

KATYA'S BOOK OF MUSHROOMS




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KATYA ARNOLD AND SAM SWOPE



To my son Andrey,
passionate mushroom picker,
my son Daniel, passionate mushroom eater,
and my husband, Alex, who is both
—K. A.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is about my passion for mushrooms, a passion typical of anyone raised in Russia, as I was, or in China or much of Europe. American parents take joy in teaching their children to identify flowers, trees, and birds. It is my hope that this book will help families discover the special excitement of hunting and naming mushrooms. The book is an introduction to the world of mushrooms. It is not a field guide intended for use in identifying mushrooms. For that information consult the books listed here and contact your local mycological society. Common sense tells us not to eat any wild food without first obtaining expert identification. Some mushrooms are poisonous. Never eat a mushroom unless you can positively identify it.

—K. A.



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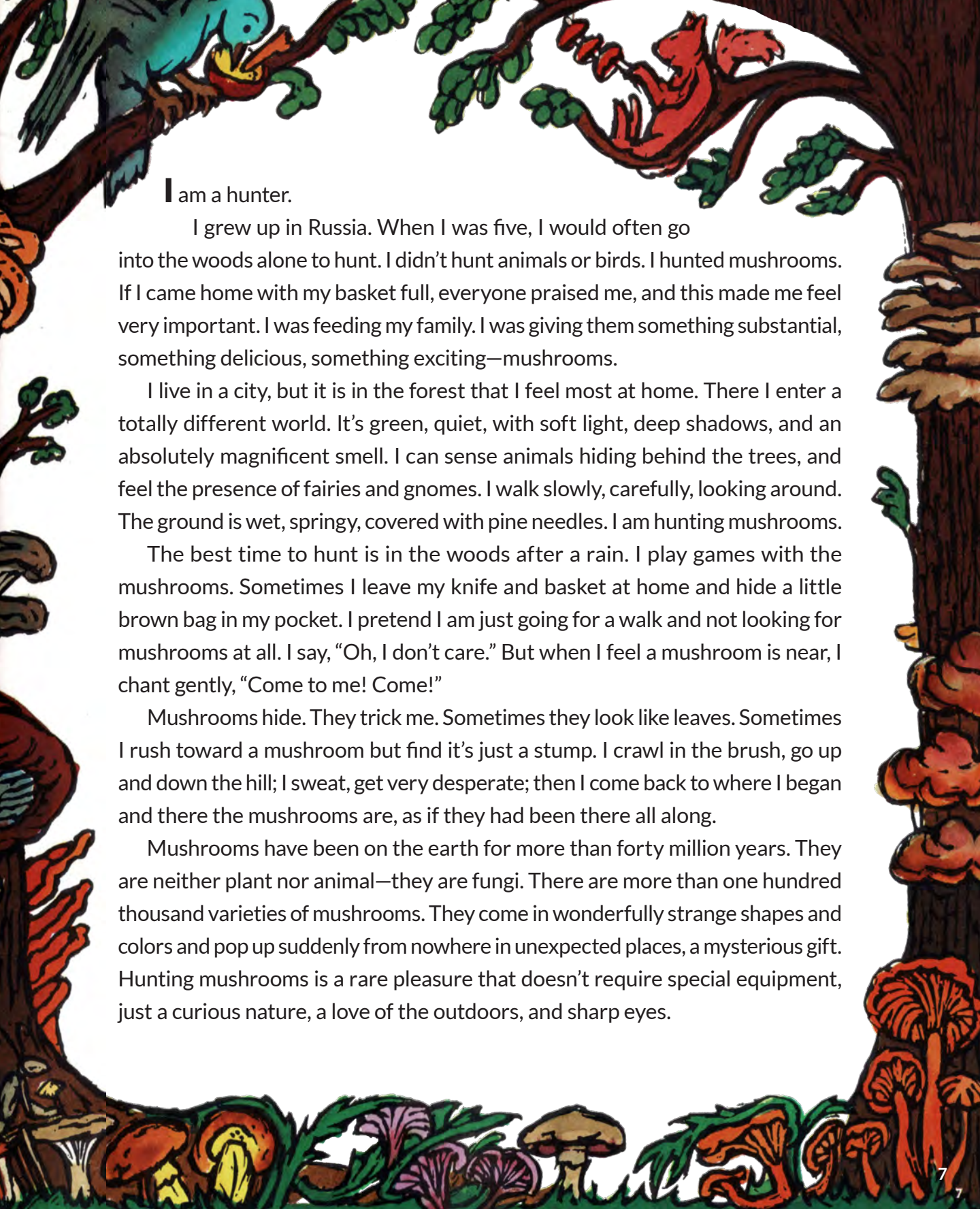
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WRITTEN BY KATYA ARNOLD WITH SAM SWOPE

ILLUSTRATED BY KATYA ARNOLD







I am a hunter.

I grew up in Russia. When I was five, I would often go into the woods alone to hunt. I didn't hunt animals or birds. I hunted mushrooms. If I came home with my basket full, everyone praised me, and this made me feel very important. I was feeding my family. I was giving them something substantial, something delicious, something exciting—mushrooms.

I live in a city, but it is in the forest that I feel most at home. There I enter a totally different world. It's green, quiet, with soft light, deep shadows, and an absolutely magnificent smell. I can sense animals hiding behind the trees, and feel the presence of fairies and gnomes. I walk slowly, carefully, looking around. The ground is wet, springy, covered with pine needles. I am hunting mushrooms.

The best time to hunt is in the woods after a rain. I play games with the mushrooms. Sometimes I leave my knife and basket at home and hide a little brown bag in my pocket. I pretend I am just going for a walk and not looking for mushrooms at all. I say, "Oh, I don't care." But when I feel a mushroom is near, I chant gently, "Come to me! Come!"

Mushrooms hide. They trick me. Sometimes they look like leaves. Sometimes I rush toward a mushroom but find it's just a stump. I crawl in the brush, go up and down the hill; I sweat, get very desperate; then I come back to where I began and there the mushrooms are, as if they had been there all along.

Mushrooms have been on the earth for more than forty million years. They are neither plant nor animal—they are fungi. There are more than one hundred thousand varieties of mushrooms. They come in wonderfully strange shapes and colors and pop up suddenly from nowhere in unexpected places, a mysterious gift. Hunting mushrooms is a rare pleasure that doesn't require special equipment, just a curious nature, a love of the outdoors, and sharp eyes.

What Is a Mushroom?

I love mushrooms for many reasons. Obviously some are tasty to eat. But they are also marvelous to look at, and they come in many different colors. When I pick them out of the moss or dried leaves and needles, I am amazed by how clean and perfectly shaped they are, a true art of nature. They are wonderful to hold. Some are heavy and velvety, like a ripening peach. Others are light, brittle, and shiny like a piece of jewelry. When I turn a mushroom over, I feel the spongy underside or admire the gills, which radiate from the leg like rays from the sun. But whatever the color or shape, mushrooms are all cool and of the earth.



Mushrooms seem like plants, but they don't have chlorophyll, the pigment that makes plants green and helps them produce their own food. Like animals, mushrooms "eat" their food. But they don't have feelings or stomachs, and they don't move around as animals do.

Mushrooms are fungi. Fungi don't reproduce from seeds, like plants, or from eggs, like animals. They reproduce from spores. Most spores are single, simple cells. Every mushroom produces hundreds or even millions of spores, which are carried to different places by the wind and rain, by animals and insects. New fungi grow from the spores. Some spores live for hundreds of years and are so hardy they can survive droughts and freezing cold.

MUSHROOM (*Agaricus*)

The mushroom is the "fruit" of the fungus



If the conditions are right, a mycelium grows out of the spore. The mycelium is the body of the fungus. It resembles a mass of threads. A mycelium grows underground or beneath tree bark. It takes in food and expels waste. It can be huge, as big as a whole state! Some mycelia live for just a few days and some live for several hundred years. Every now and then, after a rainstorm, they produce new baby (or button) mushrooms.

Mushrooms are the "fruit" of fungi. Their lives can be as short as a couple of hours or as long as many years. Just as a tomato is only part of a much bigger plant, mushrooms are only part of the fungus.

PLANT (*Tomato*)

The tomato is the "fruit" of the plant

