

# I Believe in Unicorns

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My name is Tomas Porec. I was seven years old when I first met the unicorn lady. I believed in unicorns then. I am nearly twenty now and because of her I still believe in unicorns.

My little town, hidden deep in its own valley, was an ordinary place, pretty enough, but ordinary. I know that now. But when I was seven it was a place of magic and wonder to me. It was my place, my home. I knew every cobbled alleyway, every lamp post in every street. I fished in the stream below the church, tobogganed the slopes in winter, swam in the lake in the summer. On Sundays my mother and father would take me on walks or on picnics, and I'd roll down the hills, over and over, and end up lying there on my back, giddy with joy, the world **spinning** above me.

I never did like school though. It wasn't the school's fault, nor the teachers'. I just wanted to be outside all the time. I longed always to be running free up in the hills. As soon as school was over, it was back home for some bread and honey – my father kept his own bees on the hillside – then off out to play. But one afternoon my mother had other ideas. She had to do some shopping in town, she said, and wanted me to go with her.

"I hate shopping," I told her.





"I know that, dear," she said. "That's why I'm taking you to the library. It'll be interesting.

Something different. You can listen to stories for an hour or so. It'll be good for you. There's a new librarian lady and she tells stories after school to any children who want to listen. Everyone says she's brilliant."

"But I don't want to listen," I protested.

My mother simply ignored all my pleas, took me firmly by the hand and led me to the town square. She walked me up the steps into the library. "Be good," she said, and she was gone.

I could see there was an excited huddle of children gathered in one corner. Some of them were from my school, but they all looked a lot younger than me. Some of them were infants! I certainly did not want to be with them. I was just about to turn and walk away in disgust when I noticed they were all **jostling** each other, as if they were desperate to get a better look at something. Since I couldn't see what it was, I went a little closer. Suddenly they were all sitting down and hushed, and there in the corner I saw a unicorn. He was lying absolutely still, his feet tucked neatly under him. I could see now that he was made of carved wood and painted white, but he was so lifelike that if he'd got up and trotted off I wouldn't have been at all surprised.

Beside the unicorn and just as motionless, just as neat, stood a lady with a smiling face, a bright flowery scarf around her shoulders.





When her eyes found mine, her smile beckoned me to join them. Moments later I found myself sitting on the floor with the others, watching and waiting. When she sat down slowly on the unicorn and folded her hands in her lap I could feel expectation all around me.

“The unicorn story!” cried a little girl.

“Tell us the unicorn story. Please.”

She talked so softly that I had to lean forward to hear her. But I wanted to hear her, everyone did, because every word she spoke was meant and felt, and sounded true. The story was about how the last two magic unicorns alive on Earth had arrived just too late to get on Noah’s ark with all the other animals. So they were left stranded on a mountain top in the driving rain, watching the ark sail away over the great flood into the distance. The waters rose and rose around them until their hooves were covered, then their legs, then their backs, and so they had to swim. They swam and they swam, for hours, for days, for weeks, for years. They swam for so long, they swam so far, that in the end they turned into whales. This way they could swim easily. This way they could dive down to the bottom of the sea. But they never lost their magical powers and they still kept their wonderful horns, which is why there are to this day whales with unicorn’s horns. They’re called narwhals. And sometimes, when they’ve had enough of the sea and want to see children again, they swim up onto the beaches and find their legs and become unicorns again, magical unicorns.

After she had finished no one spoke. It was as if we were all waking



up from some dream we didn't want to leave. There were more stories, and poems too. Some she read from books, some she made up herself or knew by heart.

Then a hand went up. It was a small boy from my school, Milos with the sticky-up hair. "Can I tell a story, miss?" he asked. So sitting on the unicorn he told us his story. One after another after that they wanted their turn on the magical unicorn. I longed to have a go myself, but I didn't dare. I was frightened of making a fool of myself, I think.

The hour flew by.

"What was it like?" my mother asked me on the way home.

"All right, I suppose," I told her. But at school the next day I told all my friends what it was really like, all about the unicorn lady – everyone called her that – and her amazing stories and the fantastic magical storytelling power of the unicorn.

They came along with me to the library that afternoon. Day after day as word spread, the little group in the corner grew until there was a whole crowd of us. We would rush to the library now to get there first, to find a place close to the unicorn, close to the unicorn lady. Every story she told us held us entranced. She never told us to sit still. She didn't have to. Each day I wanted so much to sit on the unicorn and tell a story, but still I could never quite summon up the courage.

One afternoon the unicorn lady took out from her bag a rather old and damaged-looking book, all charred at the edges. It was, she



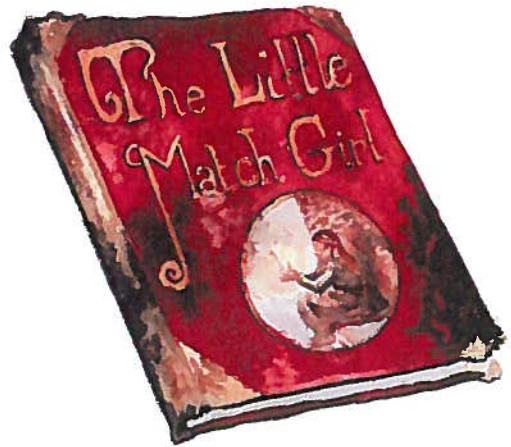


told us, her very own copy of *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen. I was sitting that day very close to the unicorn lady's feet, looking up at the book. "Why's it been burnt?" I asked her.

"This is the most precious book I have, Tomas," she said. "I'll tell you why. When I was very little I lived in another country. There were wicked people in my town who were frightened of the magic of stories and of the power of books, because stories make you think and dream; books make you want to ask questions. And they didn't want that. I was there with my father watching them burn a great pile of books, when suddenly my father ran forward and plucked a book out of the fire. The soldiers beat him with sticks, but he held on to the book and wouldn't let go of it. It was this book. It's my favourite book in all the world. Tomas, would you like to come and sit on the unicorn and read it to us?"

I had never been any good at reading out loud. I would always stutter over my consonants, worry over long words. But now, sitting on the magic unicorn, I heard my voice strong and loud. It was like singing a song. The words danced on the air and everyone listened. That same day I took home my first book from the library, *Aesop's Fables*, because the unicorn lady had read them to us and I'd loved them. I read them aloud to my mother that night, the first time I'd ever read to her, and I could see she was amazed. I loved amazing my mother.

Then one summer morning, early, war came to our valley and shattered our lives. Before that morning I knew little of war. I knew



some of the men had gone to fight, but I wasn't sure what for. I had seen on television tanks shooting at houses and soldiers with guns running through the trees, but my mother always told me it was far away and I wasn't to worry.

I remember the moment. I was outside. My mother had sent me out to open up the hens and feed them, when I looked up and saw a single plane come flying in low over the town. I watched as it circled once and came again. That was when the bombs began to fall, far away at first, then closer, closer. We were all running then, running up into the woods. I was too frightened to cry. My father cried. I'd never seen him cry before, but it was from anger as much as fear.



Hidden high in the woods we could see the tanks and the soldiers all over the town, **blasting and shooting** as they went. A few hours later, after they had gone, we could hardly see the town any more for the smoke. We waited until we were quite sure they had all gone, and then we ran back home. We were luckier than many. Our house had not been damaged. It was soon obvious that the centre of town had



been hardest hit. Everyone seemed to be making their way there. I ran on ahead hoping and praying that the library had not been bombed, that the unicorn lady and the unicorn were safe.

As I came into the square I saw smoke rising from the roof of the library and flames licking out of the upper windows. We all saw the unicorn lady at the same moment. She was coming out of the library carrying the unicorn, **staggering** under its weight.

I ran up the steps to help her. She smiled me her thanks as I took my share of the weight. Her eyes were red from the smoke. Between us we set the unicorn down at the foot of the steps, and she sat down exhausted, racked with a fit of coughing. My mother fetched her a glass of water. It must have helped because the coughing stopped, and all at once she was up on her feet, leaning on my shoulder for support.

“The books,” she breathed. “The books.”

When she began to walk back up the steps I followed her without thinking.

“No, Tomas,” she said. “You stay here and look after the unicorn.” Then she was running up the steps into the library, only to reappear moments later, her arms piled high with books. That was the moment the rescue began. People seemed suddenly to surge past me up the steps, and into the library, my mother and father amongst them.

It wasn't long before a whole system was set up. We children made two chains across the square from the library to the café



opposite, and the books everyone rescued went from hand to hand, ending up in stacks on the floor of the café. The fire was burning ever more fiercely, the flames crackling, smoke billowing now from the roof. No fire engines came – we found out later the fire station had been hit. Still the books came out. Still the fire burned and more and more people came to help, until the café was filled with books and we had to use the grocer's shop next door.

The moment came when there were suddenly no more books to pass along and we all wondered why. Then we saw everyone coming out of the library, and last of all the unicorn lady, helped by my father. They came slowly down the steps together, their faces smudged and blackened. The unicorn lady sat down heavily on the unicorn and looked up at the burning building. We children all gathered around her as if waiting for a story.



“We did it, children,” she said. “We saved all we could, didn’t we? I’m sitting on the unicorn so any story I tell is true because we believe it can be true. We shall build our library up again just as it was. Meanwhile we shall look after the books. Every family can take home all the books they can manage and care for them. And when in one year or two or three we have our new library, then we shall all bring back our books, and we shall carry the magic unicorn inside and we shall all tell our stories again. All we have to do is make this story come true.”

So it happened, just as the unicorn lady said it would. Like so many families in the town we took home a wheelbarrow full of



books and looked after them. Sure enough the library was rebuilt just the same as the old one, only by now everyone called it the Unicorn, and we all brought our books back just as the unicorn lady had told it in her story.

The day the library opened, because I had helped carry the unicorn out, I got to carry him back up the steps with the unicorn lady, and the whole town was there cheering and clapping, the flags flying, the band playing. It was the proudest and happiest day of my life.

Now, all these years later, we have peace in our valley. The unicorn lady is still the town librarian, still reading her stories to the children after school. As for me, I'm a writer now, a weaver of tales. And if from time to time I lose the thread of my story, all I have to do is go and sit on the magic unicorn and my story flows again. So believe me, I believe in unicorns. I believe in them absolutely.

