The Unicorns, Part One

by Brian Joseph Davis

Most days you would have already checked the cargo door with a weak tug, hit the light switch and watched the overhead fluorescents stutter out. You would have taken printouts of the day's last orders, put them on top of a black tray, grabbed your windbreaker, and left the light industrial park that you've worked in since you were a teenager.

But tonight, long after quitting time, you sat, digging your nails into your father's old oak desk. You were a print-on-demand publisher and you were being held hostage by the husband and wife team responsible for the 872-page *Index of Equine Characters in Fantasy Fiction*. It had not received a single order, and its authors were upset and armed.

The couple had similar features: competing jowls and oddly chopped curly hair that wanted to escape what it was attached to. At some point in his life the man had chosen to wear cargo shorts, a Joker T-shirt, and nothing else. The woman layered mismatched jogging apparel with a jean jacket covered in Bedazzler unicorns. Your business was designed so that you would never have to meet these people—a book is submitted, and for a fee it is laid out. Editing is extra. It gets stored on a computer until someone orders a copy.

You inherited the business from your father. Well, not quite. He started it as a song poem record company. Customers would send in their lyrics after finding an ad in the back of tabloids or music magazines that promised to *Set Your Poems To Music. Songwriters Make Thousands of Dollars. Free Evaluation*. Your father would perform the lyrics, no matter what they were, to either a thin pop waltz or a mild country stomp and send back a badly pressed 7-inch.

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Though at home he kept copies of the more ribald or peculiar ones—attempts at novelty songs about the Academy Awards streaker of 1974, or jingles about *Deep Throat*—and played them for friends doubled over in laughter after several Maker's Marks, your father taught you not to put yourself above the customer. “Be at least a little bit beside the customer,” he said. “It helps.”

You moved into the shop slowly, with your new ideas and photocopiers. As customers bought computers and realized their terrible desires in private, your father's orders shrank to a trickle. But you offered something different, a heftier object that was the end result of people buying computers, and the orders for books increased. Then one day, without telling him, you sold the 7-inch press and the lathe cutter to a small record company. The new owners—too young for their beards—high-fived after they loaded the greasy contraptions into a battered white van. Later, your father stared, confused, at the empty spot where the wall paint layers ended in the shape of the old machines. He stopped coming in.

It was your business now, and faceless senior citizen memoirists paid your lease. There were variations in routine. You once published a children's book titled *Mommy, Please Don't Wash Your Hands Again* by a housewife from Toledo. She had sent the order three times.

This man and woman were the first authors you had ever met, and you were surprised by how much they looked like the customers in your head, the ones you thought about as you reloaded toner into the photocopier on wan mornings. Your father was a musician, but you had never been a writer, and you felt you lacked an understanding of these people that he naturally had.

You tried to reason, hands waving in the air, that they had checked a web dialogue box, indicating they understood that you printed books and facilitated sales as a service publisher, but marketing was up to

them. You wanted to be beside these people, but instead they were in front of you, ruining your tight-as-a-duck's-ass, wholly digital business with their three-dimensional realness.

When she took out a gun, you finally understood people: They will kill just to be heard, as easily as they will spend $39.95 to be published. You said, “Take whatever you want. Take my car keys.” The man asked you, “Have you ever written something? Have you ever actually written something?”

The woman screamed, “Call me Shadowfax!”

They demanded you perform for them. “Write something,” he implored, as if you had forgotten what they were demanding.

“Call me Shadowfax,” she said again, with a slight neigh.

You had often thought of stories while putting together shipments or sourcing new laser stock, but you never had the time to write them down.

Now, how much time you had left was dependent on how many stories you could write. Hands up and steady in the air, you asked if they wanted you to sit at the desk. She waved you over to your chair with the gun.

So you wrote and became, like them, strange.