

## Once There Was a Tree

Romanova, Natalia

Once there was a tree. It had grown for many years and now it was growing old. Dark clouds swept across the sky. Rain fell, thunder roared, and a lightning bolt split the tree in two. A woodsman came upon the broken tree and sawed it down so that only the stump remained. Soon a bark beetle with long feelers settled in. The beetle loved the stump and laid her eggs under its bark. The eggs hatched and tiny maggots emerged. All summer long they gnawed tunnels in the bark. Winter came and they slept. When they awoke in the spring with long feelers of their own, it was time to fly away. But the tree stump was not deserted for long. With all the entrances and exits the maggots had made, here was the perfect place for ants to live. One ant brought a leaf, another twig, and another grain of sand. They cleared out the tunnels and made the stump their home. A bear approached the tree stump, sniffed at it, and sharpened her claws on the bark. The stump was hers, like everything else

around. Even the ants in the stump were hers, and no other bear would dare disturb them. A titmouse flew down and landed on the stump. She spotted an ant dragging a caterpillar and pecked at it. Now the caterpillar was hers. The ants were hers, too, and so was the tree stump. No other birds would come near. One rainy day a frog found shelter in a hole in the tree stump. Time and weather had dug these holes, which would protect others who also passed by. The warm sun dried the tree stump, and soon a new occupant had mobbed in – an earwig. Liking nothing better than the shade, he crept under the bark to sleep. A man was walking in the woods and saw the tree stump. He sat down on it to rest, and now the tree stump was his. The man thought he owned the forest – and the earth – so why not the tree stump?

But who really owns the tree stump? Does it belong to the bark beetle that gnaws tunnels inside it? Or the ants that travel through the tunnels? Or the earwig that sleeps under its bark? Or the bear that uses it to sharpen her claws? Does it belong to the titmouse that flies down upon it? The frog that finds shelter in one

of its holes? Or the man who believes he owns the forest? Maybe the tree stump belongs to all – the beetle and the ants, the bear and the titmouse, the frog, the earwig, and even the man. All must live together. Meanwhile the tree stump gets older and older. The sun warms it; the rain cools it. Soon it begins to rot. Night comes, and the forest is cast in moonlight. What remains of the tree stump glows in the dark. Now the tree stump is gone. A new tree has grown in its place. A titmouse is perched in its branches – it is her tree. And an ant crawls up high – on her tree. A bear lumbers by and sharpens his claws on the bark. A man lies down to rest in its shade. The tree belongs to all, because it grows from the earth that is home for all.