



Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Beautiful

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Mythology

In Northern Russia long, long ago lived a man, a woman and their daughter Vasilisa. Whilst their home was only a little hut on the edge of a dense forest, their life was a peaceful and happy one. However, even the brightest of skies can become grey, and one day misfortune came upon them. The woman became gravely ill and, knowing that she was dying, she called Vasilisa to her bedside and gave her a little doll.

“Do as I tell you, my child”, she said. “Take good care of this little doll and never show it to anyone. Put it in your pocket, and when you are worried, give the doll something to eat and it will always help you.” Then the mother closed her eyes and died.

After a long time of sadness, the father decided to marry again and he chose a widow he thought would be a good mother to Vasilisa. The stepmother had two daughters of her own and they were mean, spiteful and very hard to please. But the stepmother loved them dearly and at the same time despised Vasilisa for her beauty. You see, she feared that Vasilisa’s loveliness made her own daughters look unattractive to wealthy suitors. The three women felt so threatened by Vasilisa that they wanted her to become thin and haggard and her face to turn ugly. So they made her do many chores, some beyond her strength, and made her work outside where she was exposed to the sun, wind and rain.

“Come, Vasilisa! Where are you?” the stepmother would say. “Fetch the wood, don’t be slow! Start a fire, mix the dough!”

And the stepsisters would say, “Wash the plates, milk the cow! Scrub the floor, hurry now!”

Vasilisa did everything she was told to do and always got her chores done on time. But with every day that

passed she only grew more and more beautiful. Such was her beauty it could not be told, but it was a true wonder and joy to behold!

Early in the morning Vasilisa would milk the cow and then, locking herself in in the pantry, she would give some milk to the doll and say, "Oh, my dear little doll. Whilst you drink this milk, my dear, I'll pour my troubles in your ear. And the doll would drink the milk and bring comfort to Vasilisa. Then Vasilisa would suddenly realise that the vegetable beds were weeded, the water had been fetched and the fire had been lit.

One day late in Autumn Vasilisa's father left home and was not expected back for a long time. This meant Vasilisa was left alone with her stepmother and step sisters. It rained for days and they were running out of dry wood to burn which they needed to provide light. They were trying to spin yarn, weave lace and knit stockings but they could not see properly from the single splinter of birch that burnt in the corner of the hut. The stepmother ordered Vasilisa to go and get a light from Baba Yaga.

"Go to Baba Yaga's house and fetch us a light, for we can't work unless it's bright."

Now Baba Yaga was a name people dared not speak for she was a cunning witch. She lived in the deepest part of the forest in a wooden hut that stood on giant chicken legs. All the villagers would tell you never to go into the forest alone as Baba Yaga eats people.

Vasilisa was pushed out of the hut into the blackness of night and into torrential rain and howling winds.

Vasilisa was really scared until she remembered the little doll in her pocket. She also found some breadcrumbs which she gave to the doll, saying, "Oh my dear little doll, they are making me go to Baba Yaga's house and she gobbles up people."

The doll answered, "Never you mind, you'll be all right. Nothing bad can happen while I'm with you tonight."

"Thank you for comforting me, little doll," said Vasilisa, and she set off to find the house.

Vasilisa walked all night and as the sun was rising Vasilisa heard the sound of galloping hooves behind her. She stepped aside and as the horse passed she noticed the rider was wearing a dazzling white coat. As she set off on her way again Vasilisa wondered who the rider could be. Vasilisa walked through the day and as the sun began to fade she heard the sound of galloping hooves once more. This time the rider sped past her wearing a bright red coat. Vasilisa continued walking, and as night fell once again, a third horse galloped by. This time the rider wore a cloak as black as night. As the horse and rider disappeared out of sight Vasilisa came to a clearing in the forest.

Although it was now dark, she could see this part of the forest was lit by skulls with blazing red eyes. The skulls were mounted on top of a high fence made out of human bones. Beyond the fence, she saw a strange wooden hut standing on giant chicken legs. The house turned around to face her. Then the chicken legs knelt, lowering

the hut to the ground. Ever so slowly the door creaked open.

Baba Yaga's nose appeared first because it was so long and bony. A second or two later it was followed by the body of a tall, skinny and evil looking old woman. Vasilisa was so frightened that her legs refused to obey her when she told them to run. The old lady came towards her, flying just above the ground on her giant mortar.

"I smell Russian flesh", cackled Baba Yaga. "Who dares to approach my hut?"

"It is I, Vasilisa, my stepmother has sent me to ask you for a light."

"Did she now" snarled Baba Yaga. "I will give you the light but first you must do some simple tasks for me. If you are not lazy, and finish your work properly like a good girl, then I will give you the light that you ask for and set you free. Be warned, however, if you do not, I shall cook you in the oven and eat you for dinner!"

Vasilisa accepted Baba Yaga's terms and cautiously entered the wooden hut. Once inside, Baba Yaga began her demands. "Fetch me my supper and in return I will feed you!" Vasilisa rushed to the kitchen to prepare stew and pie. "More!" demanded Baba Yaga. Vasilisa then roasted a chicken, baked bread and cooked vegetables. "Very good" said Baba Yaga and handed Vasilisa a small piece of bread to eat. "Now go to bed" shouted Baba Yaga, "and after I leave in the morning you must carry out your first tasks of tidying the garden and making pumpkin soup for my dinner." Vasilisa sighed with relief as she knew she could do this. "But wait!", sneered the old witch, "You must also remove all the black bits from that sack of millet!"

Faced with what seemed to be an impossible task in the time, Vasilisa sat worrying whilst Baba Yaga fell heavily asleep, snoring loudly. Vasilisa pulled the little doll out of her pocket and fed the doll the small piece of bread she had been given.

"Oh, my dear little doll," she whispered, "Whilst you eat this bread, my dear, I'll pour my troubles in your ear. Baba Yaga's task I can't complete but if I don't it's me she'll eat."

The doll replied, "Do not be sad and do not weep, but close your eyes and go to sleep. For tomorrow is another day so let your worries fly away." Feeling at ease, Vasilisa fell into a deep sleep.

Vasilisa awoke to discover the sun had already been awake for some time and Baba Yaga had already left. As Vasilisa thought about her tasks something outside caught her attention through the window. She saw the horseman with the dazzling white cloak but he vanished in an instant. Vasilisa noticed that the garden was already tidy. She then looked around and saw that the pumpkin soup made and the black bits had been removed from the sack of millet and put to one side. Vasilisa was confused. Who had completed all these tasks for her?

Later that afternoon Baba Yaga returned. Surprised that Vasilisa had finished all the tasks she had been set, she said, "Well now, aren't you a good little worker, my dear? So I will set you more tasks to be done before I

return later tonight. You will make me bread and cheese for breakfast, clean the hut and fetch water from the stream to fill up the water tank". Vasilisa was relieved for she knew she could finish these tasks. To Vasilisa's horror, Baba Yaga passed her a sieve instead of a bucket. "You will use this to collect the water" she chuckled and she flew away again in her huge mortar.

Poor Vasilisa wondered how she was ever going to collect enough water to fill the tank using a sieve. She pulled out her doll from her pocket and gave her some crumbs from Baba Yaga's dinner plate.

"Oh, my dear little doll," she cried, "Whilst you eat these crumbs, my dear, I'll pour my troubles in your ear. This task is just so hard to do, but if I fail, my bones she'll chew!"

The doll replied. "Don't be afraid and don't you worry, just close your eyes for it happens in a hurry."

Vasilisa took the sieve to the river and closed her eyes for just an instant. When she opened them again she could see a reflection on the water in the moonlight. She peered over her shoulder and what did she see? The horseman with the bright red coat was in the garden. Suddenly, the horseman vanished. Vasilisa looked at the water tank and to her surprise it was filled to the brim with water. Delighted, she rushed inside to find that the hut was clean and bread and cheese were on the table. Vasilisa was full of questions. Who had completed all these tasks for her and why?

When Baba Yaga returned she could not believe that Vasilisa had completed all the tasks in the time. She so desperately wanted to cook and eat Vasilisa that she decided to give her a really difficult task that she could not possibly finish in time.

"I am impressed with your hard work, my dear. If you complete this last task I will give you the light you seek". Vasilisa gladly accepted. "Tonight...." Baba Yaga began but then gave it some thought. "Um, tonight you can count the number of stars in the sky. In the morning, if you tell me the right number, you can take your light and go free. But if your answer is wrong, even if it is only by one star, then I shall have you for my breakfast." Baba Yaga yawned and minutes later she was fast asleep.

That night Vasilisa gazed out of the window at the sky and tried to count the stars – 1,2,3,4... But after a while she was not sure if she was counting the same ones twice and so she had to start over again. Despondent, she pulled out her doll from her pocket and gave her some small crumbs of cheese.

"Oh, my dear little doll," she said softly, "Whilst you eat this cheese, my dear, I'll pour my troubles in your ear. I must count stars in the sky, if I don't get it right, my skin she will fry."

The doll replied, "Have confidence that all is well, now rest your eyes, by morning you'll tell."

Vasilisa closed her eyes and when she opened them she was gazing at the horseman with the cloak as black as night. He whispered the number to her and quickly vanished.

Now, as you might expect, the number the horseman told Vasilisa was a very big number indeed. He whispered it to her as a secret and so I cannot tell you what it was. What I can tell you is that it was the exact number of stars in the sky.

The sun rose brightly and awakened Baba Yaga. It was morning. Before Baba Yaga could utter a word Vasilisa excitedly yelled out the number she had been given and then waited nervously for Baba Yaga's response. Baba Yaga could not believe her ears. Now Baba Yaga may have been a horrible old witch who liked to eat people but she did honour her promises.

"You are right, child!" she exclaimed. "Now, I will give you what you desire." Baba Yaga flew outside in her mortar and brought back one of the skulls with the red eyes. Offering it to Vasilisa she said, "Here is the light for your stepmother and stepsisters." Vasilisa nervously stretched out her arms and took the skull. "You can also take some soup for your long journey".

Vasilisa was finally free and she began the long walk home. She could not help but ponder on how all the tasks had been completed whilst she was asleep. She pulled out her doll from her pocket once more.

"Oh, my dear little doll. Whilst you drink this soup, my dear, I'll pour my troubles in your ear. Did you do the tasks for me, as without your help, I would never be free?"

The doll answered, "Don't you see what happened, my friend? It was you that did all the tasks in the end. She then told Vasilisa that the white horseman she saw was the dazzling white sky of the morning, the red horseman was the red sky that came with the afternoon and the black horseman was the night sky. Vasilisa thought about this for a moment and realised that it was indeed she who had finished all the tasks given to her by Baba Yaga.

Vasilisa eventually arrived home. As she stepped into the hut after her long journey her stepmother and stepsisters did not look pleased to see her.

"Here is the light you asked for, Mother."

Receiving no reply, Vasilisa hesitated as she saw that as the light from the skull fell onto her stepmother and stepsisters, they burst into flames and soon turned into dust.

Vasilisa was now all alone. After some time, a kind old woman who lived in a nearby hut knocked on her door. "I see you are alone my child, why don't you come and live with me?"

Vasilisa gratefully accepted her offer. The old woman was very kind to Vasilisa and they lived happily together. One day as Vasilisa was tidying up she found some flax and decided to spin it into yarn. She worked quickly and skilfully on the spinning wheel and the golden thread she made was as thin and fine as a hair. She used it to weave cloth that was light and delicate, and when she bleached the cloth, it was whiter than snow.

“Here,” she said to the old woman, “Go and sell the cloth and keep the money for you.”

The old woman looked at the cloth and gasped. “No, no, my child, such cloth is only fit for a Tsarevich to wear. I had better take it to the palace.”

The old woman took the cloth to the palace, and when the Tsarevich saw it, he was filled with wonder. “I must meet the person who made this beautiful cloth,” he exclaimed.

The Tsarevich rode with his men to the old woman’s hut and when he saw Vasilisa he was so overcome with her beauty he could not speak. He fell instantly in love with her, and taking her hands in his, asked her to marry him.

Vasilisa’s father returned soon afterwards to an empty hut. He presumed his wife and stepdaughters must have gone away and realised he would not miss them. He was very happy, however, when he heard of Vasilisa’s marriage to the Tsarevich.

Vasilisa invited the old woman to live with her at the palace. And the little doll? Well, Vasilisa always carried her in her pocket and she continued to feed her and tell her all her troubles.

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