

Tania's Midnight Adventure



By Kanika G



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Beauty and the Beast



"Oh look at this, will you? It's unbelievable, but true," Tania sang, as she ran around the wide open mountaintop meadow encircled by lush green pine trees. Sonia pranced behind her, waving a small tree branch she had picked up on the trek and had been using as a hiking stick.

Mama's delighted laugh chimed through the air, as Papa lay flat on his back on the smooth sprawling grass-covered undulating ground, inhaling the cool pine scented mountain air.

Several patches of white daisies danced in the gentle breeze. Brightly colored butterflies with exotic patterns flitted between sporadic flowering bushes, a couple of them engaging in a lively graceful dance.

Panting, Sonia plonked down next to Papa and rested her head on his leg. "Papa, you're bleeding," Sonia gasped, pointing at a spot on his track pants under his knees.

Tania dashed over to see what the commotion was all about. Papa sat up to check his leg, and burst out laughing. "That's not blood, Sonia." He pinched her cheeks. "Come, look closely. What do you see?"

Sonia and Tania peered at the red spot. "It's a ladybug!" They exclaimed in unison.

"What a beautiful deep shade of red it is, just like a drop of fresh blood. It's beautiful." Tania sighed, while Sonia continued to gaze at it mesmerized.

"There are loads of them all over the place," Mama remarked from a few feet away. "Look carefully at the grass, and you'll find that it's teeming with life. "Bugs, flies, moths, strawberries and whatnot."

"Strawberries!" Sonia smacked her lips. "Where, where?" Her eyes darted around.

Tania laughed and walked over to where Mama was pointing. She bent down to examine the little red fruit smaller than a cherry seed. "This is a strawberry?" Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"It's so tiny," Sonia squealed. "Are you sure it's a strawberry?" She frowned, skeptically.

"Yes," Mama smiled. "It's a wild strawberry. Fruits in the wild are usually much smaller than we see in our markets. It takes years of cultivation and seed selection to get the large fruits we buy."

"Are these poisonous?" Tania asked, looking warily at a strawberry she had plucked.

"No," Papa clapped her back and bit into one he had picked.

"Yay! So we can eat them." Sonia's eyes sparkled as she bit into one, but then her nose scrunched up in disgust. "Pooh, these are tasteless," she spat.

"They're wild," Mama shrugged.

Tania, on the verge of popping a strawberry into her mouth, stopped. "Never mind. I think I'll stick to cultivated strawberries from Mahabaleshwar and let these decorate the hillside.

"Are you girls hungry?" Mama asked, fingering her backpack in search of the zipper.

"No, but can we go explore this place?" Sonia pleaded.

Mama and Papa exchanged glances and nodded.

"Sure," Mama said, "but don't wander off too far."

"And be back in an hour." Papa added. "It's already 3:30 and we need to get back before sunset."

Tania nodded, remembering some of the narrow steep sections of the path they had hiked to reach the meadow. A few other sections had been covered in loose dry leaves and would prove tricky downhill. Besides, an unfamiliar forest would not be safe in the dark. "Yes, Papa, we'll be back in an hour," she promised.

Mama yawned and stretched. Then she rummaged through her backpack, took out her kindle and resumed reading a mystery story she had begun the previous night, while Papa snoozed in the mild afternoon sun.

Tania and Sonia, ran off to explore the forest beyond the meadow. They walked up to the ring of pines bordering the meadow, and peered through them to

get a glimpse of what lay beyond. But the trees blocked their view. So they followed a path under the thicket of pines. After a couple of minutes they emerged into another clearing. This was flatter than the meadow where Mama and Papa were resting, and the girls agreed that it was the perfect spot to play Frisbee.

Tania was about to take out her little silicone Frisbee from her backpack when she heard Sonia shouting, "Look Tania, look at that. What could it be?"

Tania spun around to look in the direction Sonia was pointing. At the opposite end of the clearing, stood a small stone hut with a pointed roof. The girls looked at each other in excitement and dashed towards it.

"What is this, Tania?" Sonia asked in awe of the structure. The slanting tin roof extended several feet beyond the hut in every direction, thus covering a crumbling stone patio. Behind a long wooden bench, the doors were shut tight.

"I don't know," Tania murmured, intrigued by some intricate carvings on the door. She walked towards it, wondering if she could force it open, but just then, a monkey jumped out of some neighboring trees and startled her. Tania had once had an unpleasant encounter with monkeys during her visit to the

Himalayan hill station of Nainital. Frightened, she backed away.

Emboldened, the monkey began to snarl and hiss. Two more monkeys started approaching from a distance. Sonia gripped Tania's arm with one hand. Panic threatened to engulf Tania, but she took a deep breath to calm herself. She was the older sister. So, she would have to figure a way out of this. Sonia was depending on her.

Tania looked around trying to figure out what to do. The two monkeys, initially at a distance, were rapidly closing in. Who knew how many more would follow. Then Tania noticed that Sonia was clutching her hiking stick in her other hand. That gave Tania an idea.

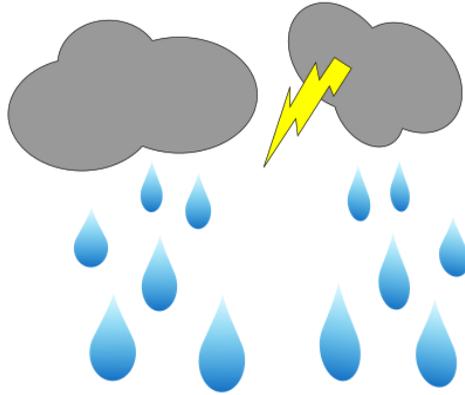
She took the stick from Sonia and banged it on the ground. The monkeys seemed to hesitate. Tania wanted to run away as fast as she could, but she recalled Papa's advice; not to show fear or turn her back in such a situation. She slowly backed away from the monkeys, always looking straight at them and periodically banging her stick. The monkeys did not come any closer to them, and then after a few minutes, they dispersed back into the trees.

Once the girls had put enough distance between themselves and the monkeys, they ran over to Mama and Papa as fast as they could. Panting and wheezing they collapsed on the grass. Mama waited for them to catch their breath before asking, "What happened Tania? Are either of you hurt?"

"No Mama," Tania replied and told her what had happened.

"Mean monkeys," Sonia chimed in several times. "Mean beastly monkeys," she added as Tania finished.

Rain, Rain, Go Away!



"We found the perfect place to play Frisbee," Tania recalled. "Do you want to come and play?"

"Sure," Papa nodded, and Mama too got up after packing her kindle.

Hopping and skipping, Tania and Sonia led the way to the clearing they had discovered. Tania peered through the pines. She was still feeling nervous about running into monkeys.

Once in the clearing, Tania set her backpack down and took out her Frisbee. Mama looked around with a puzzled expression. "Where is your stone hut?" she asked scanning the area.

"There," Tania pointed to the opposite end of the clearing.

"Ah yes, I see it." Mama smiled. "Let's go take a look."

"No, let's play now," Tania insisted.

"Okay," Mama shrugged, and the four spread out and began to play.

Over the last year, Tania had been getting pretty good at Frisbee, and she was enjoying herself. Sonia was still having a hard time with both catching and throwing, but today her performance was even worse than usual, for she kept getting distracted by butterflies. "This one looks like a cheetah," she shouted in glee. "Look, it's yellow with black spots..." Wham! The Frisbee hit her nose. "Ouch!" she screamed frowning at Tania who was in peals of laughter.

"Pay attention, Dodo." Tania giggled helplessly at the fierce expression on Sonia's face.

"Who are you calling a dodo, Scaredy Cat?" Sonia demanded, sticking her tongue out. In a temper, she flung the Frisbee in the direction of the stone hut. "I was paying attention when Mama asked to go there."

"As if you weren't scared too!" Tania screeched. "You were hiding behind me. I saved you, you ungrateful creature. Go get the Frisbee. You threw it, you get it. Let's see how brave you are." Tania sneered. "Go get it!" Tania ordered, pointing at the distant Frisbee.

Sonia folded her arms across her chest. "I will not!"

"Will too!"

"Will not!"

"Okay, this has all been very entertaining," Papa interrupted. "I hate to break up the party, but it's getting close to sunset. We need to get moving. Pick up your backpacks. Let's all go together. We'll take a closer look at this stone hut of yours and retrieve the Frisbee too."

"Fine," Tania agreed, ungraciously.

"Yay!" Sonia danced, as Tania looked daggers at her.

The four of them walked to the hut. As they got closer, Tania anxiously scrutinized her surroundings, but the monkeys were nowhere to be seen. Relieved, her curiosity was aroused once again. She desperately wanted to know what was behind the

carved door. Still apprehensive about approaching it, after what had happened the previous time, Tania nudged Mama. "Mama, open the door. I want to see what's inside." Tania's eyes shone with excitement.

Mama shook her head. "No, Tania, we can't do that. We don't know who this belongs to."

"Look there is a solar panel." Sonia pointed out. "They taught us about these in school. They're for electricity." She nodded sagely.

"Hmm.. I do wonder what this is all about." Papa examined the solar panel. "Perhaps, it's a camping ground. Certainly looks suitable." Papa turned the corner and looked down the hill. "Yes, look, there is a flag pole here."

Tania dashed over to where Papa was pointing. On a small circular platform stood a pole. A few feet away Mama noticed some half burnt logs arranged as a pyramid. "It could be the remnants of a bonfire," she guessed.

"But what's the hut for?" Tania asked. "Can't we just peek through the door. I won't touch anything, I promise." Tania pleaded with Papa.

"No, Tania. We don't know what's in there or who it belongs to. We can't spy on other people's private stuff. It's wrong." Papa was firm.

Tania sulked for a moment, but smiled when he waved a tamarind sweet in front of her face. "Can we at least take a picture of the carvings?" Tania asked, snatching the sweet from him.

"Absolutely," Papa nodded and took the picture. Then Papa and Tania walked up to Mama and Sonia who were singing camping songs by the long dead bonfire. "It's time to leave," Papa called out over the din.

The four of them had reached the meadow where Papa and Mama had been resting, when they were startled by a loud rumble of thunder. The sky began to darken and in a minute it began to drizzle. The clouds looked dark and threatening, so Mama suggested they go back and take shelter under the extended roof of the stone hut until the rain passed.

Just as they reached under the roof of the hut, lightning split the sky in two. A deafening boom of thunder followed, and then the sky exploded. Torrential rain, the likes of which they had only ever seen in Mumbai, poured down. The cold rain was soon accompanied by marble sized hailstones

drumming on the tin roof of the stone hut. Tania was worried that the rain would drive the monkeys to seek shelter near the hut too, but they did not show up.

After a quarter of an hour when the rain showed no signs of stopping, Mama and Papa looked worried. "Let's play Rummy," Mama suggested pulling out a deck of cards from her backpack, but Tania could tell she was anxious.

"Cards? Here?" Sonia was puzzled. "Don't we need to go home? It's getting dark. Won't leopards eat us on the way back, if we leave after sunset? Tania said they will."

"I was kidding," Tania said, trying to stifle her own fear. She knew an unknown forest could be very dangerous in the dark, but there was no point in frightening Sonia. The girls looked at their parents expectantly.

"It's true the forest is dangerous at night, but it will be really slippery going downhill in this rain, and that's not safe either." Mama bit her lip.

Papa remained silent and thoughtful for a few minutes. "Let's see when the rain stops and then decide what to do next," he suggested. "There' no

point in worrying, so until then, let's watch the rain and play rummy. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Tania nodded, and Mama smiled as she shuffled the cards, but Sonia did not seem to agree. She sang and hummed *Rain, rain, go away*, while they played.

Stranded!



When Sonia won the first round of rummy, she cheered up and became excited, but after losing the next few rounds, she scowled. "I'm hungry!" she complained.

"Would you like some trail-mix?" Mama offered.

"No. I want to go home." Sonia screamed.

"Sonia, didn't you carry some candy in your backpack?" Tania asked. The rain was beginning to ebb. She hoped to distract Sonia until they could decide what to do.

"Yes, I did, but Mama said I could only have it after dinner. So, I want dinner now." Sonia sulked.

"Never mind Sonia," Mama said. "You can have a candy now. In fact, I think we'll all have some candy. The sugar will cheer us up."

"Really?" Sonia's eyes lit up, and she wasted no time in unzipping her backpack to take out the candy. "What flavor do you want?" she asked, and Mama was delighted to see her smile.

Mama patted Tania and thanked her for cheering Sonia up. "You're growing up so fast," she said brushing Tania's cheeks with her fingers. Just as they finished sucking on their candy the rain stopped.

"So what do we do now?" Tania asked.

Papa looked at his watch. "It's a quarter to six," he pursed his lips.

"The sun will set in about twenty minutes. Besides, it's been raining heavily for almost an hour. The trail

will be treacherous." Mama observed.

"Then why don't we just stay here?" Tania asked. "I mean Papa and you were lying on the grass quite comfortably. We could just stay here for the night, couldn't we?" Tania asked, starting to feel excited.

Mama and Papa stared at each other. The idea hadn't occurred to either of them. Before they could respond, Sonia objected. "I am hungry. I want to go home. Home, home, home," she shouted and began crying.

"Well, I have a pack of trail-mix." Mama offered.

"I don't like trail-mix." Sonia sobbed.

"I have a couple of granola bars. Would that be okay for you, Sonia?" Papa asked.

"Okay," Sonia nodded, wiping away her tears. Papa handed her a granola bar and she started chomping on it.

"But what about water? My bottle is empty." Tania waved it sadly.

"I still have a full bottle, since I drank some from you." Mama recalled.

"My bottle is full too," Sonia chirped, feeling better after a few bites of the energy rich bar.

"That's two liters, not bad." Papa remarked rummaging through his own bag. "My water is over, but wait! What have we here? Something fell out of his bag and rolled a few feet down the hill, but Papa was too preoccupied to notice. "These should help too," he declared triumphantly holding up a couple of oranges. "Tania, didn't you pack some oranges before we left?"

"I did!" Tania's eyes sparkled, for it seemed like they were going to stay on the mountaintop after all.

"There is one problem, though." Mama called out from a distance. She had wandered out of the shelter of the extended hut roof. "The ground is soggy, and without the sun, it won't have a chance to dry. We'll be soaking wet if we try sleeping on it."

"Oh, oh! It seemed like such a good idea." Tania stuck her lip out. "What now?"

"You can't give up so easily, Tania. Let's try to think of a solution." Papa tugged at his goatee.

"Couldn't we just sleep here?" Sonia pointed to the wooden bench they had been sitting on.

"Only you will fit there, Sonia." Tania laughed, "And even you will fall off. You know how much you roll around in your sleep."

"Roll, roll, roll yourself, gently on your bed," Sonia began to sing. Tania and Papa rolled their eyes and laughed, as Mama looked around the place searching for something that might help them.

That's when she chanced upon the object that had rolled out of Papa's backpack. Mama picked it up and recognized it for what it was. "Look what I found," she shouted waving it at the rest of them. The black cylindrical object was just six inches long, and from the distance in the dark, the rest could barely see it.

Mama rushed back to the hut. "Look," she placed the object in Tania's hand.

Tania gasped. "It's the two person hammock Poonty sent Sonia and me when I told her we were planning a trip to Mashobra. I have the second one in my backpack. How stupid of me. I have been carrying this everyday on our hikes, and I never even thought about it."

"Me too," Papa slapped his forehead. "Sonia made me carry the one Poonam sent her. She said it was

making her backpack too heavy. Goodness knows what she has in there. It seems to be bulging quite a bit."

Poonam was Papa's sister, and Tania called her Poonty, short for Poonam Aunty. Poonam lived in Baltimore. When she heard that her favorite nieces were preparing for a trip to the hills, she had sent Tania and Sonia each a hammock for camping. Not too familiar with camping gear, she accidentally sent them each a two person hammock. Later, she had covered up her mistake saying, "Your parents can use the second one. After all, they won't let you go camping alone, now will they?"

Tania and Sonia had been excited about the prospect of camping, but Papa and Mama had unanimously vetoed it. It's uncomfortable, too many bugs, it'll be cold, I don't know a good camping ground. Their list of objections had been long. Tania and Sonia figured it would never happen, but they had insisted on carrying the hammocks with them on every hike, so they could at least pretend they were going camping.

"That's because I was carrying these." Sonia opened her backpack, and out tumbled a box of cherries, a stainless steel snack-box, four small yellow bananas, two small tetra packs of milk and a spotless white sheet.

Everyone stared at her open mouthed. "Where did you get these?" Mama asked recovering from her astonishment.

Papa opened the snack-box and goggled at four brown bread tomato sandwiches.

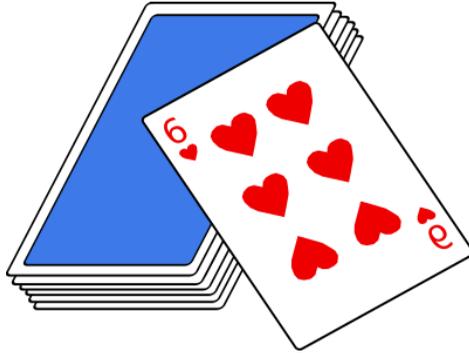
"I got them from Aman Bhaiya." Sonia replied. "I forgot all about it! Now we have enough food to camp here for the night. Yay!"

Aman was the son of the caretaker at the cottage Tania and her parents had rented out for a couple of weeks. He was thirteen, and during the summer break from school, he was assisting his father with his caretaker duties. He adored Sonia for her generous heart and mischievous ways. So when Sonia told him she wanted to pretend to go camping, he had insisted on packing a picnic for her. "Then when you are back, I'll spread out the sheet in the balcony, and we can sit here and eat it together," he had said, and Sonia had been delighted.

"I guess we're camping after all," Papa shrugged.

"All thanks to Tania and me, we're safe and well fed." Sonia declared, and everyone burst out laughing.

Fun and Games



"Hmm, I don't know how you engineered it," Mama narrowed her eyes, "but since you got your way with this, we might as well do it right." Tania laughed.

"Actually, you know, I've never been camping. So I guess I was scared." Mama admitted.

"So what's next?" Papa asked. "Should we look for a good place to set up camp?"

"Yes, we need to find two pairs of sturdy trees that are between ten and fourteen feet apart," Tania rattled off, squinting at the hammock's instruction manual in the fading light.

"Didn't you carry a flashlight in your pretend camping backpack?" Papa asked.

"I did," Tania replied, "but I want to save the battery for when it gets really dark. I know how to set up the hammocks. It's really easy. But we need to find the appropriate trees."

The family discussed the best place to look for trees and decided on the barrier of pines separating the two clearings they had already explored. It was the space they knew best, and that was important in an unfamiliar forest. Besides, having clearings on both sides, these pines were unlikely to host to any dangerous animals. Wild animals would probably prefer the safety of denser vegetation. Sonia pointed to a couple of tall tapering pines about eleven feet apart, but Mama shook her head. "No, Sonia. Do you see that the tree has no leaves at all? It's dead."

"Does that matter? It's like a pillar isn't it?" Tania asked.

"Dead trees have weakened root systems and are liable to fall. It would be very dangerous to attach a hammock to one, especially since we don't even know how long it has been dead." Mama explained.

"Oh!" Tania exclaimed in wide-eyed horror. "I don't want a tree to fall on us. Let's keep looking."

Tania and Sonia, now examined not just at the base of the trees, but also checked if they had leaves. Eventually, they found a suitable pair right near the edge of the flatter clearing. A few feet away, Papa located another suitable pair and the location seemed perfect for stringing up the hammocks.

Mama and Papa wrapped the straps tightly around the trunks of the trees, while Sonia and Tania used carabiner clips to attach the hammocks to the straps.

"That was easy," Sonia declared, as she plopped herself onto one side of one hammock. Tania joined her on the other side, and their weight caused the edges of the hammock to gently curve and envelop them.

Only their faces remained visible. "This should keep most of the bugs out, Mama," Tania observed, remembering one of Mama's objections to camping. "In fact, we might even be protected from a light drizzle. But I hope it doesn't rain heavily. Then we'll be soaked."

As the last vestiges of twilight faded away and darkness enveloped the mountaintop, pinpricks of starlight began to emerge dotting the velvety black sky. "Look how many stars there are, Mama," Sonia tried to count them until they were too many for her

to keep track. "How come we don't see so many stars in Mumbai?"

"The city lights in Mumbai are too many and too bright. The light pollution washes out the stars, so we can only see a very few very bright ones." Papa explained. "It's nice to see so many stars. I am glad the clouds cleared up." He sat down on a tree stump and put his arms round Mama, who was perched on her haunches. Just then the moon became visible over the neighboring mountaintop. The bright white orb rained down a silver glow lighting up the clearing.

Sonia's tummy began to rumble. "I'm hungry. Can we eat now?" she asked jumping out of the hammock.

"Hey, watch it!" Tania shouted. "I almost fell out. Next time give me a warning, okay?"

"Oh, sorry Tania. I'll be more careful next time." Sonia apologized as she unpacked the picnic food from her backpack.

When she took out the white cloth to spread out as a mat, "Don't," Mama objected. "It will get wet and dirty. We can manage without it." Sonia shrugged and nodded. She opened the steel snack-box and

walked around handing a sandwich and a banana to everyone. Then she parked herself on Papa's lap and began chomping her own sandwich.

After eating, Papa used the scissor included in his Swiss Army knife to open the tetra paks of milk and handed them to the girls. Mama found an empty plastic bag in her backpack, where she put the banana peels. "Girls you need to put your empty milk cartons in here when you're done," she called out hanging the bag from a low tree branch.

"I know, Mama." Sonia responded, slurping her milk. "We can't dirty the pretty forest. Teacher told us it's bad to litter."

After the girls finished their milk, Mama took out the playing cards. "How about a few rounds of rummy?" she asked.

"But where do we sit? The grass is so wet, our pants will be soaked." Tania called out from the hammock.

Papa looked at his watch. "It's still too early to sleep." He looked thoughtful, and then his eyes lit up. "I remember a rocky section in the other clearing near one of the flowering bushes. I could see it from where I was lying down. We can go there and hang

out until we're ready to sleep," he suggested. "The rocks won't be too wet to sit on."

"I think we can leave the hammocks here," Mama said, "but we should carry the backpacks. I don't want to take any chances with the monkeys."

Everyone agreed. Sonia's backpack was considerably less full after their meal, so she stuffed their trash bag in it. As they stepped into the thicket of pines separating the two clearings, Tania took out her flashlight and led the way.

When they emerged into the clearing, the rocky section Papa had mentioned was easy to spot, glistening in the silver moonlight. Sonia and Tania made a beeline for it. "It's awesome." Tania declared, setting down her backpack.

They each picked a not-too-pokey rock to sit on. In the middle was a flattish rock that could serve as a table, but it was slightly wet, so Mama hesitated to put the cards on it. Sonia observed Mama's predicament and offered a solution. She placed the steel snack-box on the rock. "Mama you can place the cards on that," she said and placed her box of cherries next to it. "There, now we have something to munch while we play." Sonia smiled, and Mama patted her back.

"Thanks Sonia, but that's not big enough," Mama observed. Tania scratched behind her ears and then opened the snack-box. She placed it upside down, next to the lid. Together they were large enough.

" Good thinking, Tania. The two of you make a good team of problem solvers." Papa's eyes twinkled.

Mama dealt the cards. Once everyone had taken their cards, she put the remaining on the box. "We can use the lid for the discard pile," Mama suggested.

Four rounds of rummy interspersed with jokes, banter and laughter was followed by some half an hour of *guess who*, at the end of which every last cherry was eaten. Sonia and Tania then ran around the clearing planting some of the seeds. "Don't plant too many or this won't remain a clearing," Papa warned.

"I am planting them 12 feet apart," Sonia called out. "That way, in a few years, people can strap their hammocks to them and eat cherries while relaxing. Isn't that awesome?"

"Can't think of anything more blissful," Mama laughed, as she picked Sonia up and swung her around.

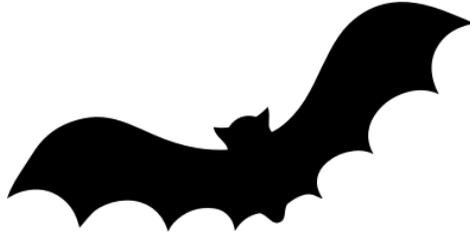
"Let me go, let me go," Sonia yowled. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I wish you could still do that to me, Mama, but I'm too heavy now." Tania looked on longingly.

So she was startled, when she found herself swept off the ground. "I think not yet," Papa declared swinging Tania around. The four of them then walked around the clearing and chatted about this and that.

When Sonia and Tania started yawning, Mama decided it was time for them to go to sleep. They each chose a pine tree to pee behind, gulped down a few sips of water, and then climbed into their hammocks. When Mama and Papa came to kiss them goodnight, they were already fast asleep.

The Haunted Hut



A monkey family had chased Tania to the edge of a cliff. Tania shouted out for help, but Mama, Papa and Sonia were too far away, and they were fast asleep. Tania looked at the steep drop behind her and wondered if she could chance it. She really did not want to be bitten by a monkey. The chances were small, but what if one of them had rabies? She remembered how she had fended off a couple of them with a stick, earlier that day, but even as her eyes searched for a stick, she knew it would be no good. There were dozens of them and they wouldn't be intimidated by a little girl waving a stick.

Tania marveled at how quickly their numbers had doubled. And even more were joining the crowd. How were Mama and Papa sleeping through all of this? The monkeys were snarling, hissing and creating such a racket. What did they want from her?

Just then, a large monkey leaped off a nearby tree and landed right near Tania's foot. Startled, Tania screamed and took a step back without thinking. Down the cliff-side she went gasping and screaming. The fall seemed to last for ever until, thud, her body made contact with the ground below.

Tania stared skywards as she woke up in cold sweat. What was going on? Was she dead? Was this the after life? When she sat up trying to find her bearings, she saw the hammock fastened to the trees, and Sonia fast asleep in it. Only, Sonia was lying breadth-wise instead of lengthwise. "So it was all a dream," Tania mumbled, relieved. "Hmph, Sonia pushed me off the hammock, I guess. So what's new?" she grumbled and used the support of her arms to push herself up. "Ouch," she cried out, startled by a sharp twinge of pain in her elbow. "Oh great! I must have banged it when I hit the ground," Tania muttered, examining her elbow for a bruise.

It was too dark under the trees to see clearly, but touching her elbow made her wince. Contemplating the pain getting back into the hammock would cause, Tania decided to delay it. *I'll just walk around for a few minutes until the pain subsides*, she thought. As she recalled her dream, she laughed. "How silly of me. I know monkeys are diurnal. They wouldn't

attack me at night. But somehow, I'm not very sensible when I dream."

The moon was still bright in the sky, so although Tania took the flashlight from her backpack, she kept it switched off as she strolled around the clearing enjoying the cool crisp night air. Having calmed down and feeling cheerful, she looked around and found herself standing in front of the stone hut. The door with the carvings was calling out to her. Mama and Papa had told her not to open it, but she was consumed by curiosity. She had to know what was inside. Perhaps, she could just peek through the thin space between the bottom of the door and the frame. Technically, she rationalized, her parents had not forbidden that. True, she had never asked, but really, what harm could it possibly do? It would be just a teensy-weensy peek.

Tania got down on all fours and bent her head low. Then she turned on the flashlight. She peered hard through the gap, but it was really thin and she couldn't make anything out. Just as she was about to switch off the flashlight and give up, she heard a strange screeching sound coming from inside. Then she heard a clatter of falling metal objects.

Now Tania was scared. Was someone living there? Would they come out and catch her? Whoever it

was, would be quite angry that she had been peeking into their house in the middle of the night. If she ran towards the hammocks, she would be easily visible to anyone who opened the door and shone a flashlight. So she hid behind a thick flowering bush a few feet away from the hut and waited, her heart pounding.

Tania waited for almost five minutes, but nothing happened. No one emerged through the carved doors. With her fear subsiding, curiosity took over again. But this time, Tania decided to look on the other side. Perhaps there would be a window she could peek through. Why hadn't she considered that before, she wondered, slapping her forehead.

Cautiously, she crept around the hill till she was facing the other side of the stone hut. Unfortunately, there was a thicket of trees in front of the hut wall blocking her view. So she crept closer to the hut along the edge of the thicket. The trees were blocking the moonlight, so it was very dark. Tania wondered if she should take out her flashlight, but thought the better of it. If indeed someone was in there, the flashlight would give her away. So she felt her way slowly in the dark, until she bumped into something.

A flutter of wings startled her. She muffled a scream as a dozen winged creatures took to the air. Bats, Tania realized to her horror as they took off into the darkness. Images of haunted houses from movies and books flashed before her. Fear gripped her insides, but it only made her more determined.

"There are no such things as haunted houses," she whispered firmly to herself. Now, she had to know what was in there. She wouldn't give into irrational fear.

As Tania groped around in the dark, she realized the object she had bumped into was a ladder. She followed the rungs with her eyes and noticed that it led to an attic window. *Conveniently placed*, her mind suggested, *just like in a horror movie*.

"I'm not scared," Tania hissed through gritted teeth and began climbing the ladder with renewed determination.

Tania looked through the cracked window pane. Even with the moon shining, it was too dark for her to see anything. She decided to shine her flashlight for just a couple of seconds for a quick glance. The dusty wooden floor of the attic was cluttered with sticks, rocks, ropes and chains. And then she saw it. Advancing towards her, a rotting terrible face. The

flashlight fell from her hand. "Taaaniiiiaaa," she heard her name wailing through the wind, just as the moon slid behind a cloud, making it pitch dark.

Tania rushed down the ladder in fright and yelped, as a splinter embedded itself into her finger. Whatever was up there, corpse or zombie was terrifying. Oh why had she looked? Panicking she hurried down the last few rungs of the ladder, howling in agony when her injured elbow bumped into a tree branch. Her foot had scarcely touched the ground, when something clasped her wrist. As she turned around, the moon peeked out from behind the cloud, revealing a ghostly figure in white. Tania screamed and screamed, unable to stop. Her eyes bulged in fear, but the clasping figure held on tighter than ever. "Taaaniiiiaaa," the wailing sound grew louder in the wind, and Tania fainted.

The Discovery



"Hey, Tania," Sonia pinched Tania's nose shut.

"Don't do that," Mama admonished, making her way up the hill, but just then Tania sputtered and coughed, so Sonia released her.

"What are you doing?" Tania glowered at Sonia.

"Waking you up, silly. Why are you sleeping here? Didn't you like the hammock? Or were you worried that it would rain?" Sonia prattled on.

"I was not sleeping here." Tania frowned. Then the terrifying memories flooded her mind. "I guess I fainted." She blushed.

"Mama, Tania fainted. I fixed her." Sonia shouted.

"What? Tania, what happened?" Mama asked rushing over, stretching out her hand to help Tania off the ground.

"What are you doing here, Mama?" Tania squinted as she looked around. It was still night, but the moon was bright in the sky once again.

"Looking for you, of course. Why did you leave the camp, Tania?" Mama sounded angry. "And what happened? Did you say you fainted?" Mama's tone changed from annoyance to concern.

Tania took a deep breath and then told Mama all about her midnight adventure. "There is something awful there, Mama," she shuddered. "Probably a dead body. I should have listened to you. I'm so

sorry. It's the most horrible thing I've ever seen. I shouldn't have looked through the window."

Mama patted Tania's back and cuddled her. "Tania, while you shouldn't have looked in, I doubt there is anything remotely frightening in there, let alone a rotting swaying corpse. The moonlight plays tricks on your eyes. Let's get back to bed now, Tania. You need to get some sleep. We'll start back home, after sunrise. There's still a few hours before that. But first tell me Sonia, how did you get here?"

I woke up, and Tania wasn't in the hammock. I looked around nearby, but she wasn't anywhere. Then I thought I saw someone creeping near this hut, so I came here to investigate. When I got here, Tania was coming down the ladder, so I caught her hand, but she fainted." Sonia shrugged. "I thought she came here to sleep."

"You mean the ghost was you?" Tania stared at Sonia in wide eyed astonishment.

"What ghost?" Sonia was confused. "I'm not a ghost. I'm Sonia. Don't you remember?" Sonia's eyebrows scrunched up as she looked at Tania, wondering if fainting had addled her brains.

"The white ghost that caught my wrist." Tania gritted her teeth.

"Oh," Sonia's eyes widened and her lips formed a perfect oval. She dashed off a few feet down the hill and returned with a white sheet. I was feeling cold so I used the sheet Aman packed for our picnic. I wrapped myself in it when I came looking for you." Sonia looked at Tania with innocent eyes. "I took it off and chucked it, when I was trying to wake you up."

Mama rolled her eyes listening to the midnight shenanigans of the two girls. "Can we get back to bed now?" she complained. "I think we've had enough drama for one night. There's no dead bodies or ghosts, Tania. Come on, let's go."

Back in the hammock, Tania held on to Sonia tighter than usual. She was worried about nightmares. An image of the face she had seen, kept popping up as soon as she closed her eyes.

Tania had a restless night. She was not sorry when the first rays of dawn kissed the mountaintop. For a few minutes, she watched the sun rise with layers of pink and orange pushing their way into the greyish blue dome. She was tired, but not the least bit sleepy. Eager to get home, she woke Mama and Papa up.

Mama filled Papa in on the previous night's adventure, that he had peacefully snored through, while Tania woke Sonia up. It didn't take the family long to pack up their belongings.

"Tania, do you want to see what's really there in that attic?" Papa asked.

Tania hesitated. What she had seen the previous night terrified her. But then again, it might just be an optical illusion. In the light of day, things might look a lot better. Then maybe, she'd stop seeing that horrible face every time she closed her eyes. On the other hand, what if she had only seen a whiff of something truly sinister? Did she really want to find out?

"How about, one of us take a look first? Then, if it's okay, you can take a look too." Mama said, accurately reading Tania's conflicted expressions.

The family walked over to the stone hut. "Since I missed all the fun last night, I'll go first." Papa winked, as he began scaling the ladder.

Tania clasped her hands together and rested her chin on them. She bit her lips and watched Papa, hoping he would be okay. Her worst fears were confirmed, when she heard Papa gasp.

But soon after, she saw him throw his head back and laugh. "Come up here Tania. Is this what you saw?"

Relieved and curious, Tania climbed the ladder and joined Papa at the top.

She screamed, but Papa held her tight and eventually she made sense of what she was seeing. A terrifying mask, of a bloody rotting face attached to a cloak swayed up to the window pane. A few seconds later a monkey peeked out from behind it.

As Tania looked around the rest of the room, she noticed various camping and hiking gear. There was a fireplace too. "Down the chimney! That's how the monkey's got in." Tania exclaimed. "Just like Santa!"

"That's not all. Look!" Papa pointed to a place in the middle of the room.

Tania peered at the stuff and realized she was looking at a pile of junk like broken slippers, empty packets of chips, a broken Frisbee, a torn mosquito net, a bracelet, some hats and hair clips, a scarf and some empty tubes of mosquito repellent.

"What is this place, Papa?" Tania asked, puzzled.

Papa glanced at the dusty folded up tents, tools, ropes and firewood surrounding the strange assortment of junk. "Looks like it belongs to one of those companies that plan adventure and camping trips for people. Perhaps, they shut down during the two years of reduced tourism because of the corona virus. Looks like they may be selling off this place and it's in limbo until then.

"I want to see too!" Sonia called out from down.
"What's there Tania?"

"Take a look yourself," Tania suggested as Papa and she descended.

"What's there?" Mama and Sonia asked, but "You'll see," was the only answer they could get.

Brimming with curiosity, they rushed up the ladder. "Arrrgh," Sonia screamed. "Oh wait! It's a monkey, and there's another. Ooh, it's a monkey house."

"It is indeed," Mama peered around curiously, and soon there were several monkeys staring back at them through the pane. They've made their home here, the clever fellas."

"Mama look at that baby. It's so tiny and cute." Sonia pointed.

"What baby?" Tania asked, rushing up the ladder to join them.

"Aww," Mama smiled. "No wonder they attacked you yesterday. They were trying to protect the little ones and their stash of stuff I guess."

"Yes, that must be it. Then let's leave them alone and go. I'm so glad you convinced me to take a look. I feel much better now."

"Mama, I want a baby monkey," Sonia demanded as they trekked back home.

"Now Sonia, it's not nice to take a baby monkey away from its parents. You'll make it so sad." Papa explained.

"A soft toy baby monkey, then?" Sonia looked up at her parents, hopefully.

"Sure, why not?" Mama laughed.

"It'll be something to remember this adventure by," Tania added eagerly.