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NO ROOM FOR THE UNICORN

Laura Resnick

I *wanted* the unicorn to come along, despite what some have said. My father Lamech, may he rest peace, never liked the unicorn, this is true, but then he was not a man who was widely known for his tolerant views. Before I was married, he would bang his shepherd's staff on my head if I even *looked* at the pretty Hittite girls on the other side of the valley. This taught me to be more lenient when my son Ham brought home a girl who didn't keep kosher. In any case, Lamech gave up the ghost long before I built the ark, so it's not as if his opinion on the subject was of great concern to me then, what with the end of the world bearing down on us, and all.

No, as far as I was concerned, the unicorn was welcome.

In case you didn't know, by the way, there was only one unicorn. Some have said that unicorns were as numerous in those days as the cedars of Lebanon, as the lilies of the field, as the children of Adam, but that's a lot of *hazarai*. There was only the one.

He lived near us in the land of Nod, east of Eden. At least, we always *figured* the unicorn was a he, but who can tell for sure? Like I said, there was only one, and he wasn't built precisely like a stallion *or* a mare, if you take my meaning.

There were giants in the earth in those days, as well as a unicorn. Those were the days of heroes and men of great renown: Methuselah, Seth, Adam, Jared, Enoch. Men lived for centuries, and they took as many wives as they pleased. Everyone spoke one language, so travel wasn't such a hassle. Interest rates were low, and a father could afford decent weddings for all his daughters, so long as he didn't have too many. Yes, times were good. But then a few bad apples had to go and spoil it for everyone.

In these heathen times, you might think it strange that I took Yahweh at His word the first time He told me He was going to make it rain for forty days and forty nights, but we were used to the strange and magical powers that ruled our lives then. Yahweh's awesome miracles were a daily occurrence for us, so commonplace that we often scarcely noticed them -- and perhaps that was one of the things that made Him really mad. He told me that mankind was irredeemable, and that He would destroy the world and start anew.

His instructions were very specific. I was to take my wife, my children, and their spouses on board an ark of my own construction, and we would stay aboard until the rain was over and the sun had dried up the land. As for the animals, I was

supposed to find one pair, a male and a female, of every species. He was very clear on this point: *two* of every kind.

Well, it was a tall order, especially considering that Yahweh didn't give me a whole lot of time to accomplish all this -- not that I'm criticizing. But I was a shepherd, not a naval architect. I mean, I had never even *seen* a boat, much less learned how to build one. So, after watching me struggle futilely for a few days, Yahweh heaved a sigh that shook the pillars of the earth and told me how to do it.

"This is how to make it, Noah," He said to me. "Make an ark of resinous wood, then caulk it with pitch inside and out. The length of the ark is to be three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits." Of course, He went into more detail, but I'm an old man now and can't quite remember. I was an old man even *then*, in fact -- six hundred years old, to be frank. So, I'm sure you can see how all of this was a bit of a strain.

I had to send some of my family out after these pairs of animals, since not all of them were cooperative. My wife was furious, because Yahweh had said we must bring the *unclean* animals, as well as the clean. Believe me, given a choice in the matter, I'd have left the rats and puff adders behind and taken the unicorn along. I mean, how would *you* like to spend more than forty days in a boat with cobras, hyenas, spiders, hippos, bullfrogs, jackals, vultures, and lions while the world is coming to an end?

The unicorn appeared one day while I was working on the ark. He was a pretty smart animal, and he obviously knew something big was afoot. He was beautiful, too, despite that silly single horn sticking out of his forehead, the horn about which my father had always made such obscene comments.

The unicorn was white, a pure, glistening, undefiled color, whiter than goat's milk. He was big, though not as big as some have said, his back being about as high as a man's shoulder. His pale hooves were slightly mottled, like mother-of-pearl or fine marble from the north, and his eyes were as blue as the sky over Eden, the land from which he had come with our forefathers. His mane was long and wavy, as shiny and soft as a maiden's hair.

Speaking of maidens, I've heard a lot of strange stories about unicorns and virgins. It's complete fabrication. Maidens had nothing to do with the unicorn, and he reacted no differently to them than to the rest of us. There was, however, a widow named Zipporah who... Well, it was a long time ago, so why stir it up again?

And as for grinding up the horn of the unicorn to make a potion which would render men more potent -- even if such a thing had occurred to us, do you seriously imagine the beast would have let us catch him and cut off his horn? As I've said, he was not stupid.

I suppose he was so smart because he had lived so long. My grandfather Methuselah told me that the unicorn had been around long before his own birth, and when you consider that Methuselah was nine hundred years old when he told me this, it's pretty impressive. The unicorn never aged, though. I figure he was more than a thousand years old when the flood came, but he looked fit and muscular, his

coat shiny and sleek, his legs sturdy and strong, his eyes alert, his gate quick, his movements agile. If I could have asked the unicorn one single question, it would have been how he kept in such good shape. At six hundred, I was really starting to show my age.

I suppose that if the unicorn could have asked me one question, it would have been what was I doing building an ark in the middle of terra firma.

He was dying of curiosity, I could see that. He was usually very independent and elusive, but once I started building the ark, he started hanging around all of the time. Meanwhile, the animals began lining up two by two. Some were brought by my children, others came on their own, apparently having been warned by Yahweh about the catastrophe to come. He had created them after all, so there was no reason He couldn't speak to them.

One day it finally occurred to me that I had never seen another unicorn. This worried me, since it had never before dawned on me that I might have to leave the unicorn behind. But Yahweh had said *two* of each species, and He had said it several times.

"You'd better go find a lady unicorn," I said to the unicorn.

He stared at me, his blue eyes sparkling with curiosity, his round nostrils quivering. He sniffed the edge of the ark.

"Go already," I ordered. "Find a mate to bring on board with you."

Well, the dumb beast just poked some reeds with his horn and kept standing around. In an effort to make him leave, I threw a flagon at him. He dodged it and pranced around playfully, thinking this was a new game, though I was an old man and had not played with him for several hundred years. I threw a few more things at him and shouted a little. When he finally realized it wasn't a game, he moped and looked hurt, letting his head hang down and his horn scratch the dirt. You could make the unicorn happy, sad, or curious, but you could never make him do what you wanted him to do.

Since he obviously wasn't going to find a mate himself, and since the flood was getting closer every day, I decided to send my son Japheth out to find a lady unicorn. No one had any idea where to look, and it seemed kind of hopeless, but he tried anyhow. He's a good boy, if only he would get a haircut now and then.

Japheth searched in the west, since that's where the unicorn had come from. He could only go so far, though, since Eden, if it even still existed, was forbidden to men. And under the circumstances, he thought it best not to try Yahweh's patience.

By the time Japheth returned to us, his quest having proved unsuccessful, the sky was darkening with thunderclouds such as no man has ever seen since. A wind came up which tore saplings out of the ground by their very roots, knocked down our simple shepherd's tents, and stripped the wool from our sheep as they clung precariously to the rocky hills.

Despite all of this, I managed to get Yahweh's attention for a few minutes, for my heart was heavy about the unicorn. We had failed to find his mate, but couldn't

Yahweh permit us to take him aboard anyhow? The Lord God didn't exactly answer my prayer, He only repeated what He had been saying every day: there must be *two* of each species, a male and a female, of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and so on.

As the storm swelled above our heads, as the end of the world drew near, as the sky thundered with Yahweh's rage, we loaded the ark. There were green alligators, long-necked geese, ivory-toothed elephants, venomous serpents, furry-legged spiders, slinking panthers, roes and hinds, monkeys and leopards, wolves and bears. Every kind of creature came aboard the ark, save one -- the loveliest of all.

The unicorn pranced excitedly around the ark as we loaded it. Of all the beasts, he was the only one who knew something monumental was afoot, yet the others lumbered aboard dumbly, guaranteed of Yahweh's protection, while the unicorn vainly awaited his turn beneath the angry sky. In the end, perhaps realizing we meant to leave him behind, he stopped prancing and merely watched, his pale eyes growing opaque, his head lowering, his fur growing dull for the first time in a thousand years as the fierce wind coated everything with sand and dust.

The rain started to fall just as we loaded the last of the food supplies into the ark. My family all rushed on board and took their places, and I followed them. There was a moment when, ignoring my wife's urgent plea to remain safely on board, I went back for the unicorn. But as I made to help him aboard, the air around us filled with the echoing crash of Yahweh's wrath, the sky opened up, and a bolt of lightning scorched the earth around us.

I had been taught that God was imponderable and unknowable. For whatever reason, He intended for the unicorn to remain behind, to perish in the flood, to disappear forever from the face of the earth. And so I left him there to die.

The unicorn was not angry at my desertion, since anger was not in his nature. He remained near the ark that night as the terrible downpour carried away everything we had owned in the old life and flooded the valley in which we had lived.

By morning, the water had risen high enough to move the ark, and we began floating away from the world's past. According to Yahweh, the future would not begin until the waters withdrew and subsided. This would be a strange time of waiting for us, while He washed the earth clean and destroyed what was, in order to make room for what would be.

I looked out the small window which I had made with Yahweh's patient instruction. The unicorn had found high ground during the night, and he stood there without moving, watching us as we floated away. He was drenched and bedraggled, and he held his foreleg up slightly, as if he had hurt it in the climb to safety. He looked wistful and lonely, but unafraid; fear was not in his nature, either.

Did he blame me, I wondered? Did he know we would never again return to the land of Nod? Did he know that Yahweh had chosen to destroy him in the infancy of the world, never to be seen again, only to be spoken of as a vague, improbable myth?

The unicorn never moved as we disappeared, floating away amidst the relentless

downpour, the crash of thunder, and the swirling waters of the flood. I wondered how long he remained in that spot, and whether his death came fast or slow, whether he drowned in a few minutes or lingered for days on some rocky peak, injured, hungry, and cold.

You probably know most of the rest of the story; it rained for forty straight days. We weren't idle, though. Do you have any idea how much food all those animals consumed, and how much mess they made as a consequence? And trying to keep the lions away from the lambs, and the leopards away from the harts, and the mice away from the elephants, and the asps away from *everybody* was no small task either. We filled up our spare time, when we had it, with backgammon and mah-jong. And, of course, we prayed, not wanting Yahweh to forget that He intended to spare us.

The rain finally stopped, and, as Yahweh had instructed, we sent a dove out to reconnoitre. To tell the truth, it was a pretty grim time. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out, people, animals, creeping things, and birds. Everything with the least breath of life in its nostrils, everything on dry land, just like the stories say -- all dead. Only those of us who had entered the ark survived.

Little by little, the waters ebbed, though it took longer than any of us had really planned on. Finally, on the seventeenth day of the seventh month, the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. We were able to get out and stretch our legs, though it was a couple of more months before the waters subsided enough for us to get on with our lives.

I built an altar, but I didn't make any sacrifices, contrary to what you've heard. What was I going to sacrifice? There were only two of every species of animal, and I'd gone to too much trouble saving them to sacrifice them now. I guess Yahweh saw the logic in that, because He made a covenant with me anyhow, and we were blessed with the rainbow and the promise that nothing like this would *ever* happen to us again.

I'm ancient now, set in my ways and stubborn about my habits. This is a new world, and I cannot get comfortable in it. Although Yahweh has been kind to me, there is no place for me here. Soon I will give up the ghost, like Lamech and Methuselah, and like their fathers before them, which is why I set this down.

For you who will never see a unicorn, I wanted the truth to be known. And know this, too. If I questioned Yahweh's compassion in leaving the unicorn behind, to die in the flood which destroyed the old world before the new world was created, I understand His wisdom now.

Those were different times, back before the flood. Men heard God when He whispered in their ears, and heeded His warnings. We lived as giants, surrounded by Yahweh's magic and miracles.

The unicorn, curious, lonely, or perhaps scenting his destiny -- who can say for sure? -- followed our forefathers out of Eden. He danced around us in the land of Nod, a beautiful, immortal creature, incapable of anger, fear, or treachery. Perhaps he was fit for the world we knew then, but he was unfit for the world which

followed. For in this new world with no place for giants, there is no room for the unicorn.

- The End -