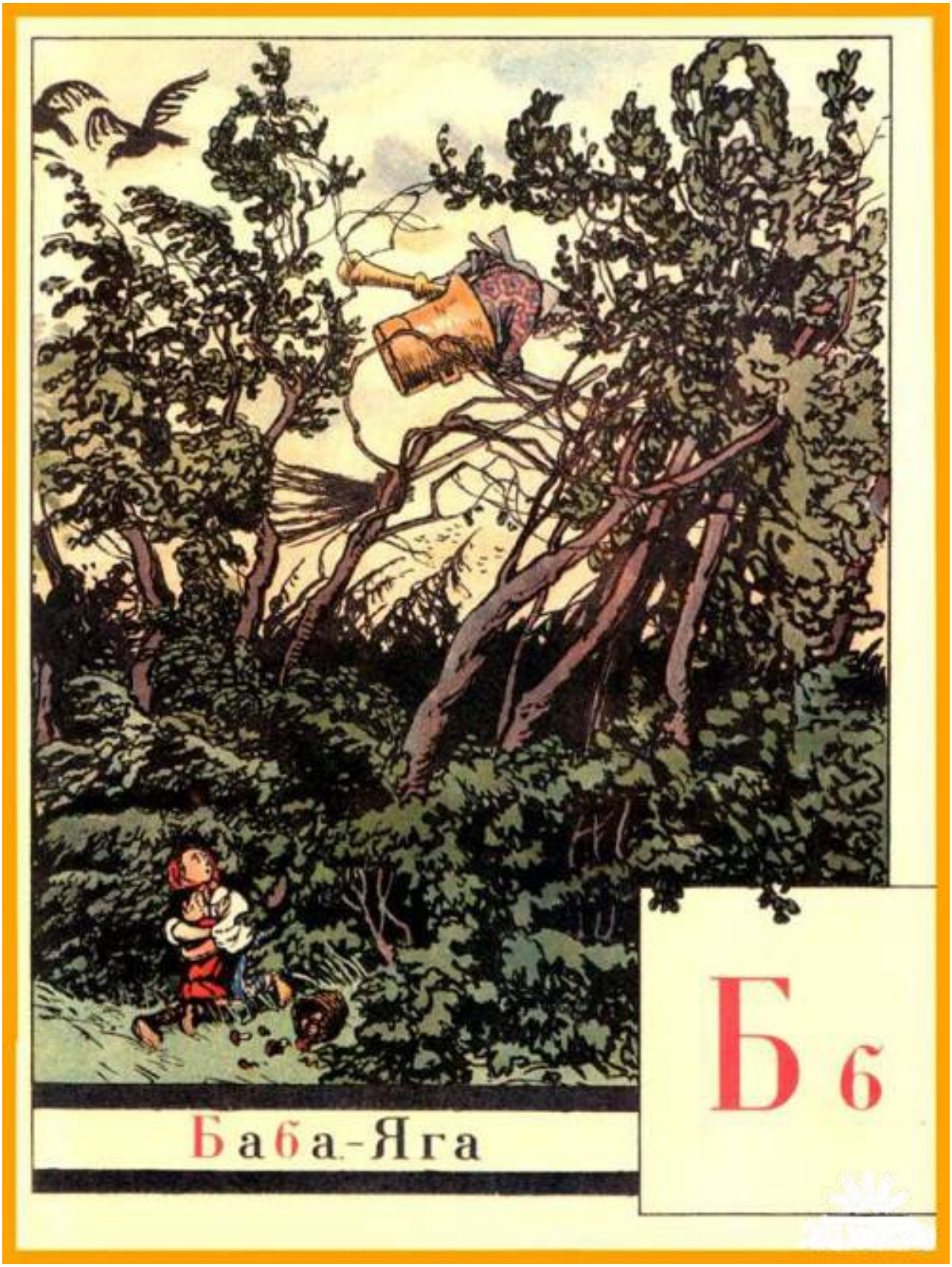


“Baba-Yaga,” a page from a 1904 alphabet book by Alexandre Benois (1870-1960)

Who is Baba Yaga?

Baba Yaga is a character in fairy tales from the East Slavic countries: Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. She occasionally appears in other forms of folklore as well (charms to get children to stop crying and sleep, riddles, children's rhymes, incantations/spells) and has inspired writers, artists, and composers.

Baba Yaga's Attributes

Baba Yaga lives in a hut that stands and turns around on chicken legs (or on ram's horns, or a spindle). When the protagonist of the fairy tale comes to the hut, she or he tells the hut to turn around and face her/him.

Inside her hut, Baba Yaga takes up much of the space, and her large nose sticks into the ceiling (in Russian, it has "grown into the ceiling": *nos v potolok ros*); she rakes coals with her nose; she has large breasts that hang over a rod.

When encountered elsewhere, such as when she chases after someone, she rides in a mortar, pushing herself along with a pestle, and wiping her traces away with a broom. In Russian tales, this is sometimes stated in a rhyming phrase (*v stupe edet, pestom pogonyaet, pomelom sled zametaet*).

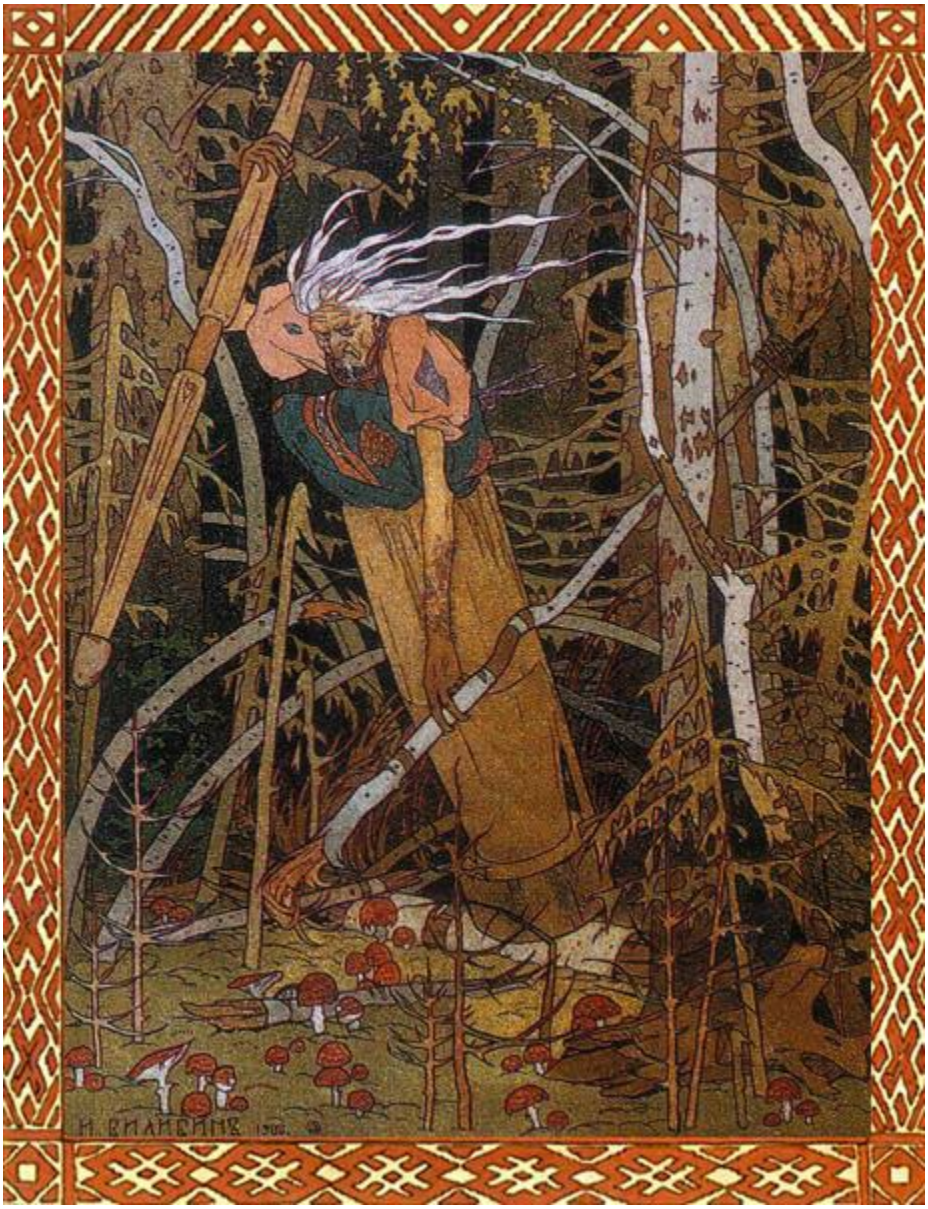
Baba Yaga sometimes speaks in a low voice, a bass voice, or a rough voice.

She is sometimes called "Baba Yaga Bony Leg," a rhyming epithet (*Baba Yaga kostyanaya noga*). The leg can also be made of clay, iron, or other material.

She is most often called Baba Yaga, Yaga Baba, or simply Yaga, but there are many variations on the name Yaga—Yagaya, Yagabova, Yegabova, Yegabikha, Yegibitsa, Yegishna, Yuga, Yazia, Gigibikha, Yagabikha, Ibikha, etc. The related witch in Slovak and Czech folklore is named Ježibaba.

Her children sometimes have a matronymic name such as Yagishna for daughters or Agich or Yagich for a son, meaning "daughter or son of Yaga." There are a few other instances of matronymics in East Slavic folktales (such as Ivan the Maid's Son, Ivan the Cow's Son, or Ivan the Cat's Son), and it seems that, in this patriarchal culture, a matronymic can only occur in a fantasy situation like the fairy tale.

A curious episode often takes place when the fairytale protagonist arrives at the hut on chicken legs. The protagonist tells the hut to turn around. Baba Yaga notices the Russian scent of her visitor, or sometimes says that the "Russian bone" has come, and then states or implies that she will eat the visitor. The protagonist reproaches her and demands hospitality, and she immediately complies.



Baba Yaga riding in her mortar with a pestle and broom, in an illustration by Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942)

In all Slavic languages, the basic meaning of "Baba" is "grandmother, old woman."

Linguists have provided many suggestions about the origin or meaning of "Yaga." There are Russian dialect words *yagat'* ("yell, make a noise, rage, curse, squabble") and *yegat'* ("burn fiercely, be angry, rage"). In Croatian and Serbian *jeza* means "horror, chill, shudder"; in Slovene it means "anger." A Polish word for a witch is *jędza* and a female forest spirit in Czech is called *jezinka*. Bulgarian dialect terms for "sickness, illness" or its personification are *eza, enza, endza*, and *iandza*.

Linguists have pointed out similarities between “Yaga” and Lithuanian words meaning “to do something slowly, lazily” and “to torture,” Anglo-Saxon “doubt, worry, pain,” and Old Norse “pain, worry.” There are also suggestions that the name is not Slavic or Indo-European in origin but borrowed from Mongolian, Turkic, or indigenous Siberian languages (kinship terms meaning “mother,” “elder sister,” or “aunt”).

Baba Yaga’s hut on chicken legs in an illustration by Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942)

The Search for Baba Yaga’s Origin and History

Many people have speculated about Baba Yaga’s origin. Writers in the eighteenth century suggested that she was a Slavic pagan goddess of the underworld before becoming a character in

fairy tales. The ethnographer and folktale publisher and editor Aleksandr Afanas'ev (1826-1871) interpreted Baba Yaga as a personification of the storm cloud.

Folklorist and linguist Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) believed that fairy tales were derived from initiation rituals in which young people undergo a symbolic death and rebirth. Fairytale protagonists tread a similar path to and from the "other world" where they undergo tests, must accomplish difficult tasks, retrieve objects, fight ogres and dragons, etc. In this context, Propp interprets Baba Yaga as the guardian of the gateway to the land of the dead.

Initiation might have been conceived as being swallowed by an animal, and the hut where initiation took place might have had the form of an animal. In the fairy tale, the hut of Baba Yaga has only retained a partially animal form, the chicken legs. The "Russian scent" that Baba Yaga notices is the smell of the living, which is offensive to the dead.

Baba Yaga is associated with the dead and appears to have power over animals. Propp concludes that she was a female totemic ancestor. With the rise of patriarchy and agricultural society, an older divinity was reinterpreted as an evil spirit and Baba Yaga was demoted to being a witch in folk narratives.

Propp's work has influenced many other scholars, who look to ancient ritual (initiation ritual, burial ritual) to explain Baba Yaga. Others have suggested a snake or bird origin, e.g., that Baba Yaga was originally a snake and passed through a stage of being one-legged before becoming the character she now is. She has also been interpreted as a great mother goddess or earth goddess (see for example Joanna Hubbs).

Other scholars have suggested that the hut on chicken legs is an echo or remembrance of the nomadic life of the past, or of ancient Slavic burial practices.

Ute Dukova, a scholar of Bulgarian language and folklore, suggests that there was a proto-Slavic term for a "female demon of illness" or "illness" and that, in the West and East Slavic countries, this being left the world of living folk belief and became a character in folktales, while, in the South Slavic region, the term was still used in curses, which reflects the dangerous nature of illness, originally thought of as a demon or an evil spirit.

Baba Yaga's Ambiguity

From the point of view of the fairytale protagonist, Baba Yaga is an ambiguous character. The protagonist may encounter and interact with three Baba Yaga sisters. In some tales, one sister helps the protagonist, while another sister harms or tries to harm him or her. In different versions of the same story, Baba Yaga is helpful in one version but tries to harm the protagonist in another.

In tales with a boy protagonist, Baba Yaga is always a villain. In the most popular tale in this category, Baba Yaga kidnaps a boy and tries to cook him in her oven. She and her daughters are tricked and cooked instead. Sometimes she chases after the boy, but he manages to escape.

In tales with a girl protagonist, Baba Yaga is ambiguous: sometimes a wicked stepmother, sometimes a malevolent kidnapper, sometimes an ambiguous tester. The most popular tale in this category (referred to by folklorists as the tale of "The Kind and the Unkind Girls") opposes a heroine and her stepsister. The wicked stepmother (sometimes Baba Yaga) sends the heroine away or has her father abandon her in the forest. The protagonist is tested by a supernatural figure (sometimes Baba Yaga). Baba Yaga assigns her difficult tasks, but the heroine is kind to animals who help her accomplish the tasks. The heroine is rewarded and returns home. The stepmother wants her daughter to receive the same rewards and sends her out. The stepmother's daughter is rude to the animals, does not accomplish the tasks, and is punished or killed.

In tales with young adult protagonists, Baba Yaga is ambiguous: sometimes a helper but more often a villain. As a helper or donor, she gives the hero advice, a horse, or magic objects to obtain the apples of youth; helps him deal with the Tsar Maiden, a powerful female figure who is initially threatening but ultimately marries the hero; helps the hero find his way to three underground kingdoms of copper, silver, and gold, and to find his way home again. She guides three brothers who search for their kidnapped sister.

When she plays a positive role, she helps a protagonist, female or male, on a quest to recover an extraordinary or supernatural spouse (Finist the Bright Falcon, the Frog Princess, or the Tsar Maiden). As a villain in these tales she tries to keep the two apart, or keeps the spouse under enchantment and asleep, and pursues the couple when they flee.

As a villain, Baba Yaga's image and activities are varied and colorful: she turns people to stone, has one eye, or has a son with seven throats. She or her daughter are usurpers who try to take the heroine's rightful place as a bride, wife, or mother. Baba Yaga forges a letter, making a false report that the heroine has given birth to monstrous children who are half-human, half-animal. She is a wicked midwife who steals the heroine's children and replaces them with animals. She sucks milk or blood from a young woman's breasts.

Baba Yaga is the mother of three dragons slain by the hero. She pursues the hero in the form a giant pig with its mouth gaping open from heaven to earth. Baba Yaga is a warrior at the head of an army. The hero pursues her underground, where smiths and seamstresses produce soldiers for her. The hero engages in hand-to-hand combat with her; her daughter tells him to switch the places of vessels that hold strong and weak water (or beer or wine). In a break from fighting, Baba Yaga drinks the weak water, and the hero can defeat her.

The hero combats Baba Yaga and forces her to restore an old man's eyes or sight with healing water or forces her to revive men she has turned to stone.

Baba Yaga is a very unwilling or hostile donor in a group of tales in which the hero's wife has been kidnapped by the ogre Koshchei. He first tries and fails to rescue her but finds out that Baba Yaga has a horse faster than Koshchei's. There are stakes with human heads on them around her hut or home, with one empty. She says that he may have any horse he wants, but he must guard her herd of mares for three days and not let them run away. The mares are Baba Yaga's daughters. They run away, but the hero's animal helpers drive them back.

Two Baba Yaga Tales

"Baba Yaga." Recorded in the Rechitsa district, Brest region in western Belarus, probably in the early 1950s. Source: Avanesov, R. I. and Biryla, M. V. Khrėstamatyia pa belaruskai dyialektalohii. Minsk: Vydavetstva AN BSSR, 1962, no. 554. Aarne-Thompson tale type 327C, The Devil [Witch] Carries the Hero Home in a Sack. Translation by Andreas Johns.

There was an old man and woman. They had a son, Hryshka. Once Hryshka went into the garden. He climbed up an apple tree and started picking apples. Baba-Yaga rode along the road in a mortar; she drove the mortar with a pestle and swept away her tracks with a broom. She saw Hryshka, stopped, and said to him, "Hryshka, why are you picking sour apples? Here, come have a sweet red apple."

Hryshka stretched out his hand to take an apple and Baba-Yaga grabbed him and carried him off to her hut. The old man and woman came out of their hut and called for Hryshka but he was gone. They cried.

Baba-Yaga had a daughter, Donka-Holyonka. Baba-Yaga told her to heat up the oven and cook Hryshka. Donka-Holyonka heated up the oven, took the baker's peel and said to Hryshka "Lie down on the peel." No matter how he lay down it was always wrong. Then he told Donka-Holyonka to show him how to lie down properly. When she lay down on the peel, Hryshka shoved her into the oven. When Donka was cooked, he took her out, put her on the table and took the iron pestle and climbed up on the oven. Baba-Yaga came and ate. When she had eaten her fill, she threw the bones on the ground and jumped up and down on them. Jumping, she said, "I'm jumping, jumping on Hryshka's bones."

And Hryshka said to her from the oven, "Jump, jump on your daughter's bones."

Baba-Yaga looked up at the oven, saw Hryshka and rushed at him. Hryshka struck her with the iron pestle and killed her, and went outside and climbed up a tall tree.

Geese flew by and he asked them, "Geese, [my] doves, throw me each a feather and I'll fly with you to my father's place." The geese threw him feathers. He covered himself with feathers and flew with them to his hut. The old man and woman were very happy, they summoned guests and drank and made merry for a long time.

"The Stepdaughter." Recorded in Kirensk, Irkutsk region, Siberia in 1975. The storyteller was L. V. Belova, age 60. Source: Matveeva, R. P. and Leonova, T. G. Russkie skazki Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka: volshebnye i o zhivotnykh. Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1993, Prilozhenie no. 2, pp. 304-5. Aarne-Thompson tale type 480, The Kind and the Unkind Girls. Translation by Andreas Johns.

An old man lived with an old woman. Well, they had a daughter and no other children. Well, suddenly the old woman fell ill and died. Well, what then? They went on with their life and the child was still small. He found himself another old woman. And she had a daughter too. Well, she became a stepdaughter.

She loved her own daughter very much but plagued the poor girl in all sorts of ways. Well, she plagued her and once said to the old man, “Old man, here’s a task for you. Get your daughter, put her on a horse, take her to the forest, so no one sees her, otherwise I won’t live with you.”

Well, all right. There was nothing the old man could do, he didn’t want to live alone, so he went, harnessed the horse, and took her to the forest. He drove her and cried, and the girl didn’t know anything, the girl was fifteen years old.

Well, all right. He brought her and put her down in the taiga, in a ravine. She got up and followed her eyes [literally, “went where her eyes looked,” the Russian equivalent of “following one’s nose”]. The girl walked and walked, and saw a hut standing on chicken legs, on ram’s horns. She said to the hut, “Hut, hut! Turn your front to me, your back to the forest.”

The hut turned, and the girl went in. The girl saw Baba Yaga lying there, her feet on the ceiling, her breasts on a rod. She said “Hello, girl, how did you get here?”

She said, “Grandmother, [she] sent me here.”
“Well, all right.”
“I don’t have a mother.”
All right.

“Well, dear, I’ll give you two tasks now. One task is to heat up the bath for me. And the second task is to spin a bag of wool in one night.”

All right. She gave her a sieve to carry water in. She piled up wood, heated the bath, and… [had to] bring water in a sieve. The girl sat and wailed and wailed. Well, what? She dipped the sieve, but it held no water. She sat there and a swallow flew by. “Why are you crying, girl?” “My dear bird, why do you ask? Help me, rub clay on this sieve, and I’ll bring water.”

The swallow rubbed clay on the sieve very quickly. She dried it and brought enough water for the bath. Baba Yaga bathed and went home. Good... She gave her dinner. Well, all right, she went off to sleep, and dragged over a bag of wool for her. “Here, you have to spin this overnight, otherwise I’ll eat you.”

Well, all right. The girl was sitting there with the distaff and the spindle. So now she was sitting there, she spun and spun, spun and spun, and hadn’t spun half the sack yet. And the night would soon be over. She wanted to eat something. So she decided to cook some porridge. She cooked the porridge and was going to eat. She looked and saw a mouse that ran up to her and said, “Girl, girl, give me some porridge on a spoon, I’ll help you with the spinning.”

She put some porridge on the spoon for the mouse. And again. Ten mice came running, and she fed them all porridge. And they set to spinning, and she spun. They spun all the wool and wound it into balls by morning. The girl lay down and slept. She slept, and the wool was all spun. And Baba Yaga was happy and rewarded her, she dressed her in beautiful clothes, and harnessed a horse to a beautiful sleigh and took her home.

The old woman was making pancakes, preparing a funeral feast for her. The dog was sitting there and said, “Bow wow wow! They’re bringing the old man’s daughter in gold and silver... They’re bringing the old man’s daughter in gold and silver.”

All right. So what did the old woman do now? She beat the dog, kept making pancakes and preparing for the funeral feast anyway. And suddenly the [old man’s] daughter arrived, looking splendid, well-dressed, beautiful. And how many coins she brought!

She looked her all over: “O, Lord! What a daughter has returned!”

Well, then a week, perhaps two weeks went by, and she told the old man, “Take my daughter where you took yours.”

Well, he got her together, loaded her things and took her off. The same thing happened again. He took her to the same ravine, dropped her off there. She walked and walked down the same path and came to that same old woman.

So Baba Yaga gave her the same task, to fetch water in a sieve. She didn’t heed the bath for her, she didn’t spin the wool, and she beat all the mice. And she ate that girl up. She gathered up the bare bones onto the sleigh and took them away. The old woman was preparing to meet her. And the dog said, “Bow wow wow! They’re bringing the bare bones of the old woman’s daughter!”

That was what the dog said. Then she beat the dog, cursed at it, she didn’t understand at all. The dog repeated, “Bow wow! They’re bringing bare bones!”

The gate opened, Baba Yaga threw out the sack with the bones, and the old woman fainted, and was gone.

And that’s the end of the tale and a cucumber for Marfushka. [This last phrase rhymes in Russian; it serves as a kind of signal to end the tale and return the listeners to the present and the real world.]

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