



# *The White Unicorn*

Carolyn Greco

Fable

---

*5 min read*

In the middle of the snow-covered mountains, nestled among the cold, unforgiving rocks, a young girl and her grandmother lived in a cosy little cabin. All night long the winds wailed about the cabin and the snow drove hard against it. The grandmother groaned and muttered in her sleep, for she was a practical woman, and hated the inconvenience of a storm. But the little girl would lie awake, listening to the wind, and fancying she heard it singing.

One night, as she lay awake trying to make out the words to the wind's song, she heard a sharp pounding on the door. She sat upright, wondering if she had imagined it. But then it came again, louder and more determined than before; so, making sure her grandmother was asleep, she slipped out from between the covers, put on her slippers, and tiptoed downstairs.

The fire was low in the grate, and the snow was driven hard against the window. She lifted the latch and pushed open the door, and a great drift of snow and wind rushed in, bringing with it a shining white figure. Then the door slammed shut, and she turned to face her visitor – a unicorn, beautiful as the moon on a snow-covered field, more beautiful than starlight reflected in diamonds. His coat was wet with melted snow, and he shivered violently. And yet his eyes were clear and deep, and he held his head up as proudly as a king, as bravely as a knight who charges into battle.

“You’re beautiful,” breathed the girl, “let me serve you.”

“Dry me off and get me a blanket,” replied the shining creature, as another tremor shook his body. “The night is

cold, and the storm is wild; without someone to help me, I shall surely perish.”

So the girl tiptoed quietly upstairs and brought down her own towel and blanket. She carefully brushed the snow and ice from the unicorn’s back and mane. Then she took the towel and rubbed him all over until he was quite dry and his coat shone like the silver and velvet in the soft firelight. And she drew him near to the fire, stoked it, and draped her own blanket over his back. Then his mood appeared much improved, and he lay down gracefully before the fire and told her tales of the beautiful kingdom where he grew up, where the white pillars reached to the heavens and every arch was studded all over with beautiful clear gems. And the girl sat entranced, huddled up in her own little wet towel – she sat before his shining, pointed hooves and watched and listened to him, for he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. And it seemed to her that all the beauty of the moonlight and the wind’s song had been caught up in this shining creature, with his eyes like the blackest obsidian, and his horn like a spear of cut diamond.

Presently the fire sank low. The storm ceased to buffet the house, and a faint light came from outside the snow-covered windows. A loud creak and a complaining groan from upstairs told the girl that her grandmother would soon be awake. The unicorn started to his feet.

“Must you go?” whispered the girl.

“I shall,” he answered.

“Do stay another night,” she pleaded, “There is a snug little woodshed where you can sleep. And tomorrow night you can come in and warm yourself, and be on your way in the morning.”

“Very well,” answered the unicorn, “It doesn’t really matter.” He followed her to the woodshed. There she made him a nice, cozy bed of wood chips and straw, and left him with her own blanket. Then she left him and returned to her house.

She carefully stoked the fire, swept and scrubbed the floor, and then put on the kettle for tea. And when the grandmother came downstairs, there was no sign that a half-frozen unicorn had been there the night before.

“You’re up early today,” croaked the old woman.

"I am! And I feel very happy," answered the girl, smiling brightly.

"'Early to bed, early to rise,' as they say," remarked the old woman, easing herself creakily into a rocking chair.

"Yes, grandmother," nodded the little girl, smothering a yawn behind her hand. She made their breakfast quickly and with good taste, and then sat down on the hearth at her grandmother's feet to darn her old stockings. But she kept nodding off, and the close stitches grew blurry before her eyes; and now and again a strange tremor would seize her and she wished for a blanket to draw around her shoulders. Then she would remember the graceful unicorn in her woodshed and would shake herself and continue her work. But presently even her best intentions were overcome and she fell fast asleep on the brick hearth. In her dreams she saw a great dog with a gentle face and fur that shone like spun gold; he came up to her and curled himself around her. And suddenly she was filled with the most beautiful warmth, and her shivering stopped, and she was quite happy and content. She rested her head against the dog's warm shoulder and slept peacefully.

She awoke to find herself curled up alone on the hearth, but the warmth and contentment from her dream still remained. And when she sat up, she found a long golden hair caught on the stand that held the fire tools. She quietly slipped it into her apron pocket and took up her work again, hoping to finish before her grandmother, who had also fallen asleep, noticed.

That night, she lay in bed as before. The wind howled dismally about the house and the snow drove against it with a steady, impenetrable force. Again, she heard the sharp pounding against the door and again, she slipped down to answer it. There stood the white unicorn, shining like pale dawn on smooth steel, like the noonday sun on a pearl. He stepped in, dipping his finely arched neck and lifting his shining hooves delicately over the rug. He looked more beautiful and aloof than ever, and the girl felt she could have gazed at him forever. But he trotted easily over to the hearth and turned, facing her with an impenetrable stare. "You never gave me anything to eat," he said. "And yet you kept me in that tiny shed all day. If you don't feed me, I shall surely perish."

"Ah! Forgive me," cried the girl, "I'll get you something to eat right now."

And she went to the pantry and took out all the oats and bread and grains she had, and spread them before the unicorn. He sniffed at them disdainfully, and she was worried that he would refuse them. But finally, with a

“it’ll have to do,” he took a mouthful of oats and ate them ravenously, until all of the food was gone. Then his mood seemed much improved, and he took up his place by the fire as before, and told the girl stories of his adventures. He told her about glorious battles he had fought in, and marvelous sorcerers and fairies who had loved him, and how he had set their love at naught, and left the populous cities to return to his own kingdom. “That is where I am headed now,” he said, tossing his shining mane, “and there I will live, in beauty and solitude, and my name shall remain here as a wonder and a sorrow to all mankind, who shall never see me again.”

“But won’t you be lonely?” asked the girl, for the thought of his departure pained her.

“Not in the least!” laughed the beautiful creature, “For I am the fairest and cleverest by far of all beings, and have need of no one else.”

And as he spoke, the sunlight glimmered through the snowy window, and the bed upstairs creaked and groaned.

“Oh, do stay another night,” pleaded the girl, kneeling before him. “You are indeed the fairest and the cleverest, and I should hate to lose you.”

“That’s rather selfish of you,” said the unicorn, rising and shaking off the blanket, “although it’s not at all an unusual statement. It is quite fitting that you should feel so. But I must not stay – I desire to return to my home, and so homeward I shall go. Fare you well.” And he shook the blanket from his shining shoulders, and stood before her in all his glory. And the little girl wept, and threw her arms around him, and begged him not to go; but he remained adamant. And so, still weeping, she led him to the door, and he stepped out into the grey dawn. He shook out his mane and trotted off, his dainty, pointed hooves barely leaving a mark in the snow; and the sun caught the tip of his raised horn, and caused it to shine like the north star.

The little girl watched him until he was out of sight. Then she sighed wearily and commenced cleaning the kitchen as she had the day before. Presently her grandmother came down. “Up early again, I see,” she wheezed.

“Yes, grandmother,” sighed the little girl.

“Not so chipper this morning, ‘ey? Maybe you’d better take it easy,” said the old woman, turning her sharp eyes

on the child before shuffling over to her chair.

The girl nodded again, and made no response. She put on a kettle for tea and went to make breakfast. But when she got to the pantry, she found it half-empty, for the unicorn had eaten almost all of their food the night before. She scrambled to find things to cook a breakfast for her grandmother, but ate nothing herself, fearing that her secret would be found out if the old woman noticed how little food they had left.

And when breakfast was finished, she sat down upon the hearth at her grandmother's feet and picked up her stockings to darn. But her bones ached with weariness and she grew faint with hunger. Her head throbbed, and tears fell upon her work despite her fastest blinking. Soon she was overcome by hunger and lack of sleep, and sank into a heap on the hearth. And in her dream she saw a dove approach her with a basket in its grasp; and the dove's feathers were like finely wrought gold, like sunlight caught in a gold goblet. And she opened the basket and found it full of sandwiches of meat and cheese, and wonderful, creamy pies, and fresh fruits, the like of which she had never tasted before. The little girl ate and was satisfied. She awoke with a comfortably full feeling, and all the pain gone from her body. But there was no sign of bird nor basket, but a single golden hair remained on the fire tongs. She placed the hair into her pocket with the other, and picked up her darning again thoughtfully.

That night the wind sang a wild and mournful song, and the little girl held tightly to her pillow and wept silently, for she could understand every word. It sang of love and of loss, of strength and true devotion given by generous hearts. And it sang of selfishness and pride, and of the nets and idols that men build up for themselves and often mistake for love. The girl buried her face in her pillow and sobbed aloud, for she thought of her beautiful unicorn, and how so many had loved him; and she wished for him, and yearned to look upon his beauty one last time.

Suddenly a familiar knocking sounded at the door, somewhat fainter than before. The girl flew downstairs and pushed open the door in an instant, hardly daring to hope – and there stood her unicorn, shining like the cold stars on the even colder ice, holding his finely-shaped head as proudly as a warrior facing his death. And from his forehead a trickle of blood ran, and the fine hairs on his sides were marred and scraped by many blows.

“Ah, what happened to you?” gasped the girl.

“It’s none of your concern,” said the unicorn coldly, his proud eyes blazing with fury like lightening. “But I pray you, staunch the bleeding, or I may perish.”

So she ran and got a clean cloth and a bowl of warm water and had him lie before the fire with his heavy head in her lap. She cleaned the wound and pressed the cloth firmly against it until the bleeding slowed. She ran her hands lovingly over the cold, beautiful face, and gently laid a kiss upon the pitiless eye. And the wind sang about them more mournfully than ever till the little cabin shook, and even the great mountain trembled at its foundation.

Presently the unicorn lifted himself unsteadily to his feet. “I shall go on,” he said. “I pray you, open the door for me.”

“No!” cried the girl, flinging herself to her knees, “You mustn’t! You’re injured and weak, and the night is cold – only stay with me, and let me protect you!”

“It is my will that I should go; you must allow me that,” said the beautiful creature.

“Ah, but I would fain save you,” wept the girl. Then suddenly, standing up, “let me go with you.”

“Come if you like – it makes no difference to me. Only let me go,” returned the cold being.

“The night is cold, and I know not where you go! Let me gather my things,” said the girl.

“Nay, I would go now. If you want to stay, then stay – it matters not to me.”

The little girl wept, for her cabin was very dear to her, and she feared the strength of the snow. But as she looked upon the unicorn he grew even more beautiful in her eyes, and she felt more than ever that she must never let him go. So she opened the door and followed him out into the biting cold. The winds sang a wild, tormented song, and their voices cut to her heart and chilled it, and the snow fell heavily upon her bare head and simple nightgown. She was chilled through in an instant, and would have turned back; but before her she saw the majestic figure of the unicorn, glimmering in the dark, stepping on through the storm despite the wound on his head. And so she pressed on.

They traveled through the blinding snow, through darkness so thick that only the subtle light that came from

the unicorn kept her on track. Her face and hands grew numb with the cold, and she clutched her arms about herself, shivering. And still the winds sang about them, songs of woe and loss, songs of pain and misery uselessly endured.

Presently they came down into a valley, leaving the shrieking winds and the tormenting snow behind. Before them, covering the floor of the valley, was a shining pond of solid ice. It shone like crystal under the moonlight, and the white unicorn tossed his delicate head at the sight, and stepped unhesitatingly onto the slippery ice.

The girl sought to follow him, but her wet slippers stuck fast to the ice, and she could not budge. "Dearest unicorn, wait for me! My slippers are frozen to the ice!"

"Then leave them behind," said the beautiful being, "I wait for no one. If you would not follow me, then go back – it matters not to me."

And the girl bit her lip, for the slippers were the only things she had on her feet. But she saw the unicorn turn away and toss his bloodied head proudly, causing his mane to cascade beautifully over his smooth shoulders. And she drew her feet out of her slippers and ran quickly over the ice to meet him, every step burning as if she walked upon flaming needles. She caught up to him, and he nodded slightly in acknowledgement, but said nothing. And so she walked beside him for a time, happy in his company, and reveling in his beauty and in the wonderful but cold light that emanated from him.

So they crossed over the frozen lake until the ice grew thin and cracked beneath their feet, and the shards stuck up into the moonlight like broken shields. The girl's hands and feet grew completely numb, and her teeth chattered in her head like a mad band of monkeys. Several times she slipped and began to fall behind the unicorn, but she made no comment for fear of what he might say. Soon the ice grew perilous indeed, and she looked ahead and saw that nothing but icy water stretched before them. The unicorn swished his beautiful tail and stepped out onto the water, which seemed as solid as stone beneath his shining hooves.

At that, the girl let out a cry. "Oh, let me ride upon your back awhile! The water is cold and deep, and I can not walk upon it as you do."

“I carry no one,” said the shining creature, regarding her coldly. “Nor do I wait for any. If you would not follow me, then go back – it matters not to me.”

“Don’t leave me here,” wept the girl, “I’ve followed you so far – I would do anything for you! But I can’t, I can’t swim through those freezing waters!”

“Then you should have stayed home. It is no concern of mine,” said the white unicorn, turning away from her. “If you truly cared, you would follow me anywhere. But let it be – it matters not to me.”

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, and a wave of warmth and light filled the icy canyon. The girl cried out in surprise and covered her eyes – then the light grew dimmer, and she looked and beheld a wonderful golden unicorn standing before the white one, radiant as the sun in his glory, fresh and hearty as ripe fruits in high autumn, as flowers and trees in their prime. At the sight of him the girl felt the golden hairs in her apron pocket grow warm, and she knew at once that they had come from his golden mane, which shone in the dark night like molten gold. And his eyes blazed like fire, and his magnificent horn was already stained with red.

He stood upon his hind legs and plunged forward, sinking his horn deep into the heart of the white unicorn. The blood rushed forth, red as roses, redder than the purest ruby; and the white unicorn struck out at him with his shining hooves. But the golden one was stronger, and tossed his bleeding body aside onto a slab of ice.

The golden one walked right past the other without acknowledging him and bent his head to the shivering girl. “Come with me,” he said, in a voice as deep and melodious as a dryad’s flute, “let me take you to a warm place, where there is sunlight all the time and the fruit trees are heavy-laden with the sweetest things, and flowers bloom year-round. I will carry you there on my back. Please, come with me.”

“Never!” cried the girl, shrinking back. “You’ve hurt him! How could you do it? How could you? I love him,” she wept, more softly.

The golden unicorn lifted his head in amazement. “How can you love him after all he’s done to you? And why do you spurn me, when I’ve only ever helped you? I don’t understand. I only want what’s best for you. Why won’t you go with me?”

“Go away,” sobbed the girl, crawling on her frozen hands and knees to where the white unicorn lay shivering

and bleeding on the ice, like a piece of discarded silver. She picked up his cold, delicate head and held him, stroking the side of his icy face. He sighed wearily, and she felt the last bit of warmth leave her body and go into him. "I love you," she whispered softly.

The golden unicorn remained before them, still glowing like a smith's fire. "I see," he said, "you and I are very much alike." The white unicorn shuddered and coughed, and a fresh wave of blood rushed from his heart. "I would have saved you," continued the gold one. "I would have sacrificed myself to save you as I thought you should be saved." The girl drew the beautiful, cold head against her heart, and laid her own head upon it. The blood soaked through her nightgown and her limbs were overcome by numbness. "As I thought you should have been saved," repeated the golden one, "without regarding your own thoughts and feelings on the matter. I would have given you everything – but you would not have wished it, would you?"

The girl shook her head slightly. It was all she could do.

"I could have cared for you, and made you perfect. I could have made you mine. I could have done for you as you did for him. But I see now – that is not my decision to make. You are free from obligation to me." Then he stood, shaking his mane, and golden light shimmered from it like a thousand tiny, warm stars. Then he reared up on his hind legs again and plunged headfirst into the icy cold water. His golden horn shattered, and his body resolved itself into a blinding golden light, which filled the cold sea and the ice and the air, and turned all into a blaze of light and warmth.

The white unicorn started up, suddenly whole again – his wounds were closed, and the blood dried suddenly in the heat and chipped off, like old mud on shoes left before a fire. The little girl got to her feet as well. Suddenly she could feel them again, and her whole body grew warm and strong. The two looked at each other for a minute in silence.

"I must go," said the white unicorn at last, bowing his graceful head. "Will you come with me?"

"No," said the girl, softly. "I should return to my grandmother's house. But feel free to visit if you ever pass by this way again."

"Understood," said the other. He bowed again, turned on a dime, and raced off over the icy water, his silky mane and tail streaming out behind him like the tail of a comet. The little girl watched him go, and then turned

and made her way thoughtfully back to her grandmother's house. The warmth stayed with her until she reached her own door, and followed her as she retrieved the blanket from the woodshed and lay down bundled up next to her grandmother.

The next morning she had a slight cold, and her grandmother made tea for her. "That's what comes from gadding about at night," she said, nodding her old head wisely.

"Thank you, grandmother," said the little girl, sipping the tea gently. Then she lay down for a long while and thought, and the wind sang gently around the little cabin again, and the sun shone brightly and melted the snow into icicles as shining and beautiful as the horn of the White Unicorn.

Read more fairy tales on [Fairytalez.com](http://Fairytalez.com)