

Baba Yaga at the Toy Store

by Casey Robb

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 from a gust of smoke. I stepped back. Her eyes narrowed.

"What do you think that is?" she snarled, waving her crooked fingers toward 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 back 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.

I didn't know what a Jew was. Or that this Baba hadn't always been round. That she and her tender husband once held hands in a filthy box car to the end of the line, had slept on rags and turned into stick figures. I didn't know, till years later, how she'd stood in the dirty snow in a dim yard before dawn and witnessed the cold gray uniforms pacing and counting, and counting and pacing—*achtzehn... neunzehn... zwanzig*—her eyes searching the shadows for her stick man who lingered in a distant line. A putrid smoke descended. She sneezed. She shivered. She

watched an icy sun sneak up from behind gray buildings, streaking the sky with crimson, cobalt, a sudden hue of sapphire, the colors aching like a crime. She reached her stiffened fingers to her pallid mouth and pulled out yet another loosened tooth.

One dull, overcast winter day, she heard guns, remote and faded at first, but then firing closer and closer. Allies? Could it be? The camp guards rushed into the barracks—*SCHNELL!*—where they shoved and prodded all prisoners who could walk or hobble, onto their final death march, out the gate, into the frozen woods and gone. Within hours, Soviet soldiers filed into the camp in their white winter suits, their red stars glistening on furry caps. She was helped to a table in the yard and offered soup and bread. And there he was, propped up by two soldiers and shuffling toward her—her tender stick man.

The soldiers helped them onto a truck crammed with broken people, but she saw only him and his pale hallowed face. The face she loved. The truck bounced along mud roads and, finally, let them out at a bustling, crowded camp with boxes of blankets and tin rations. Two years they waited, restless, in one camp then another, till official forms were covered with stamps and signings and tears, and it was off to America on an army transport ship to a new life, to grow plump and strong together, and safe.

As a child, I didn't know all this, about the train and the smoke. And the man. Not till I turned fourteen. October had whirled around again and, one day, Mom and I were sitting on the couch watching our little black and white TV when a Halloween witch appeared on the screen. And I remembered Baba Yaga.

“Mom,” I said. “Do you remember that grouchy old woman who ran that toy store?”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “Hon, she wasn’t old at all. She was about my age.” Mama stood up and turned off the TV. She sat back on the couch and told the woman’s story, of the camp and all.

She paused, then continued on... about the accident.

“The first month in their new apartment,” she said, “the neighbors brought food. I didn’t know much about kosher, but I found some lox and *latkas* at the store. Other folks brought lovely lavender sheets and a desk so they could settle in real nice.” She smiled a little. “Must have seemed like heaven on earth. Somehow, they even got a cheap used car, and her husband was driving around town, so pleased with their life and their luck.”

She shifted on the couch and leaned forward. “On his way home, a drunk driver met him at a crossroad. He died in the ambulance.”

Mama shook her head and stared down at her lap. I sat on the couch a while, stunned, holding this story in my hands like a dazzling, dangerous thing. That’s when I first knew that no amount of magic, not even Baba Yaga’s, could mend a tender spirit so perfectly crushed, like a luminescent beetle under a black boot.

Mama stood up. She blew her nose, then left to clean up the kitchen. I slipped out the door and walked down Kirby Drive to get a fresh look at this lady I’d once called Baba. I hadn’t been down there in years. The toy store was locked up. A “For Lease” sign hung on the door. I peered through the glass window, cupping my hands to kill the glare. The shelves were gone. Only the dust remained. The den seemed smaller than I remembered. Quiet now. Hollow and still.

I placed my hands flat against the window, closed my eyes, and kissed the glass.