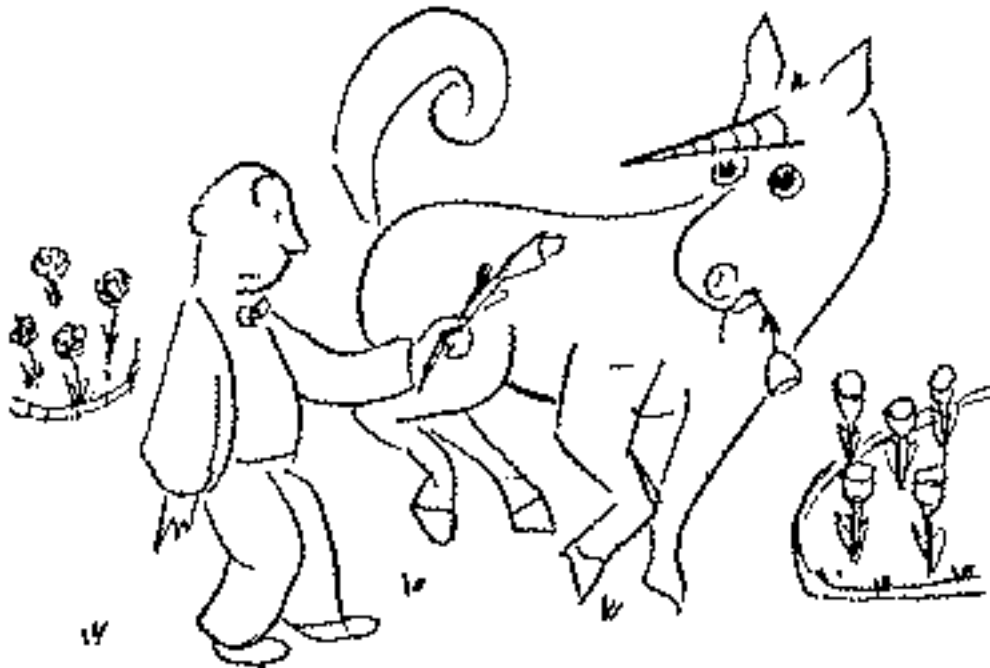


The Unicorn in the Garden
by James Thurber (1894-1961).
reprinted from
Fables For Our Time



Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him.

"The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden.

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The unicorn was still there; now he was browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man, and he pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him coldly. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch."

The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat down among the roses and went to sleep.

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest.

"My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked

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at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jaybird."

So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after.

Moral: Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.

GLOSSARY

booby: in this context, a crazy person (probably from the name of a stupid extinct bird).

booby-hatch: a mental institution, a place where the insane are kept.

breakfast nook: a little side room for eating breakfast.

browsing: sampling or tasting here and there.

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"crazy as a jaybird": extremely crazy or hopelessly insane

cropping: clipping or cutting close to the root.

cursing: using dirty or obscene speech.

"Don't count your boobies until they are hatched": from the American expression "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched", meaning "Don't count on things to turn out exactly as you planned them."

gloat: a look of malice or greed.

institution: a mental institution, an insane asylum.

moral: in this context, the "lesson" of the story.

mythical: relating to a myth, hence not real.

psychiatrist: a mental doctor.

solemn: grave or serious.

strait-jacket: an armless belted jacket used to confine the violently insane.

subdue, subduing: capturing, seizing.

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unicorn: a mythical beast which looks like a horse with a horn in the center of the head.

"The Unicorn in the Garden" is a short story written by James Thurber. The most famous of Thurber's humorous modern fables, it first appeared in *The New Yorker* on October 31, 1939; and was first collected in his book *Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated* (Harper and Brothers, 1940). The fable has since been reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival* (Harper and Brothers, 1945), *James Thurber: Writings and Drawings* (The Library of America, 1996, ISBN 1-883011-22-1), *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales*, and other publications. It is taught in literature and rhetoric courses.

Plot summary

A husband sees a unicorn in the family garden and tells his wife about it. She ridicules him, telling him "the unicorn is a mythical beast" and calls him a "booby". When he persists, she threatens to send him to the "booby hatch" (the mental institution). He persists, and she summons the authorities. However, after she tells them what her husband saw, they force her into a straitjacket. They then ask the husband if he told his wife he had seen a unicorn. He tells them that he has not, because "the unicorn is a mythical beast." Thus they take the wife away instead, and "the husband lived happily ever after".



James Thurber (1894-1961). American author, cartoonist and celebrated wit. He was one of the foremost American humorists of the 20th century. Thurber was best known for his cartoons and short stories, published mainly in *The New Yorker* magazine and collected in his numerous books. He is also the author of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* and the creator of numerous *New Yorker* magazine cover cartoons. Thurber wrote nearly 40 books, and won a Tony Award for the Broadway play, "A Thurber Carnival", in which he often starred as himself.

