, "See, darling?"

He rolled his eyes, playing the martyr so broadly that I wondered whether he had a pack of stick-on stigmata hidden in the pocket of his anorak. "Merciful powers above, you're a supposedly intelligent wench: Do I have to spell out everything for you, chapter and verse? Are you that literal-minded? Are you incapable of basic inference?" He paused, striking a toplofty pose, apparently waiting for the applause of the multitude.

Now mind you, the hour of Wellcome's self-styled Calvary was lunchtime and the coffee shop was packed to the gussets with the usual Natives, alt of whom knew and respected Greta Marie Bowman. It was out of this selfsame respect that they went deaf, dumb and blind by common consent. They understood that she had fallen in with this acerbic yahoo of her own free will, they realized that she had brought all her sufferings down upon her own head voluntarily, they were firm in the belief that she should have known better, but damned if they were going to underwrite her humiliation, deserved or not. No one present reacted to

Wellcome's words with so much as a glance in his general direction. In fact, as far as the good folk of Bowman's Ridge were concerned, Wellcome wasn't even there. They didn't just ignore him, they nullified him.

Gadfly that he was, Wellcome did not take kindly to being overlooked. The Natives' lack of cooperation irked him. He took a deep breath and brought his fist down on the countertop just as he bellowed, "You peruse, but you do not read. Have you no grasp of subtext?"

Poor Greta Marie. I could see her lips begin to tremble, her eyes to shine with tears that didn't spring from joy. "I'm -- I'm sorry, dear," she said, her voice all quavery. "I -- I suppose you mean I ought to be prepared for -- for our trip, yes?"

Wellcome slapped his brow and let his celluloid smile glide across the room. "Finally!" he informed the audience. They gave no sign that he had spoken. "At the very least, I expected you to be packed."

"Packed? But -- but how could I? I wouldn't know what to bring. We haven't even discussed where we'll be going."

His shoulders sagged. Now he was both martyr and victim. "I thought you listened to me," he complained, wounded to the marrow. "Haven't I said time and time again how the winter weather affects my artistic spirit? Haven't I spoken of my very deep, very basic need to follow the sun?"

"You did mention something about visiting your aunt in Tampa every year, but --

"

"Well, my dear Auntie Clarice has just written to say that she is going off on a holiday cruise this coming week, and that we may have the use of the condo in her absence, with her blessing." He beamed at her as if he'd just laid the crown jewels of Zanzibar at her feet.

Greta Marie turned pale. "Oh no," she said, hands fluttering before her face.

"This coming week? Oh no, it's much too soon. I couldn't possibly make all the arrangements. Reverend Fenster is too taken up with the Christmas season, and we Bowmans have always been married from the Congregational church. Besides, there's simply nowhere we could book a large enough hall for the reception, let alone arrange for refreshments, and what about the blood test and the license and my gown and -- "

Wellcome's brows rose and came together until he was glaring at Greta Marie from beneath the shelter of a hairy circumflex. "What the devil are you jawing about?" he demanded. "Since when does one need a blood test to go to Tampa?"

"Oh," said Greta Marie softly. She folded her hands above her bosom and repeated, "Oh." Her head bowed like a flower on a broken stalk. "I thought you meant we were going to be -- " she began, then sank into silence.

"What? To be what?" Wellcome was mystified. For one fleeting moment he seemed

rapt by words that were not his own as he attempted to solve this present conundrum. "Do you imply -- ? That marriage twaddle you were spouting about your ancestors and the First Congregational Church -- ? Surely you weren't serious?" Without waiting for her reply, he dismissed the very possibility with a brief wave of his hand. "No, no, you couldn't have been; something else must be nibbling your liver. Spit it out, woman! I don't indulge in telepathy."

Greta Marie set her hands firmly on the edge of the counter. I swear that I could see the ranks of Bowmans long gone form up in ghostly phalanx behind her and then, one by one, add their ectoplasmic mite to the stiffening of her backbone. By degrees she sat up taller, straighter, prouder, looked Wellcome in the eye and coldly said, "I thought you were a gentleman."

There could be no greater condemnation uttered by a woman of Greta Marie's age and station. For all his failings, Wellcome was not slow on the uptake; the penny dropped, the "marriage twaddle" that he had dismissed as ridiculous returned to leer at him, nose to nose. I saw the flickering play of emotions over his countenance: shock, comprehension, a smidgen of shame, and then the urgent realization that if he didn't act fast, he was in peril of losing face before the one earthly creature he loved above all others.

If you think the creature in question was Greta Marie, you haven't been paying attention.

Frost crackled at the corners of his mouth as he smiled thinly and said, "Well. Here's a surprise. Don't tell me that you still cherish orange blossom dreams at

your age?"

Greta Marie jerked her head back as if she'd been slapped. His words jarred her to the core, that much was plain to see, but the old blood bred hardy souls. She drew her mouth into a tight little line and refused to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

This sat ill with Wellcome, who would have preferred more concrete evidence that his words had hit the mark. "And I thought we understood each other," he said, reloading his figurative blowpipe with a freshly venomous dart. "What a sorry disappointment you are. I expected more of you. I believed that you were different, that you were a woman of perception, a woman of spirit, one to whom the petty constraints and empty rituals of society mean nothing so long as she can serve Art."

That did it. That was my limit. "Art my ass," I blurted out. "You just want to get laid."

Wellcome curled his lip at me. "Enter the white knight," he drawled. "And what concern of yours is this? Barbara Barclay, champion of Romance! I should think you'd want to encourage your friend to seize the golden opportunity I'm offering her. Do you honestly believe she'll get many more like it on this side of the grave? If she ever got any before."

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this!" Greta Marie stood up and started

for the door, but Wellcome blocked her escape.

"I urge you to reconsider," he counseled her. "I've always been passably fond of you, you know, especially your good sense. Certainly a woman like you, wise enough to perceive the rich aesthetic contributions of my work to world literature, must also see that I have only your best interests at heart in proposing *cette petite affaire*. Tampa is lovely at this time of year. Do you want to end your days as a hollow husk, a topshelf virgin whose life will be forever incomplete without so much as the memory of a man's attentions? I'll spare you that horrible fate, but you're going to have to be a good girl and --"

Greta Marie just gave him a look; a look that plugged his chatter snugger than jamming a badger in a bunghole; a disinterested, calculating look such as a farmer might give a stubborn tree stump, mentally debating which was the best crack into which to jam the dynamite.

"My ancestor, Captain James Resurrection Bowman, received a grant of land in this town as a reward for his heroism in the Revolutionary War," she said. "A friend of his received a similar grant, except his was much smaller and located on Manhattan Island. He offered to swap, Captain James chose to decline. In retrospect it was a stupid choice, but it was his own. All my life I have followed Captain James' example; I have always made my own choices. If I remain a virgin until I marry, it will not be for lack of such...generous offers as yours, but because that is my decision to make and no one else's."

"Talk about stupid choices," Wellcome snarled.

Still calm and collected, Greta Marie gave him one short, sharp, effective slap across the face, and it wasn't a figurative one either, no sirree. And with the echoes of flesh-to-flesh impact still hanging on the air she said, "The only stupid choice I made was loving you."

The incredible happened: The denizens of the coffee shop, to a man, rose to their feet and gave that slap a standing ovation. Bobo Riley from the hardware store was even heard to let out an exultant Yankee whoop that would have put a Rebel yell to shame.

That should have been Wellcome's cue to leave, making as gracious an exit as he might hope for in the circumstances. Alas, Wellcome had never been a man to read the signs or take the hint. If you told him his writing clunked like a freight train off the rails, he took this to mean that it had the power of a runaway freight instead.

He seized Greta Marie's hands. "So you do love me," he exclaimed triumphantly. "Ah, I see your little scheme: You're playing hard to get. You've read far too many of the shoddier sort of Romance novels, those dreadful bodice-rippers -- " (Here he looked meaningfully in my direction.) " -- and you want a rough wooing. So be it!"

He was more athletic than his nascent paunch and pasty skin might lead you to

believe, fully capable of sweeping a grown woman of Greta Marie's size off her feet and out the door before any of us could react. She shrieked in shock, not fear, but she didn't struggle as he made off with her. Maybe she thought she'd already made enough of a scene in the coffee shop to last Bowman's Ridge well into the next century.

I was the first to address the situation. "Hey! Aren't we going to do something?" I demanded of my fellow townsmen.

No one answered. Most of them went back to eating lunch. Bobo Riley looked as if he wanted to take action, but something was holding him back.

"Babs..." Muriel jerked her head, indicating I was to sit back down at the counter. Dumbly I obeyed in time to hear her whisper, "It's not our place to interfere in other folks' domestic quarrels."

"This is an abduction, not a family spat," I hissed. "If I know Wellcome, he won't stop until he's stuffed Greta Marie into his rental car and driven her all the way to Tampa! And then what? She hasn't got enough cash to come back on her own hook, and would she ever dream of calling anyone up here to send her the busfare home?"

Muriel didn't say a word. We both knew the answer: Greta Marie would sooner become a beachcomber or -- the horror! -- give Wellcome his wicked way with her before she'd ask a fellow Native to lend her some money. On the other hand, her fellow Natives would sooner allow a thrice-cursed outlander like Wellcome Fisher

to make off with the last living Bowman than they'd ever dream of interfering directly in someone else's personal matters.

"Well, I don't care what the rest of you do, I'm not going to put up with this!"

I announced and started for the door. A large, work-hardened hand darted in front of me to hold it open. I looked up into Bobo Riley's kind blue eyes.

"Mind if I walk with you down street a bit, Mrs. Barclay?" he asked. "I just happen to be going your way."

Within two minutes I found myself transformed into the most popular woman in Bowman's Ridge. Simply everyone in the coffee shop was suddenly seized with the simultaneous urge to pay their checks and join me for a little stroll down Main Street. Even Hal abandoned his kitchen and Muriel her place behind the counter, leaving the waitresses and a few stragglers behind to hold down the fort. We weren't going to deliberately interfere in anything, perish forbid. We were just going to exercise our Constitutional right to take, well, a constitutional.

We followed the faint sound of Greta Marie's fists beating a muffled tattoo on Wellcome's chest. They hadn't gotten far. Wellcome had parked his rental about a block away, down by the old war memorial on the green. Our itinerant Town Meeting caught up with him as he was trying to dig out the car keys without letting go of his prize.

When he saw us coming his eyes went wide as a constipated owl's. He forgot all

about the "rough wooing" underway and dropped Greta Marie smack on the town green, then took to his heels. At first I thought that he was running away in fear for his life, that he intended to beat feet all the way to Montpelier, but it turned out that I underestimated him. He fled only as far as the war memorial -- a truncated obelisk, its sides inscribed with the names of the Bowman's Ridge men who'd died in both World Wars, Korea, and Viet Nam, its flat top crowned with an urn that the Women's Club filled with flowers on appropriate occasions. Spry as a springtime cockroach, he clambered up the monument and perched there, holding onto the lip of the empty urn.

"A lynch mob," he sneered down at us from his perch. "How typical of the rustic mind. Haven't you forgotten something? Pitchforks? Torches? You crackerbarrel cretins, how dare you harass me? A plague on your pitiful frog-fart of a town! And you -- !"

His glittering eyes zeroed in on Greta Marie. Bobo Riley had fallen behind the rest of us in order to help the lady up and now squired her on his arm. "This is all your fault, you squalid excuse for a hicktown Hypatia! You pathetic pricktease, I'll wager you fancy yourself quite the bargain basement Mata Hari, don't you? Don't you?"

"Oh!" Greta Marie covered her face with her hands and shuddered. Wellcome's sharp tongue had finally drawn blood. She was crying, and in public, too! Bobo Riley folded his big arms protectively around her and glowered up at the treed critic, growling threats that failed to stem Wellcome's spate of vengeful poison.

"Don't cry, darling," Wellcome crooned sarcastically. "There's nothing wrong with you that a good upcountry rogering wouldn't cure. So sad that you'll never get it now. Thank God I came to my senses in time. You contemptible dirtfarm Delilah, how a man of my breeding could have ever been mad enough even to consider the sensual enrichment of your dusty, backshelf, remaindered life--!"

Greta Marie threw her head back and howled her misery to the skies.

They were on him in the time it takes to blink. We never saw them come; they were simply there, all three of them, eyes hollyberry bright, horns blazing in the thin winter sunlight. The largest of the three, the one I'd comforted earlier that same day, was the first to reach him. It set its forefeet on the pediment of the war memorial, paused for an instant to look Wellcome in the eye, then jabbed him straight through the center of the chest with its horn. He fell to the snow-covered green and lay there unmoving.

The other two unicorns took it in turns to sniff the body and to snort their disdain. They did not depart as abruptly as they had arrived. The three of them turned as one and trotted up Main Street, tails swishing, in the direction of the town library. One of them paused to munch on a swag of Christmas greenery decking the front of the florist's. No one made the slightest move to stay them, and Greta Marie, still weeping in Bobo Riley's arms, never once tried to call them back.

Wellcome Fisher was dead. We had no illusions of anyone being able to survive a direct thrust to the heart with something as sharp and pointed and long as a unicorn's horn, but we only thought we had all the answers until Hal bent over the body and exclaimed, "Hey! There's no hole."

Everyone swarmed around. Hal was right: There was no hole. Not a puncture, not a piercing, not a scratch. No blood stained the snow. There wasn't even the teensiest rip in Wellcome's clothing. The crowd buzzed.

I stood apart. I knew what had happened, but darned if I was going to tell my neighbors. They already thought I was weird enough, and if I started explaining about the rules that govern unicorns --!

The unicorn is not a monstrous beast, it doesn't kill for sport or spite, it lives to heal, not harm. It bears upon its brow a horn whose touch has the power to purge all poisons and make what is polluted sweet and wholesome once more. The unicorn hadn't been trying to kill Wellcome, merely to cure him. It had touched his heart with its magical horn, intending to remove only the taint of malice and envy, leaving behind all that was good and selfless and decent in the man. No one was more surprised than the unicorn by what actually happened.

Let's just put it this way: It was going to be one hell of an autopsy, one of the starring organs gone without an external clue to explain its vanishment. Oh well, the medical examiner would probably call it a coronary anyway, heart or no heart. Old Doc Barnett hates to make waves.

It took a goodly while to sort things out on the green. By the time Chief Dowd and the rest of the local authorities finished taking statements ("Dunno. He just sorta keeled over. Not a mark on him, see?") and viewing the body, it was getting dark. I looked around for Greta Marie. I figured she shouldn't try to drive herself home after all she'd been through today.

I'd been anticipated. When I found her, she told me that Bobo Riley had already offered to drive her home and she'd accepted. Despite the fact that several other Natives were within earshot, Bobo went on to say that he'd pick her up at her place come morning and take her back to town so she could recover her car next day. Then he asked her if she'd like to help him clown at the hardware store by dressing up as Mrs. Claus and giving the kids candy. This was the Bowman's Ridge equivalent of him clasping her to his manly chest, raining kisses upon her upturned face, and telling her that he desired her above all women with a raw, unbridled passion that knew no bounds. I don't know if Greta Marie felt all the earth-heaving thrills and collywobbles I put into my books, but her eyes were shining with that special To Be Continued light.

I went home. Rachel was waiting for me by the front gate. Something was clearly wrong. Instead of her usual air of carefully cultivated angst and ennui, she was bouncing like a Labrador puppy.

"Mom! Mom! This is so cool, you've got to see this! I don't think he belongs to anyone, and he is soooo gorgeous. I'll take care of him myself, I promise, and if there's some kind of problem with the zoning geeks I'll pay for his board out

of my own allowance, honest. Can I keep him? Can I? Can I? Pleeeeeease?"

"Keep--?"

The unicom stepped out of the lengthening shadows, rested his heavy head on my daughter's shoulder, and -- one Transient to another -grinned.

This story is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Clifton Webb.