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### THE EMPLOYEE'S UNICORN

Wayne Delver found it in the forest behind the football field. The field hadn't been used in some time; the high school it's attached to shut down some years ago for lack of students – how long, twelve years ago, now? It's a long and flat building just like everything else in Carter. Flat, made with concrete and steel in the 1960s, and left there when the children get old and move away.

Wayne went to that school. Yes, he was the quarterback, actually, and would run this very football field, under the electric floodlamp starlight. It's been so long that he cannot remember the faces of his teammates anymore, as they were when they were young, but he can remember the wet turf on his shoulder, the formless roar of the crowd, the taste of the mouthguard, as he leapt towards and hit touchdown.

That was the last game before he tore his back and couldn't play anymore. Since then, he was rejected from the state college, worked as an ice cream vendor, married his girlfriend at nineteen, got a job in the post office, had two children, was fired from the post office, had a third kid, found a place in the grocery store stocking shelves, missed one too many anniversaries, had twelve too many beers, was divorced and forced out of the house he'd bought, and finally, mercifully, was given a slot in the high school as a janitor. Then time passed like a bony tumbling spectre for an indeterminable duration of time. The school shut down. Now he works at the walmart.

But, during his time as janitor, after the workday he'd take long walks along the field, watching the youngsters practice as he once did. At that exact time of day, especially in the late summer, the sun would set and the sky would sigh into a deep blue, as it always did. He has continued taking these walks, which would run closer and closer to the forest and then turn away back to the street.

On this day, though, he enters the forest. Like most other forests around here, it's scrappy and overgrown; it's where hunters and their sons go out on fall Saturdays to shoot some animals. Signs on the trees say POSTED. NO TRESPASSING. Something possesses Wayne to trespass anyways. They're just papers nailed to old dry wood. He is not thinking about how his shoes are not made for hiking, or the brambles attaching themselves to his worn old jeans. He is off schedule. The sky is darkening, and by now, normally, he would be on his way back to the road, and as the canopy widens, the restless air is cooler.

Farther into the woods he reaches a fence of wire. Each length of fence is made up of twelve iron wires, twisted and cut to be sharp on the ends. The forest gets darker. The metal thorns are the last thing that gleams with sunlight before only indirect illumination ushers Wayne between the taller and taller trees. The forest gets darker.

Maybe, Wayne thinks, or perhaps he says it aloud, Maybe I can just keep walking here, and when it gets so dark I can't see I'll just close my eyes and put my arms out. He hears nothing but the amorphous forest noises, the leaves and crickets, and the deeper hum of the earth beneath all of it. His heart beating. Footsteps. Sticks and twigs crushing, closer — he's hit and tackled—

How'd you find this place?! Wet breath on his ear.

How – I – how? I don't – I didn't-??? Wayne had landed on his bad arm. Pain wraps around and clenches his old bones. He opens an eye, coughs, sees brown leaves and a dark beetle crossing a twig. Painfully (he had slept on it badly) he wrenches his head upwards. Through a wince, he sees the shadowed man in a park ranger's hat, a park ranger's coat, but a black blindfold, and a face mask.

You're twenty-four yards deep into a unicorn preserve. You can't be in here.

Wayne is stunned. He coughs, and is about to inhale to laugh when there's a blinding sharpness on his temple, and then he's back in his house. His shoulder aches.

It's morning. He slides out of his couch, still in his outside clothes. If it wasn't just a weird dream, he thinks, then there'd probably be some indicator that it happened, like ... his mind de-fogs. He rubs the sleep out his eyes. *Unicorn preserve?* Unicorns aren't... Oh, man, Jesus Christ, that's...

It's too ridiculous to keep thinking about. It's time to brush teeth and make breakfast. At least it's Saturday, so Wayne can play his game, the one he made up just for himself, where he doesn't look at any clock, or his watch, or think too hard about where the sun is, he can just be unaware of the minute and the hour for a little while. It's like floating around. Comfortable and kind of exciting, like not wearing a seatbelt in a moving car. Maybe things felt like this all the time before they invented numbers, and seatbelts, which Wayne also used to avoid sometimes, until his first daughter, who'd been taught in school the importance of seatbelts, bothered him whenever she noticed he hadn't done his part. *Papa! You're gonna go through the window!* She would say, giggling and kicking her feet on his chair, since after the first couple of times it had become their little joke. *Oh, alright, alriiiiight*, Wayne would always say back, shooting a grin

back at her, and then he'd click himself into safety. There was nobody to tell him to put his seatbelt on now.

He makes himself a peanut butter sandwich for breakfast. There isn't much to do today. It seems kind of late already. He sits at the one-chaired kitchen table with a cup of coffee and opens his computer. A nice college boy at the library some weeks (months?) ago had showed him how to change the default 12-hour time on the computer to military time, which he always preferred because it felt manlier, and, at another time, how reddit works, which he now mostly uses for car pictures, and other things. Maybe that youngster is at the library right now, and he'd be able to talk to someone this week if he goes to say hello. Probably not. It's the weekend. He's probably out at some wild party with his friends, talking to girls...

The unicorns have not left his mind. Maybe...

## **r/unicornappreciationreal**

u/wayne 71 - **unicorn preserves?**

Hi folks I think I came across a unicorn sanctuary yesterday on my walk The park ranger came up and I think knocked me out. A real asshole honestly. He was wearing a blindfold. Or maybe it was a dream I dont know. Please help.

Thanks

Wayne

u/ dougboy: So they really let anyone on here nowadays? Lmfao +5

u/Sarastarchild444 MOD: Hi Wayne! Welcome to r/unicornappreciationreal! So in our community we operate with a couple of ground rules which you can find in our FAQ. Basically, we welcome everyone as long as they are serious about unicorns and their wellbeing. Entering unicorn preserves without authorization is a misdemeanor and can actually put both you and the `corns in danger. Sorry the ranger had to remove you bud. But you can't just go tramping on into these things! +6

u/wayne\_71: Oh sorry. I didnt know . -3

u/Sarastarchild444 MOD: All good bud! Just stay out of things you don't understand, kay? +1

Maybe it's the weightlessness of no clocks that's keeping Wayne scrolling through the page. It's mostly text-posts, either long paragraphs recalling encounters with the unicorns, or short, misspelled questions, probably written by young children. *How long is the Unicorns Maine and can i maybe brush it niceley?* The rational thought that these are all just unwell people feeding delusions, or that it's just one big joke, was initially at the front of Wayne's mind, but floated upwards, and eventually out of his head. Wayne did not notice. Now, frustratedly, it looks down at him as he continues reading the testimonies of the unicorn enthusiasts.

There are drawings of unicorns, digital illustrations, paintings, and crayon scribbles, there are recordings of songs about unicorns, there are some specimens of golden hairs photographed with flash on somebody's wooden table, but there's no pictures of any unicorns themselves. He makes another post. *Why no pictures?* For some reason, he is immediately banned. Wayne is angry and then ashamed. He should have read the frequently asked questions. He is about to

close the computer to do something else (it's already been some hours) when he receives a direct message. He opens it. *So you wanted pictures?*

*Yes. Is that not allowed?*

*Theyll get mad if you ask lol. it kinda isnt. looking at them irl harms them but idk the picture is already taken soooooo. here*

Attached is a picture of a real unicorn. Wayne feels a tightening in his heart, and a sort of headache. Immediately he knows that it's real. It's the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

It's getting dark again. He is back at the field. The thoughts of football pale in comparison to the memory of the unicorn picture. The forest is before him, like it was yesterday, like it was hundreds and hundreds of days before, but it looks different now. He knows what's behind the unassuming shrubs and discarded beer cans. He knows the metal wire fence. It will gleam in the moonlight again tonight.

He reaches it in what feels like seconds. Now he knows to be careful: he makes sure to not step on any twigs, or tread through clumps of dry leaves, or hum to himself. He imagines the ranger (the park rangers would be on their night shift now, the night rangers) and feels exhilarating fear. There are some birds that seem to only sing at this time of night, this deep into the forest, and they sing mournful, minor-key shreds of noise, like glimmering fish swimming between the darkness of crickets chorus.

He thinks he is past where he was caught last night. Any further and he might get lost. He leans against a pine tree that twistingly reaches to the sky. He catches his breath. He cannot see his shoes in the darkness. Shit, I'm so stupid, he thinks. Of course this penlight isn't enough to

see shit in this forest. Waiting in the middle of the night for some unicorns. Chrissakes, there's not gonna be any damn unicorns, Wayne.

His chest tightens again. Is it the rangers? He hears something, something like the underlying forest hum from before – and, say, forests don't usually have those – but it's turning into a more rhythmic whisper now, except it's like if a whisper was coming from inside of him. There would be silence, then four thrushes in his gut, in fast succession. Movement and stillness. Movement and stillness. Movement and –

And the whisper bursts through into a true, unmistakable clamber of hooves hitting the soil. Wayne's heart flutters. It's already coming closer. He feels a breeze coming, more of a wind in the seconds after he notices, and it rustles his shirt, the cooler air curls up around his limbs raising the hairs there, and it's louder now, unignorablely loud, like a ringing of church bells, a city of white cathedrals, each with bells ringing at midnight. A gust of unicorns whistles through the forest. The first, the leader, its long white head springing up and down with each gallop. Its fur is the color of pearls, its mane mother-of-pearl. Before it passes, he catches its eye, darker than the clearest night, and it suddenly whinnies, stands on its hind legs, and, as Wayne's heart skips, lobs itself past him, and it's gone. And there are more unicorns coming. He has pressed his back against the tree as much as he can. His mouth is open, gaping at the sight, and he's not thinking about anything but the unicorns, their horns sharper and shinier than stars, the glow they seemed to leave behind.

And now they are gone. But there are still the hoofprints they left on the soil, and the receding sound of their journey, echoing off trees and hills, off the night sky and all the dreams of everyone asleep in Carter. Wayne slides down the tree and leans his head back. Maybe he can go back tomorrow. Oh -- but he looked at them! A turn of guilt unfurls in his stomach. They

seemed strong and grown-up, at least, and he didn't see anything bad happen to them, but maybe it'd be a more invisible affliction, like liver cancer. What if, after galloping away, the unicorns he saw just collapsed and never ran again?

Right as he is about to head out of the forest, he hears *Help me! Help me!* He hears a voice in his head. It sounds like water on glass, like the chirping of birds, wind chimes. Physically, he hears indistinct, muffled wailing. A long, babylike cry, that suddenly stops and winds up again. He lets it cry before getting ahold of himself and looking for the source.

He catches a glimpse – a little white thing curled up under leaves – a small, dull horn – half-lidded big black eyes – and immediately looks away from it.

*Help me! Please, help me!*

I... okay, alright, Wayne mutters. He screws his eyes shut and kneels towards the little unicorn.

*I do not know where they all went. I'm so hungry.*

Oh, that's okay, Wayne says, with confidence he didn't realize he had. Do you like apples?

*Yes.*

I have some apples I can bring you. I can slice them up for you.

*I am also so very lonely. They left me behind.*

Oh... I'm sorry. I'm sure they didn't mean to leave you here. They were in a rush.

*Do you think so?*

Yes. I am sure they'll come back this time tomorrow...

They talk some more. Wayne savors the inner-ear sound of the unicorn's thought-voice. It seems to be coming from the same place as the forest hum. Eventually, he decides it is best to bring the unicorn home with him, so it doesn't get eaten by an owl, or something. The thought of an owl latching onto the little creature and taking it far, far away is enough to make him start walking faster. He has the unicorn, which he has still seen only a glimpse of, curled up in the pocket of his cargo pants. It's a soft, warm thing. And it's up to him, he proudly thinks, to keep it safe from the world.

It's past midnight by the time he gets home. He flicks on the single fluorescent lamp in the kitchen and pulls out an apple and a knife. He takes a white plate, places the apple on it, and slices it into six pieces, and then, considering how small the unicorn's mouth is, slices each piece into three smaller pieces.

Okay, he says. I put out some apples for you. I'll set you on the table and you can have some dinner, okay?

*Okay*, the unicorn sleepily says. Wayne closes his eyes again and sets it on the table. He can hear its little hooves trotting across the flat surface until it reaches the plate and eats the apples, making faint munching noises.

I hope you like it, Wayne says, and has the good idea to place the dish towel on the table. You can sleep here. Good night.

*Good night!* says the unicorn.

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Wayne has a little unicorn in his house now that he's only caught one glimpse of, ever. Over time, as the unicorn adjusts to its new surroundings, it gradually returns to sleeping during the day and running at night. It has a small corner by the cupboard where, as the sun rises, it nestles itself into an oven mitt. Its little hooves on the old floorboards, rhythmic and soft, rumble throughout the night like marbles in a bowl. Wayne and the unicorn have conflicting schedules and only speak at sunrise and sunset.

So, unicorn, what's your name? Wayne gently asks as he sets down a small bowl of tangerine peels. He is careful not to put it down too roughly, in case the unicorn is hurt by the shockwave. He turns a chair around and sits facing away from the table. He hears the creak of the cupboard door opening and little hooves making their way to a bowl. Then, quiet munching. The unicorn loves tangerine peels.

*I don't think you could pronounce it,* the unicorn says.

Oh, Wayne says with a chuckle. Well, my name's Wayne Davidson. Nice to meet you.

*It's nice to meet you too, Wayne.* Wayne grins at that. When was the last time he met anyone, besides a new hire at the Walmart? It must have been years ago.

After making himself dinner, Wayne retires to bed. The night-trotting returns. The unicorn never asks about its parents, or if it can return to the forest. Wayne has been too afraid to ask, anyways.

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Wayne rises at six, when the unicorn has just fallen asleep, and the sun is halfway over the trees. By seven-thirty, he is at the Walmart. In the earlier hours, he roams the shelves to make sure every product, wrapped and tagged, arranged and priced, is in its correct place. The vast building, white and open, is illuminated by strips of fluorescent LEDs that go back and forth from the East and West walls. Wayne, finished with his inventory check, looks to the other side of the Walmart, where the strips coalesce into one pure length of brightness, an interior horizon. Some other employees shuffle around somewhere in the labyrinth. Other than that, it is silent.

Wayne used to hate the constant light until he realized that it meant he'd be able to play his timeless game again. Potentially, he could spend the entire day floating. The stratosphere can buoy him like water as he looks down at the world, drifting. The detachment has never felt so serene. The brightly colored plastic wrapped merchandise in his hands appear on the shelves one by one, uncounted. He'll know when he's finished when he sees the long rows of identical paper towels, tissue boxes, and parchment shimmering under floodlights from one end of the aisle to the other. The unicorn sometimes talks to him while he works, and floats along with him. Wherever he goes, he can hear it.

*Wayne?*

Yes? Wayne dutifully replies. It's still very early in the day. There aren't yet any customers to hear him talk to his unicorn.

*How come you never look at me?*

I can't or it'll hurt you, Unicorn, Wayne says. He could have sworn he had mentioned that before, but now that he thinks of it, somehow he never mentioned it at all.

*Is that true?*

Yes, it's true, Wayne says, gentle as can be, despite a growing pit of dread in his chest. A bundle of paper towels falls off a shelf behind him. As he goes to pick it up, he hears a kind of cough in his head, like branches snapping in the wind. He swallows and quietly asks: Now what is this all about, Unicorn?

*You're lying to me*, the unicorn says quickly. There is a silence. A refrigerated aisle hums. Elsewhere, air conditioning buzzes. Wayne can't think of anything to say.

*It's because you hate me. You think I'm ugly, Wayne.*

Now – Now that's not – you're wrong about that, Wayne stammers out, painfully aware of his own stupid words. He can feel his face turning red. Somewhere in his head he hears something heave to the side. It is like no other cry. Like a glass palace perpetually shattering on jagged gray rocks. No pause for breath or change in pitch, and impossible to tune out, unbearable, driving Wayne out of the building, clocking out early – hands shaking, struggling to handle the card – and driving thirty over the speed limit back home. He fumbles with the keys as the crying rattles his skull.

The unicorn has made a mess out of everything. The table it slept on is turned over. A ceramic plate shattered on the floor, leaving grapes everywhere, already attracting flies. After all he had done for it. Wayne could smash a window.

Where are you, Wayne says, and it comes out terribly, a long growl. The shattering skips and tumbles over itself, but continues, sharper. Somehow Wayne knows it's in the bathroom. He yells at the closed painted door.

I don't hate you!! I really really do care about you!

The thrash of noise, at this point devolved into static, offers no answer. He hits the door and coughs. His heart is beating too fast.

Through the noise, the unicorn speaks. *I'm going to leave tomorrow morning.*

Wayne leans on the doorframe and slides down, clutching his sides. Please don't go away.

Please don't go away...

Gradually, the noise dims. Silence. Wayne lets out a brief exhale. He has to make himself breathe right again. He sits there for a long time, the back of his head to the door, facing down the hallway to the living room. From there, he sees the light change from yellow, to red, then a deep blue, before it disappears.

His back is starting to hurt. As he sits up to go to bed, the unicorn asks him something.

*Don't you want to see me? I'm beautiful.*

Wayne does not respond. He stares into the darkness with no thoughts.

*I'm the most beautiful thing you'll ever see.*

Wayne makes it to his bed, takes off his clothes, and gets under the covers. He closes his eyes.

*I'll be gone by tomorrow. Then you'll never get to see me again.*

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Wayne had not been able to sleep that night. He opened his eyes when the sun appeared in the window, bathing his bedroom in pink. Nobody else is awake at all, he feels. *Except me.* He exhales until there is no air left in his body, and keeps his lungs empty for a couple of seconds. He won't let himself think.

The state of that house. The rug is still trampled and creased and torn. Like everything else Wayne sees, it glows in the morning light, which drifts like a cloud through every opening. Through the walls. He's in the hallway now and has not stopped moving at the same waterlike pace. The single hanging lightbulb is like an opal. The radiator is a grove of leafy and light birch

trees. Just one more time? Every wall in the room could lean to meet your hand like the flesh of a friendly creature. Please? The very same light illuminating it all nestled between the leaves and petals outside. Please? A hug and a kiss for every part of your head. *Please?* Wayne's hand is already opening the bathroom door.

He sees the unicorn.

Awake in silence, it stands upright, the lights are on, reflecting off each and every strand of hair on its mane, golden pink strands, wavy and floating on nothing. Two red little ears, like the petals of a frosted tulip. Fur of platinum, ivory, of clouds and snow. Eyes of the deepest, most mysterious oceans, swimming with unknowable sea creatures. Infinitely dark. Its hooves are also pure black and shiny, like polished diorite from the hearts of cold mountains. Every limb joins together perfectly, no bones, or any indicator of biology, nothing besides artfulness. It is impossible to look at all at once. Its horn is made of pure brightness. Wayne can feel it numbing his face. It was this that turned every floorboard in that little apartment to mahogany, each window to crystal.

You're so beautiful, Wayne says.

*I know*, replies the unicorn, as its eye droops to the side. Something is happening to it. It seems like it's crying, but really, it's the sea-eye itself that is dripping, leaving long trails of dark slime down its body. Its skin drips with it as each strand of fur, like a rotting strawberry, turns foamy and gray. It smells terrible. The thing's legs give out and it sloshes onto the floor, liquidizing, fluids mixing and leaking out of the porous membrane that its flabs of flesh is becoming. A depression forms in its head, its jaw hangs open, disfiguring. Its horn dims and softens until it merely reflects the LED in the hallway, then turns black and falls off like a frostbitten finger. That too disintegrates into the widening puddle. Wayne feels its clammy

stickiness reach his toes. The fluid has fully drenched the bathroom rug. It sinks into every crevice between the tiles. It smells like dead animal and guilt and sickness and then nothing.

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It took a few hours to mop up, and, soon enough, Wayne was at work. He will have to make up for his missed time by working late today. He stocks a shelf of air fresheners. Paper towels. Backpacks for little kids. It has faded quickly, like a dream. The shape and size of the unicorn, the sound of its voice – if it could even be called a sound, or a shape – Wayne cannot picture it anymore. The last couple of days of his life seem to warp and meld around a brightness he forgets the name of. Or did it ever have a name? But he remembers the nausea, the crushing guilt, something wailing inside him. It's still there, kind of. He puts another backpack on the shelf. Well, besides that, his work is cut out for him. This truckload'll be fully stocked by tomorrow. It's almost Friday, and then it'll be the weekend. And then another Monday, and a Friday again, and a weekend again.