



I BELIEVE IN UNICORNS



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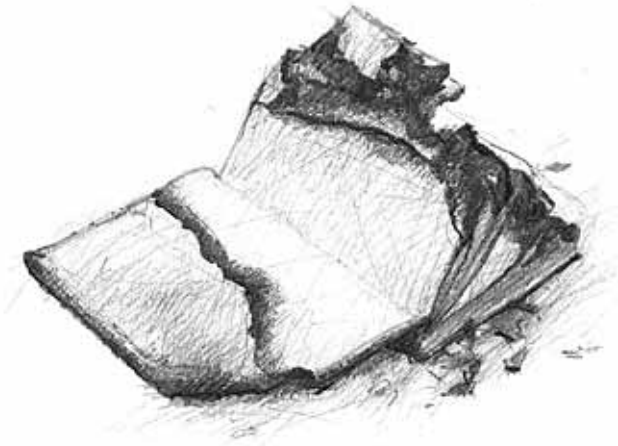


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To my grandsons, Alan and Laurence — M.M.



MY NAME IS TOMAS POREC. I was just eight years old when I first saw the unicorn, and that was twenty long years ago.

I grew up and live to this day in a mountain village that we like to think is just about big enough to call itself a small town. Hidden away in a remote valley it might seem to travellers passing through that it is far too sleepy for

anything of any significance ever to have happened here. Not so, for something very significant did happen, something both dreadful and wonderful at the same time.



For me as a child this place was my whole world, a place full of familiar wonders. Being an only child I spent a lot of time wandering about on my own. I knew every cobbled alleyway, every lamppost. I knew all the houses, and I knew everyone who lived in them too – and their dogs. And they knew me. From my bedroom window in the farmhouse where we lived on the edge of town, I could look out over the rooftops to the church tower. I loved to watch

the swifts screaming around it in swooping squadrons on summer evenings. I loved the deep dong of the church bell that lingered long in the air. But as for going to church, that



was a different matter. If ever I could get out of it I most certainly would. I'd far rather go fishing with Father. He didn't like church any more than I did. Mother and Grandma always went, religiously.

But church or not, Sunday was always the best day of the week. In the cold of winter Father and I would go tobogganing on the hillside. In the heat of the summer we'd swim in the lakes and stand there under the freezing



waterfalls, laughing and squealing with joy. Sometimes we'd go off for long tramps up in the hills. We'd watch the eagles soaring out above the mountain tops. We'd wander the forests, always on the lookout for telltale signs of deer or wild boar, or even bears. Sometimes we might even catch a brief glimpse of one through the trees. Best of all we'd stop from time to time, just to be still, to feel the peace and breathe in the beauty. We'd listen to the sounds of the forest, to the whisper of the wind, to the cry of wolves, distant wolves I longed to see but never did.

There'd be picnics too, with all of us there. Grandma, Mother, Father and me, and while they slept afterwards, stretched out in the sun, I'd go rolling down the hills, over and over, and end up lying there breathless on my back, giddy with happiness, the clouds and mountains spinning all about me.

I didn't like school any more than I liked church. But

Mother was much more strict with me about school than she ever was about church. Father took my side in all this. He always said that school and books had never done him much good, and that Mother fussed me too much. "A day in the mountains will teach him a whole lot more than a week in school," he'd say. But Mother was adamant. She never let me miss a day of it, no matter how much I complained of stomach-ache or headache. I could never fool Mother — I don't know why I went on bothering even to try. She knew me and my little games far too well. She knew I'd lie shamelessly, invent anything not to have to go into that school playground and line up with the others, not to have to face the four walls of the classroom again, not to have to face the teachers' endless questions, nor the mocking banter of my friends when I made mistakes, which I very often did. So there I'd find myself, day after day, wishing away the hours, gazing out at the mountains and forests where I so longed to be.