



Ivan Bilibin, Illustration from *Contes de l'isba* (1931)

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## BABA YAGA AND THE MAIDEN

ONCE UPON A TIME there was an accountant named Kindly who lived with his wife Gently and their daughter Maiden in a quaint cottage in the town of Yesno surrounded by the primeval forest of Youme. One day Gently fell ill with a-room-of-her-own fever. As the days passed, she became weaker and weaker. She called her daughter to her bed and brought a tiny doll and spindle from beneath the wool blankets.

“God calls me,” said Gently, “but before I go I want you to have this doll. Her name is Crybaby. She will help you when you least expect it, but you must feed this little one milk and bread every night before you go to sleep. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said Maiden.

Her mother died that night, and months later her father bethought himself to take another wife. The woman he chose was a widow called Spite with two daughters of her own called Snot and Piss. Both stepmother and stepsisters took an instant dislike to Maiden. They made her do all the household chores while they took on airs and acted as if they were better than everyone else. Maiden milked the cow twice a day, collected mushrooms in the forest, and swept ashes and cinders from the fireplace. She spun miles of wool and flax, scattered grain for the chickens, and scrubbed clothing and linen in a wooden barrel in the garden shed.

Every morning her father ate his breakfast of sausages and potatoes and sharpened his scythe before travelling the roads in his clockwork beetle and balancing accounts for the citizens of Yesno. After he left, Maiden would prepare a large pot of oxtail stew and a small pot of porridge. Her stepmother and stepsisters ate the stew with silver spoons while Maiden dipped crusts in the porridge.

During the day Maiden used a ballpoint pen to record numbers on a roll of paper two metres wide and eight metres in diameter. The numbers crawled under her skin, causing it to swell out of proportion to her desires.

As she wrote, the paper rolled itself into a second large cylinder. She looked like a Jerusalem cricket poised between two ends of a Roman scroll. Her bedroom windows were covered with purple velvet, and she strained to see in the dim light. Snot and Piss would often cut tiny holes in the manuscript with their self-harming razor blades. Although exhausted and beaten down, she still remembered to feed Crybaby milk and bread every night.

One day her father made plans to attend a product launch in a distant city.

“I’ll be gone for three days,” he said.

“Oh father,” said Maiden, “please take me with you!”

“All business. You would be bored. I’ll bring you back a gift box of pretty ballpoint pens and a coat of many colours.”

She pleaded and prayed, but the answer was still no.

The next day she was alone with her stepmother and stepsisters.

“I’m giving you a new task today,” said Spite. “We’ve run out of mimeograph paper and red ribbons for the typewriters. All you have to do is walk through the forest to the home of Baba Yaga. Knock on her door and ask her for office supplies—or, better yet, electronic tablets and passwords. She’s a kindly old woman who helps travellers in distress.”

Snot and Piss took Maiden aside.

“We admire your tenacity,” they said. “When you meet Baba Yaga, give her a *nom de plume*. That way she can’t trace you back to Yesno.”

Baba Yaga was a misshapen witch who thwarted—or aided—the many travellers and supplicants who availed themselves of her psychological insights and dream interpretations. Her pockets were filled with grim monologues stolen from the collected works of Sir Walter Scott. During the day she floated through the birch trees in a wooden mortar bound with hoops of dashed hopes. She waved a sabre-shaped pestle and used her supernatural powers to chill birdsongs and make streams flow backwards. She collected rodents, mushrooms, and tree bark; larkspur, snakeroot, and thimbleweed; sweet trefoil, dandelion blossoms, and ripe plums. Her home was a hut that moved about on fowl’s legs, so it was not easy to find.

Maiden and Crybaby wandered through the years: 1066, 1956, 2526, and 1,000,006. She called out to Baba Yaga in a sing-song voice:

Cheese and fresh bread

Mushy like your head

Spinning in your mortar  
I could be your daughter.

Footsteps interrupted her recording session, as the hut suddenly emerged from the forest. Baba Yaga leaned out of April, the cruelest window.

“Who disturbs my peregrinations?” she said.

“It is I, Angel-In-The-Puddle,” said Maiden, “seeking the elusive quill and ox gall inkpot.”

“What is your doll’s name?”

“Baby-In-The-Anagram. I seek Pleistocene fossils and Klein bottles for my collection of Blavatsky cue cards.”

“I know why you’re here,” said Baba Yaga. “Come, I’ll prepare our breakfast.”

The inside of the hut was very small. Baba Yaga had to fold herself in half so she could move about. She stoked a penitential fire and sprinkled salt into a cauldron of forgetfulness stew. Maiden placed Crybaby in a cradle and set it to rocking. Baba Yaga ladled the stew into wooden bowls and bur-nished a tin spork. Maiden eschewed the cutlery and opted instead for a sheet of edible onionskin.

Baba Yaga told Maiden that she would provide her with her due fortune, but only if Maiden completed three tasks.

“While I am gone today, you must separate this sack of black and white beans. If you fail, I will absorb you and raise Crybaby as my own child.”

Maiden knew that she could never separate the black and white beans in one day, but after Baba Yaga left Crybaby sat up in her cradle.

“I’ll help you,” she said. She wept a single tear, and the sack of beans separated into two.

When Baba Yaga returned that evening she growled while heating the forgetfulness stew. At bedtime she folded her documentary hips and curled up on the stove top. Her snores frightened the fairy tale characters in her pockets.

Maiden fed Crybaby her nightly milk and bread, and Crybaby giggled and twisted her spindle this way and that.

The following morning Baba Yaga prepared to leave for the day.

“Your second task is to braid these willow branches into a basket big enough to hold the sky. If you fail, I will absorb you and raise Crybaby as my

own child.”

Maiden knew that she could never weave a basket that big in one day, but after Baba Yaga left Crybaby sat up in her cradle.

“I’ll help you,” she said. She pricked her finger with the spindle, and the willow branches wove themselves into a basket big enough to hold the sky.

When Baba Yaga returned that evening she growled while heating the forgetfulness stew. At bedtime she folded her bureaucratic hips and curled up on the stove top. Her snores frightened the mice in the rafters.

Maiden fed Crybaby her nightly milk and bread, and Crybaby giggled and twisted her spindle this way and that.

The next morning Baba Yaga prepared to leave for the day.

“Your third task is to divide this egg into one hundred equal pieces. If you fail, I will absorb you and raise Crybaby as my own child.”

Maiden knew that she could never divide an egg into one hundred equal pieces in one day, but after Baba Yaga left Crybaby sat up in her cradle.

“I’ll help you,” she said. She rubbed a drop of her saliva on an egg and cracked it into a barrel of flour. The flour then shaped itself into one hundred biscuits, which baked themselves in the oven.

When Baba Yaga returned that evening she growled while heating the forgetfulness stew. At bedtime she folded her constabulary hips and curled up on the stove top. Her snores frightened the mythological sea creatures in her dreams.

Maiden fed Crybaby her nightly milk and bread, and Crybaby giggled and twisted her spindle this way and that.

The next morning Maiden was surprised to find that, while three days had passed in Baba Yaga’s hut, nine months had passed in the forest. The ground outside was now covered in snow, and a troika of white wolves stood hitched to a black sleigh. Their names were Spite, Snot, and Piss.

Baba Yaga packed the beans and biscuits into the basket.

“You won’t need ink cartridges and reams of opaque paper,” she said. “When you return, your father will not be aware of your journey or the time you’ve spent away from home. It will be as if three days have passed, with none the wiser.”

Maiden cracked a whip above the troika. The snapping sound made the wolves’ wounds split open and bleed.

When they arrived in Yesno, Spite, Snot, and Piss turned back into their human shapes and slipped on servant uniforms. Maiden continued writing

figures on the never-ending scroll while wearing her coat of many colours. Crybaby turned into a real baby, and her mother rocked her in a basket as big as the sky.

Moral:

Black and white make grey  
Months pass in a single day  
Feed your baby every night  
Gently, kindly, out of sight.