

Baba Yaga, the Girl, and the Hedgehog

A Baba Yaga Story Retold



Baba Yaga's house

There are many Russian folktales about the creepy Baba Yaga. Although she is sometimes nice, most of the tales of Baba Yaga are terrifying. In all the stories, she's an old, witch-like creature that has lived for hundreds of years and enjoys eating human beings. In many stories, she lives in an enchanted house that roams around the forest on giant chicken legs. In this folktale, that's exactly what the house was doing when Marusia happened by.

Marusia was a good little Russian girl who was on her way to buy turnips at the market for her family. Along the way she inadvertently passed through Baba Yaga's corner of the forest. Baba Yaga's house was strutting by on its giant chicken legs patrolling the forest just as Marusia entered the woods. Shocked and terrified of the walking house, Marusia froze. Baba Yaga easily captured the little girl and dropped her directly into a giant soup pot.

"I love to eat bad little Russian girls," crowed Baba Yaga as she salted and peppered the little girl.

"But I'm not a bad girl," said Marusia while trying not to sneeze, "I'm a good girl!"

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“Well, I can’t eat a good girl for my dinner,” exclaimed Baba Yaga, “but I can make her cook my dinner!” And that’s what Marusia did along with some cleaning.

After Baba Yaga ate, she fell into a deep sleep. It was the perfect time for Marusia to escape, but she was quite trapped because Baba Yaga had magically locked the gate and Marusia could not get out.

Day after day, Baba Yaga flew out on her mortar and pestle in search of a special flower that, as she told Marusia, would help her live for another 200 years.

Trapped in Baba Yaga’s house, Marusia had no choice but to continue to cook and clean for the old hag. One morning, Marusia asked, “Baba Yaga, may I have some turnips? My mother sent me to buy turnips, but I lost the money and...”

“You lost the money,” exclaimed Baba Yaga. “Then you are a bad Russian girl.” With that Baba Yaga swept up the small girl and dropped her directly into a soup pot. Satisfied that she’d get to eat a bad little Russian girl for dinner, the old crone went outside to get some mushrooms and greens to add to her soup. While she was out there, she came across a hedgehog and decided he’d make a tasty addition to her soup, too. Into the pot—along with Marusia—went the mushrooms, the greens, and the hedgehog.

As it turned out, the hedgehog could speak quite well. The hedgehog explained that he was actually the son of the tsar and tsarina. The tsar and tsarina couldn’t have any children, which made the tsarina very sad. One day the tsarina stood near a very special flower in the royal gardens and wished for a son, even if he was only the size of a hedgehog—and that’s when the hedgehog appeared. Although the royal couple was at first thrilled, they soon became embarrassed of having a hedgehog for a child. People made fun of their hedgehog son and of the royal couple for keeping him. So the tsar and tsarina placed the hedgehog on a rooster and sent him off into the woods to live on his own.

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As Marusia listened to the hedgehog she had an idea. "This special flower, what did it look like," she asked the hedgehog.

"It was a black sunflower," replied the hedgehog.

"Baba Yaga," Marusia called, "if I tell you where to find your black sunflower, will you give me the turnips I need and let us go?"

"Why yes," said Baba Yaga.

"Hedgehog, can you show us where to find the flower," Marusia asked.



The hedgehog agreed. Baba Yaga tossed Marusia and the hedgehog into her giant mortar and pestle, and off they went. They flew over forests and mountains. Finally they came to the palace garden. As soon as Baba Yaga plucked the black sunflower from its stem, the hedgehog turned into a real boy named Dmitri. Baba Yaga was too excited about her flower to even notice. Together, the three flew back to Baba Yaga's house. Marusia got her turnips and she and Dmitri were free to go. The two children went to Marusia's house where they made turnip soup and lived happily ever after.

SOURCE: Small, E., Lent, B., & B. (1966). *Baba Yaga*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.