

BABA YAGA

Through the thin wall
Between safety and danger
Vassilisa steps,
Thrust by cruel hands,
Drawn by spells and incantations
Into the night wood
Of Baba Yaga.

Baba Yaga, Baba Yaga,
Flies through the sky
In her mortar machine,
Steers by the white of the moon
With her magic pestle
To her chicken-leg house,
Rattling and clack-clacking
Its knitting bones,
Lighting up the tree-hags
With its welcome-home
Skullduggery lanterns.

Vassilisa, Vassilisa
With her mother's dolly
In her pinny pocket,
Treads carefully,
Oh, so carefully
Over twig and bracken:
Hold the breath, stop the heart,
The wood is full of death.

Up rears the white horseman of the Dawn,
His singing cloak of bird song,
Bright toadstool and fairy ring
Bathes the dreadful path
At Vassilisa's feet,
Filling her heart with hope and with delight.

The skulls at Baba Yaga's gate
Are clattering their old-bone sing-song:
Vassilisa, Vassilisa,
This way, this way.

Now the radiant charger of the midday Sun
Fills the sky with his scarlet breast plate,
Pours liquid gold on acorn, leaf and berry,
Spreads a firey carpet
To guide Vassilisa on her way,
Filling her heart with courage and with strength.

Them ol' chicken legs under Baba Yaga's hut
Are dancing a dreadful four-square reel,
Squealing their horrid scritch-scratch,
Miss-match, unholy yatter-yatter:
Vassilisa! Vassilisa!
Are you coming, are you coming?
It's nearly time for supper.

The black night shadow nag
Drops his awful cloak across the land.
No light, no movement, no sound,
Save the hissing of the pestle in the dreadful mortar.
Vassilisa's heart is frozen with fear and with dismay.

And the teeth at Baba Yaga's gate-lock,
In the furnace-black, charcoal-black clearing
Are chattering:
Vassilisa! Vassilisa!
Time for tea, time for terror.

"This is the deal,"
Quotes the Crone,
Sweeping Vassilisa's footprints from the path.
"Wash clothes, clean house, cook food,
Sort sweet corn from mild-dew, sort poppy-seed from grit.
One full month's labour before the light of day
Or Vassilisa is dripping-fat, sucking-good roast flesh."
And her horrid silhouette leaps into the moon
With a howl and a switch-witch cackle.

The pocket-dolly soothes the maiden's heart:
"Vassilisa, Vassilisa,
Let nothing perturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
Sleep, sleep, Vassilisa.
All will be well, all manner of things will be well."
Before the day cracks,
The house is spick,
The clothes spruce,
The food sizzles,
The seeds sorted
The corn sifted,
And with steadfast soul
Vassilisa meets the eagle eye,
The scorching gaze of Baba Yaga,
Standing at the gaping door:
"The test is done, the game is won,
What prize do you require?"

"My sisters sent me for the fire,
To heat the house, to light the way
To keep us warm by night, by day."

"Vassilisa, Vassilisa,"
Smiles the Crone,
"You stepped into danger,
They sent you on your own,
You trod the path,
They stayed at home,
Now the fire is yours,
And yours alone."