

Charlie and the Unicorn

by Barry R. Taylor

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Scene: A diner, mid-morning. A square table with three chairs, two coffee cups, upstage centre

[**Cue 1:** Stage black]

[**Cue 2:** Spotlight upstage left on Ethan, standing.]

Ethan: Everything was going fine until the day Charlie saw the unicorn. Or at least, he claimed he saw a unicorn. We did point out to him that unicorns are imaginary.

There were three of us, Mason and Charlie and me, I'm Ethan, and we've been friends for longer than any of us can remember. We had a tradition, on Sunday afternoons, to get together

[**Cue 3:** lights up everywhere, warm summer day]

here for coffee and donuts. We were rebels, you see. Everyone else is over at the Tim Horton's. But we like it here better, the Moonbeam Café. It's quiet, and the seats are comfortable and you can sit by the window and watch the pretty girls go by. [move to behind table]

So, we would get together every Sunday and waste an hour or two, three middle-age men shooting the breeze, complaining about our lives, complaining about our wives – not that we have any cause to complain in either department! As Mason is fond of pointing out, the simple fact that our wives put up with us is proof that miracles are real. [downstage right]

Well, maybe Charlie had something to complain about. I'm not sure. I never liked Charlie's wife, Fern, very much. She's . . . what's the word? Not exactly domineering, but . . . controlling would be the word, I suppose. Orderly and organized that's Fern. To be fair, she's a pleasant enough woman, when she wants to be. And I have to admit that Fern was a good match for Charlie. They were complementary, you could say.

Fern is practical, pragmatic, more down to earth than your average carrot. Charlie on the other hand, well Charlie was a dreamer. Always has been, for as long as I've known him. Not in the sense of planning to search for gold in the Amazon, or quitting his job to write a novel. It was more that Charlie dreamt of a better existence than this one, a life more sublime and profound. I think Charlie found this world disappointing, or that he didn't belong in it. Charlie

wanted more colour, more adventure, more magic. I think he would have been happy living in Middle Earth, or Narnia. Charlie wanted a world where the mundanities of our daily lives had been banished: a world full of wonders and great mysteries, someplace where dragons were a real possibility. Charlie was happier roaming the endless library of his own imagination than he was living his real life.

Unfortunately, we are too much in this world, and living in your mind won't pay the mortgage. That's why I think Fern was so good for Charlie. She was his anchor, the cord that kept him tethered to this world. She clipped the wings on his flights of fancy – not in a bad way, but through her own tenacious pragmatism she kept Charlie on course too. She helped him realize that however prosaic this world may be, it was the one he had to live in. So he worked at McClintock's selling farm equipment, work he was good at, and between the two of them they raised a couple of fine kids, looked out for their friends and neighbours, and never forgot to feed the dog. Then one day Charlie had to ruin everything by claiming he'd seen a unicorn.

[Sit at back chair] He told us about it one Sunday afternoon in July, right here at the Moonbeam. Mason and I had already been there long enough to get a couple of bites into our first donut when Charlie came rushing in. He was excited, bursting with a secret he wanted to tell the world. He sat down, tossed his cap on the table like he always does, and told us matter-of-factly that he had seen a unicorn.

This is how he said it happened. He woke up suddenly, in the middle of the night, with Fern fast asleep beside him. A glance at the clock told him it was 3:08 a.m. Shafts of moonlight bright enough to read by beamed through the cracks in the window curtains. Charlie climbed out of bed. He approached the window on his side of the room and pulled aside the curtain.

The sky was cloudless. The full moon was a perfect disk carved to show the face of a lady, like an ivory brooch pinned to a blue-black sky. The night was still, windless, the straw-coloured moonlight so bright you could play baseball. There's a patch of ground between the house and the woods that's protected from the wind, so Fern turned it into a rose garden. And standing on the lawn, among the roses, Charlie said, was a unicorn.

It was a big animal, Charlie said, and strong, but clearly made to run. It was pure white, with a heavy white mane, clean and combed, and a long tail raised proudly. It was standing in profile, not very far away, so Charlie could easily see the spiralling gold horn growing out of its forehead.

Charlie was transfixed. He didn't wake Fern. He didn't move. He studied the impossible beast in his garden, standing at the window of his own bedroom in his pajamas, with no sound breaking the silence but the ticking of the grandfather clock in the next room. After a while the unicorn flicked its tail and trotted off into the forest, quickly disappearing among the trees.

When Charlie finished speaking, Mason and I didn't say anything for a long time. I didn't know how to respond. What do you say when someone you thought was sane and sensible comes out with something utterly ridiculous? Charlie's face was radiant, as excited as a boy who gets a puppy for Christmas. Eventually I said, "You do realize that unicorns don't really exist, don't you?"

"I know, Charlie said, "I know that. But I saw one."

Mason was less tactful. He said something like, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. There's no such thing as a unicorn, you know that as well as anybody. You had a vivid dream, you were still half asleep when you got up and you imagined the whole thing."

Then I realized what had happened. I said, "It was Glenda MacPherson's horse." [stand, move to spotlight, stage left] That was the obvious explanation. The MacPherson's live next door, and Glenda keeps a couple of horses for her kids to ride. One of them is this big bay, as stupid as a fencepost, but it's always getting out and trampling all over Fern's gardens. Charlie was always complaining about it.

Charlie had probably awoken because Glenda's horse was loose again, and it made some noise behind the house. Roused from deep sleep, Charlie saw it in the colour-sapping moonlight, and it looked pure white. Add a rose branch or a flower at the right angle to make the horn, and in Charlie's sleep-running imagination, a unicorn is born. But it was just that stupid old horse. [move to behind Charlie's chair, right side of table] Yet Charlie was stubborn about it. "I know what I saw," he said, "and it wasn't a horse. It was a unicorn. I wasn't dreaming and I wasn't imagining it. I was wide awake and I saw it with my own two eyes." [move to between Mason's and Ethan's chairs, left side of table]

Mason and I tried talking sense to him, but Charlie was having none of it. After a while we decided to change the subject before Charlie got angry. Fortunately, there was fishing, and that always gave us something else to talk about. [move downstage left]

Later though, after Charlie left, Mason and I stayed behind to talk about the unicorn. What did it mean? Was Charlie just being stubborn about some silly dream or had he truly flipped? A psychotic episode, I think they call that, when someone temporarily loses his grip on reality. It's no laughing matter. Should we be worried? Should we tell Fern?

In the end, we decided to let it pass. Putting things off is what we do best anyway. We decided to keep an eye on Charlie and see if he was still himself. But this unicorn thing had us rattled. I've known Charlie most of my adult life, and while he was always a dreamer, he was never a kook.

I did ask Fern about it, without broaching the unicorn directly. I met her down at the bank a few days later. I asked after her family and so forth. The kids were fine. Then I said, "And how's Charlie these days? He seemed a bit stressed last time we talked."

Fern waved a hand and said Charlie was fine. His biggest worry was his golf game. And the next time we got together Charlie never mentioned the unicorn. Maybe he resented that we didn't believe him. I went fishing with him a few days after that and he seemed in every way his normal self. After a while we forgot about the whole incident. [moving back to sit at table]

Then Charlie saw the unicorn again. It was another Sunday afternoon down at the Moonbeam, in the midst of the midsummer heat, and we were sipping our coffee and taking full advantage of the air conditioning. Out of the blue, Charlie said: "You know that unicorn? I saw it again last night."

Mason said, "Oh for cryin' out loud!" or something more emphatic. I think he may have invoked the Lord's name. That man can be as blunt as a hammer.

I said, "Charlie . . . what? Unicorns are imaginary. You find them in children's books. You saw a horse."

He shook his head. "It was a unicorn. Saw it clear as day."

This time he said he woke up around 2:30, again for no reason. The unicorn was standing outside among the roses, like the first time. It was white as snow, he said, and the golden horn on its forehead glistened in the light of a setting half moon. Charlie said he watched it for a long time, fascinated, afraid to move or speak, lest it disappear. Eventually the unicorn trotted off into the woods again. But before it left, it turned its giant head and looked right at Charlie. Its eyes were big and black in the night. It was a very deliberate look, Charlie said, an **expectant** look, as if the unicorn were saying "Well, here I am. What are you going to do about it?"

Mason started to say something about this being the stupidest thing he had ever heard, but I stopped him. A more tactful response was called for. “Charlie,” I said, “your word is good enough for me. If you say you saw a unicorn, you saw a unicorn. But how are Fern’s roses handling these hot summer days?” Fortunately, that diverted the conversation into an argument about the most efficient way to water vegetables, and the unicorn was forgotten.

At least for the moment. When Charlie was gone Mason and I stayed behind again to talk about it. We were both very worried now. There was clearly something going on in Charlie’s mind, and it wasn’t good. We could dismiss the first episode as a fluke, but two was too many. This unicorn was evidence of hairline cracks in Charlie’s sanity, letting fantasy seep into his vision of reality. Those cracks were only going to grow wider. We left the café worried and sad.

A week later, at the end of July, I got a frantic call from Fern telling me Charlie had disappeared. It was seven o’clock in the morning. I was already up, doing some yard work before the heat set in, so I got to Charlie’s place pretty quick. Fern had already called the kids, but her daughter lives in Toronto now and her son is a couple of hours away.

Charlie had evidently wandered off in the middle of the night. His bathrobe and slippers were missing, but his day clothes were still sitting on the dresser where he’d thrown them the night before. The car was in the garage and the pick-up was in the yard. Charlie had wandered off in his pajamas. [stand, moving downstage] It would have been easy to find his way, even in the middle of the night. That July there was a second full moon – what they call a blue moon – and the night had been clear. Out in the back garden, I found one of Charlie’s slippers. Don’t ask me how, but I knew for certain, right then, that Charlie wasn’t coming back.

You see, I knew where Charlie had gone. He told me more than once, I just wasn’t listening. Charlie and Fern live on the side of a long, forested hill. [move toward bridge stage right] There’s a trail that leads through the woods, gently but steadily uphill all the way, until you come to a cliff, a bluff really, overlooking the river. The cliff is high enough you don’t want to get too close to the edge. Down below, the river flows right up against the base of the cliff, and it’s carved a big, deep pool. The water in the pool churns around backward in a giant eddy before flowing away downstream. The trail winds down the side of the hill to the pool, and it’s a marvelous place to go fishing.

The pool is deep, and shaded by the hill, so the water stays cool and dark. In summertime, when the river is low, it seems like every trout in the river heads for that pool, to

escape the heat and the circling eagles. Charlie and I have pulled some big fish out of that pool over the years. Charlie caught a five-pounder there one day; he boasted about it for weeks.

[downstage centre] But once or twice, on the way to the pool, fishing poles over our shoulders, we would pause at the top of the hill and look out over the land and the river below. Charlie said that if you were a bird this would be the perfect place to learn to fly. The wind streams up the cliff face in a rushing updraft, and if you had wings you could close your eyes, spread your wings and jump into that wind and let it carry you aloft and away.

And if you didn't want to fly, the cliff was perfect for that too. The pool below is deep and cold, that swirling current would make sure you didn't change your mind, and in time the river would carry your body away to the sea and that would be all. So I knew where Charlie had gone. He had found a way to escape this too-tame world where he never quite fit in.

Standing there in the garden, grass beneath my feet and roses blooming, red and yellow and amber all around, I felt the most profound sense of loss. Charlie was gone. Gone forever. I kept saying it to myself over and over, trying to make it real.

I remember, there was a rose bush sitting there on the ground, waiting to be planted. Fern had worked up a spot for it, the shovel was still stuck into the ground. I picked up the shovel, and I planted the rose. I remember it very clearly. It was a Morden rose, very hardy to survive our cold winters, deep red flowers, no fragrance. I planted it carefully, the right way. I pulled the plastic wrapping off the roots and I teased the roots apart so they would grow out from the stem. I dug a straight hole and set the rose in the ground with the crown just below the surface. That's important. Most bushes and perennials, you keep the crown above ground, but roses are different. Burying the crown just a little protects it from frost. I tapped down the ground around the rose carefully, using the shovel. I sloped it a little, so rainwater would flow toward the roots.

Planting a rose may seem a strange thing to do under the circumstances, but oddly it made me feel better. I had to do something ordinary at that moment. I had to do something normal, every-day, something simple and boring. My best friend for thirty years had lost his mind and wandered away in the night. He wasn't coming back. I knew that. It was all too sudden and bizarre to accept. I had to do something ordinary. So I planted that rose.

We called the police eventually, and they came out with search-and-rescue volunteers and scoured the woods. They didn't find any trace of Charlie, as I knew they wouldn't. I told the cop

in charge where Charlie had gone and they followed the path to the top of the cliff but of course they didn't find anything. The river would have already carried Charlie away.

They even brought in a bloodhound. The handler gave it Charlie's slipper for the scent and the dog picked up the track easily enough. Nose to the ground, she headed right up the path through the woods, just as I expected. But after a few yards the dog stopped. It had lost the scent. It sniffed around for a long time, turning this way and that. Finally it sat back on its haunches and looked up at its handler, confused. The handler was disappointed, but he wasn't surprised. He said that in spite of everything you hear about bloodhounds, they can lose the spoor sometimes, especially if the dew had been heavy. It didn't matter, really. Charlie wasn't coming back. [move to stand behind Charlie's chair]

Mason and I still come here to the Moonbeam sometimes. It's not the same without Charlie though, without his goofy face and his odd sense of humour. The kids are helping Fern along, and anyway she's too tough and practical to get mired in grief. [move to spotlight upstage left] So life goes on. [Cue 4: slow fade to spotlight on Ethan, upstage left]

But . . . it's just that . . . on that morning in the garden, the day after Charlie disappeared, I saw that rose sitting there and I planted it. I had to do something ordinary, don't you see? I needed something mundane, something everyday because . . . because you see Fern had already worked up the soil, and there were hoofprints in it, fresh ones, and they were big, too big to be Glenda MacPherson's horse and anyway that horse has horse-shoes and these hoofprints did not. And the rose stems had thorns, and right at the bottom, one of the thorns had hairs on it: long, silky white hairs like those from a horse's fetlock.

So I planted that rose, and I did it the right way. I set the crown below ground level to bury those white horse hairs and I tamped down the ground real hard with the shovel to get rid of the hoofprints, because Charlie was gone and I needed to do something ordinary. But that rose grew and its blooming already and the flowers aren't red, they're white, they're big and fragrant and white as sunlight on new snow and Charlie is gone and dammit it's just not possible!

I read somewhere that time is an illusion. It isn't real. We create time in our minds. The sense of time flowing by, of living from one moment to the next, is an illusion created by how our brains process the information from our senses. We need time to make sense of the world, so our minds make it up. But to us it's real.

Well, who knows? If our minds are powerful enough to create time itself, an illusion borne of nothing, then maybe, maybe if we want to badly enough, if we can unground ourselves just enough, we can imagine anything, and be so convinced that it's real that it really *is* real. Maybe, if we were tired of trying to live in a world that was wrong for us, where we never fit in and never felt at home, we could imagine something impossible, like a fabulous white unicorn with a golden horn, that would carry us away to a world more fantastical and amazing than this one, where we might find peace. Maybe. Maybe not. Charlie's gone and I'm not sure of anything anymore.

[**Cue 5:** three second pause, then fade to black]