



“Uncle Mati, Veterinarian”

Text by [Priit Põhjala](#)

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Storybook, fiction

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The fantastic Mr. 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, Mr. 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 Mr. Mati's new animal book.

Awards:

2019 Tartu Prize for Children's Literature
(Childhood Prize) nominee

2018 Annual Children's Literature Award of
the Cultural Endowment of Estonia nominee

Reading sample

[pp 7–9]

Mr. Mati was a veterinarian, and was the best in the world. He even had a certificate on the wall of his office to prove it. The document read in clear black and white: “Mr. Mati, World’s Best Veterinarian”. Anyone who could make out Mr. Mati’s scrawled handwriting could read it and be proud of him.

As the world’s best veterinarian, Mr. Mati naturally had the character of a veterinarian through and through. No one would ever have thought Mr. Mati was a mathematician or a tax official or a mannequin or a blender, for example. His veterinarianness was written plainly on his face. It was on his clothes, too: they were covered in camel spit and tiger slobber; they smelled like goat droppings and water buffalo manure and donkey urine and fox pee and pigeon poop and lemur doo-doo and elephant dung and badger farts all at once.

There were no doubt many people who believed Mr. Mati had been a veterinarian since birth—that he’d come out wearing a doctor’s coat and holding a syringe. But that wasn’t true, of course! First of all, before he could become a veterinarian, Mr. Mati had to figure out standing, walking, going to the bathroom, talking, reading, writing, and one plus one. After that, he had to learn how to pay bills, chat about the weather, listen to the news, put up wallpaper, and walk past the candy aisle without blinking an eye: in short, all those dreadful things that make up an adult’s everyday life. He studied very diligently at veterinary school, and it was only after he graduated that he could finally become a veterinarian.

Keep in mind that Mati hadn’t even heard of the career when he was just a little boy. Back then, he had completely different dreams about who he would become. For instance, when he was five years old, Mati wanted to become a sand-castle building engineer. That is, until he found out he wouldn’t have all that much work on his plate during winter in our northern climate. When he was six, Mati wanted to become a professional fibber. As he soon figured out, though, the competition in that field is much too stiff.

When he was seven, Mati wanted to become a rollercoaster test rider. However, he had to abandon these plans as well, because the first time he rode one, it turned out he had a fear of heights. And of speed. And of loop-the-loops. After that, Mr. Mati felt his stomach churn every time he simply saw a picture of a rollercoaster.

At the age of eight, Mati wanted to become either an astronaut or a cowboy or a detective. There comes a time in the lives of every boy and many girls when they want to become an astronaut or a cowboy or a detective. Mati would have gladly become all three of them at once—for instance, a space cowboy who solves the case of a lost cow.

When he was nine, Mati wanted to become a minister of synchronization of the integration of the nations, or a doctor of the institute of the reproduction of sensational solarization. He didn’t actually know what those jobs meant, of course, but they sure did sound exciting. For the same reason, Mr. Mati similarly wanted to become the director of a saw-set manufacturing line’s control panel or a dogmatic heretics’ inquisitor.

When he was ten, Mr. Mati wanted to become a criminal, but the kind who only commits good crimes. For instance, by startling a burglar who is working on prying open a door by popping a balloon next to his ear. Or by ruining a pirate’s tough-guy reputation by secretly replacing his black eyepatch with a pink one. Or by ruining a modernist painter’s day by hiding his easel and paint brushes.



“Mr. Mati, Veterinarian” by Preet Põhjälä

It took quite a long time before Mr. Mati began to realize his true calling was to be a veterinarian. Don't you be surprised, either, if you want to become a wild pony tamer or the director of a dollhouse cooperative or a retailer who sells scooters with slingshots built into the handlebars or a Pluto pocket watch proliferator, but ultimately, you end up being ... well, let's say a sea fisherman. Life really can take some weird turns!

You're right, though—perhaps not turns as weird as the ones in the book you just started reading.

[pp 20–22]

George and the Louse

A first-grade class came to the zoo on a field trip. The children started their day by walking around and getting to know the residents, after which they had a drawing competition where everyone was supposed to draw the animal they liked most. Mr. Mati was asked to be the judge, which meant evaluating the pictures for how realistic they were and choosing one that deserved first place.

The first picture Mr. Mati looked at was of a fox and a hare. Miia, its author, had simply been unable to decide which animal she liked best, so she drew them both. Mr. Mati told her it was a very nice picture, but unfortunately not quite realistic. "You see, if a fox is in the same picture with a plump little hare like this, then its mouth would certainly be watering," he said. To fix this, he drew two trickles of drool running down the fox's whiskers.



The second picture Mr. Mati judged was a stork by Siim. In his excitement, he'd given the bird a belly button in addition to its legs, tail, wings, beak, and eyes. "Storks don't have belly buttons," Mr. Mati said firmly. As fate would have it, he was also the author of a book about the anatomical differences between people and birds titled *People Are Wingless and Birds Are Navelless*, so he had a good idea of what he was talking about.

Marta, who adored pretty and pricy clothes, had drawn the third picture. It was no wonder that she's started out drawing a very soft and furry chinchilla, but it gradually turned into a fluffy fur coat.

The fourth picture—a sheet of paper scribbled black from corner to corner—was by Karl, and it was supposed to show a mole lounging underground in pitch-black darkness. In the fifth picture, Aksel had drawn a black panther. The animal itself was rather realistic except for one tiny detail—it was blue from head to tail. Karl had worn the black colored pencil down to a nub while drawing his mole in the pitch-black darkness.

The sixth picture, which was by Karola, showed a green woodpecker pecking at a tree. I might add that I myself was at the zoo that day, too, and her woodpecker was my favorite. Mr. Mati liked it, too. "Oh, what a pretty green teapot!" he said to the girl jovially. Of course, Karola was offended by this comment and never drew a green woodpecker again. It's a shame she didn't, because it really was a pretty teapot—I mean, woodpecker.

Mr. Mati inspected many more pictures that day. All of them were great, but they each had some little flaw. By that time, Mr. Mati had started to think he wouldn't see a single realistic picture worthy of first place.

Last of all, little Georg handed Mr. Mati his picture. Georg was on the verge of tears because he'd spent too much time watching the bears and hadn't finished his drawing. He'd wanted to draw a gigantic bear, but all he'd had time to do was to make a teensy-tiny dot in the middle of his paper.

Mr. Mati took Georg's picture and looked at it this way and that. He stuck his nose right up to the dot.

Wiping his glasses, he looked at it again. Suddenly, Mr. Mati beamed. “What an incredibly realistic louse!” he praised, staring at Georg’s dot. “It’s drawn just the way we humans see it with our naked eye.”

So, Mr. Mati decided to give little Georg and his dot the first-place prize in the drawing competition. What’s more, he gave the boy a boxful of newborn lice, which all ended up in the first-grade students’ hair by the very next day.

After that, I was sure glad that my favorite woodpecker picture hadn’t won first place!

[pp 49–52]

The Glasses and the Droppings

Poor eyesight plus eyeglasses you forget at home times a more problematic type of absentmindedness equals a whole bunch of embarrassing incidents. I realized this equation adds up one time when I was on my way to pay someone a visit and realized I’d left my glasses at home. First of all, I chatted with a trash can on the street for fifteen minutes, thinking the election ad pasted onto it was an old schoolmate. And then, after I was already at my friend’s house, I pet a broom for half an hour because I thought it was the family cat. I might add that the cat (which I thought was a teapot) was actually sitting on the coffee table next to a teapot, into which I’d stuck some carnations I brought the woman of the house, thinking it was a vase.

But none of that is even comparable to what unfolded when Mr. Mati left his glasses at home. Whereas like a hedgehog, I can barely see past the tip of my nose without them, Mr. Mati’s vision without glasses was like that of a mole, which is even worse. It was so bad that on the day Mr. Mati left them at home, he accidentally rode a steamroller to work (it was painted the same yellow as the trolley he usually took) and thus ran seven hours late.

Once he finally arrived at the zoo, Mr. Mati decided to spend the remaining hour of the workday on his usual relaxing walk. He wanted to check in on all the zoo residents, say hello to them, and then tell them goodbye for the day.

First of all, Mr. Mati came across the zoo director, whom he took for a bison. Both were big and hairy! Mr. Mati scratched the zoo director under the chin and stuck a handful of fresh grass into his mouth—the bison’s favorite food. This made the director very angry. He wanted to yell at Mr. Mati, but you try yelling with your mouth full of grass! It sounds just like the rumbling of a thankful bison.

Another problem with this was that Mr. Mati had already strolled off and had come across a real bison, who he thought was the zoo director. “Here’s my study on the health of the zoo’s bison,” Mr. Mati said, handing the bison a giant stack of papers. He’d been working on the report for three whole months. The bison, who was in very good health and therefore had a fantastic appetite, gobbled them up in just three seconds.

Mr. Mati didn’t notice, because he’d spotted the zoo’s gardener, who was weeding a flowerbed nearby. The gardener was down on all fours and wearing green overalls, so Mr. Mati thought: “What a nice idea—putting a green sofa there by the flowerbed. It just begs to be sat upon to rest my legs for a spell!” And so, Mr. Mati took a seat on the gardener.



When a lovably curvy guy unexpectedly plops down on your back, it's hard to do anything but collapse onto your belly and groan. And that's just what the gardener did. Falling straight into the flowerbed knocked the wind out of him and crushed all the narcissus. Mr. Mati stood up and continued his walk, making a mental note to tell the gardener about the broken sofa and the crushed flowers.

Before long, Mr. Mati noticed rabbit droppings lying in the grass on the side of the path. He thought they were chocolate-covered raisins, so he carefully plucked them all up and put them into his pocket. "I'll snack on them at home later," Mr. Mati reckoned, "or maybe even offer them to someone else!"

Then, Mr. Mati came to the zoo cafeteria, peeked inside, and saw a little bowl of chocolate-covered raisins on the table. "Well I'll be! Some mischief-maker has filled the candy bowl with rabbit droppings! Well, you're not going to trick me, whoever you are" Mr. Mati thought, and tossed the candy—bowl and all—right out the window.

Nothing all that exciting happened later, if you don't count the fact that Mr. Mati asked a giraffe for an autograph (because he thought it was a British actress), tried to feed termites to a British actress who had come to see the giraffes (because he thought she was a peacock), and plucked a couple feathers from a peacock's tail (because he thought it was a rose bush).

As he headed out, Mr. Mati was stunned: no one, not even the zoo director or the gardener or the cafeteria cook, said goodbye to him. All of them just glared.

Mr. Mati's neighbor, on the other hand, was especially furious that night. Why, you ask? Well, no doubt you'd be furious, too, if someone offered you rabbit droppings and told you they were chocolate-covered raisins.

[pp 57–60]

The Animal Unknown to Science

All kinds of things were brought to the zoo where Mr. Mati worked. In fall, farmers would deliver

apples, potatoes, carrots, turnips, pumpkins, and cabbages for the animals to eat. In summer, buses would bring tourists to see them. Once, a woman brought her husband, claiming he was the world's biggest donkey. Another time, a man brought his noisy neighbor, asking them to be stuck into a cage with a bloodthirsty tiger.

One nice summer day, however, someone delivered a bizarre creature they found in the middle of the city. It was impossible to say what it was, exactly. The animal might well have been a winged cow or an owl with udders; a feathered dog or some kind of modern, civilized dinosaur.

Mr. Mati took the unusual creature into his office and set it down on the table. Then, he called some scientists to come see it: a zoologist, an oologist, and a penguinologist. Experts like that had to be able figure out what they were dealing with! When everyone had arrived, they stood staring at the incredible beast as it lapped milk from a saucer.

After a while, the zoologist, a.k.a. the animal scientist, made a ceremonious remark.

"My dear colleagues," he declared, "it seems that what we have here is an animal previously unknown to science."

"I've heard of a similar case," said the oologist, a.k.a. the egg scientist, raising her hand. "One time, Russian scientists found an unidentified tropical animal with big, yellow eyes like those of an owl; an oval head like that of a hare; and a stubby, furry tail like that of a bear cub."



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“That was Cheburashka. In a children’s book,” the zoologist huffed.

“So what?” the oologist snapped. “We’re in a children’s book, too!”

The zoologist simply ignored her and continued: “We must determine what already-known animals this ... um ... oddity resembles most. Everything looks a little like something else! Is it more pipe-toothed or claw-hoofed? More chew-beaked or snout-headed? And we can’t rule out it being some type of a straight-wing or a fringe-fin.”

“Let’s wait a little while—maybe it’ll start laying eggs!” the oologist proposed. “If the eggs are light-colored with brown spots, then it’s probably a type of sparrow.”

“Penguins lay eggs, too,” announced the penguinologist. a.k.a. the penguin researcher. “But they do so very rarely, and I’ve got an appointment for a haircut in half an hour. Luckily, we can also tell its degree of penguinness by what it thinks about wearing tuxedos ...”

“I reckon we should give it some kind of a name to start with,” Mr. Mati interrupted. “Names are what matters most. And that way, it’ll be easier for us to talk to it.”

All the scientists agreed and paused to think for a moment.

“Colory,” the zoologist proposed. “Because it has colorful feathers.”

“Finny,” said the penguinologist. “Because it has blue fins.”

“Mr. Mati,” Mr. Mati said modestly. It was a fact that the creature was currently scratching its back with his comb.

The oologist didn’t get a chance to say anything, because the strange creature had finished its milk, stopped scratching itself, and jumped off the table.

“That was nice, but I’m all done,” it announced. “Does that mean I may leave now?”

At first, everyone was speechless. Then, the oologist went “oooo!” and the zoologist went “zoooo” and Mr. Mati and the penguinologist were so startled they tried to hide behind each other’s back.

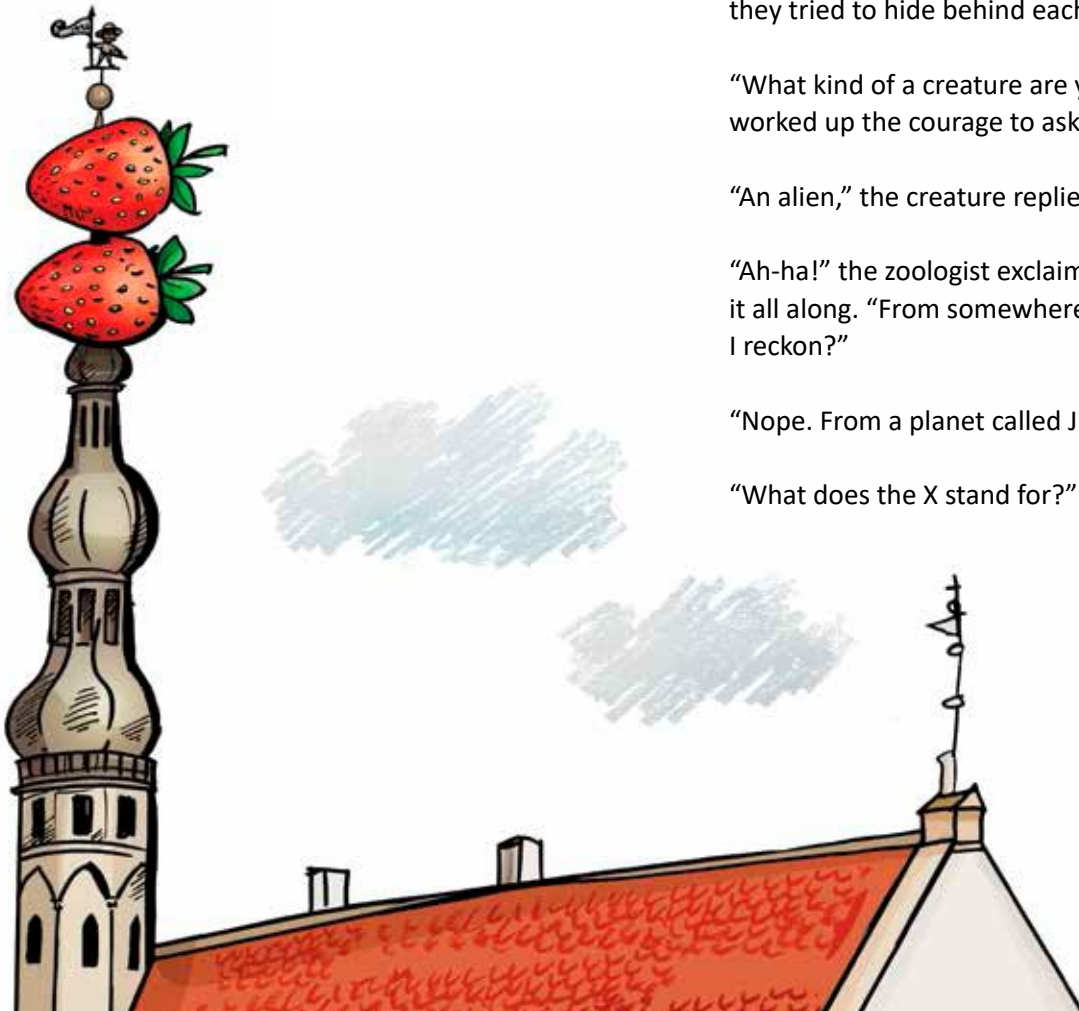
“What kind of a creature are you?” Mr. Mati finally worked up the courage to ask.

“An alien,” the creature replied.

“Ah-ha!” the zoologist exclaimed as if he’d suspected it all along. “From somewhere out in the boondocks, I reckon?”

“Nope. From a planet called Julius X.”

“What does the X stand for?”



“Err, nnothin’. It’s just to sound cool.”

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

“Yep. But I actually made it so all of you can speak our language.”

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

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

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

“Julie. All the men of Julius X are named Julie. The women are Julias. But I really have to get going now. I’d like to check out Town Hall Square before I go home.”

All the scientists would have liked to chat much longer with their exciting guest, but there was nothing they could do. As the alien started walking towards the door, Mr. Mati piped up: “One more question. What should we treat you to if you ever end up in these parts again? What do you enjoy besides milk?”

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

With that, he walked out.

[pp 67–71]

The Porcelain Elephant

Mr. Mati took an elephant for a walk in town, where they came across a porcelain shop. There were many wonderful little porcelain animal figurines on display in the shop window, and Mr. Mati got an urge to pop inside to take a closer look.

“You stay outside and wait, please,” Mr. Mati said to his companion. “Don’t go running off if you happen to spot another elephant.”

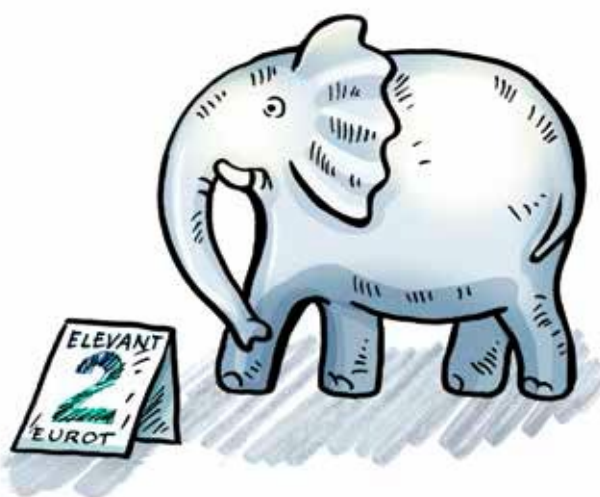
However, this elephant was as tender as could be. Even her name fit the bill—Cutie. And now, Cutie

snuggled up to Mr. Mati’s side, wrapping her trunk around his coat tail and signaling in every other way she could that she didn’t want to be left outside all alone. So, Mr. Mati softened up and decided to take her along into the porcelain shop.

Now, this may seem like a very strange idea—walking into a porcelain shop with an elephant! It wouldn’t seem strange at all, though, if you’d heard of the old Indian lady who taught her ten-foot-long pet tiger to use a litter box or the Norwegian boy who often took his tamed blue whale swimming in the public kids’ pool. Compared with a blue whale, an elephant is only the size of a button—barely bigger than a whale’s tongue, which weighs almost three tons!

In any case, Mr. Mati entered the porcelain shop with Cutie, filling the whole space with elephant. The storeowner, who had been terrified of elephants since he was a kid, hid beneath the counter without saying a single word, squeezed his eyes shut, and started humming a comforting tune in his head: “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are ...”

Mr. Mati went to inspect the animal figurines while Cutie, who felt awfully uncomfortable in the cramped store—sort of like a sardine in a tin—started to squirm. She flipped her tail, which sent a dolls’ china tea set flying; it smashed to smithereens on the ground. Alas, this was no ordinary china—it had been made by the renowned Italian craftsman Sinibaldo for his daughter Salvatora as a present for her fifth birthday. The gift turned out to be so fragile and delicate that Sinibaldo gave his daughter a carrot instead and hid the china in a cupboard behind seven locks, where it stood untouched for one hundred and fifty years.



Only then did the storeowner dare to open first his eyes, then his mouth. “You donkey!” he screamed at Mr. Mati. In spite of how angry he was, he still didn’t have the courage to face the elephant.

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

At the same time, Cutie impatiently waved her trunk, knocking down a porcelain figure and causing its head to snap off. Now, there are many people who might have sighed in relief, because it was a very ugly statue. Nevertheless, it cost a pretty penny, because it had belonged to a world-famous American movie star who had kept it in her bathroom. Now that it was headless, though, it wasn’t worth much at all. Trembling with rage, the storeowner shrieked: “You swine!”

Mr. Mati’s ears pricked up with pleasure. “If you say so. Who am I to argue?” he said, trying to stay modest. “All I’ll say is that pigs are great communicators and have an extraordinary sense of smell. In France, they use pigs to root truffles out of the ground. Maybe I should give it a try as well when I retire someday!”

Just then, Cutie tried to scratch behind her ear with her leg, accidentally knocking down an especially valuable Chinese vase, which had once belonged to Princess Changping, the daughter of the Chinese Emperor Chongzhen, who had stored her hairpins in it. At almost four hundred years old, the vase cost at least one million euros! When the storeowner saw it smash into one thousand and one tiny shards on the floor, he tore out a clump of his hair and stuttered: “You ... you ... amoeba!”

As you may know, they say amoebas have no brains. Mr. Mati, however, was again very pleased by the comment and even blushed in delight. “You are too kind!” he gushed. “Amoebas are beautiful creatures. So round! You know, my doctor thinks I’m a bit pudgy, but just like you, I believe I’m just adorably round.”

Mr. Mati felt the storeowner had treated him so wonderfully that he simply had to buy something as

a sign of thanks—even if he had no real used for it. Are there any of us who wouldn’t buy a knickknack or two not out of necessity, but just to be polite, or because it was a bargain, or because it was just nice and new? I certainly have! For instance, at home, I’ve got a hay turner, two curling irons, and a book titled *How to Grow Flowers in a Hotel Room by Candlelight* because of feelings just like that.

So, Mr. Mati bought a teensy porcelain elephant figurine priced at two euros. Only as he started to pay did he notice how untidy the shop was—there were shards of porcelain and clumps of hair strewn around everywhere. “You really should clean up a little,” he nicely suggested to the storeowner. “Think about the people who come in with pets, like I did today. Animals don’t wear shoes like you or I—they might get hurt if they step on these shards.”

This was too much for the owner of the porcelain shop to bear. He started sobbing and stomping his feet. Mr. Mati gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder: “It’s alright, it’s alright,” he soothed. “Make yourself a cup of tea, calm down, and then start cleaning. It won’t seem so bad anymore once you get started!”

Then, he carefully stuck the porcelain elephant into his pocket, called Cutie to his side, and stepped outside feeling very contented.

Translation by Adam Cullen