

[In 1962 Peter S. Beagle began work on his beloved fantasy novel, *The Last Unicorn*. That first version was quite different — among other things it was set in the modern world, and it began with a conversation between the unicorn and a dragon who had just had a very rough encounter with the 20th Century. Beagle wrote 85 pages and then stopped, uncertain how to continue with the tale. Three years later he picked up this fragment, threw out all but two pages of the first chapter — including the dragon — and started over again, eventually completing the classic version which has thrilled millions of readers around the world since it was first published in 1968.

40 years later, that long-abandoned dragon became the inspiration of Peter's story "Oakland Dragon Blues."

Here, for those who might be curious, is the lost conversation that started it all...]

**FROM THE FIRST DRAFT OF THE FIRST VERSION OF *THE LAST UNICORN* [circa 1962, incomplete]
— Peter S. Beagle**

I

The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone. She was very old, though she did not know it, and she was no longer the careless color of sea foam, but rather the color of snow falling on a moonlit night. But her eyes were still clear and unwearied, and she still moved like a shadow on the sea.

She did not look anything like a horned horse, as unicorns are often pictured, being smaller and cloven-hoofed, and possessing that oldest, wildest grace that horses have never had, that deer have only in a shy, thin imitation and goats in dancing mockery. Her neck was long and slender, making her head seem smaller than it was, and the mane that fell almost to the middle of her back was as soft as dandelion fluff and as fine as cirrus. She had pointed ears and thin legs, with feathers of white hair at the ankles; and the long horn

above her eyes shone and shivered with its own seashell light even in the deepest midnight. She had killed dragons with it, and healed a king whose poisoned wound would not close, and knocked down ripe chestnuts for bear cubs.

Unicorns are immortal. It is their nature to live alone in one place: usually a forest where there is a pool clear enough for them to see themselves—for they are a little vain, knowing themselves to be the most beautiful creatures in all the world, and magic besides. They mate very rarely, and no place is more enchanted than one where a unicorn has been born. The last time she had seen another unicorn the young virgins who still came seeking her now and then had called to her in a different tongue; but then, she had no idea of months and years and centuries, or even of seasons. It was always spring in her forest, because she lived there, and she wandered all day among the great beech trees, keeping watch over the animals that lived in the ground and under bushes, in nests and caves, earths and treetops. Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them.

One morning, the wind bore her an oily, sulphurous reek that sent her nostrils flaring with the oldest terror of all her kind. The dragon-smell never leaves you, having once touched your throat; not in a hundred years, not in five hundred. Faint on the wind from the other side of the forest, it hurt the unicorn's eyes, and she shivered and stamped in fear. The hatred between dragons and unicorns goes a long way back, to the time when the first unicorn wandered into a world full of dragons, and there has never been peace between them, nor ever will be. Wherever they are, and whenever, when they meet they must fight, and one of them always dies.

The unicorn had killed three dragons in her life, but she was always afraid, and she always ran away when the beasts were dead. She was afraid now, but she knew her duty, and she raced through the forest like sunlight, leaping over brooks and bushes, feeling vines and creepers tangling in her mane and around her horn. The dragon-smell grew stronger, filling her nostrils like smoke, until at last she burst into a clearing where the dragon crouched, hissing fire. Rearing on her hind legs, her horn glowing with its own deep fires, she cried out the old and terrible challenge of unicorn to dragon. The cry had not been heard in her forest in the lifetime of any other animal, and it changed the courses of

three streams, turned every golden eagle in the forest white, and made an owl who was writing his autobiography forget his own name for two weeks.

Considering that it had been a century since she had made any sound at all, the unicorn was frankly pleased with her own battle music. She almost wished to be the dragon, the better to hear herself. “Come and fight with me, dragon!” she cried. “Come and fight, and be beautiful, and die!” But the dragon only looked at her, twitched his black lips once or twice, and began to cry.

“Oh, that’s all,” he whispered quietly. “Oh, my scaly tail, that is absolutely all.” He cried very softly, with his eyes closed and his head lowered, but his tears splashed his feeble fires out with a smell like gunpowder. “Come and fight, come and fight,” he mumbled. “A dragon comes crawling home half-dead, and the first thing he hears is come and fight, come and fight. I’m tired, my stomach hurts, I have a headache — go away and leave me alone. Fighting all the time, all the time.” He sniffled like a distant hurricane, and licked forlornly at his tears with his forked tongue.

The unicorn came down on all four feet with a thud and stared at the dragon in complete bewilderment. The only tears she had ever seen were those of lonely young girls. She had never imagined that anything else in the world wept. Nothing in her long life prepared her to deal with a weeping dragon. She cleared her throat and said hesitantly, “What’s the matter? Are you unhappy?”

“No, I’m fine,” the dragon muttered bitterly. “I’m just lovely, I am. Jolliest dragon in the whole world, that’s me.” His tears were beginning to form an emerald-green puddle around his front paws, and the unicorn danced daintily back a few paces. “If you knew where I’ve been!” he wept. “If you’d seen the things I’ve seen! You wouldn’t be going around picking fights then, I can tell you.”

He was a larger dragon than the unicorn had first thought, and almost as old as herself, for the scales on his body were a dull greenish-black, and his claws were blunt with age, no sharper than a turtle’s. The long low purple crest running along his back from his ears to his tail-tip — a dragon’s joy — was torn in several places, and lay limp and prideless. The poisonous spikes at the end of his tail were all broken off short, and he wheezed and coughed and rattled when he breathed out his damp ashes, as though he were

all rusty inside. He rolled in his own tears and wailed until both the unicorn's fear and her patience were quite vanished.

"Oh, do stop crying, for heaven's sake," she told him snappily. "Haven't you any shame? What would all the other dragons think if they saw you now?"

Dragons have much more sense of family than unicorns do, but the unicorn's appeal only made the old dragon grin like a broken piano through his green tears. "They're all crying," he said, "every one. Right now, every dragon in the world is lying down and howling with frustration. Listen to the rain some time, you'll hear them." The unicorn stared at him without understanding, and he became equally impatient with her. "Or doesn't it ever rain around here anymore?" he demanded. "Don't you ever go anywhere, don't you ever look around you? Don't you know what's happening in the world?"

The unicorn shook her head. "I never travel," she replied, as mildly as if she were speaking to another unicorn.

"I never travel," the dragon mimicked her. "Every time I look at one of you people, I have to bite something." He snorted damply. "Well, I'm done traveling," he said. "No more. I just want to lie down somewhere, in a nice hole in the riverbank, nice and damp and cool. Unless you really want to kill me here. I don't much care. I'd just as soon get killed by a galloping anachronism as on that road I followed here." His eyes squeezed shut, as if he were about to start crying again. "Oh, that road," he mourned, "that terrible black road."

"The road to my forest," the unicorn said, "is wide and white as wings. I haven't been on it in some time, but I remember that I always liked the little dusty sound it made under my feet. No one comes to see me over that road anymore, but it is still there, just as it was, wide and good to walk on."

"Sweet and foolish lady," the dragon answered her, "the road to your forest is made of black iron, and on it, all day and all night, the coaches run and roar, and flash yellow lights till they drive you mad, and yell like sea-demons. They're bigger than I am, some of them, and they run faster than you ever dreamed of running." Very gingerly he twitched the battered tip of his tail. "One of them ran over my tail," he said. "Can you imagine what that was like for me, to be run over by a coach?" He sniffled, rubbed his nose on his forepaw,

and went on. “The coachman told me it was my fault. He said I was going too slowly. Oh, I ate him up, but it didn’t make me feel any better. It was because I was afraid of the coach, and I knew it, inside. And the road hurt my feet so. I kept looking for a better road, someplace quiet and sandy, with children playing in puddles, and a few sheep here and there, but I couldn’t find any of those. I think all the roads are like that one now.”

“So my white road is gone,” the unicorn said softly. “Well, why should I be surprised?” Nevertheless, she felt a little sad, and she wished the dragon had not told her. “So long as there is still a road,” she said. “But tell me about the city, the city where the kings lived. Is the city gone too?”

“What do you care about the city?” the dragon jeered at her. “Little white soul, you’ve never once set foot in any city, not in all your life. What difference would it make to you if the kings’ city had turned to straw yesterday morning, and been eaten down by donkeys?”

“I know all about the city,” the unicorn answered. “I have always known about the city, but I don’t know how I know. It shines in my head the way I know the ocean shines, and I’ve never seen the ocean, either.” Her light feet were almost dancing with impatience. “Tell me about the city,” she said. “Do the princes still walk through the streets at noon, very slowly, and is the city still full of birds?”

“What the city is full of, mostly,” replied the dragon, “is policemen.” He moaned against his broken claws and began to shiver all over. “Policemen,” he said. “I don’t suppose you happen to see policemen in your head, but believe me, they outnumber the birds. Oh, my teeth — they come up to you and say, uh, you just passing through here or what, and you say, oh, I’m going right on through, sir, just as fast as my four old feet can carry me. And he says, because you look sort of strange, and you say, yes, I know, lovely sir, my fault entirely, and I’ll take a bath just as soon as I can. And you start to go away from there, and he puts up his hand and says, well, just to make sure about things, how about you show me your license? And you get all excited, and you start to feel a little bit incineratory where all the fire is, and you say, what license? Can’t you see I’m a dragon? And he says, well, maybe that’s what you are where you come from, but in this town you’re a vehicle, and I’m asking to see your license. Because we got an ordinance in this town about vehicles more than twenty-nine feet. long.” The dragon said miserably. “And

then you say, oh, I can't stand this, and you eat him up. And that's a mistake, that is a tactical error. Boy, do they throw the book at you for eating up a policeman. Especially if it's Sunday. They have an ordinance about that, too."

"Yes, but the princes," the unicorn insisted. "There were princes in the city, I know there were."

"Not anymore," the dragon said. "Just policemen."

"What are policeman to me? Tell me about the people, then, if there are no princes. I used to dream that they were gentle and happy in that city — are they still?"

"That I wouldn't know," the dragon answered indifferently. "But they taste terrible. They taste like clocks and coal oil. And the children are bitter as silver — now, that surprised me. The children used to be the best eating in the world, better than antelope, better than wild geese, but now I just can't bring myself to eat another one of them. Oh, it's been dogs and cats and mangy little squirrels for weeks now — and when you think how I used to dine off steamed knight, knight on the half-shell, broiled in his own armor with all the natural juices — excuse me, I'm going to cry again."

The unicorn had almost forgotten that she was talking to a dragon. Now she backed away from him, the hairs of her mane flaring as if the wind were passing over her. "Go away," she said. "You may stay in my forest, but go away now."

"Much thanks for such a sanctuary." The dragon sneered out the old courtly words, and began to slither past her into the woods, groaning with the effort of lifting his belly off the ground. "My back's killing me," he grumbled. "Aches all the time, right there, behind the hump. The funny thing is, all the dragons I've met in the last hundred years had back trouble. My cousin says it's chronic, has to do with the new air. He says, after a while you start to shrink, and then it doesn't hurt so much. The smaller you are, the less it hurts. My cousin says that's why there aren't many of us left. We all just small away to nothing. Funny, isn't it? Makes you feel lonely, if you're used to having a lot of dragons around."

"I don't understand," the unicorn said. She hated and feared all dragons, but she could not imagine a world without them. That really does make me feel lonely, she thought.

How strange, how ridiculous. “What about unicorns?” She asked hesitantly. “Did you see any unicorns, on the road or in the city?”

Then the dragon swung his long neck at her like a whip, and grinned with all his rusty teeth showing. “I didn’t see any unicorns anywhere,” he answered. “That’s a fact. I didn’t see a single one.” His eyes were glowing red-yellow, like hunter’s moons.

“None?” The unicorn stood very still. “No unicorns at all?”

“Not a one,” answered the dragon, quite cheerful now. “Neither did my cousin. He says there isn’t one of them left. We dwindle, he says, but they just vanish. Of course, he hadn’t had the pleasure.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said. She felt a slow coldness spreading through her. “Why should all the unicorns disappear?”

“Who needs them?” the dragon grunted. “I tell you truly, I don’t much like this time on the earth. It’s a bad time for dragons. But it’s no time at all for unicorns, and that’s something, anyway.” He waved his tail at her, almost jauntily. “Enjoy your singularity while you can,” he said. “You’re one myth that was always more trouble than it was worth.”

Waving his tail had been a mistake. It seemed to upset his internal equilibrium. He gulped and blinked, and the momentary ferocity in his eyes was replaced by simple discomfort. “Excuse me,” he whispered. “I have to lie down.” He dragged himself off into the forest, hiccupping and groaning, and she could hear him being miserable in the underbrush for a long time after he was out of sight.