

Baba Yaga at the Toy Store

That toy store near our house was dark and creepy, like a cave... like the shadowy mouth of a monster. None of us kids wanted to go in, not ever. Not even a big girl like me, brave and already ten. Especially not this month. October felt wicked with bare branches bending over and a stinging breeze. Besides, the sky was fading and I was due home. But there was that door, propped open, its inner chamber beckoning. Maybe there was a mummy doll... a plastic *Creature from the Black Lagoon*... or a witch doll for Halloween. I peered in. My eyes adjusted to the inside dark.

The old cashier woman was gone. Good. I'd spied on her before, once or twice, on a dare. Surely she was a witch. I sucked in a breath. Should I step in? A gust blew. Leaves stirred up from the sidewalk and fluttered, pushed, against my back. Yes. I slipped in unseen and stalked around hunting dolls.

Along the aisles, my shoes stirred up puffs of musty stuff. Metal shelves towered above me in this cluttered den of dusty boxes—Tinker Toys, Lincoln Logs and Dale Evans pistols, the Lone Ranger and Tonto. A blonde Chatty Cathy doll stared through a faded plastic cover, like a prisoner wanting out.

Suddenly, the cashier woman appeared behind the counter, round, hunched over, her tangled black hair hanging to her shoulders, her hook nose pointing down at her pen scribbling at a receipt book. I slipped behind a shelf of G.I. Joe's and jeeps and red race cars, and spied on her. Trapped. Mama wanted me home by five. I slid back my jacket sleeve to check the time—whoops, no watch. Dang. Is it lost? Now I'd better be a brave girl and ask.

I tiptoed to the counter and peered up at her—I was short for ten—hoping she'd see me, yet hoping she would not. "Um..." I sucked in a breath. My voice quivered, for she wasn't just any witch. She was certainly Baba Yaga, that old Russian fairytale witch, the one who lived deep in the forest in a magic hut that moved and danced and chased after children on mammoth chicken legs.

"Uh..." I breathed in again, then squeaked out, "What time is it?"

Baba jerked and snorted, as if I'd appeared out of a sudden gust of smoke. I stepped back. Her eyes narrowed.

"What do you think that is?" she snarled, waving her crooked finger at a tick-tock clock on the counter. Her sleeve slipped up her forearm a bit, revealing a neat row of stark blue numbers. Strange. Tattoos. But... tattoos are never arithmetic—not addition, not subtraction. Tattoos should only be sweethearts and blossoms and wings.

That old witch Baba yanked her sleeve down to her wrist and watched me, her lips thin and tight. I froze, dropped my eyes and backed out of the store. Her frown followed me all the way to the sidewalk where I turned and raced home. The stores flew by. Was her hut chasing me? I stole a look back. Almost tripped. I ran till I reached my own safe street. "Ha," I yelled, and stuck out my tongue. Back then, I didn't know.