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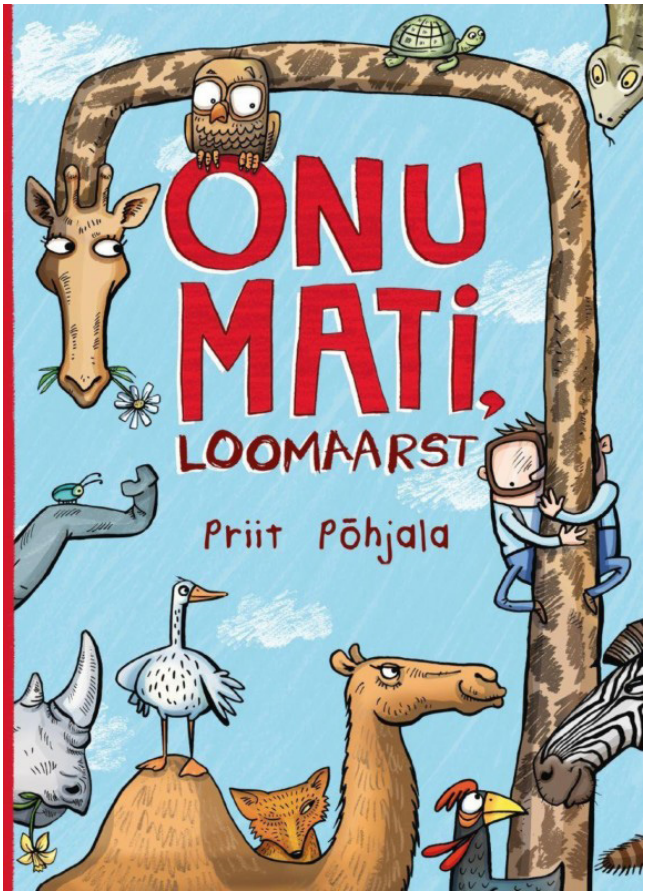

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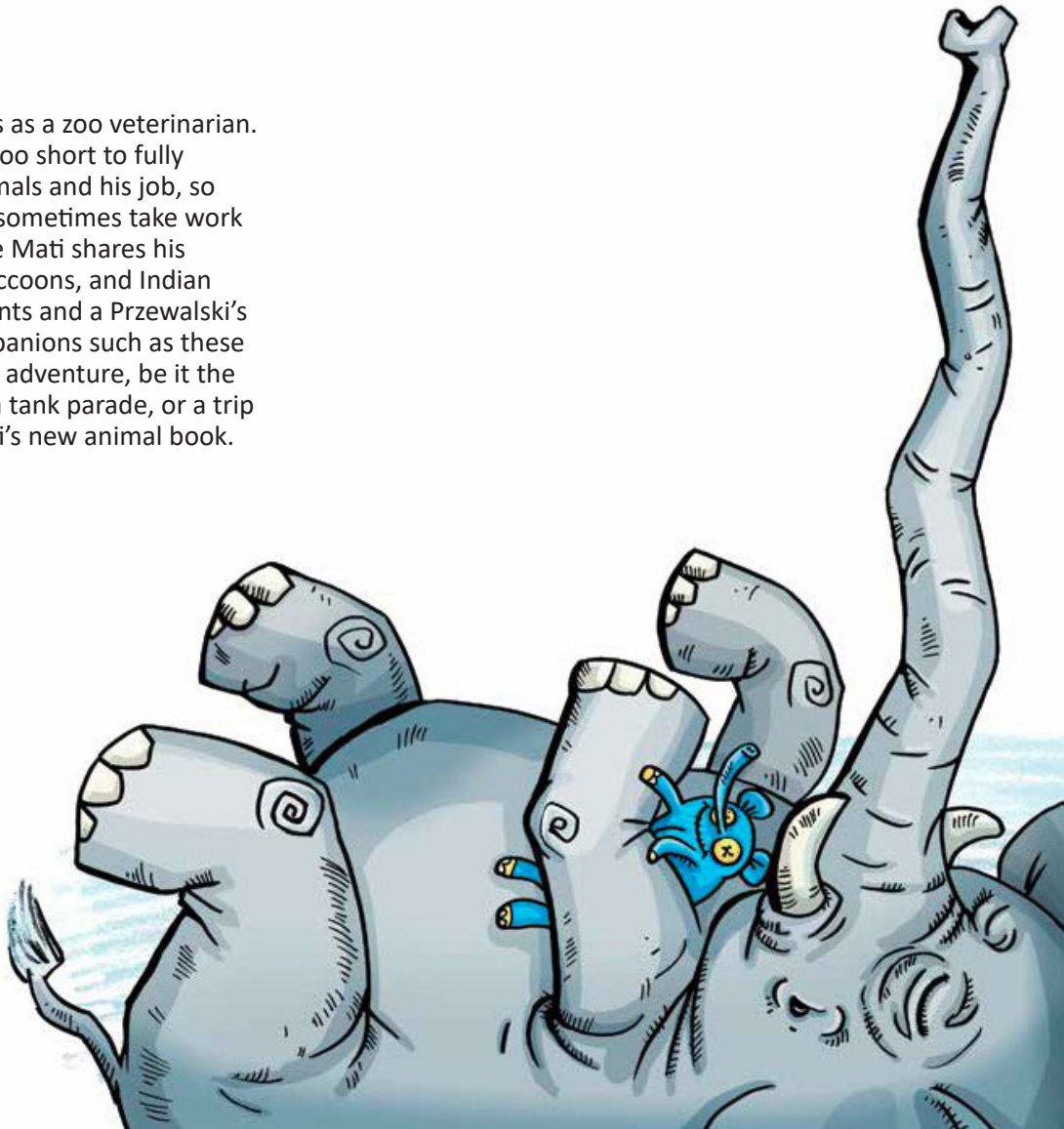
The fantastic Uncle Mati works as a zoo veterinarian. Unfortunately, his workday is too short to fully accommodate his love for animals and his job, so he has no other choice but to sometimes take work home with him. As such, Uncle Mati shares his home with bats, capybaras, raccoons, and Indian cobras, not to mention elephants and a Przewalski's horse. Naturally, unusual companions such as these bring about many a wonderful adventure, be it the presidential ball, marching in a tank parade, or a trip to Berlin to present Uncle Mati's new animal book.



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Uncle Mati, Veterinarian - Excerpts

Uncle Mati

Uncle Mati was a veterinarian — and the world's best, no less. He even had a certificate to prove it, hanging proudly on the wall of his surgery. The certificate read, in clear black and white:"Uncle Mati, World's Best Veterinarian." Anyone able to decipher uncle Mati's scrawled handwriting could read it and be duly proud of him.

As the world's best veterinarian, uncle Mati naturally possessed the very essence of a veterinarian through and through. No one would ever have mistaken him for a mathematician, a tax inspector, a mannequin, or a blender, for instance. The fact that he was a veterinarian was written plainly on his face. It was written on his clothes, too: they were liberally spattered with camel spit and tiger slobber, and smelled faintly (or not so faintly) of goat droppings, water buffalo manure, donkey urine, fox wee, pigeon guano, lemur leavings, elephant dung, and the occasional badger fart — all at once.

Many people were convinced that uncle Mati had been a veterinarian since birth, arriving in the world clad in a white coat and wielding a syringe. But that was, of course, nonsense. Before he could ever become a veterinarian, uncle Mati first had to master the arts of standing, walking, using the lavatory, talking, reading, writing, and adding one plus one. After that came paying bills, making small talk about the weather, listening to the news, hanging wallpaper, and walking past the sweet aisle without batting an eyelid — in short, all those dreary accomplishments that make up an adult's daily life. All the while, he studied diligently at veterinary school, and only after he graduated could he finally practise his calling.

When Mati was a boy, the very idea of becoming a veterinarian had never occurred to him. His dreams were quite different. At the age of five, he longed to be a sandcastle-building engineer — until he discovered that such work would be scarce in winter in our northern climate. At six, he aspired to be a professional tall tale-teller, but soon realised the competition in that field was far too tight.

At seven, he wished to be a rollercoaster test-rider — until his very first ride revealed his fear of heights. And of speed. And of loop-the-loops. Thereafter, even a mere photograph of a rollercoaster was enough to make his stomach lurch.

At eight, he fancied becoming an astronaut, a cowboy, or a detective. There comes a time in the life of every boy, and many girls, when they dream of all three. Mati would have been delighted to combine them — a space cowboy detective, for example, solving the mystery of a missing cow.

At nine, he was taken with the idea of being the Minister of Synchronisation of the Integration of Nations, or the Doctor of the Institute for the Reproduction of Sensational Solarisation. He had no idea what these jobs involved, but their titles were wonderfully grand. For the same reason, he also wanted to be the Director of a Saw-set Manufacturing Line's Control Panel, or a Dogmatic Heretics' Inquisitor.

At ten, he briefly considered becoming a criminal — but the sort who committed only good crimes. For example, startling a burglar by bursting a balloon beside his ear. Or ruining a pirate's fearsome reputation by secretly replacing his black eye-patch with a pink one. Or thoroughly confounding a painter of modern art by hiding his easel and brushes.

It took quite some time before uncle Mati began to realise that his true vocation was to be a veterinarian. And do not be surprised if you wish to become a wild pony-tamer, the director of a doll's-house union, a seller of kick-scooters with built-in catapults, or a Moon-Ridge Bridgers — yet end up as, say, a fisherman. Life is prone to taking strange turns.

Although perhaps not as strange as the turns in the book you are holding.

The Glasses and the Droppings

Poor eyesight, coupled with leaving one's spectacles at home, multiplied by a serious form of absent-mindedness, equals a whole series of embarrassing incidents. I experienced this equation for myself when, one day, I forgot my glasses before going to visit someone. First, I stood in the street conversing with a litter bin for fifteen minutes, thinking an election poster pasted to it was an old schoolfriend. Later, at my friend's house, I spent half an hour stroking a broom, firmly convinced it was the family cat. Meanwhile, the real cat (which I mistook for a teapot) sat on the coffee table beside the actual teapot, into which I had put the carnations I had brought for my hostess — believing it to be a vase.

But none of that compares to what happened the day uncle Mati left his spectacles at home. Without glasses I'm like a hedgehog, I can barely see beyond the tip of my nose, but uncle Mati's unaided eyesight was worse still, more like that of a mole. It was so poor that, on that fateful morning, he accidentally rode a road roller to work (it happened to be painted the same yellow as the tram he usually took) and arrived seven hours late.

At last reaching the zoo, he decided to spend the single remaining hour of his working day on his customary leisurely round, greeting all the animals before bidding them goodnight.

The first creature he encountered was, in fact, the zoo director — though, lacking his glasses, uncle Mati took him for a bison. Both were large and hairy, after all. He scratched the "bison" behind the ear and popped a handful of fresh grass into his mouth, knowing it was his favourite treat. This made the director rather cross, though it is hard to deliver a proper telling-off with one's mouth full of grass; it came out sounding more like the grateful rumbling of a well-fed bison.

Meanwhile, uncle Mati had moved on and encountered the actual bison — whom he mistook for the zoo director. "Here you are," he said, handing over a great sheaf of papers. "My report on the health of the zoo's bison." It had taken him three months to write, but the bison, being in excellent health and therefore possessed of a hearty appetite, ate the lot in three seconds flat.

Oblivious, uncle Mati next spotted the gardener, down on all fours in green overalls, weeding a flower-bed. "What a marvellous idea," he thought, "to put a green sofa right by the flowers! Perfect for a little rest." And so, he sat down on the gardener.

When a pleasantly solid gentleman unexpectedly lands on one's back, there is little to do but collapse flat and groan — which is precisely what the gardener did, flattening the narcissi in the process. Uncle Mati rose and continued his stroll, resolving to inform the gardener later that the "sofa" was broken and the flowers crushed.

Presently, he noticed some rabbit droppings in the grass at the path's edge. Mistaking them for chocolate-coated raisins, he picked them up carefully and popped them into his pocket. "I'll have them later at home," he thought, "or perhaps offer them to someone else."

Soon after, he passed the zoo café, where he spied a little bowl of chocolate raisins on the counter. "Ha! Some scamp has filled the sweet bowl with rabbit droppings," he thought, and — unwilling to be fooled — flung the lot, dish and all, out of the window with a bang.

Later, nothing of note occurred — unless one counts the moment he asked a giraffe for her autograph (believing she was a British actress), attempted to feed termites to a British actress visiting the giraffes (thinking she was a peacock), and plucked a few feathers from a peacock's tail (imagining it to be a rose bush).

When it was time to go home, uncle Mati was astonished that no one — not the zoo director, nor the gardener, nor the café manager — bade him farewell. They merely glowered.

His neighbour, however, was the angriest of all that evening. And would you not be, if someone offered you rabbit droppings, assuring you they were chocolate-coated raisins?

George and the Louse

A first-year class came to the zoo on a school outing. They began the day by strolling about to meet the residents, after which they held a drawing competition. The task was to sketch one's favourite animal. Uncle Mati was invited to be the judge, which meant assessing how realistic the drawings were and choosing the one most deserving of first prize.

The first picture uncle Mati examined showed a fox and a hare. Miia, its artist, had been unable to decide which animal she liked best, so she had drawn both. Uncle Mati complimented her work, but explained it was not entirely realistic. "You see, if a fox were in the same scene as a plump little hare like this, its mouth would certainly be watering," he said. To remedy the matter, he added two thin trickles of drool running down the fox's whiskers.

The next picture was by Siim — a stork, drawn with great enthusiasm. Along with its legs, tail, wings, beak, and eyes, Siim had thoughtfully provided it with a belly button. "Storks do not have belly buttons," uncle Mati said firmly. He should know: he had once authored a learned volume entitled People Are Wingless and Birds Are Navelless, so he was on familiar ground.

Marta, who adored fine and fashionable clothes, had produced the third drawing. She had begun with a soft, furry chinchilla, but as the picture progressed, it had somehow turned into a fluffy fur coat.

The fourth picture — a sheet of paper shaded entirely black from corner to corner — was Karl's. It was, he explained, a mole relaxing underground in pitch darkness.

In the fifth picture, Aksel had drawn a black panther — perfectly realistic except for the fact that it was bright blue. This was not intentional: Karl had worn the black pencil down to a stump for his pitch-black mole.

The sixth picture, drawn by Karola, depicted a green woodpecker at work on a tree trunk. I should mention that I myself was at the zoo that day, and her woodpecker was my favourite. Uncle Mati liked it as well. "Oh, what a delightful green teapot!" he said cheerfully to the girl. Karola, naturally, took offence, and from that day on never drew another green woodpecker. A pity, really — it was a lovely teapot.
I mean… woodpecker.

Uncle Mati examined many more drawings. All were splendid in their way, yet each had some small flaw. He began to suspect that he might not see a single truly realistic picture worthy of first prize.

At last, little George approached, on the verge of tears. He had spent far too long

watching the bears and had not finished his picture. His plan had been to draw a gigantic bear, but in the end all he had time for was a single, tiny dot in the middle of the page.

Uncle Mati took George's paper and peered at it closely. He tilted it this way and that, then pressed his nose almost against it. Suddenly, his face lit up. "What an extraordinarily realistic louse!" he exclaimed. "Drawn exactly as we humans see it with the naked eye!"

And so, uncle Mati awarded first prize to George and his dot. As an extra reward, he presented the boy with a box of newborn lice — all of which, by the very next day, had taken up residence in the hair of the entire first-year class.

After that, I was very glad indeed that my beloved woodpecker had not won first prize.

The Animal Unknown to Science

All manner of things found their way to the zoo where uncle Mati worked. In autumn, farmers brought apples, potatoes, carrots, turnips, pumpkins, and cabbages for the animals. In summer, coaches delivered tourists to see them. Once, a woman arrived with her husband, claiming he was the world's largest ass. Another time, a man tried to hand over his noisy neighbour, asking that he be put into a cage with a bloodthirsty tiger.

One fine summer's day, however, someone turned up with a truly extraordinary creature they had discovered in the middle of the city. It was quite impossible to say what it was. It might have been a winged cow, or an owl with udders; a feathered dog, or perhaps a modern, civilised dinosaur.

Uncle Mati carried the curious beast into his office and placed it gently on the table. Then he summoned some scientists to examine it: a zoologist, an oologist, and a penguinologist. If anyone could identify such an oddity, surely they could. When the experts arrived, they stood in silence, staring as the creature calmly lapped milk from a saucer.

At length, the zoologist — the animal expert — made a solemn pronouncement. "My dear colleagues," he declared, "it appears that what we have before us is an animal previously unknown to science."

"I've heard of something similar," said the oologist — the egg expert — raising her hand. "Once, Brittish scientists discovered a mysterious animal with large, yellow eyes like an owl's, a big head like a bison's, and a short, furry tail like that of a bear cub."

"That," the zoologist sniffed, "was Gruffalo. From a children's book."

"So what?" the oologist retorted. "We're in a children's book too!"

The zoologist ignored her and pressed on. "We must first determine what known creatures it most resembles. Everything looks a little like something else! Is it more

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pipe-toothed or claw-hoofed? More chew-beaked or snout-headed? And we cannot rule out its being some sort of straight-wing or fringe-fin."

"Let's wait a while — perhaps it will lay eggs," the oologist suggested. "If the eggs are pale with brown speckles, it is most likely a type of sparrow."

"Penguins lay eggs as well," the penguinologist — the penguin specialist — put in. "Though rarely. And I have a hairdresser's appointment in half an hour. Fortunately, we can also judge its degree of penguinity by its opinion on wearing tuxedos…"

"I say we begin by giving it a name," interrupted uncle Mati. "Names are the most important thing. And it will make it easier to talk to."

The scientists agreed, and each paused in thought.

"Colory," suggested the zoologist, "for its colourful feathers."
"Finnegan" said the penguinologist, "for its blue fins."
"Uncle Mati," said uncle Mati, modestly. The fact that the creature was at that moment scratching its back with his comb gave him a certain claim.

The oologist never had the chance to offer her idea, for the strange animal had finished its milk, ceased its scratching, and leapt down from the table.

"That was pleasant, but I am done," it announced. "May I leave now?"

For a moment, no one spoke. Then the oologist went "Ooooo!", the zoologist went "Zoooo!", and uncle Mati and the penguinologist tried to hide behind each other.

"What sort of creature are you?" uncle Mati at last managed to ask.

"An alien," the being replied.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed the zoologist, as though he had suspected it all along. "From some remote corner of the countryside, I imagine?"

"No. From a planet called Julius X."

“And what does the X stand for?”

“Err… nnnothin’. It’s just to sound cool,” the alien said.

“And you can speak our language?” the penguinologist inquired.

“Yep. But I actually arranged it so that all of you can understand Julian.”

“And what language is that, if I may ask?”

“Julius X is our homeland, and Julian is what we speak there.”

“And what is your name?” the oologist asked politely.

“Julie. All the males of Julius X are named Julie. The females are Julias. But I really must be off now; I want to see Town Hall Square before I return home.”

All the scientists would have liked to converse much longer with their remarkable guest, but there was nothing to be done. As the alien walked towards the door, uncle Mati piped up: “One more question. If you ever return to these parts, what should we offer you? What do you enjoy besides milk?”

“Town hall squares,” the alien replied seriously. “My favourites are medieval town hall squares with cold milk and strawberries.”

With that, he departed.

The Porcelain Elephant

Uncle Mati took an elephant for a walk in town, and they happened upon a porcelain shop. The window displayed an array of exquisite little animal figurines, and uncle Mati felt an irresistible urge to step inside for a closer look.

“You stay outside and wait, please,” he said to his companion. “Do not wander off, even if you spot another elephant.”

However, this elephant was as gentle as could be. Her name suited her perfectly—Cutie. She snuggled up to uncle Mati’s side, curling her trunk around his coat-tail and signalling in every way that she did not wish to be left outside alone.

It might seem rather odd to you, going into a porcelain shop with an elephant! But it wouldn’t feel nearly so strange if you knew of that old Indian lady who taught her three-metre-long pet tiger to use a litter box, or that Norwegian boy who often took his tamed blue whale swimming in the public kids’ pool. An elephant next to a blue whale is like a button—barely bigger than the whale’s tongue, which weighs almost three tons.

Anyway, Uncle Mati stepped into the porcelain shop with Cutie, and the whole shop became filled with elephant. The shopkeeper, who had been afraid of elephants since childhood, crawled under the counter without saying a word, squeezed his eyes shut, and began humming to himself: “Mary had a little lamb. It’s fleece was white as snow, yeah…”

Uncle Mati went to inspect the animal figurines, while Cutie, feeling terribly cramped in the tiny shop—like a sardine in a tin—started fidgeting. She flicked her tail, sending a dolls' china tea set crashing to the floor in pieces. But this was no ordinary tea set. It had been made by the famous Italian craftsman Blubaldo for his daughter Salvatora's fifth birthday.

The set had been so delicate and fragile that Blubaldo had given his daughter a carrot instead, hiding the tea set in a cupboard behind seven locks. There it had stayed, untouched, for a hundred and fifty years.

Only then did the shopkeeper dare to open his eyes—and then his mouth. "You absolute ass!" he shrieked at uncle Mati. Despite his anger, he did not have the courage to face the elephant.

Uncle Mati, flattered, took this as a compliment. "Oh, thank you!" he said. "Donkeys are exceptionally friendly and intelligent animals. I often feel a kinship with them."

Meanwhile, Cutie impatiently waved her trunk, knocking down a porcelain figure whose head snapped off. Some might have sighed with relief, as it was an unattractive statue. Nevertheless, it had been expensive, once owned by a famous American movie star who kept it in her bathroom. Headless, it was now worthless. The enraged shopkeeper cried, "You swine!"

Uncle Mati's ears pricked up in delight. "If you say so. Who am I to argue?" he replied modestly. "Pigs are excellent communicators and have a remarkable sense of smell. In France, they are even used to root out truffles. Perhaps I shall try that when I retire!"

At that moment, Cutie attempted to scratch behind her ear with her leg, accidentally sending a priceless Chinese vase crashing to the floor. It had once belonged to Princess Changping, daughter of Emperor Chongzhen, who had stored her hairpins within it. Nearly four hundred years old, the vase was worth at least a million euros. Seeing it shatter into a thousand and one fragments, the shopkeeper tore a clump of his hair and stuttered, "You… you… amoeba!"

Amoebas are said to have no brains, yet uncle Mati again felt complimented. "You are too kind!" he exclaimed. "Amoebas are beautiful creatures—so perfectly round! My doctor tells me I am a little pudgy, but I prefer to think of myself as charmingly rounded, just like you."

Feeling obliged to show his gratitude, uncle Mati purchased a tiny porcelain elephant for two euros. Only as he reached for his money did he notice the shop's disorder: shards of porcelain and clumps of hair littered the floor.

“You should really tidy up a little,” he suggested kindly. “Think of the people who come in with pets, like I did today. Animals do not wear shoes—they could be hurt by these fragments.”

This was too much for the shopkeeper. He began sobbing and stomping his feet. Uncle Mati patted his shoulder comfortingly. “It is all right. Make yourself a cup of tea, calm down, and start cleaning. Once you begin, it will seem much less dreadful.”

Carefully, he slipped the porcelain elephant into his pocket, called Cutie to his side, and stepped outside feeling very content.