

IT WAS AT A SPRING CARNIVAL in Central Kentucky, sometime after the Second World War, that I first saw her. Alone, but nevertheless in a holiday-making mood, I was strolling about eating a burger and drinking a Coke when suddenly I spotted a large billboard advertising “The Unicorn Woman.”

Like most of you, I had seen crocodile women, bearded ladies, and assorted other freaks or, I should say oddities, but I’d never seen a unicorn woman, genuine or not. Thus, I was curious, especially since there was no photograph or drawing on the billboard to give a clue, not even the most ambiguous one, nor did the name Unicorn Woman provide an easy giveaway, like say, for instance, the Bearded Lady: stick a beard on any woman you see, and that’s what you have. Usually it was quite obviously fake.

Standing in front of the tent, I finished the burger, drank the Coke, and watched other men enter. Some entered straightaway, others waited nonchalantly at the edges of the crowd, still others glanced about furtively as if it mattered who saw them go in: Their preachers? Their wives? Their sweethearts? *Any* stranger? One man even looked thoughtful, as if he were meditating—contending only with himself about whether or not to enter. Most of the men wore ordinary workers’ or farmers’ clothes, but there was an occasional fancy young man or dandy. There were even a few obviously wealthy men who entered. After a while, I paid my dime and started to trot inside.

“Your change, buddy. It’s just a nickel.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ll be glad you went in. She’s lovely.”

I put the change in my pants pocket and entered.

Of course, I had expected to find either a woman in a cage or a unicorn in one, even though I’d read somewhere that the unicorn was a mythical beast, which had only existed in the collective imagination. A fabled creature.

A creature of fables, of legend. It appeared only in art and literature, some ancient myth that had origins in India or China. And then had inspired the imaginations of people everywhere. The subject matter of historians and philosophers, and there were even said to be even medicinal cures and medicinal magic in the horn. I tried to remember what the unicorn was a symbol of. Of hope? Of peace? Of freedom? Of spirituality? But there were no such things as unicorns. And to hunt them would be foolish.

The Turks and Greeks and Hebrews had unicorns. Then I wondered if Africans had ever accepted the unicorn myth? Or Indians of America?

Hadn't I read somewhere that the Africans had a name for the unicorn? Okapi? And did not some Indians in America also have the unicorn as a spirit animal in their myths and legends? I tried to remember what I'd read. I tried to remember the origins of the unicorn.

I immediately saw just the back of the woman, who sat on a stool in the middle of a roped-in circle. Viewed from the rear, she looked like any ordinary woman. She was clad in a brown, broad-shouldered, sequined dress, and she was brown herself, which surprised me, as I was used to entering carnival tents only to discover white freaks. Her slender, dimpled arms were the color of my own.

I joined the circle of men and one woman. For some reason, women freaks attracted men more than they did other women. Men freaks, on the other hand, attracted whole families. Even little children. I don't know if this was always the case, or whether one can make a fast rule of it, but whenever I paid my dime or nickel, it was generally the case. And in those days I was a carnival-goer. I enjoyed carnivals, circuses, and state fairs. I liked the food and I liked the spectacle and the amusements.

When I got to the side of her and was able to observe her in profile, I saw the spiraled horn protruding from her forehead like a bull's horn or a goat's: diagonally pointed upward, it was white and shining. Red, black, and white, weren't those supposed to be the colors of a unicorn's horn?

Red at the tip, black in the center, and white at the base? But this horn was one color. White. A white horn protruding from her brown forehead.

I walked around until I finally stood straight in front of her, face-to-face with her. Like a lot of freaks, and a number of theatrical performers, she looked but didn't see you individually. There are tales of performers and

entertainers who distinguish people, who behave as if you're the only person in the world when you meet and greet them. But I've found that to not always be true. Well, I saw her. And for that moment, it was like she was the only woman in the world. A real beauty. And the funny thing about it, the horn didn't disturb her beauty; it enhanced it.

I remained in front of her longer than I should have, because the other gents and one lady suddenly shouted, "Get a move on, bud."

I completed my second circle, then my third; I don't know how many turns I took around the woman. I felt indefatigable. Each time I paused before her, I was shouted at to let the others get their chance.

"Get a move on, bud."

"Do you think it's real?" asked the woman.

"It looks real," observed a man. "I bet her forehead's tender, though."

"A lot looks real that ain't," said the woman.

I must admit that the horn did look real. It appeared to be actually growing out of the woman's forehead. Roped-off, she was nevertheless close enough for you to touch, but you didn't dare touch her or her horn. It was sort of an invisible or unspoken rule: you looked but didn't touch, like in a museum with a work of art, even a natural history museum with their exhibits, though there was no sign forbidding it. I wondered whether she'd polished the horn. I imagined her brushing it after she'd brushed her teeth. Some special horn powder or paste. Part of her regular daily make-up routine. And she had the classic style of the age. Well-manicured eyebrows and Vaseline to give a special shine to her red lips. And she was well-groomed.

The horn looked real, like I said, but in those days I did not believe it was.

"I didn't know what I expected to see," said the woman. "I thought it was going to be part unicorn and part woman, not all woman and just that horn sticking out of her forehead."

"Well, I never would've believed anything else," said the man, with a look of appreciation. "I can believe the horn. Plus, the horn's what lets you know she's a unicorn. Wouldn't be a unicorn without a horn."

"Could be a goat," said the woman. "Ain't a unicorn supposed to have a goat's beard anyway? A goat's beard and a lion's tail, not just a horn. I saw a picture of one in an encyclopedia."

"She kinda reminds me of Billie Holiday. Lady Day."

"Every good-looking woman reminds you of Billie Holiday."

Every time I got in front of her, I stayed too long. "Get a move on, bud!" they shouted, yet again.

"That stool should be electrified and *she* should turn," said the woman. "We shouldn't have to turn. She should turn and let us just stand and watch. Look at her. She's an odd creature. She should give me some makeup tips."

The next time I saw her she had an electrified stool that turned, and her audience just stood and watched. Mirrors could have done the trick.

But with mirrors you'd possibly never get to observe the real woman. "*Stop hogging the front; I don't want just the reflection.*"

"Move it, Joe."

As I moved, I noticed that whenever there were other displays of cupidity, the people in line waited patiently, talked among themselves till their turn came around; it was only when I hogged the front that the shouts came to get a move on.

I was traveling in Memphis when I saw billboards announcing a traveling carnival in town. I had not stopped thinking of that Unicorn Woman. Whenever I saw a notice of anybody's carnival, especially on days when colored people were free to enter, and allowed to enter, I'd go to see if perhaps the Unicorn Woman was there. Whenever I met a new woman, I couldn't help measuring her against the unicorn one. I didn't always do this consciously, but that underlying feeling persisted: "*She's not the Unicorn Woman.*" I suppose most men have some woman that they idealize and measure all others by. Or perhaps most men haven't met their unicorn woman yet, not even in their imaginations and fantasies. But I've met mine, and all I seem to be able to do whenever I encounter any other woman is to shrug. It's not always a visible shrug, though; it's one of those interior shrugs of the spirit. You know the kind.

For instance, one night in Memphis I was out with a woman. Well, a fine thing!, any man would have said of her. Nice, pretty, all of it. It was foggy out, and she wanted to walk in the fog. I don't know why. Some women just have these things they've got to do. Tics, I call them, or fancies, because they're too minor to be obsessions. Maybe she associated the fog

with romance. I held onto her elbow and we walked along. I was uncertain of Memphis at the time. I didn't really know the territory, and she was escorting me around the colored sections of the city.

She had introduced me to Parkway Village and Orange Mound. She had introduced me to Lamar Avenue and Getwell Road. She showed me the schools she had gone to: Dunbar Elementary and Melrose High School. She showed me the churches and black-owned businesses in the area.

"Don't you just love the fog?" she asked, as we walked along one of the avenues.

"I've never really thought about it. As something to love, I mean."

Fog had always seemed to me just something to try to avoid getting lost in.

"It's just nice. I don't know what it does to me."

"If you don't know, I certainly don't."

She snuggled up to me. The fog must have made her feel like Marlene Dietrich or Garbo or one of those. In fact, I remember seeing a movie with Garbo on a ship in the fog and she was explaining how the fog did something to her, too, but I've forgotten exactly what it was she said it did, though I believe she said it made her feel holy.

"It makes me feel *new*," she said. "I don't know, it just makes me feel *new*, or something."

I wondered whether "new" had anything to do with romance, or holiness. Maybe either one of them could be her "something." We stood for a moment and peeked in a shoe-store window, then we continued walking.

"This your first time in Memphis?"

"No, I came once with my father when I was a boy. I think we visited Orange Mound, but I'm not sure. He was explaining to me the history of the place, about its being built by and for blacks. I was a little boy, though."

"That's nice. I mean it's always nice to come back to a place where you've been when you were little. Even if you don't exactly remember. That just does something to me."

"Does everything do something to you?"

"No, not everything. But I always just love to go to Miami because the first time I was in Miami I was a little girl. It just does something to me every time I'm there. We had to travel through some places to get there though.

We were in some places where people treated us like we weren't even visible. You'd say something to them and they wouldn't even acknowledge you. And other places where we were too visible. . . . I remember this one little town that had a sign that read 'N\_\_\_\_\_ read and run, and if you can't read, run anyhow.' They didn't allow colored people in that little town, and we didn't stop where we weren't welcome. My father kept driving. . . . But I adored Miami. And we met this group of Seminole Indians from South Florida who had stayed in Florida, and we met some people from Havana. I didn't know who I was meeting until years later because I was just a small child. All the beaches were white people's—only beaches, then someone directed us to this private beach and then we returned to Miami after the war for the opening of this colored people's beach. All colored people parading up and down the beach. . . . That was lovely. . . . They said some colored people had had a wade-in at one of the white beaches and got themselves arrested. Then they established their own beach. . . . I adore Miami."

"Miami in the fog must be nice," I suggested.

"Oh, but it is! Though I don't exactly remember Miami having fog while I've been there, but it must. Every place has fog. Though every time I've been there, the air's just been as clear as anything. You were a soldier, weren't you?"

"Yeah."

"I can always tell a former soldier." She pronounced it like "farmer soldier." "The way you walk or something. The way you conduct yourself. I guess it's the military training. Maybe it's that or maybe it's the way a soldier looks at a woman. Perhaps not all soldiers . . ."

I looked at her; she giggled.

"A lot of men don't know how to look at a woman, you know. They really don't." She shrugged. "A lot don't even look at you. It's a certain type of acknowledgment, I suppose. And you're always tipping your hat to me. It's a certain type of acknowledgment."

I looked at the fog, at the languid shimmer of the buildings seen through fog. They looked like cardboard buildings, like we were living in some future century where they built only throwaway buildings. Two ghosts came walking toward us: the man ghost tipped his hat, the woman smiled. Then

we were able to distinguish them as real. They entered one of the buildings. Music could be heard from within. A songstress singing a song of love.

"I bet he's a farmer soldier," she said.

The woman had looked like one of those adoring types, I thought, but didn't say.

"Did you see a lot of action? I guess that's a silly question, isn't it? All soldiers I've ever met tell me they saw a lot of action. I guess you couldn't be over there overseas during a war and not see a lot of action?"

"With a frying pan."

"What?"

"I was a cook in the army."

"Were you one of those Consciousness Objectors?"

"No."

"So you got to shoot a few too?"

"Yeah, when I was shot at, I got to shoot a few. We were allowed to defend ourselves."

She looked at me, musing, like she was trying to figure out the relative merits of the gun, even in a defensive posture, versus the frying pan, and waiting for me to give my opinion on the subject.

"So you did see *some* action," she said finally, scratching her eyebrows.

"Yeah."

"Yeah," she said, jollily. "I didn't believe you could go over there to a whole war and not see some action, not unless you were a Consciousness Objector—I've met some of those—or one of those colored flyers."

At first I thought she said "colored flours"; then it registered. She was talking about flyers, like the Tuskegee Airmen. But I wondered what was the difference between a whole war and a half war. Maybe we were in the latter all the time. What they called "fighting on two fronts." What they called "double victory." I'd met some men during the war who talked like that.

"I met one of our colored flyers and he said that they just kept training them and retraining them because they didn't know what to do with them for ever so long, at the beginning of the war. I forget what field he was stationed in, but I believe it was somewhere out west. I know about the Tuskegee Airmen, but he was talking about the West. And then he said

they finally sent them overseas. They still hadn't figured out what to do with them, but they shipped them overseas anyway. He said he didn't get to see as much action as they could have seen if they'd known what to do with them in the beginning of the war, but he knows airplanes inside and out. I asked him whether there were any colored women who flew planes during the war, but he looked at me like that was a foolish question."

We strolled along, breathing fog. I tried to remember that incantatory passage by Charles Dickens about the fog. *Fog everywhere . . . Chance people.* I'd learned that passage once for a school recitation, but I couldn't remember it now. Something too about a Megalosaurus. Fog moving down the hill like one? Maybe we could meet a Megalosaurus made of fog. Something. Fog in the nostrils? Someone told me once about how foggy Milan is. Because of its geography. I don't know what started the conversation. An Italian American was working in the mess hall along with the blacks. He was a dark-skinned Italian American. Like the Japanese Americans, they'd been considered the enemy. A threat to homeland security. He told me about how they were treated. But he'd joined the army anyway. He was teaching me a few of his favorite Italian recipes and then he started talking about Milan, where his ancestors originated before they came to America. Because of her adoration of the fog, Milan would've been her dream city.

"It would've been nice to have been somebody's deer," she was saying. *Deer?* That's what I heard.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I squeezed her shoulder a bit and pulled her a bit closer.

"Somebody's *deer*," she repeated. "You know. 'Dear So-and-So, I have just landed on foreign soil . . . ' and all that. Like when soldiers write their gals letters, you know. Some of the gals collect those letters. I met all my soldiers after the war. None of the fellows I knew before the war were old enough to be soldiers."

"Then you weren't old enough to be somebody's *dear*."

"That's right. I was a youngling during the war. But I still wonder what it was like to be a grown woman during the war. A grown woman and in love, and receiving Dear-So-and-So letters from a soldier. I used to see some of those gals getting their letters from soldiers and writing to them. Some of them weren't that much older than me, but they were still grown



women. I used to call them ma'am and some of them would laugh at me. Did you have a dear?"

"No."

"You couldn't have been too old when the war started."

"No, I was eighteen."

"And I'll bet you were a fine young man. To go through a whole war too. That's just awful, not to have had a dear to write letters to. And to have received letters from. I'll bet you have a dear now, though, don't you?" she asked, but answered for me. "Of course you do. All the good ones already have their dears. . . . All the fine ones . . . Are you still a cook?"

"No, I repair tractors."

"You do? You know, one farmer soldier was telling me that they had tanks that could be converted into tractors when the war was over. You know, like interchangeable parts or something. They could either be tanks or tractors depending on if there was a war or not. In peacetimes, they were tractors. In wartimes, they were tanks. I bet you could have repaired a tank. . . ."

"Sure. I can repair just about anything."

"I'll bet. You look like that sort of guy. But I bet they didn't know what to do with you either."

"Probably not."

"That's the same with most of our men. And many of them were eager to do whatever was needed for the war effort. And it's been like that with every war, my papa told me. I wasn't too young to remember that. And the ration books on the home front. And the women going off to work in the factories and the defense plants. I remember all that."

I said nothing.

"Do you want to go in here?" I nodded.

"Yeah, this is a really nice place; you'll like it. They've got a jukebox and sometimes they have live music. They've got a woman who sings songs she wrote herself. Anyway, you look like you've had enough fog. You don't look like you appreciate it as much as I do. I have to remember that everybody doesn't like fog, that fog annoys some people. And especially if you were a flyer. You can't like the fog, for sure. It just does something to me, though. . . . Yeah, I bet you could've repaired a tank or two. Well, as many as you'd wanted, I'd imagine. And I bet you could've converted tanks into

tractors, or even tractors into tanks. But I'm sure you could have repaired a tank or two. Well, as many as you'd wanted, I'd imagine. I wonder how many tanks got converted into tractors after the war? Who knows, but you could be repairing a tractor that used to be a tank, like the men repairing tanks that used to be tractors, but of course you'd have to know that though, wouldn't you, I mean with your knowledge and information. I mean, what good are interchangeable parts if they can't be recognized and especially by mechanically inclined and knowledgeable men like yourself?"

I held the door for her as she was talking and we went inside. The door was too solid to be made out of cardboard or any other throwaway thing. Inside, we listened to a woman singing:

*Love's such a wonderful thing O yes, O yes, Oh yes.*

*Love's such a wonderful thing O yes, O yes, Oh yes.*

*Makes you walk when you walk,*

*And you're walking so light,*

*Makes you talk, and you talk*

*And your talking's just right.*

*Makes you feel good from morning*

*Till night.*

*Yes, love's such a wonderful thing. Oh yes.*

*Love's such a wonderful thing O yes, O yes, Oh yes.*

*Love's such a wonderful thing O yes, O yes, Oh yes.*

*Makes you sing with joy,*

*And you feel so bright,*

*Makes you love everybody*

*That comes in sight*

*Makes you so happy*

*And everything's all right,*

*Yes, love's such a wonderful thing.*

*Makes you sing with joy,*

*And you feel so bright.*

*Makes you love everybody*

*That comes in sight.*

*Makes you so happy  
And everything's all right,  
Yes, love's such a wonderful thing.*

Then a Mexican man joined her and sang:

*Awnn Taliano, you are the only  
One I'm dreaming of, Awnn Taliano,  
You are my only love,  
Awnn Taliano, until my days  
All cease to be,  
My Dearest Senorita, come to my  
Hacienda with me.  
You are my love, my only love,  
You're in the stars above,  
There in the night,  
You're like a flitting dove,  
Against the light,  
Please, be my own, my dear  
You'll always be.  
Awnn Taliaino, you are the only One for me,  
You are my fair one, Senorita,  
And you will always be,  
Forget your past love affair  
And come with me.*

And they sang together the following song:

*Down that bull, here he comes a-charging,  
Down that bull, here he comes a-charging,  
Down that bull, here he comes a-charging,  
Please oh! matador.  
Down that bull, put him in his grave now,  
Down that bull, put him in his grave now,*

*Down that bull, put him in his grave now,  
Please oh! matador.  
If he kills you I will die.  
I could not stand to live.  
Down him now, before I cry. Your life I cannot bear to give.  
So now you down that bull,  
Here he comes a-charging,  
Down that bull, here he comes a-charging,  
Down that bull, here he comes a-charging.  
Please oh! matador.*

Though no unicorn woman, the woman sitting across from me is very attractive. Both her hair and her skin are reddish brown. Her hair, swept back from her narrow forehead, is so closely the color of her skin that even with the different texture, it's still almost hard to tell where her forehead ends and her hair begins. This makes her forehead look broad and full except for one thin line of gray streaking catercornered from the center of her hairline. She's got a longish, pointy nose, but it doesn't distract from her face and seems paradoxically to focus your attention more fully on her expressive, slanted eyes, which are brownish black and dart about as if there were things about her worth looking at, or looking for. When they land on my face, they seem a bit surprised or startled. Her eyebrows are zig-zagged from her constantly scratching them as if she's got dandruff of the brows—perhaps another tic, perhaps nerves. Her mouth is somewhat biggish, but she had painted it in such a way that it looks smaller, more full than big. Sometimes she purses it or closes her lips together as if to even out her strawberry lipstick. The mole on the corner of her right jaw jumps out of sight when you look at her full-faced but becomes nicely visible when she turns sideways. In fact, seen in profile, the mole enhances her face, slightly alters its character, so that she doesn't seem merely attractive but almost a beauty. There are barely perceptible lines in her young forehead, but I notice them because they have the same pattern as the lines on my own, shaped like a T with double lines at the top. I wonder what those people who read foreheads would say. Her teeth are small, regular, and white. Indeed, they are so regular and sparkling

that they look as if they've been filed then whitewashed. She smiles at me, showing them off. She could be somebody's darling. Anybody's dear. That is, if you didn't know the Unicorn Woman existed.

"So have you moved to Memphis, or is this just a vacation?" she asks.

I thought I'd already answered, but I reply, "Just a vacation."

"I used to think I'd like to move to Miami," she says. "I know it's the Deep South. But it doesn't seem like the South South. It seems to have its own character. I think it's nicer to have a place like that to go to, though. It makes it . . . I don't know what the word is I'm looking for."

"Special," I offer.

"Yeah, special," she repeats. "I like 'special.' That wasn't exactly the word I was looking for, but I like it."

Her blouse, peeking out from the lapels of her dark cotton jacket, is lacy and white and makes you want to touch it, so I do.

"You're very forward, aren't you?" she says, giving me a look of discreet indulgence. "Men like to call some women forward, but a man's more forward than a woman any day."

She takes my hand off her blouse and puts it atop the bowl of salted pretzels. I give her one, and she leans back and crunches.

"Do they call you forward?" I inquire.

She crunches a moment, swallows, sips a little beer, then replies, her look tender, "Yeah, they do. But I'm not half as forward as they think I am." She pauses. "Nor half as backward either." She reflects. "But I think you have to be at least a little forward, don't you? To get by in this world, you have to be a little forward. And at least a little forward-thinking, too, don't you think?"

Her questions are rhetorical, so I don't answer.

"I can tell you're a good guy though, forward or not," she says, raising one of the jagged brows. "And you seem like an intelligent sort. I don't think you haven't got a dear, though. Or at least someone you *wish* you had."

But as I was saying, I was also in Memphis when I saw the Unicorn Woman for the second time. Seeing a sign advertising a traveling carnival in town, I

went and discovered the Unicorn Woman was there. So I paid my dime—the price had been raised—and entered straightaway. This time she had an electric stool or, if not electric, some mechanism that made it turn. I just stood in one place, and she kept turning toward me, her horn pointing up like an arrow.

“Look at that.”

“I wonder if she was born with it or if it just grew sometime afterward. Mighta been a full grown woman when she growed that horn.”

“Well, if she'da had it when she was born, it musta tore somebody.”

“Oh, it couldn't've been more than a gristle then. And then as she grew . . .”

“I just might believe in it.”

“I think she musta been a full-grown woman to have growed a horn that fancy. I don't believe she grew that horn until she grew up.”

“I just might believe in it.”

“They never let you touch 'em. Look but don't touch. That's the policy. That's the rule. You have to see to believe.”

“Looky there.”

“I wish she'd turn slower, so I could get a real good look.”

“You certainly have to see to believe.”

“I prefer the bearded lady myself. That ain't natural neither, but it's more natural than that. A beard is more natural than a horn, even if it is on a lady.”

“I'm not such a fool to believe everything I see.”

“She looks like she's straight out of a fairy tale, don't she?”

“A mythology book, or a fantasy, or what they call that scientific fiction.”

“I don't believe it. They don't have colored unicorns. All the unicorns I've ever seen have been white.”

“I don't believe it anyhow, colored or not. But colored seems to make it more impressive and more unusual. Any unicorn can be white.”

“Suppose we all had those horns, though? That would be something, wouldn't it? If every human being had a horn?”

“Yes, it would sure be something. But if we all had horns, it would just be a natural thing. We probably wouldn't even notice it, unless the horns all had different shapes and colors.”

"I should have worn my overshoes, all that mud outside, and people traipsing it in here too."

"It looks dangerous, don't it, that horn? I bet you could sharpen it like you would a pencil."

"No, you'd have to file it."

"I wouldn't want her to butt me with that."

"I once saw her in Kansas City and again in Atlanta."

"I'd like to take that broad out, to a fancy dinner or a movie."

"Just be careful. Don't let her butt you with that horn."

"She reminds me of a songstress."

"I wonder what it feels like having that horn."

"Like your teeth, I would imagine. Do you feel your teeth?"

"Sure you do."

"It's made out of the same stuff as fingernails, I bet, or your hair. They say that's the same stuff."

"I wonder what she eats."

"Oats and barley, like a goat or a little lamb. Ha."

"She's a human woman; she ain't no goat or a lamb. I like oats and barley."

"What freak do you want to see next?"

"What they got?"

"They ought to have music in here."

When I got outside, I asked the man what the unicorn woman's name was.

"The Unicorn Woman."

"Does she have a name, like Sally, Sue, Gloria, Evelyn?"

"Ziga something. Dalan, that's right. Ziga Dalan."

"What kind of name is that?"

"That's her name, bud. I don't make 'em."

"Any chance of getting to meet her?"

"Up close and personal?"

"Yeah."

"Not a chance, bud. Our freaks don't fraternize with the general public." He must have liked the alliteration because he repeated it. "Our freaks don't fraternize."

(I remember years later going to a traveling carnival and seeing exactly that sign: OUR FREAKS DON'T FRATERNIZE. I was certain that he'd inspired it. Or that indirectly, *I'd* inspired it, because that was his answer to *my* question.)

Except for the horn, Ziga Dalan, if that was her true name, didn't look freakish to me. I paid the man another dime to go in and see her again.

Standing in a shadowy corner, I waited until she turned toward me. Whether or not her name was authentic, it was good to know it. It added a dimension to her, though whenever I think of her I can't think "Ziga" or even "Dalan"; I must think "Unicorn Woman," perhaps because that was the first name I met her by. And "Unicorn Woman" intrigued me more than any name.

I stayed until the tent closed, then hung around outside until one of the carnival security men said, "Get a move on, bud." I had not seen the Unicorn Woman exit, though I stood at such an angle so I could observe both the front and back of the tent. I was certain she hadn't exited.

Perhaps she'd waited until assured that all strangers and stragglers, like me, were off the grounds before she left, in order to keep the mystery and her privacy.

"Get a move on, bud."

The funny thing is my real name *is* Bud—Buddy Ray Guy. So whenever people think they're calling me *out of my name*, they are actually calling me *by* name.

"You know how to boil water, Bud?" asked Ben Boone, the sergeant in charge of the mess.

"Yes, sir," I said, saluting.

"The last guy they sent back here didn't know how to boil water, didn't know beans from potatoes. You sure you can boil water, Bud?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name, Private?"

"Bud, sir."

"I hope you're not another wise guy. I don't like wise guys."

"Sir, it *is* Bud. Private Buddy Ray Guy."

"Another wise guy. I don't like you."



I showed him my tags.

"Private Bud Guy. So it is. I bet your middle name ain't Ray. I bet it's Wise. Bud Wise Guy. Dalton, show this wise guy the ropes."

I can't help it. Whenever anybody says that I start looking for ropes.

Instead, I was handed an apron. Well, it did have strings attached.

For a while in the army, I was nicknamed Budwiser. I couldn't tell whether a fellow was calling for me or a beer.

Granger works on one tractor and I work on another. Sometimes we're hidden from each other between tractors and he's all voice.

Sometimes we work on different sides of the same tractor. Either way, he's all voice.

"Enjoy your vacation?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Where'd you go?"

"Memphis."

"The big M, huh? Well, I guess Miami's the big M, though, ain't it?"

"Probably."

"You headed south. I thought a fellow like you would've headed up north. Memphis must be the little M, unless you're from Milwaukee. I was in Memphis once. Seemed like a nice place to visit."

I laugh.

His head darts up for a moment, then he's concealed by the tractor again.

"I enjoyed it."

"That sounds like a woman to me. Only reason I know for a fellow like you to head south is on account of a woman."

I turn a screw. The hard-packed ground I'm working on is incised with tractor tracks and footprints. It's like standing on some sort of clay mosaic. There's no grass in the space we work, a section of yard framed on one side by the concrete rectangular office building and on the three other sides by a high, wire fence. Stacks of lumber are arranged against the fence on the street side, for whatever purpose I've never guessed. Much of the wood has dry rot. Perhaps this used to be a lumberyard before it was converted into a tractor repair yard.

"You know, when I was younger I used to like to travel during my vacations. And a man like me's best suited for the Southern states. Now, I've been fixing tractors for twenty years, and my idea of a good vacation is . . . Do you know what my idea of a good vacation is?"

"What?"

"To go home and hug on Charlotte; that's my wife."

Chuckle.

"Well, I guess that's traveling of another variety."

"Yeah."

"You ain't married are you, Bud?"

"No way."

"That's because you're still a youngster."

"Not so young."

"Youngster to me. I'm an old man compared to you. And you let the army claim you before a woman did. That always ruins a man for a while. But listen to me talking. I missed two wars. Too young for World War I and too old for World War II. Too young for one war and too old for the other. I'm from the between-the-wars generation. I don't know what sort of person that makes me or my generation. I don't even know if they have a name for my generation. . . . And then, of course, I let a woman claim me."

Pliers.

"Me and the wife did take a camper and go south to fish. Not the deepest South, because sometimes I'm mistaken there. Still I enjoyed catching her more than I did the fish. I enjoyed catching Charlotte more. That sounds like the name of a book, don't it? *Catching Charlotte*. I like some Mark Twain, speaking of booksters, and by the way her maiden name is Finn. Charlotte Finn. But still I think that says a lot about a man, when he stays passionate even unto old age. Passionate old men can be wondrous. And when he lets a woman claim him before anything else . . . I mean, I'm one of the best tractor fixers around, if I do say so myself, but what does that really say about a man?"

"That you're one of the best tractor fixers around."

"You're darn right. How'd you get to be so smart? But what does that really say about a man?"

Jumble of wires. I unjumble.

"I don't know."

"You're right, you don't know. Even the wisest men don't know. When I was a youngster, I didn't know. Here I am now, and I still don't know. And as a youngster I couldn't imagine myself passionate even unto old age. Maybe a man's defined by love. They say that about a woman, and sometimes define a woman by love, but it might also be true about a man. All I know's I enjoy tractor fixing. It's the second thing I do enjoy. It's still working with your hands, right?"

I flinch. "I think the mind's in there somewhere."

"You better believe it. The mind directs the handy work. And that ain't just whistling Dixie. Pardon me. So who was the woman?"

"Nobody special."

"Had to be somebody special, or you'd spill the beans. You'd be telling stories and tales about her. That you keep her to your private self means she's special."

"Charlotte's special and you spilled the beans."

"I didn't spill 'em, Bud, I just shook 'em a bit. Anyway, Charlotte's my wife. Did you ever hear the difference between a wife and a girlfriend?"

"What?"

"With a wife you can't do nothing right. With a girlfriend you can't do nothing wrong. That's a joke, Bud, and it's not exactly the truth. But you know, Bud, you're right for sticking up for working with your hands and for the intelligence in the matter. And for the intelligence of the working man. Because you know in the old days, in yesteryear, the artist was considered to be very low on the totem pole because he worked with his hands. Then it took somebody like Michelangelo or the Renaissance that raised the status of the artist to the level that we think of artistic men today. People probably said, 'Hey, wait a minute, the mind's in there somewhere.' Then the artist climbed the totem pole. But in yesteryear if you were an artist, you worked with your hands, period. You and me, Bud, we're artists of tractor fixing. I suppose tractor fixing is an art."

He works a moment, then he resumes, "I learned that tidbit from Charlotte's cousin who's a schoolteacher. She don't come a-calling unless she teaches you something. That's what she believes in. She will teach anybody anywhere and anytime and not just in the classroom. She doesn't limit herself

to the classroom. Anyway, it raised my status just to hear talk like that, about the work of artistic men. Sometimes she will talk about artists, but in the olden times artists generally referred to men. She says that some folks are beginning to study the role of women in art and the history of art and that maybe the original artists were women. She says that we have always been under the assumption that the cave drawings were done by men, but it's possible that not a few of them were done by women.

"Charlotte's cousin says there's a whole history of women artists that hasn't been told yet. If it was up to her, she'd rewrite the whole history of art herself."

I wait for him to chuckle. It's slow this time, but it comes.

"Are you going to drive yours out?" he asks. He means the tractor.

"Yeah."

"Whose farm?"

"Hennebelle."

"Who's gonna pick you up? Ranch?"

"Yeah. Ranch."

"That means that they'll send Cerf for me. Talk your ear off, that fellow does."

I say nothing. He works in silence for a moment, then he says, "You know, when those artists got their status, they started doing the silliest things. A man don't need status if it makes him crazy. Charlotte's cousin told me all the crazy things them artist fellows used to do. She even mentioned a few artist womenfolks, like I said. They didn't seem half so crazy as the fellows, though, and the fellows even had the higher status, and are glorified in the history of art. Well, you learn a lot when there's a schoolteacher in the family. I don't know what to do with most of the stuff she's teaching me, except sometimes to use it in a conversation, like I'm doing now, so to speak. . . . Hennebelle? I shoulda recognized that tractor."

"What do you mean?"

"Because it looks like somebody bombed it. I hear you laughing. I knew you'd appreciate a good joke. . . . Yeah, Ranch is decent, but with Cerf, you can't get a word in edgewise."

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There's a professor who works at Kentucky State College in Frankfort, one of the historical black colleges—it was referred to as Kentucky State Industrial College in the earlier days—teaching biology, anatomy, physiology, you know, the premedical sciences. I call to make an appointment with him. As he's on vacation, I leave my name and address with a secretary. Several weeks later I receive a postcard informing me when Professor Blake will be available. I call again, and when an appointment is accorded me, I drive up there one Friday afternoon.

The college is located on a hill. During the flood of '33, people fled to the college for safety, since it was the highest point and a place of refuge. I park at the bottom of the hill and walk up, taking a few bounding leaps to get my nerve up, or my energy. Professor Blake is in his office sitting behind a tiny walnut desk. Behind him on the pale green wall is a multicolored painting showing the human interior. I'm sweating a bit when I enter.

"Professor Blake?" I inquire.

"Come in." He peers at me up over his horn-rimmed glasses. The room smells like peppermint candy mints and armpits, though I can't be sure whether they're his or mine.

"Are you one of my farmer students?" he asks. That's how he pronounces "former," even though he's a professor.

"No, sir."

"I didn't think you were. I always remember my farmer students. You do look kind of familiar though. Take a seat."

I sit in the seat reserved for students and "farmer" students. I stare for a second at the tiny red pineal gland on the anatomy and physiology chart, read the small print that says "function uncertain," then I look at him and explain.

"I have an aunt who went to high school with you, sir, so I sort of know of you through her. She also took refuge here up on the hill at the college during the flood of '33. Perhaps I resemble her." I start to add that I also know him by reputation, since this is, after all, a college and he has an academic reputation, but I seem to be overexplaining and maybe talkative out of nervousness, and decide that knowing him through my aunt is good enough.

"What's your aunt's name?" he inquires.

"Maggie Guy."

"Maggie Guy?" He looks bewildered for a moment, then he smiles. "Yes, I do believe I know Maggie Guy; yes, I do believe I remember her. So you're Maggie's boy?"

"I'm her nephew, sir."

"Nephew, yes." He keeps nodding. "Yes, she does ring a bell. Yes, I do believe we did go to high school together. I think I do remember a little Maggie even from kindergarten. I think we went all through the school years together, until I went off to college. Yes, indeed."

I say nothing.

"Margaret Guy. Her true name is Margaret, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course I know Margaret. Mag, we also used to call her. So you're Mag's boy?"

"Nephew."

"Yes, of course. Well, I actually certainly do remember Margaret Guy, if I remember correctly. And perhaps you do resemble her. That's probably why I thought I knew you. So you're interested in enrolling in one of my courses, are you? Want to become a doctor, do you, young man?"

"No, sir."

"You don't? Then why are you enrolling in my courses? They're all premed courses. I like to keep them reserved for our future doctors. We need to set that priority. I keep them open for our future doctors first and foremost, and then I allow the otherwise interested."

"No, sir; let me explain. That's not what I mean. I mean, I don't wish to enroll in any of your courses. I don't wish to become a doctor. I'm here because I want to ask you a question about human anatomy."

"You're a little too old for that, aren't you, boy?" he chuckles.

"I didn't mean to express it like that, exactly."

"What's on your mind, young man? I'm certainly available to answer your questions. That's why this college was established. For the Mental Improvement of the Negro. And I'm its humble servitor."

I flinch and think of how as a boy I'd tried to get some of the kids in the neighborhood to join a club that I'd pompously called "The Society for the Mental Improvement of the Negro." I thought that we'd read books and exchange books and discuss and explore the ideas in them. I suppose

it would be a sort of book club. I thought the other kids would be excited by the idea, but they had merely laughed at me and ridiculed me for my pomposity. I'd felt resentful that the other kids had not been as interested in moral and mental improvement as I had been. Now when I heard my words echoed back to me by the professor, I understood the joke. Why did it sound so funny? But Professor Blake wasn't joking. He waited for my question.

"Yes?" He prods my silence. "Don't be skittish, young man. I teach future doctors, after all. And I've heard many questions. Even small, foolish questions."

Hoping mine is not a small, foolish question, I proceed to tell him about the Unicorn Woman. I ask him whether it's indeed possible anatomically and physiologically for a real human woman to have a horn growing out of the center of her forehead, as if she were a goat or a ram.

He looks at me. At first I think it's because I'd indeed asked a small and foolish question, then dismissing that, I think his look is because I'd said "human woman," which was redundant. If someone's a woman, they are indeed human. But he looks at me again and seems confused.

Then he gives me another look. Wary?

He peers around at the chart of the human interior. He looks back at me, this time bellicose.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Buddy Ray Guy."

"Well, Mr. Guy," he recites, "in the annals of time and human history and the world, man has discovered many things about the human being, many manifestations and phenomena that many consider impossible or improbable. Therefore, it's not totally inconceivable for a human woman to have such a manifest phenomenon. There are marvels to behold." Then he whispers, leaning forward, "Does that answer your question?"

"Uh, yes, uh, yes, sir," I stutter.

"But I will say, Mr. Guy, that I've visited many natural history museums, and I've seen the horns of many animals from modern day to prehistoric times, but I've yet to see the horn of a human being, except maybe a cornet."

He guffaws, blowing out air and spittle, then he leans back in his chair, his hands perched on his small stomach; he waits. I chuckle a bit and nod. He gives another horse laugh, looks gratified, and then he speaks.

"You're Maggie Guy's boy all right, you certainly are. Maggie ought to know better than to send you here to try to kid me. You can't kid a kidder. He'll just kid you right back every time. Tell her I threw your joke right back at you, and that I was ready, you hear? I've known Maggie since we were in preschool. She's an old-time kidder herself. She used to be the class jokester. She was both serious and a clown. We were the two smartest kids in our class, and in a bit of a competition with each other.

"Well, you tell Maggie howdy for me. Send you around here to try to kid me. I'm Professor J. Kidder, that's who I am. Yessiree. Don't ask me what that J. stands for or I'll kid you again. Well, you tell Maggie howdy for me. You tell her I've got a few jokes and riddles still left up my own sleeves."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her I enjoyed that one. A woman with a horn. That joke was inspired and refreshing. There's no drought like a joker's drought. I'm around serious-minded people all the time, and we've got a lot to be serious about, but I appreciate a good joke every now and then. You're Mag's boy all right. Nice to meet you, my boy. Tell Mag I enjoyed your joke, and you tell her mine, you hear?, about the cornet, tell her I threw the joke right back at you, and that I was ready, you hear? I never was ready for her jokes when I was a boy, but I'm ready now. Tell Maggie to come by and see me herself sometimes. We were kids together, like I said. You send Mag around here, you hear?"

My aunt Maggie Guy is a doily maker. You know what doilies are.

Little lace-like things that come in all shapes and sizes, usually white, but they can be any color. You crochet them. Aunt Maggie has doilies everywhere—on the arms and backs of sofas and chairs, on tabletops, atop the mantelpiece, atop the radio. Anywhere you look where there's an empty space, she fills it with a doily. There are even doilies hanging from the walls as if they were works of art, and perhaps hers should be.

Anybody who needs a doily knows where to go. She does her biggest business around Christmastime, when she especially sells what she calls "The Giant Doily," which can be hung on the wall like a tapestry or one of those religious handkerchiefs. I've forgotten their names, but you've seen them, imprinted with holy images or pilgrims. Once a white man even came



to her house because he had heard from his housekeeper, Romain Pavan, one of Aunt Maggie's neighbors, about her giant doilies and wanted to see them for himself.

"You ought to advertise in the newspapers," he told her. "I can help you promote the giant doily and make it famous."

When Aunt Maggie didn't say a word to him or show any sign of excitement or enthusiasm, he said as he held one of the giant doilies aloft and waved it in the air, "Well, why don't you let me draw you up an advertisement and show you what we'll do for you. I'm an advertising man. Then if you'll agree, I'll have you sign our standard contract. If I were a huckster, I'd have you sign the contract first. But I'm an honest man. And you will have your picture in the paper. Well, how about that, Miss Guy?

"Plus, as an additional enticement, I will mock-up a sample ad for you and bring it around for you to look at and ruminate on." And then he pulled out a sketch pad and did a quick mock-up for her.

"No, thank you, sir."

I don't know why my aunt decided not to let the man help her promote her doilies to a larger audience and make them and her famous.

Something in the ad mock-up must have offended her. He was going to promote the doilies as AUNT MAGGIE'S ORIGINAL GIANT DOILY, then there was a drawing of the giant doily, and beside that a space for Aunt Maggie's picture. In the smallest print he had written "caveat emptor," which Aunt Maggie took to be his name. In italics underneath the drawing of the doily he had written "Handmade by Aunt Maggie herself." I suppose Aunt Maggie simply preferred to be a private person, my aunt, but not everybody's aunt. But, like I said, she's got doilies everywhere, every empty space, and she does her best business at Christmas and Eastertime. And there's even a doily that resembles the American flag.

Aunt Maggie is the next person I tell about the unicorn woman and I wait for her reaction.

"Did you say anything to this woman?" she asked.

"Nobody said anything to her. People just talked about her and around her."

"You could've said something to her, seems like to me." She held up a doily to see how it looked in the light.

"It's just something that's not done, sort of an invisible law," I explained. "You just look at those kinds of people, oddities, you don't talk to them."

"Well, I said something to a bearded lady once, an oddity or not. I was just seven though. If I were a grown woman, maybe I wouldn't have said a thing, considered her too strange, but I was a little girl. I talked to her like you'd talk to any natural woman, and she talked right back. I asked her if her beard itched, and she said yes it did. Maybe the next time you should say something to her, invisible law or not. Oddity or not. Treat her like a natural woman. I know you're not a boy, you're a grown man. But speak to her."

"Maybe."

"Okay, *Maybe*." ("Maybe" is who she called me, whenever I answered her that way.)

She held her doily like a half mask and stared at me across it, then she put it on the table. We were sitting at her dining room table, full of doily tools and doily fabric. Everybody called it her "doily table" instead of her dining room table. It was a huge walnut table and seemed the finest, most expensive piece of furniture she possessed. She never served food on it, though, but kept it exclusively for doily making and would take her dinner guests into the living room or the kitchen. She did not like to rearrange her doily stuff just to have a place to eat fancy, as she expressed it. Here, though, she had poured me a small glass of some cherry liqueur, which I was sipping. She must have sipped it often, because her breath always smelled like cherries.

"What else you got to say about her?" she asked, on account of my silence.

"I went to see that professor you went to school with."

"I never went to school with no professor."

"Professor Blake at KSC."

"Harry wasn't no professor when I went to school with him. Just this shiny little boy who knew how to say his alphabet backwards. Did he tell you we were the two smartest kids at our school? What'd you go see him about?"

"To ask him if he thought the horn was real."

She laughed a moment, then she asked, "What'd he tell you?"

"He thought it was a joke. He thought that you'd put me up to it. To kid him. He said you two were smart, but you were a couple of jokesters."

Crocheting what looked like a difficult stitch, she said nothing for a moment, then, "Remembered me, did he? Did he remember me right off, or did you have to nudge him?"

"I had to nudge him."

"Hmm. Well, what you ought to do is to go see one of those herb doctors, root doctors some people call them. Herbalists. They see all sorts of strange sights, people who wouldn't go to an ordinary doctor or doctor's doctor, or would be too embarrassed. Though I suppose that ordinary doctors have seen some curiosities. But a root doctor ought to be able to tell you whether your sight is real or not. They have seen strange and amazing things. I know this woman in Midway who's a herbalist. She's not a doctor's doctor like Harry Blake. I'll write her name and address for you."

She got up, hunting for paper and pencil, and finally came back with a torn piece of brown paper bag and a stubble of a yellow pencil. She scribbled, then handed the paper to me.

"You would not know she's a jigaboo by looking at her, either," she said. "She looks like an Irish woman."

I put the paper in my shirt pocket and sat and watched her make another intricate crochet stitch. I stared at the straws in her small, pierced ears. She kept straws in them when she wasn't wearing earrings, to keep the holes from closing. I sipped the cherry liqueur.

"But you men tickle me," she said suddenly. Twisting her threads she looked like a weaverbird, or Eliot's beneficent spider. In fact, she studied birds' nests and spiderwebs, she said, because they gave her new ideas and enhanced ideas she already had about creating doilies. Likewise, she said, did the veins of leaves and the way that roots grew.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't know. Y'all just do. All of you men. You got all this concern in the world about whether or not the woman's horn is real. And supposing what if it ain't real? Supposing what if it's a fake horn? Does that make her a fake woman? You men just tickle me silly. If I went to a carnival show and saw a horned man, a unicorn man, that I liked and that took my fancy, I wouldn't worry me a bit about whether the horn was real or not. I would spend my time wondering about what the natural man was like."

"I do wonder what the woman's like," I defended. "It's just . . . maybe it's easier to ask people about the horn than the woman. I can't really ask anyone about the woman. The reality of the horn. . ."

"Maybe you've got something there," she interrupted, twisting a thread and knotting it. "Maybe you have. I still don't believe a fake horn makes a fake woman though. I believe she's as natural as any other woman. And I don't doubt she's as beautiful as you say she is. But you got to decide what interests you most—the horn or the woman. 'Will you still love me without my wig?'"

"Aunt Maggie, what're you talking about?"

"This man Catherine Hanuman married. She asked him—man named Sugar McGee—some people called him Cup o'Sugar. She asked him, 'Will you still love me without my wig?' He said he would and they got married. Well, he is somewhere in Kansas City today, I believe. Listen to you laughing. You think it's not like that, don't you? Well, I have known people brighter and more sophisticated than Kate and Sugar, plus sober when they got married, but their reactions are still the same. A wig can be anything. A horn can be a wig. A horn can be anything. Will you still love her without her horn?"

"She still seems the most interesting woman in the world to me." I shrugged. "And I'll admit, I haven't seen anyone more beautiful."

"I believe that's what Sugar said about Kate Hanuman."

I laughed again.

"I hope she doesn't take too much pride in her horn. . . . So you said you had to nudge Harry to remember me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Was it a heavy nudge or a light one?"

"Light."

"And you know something? I bet it wasn't even *me* he remembered. I bet he just remembered my *horn*." She smiled. "I ain't gonna tell you what my horn *is* though. But I bet it wasn't *me* he remembered at all."

"He said you oughta come by and see him yourself sometimes."

"Hare said that?" She mused. "Uh, uhm." She smiled again. "Maybe that's all I want him to remember is my horn, anyway. And how smart I used to be as a girl." She gave a laugh that you could barely hear. "Maybe

that's all I do want him to remember. Well, anyway, you ought to go over to Midway to see that woman, that herbalist doctor. She looks like an Irish woman, so don't be mistaken. Maybe she can tell you something you want to know about that Unicorn Woman. If not, I think you ought to try talking to that horned woman herself, if you see her again. I believe any woman likes to be talked to, horned or not. Of course, I might be wrong.

"My understanding of other womenfolk might be wrong. Sometimes I don't even understand my own self. You never know what's possible with people, though, do you?" She looked like she was pouting. "Maybe one of these days if I get really curious enough, I might go up there to that college and see exactly what it is that Harry Blake does remember. I know he teaches doctors how to be doctors, that's why I call him a doctor's doctor.

"That was always his dream and wish, to be a medical man."

*"She's very cultured," says Grange, while repairing a tractor. "She can tell you who people are that I've never heard of. Blanche—that's the schoolteacher's name and my wife's cousin—well, she says she believes that culture is a myth, but she feels obliged to take it with her wherever she goes. I can't buy that. That's one thing that Blanche says that I can't buy. How can culture be a myth? Culture is culture. It's not mythology. But I've got to give it to Blanche. She knows hordes of people from historical times to the present day that I've never heard of, and I learn somebody new every time she comes to visit. It was Botticelli yesterday. Brueghel came last Sunday. Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Boccaccio, Vico, Kant have been there. She brought Confucius with her once, but I already knew him. When I was in school, Confucius used to say as much as Simon."*

She looks like any ordinary country woman sitting on her front porch in a wicker chair, catching breeze, barefoot and wearing a colorful starched apron—copper, green, orange. Because she's fair-skinned I momentarily mistake her for a white country woman. In fact, after the war, I saw women all over little villages in Southern France who looked exactly like her. And there's a touch of the Irish, as my aunt said. A bunch of concord grapes are in her lap. Their rich odor drifts toward me. A chicken squawks, rises,

then settles, and chases a duck. In the yard there are lots of chickens and ducks running about or pecking corn. One bantam rooster perches on the low branch of a walnut tree whose leaves, sunlight behind them, look like they're made out of metal. The fence in front is entwined with honeysuckle vines; you can't tell whether the fence is wire or wood. In the back of the house, there's an orchard—apple trees, cherry trees, and more walnut trees. A grape arbor encircles the whole. There are wildflowers. Milkweed and morning glories. Goldenrod, bloodroot, Virginia bluebells. And there are the kinds of flowers that attract birds and butterflies. She also has aloe plants and other healing and medicinal-looking plants. There's a generous cabbage and lettuce patch to attract the likes of Peter Rabbit or is that Brer Rabbit?

I stand for a moment appreciating the fresh air and the green countryside. Casual, watching me, the woman seems waiting for me to speak.

"Are you Miss Vinnie Leeds?" I ask, finally.

She looks a bit surprised at first, as if she doesn't recognize her own name, then she says, "Yes, I'm Vinnie Leeds. Come up on the porch, sir."

I climb steps to the yard, head up the concrete walk, then climb more steps to the porch.

She peers at me. "Sit down and I'll be with you in a minute, sir," she says, indicating the other wicker chair as she spits grape seeds into her palm, then tosses them into the yard. The chickens and ducks come running for them. She offers me some grapes. I shake my head as she explains, "I want to finish listening to *Amos 'n' Andy* on the radio. Most people know not to come when it's *Amos 'n' Andy* time, but you are new to me. I've never seen you before. Whoever told you about me should have told you about my radio shows. Everybody that knows me knows that I have special radio shows that I listen to, and *Amos 'n' Andy* is one of them. I keep to my schedule."

I don't remember what Amos and Andy were saying, but I'll make up something:

*How'd you like the races, Andy?*

*I liked them fair enough, Amos. I won.*

*Well, you are not looking like a man when he wins.*

*Well, I won at the races, but I lost to Kingfish.*

*How in the world did you lose to Kingfish?*

*Well, when I got back, I told Kingfish that I had won and he says, 'I bet you don't know how much you won,' and I said, 'I bet you don't.'*

*And you meant to say, 'I bet I do too.'*

*Andy, he had reformulated the construction of the interrogation, leaving out the I, and took you off-guard.*

*Yeah, he tricked me.*

*Andy, you trick yourself when you don't listen. That was really a numbskull thing to do. You knew how much you had won.*

*Well, I'm not going back to the races.*

*Why aren't you going back to the races?*

*I don't want to lose to Kingfish again.*

*Good night, Andy.*

*Good night, Amos.*

*(in unison) Good night, folks in radio land.*

She turns off the radio. "That Andy is something else, ain't he? Seems like it needed another line in there, don't it? I think that Amos should have told Andy he shouldn't go back to Kingfish, not to the races." She laughs. I think she tells me her other favorite show is *Perry Mason*, when it was a radio show, before the days of television. And there are some romantic radio shows she likes to listen to, but I don't remember their names.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asks. "I certainly don't recall ever having seen you."

"My name is Buddy Ray Guy. I was recommended to you by Maggie Guy, my aunt. I mean, you were recommended to me by her."

"Well, come into my parlor," she says, rising.

I'm expecting her parlor to be untidy, but when I get in there it's spick-and-span. I don't see any herbs and potions cluttering up the place. It's sparsely furnished with a sofa, a large soft armchair, a walnut coffee table, and a small bookcase made of cherry-tree wood. This later is likewise sparse, containing only a Bible, a volume of Shakespearean plays, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Claude McKay's *Banjo*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. There's also a book on human physiology, another on plant biology, a dictionary, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, a collection

of American humor, and a book on Greek mythology. There are several coffee-table books: *How Does Your Garden Grow?*, *Conchology: A Beginner's Introduction*, and a travel book called *Baffin Island*, which I'd first misread as *Baffling Island*. There are a couple of books on the Hawaiian Islands and Hawaiian history and some books about Native Americans and Africans. Another reads *Irish Fairy Stories, Folktales, Legends and Myths*. There are several pamphlets, the kind that appear to be self-publications. One of the pamphlets is entitled *A Guide to the Medicinal Plants of Kentucky: Barks, Leaves, Stems, Roots, Flowers, Seeds . . .* Underneath the title, written in Latin, is "Periculosum est modicum sapere."

She sees me glance at the brochure and says, "Yes, sir, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

It's a sparsely furnished room, like I said, but it doesn't seem empty. Or rather, it seems the room of someone who knows the uses and value of empty space. It somehow reminds me of the Orient or what I imagine the Orient to be. There are no pictures on the wall, nor even tapestries. It's as if she has everything needful already inside herself. It seems, in other words, the room of someone who looks inward. But the cleanliness is the main surprise, and only one lone spiderweb in a high corner, like a string of almost invisible jewels. There is an old-fashioned Victrola and a pile of records. I notice something by Louis Armstrong.

"I don't see any herbs and potions," I observe, standing in the middle of the room.

"I keep my herbs and potions in the kitchen. My teas and candies. You can make healthy candies out of the right combinations of plants and herbs. How can I help you? Are you looking for a root tea? What ailment did you come with?"

"I don't come with an ailment; I come with a question."

"You weren't looking like you come with an ailment. But sometimes a question can be an ailment, can't it, sir?"

I tell her about the Unicorn Woman.

"Well, she needs to come here herself and not to send you. I have to see her before I can recommend a cure to her."

"She didn't send me. I came here actually to ask you whether the horn is real or not. Whether such a thing can actually exist in the world."



"It can be real, but I would have to see it and test it, and then I would assume that she'd want it cured, like I said. All I can tell you now, after hearing your story, is that it *could* be real. Things that I've seen make me suspect that it is, but you'd have to bring the woman to me. I'd have to see her for myself. Do you think you'd be able to bring her here?"

"I don't believe so. Not yet. Anyway, I'm not sure she'd want it cured."

"Her or you?"

I say nothing. That's when I glance at the title I'd originally misread as *Baffling Island*. Baffin Island. How would a baffled island feel?

Then I explain the horn: that the Unicorn Woman is a carnival act and that she needs the horn in her profession. Miss Leeds looks as if that doesn't make any real difference to her way of figuring things.

"Well, while you're here, do you want me to give you something for the stomach trouble you got?"

"I didn't say anything about stomach trouble."

"I know you didn't. You didn't have to tell me. You're talking about things of the heart, or the spirit, and I tell you about the stomach. I know my business. I'll go in here and get you a little garlic oil. Won't even charge you for it."

"Oh, I'll pay you, Miss Leeds. How much do you charge?"

"You already paid me by telling me about somebody I didn't even know existed in the world. I once cured a callus on a little girl's forehead that she got from knocking her little head against the wall all the time, but I've never cured a horn. I'd like to try that. Maybe that's all it is anyway, just some new kind of overgrown callus, and the carnival people mistake it or advertise it for a horn."

She brings me the garlic oil and I thank her. She also gives me some peppermint tea.

"You can thank me again when you win that unicorn woman, if you bring her here and let me see her, even if she doesn't want to be cured. I'd just like to see her for myself."

I don't reply.

"Uh, do you want me to put a little piece of paper on this bottle to identify what it is and what it's for? And the tea?"

"No, I'll remember."

“Good. I don’t believe in wasting paper. Wasting paper is like wasting a tree, at least that’s what they tell me.”

At first I think she means the conservationists, then I suddenly wonder if she means the trees! She is just the sort of person who would talk to trees. Of course I don’t ask her that. I’d always felt uncomfortable around that kind of talk, and around mystical people and people who talked to plants and trees.

I say thanks again and get in my car. Smell of honeysuckles, black walnut. She waves. A hummingbird hovers in the honeysuckle bush, flying backwards, then sideways, then hovering again over a flower. Aren’t they the only birds that can fly backwards? I wave at Miss Leeds, then head straight.

A midget—do they say “tiny person” these days?—kneels in front of a tin basin washing a man’s feet, scrubbing his long ruddy toes with a miniature hairbrush. I watch the tiny person but not the man. The man I watch only from the corners of my eyes. Reared back in a brown swivel desk chair, he sits right-angled to an oak secretary, puffing a cigar. Facing the tiny person, he doesn’t look at me. His profile resembles Disraeli’s.

Papers scatter the desktop. The frothy water smells like borax and twenty mules. An uncapped and half-empty bottle of impure-looking mineral oil rests beside the basin. The little person raises off his knees and squats, leaning forward slightly, scrubbing vigorously. The trailer is cluttered with carnival paraphernalia: multicolored thingamajigs that you can’t identify by name.

“If I let every guy who got passionate about her see her, I couldn’t run a carnival,” says the owner. “And it ain’t just her. There’s the Crocodile Woman and of course there’s your traditional Bearded Lady. Fellows all the time want to see those dames, up close and personal, if you know what I mean. In fact, another passionate jokester was in here just ahead of you, mister, asking about the same dame and claiming to be a professor of hornicology at some university, or some nonsense and thought it gave him special privileges. A real jokester. I don’t understand that sort of passion myself. Don’t understand it and don’t want to understand it. You amorous jokesters take the cake. And there are a lot of lunatics in the world that get obsessed with these women. I don’t know who’s a jokester and who’s a lunatic. You might

be either. And some folks just don't like me for allowing the colored folks into my carnival and because I don't discriminate. I figure this is a new day and age."

The little man is slender, not stocky like some of the little men you see, he looks like a little boy. They are both wearing dungarees.

"If I let every fellow who wanted to see Ziggy see Ziggy, I wouldn't be in the carnival business, you know what I mean, bud? I'd be in another business. And I wouldn't be the boss."

The little man wipes the man's feet and rubs them gently with mineral oil.

"Even Mr. Masters here is fond of Ziggy, ain't you?" The little man says nothing.

"I don't understand that kind of passion myself. Do you, Mr. Masters?"

The little man shakes his head but looks as if he understands perfectly.

I stand and watch the Unicorn Woman and wait for her revolving high stool to revolve toward me. It's a stool that not only turns itself, but raises and lowers itself as if it were powered by some type of hydraulic system or power, but there is none visible. One stares across at her, down at her, and up at her. She does not raise or lower her own head, however. She looks as if she's made out of brass, and she has the sort of expression one sees on mannequins, except for an occasional flash of an indescribable expression that lets you know she has a spirit in the brass. Of what nature or blend of natures she is, I'm still uncertain. I wonder if she's noticed that I've made my appearance several times and whether she thinks I'm an obsessed man, a jokester or a lunatic?

I've come with a prepared question: Were you born with a horn, or did it just grow and when? I don't ask. I've thought also to ask simply, What's your name? But that would have been a dishonest question since I already knew her name. That is, if the owner of the carnival was a truth teller and not just a jokester himself.

People in the milling crowd ask each other questions, but no one addresses questions to the Unicorn Woman herself, not even: Is that a real horn? Then she'd have to answer yes, wouldn't she?

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*"Blanche's a drama teacher, did I tell ya?" Grange is saying. "I always tell her, if I didn't know what she taught in the classroom I could always tell, because she's got these very expressive features, just like theatrical people, and her hair always looks like it's wet, like somebody pasted wet feathers all over her head. Ya know what I mean?"*

*"Sure."*

*"I'll tell you what I learned Sunday, not just artsy-craftsy stuff either."*

*"Blanche is well-rounded. For one thing, I learned the universe is either expanding or contracting, but no one knows for sure which. And when there's a new moon, the moon is invisible. That explains those nights I couldn't find a moon. That's the difference between the full moon and the new moon. The new moon's invisible; the full moon's completely visible. When I asked Blanche what made that so, she didn't say. Still, it's an interesting bit of information. And it explains those nights when I can't find a moon. Blanche is the type of person who goes about teaching everybody everything you can imagine, or the store of information that she knows."*

*"You know those types of people, don't you, Bud?"*

As soon as I open the door of the trailer, the man, still in profile, says, "You back gain, dreamer? Go hunt passion somewhere else, will ya?"

The little man, staring at me full-faced and rubbing his hands together, says, "I love a good love story. And this is a mystery too, eh?"

"Just make sure you do your job, Mr. Masters," says the carnival boss. "Leave the mysterious abysmal zones to them that's in the business."

The dream leaps, changing scenes, and suddenly I'm sitting in a bar in Paducah, Kentucky. The Unicorn Woman, dressed up to resemble Carmen Miranda, wears a bowl of fruit on her head and a necklace of bananas, passion fruit, and pineapple rings. She's dancing and prancing near my table.

"Do you like my hat?" she asks.

"I adore it."

Her protruding belly button, speckled with glitter, looks almost like a miniature horn itself.

"How do you like Paducah?"

"I love it, but you'd be anywhere and I'd love it. You know that."

"I have to keep moving you know, because I'm in danger."

"What sort of danger?"

"Men keep following me around. Passion, you know. Least the carnival boss says it's that. He says it's passion, but I'm not sure myself. Me, I don't know the difference between passion and curiosity."

"Curiosity is a part of passion. Passion is the foundation of curiosity, or curiosity is the foundation of passion."

"Say what? Are you a schoolteacher? Well, whether it is passion or curiosity that fascinates the people, it's the horn, not me. It represents something for 'em. To tell you the truth, this horn just grew. Woke up one morning and there it was, just like a new moon. It just grew, like Topsy's."

I explain to her the difference between a new moon and a full moon.

Her horn, therefore, has to be a full moon.

"Is that right? Well, you learn something every day, don't you? Thanks a million, Bud. Well, I've got to run."

"Where to next?"

"I just follow the carnival, Bud. I just follow the carnival. It's a traveling carnival. If some nice gent could propose a vision of my horn that I liked, I might follow *him*."

I try to propose a vision of her horn to her, a vision that she might like, but I awake inside a new dream.

"I think she's an angel come to dwell among us," says a woman.

"Or a devil," says the man she's with.

"Her name's Zigagiz. You can read it backwards or forwards and it's the same."

"Sounds like a devil's name to me."

"Or an angel's."

"Zigagiz Dalanalad."

"Didn't I tell you? No ordinary human woman. Ordinary human women don't have names like that."

The Unicorn Woman rotates till she blurs. When she comes into focus again, the horn is gone.

"Just an ordinary human woman," says the woman. "Didn't I say so? Without that horn, she's the same as you or me."

I drive the tractor out to the Hennebelle farm. It's one of those farms that lets you know how bluegrass got its name and why it deserves it: the grass is so green it looks blue. Cows and horses graze in one swollen meadow. In another, corn, wheat, and barley are planted. Another is reserved for tobacco, its leaves undulating. The farm is surrounded by a rock fence, each stone of individual character, shape, and color laid individually perhaps five generations ago, the sort of fence that hardly needs mending. I imagine the old days and slaves mending the fence, watched by an overseer. Somebody said slave cabins are still on this property, but I haven't seen them myself. I've only traveled on the outskirts of the property, along the borderline, and they say the slave cabins are inward. But I imagine those old slaves hand-placing the stones meticulously. In fact, everything on the farm looks hand-placed, as if an architect's and landscapist's scale model, magically enlarged and brought to life. The Hennebelle mansion, Jeffersonian, sits half a mile back from the road. It is white with a multitude of tiny, green-framed windows.

Hennebelle could be peeking out of any of them, observing me. I imagine him as the master in the old days and me one of the retainers. Why do I think "retainer" and not just slave? Then I imagine myself a slave on loan or rented from one of the other plantations, a skilled craftsman. I think one of my ancestors was a blacksmith who used to travel from plantation to plantation. Momentarily, I think I see a man standing in one of the windows, in shirtsleeves, holding a pipe, but it's the flickering shadows of an elm.

I've seen Hennebelle only once in person—a short white man with his straight red hair combed forward like an umbrella bird's feathers—a quick glance while he pranced by on horseback while I was returning another tractor. He nodded to me and I nodded to him. We did not exchange words. He continued to prance on. I saw him another time, though, in the society pages of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*: his hair combed back from his broad forehead this time but still longer than it was stylish to wear in those days. He looked more like someone from another century. Forward or backward, I wasn't sure. He could have been from the nineteenth century, or he could have been from some future century. Dressed in white tie and white tails, in the newspaper photo, he did not look like a bird of any variety. His ears peeking up between the bushy blades of his hair. His pretty wife beside him wore black fur.

They had four handsome sons standing nearby wearing little jockey costumes: Josh, Wilde, Stern, and Clever. Years later I read in the same newspaper that son Josh, the eldest, had had a play produced on Broadway or Off-Broadway and that it had made him a sensation in certain New York literary circles. The local paper had reprinted some of the reviews, three of which I still remember:

*"This is a wild, impertinent, spiritual comedy. J. H. is a new theatrical sensation."*

*"J. H. is a pleasantly sardonic prophet of our modern age. Bravo!"*

*"This is a play of irredeemable vulgarity: vulgarity of thought, of character, of sentiments, of language. It does not belong on or off the Great White Way."*

I believe it was the latter critic that Josh Hennebelle must have listened to, because I read no further notices of plays, on or off Broadway or even locally, written by Josh "Henny" Hennebelle. I did read a small item about him a decade later, that he had roamed from New York to Amsterdam to New Guinea, then he'd become the assistant manager in an upstate New York office paper products company. He was about to marry the former Miss Thala Kodiak Arctos of New York City, who was photographed in a white fur coat, in the days when society women always wore furs. The caption underneath her read "Venus in Furs." Perhaps this caption struck her fancy because the new Mrs. Josh Hennebelle was said to be a bit of an eccentric who insisted upon wearing fur both summer and winter, indeed every season.

Of the other Hennebelle boys, Wilde stayed on the farm and married his childhood sweetheart. Camera shy, he never appeared on the society pages. Stern became a horse breeder and stayed a bachelor, though he is often photographed with Hollywood and Las Vegas showgirls visiting Kentucky for the Derby, and every Kentucky Derby Stern throws a gigantic Derby Day party, photographs of which take up several society pages. Recipes of dishes served there, such as "Cantaloupe Chocolate Mousse Delight," are reprinted for local housewives. Party guests descend from helicopters and step out of pontoon boats. There's usually a surprise celebrity guest of honor.

I don't remember reading any notices about Clever. Once, out of curiosity, I attempted to ask one of the hired men at the Hennebelle farm what had become of Clever, but he didn't understand me. So I'm not certain

that his name truly is Clever or whether that was a newspaper misspelling of the name.

One of the Hennebelles, while visiting Hawaii, was overheard to have said that the native Hawaiians looked like Negroes too much for her taste. Except it wasn't the word "Negro" she was reported to have said but the more derogatory name. "They may call them Hawaiians, but they look like N\_\_\_\_\_ to me." I suppose she had seen too many Hawaiians in the movies played by white people or colored people of other nationalities. J. A. Rogers, in one of his books, was reported to have overheard a similar comment from a Caucasian visitor to the islands.

"How you doing, Bud?" asks Putman, one of the hired men, who appears as soon as I park the tractor inside the gate. When Putman calls my name I can never tell whether he's calling me out of my name or calling me by name.

I climb down from the tractor and give him the invoice. "Do you use?" he asks, offering me a tin of snuff.

"No thanks."

He pinches a bit and snuffs.

"I don't know, Bud," he says, putting a dab more under his tongue, snapping the tin shut and putting it in his shirt pocket. "I think the land just don't like a machine. I think it rebels. Mr. Hennie's making a fuss over this one tractor, though, like he thinks it's a sacred tractor. I think either the land don't like a machine or the machine don't like the land. Gotta be one or the other. Do you want a cup of coffee while you're waiting for your ride? Come up to the kitchen."

"No thanks. I'll just wait here by the rock fence."

"Okey dokey, suit yourself, mister. Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking against the machine, even a sacred machine. I believe in the machine myself. I worked on 'em during the war. But it's got to be something. Grange brought this tractor in the last time, so I know y'all ain't playing tricks on us. Well, see you around, Bud. I hope it ain't on the same tractor, though."

He laughs, showing discolored but marvelously well-shaped teeth, gums pink but spotted with flecks of brown. He has a wide mouth and an overbite, which makes him look like those museum reconstructions of an early



version of man. He reminds me of someone I've seen in the movies—old cowboy movies. His straight brown hair looks like it was cut under a bowl. He climbs upon the tractor and drives into a long shed where other farm equipment and farm machines are kept. He doesn't exit, so I assume he has work to do inside.

I stand against the rock fence thinking of rebel land or rebellious land and light a Philip Morris cigarette. A Hennebelle goat, grazing in a nearby meadow, suddenly rushes for the rock fence, charging, then stops short and lazily chews and watches me.

"So what do you think about the horn, fella? Do you think it's as real as your own?"

I study his horn. It really does seem manufactured of the same stuff as the Unicorn Woman's. But real horns are supposed to have a center of bone. I wonder if hers has a center of bone. I suppose *his* does.

"What advice would you give? Are you any kin to the unicorn, even if it is a mythical beast? What do you know about your cousin? What's your advice?"

Of course he gives no advice but looks as if he's got plenty to give, however nonchalantly, if one could only comprehend goat vocabulary. He continues to chew. What do three consecutive, rapid chews mean, then one, pause, then a long, slow, languorous, solemn chew?

"Cigarette?"

A shake of the beard. Well, that's understandable in any language.

But he looks at me like I'm an articulate machine.

A tender chestnut colt grazing farther up in the meadow eating green seems to be almost wading in green, wind tossing its forelock like a bohemian's. Rigid brown haystacks rise nearby, the sun peeking around them as if they were a straw man's shoulders. Watching the colt, I think of Colorado or Wyoming or one of the Dakotas, but the West has always seemed to me like one big state. I think of once reading about black cowboys out west, maybe some historical book or something, again, by J. A. Rogers. Cowboys you never see in the Western movies. I try to remember the name of a black town out west they settled. Boley, Colorado? Even horses native to Kentucky always remind me of the West. Of rodeos, not the Derby. I think of the black freetowns in Kentucky, founded by former slaves. Once I had started

to take a tour of the freetowns. A photographer from the North had come to Kentucky to photograph them.

Cars whisk by, trucks, then a solitary tractor lumbers down the road.

A small, fleet dairy truck marked "Gulliver Ulysses Waterhouse's Dairy" turns in at the gate. The dairyman, who is probably not Gulliver but a hired man, does not drive up to the house but goes to the corner of the hip-roofed barn where he deposits, beside a rusty water pump, a case of milk bottles and retrieves the empty ones. As he drives back, I catch a glimpse of him through the wide windshield glass: he has the broad, high-cheekboned face of a man I met once overseas who said he was from the Sandwich Islands, a brown-skinned man, but this one is as pale as the milk truck or the goat's beard. Still he has the same features of the Sandwich Islands man. He does not glance my way but stares obliviously forward, as the truck heads for the exit, adding to the jungle of tracks in the grayish brown dust. Ellison had not yet written *Invisible Man*. But that's how I feel: like an invisible man. But I can smell my armpits like wet hay as I raise my arms trying to escape the flying dust.

Another truck, a cleaner's delivery truck, pauses in front of the gate; the driver looks for a moment as if he can't remember the gate or does not know the proper gate. He examines a chart, then drives on. Somewhere, unseen, I hear water running over rock. A hidden stream somewhere in the distance. If there wasn't a "no trespassing" sign posted on the gate, I'd go hunt for it. And maybe hunt for the slave cabins too. There is no shade, and in the bold sunlight, I'm sweating like a river. I feel like I'm made of oil and tar. Suddenly I feel too visible.

The goat, still keeping me company, chews, indifferent. Then he chews, observing me, observing the highway, observing Ranch, as he drives up in the pickup truck and toots the horn. I spit out the butt end of my cigarette, stamp it out, and climb in.

"Were you talking to that goat?" asks Ranch.

"Yeah. Wanted his advice on a matter."

"What advice did he give you?"

"Not a thing."

"Sign of true wisdom," says Ranch, without a word more.

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*The Carmen Miranda hat, but the Unicorn Woman's not under it. It's thrown among the other carnival paraphernalia. The little man, sitting on the pile of junk sculpture, watches me.*

*"You again? Human Befriending Goat Befriender Bearing Questions? Well, I've got a question for you. Suppose she were a rhino woman or an antelope woman? Would you still be fascinated by her?"*

*I think of African women, then I think of Native American women, but I don't reply to his question. I do, however, like his new name for me.*

"Here we are," says Ranch, turning in the gate of the tractor repair company. "Did you have a good nap?"

I say, "Thanks," climb down, and take the invoice to the office.

Peggy, the secretary, blonde hair in a pompadour, stamps the invoice, separates the pieces, the original and the two carbons, in three different gray metal trays, then hands me the fourth carbon. A spit curl dangling in the middle of her forehead softens the effect of the pompadour.

Her lips are tiny and pink, but her eyes are huge, close-set, and parrot-green. She's younger than she looks. In those days, young women tried to look older. In these days, old women try to look younger. I remember when I first came there to work, she'd shown some alarm that the company had hired a colored man as a tractor repairman. She didn't seem to know how to treat or react to me. But she's gotten used to seeing me around, though I don't stay around her too long. I just hand in my invoices and exit.

Out back, Grange looks up, a wrench in his hand.

"You back? Almost quitting time. Y'all should've just taken y'all's time driving back, you and Ranch. Start on the new tractor tomorrow."

Grange hadn't taken his time getting back. I wonder why he'd advised me to do what he hadn't done. But maybe he thinks I don't like tractor fixing as much as he does. He's one of those tractor fixers who even fixes tractors in his spare time, maybe even in his dreams, like somebody said actors on holiday always went to see a play. A tractor fixer's tractor fixer.

"Well, I'll just look 'er over, see what's to be done," I say.

"Always too much," says Grange. "If folks knew how to treat a tractor, we wouldn't have to work so hard. A machine needs tender loving care, same as a woman. That's how you treat a machine. Of course not too tender, or they won't do their job, right? Or like those science fiction stories about machines taking control of the world."

I walk around the tractor, climb up on it, start it, listen, climb down.

"You look kinda dreamy," he says. "What're you dreaming about? Memphis?"

"Yeah."

"Always Memphis. Musta been a real doll, that woman, whoever she is. I've seen some of those Memphis women myself. Real beauties. They're not as beautiful as Kentucky women, though, but they've got their own brand of beauty. A man don't turn into a Memphian for nothing."

I say nothing. Memphian. Sounds like a religion. Like you could make a religion of a place. Unicornian. What would that be? I think of the saying about Kentucky: land of fast horses and beautiful women. Of course, some people make a joke of it and say "land of fast women and beautiful horses."

Like you could make a religion of a woman? Hadn't I read that somewhere? Where a man made a religion of a woman?

"I don't know," says Grange, as I tinker with the tractor. "I think you ought to watch out for those women that make you a dreamer, though."

"Women that make you a dreamer are never what you expect. Never are what you expect. They never are. They're all illusion and confusion. Now I'm speaking to you from experience, which is the best teacher. Blanche believes you can know some things without experiencing 'em, by looking at pictures and reading books and using the power and persuasiveness of your own imagination. I don't believe it. It don't sound rational. If you don't learn from your own experience, you got to learn from somebody's else's. I mean, somebody that experiences the world directly. Now that's rational."

"And I know where from I speak. Illusion and confusion, that's all it is. Plus, women make you a dreamer while you're courting 'em, but then when you get 'em they keep you wide awake. I know where from I speak. Pick a woman while you're wide awake and you know what you got."

"That sounds like some sound advice," I say, using a trick my Aunt Maggie taught me.

"I know it's sound advice," he says, putting his tools away. "Because I've experienced both kinds of women, the kind you pick when you're dreaming and the kind you choose when you're wide awake. I know where from I speak. I chose my wife when I was wide awake. But some of my girlfriends before her I picked out when I was dreaming."

I take off my greasy gray work jacket and put on my gabardine street jacket and start for the exit. Grange walks along beside me.

"Of course the younger men never listen to an older man when he's talking to him," he says, wiping oily hands on a dirt-black undershirt he uses for a cleaning rag, then stuffing it into his tool box that he carries home with him. Like I said, he fixes tractors in his spare time.

"That's why the men stay backwards when it comes to a woman," he says. "A woman will listen to another woman, I mean even an older woman, and get ahead and learn from her, but a man has always got to be his own. That's why we haven't progressed. I mean, we've made mechanical and technological progress, but on the subject of the woman we haven't progressed at all. Plus, the womenfolk have developed their faculty of intuition and men seem to fear intuition and the tenderer things of the mind and the spirit. With womenfolk those things are a priority."

At the gate, he asks, "Did you see Kate peeking at you?"

"Kate?"

"Yeah, Kate Riley. She's the woman they had working here, fixing tractors when the men were off fighting the war. You know they hired a lot of womenfolk to do the work of the men. So our company hired Kate. Fired her when the men came back, and then they hired you, and also you being a colored man and all, I suppose that got Kate Riley riled up."

This is the first time he's mentioned me being a colored man, almost as if he's just noticing the fact. Otherwise he's been treating me like he doesn't notice color. I'm just another tractor repairman.

"No, I didn't notice," I say.

"Well, she notices you. She's always walking by here looking mad as a wet hen. Well, it's as much her fault as anybody's. They offered to put

her in the office along with Peggy—I call her Pompadour Peggy—but she wouldn't go. She said that would be a waste of her talents. That she was fixing tractors all throughout the war and she could fix them better now. But it seems like it would be a move up if you ask me, but she didn't see it that way. She treated it like they were demoting her. They even said she could be employed polishing the tractors, once we men repaired them, but she didn't take that opportunity either. The boss gave her freedom of choice.

"When you're free to choose, that makes you responsible. I don't see why she didn't pick tractor polisher if she was so keen on tractors. Polish up the tractors when we men got through fixing them; that's a real nice upwardly mobile job. I try to see her part, but a man back from the war wants his job back. You fought in the war, so you need your job back the same as any man. Don't matter to me what's your color; you're still a tractor fixer. And a pretty good one to my lights. We even had her daddy talk to her. He's the man who does the topiary work you see around here for the people that don't like their bushes and trees to be natural but want them carved into animals and birds and pyramids and such. Mr. Pinxit wanted her daddy to trim a bush to look like a duck. That's what topiary work is. A right nice little business he's got for himself. She wouldn't even listen to her daddy.

"Some women are like that. They've got to be their own women. Her daddy's a man of all work, though, not just a topiary man, so she should have listened to him. But if you see a woman peeking in here looking like a wet hen, that's Kate Riley. Even Peggy talked to her, woman to woman, you know, and confidentially, but she won't listen. Women are forward in love and the tender things, but sometimes they can be backwards and bullheaded in everything else."

I say nothing.

"The next time I see Kate Riley I will explain to her that you didn't take her job from her, that you had this job before the war, and got it fair and square. I didn't know they hired any colored fellows to work here before the war, but the boss says you usedta come up here as a youngster and fix tractors, even before my time. And he let you learn the business. I don't really think of you as being colored myself. The little Kentucky town I'm from

you couldn't tell white from colored, because we all looked the same. It's in our history. Outsiders couldn't tell, but we all knew each other. We knew who was who. We knew who was colored and who was white. Outsiders were always amazed at us. Even the sheriff of the county couldn't tell the difference. Sometimes he would lock up a colored man when he thought he was locking up a white man and sometimes he would lock up a white man when he thought he was locking up a colored man and put them in the wrong segregated cell. Even though we could tell who was colored and who was white and we'd try to warn him. But sometimes the colored was whiter than the white. And sometimes the white was more colored than the colored. That's just the history of the place. I just think of you as another tractor fixer. Kate'll pull in her horns after a while. She won't cause no trouble. Riley raised her right."

Outside, he heads in one direction and I another. I try to picture his little town.

Going to my parked car, I pass Peggy, standing at the bus stop. She pretends not to notice me.

*"Tell us your name."*

*"Kate."*

*"A real universal name. I didn't think it was Ziga. Here you have 'em, gents: the Parrot Woman, the Chameleon Woman, the Unicorn Woman, the Bearded Lady. Take your pick. Pay an extra dime for the Bearded Lady and we'll even allow you to do topiary work. How does that grab ya?"*

*I pay to go see the Parrot Woman. She smiles in front of me, but not at me.*

*"Polly Pompadour's my name," she says. "Or Pompadour Polly. What's your game?" When I don't answer, she pouts and asks, "Do you want a cracker?"*

I drive Aunt Maggie to see the woman she calls Doc Leeds. "Why don't you drive around a little bit," says Aunt Maggie, as we enter Midway's city limits. "I never do like to catch that woman listening to *Amos 'n' Andy*. I don't mind *Perry Mason* or the *Orson Welles Commentaries*, which she sometimes will

listen to. Or the radio romances. But she will stop in the midst of treating you to listen to *Amos 'n' Andy*.

"I've experienced that. I don't see why colored people find them so humorous. They're an embarrassment to the race. I wish there was a colored *Perry Mason*. Or a colored *Quiz Kids* or a colored *The Shadow* or other of the radio shows and radio series. Or even a colored radio romance. But that *Amos 'n' Andy* . . . I don't understand how intelligent people like Doc Leeds can listen to them and love them. She behaves like she loves them. Like she really loves them and finds them hilarious. I guess there are some people that are closet *Amos 'n' Andy* listeners among our race. Do you listen to *Amos 'n' Andy*?"

She looked at me as if whether or not one listened to *Amos 'n' Andy* was a judgment of character.

"Sometimes."

"Well, at least you're honest. Some people ain't even honest. I prefer *The Romance of Helen Trent* myself. I would like it even better if it were a colored man and woman. A romance between a colored man and woman, but they wouldn't put that on the radio. Not in this day and age."

We cross Railroad Street. As we cross the tracks, she bounces into my shoulder, says excuse me, and straightens up.

"I remember on V-J Day everybody was dancing out here on Railroad Street. Everybody. Dancing in the street. Men, women, children, white, colored, and one Indian. You know Mr. Dancing, don't you? The Indian man? He was out here. He wasn't dancing." She chuckles. "He was watching. A few got drunk and pretended like they was Indians. Hahjo hahjo hahjo. That's the sound they was making. I don't know if that's a true Indian sound. I don't know if the Indian people really sound like that or if it's just for the movies. I never like to see people do that. Play Indian, you know. I don't like to see people play Indian any more than I like the minstrel shows. Mr. Dancing just watched them. He watched all of them.

"He was even watching the colored people, because there were some colored people playing Indian. And me, I stood there watching Mr. Dancing. But every time I see Railroad Street I think of V-J Day. I think of the war being over, and I think of you returning from the war. I think of people



dancing in the street and I think of Mr. Dancing. I will. Well, I will say I trust Doc Leeds on just about every matter, except for *Amos 'n' Andy* and her preference for that radio show. You haven't had any more problems with your stomach, have you?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't."

"And you won't. Because Dr. Leeds knows her business. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, she's always saying, but she has more than a little knowledge."

We park on Railroad Street in front of a men's clothing store. I light up a cigarette.

"You ought to have Doc Leeds talk to you about internal pollution," says Aunt Maggie. "You wouldn't smoke cigarettes anymore."

I smoke anyway.

As we pull up in front of Doc Leeds's, she's turning off the radio.

"I know you; you're the Unicorn Hunter," she says, pointing at me, as we step onto the porch.

"How do, Maggie?"

I sit in the wicker chair on the porch while Aunt Maggie goes into the parlor. I can hear them through the open window to the right of me.

"Why don't you give me a little bit of everything, Dr. Leeds?"

"Now you know I can't do that, Mag. Some combinations of things don't go well with others. You just stick to your regimen."

"The program you put Golgi Tatum on, she says makes her hair grow."

"Now you know I cannot put everyone on the same regimen, because you're all individual people, but if you're worried about your hair, I can give you something to make it grow. This is made with peanuts, so you will have to mix a little brilliantine or a little sweet oil in with it to camouflage the smell. Rub it into your scalp and a little bit on your hair. It will also make it glisten and shine."

"I know what you gave Golgi makes her hair real healthy. I like healthy hair. And Golgi told me you also gave her something made with oysters."

"That was not for her hair, Mag. You think you can go around asking other people what I give them, and it will work for you. Everybody is an individual and needs a customized and personalized regimen. What works

for Golgi might not work for you, Maggie. You just stick to your own regimen and don't worry about Golgi's regimen."

"I wish you had something that could make a person remember what they want to remember and forget all the stuff they want to."

"The memory is impartial."

"Well, it seems pretty partial to me. Partial to what you want to forget."

"I can give you something for mental clarity."

"Yes, I need me some mental clarity."

"Well, I'll go back in here and get your medicaments."

Silence. I watch the chickens. One marches a bit ahead of the others, looking like a scout. Smell of honeysuckles, black walnut, milkweed. I listen to the eternal hum of the country. From inside, the clink of jars, then the crisp crack of paper. If one destroys trees to make paper, what does one destroy to make glass?

"Here you are."

"I wish you would just give me a little bit of everything though. What won't cure one thing will cure something else."

"That ain't the way it works, Mag. You just stick to your own regimen. Put a little bit in your scalp at night before you brush your hair. If you heat it first, it works even better. Also, put a half teaspoon of this in your cup of coffee or whatever you imbibe in the morning."

"Chamomile tea."

"Say what?"

"What I imbibe in the morning."

"Good for you. You oughta try ginger tea and peppermint tea."

"I would like to try some of that oyster stuff too, Doc Leeds. Fedora Doppler said she got some oyster stuff too, and I know I have got the same constitution as Fedora."

"Now, Mag, there are no two people that have the same constitution. They may resemble each other. You might resemble Fedora Doppler, but you're not her. And having the same constitution is an illusion. If you think you need some oyster stuff, go buy yourself some oysters. You just got a fixation on oysters. Go home and make yourself an oyster casserole or some oyster stew."

Aunt Maggie is silent, then she says, "Doc Leeds, I heard somebody say she slept with a magnet under her pillow. Does that make the hair grow and make it healthy?"

"Ptah! Fiddlesticks!"

They're back on the porch and Aunt Maggie is sticking a bag into her pocketbook. She rummages in it, then snaps it shut. Her pocketbook looks like the cheeks of a fat, greedy brown squirrel. She takes a few dollars from her purse and puts them in Doc Leeds's hands. Doc Leeds returns some of the money.

"You are worth your hire," says Aunt Maggie, or something similar.

"Don't forget when you find your Unicorn Woman I'd like to see her," Doc Leeds says to me.

"I've already found her; I just don't have her," I say, rising.

"You haven't found her till you've got her," she says.

"If the carnival comes back this way, I'll let you know," I say.

"I don't like to go to carnivals or circuses either," says Doc Leeds. "They disturb my spirit."

I wait for her to say more, but she doesn't. We wave so long. I hold the car door for Aunt Maggie and she gets in.

"*Amos 'n' Andy* ought to disturb her spirit," mumbles Aunt Maggie as we drive off. "They ought to disturb the spirit of the race. They are portrayed by white men pretending to be colored people. It is not unlike a minstrel show, except on the radio."

"Did you get everything you need?" I ask.

"Everything I need, but not everything I want," says Aunt Maggie.

"Suppose what you want harms you?" I ask.

"An oyster never harmed nobody," says Aunt Maggie. "Except maybe another oyster. I guess I could make myself an oyster casserole or some oyster stew."

We cross Spring Station Bridge.

"Drive back by Railroad Street," says Aunt Maggie. "I want to remember when the war was over. Everybody was out there dancing except Mr. Dancing." She giggles like a young girl. "He did have a sip of my Thunderbird, though. I have danced with him at Tiger's Inn. That was many years

ago, when we were youngsters. But that day, he just watched everybody. He watched everybody, and I watched him. But even colored people were playing Indian. I don't like to see that. We should be better behaved than that. But Mr. Dancing was watching everybody. He is still a handsome and remarkable man."

Instead of driving back to Lexington, we head for Versailles, Kentucky, since we're in the neighborhood, and go by Sam and Sal's Place, which is a restaurant owned by my parents. (Incidentally, Versailles, Kentucky, is not pronounced like the French city but is pronounced the way it's spelled, as if it were "Ver-sails.") Anyway, at Sam and Sal's Place, my father, Sam, is the cook and my mother, Sal, is the waitress, bartender, and cashier. My father's more introverted and cerebral; my mother, more outward and friendly with folks, so she prefers to be where all the people are and also likes to listen to their conversations.

My parents have had the restaurant for about a decade and a half, but I remember stories about before they opened it. Though I was old enough to remember its beginnings more directly, I've always been the sort to remember things more pristinely through stories and storytelling even when I've actually been there. The things that take place in other people's heads and that come to you through stories have always held a special interest for me. I'm an admirer of storytelling and storytellers. I enjoy the spoken revelation. Even if you're like Ella Tallent, a neighborhood woman, who claims to read thoughts, even she reads thoughts in the form of stories, or so she claims. Otherwise, she says people's thoughts are too nebulous or maybe "fogbound."

But to get back to what I was saying. For instance, my father is always saying that the only reason they serve liquor is out of stubbornness. Originally they were just going to serve food and soft drinks, but around the same time that my father was contemplating opening a restaurant, the church we belonged to was contemplating making him a deacon. So the other deacons had a meeting with my father and one of them declared, "Brother Guy, a little bird told us that you are contemplating starting a restaurant."

In those days, and maybe even nowadays, when you didn't want to reveal who told you something, it was acceptable and even expected to say that "a little bird told you." Therefore, when I was small and couldn't distinguish

sounds from meanings, I used to think they were accusing someone who carried my name, or maybe even accusing me of tale bearing. You see, often people would pronounce “bird” like “bud.” So it sounded to me like they were saying, “A little bud told me.” Finally, when I was able to distinguish that “bird” pronounced “bud” was still “bird,” I used to picture a little bird standing in a hollyhock bush or on a golden branch or in a palm tree or on the edge of space with shining feathers. People would come to this little bird like some sort of oracle to be told things. Then, when I discovered Miss Ella Tallent, mentioned above, I thought she’d been that eternal little bird.

“Yes,” replied my father. “I’m contemplating starting my own restaurant. What that little *bird* told you is the truth.”

(People who have a little “bud” of their own are careful to articulate *bird*. Most of the time they don’t pronounce it “bud.”)

“The reason we called you to council, Brother Guy,” the deacon went on, “is that we are contemplating making you a deacon of the church, and we don’t feel it would be commendable or look right either for a deacon of the church to be an owner of a din of iniquity and to be serving liquor and strong intoxicating drinks.”

I believe it was Eland Cohune who spoke, being the head and eldest deacon, but I wasn’t present, so I can’t be certain. The other deacons who were present were Chatter Randan and Frosh Dunn. Chatter Randan seldom had a word to say to anybody; hence, his name. They always referred to him as “Chatterbox,” but I believe Chatter was his true name.

Frosh Dunn believed in the principle of affirming a truth once someone else had spoken it, so I’m pretty certain it was Eland Cohune who was the spokesman. However, whenever my father retells the story, he only admits to “one of the deacons.”

My father insisted that it was a restaurant he was contemplating opening and not a “din of iniquity.”

“But you’ll serve liquor and strong and intoxicating drinks, and that will contribute to sin as well as alcoholism,” the deacon asserted. “And when people drink they also smoke and dance, which are equally iniquitous, till one sin leads them to another and you don’t know how many sins people will contemplate. If that’s not a ‘din of iniquity’ I don’t know what is. It’s an honor to be made a deacon, Brother Guy, even to have it proposed to you,

and you are a well-respected member of the church and the congregation and always have been, but if you open a din of iniquity, we wouldn't be able to honor you with deaconhood."

Therefore, it was actually the deacons of our church who were responsible for my father's opening the restaurant and serving strong and intoxicating drinks, and even having a jukebox. But, of course, he was never made a deacon.

Out of further stubbornness, my father had started to "signify" by naming his restaurant "The Deacon," but my mother persuaded him not to because after all they were still a part of the church community even if they were not officers of the church, so he named it "Sam and Sal's Place."

When we arrive, my mother is behind the counter polishing glasses and my father is sitting at a window table with a newspaper and a Coke. I go get a Coke, sit down across from my father, and he passes me the sports section. Mr. Humphrey Sable, a local barber, peeks in the window and waves, says, "Hoo there," or what sounds like "Hoo there." Aunt Maggie sits up at the counter drinking rum and talking to my mother.

"I don't know why," says Aunt Maggie. "I'm just nervous all the time. You know how you get nervous all the time? I'm as nervous as a flycatcher."

"I don't know what a flycatcher is, but I know what you mean."

"I don't believe that a woman has to go through two changes, do you?"

My mother stops polishing glasses and looks like she's polishing thumbs.

"No, I believe there's only one change. Of course, there's a change in the beginning, during puberty. But they don't refer to that as a change."

"I believe there's only one change, and I've been through that. Doc Leeds has only heard of one change, and she should know."

"That's the truth."

"When I was going through the change, Doc Leeds was the only one who had medicaments that could help me. She prepared me some sort of tea and told me what foods I should and shouldn't eat. She made me something with cucumbers and something with flaxseeds, and she made me a mixture of pureed fruits and vegetables that I was supposed to mix into soups and stews and baked goods. And she gave me little exercises I was supposed to do to keep me functioning properly. And when I was having trouble with my crocheting, she gave me some finger exercises to do and

some eye exercises. Sometimes she talks to me like I'm a little child, but I tell her I'm not a little child. I'm a grown-up woman. I'm too grown-up. But most of the time she talks like a normal human woman. When I first went to see her, I was expecting something mystical and magical. But there's nothing mystical and magical about her. She's a normal human woman. I know this is not the change."

My father grunts and looks like he has the beginning or the end of a thought but says nothing. He slides the rest of the paper across to me, rises, and heads behind the counter. Reaching down, he brings up clean checkered tablecloths that look freshly ironed and stacked.

"Change these tablecloths; that's something to change," he says.

"A man changes too," says Aunt Maggie. "Doc Leeds says that men change too, and some of them have come to her with their masculine problems. It's not just womenfolk that flock to Doc Leeds. And not just colored people either. She is known far and wide. I don't know if she talks to other people like they're children though. I know that everybody is a child of God."

"You won't get me into your argument," says Father.

"We're not arguing; we're talking" says Mother.

"No, we're not arguing," agrees Aunt Maggie. "Anyway, she gave me some plant-based medicaments from her garden for my new regimen.

"Everything she does is plant-based. And I'm only allowed one rum, straight without the cola. She says I can put a pinch of nutmeg in it. And she believes in the biblical foods: honey, olive oil, cinnamon, and apples. You can make dessert from that. I know they teach you what you shouldn't eat and drink at some people's churches."

My father divides half of the tablecloth with me and we change the tables.

"When y'all drove up," my mother is saying, "Buddy was sort of leaning forward, so we couldn't see anything but your hair. We thought Buddy was bringing his new girlfriend."

"*You* thought buddy was bringing his new girlfriend," corrects my father, straightening a tablecloth. "I knew it was Mag. I can tell Mag's hair."

Aunt Maggie gives a barely perceptible grunt, the kind you only hear if you're listening for it. She has always worried about the length of her hair, though I think she has nice hair.

Heading back, Aunt Maggie says, "I started to tell them about your unicorn woman, but then I wasn't exactly sure whether you'd told them yourself. I figured you'd prefer to tell them yourself."

"No, I haven't mentioned her."

"Shy?"

"I just haven't mentioned her."

"Well, it's a wonder that you mentioned her to me. I was surprised when you actually did go to see Doc Leeds."

We cross Railroad Street again. Crossing the tracks, she bounces up into my shoulder again. "Scuse me."

"What's Mr. Dancing's first name?" she asks. "I've always known him by Mr. Dancing. Even when he was a youngster, people called him Mister. I once asked him for his first name, but he wouldn't tell me."

I tell her I don't know. Like her, I'd never heard anybody call him anything but Mr. Dancing. Then I remember my father used to call him Dan. I tell her so.

"That's just short for Dancing," she says. "He doesn't like anybody to call him Dance though. I once called him Danny and he allowed it, but I surprised myself. He's a more respectful person than he should be."

"Maybe he's one of those people that don't have a first name. Maybe his full name is Dancing. Maybe he was never given a first name."

"Or maybe he just doesn't want people to know his full name," I say.

"That might be true," says Aunt Maggie. "That might be the truth."

If I reach out to her I can slip her the note with my name and address, and the short comment: "I wish I could get a chance to talk to you." Silly? If I reach out to her and she reaches toward me. If I hurl the note like a rocket and it lands in her lap or near enough for her to spot. If I pick my moment and reach out when no one's looking. But everyone is always looking. We're here to look. If I pick my moment and reach out while everyone's looking but wait till she turns in my direction. Horn of her own invention? And suppose she really did invent that horn herself, then came to the carnival and inquired: "Mister, I've an idea for you. How about 'The Unicorn Woman'? You've got every type of woman, but not a unicorn. I don't think it's been



done. It would be unique. I think it would draw a real crowd.” Her look is like that of any performer’s.

I hold my note tenderly, gingerly at the tips of my nervous fingers. I let it drop when I believe she’s looking at me, or at least in my direction. But I must go on belief. I don’t hurl it like a rocket, nor do I hand it to her. Rather I just open my fingers and release. I simply let it drop. Perhaps, after the show, she’ll pick it up. But her look’s like any performer’s, and I wonder what she’ll do. When you can’t go on belief, you go on wonder.

“It’s some sin that made it grow,” says a man, perhaps a deacon. “Protest your innocence, girl,” says another, a rabble rouser type. “Protect your innocence,” revises another.

“I think she’s divine.”

After I let the note drop and release it, I retreat.

When I come to the carnival the next day, the tent is swept clean of debris, but the Unicorn Woman gives no special notice of me. I’m simply a member of the audience, and she’s any performer.

“There’s such a thing as collective illusion, you know,” mumbles a spectator. “I heard something like that on *Orson Welles Commentaries*, or somebody’s commentaries.”

“She looks really hot to trot to me.”

“She’d be difficult to approach though. They guard ’em, you know. They guard and protect them. I’ve been coming to their carnival since before the war. This is their first unicorn woman. During the Depression, they let some folks get in free.”

“Look. It’s there. A horn. Incontestable.”

“Young woman, have you been baptized?” someone asks. He hands her a note. “This is my church and we’re having a revival. I’d like you to attend. And here’s the address of the Divine Pilgrim’s Church, where I sometimes preach.”

So simple? Pretend you’re a preacher? Do as you please? Or perhaps he’s a real preacher.

I follow the man. He leads me to a real church with a real steeple. I return early that evening and mingle in the multitude. When the door of the church opens, I stay outside. I stand outside the whole of revival week, but no mythical woman enters or leaves. No mystical woman. She had

ignored his note. Or perhaps she's just an ordinary woman and the horn isn't real. Inside there are chants of holy passion. Then someone is standing at my elbow. Is this the Divine Pilgrim's Church?

"Hi-de-ho. Son, you've been standing out here all week. I've been watching you, and I'm sure the Holy Spirit's been watching you too. Why don't you come inside and save your soul?"

"I don't know," I admit, shrugging.

"Your soul is yearning; that's why you're here. Your soul is wrestling with you to bring you in. Let your soul win. That's all I can say to you today, son. Let your soul be the victor. That's all I can say to you."

"Thank you, Reverend."

"Don't thank me. Thank your soul that brought you here. And thank the Holy Spirit. I'm just a shepherd of the Lord. Wonders to perform. I am a descendent from preachers from slavery days, with bloodlines all the way back to Africa and before Africa. And we have healers who are descendants of the old-time slaves on the plantations. Some of them are members of our church. Son, there are wonders to perform."

I say nothing. He's holding two books, a Holy Bible and a book in manuscript form called "Appeal for Progress."

"Son, we thought this new war for democracy would mean things would be changing, but the more things change, the more they stay the same. I was a soldier myself, son, and that's what I take you for. They thought I wouldn't go to war because I'm a preacher, but I took up the fight for freedom the same as any man. A fighter for democracy abroad, a warrior and emissary. Some enlisted and some were drafted, but we fought the same war, because we had faith in democracy. We have kept the faith. But it was the same war, the first war, the Great War, and the wars before that. I saw Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans and American Indians and Filipino Americans and Mexican Americans all fighting the same war, doing what soldiers do. . . . We were all soldiers in the same war. . . . We are always fighting on two fronts, and some of us on several fronts. . . . Well, are you coming in, son?"

I stay outside and he returns inside. I can hear him from the church steps. He reads first from the Bible and then he begins reading from another book. I suppose it is the one called "Appeal for Progress."

“This is a manuscript presented to me by a member of our congregation. I will read to you an excerpt from it, since it is pertinent to us today. If women were allowed to preach then perhaps this creative and spiritual woman would preach to us today:

“UNDERSTANDING OF ONESELF”

*One's likeness, one's nationality, we know, we who believe, that we are made in the Image of God. Made in his likeness . . .*

*Giving us eyes to see with. But what do we see with our eyes? Wonderful, good things, beautiful things, the best things in life, the free things of life that indicate Freedom and Satisfaction. Or do we see evil, poverty, hate, idolatry, selfishness, misery, spitefulness, vanity, etc.? Behold! He made our eyes as a symbol of open-mindedness to behold the goodness of the free world. Yet we became blind. We must use our eyes for the purpose God made for. . . .*

*He gave us a mouth, to taste the fruits of the earth, the splendor and deliciousness of Nature. To absorb the wonderful gifts of life. Substances to nourish our bodies, to keep us alive that we perish not. That makes us strong in wonderment. Our mouths He made to sing forth praises of glory to the Almighty, and songs of merriment, for God-given life. To sing for joy, to the splendor of the earth. To sing for joy to our loved ones. And most of all for being alive. Our mouths also were made to utter words of prayer, of Love, of Endearment, used also for association and friendship, communication with each other and with God. Oh! The wonder of being made in the Image of God. Freedom of Speech he gave us. Is our speech good, for the betterment of mankind? . . . Using our mouths for God's great purposes . . . Can we breathe a word of praise to God and say, "Behold my fellowman, also made in the Image of God"?*

He reads more from the text, then I hear him say, “Freedom and Justice for all. It is written, Amen and amen. So let it be, So let it be.”

Then he reads a poem, I assume, still from the text:

“GOD'S ONES”

*If I am a brown man, I'm delighted to know, I  
Carry the Image of God, wherever I go  
Or a white man, to indicate,  
I am part of God, for my mate,*

*Or a yellow man I do my part,  
To share, the face of God, his art;  
Or a red man, I sense it too,  
Am Godly adorned, with color true,  
Or a black man, my score is run,  
For I am chosen, among God's ones,  
God's ones, the colors that are true,  
The ones that make up the Universe,  
That in his image, I am made  
And I for freedom thirst*

Then he says or reads:

*"And God is Supreme. . . . Freedom is peace and peace is Love and Love is the Blessed Word, and the Blessed Word is God. And the Word is the beginning, and God is the beginning. . . ."*

Then they sing some spirituals, and he begins to read the Word of God about faith, as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

"It lives within me," he says. "And is in me. 'If you have,'" I quote, "As much faith as a grain of mustard seed, and, believe that you can remove mountains, it will be granted as believed.' God's word." Then again he is reading from the text in manuscript:

*This progress I speak of is as a mountain that stands high and mighty, yet it is my faith that it can be moved. It is my faith, and it is truth, because it is simply the Word of God. Amen and amen.*

*I am not a preacher. Maybe I sound like one, but I am a Child of God, with Wisdom and Understanding, given me by God to know many things of God, and the earth and Man. I carry the Image of God and it alone doth reverence me. . . .*

*I appeal for your cooperation in the matter of Progress and Advancement. . . . Centuries have passed since the first promise of Salvation. . . .*

*If you are inspired by my text, it is well, for God has inspired me to write this, hoping that it brings about an effect of Love, upon Human life, and conduct. . . .*

*I predict a future Liberation, with Equality, being inspired by God who will redeem and bring forth. . . . This will be. . . . And with this knowledge . . .*

*I say to all concerned, let it be done, willingly without hurt or harm. It will be: It is God's Divine Plan. But will it be done with violence, fury, hurts, killings, destructions, by Battle? It does not have to be. It can be done with Love and Prayer. . . . Love is the greatest weapon. There has been an expansion of time between the attempt of freedom from slavery. But it is not justly abolished in the hearts of man. . . .*

*Now is the time for a Redemptive Force to occur. . . . Liberation Now!*

*I speak to you as a Mother would speak to her Children. Here I authorize to do so; for I speak truth and truth is authority. Truth rings for Freedom.*

*I speak to the people as a friend; as a friend would share Wisdom and faith with her neighbor. So will I extend my Wisdom and faith to you.*

*I repeat, my representation consists of Nations, not just one Nation, for within my body flows the blood of more than one Nation. I offer my body as a Symbol of Peace. I guarantee myself to Love all Nations, regardless of color or creed. I have the God-given privilege to do so. I love all. . . . And I, Woman, that I am, Represent Nations in God's trust, therefore I have the Love for Nations. God willing that there may be others to love, such as I, God willing that I may never change.*

Then he reads another poem from what he refers to as a Spiritual Text:

"MY BLOOD IS FOR THEE TO WHOM I LOVE"

*My Blood is for Thee, to Whom I love,  
God grant me this love to continue  
God grant me the privilege to pray  
For Mankind good and true  
God grant that others may like me be,  
With truth within their hearts,  
With Loving Kindness for everyone,*

*And peace, with prayer, may start  
 God bless the blood that flows  
 Through my veins  
 That cry out to Thee, in appeal for peace,  
 God bless the Loving soul within me,  
 That freedom worldwide may release  
 My Blood is for Thee to Whom I love;  
 Peace, Peace, it cries for still;  
 God Bless the Blood that flows for Thee,  
 And grant Thee, my appeal.  
 The land of America is supposed to be a free land, that is truth, and truth rings  
 for freedom. . . . Only God could give me the Love that I have, only God  
 can give it to Thee.*

Again, I'm not sure if he's speaking himself or reading from the text as he calls forth for a revival:

*Purify the heart, wash it with the water of life. The living water where with  
 shall it be washed. Let God wash the heart clean. Join in fellowship with God.  
 Be purified in His Love. And the Love for God means Love for Humanity. . . .  
 Advance with Truth, and Truth rings for Freedom. . . .*

He reads yet another poem from the woman's text, since he says again that, although she's a Sunday school teacher, she is not permitted to preach. He says perhaps someday there would be no more restriction against women preachers:

"THE TOAST GOD MADE TO MAN"  
*I strung the lights of different  
 Colors higher, higher, into the air.  
 I drank a toast to those above me  
 Not knowing the time, only feeling it near,  
 I let the lights be a symbol of Mankind,  
 Each color, each light, God's plan,  
 An extension cord, extended to man.*

*I served, I worked, right hard beneath it,  
 Doing for each one at hand.  
 It was a wonderful garden party. But in my heart it was for man.  
 A storm approached to end the party,  
 And on to shelter the folks all ran.  
 The lights stood still, representing a storm of life, that rained  
 And rained on man.  
 My arms extended toward the sky  
 I wondered, then and there, just why  
 That it had stormed with fun in session, God's in his work, be still my mind  
 At last myself all soaked till skin deep, looking the thing the cats dragged in  
 Looked at the lights with raindrops on them,  
 And saw the Toast God Made to Man  
 That I and God had made a toast with symbol of the lights of man from coast  
 to coast  
 It seemed God said, "I'll let you make the way for them, who are at stake  
 For them you alone have loved the most  
 And since you them Love from the heart  
 Then you, my child may be the start.  
 The start to make them all to know,  
 That I am maker of them all.  
 That I, creator of the Universe,  
 Am able to lift up man  
 And restore to him Lost Paradise. . . .*

“Now that you have heard one of the mothers of the church, I will speak to you as one of the fathers of the church.” He talks again about being a soldier in the last war, and that when the other colored soldiers had learned that he was also a preacher, they had come to him as if he were a chaplain, although he was not an official chaplain. He talks about being stationed with a segregated division of the army in Bristol, England, and that after the war he had been stationed in occupied Germany, working with the others to bring democracy to the Germans and to fight against their racist and racialized ideas of the previous decade. He repeats that colored people had to fight on two fronts. And then he quotes a 1943 war poem by Langston

Hughes entitled “From Beaumont to Detroit.” In the poem, Langston Hughes wrote about blacks before Jim Crow, before Hitler “rose to power” and still being jim-crowed afterward—“right now this very hour.” He talks about civil rights activists and that he had his own “prophecy” that someday there would be no more “appeals” . . .

He speaks of other experiences in the “Jim Crow army” before, during, and after the war. Then he talks about a mechanic he’d met from Tuskegee who’d worked on their trainer planes, who inspected and worked on the engines. I’d heard about the pilots but hadn’t heard of or given much thought to the mechanics. I imagine myself a mechanic working on airplane engines. He doesn’t sound like any preachers that I ever knew.

“Freedom abroad and freedom at home!” I hear him say, and then the choir sings other spiritual songs. They sing “Go Down Moses,” “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” “Deep River,” and “Every Time I Feel the Spirit.”

“Ev’ry time I feel the Spirit / Moving in my heart I will pray.”

The preacher sings along with the congregation and the choir. Then he introduces some spirituals written by the same mother of the church who wrote the appeal and everyone including the preacher sings:

“Lead me, Jesus, lead me, till my time no more shall be,” and several other hymns.

“Can I give you a lift home?” the Reverend inquires, as I’m still standing outside.

“No, Reverend, I don’t live too far from here. It’s walking distance.”

“Well, if it’s walking distance, your soul ought to bring you here more often. Just be careful he don’t bring you while you’re sleeping.”

I must have fallen asleep. But how could I have been sleeping and still heard the preacher and the mother of the church’s text and all her spirituals? How could I have heard them in my dreams? I rise up off the concrete steps. I light a Philip Morris cigarette and wonder if the Unicorn Woman came while I was sleeping. After the preaching and singing—had I really heard it in my dreams?—I’d dreamt about the war and of seeing my first all-black female battalion. Rows of black women marching together. They said they were paving the way for democracy. I had seen pictures of them



in a magazine and also pictures of several of them sorting mail. The 6888th Central Postal Directory Mallory Battalion.

"The cigarette is not godly," says the Reverend.

"I know, sir."

"When you get through with that ungodliness, don't throw it in front of this church. It seems like everybody wants to drop their cigarette butts and beer cans and whiskey bottles and whatnot in front of this church. I know Philip Morris and Johnny Walker and Thunderbird better than anybody else. So when you get rid of that cigarette and you want to drop it somewhere, drop it down the road a bit."

"I will, sir."

He's still holding the Bible and the manuscript. "I'm going to publish this manuscript and works by other members of the community. Since this creative woman gave me these writings, a number of people in the community have been delivering their writings to me. I can't read them all from the pulpit, but they need to be circulated. We have creative people. . . . Maybe someday you'll bring a text. . . . Are you sure you don't want a lift?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Your soul's talking to you. That's what brought you here. You let it talk. And listen to it."

He waves, gets in his car, and drives off. I walk down the road a bit, finish the cigarette in front of the Sunoco gas station, then toss the butt in the gutter, cross Upper Street, and head toward Third.

*In my dream, I hold her.*

*"Be careful of my horn," she says, turning slightly. I kiss her carefully.*

*"Freedom abroad and freedom at home!" I hear the Reverend shout.*

*He's sitting on the concrete steps of the church. Instead of Upper Street, the sign reads Upper Volta.*

*The Reverend winks at me: "She thinks it's a predicament of the flesh when it's a predicament of the spirit," he says.*

*Taking my hand, the Unicorn Woman leads me down the street. We stand in front of the Sunoco station. Then we go to a nightclub called the Black and Tan Club.*

*After the nightclub, dining and dancing, the Unicorn Woman says, "Come on to my house."*

*When we get to the Unicorn Woman's house, she walks ahead of me up the walk and opens the door. It's a cottage really, like the sort you see in fairy tales, with a green roof and gingerbread-framed windows that look edible. Inside, a tastefully furnished living room with a mirror over the mantelpiece. There's African sculpture and modern-looking "kinetic sculpture." She turns toward me and, astonished, I rub her smooth forehead.*

*"Your horn; it's disappeared!" I exclaim.*

*She glances at herself in the mirror. I see her own astonishment.*

*When I kiss her forehead, the horn sprouts again. "Is that the secret?" I ask.*

"Blanche is real down-to-earth," Grange is saying as we work on our tractors. "She's not one of those highfalutin schoolteachers. Charlotte, my wife and her cousin, doesn't believe in that. She doesn't think Blanche needs to be down-to-earth on our level, but that we should rise to her level, that we ought to climb up to Blanche's level. She believes in upward mobility. But, like I said, Blanche teaches everywhere she goes. She teaches anybody and everybody, anywhere and everywhere. At least those that want to be taught. Not just in the classroom. And she expresses things in language that you can understand, not some esoteric language and gobbledygook. And when she teaches you something, she can even make you believe that you already know it."

"Come see the Butterfly Woman."

I'm tempted to enter and see the new woman, but somehow feel it would be disloyal to the Unicorn Woman, a betrayal.

"The most royal woman you've ever seen. The most divine. Imagine the wings of a butterfly, imagine. Wings like flowers. The most beauty you've ever seen."

His voice begins in a sandpaper whisper, then gradually amplifies, growing mellifluous.

I stand chewing salted and buttered golden corn on the cob and listen. Other men pay their dimes and enter. And suppose I enter and discover that the Unicorn Woman is no longer the measure for other women and must herself be measured by the Butterfly Woman? Suppose I discovered yet another gauge for . . . what?

“Come on in,” urges the man.

A little boy pulls on my sleeve. “You got a dime, mister? I want to go see the Butterfly Woman. See what the ruse is.”

He’s a red-headed, vagabond boy with freckles, bare feet, and a straw stuck in his teeth. He reminds me of the little boys I’ve seen illustrated in the storybooks. A Tom Sawyer or a Huckleberry Finn. I hand him a dime. He pays and enters. I stand impatiently outside the tent, chewing corn and waiting for the little boy to reemerge so I can question him.

“Were the wings real?” I ask immediately.

He shrugs. “They looked to be just like butterfly wings, a red admiral or a monarch butterfly, or maybe even a glasswing butterfly or a viceroy, one of those most colorful type butterfly’s wings, but I don’t think they were real. I think they use projectors or something, like in a movie house. They didn’t let you get close enough to determine if they were real. And some of the folks didn’t want me in there, because they said it wasn’t a butterfly woman for kids, but I stayed there anyway, because I paid a dime like everybody else and I had a right to be there. I bet if I put my hands through her wings there’d be nothing but air, like movies projected on a screen.

“Anyway, thanks for the dime, mister. I think it’s just worth a nickel though.”

I let the corncob drop and scrape kernels from my teeth. I pay a dime and go see the crocodile woman, who displays what looks like crocodile skin on her back and shoulders. She wears a leopard-skin, strapless, shapeless bathing suit and keeps her back to the audience or sometimes turns in profile. There’s a bearded lady and a turtle woman, and an assortment of other female oddities, but no unicorn woman this time. I return to the tent that shelters the butterfly woman and listen to the spiel:

*have you ever seen a butterfly emerge from its cocoon wings so fragile you try to get born and try not to break or shred your wings that’s why we don’t let you*

*touch her wings her wings are so delicate if we let you touch them she wouldn't have any but every color under the rainbow and beyond the rainbow every color of every beautiful colorful butterfly you'll see in her wings most beauteous sight you've ever seen and most beautiful woman and she'll fly a little bit for you too just a little bit wings like that are meant to lift butterflies not women come and see the butterfly woman the most royal and beautiful woman you've ever seen and the most divine I have seen butterflies all over the world and I'll tell you this is the most beautiful one because she combines the beauty of them all imagine the wings of a butterfly imagine wings like flowers imagine the most beauty you've seen in one place imagine just cost you a dime you don't have to imagine have you ever seen a butterfly . . .*

I go buy another corn on the cob and return to listen. Over the doorway of the tent hangs a medallion. You'd expect it to be wings, but it isn't. It's one of those lion guardants that seem geared to frighten at the same time that the barker's words entice. I wonder why it's not a guardant butterfly. The barker pauses a moment, looks as if he's composing his thoughts. His brow looks like half-formed thoughts, then he gives me a bold stare.

*we have a gent out there who can't make up his mind whether to come in here and see the butterfly woman or not now isn't that something I say that's something just cost you a dime any man ought to spare a dime for beauty for the most beauty he's seen in the world*

A crowd of men circle him and spare a dime. I wonder if he'll keep that new line in his recitation, since it seems to inspire even more men to enter. I don't stay to listen. I ride the Ferris wheel, talk a little to the man who tests the Ferris wheel before they let folks ride it, listen to another fellow telling folks to come and ride.

*if I don't ride it, you don't ride it if you ride one of our wheels you can bet that Harry Merlan rode it first that's your security that I rode it first all I need to do is listen and I can tell if a pin is loose and where they will tell you that I've got the best hearing and have developed a strong tactile sense I can tell by the way a wheel rides it's tactile sense and it's good hearing and it's equilibrium*

*I rise and fall and she makes love to me in whispers. Currents of sea, then a whirlpool. "Purify your motives," she says. There's the sound of water in the*

*distance, water rushing over rock, some hidden spring. I move like a dancer. We're two dancers suspended in time. "You're a romantic," she says. "I didn't know you were so romantic." Timeless movement, now and always, now, here, now, always.*

*"Maybe it's only a shell, a husk, without purpose?" she says. "I once saw an Oriental woman with a horn like a unicorn's. Someone took a photograph of her and put it in a book. Do you think that's why I grew this horn? The power of suggestion? But I already had my horn."*

*Now we're riding together in a narrow canoe, the clatter and chatter of oars on water. Her earrings are oyster shells. Her long fingers are holding the oars. I stare at her inviolable horn.*

*"Those crickets' voices sound almost human, don't they?" she inquires. "They sound almost human, don't they? Almost like human voices."*

*I hear the choir behind us singing the spiritual "Deep River." Then I hear them singing "Roll, Jordan, Roll." Trees, with metal leaves. Desire, the roots. The sun, copper, green, and orange. Dolphins play around us. I smoke a cigarette.*

*"Do you think I'd be as beautiful without my horn?" she asks. The water looks like metal.*

*"It's just a horn, Buddy," she says, her long fingers making ripples in the water. She looks as if she's exercising her fingers. "Do you think I'm the wisest or the wickedest woman in the world? Do you think I'm divine?"*

*I scrutinize her but don't answer. She makes strings of her hair, to fiddle with.*

The wind from the window blows over my forehead and I wake up. I hear voices from the apartment next door.

"I thought you'd deserted me."

"I couldn't half desert you."

I imagine him undressing, standing in shirtsleeves, then undershirt, then opening a window to catch some breeze.

"Come and cuddle," she says. He goes to her, or so I imagine.