

Tova and the Tree
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There was once a girl named Tova who lived in a small village near a grand, snow-covered mountain. She enjoyed playing in the woods around her house and was more often outside than inside. She was playing with a small ball one day when she threw it high up into the air. The wind caught it and blew it towards the trees. She chased after the ball and it fell on top of one particularly gnarled and twisted tree. Tova stopped in her tracks and stared at the massive plant. It was dark and covered with knots. The stubs of ancient branches that had long since been snapped off stuck out of the trunk. Not a green thing grew from the tree, and its roots poked out of the earth, reaching their bent arms out in all different directions. As she stared at the trunk, she could barely discern what she thought to be a face, staring right back at her. She shook her head. No, it could not be a face. It was probably just knots and branch stubs arranged in such a way that it looked like a face. Probably.

She crept towards the twisted tree quietly, sometimes glancing at the face she thought she saw. But the tree didn't move and the sky was still light, so she climbed up the trunk to the very top of that stubby tree to look for her ball. When she reached the top she gasped. The trunk of the tree was hollow, and went far into the earth, so far that she couldn't see the bottom.

"Hello!" she shouted down the trunk, and her voice echoed a dozen times, "*Hello! Hello! Hello!...*" She whistled lowly and then went up and down in pitch, and the sound reverberated throughout the hollow tree.

Tova laughed and looked around for her ball. It sat on the edge of the tree, caught by a small branch. It dangled precariously over the hollow, and Tova reached out slowly to grasp it. The ball was just out of reach and she strained her body to grab it. She touched it with the tip of her fingers, but all at once the ball fell, down into the depths of the trunk.

“No!” cried Tova, lunging for the ball, and as she leaned forward her legs slipped. She slid head first into the dark, murky depths of the tree, screaming as she fell.

As she tumbled head over heels the light from the sky faded from view, and Tova was engulfed in total darkness. Fuzzy things, stringy things and squishy things brushed by her face as she fell, and soon she could feel the walls of the tree narrowing in on her. Long leafy things, perhaps flexible branches or stiff leaves, reached out to grasp her, and her falling slowed until she stopped in mid air, caught by whatever it was that was holding her. She struggled fiercely in the dark until suddenly she was freed, and she fell a short ways before rolling onto the soft ground. She felt something in her hair and she jumped to her feet, brushing her hair wildly, batting at the air around her. At last she calmed down and looked at her surroundings.

It was pitch black and her eyes had not yet adjusted to the darkness. She tried to walk around but kept on bumping into leafy, fuzzy things and so she decided to wait until her eyes adjusted to the dark. At last she thought she saw a light out of the corner of her eye, faint though it was. It was a green light and was very close to the ground, and she crept towards it in the darkness.

The light was round and small, and, not knowing what else to do, Tova reached out and touched it.

The thing was squishy and moist, and Tova recoiled in disgust almost instantly. But just as she did the object sighed, and the green light grew brighter. It was a large mushroom, and it pulled itself inside out, glowing a faint green color. She saw many other mushrooms around it and she lightly touched each one on the umbrella, and as she did they too turned inside out, emitting a dim, green light.

Tova stood up and glanced about her in the faint light. She looked up the hole through which she had fallen. She could not see an end, but stringy vines and thick spider webs crisscrossed back and forth across the opening. Tova shuddered with the thought that a spider might be somewhere in her hair, and she ruffled her head vigorously one last time, just to make sure.

“Oh, my ball,” said Tova sadly, realizing that the ball was probably caught in a spider web somewhere. But just then she saw it lying on the ground near her feet, and she cried out happily. She bent over to pick it up, and as she did she noticed a large, gaping black hole in the side of the trunk that went on deeper into the earth. Tova pocketed the ball and pondered what she should do next.

“Well,” she said, “I can’t climb back up. Looks like this is my only way out!” With that, Tova bent down, picked one of the mushrooms and held it up as a lantern. She took one big breath and then stepped into the darkness.

The hole went deep into the earth and sloped downwards. Stringy things brushed by her face and she ducked, trying to avoid them. At length she saw a green light at the very end which grew brighter as she got closer. It was the opening to a large room, and when she reached it she stuck her head into the room to look around.

Inside the room was a sprawling little village. The houses were all made out of mushrooms and the streets were paved with polished pebbles. Large lampposts lined the streets and gave off a green light. From where she stood, a thin trail went down towards the town and turned into a road, which went on and disappeared amongst the numerous houses and shops. Stalactites hung from the ceiling and stone pillars dotted the large chamber. Despite being underground, black and dark purple grasses grew all over the place, weaving between the houses and sprouting out of the rocks. Tova stared in awe at the sight before her, crawled out of the tunnel and slowly walked down the path towards the town.

As she got closer, she realized that the mushroom houses were much smaller than houses up where she lived. The tallest was only about as tall as she was, and the shortest ended at her waist. She reached what appeared to be a town square of sorts, and in the middle was a fountain, made entirely of mushrooms, that spouted water high into the air.

Just then Tova heard a peculiar sound. It was low and loud, and went *bing-BONG! bing-BONG!* She heard some scuffling and grunts and the doors to the houses opened. Little creatures, only a few feet tall, began to walk towards

her. Tova was scared and stepped backwards. She turned to run but stopped in her tracks, for the creatures were behind her too, and all around her. She turned this way and that, looking for a way out, but she was trapped!

“Are you one of them?” asked one of the creatures earnestly, stepping close to Tova. The speaker looked Tova up and down, evidently baffled at her presence. The creatures looked like large knobby mushrooms, only they had faces and limbs and wore strange spotted clothing. They didn’t walk but rather waddled back and forth, and when they stopped their heads wobbled, showering little green spores everywhere.

“Them?” asked Tova at last, still amazed at what she was seeing.

“Yeah, one of those Saxitans,” said the creature.

“No,” said Tova. “I don’t even know what a Saxitan is.”

“Oh, they’re horrible!” said the little man, and the mushroom people shook their heads in fear, sending spores all over. “They come out of the dark places and stomp on our houses. They chase down our sporelings and smush them.”

“Smush them! Smush them!” said the other mushroom people.

“They look like a whole bunch of rocks stuck together, but they walk like we do and are much faster. Oh, how I hate the Saxitans! Are you sure you aren’t one of them?”

Tova looked herself over and then shook her head.

“Yep, I’m not made of rock, so I can’t be one of them.” The mushroom people all sighed in relief.

“Well then what are you?” asked the little man. “Because you certainly aren’t one of us.”

“I’m a girl.”

“A girl? What is this ‘girl’?”

“Well, me. I am a girl. I came from up there,” she said, pointing upwards. The mushroom people all gasped in awe.

“Top-dweller, she’s a top-dweller!” they murmured.

“We have never seen a top-dweller before, and only know of them from our oldest of fables. We thought they were a myth, but here you stand! Remarkable.”

“I never knew you existed, until just now,” said Tova, “and I don’t think we have any fables describing your kind. But what are you?”

“We are the Svampoids, and we have lived beneath the earth for thousands of years,” said the little man. “My name is Magsvamp, and I am the ruler of the Svampoids! You have stumbled across our capital city, Svampopolis.”

“You are all so funny looking!” said Tova. “You look like mushrooms.” The Svampoids all laughed.

“That is not surprising,” said Magsvamp. “Come with me, I’ll show you how we are born.” Tova followed Magsvamp and the other Svampoids trailed behind making squishy noises and showering green spores everywhere. Magsvamp led her through the city of mushroom houses until he reached a

cave. Upon entering, Tova noticed rows and rows of large mushrooms, perfect in size, shape and beauty.

“This is our nursery. Whenever we want more Svampoids we sit on a sporeling. Look!” Magsvamp pointed to the scattered Svampoids sitting on mushrooms in the room, though most of the mushrooms were not sat upon.

“The spores from our heads sprinkle down and are absorbed by the mushrooms. After a few days the mushrooms are ready to either be converted into buildings, lampposts or, if we sit on them long enough, they spring forth limbs and become Svampoids like us. See! There is one now!”

Just as he finished speaking, one of the mushrooms that was being sat upon started to tremble. The sitter leaped off and the mushroom sprouted two arms, two legs and a then a face appeared. The brand new Svampoid stood up and shook himself, and spores went flying. He then exchanged a little dance and a handshake with his sitter, and then the two Svampoids laughed. The crowd that had gathered around Tova and Magsvamp sighed and wiped their eyes.

“Ah, it’s so beautiful to see a new life brought into the world,” said Magsvamp with a sniff.

“Wow, I had no idea that mushrooms could be used like this!” said Tova.

“Well, of course!” said Magsvamp. “What else would they be used for?”

Tova decided not to mention that they tasted pretty good too.

“Oh, how I miss the old days, where our Svampoids sprouted from every corner and not a single mushroom went to waste. But things just aren’t the

same since the Saxitans arrived. There aren't enough Svampoids around anymore to sit on the sporelings, and whole nurseries go to waste!"

"What do the Saxitans do that scare you so much?"

"What do they do? Come, I'll show you what!"

Magsvamp led Tova out of the cave and towards the city. He followed a thin road that went downhill towards a part of the town that was darker than the rest. Tova soon saw why. All the lampposts had been knocked over. The houses in this section had all been squashed, and mushroom was smeared all over the place. Tova gasped.

"Yes, this is why we fear the Saxitans. They come through the walls and stomp on our houses. Look there! That used to be a nursery, but now it is just slimy."

"Why do the Saxitans do this? Why can't they be your friends?"

"Because they are part rock, and as everyone knows, one of the primal urges of rocks is to stomp on things. Don't rocks stomp on things up top?"

"Well no," said Tova. "Rocks don't generally walk around up top. We move rocks around sometimes, and when we drop them they sometimes smash things."

"See! It is the same everywhere," said Magsvamp. "All rocks want to do is stomp!"

"Stomp, stomp, stomp!" said the crowd of Svampoids.

"And what can we do? We are just soft-bodied fungusoids. We can't defend ourselves against rocks."

“Can’t you build a wall so that they can’t get to your village?”

“A wall? Hah! If only!” said Magsvamp, and he pointed to a dark opening near the back of the nursery. It went deep into the earth.

“We used to use this tunnel as a means of connecting with the other Svampoid cities beneath the earth. But then the Saxitans arrived.” Tova saw smushed and crumbled mushrooms all over, smeared around the entrance and scattered in piles. “We used these mushrooms to block the opening, but it was no use! The Saxitans just blasted through them and wreaked havoc upon our poor city!”

“Hmmm,” said Tova. “I think I see your problem. Your answer to everything is to use mushrooms.”

The Svampoids looked at her quizzically.

“Well...yeah,” said Magsvamp. “What did you expect?”

“But you can’t use mushrooms to defeat rocks! Rocks are much harder. You need to use rocks against the Saxitans.”

“But we don’t like rocks,” said Magsvamp. “And even if we did, they are too heavy! We are too small to move rocks.”

“But I’m not!” said Tova, and with that she reached for some small rocks nearby and walked towards the opening. She began to stack rocks in a pile in front of the opening, and soon the dark hole was halfway covered.

“Hooray for the girl! Hooray for the top-dweller!” chimed the Svampoids. But just then they all heard a rumbling. The Svampoids cried out and clutched each other, trembling.

“It’s them!” shouted Magsvamp. “They are coming!”

As soon as he finished his words the half-built pile of stones exploded outward, and Tova reeled backwards. When she looked up at the hole she saw dozens of funny, walking rock-creatures. They were each made out of six rocks; one big, round rock in the middle, two long thin rocks as arms, two long thick rocks as legs and one small triangular shaped rock as a head. The Saxitans began jumping around and waving their limbs, and then their triangular heads turned towards Tova and the Svampoids, as if noticing them for the first time. A strange, rumbling laughter came from the dark hole and then the Saxitans burst out in what sounded like a song:

“Stomp! Stomp! Stompity-stomp!”

*Romp, stomp, grompi-too!
Smash, bash, glashi-goo!
Rompity-bompity, stompity-gompity,
Frump, bump, dumpy-doo!*

*Basher, clasher, smasher-too!
Smusher, glusher, flusher-goo!
Smackity-flakity, rakity-dakity,
Tasher, lasher, rasher-doo!*

Stomp! Stomp! Stompity-stomp!”

The Saxitans jumped from the dark hole and began stomping all over the place. They leapt into the crowd of Svampoids, scattering them all over. The poor fungus folk cried out for help and ran in all different directions while the Saxitans chanted, “*Stomp! Stomp! Stompity-stomp!”*

Tova sprang to her feet. She looked around her and saw that the Saxitans were just as tall as the Svampoids and didn't even reach her knees. She ran into the mess, careful to avoid the fleeing Svampoids, and began kicking the Saxitans.

"Take that!" said Tova kicking a rock creature right in its center. The creature shattered and its rocky limbs scattered in all directions. "You leave them alone you stupid rocks!" Tova chose her targets quickly and carefully, giving them swift kicks, scattering them everywhere. Very soon the Saxitans stopped chasing the Svampoids and focused their attention on Tova. They all lumbered towards her shouting "*Stomp! Stomp!*" and began to bat at her shins and leap at her. But Tova was enormous compared to the Saxitans, and with one kick she knocked out dozens of the blundering rock-men.

The Saxitans, however, were many in number, and there seemed to be no end to them. With every one that Tova obliterated, two more took its place. Soon she was feeling overwhelmed and backed up towards the gaping black hole. All at once the Saxitans attacked her knees.

"Ouch!" said Tova, and she fell backwards onto the ground. The Saxitans cheered and leapt upon her, piling themselves higher and higher until Tova was submerged in a sea of wriggling rocks. The Svampoids looked on in horror as Tova disappeared and the pile of rocks got higher and higher. At last the Saxitans stopped chanting, and not a noise could be heard.

Suddenly a fist shot up through the middle of the pile and the Saxitans exploded outward, crumbling as they were dashed against the walls and

ceiling. Tova pulled herself up out of the pile and did her own stomping, smashing the Saxitans until they disintegrated. More rock-men emerged from the dark, gaping hole, but before they could get very far Tova was there and kicked and punched them to pieces. Soon the pile of rocks had grown so high that the dark opening was covered. The movement in the room ceased and Tova leaned forward, panting. She could hear the Saxitans knocking about on the other side of the big stone pile, but there was no way they could get through now. Tova had effectively sealed off the entrance, using the Saxitans themselves to do so!

“Hooray for the top-dweller!” cried Magsvamp, and the Svampoids all cheered and sprinkled their green spores everywhere.

“Ah, it was nothing,” said Tova, but the Svampoids cheered nonetheless. “Oh no!” she said, suddenly. “I had forgotten what time it was. I need to get back home. It is getting late, and my parents will be worried!”

Magsvamp approached her and gave her a crown made from the tops of purple mushrooms. She placed it on her head and it fit perfectly, smelling of sweet honey with a faint earthy hint.

“You are now the Queen of the Svampoids!” said Magsvamp happily. “Come visit us often and when you do, you will be treated as royalty. All hail the Queen of the Svampoids!”

“Hail! Hail! Hail!” called the Svampoids, and they all began to dance and sing.

“How do I get home?” asked Tova, and Magsvamp chuckled.

“Oh, that’s easy! You are now the Queen of the Svampoids, so the mushrooms will do your bidding. See that big one over there? Sit on it and tell it where you want to go!” Magsvamp pointed at a large umbrella-like mushroom in the corner of the nursery. Tova approached it and leapt upon it.

“I want to go home,” said Tova. The mushroom shivered and then began to grow. The Svampoids waved goodbye as Tova was carried upwards by the growing mushroom. The mushroom bent towards the city and soon Tova was looking down upon the mushroom houses and lampposts from the top of the chamber. The mushroom then went into the small tunnel where she had come from until it reached the hollow tree, and then went up the trunk. Tova squinted as the vines and spider webs sped past. Soon a dim light appeared and before she knew it, Tova was cast out of the tree trunk and tumbled onto the grass. As she sat up, a familiar ball shot from the trunk and bonked her on the head.

“Ooch!” she said, but she cried out happily when she recognized it and picked it up. The sun was setting and she heard her parents ringing the dinner bell, and so Tova ran home with her ball and mushroom crown, hungry as ever.

She decided never to tell anyone about the hollow tree or the Svampoids, but every now and then, when she missed the damp musky smell and the warm, green glow, she would climb down that tree trunk and visit her little kingdom, and she always received a warm welcome.