

Sue Kosco

In a certain kingdom lived a merchant and his three daughters. The eldest daughter was known for her ability to ride a horse well, the middle daughter was known for her sewing ability, and the youngest daughter, Maria, while having no outstanding talents such as her sisters', possessed wit and a good heart. Because of this lacking of physical talent, Maria was mocked mercilessly by her two older siblings. Also, due to the fact that Maria could not sew or ride as well as her sisters, her mother look down at her and thought her a talentless, good-for-nothing, wretch and assigned all the hardest chores to her. Every time the stables needed cleaning, the house needed dusting, or it was approaching the dinner hour, Maria's mother called for her and allowed the older girls to sit about the house sewing and eating.

One afternoon, Maria was busy sweeping in the barn when she heard her eldest sister screaming in a far away field. Maria dashed toward the sound of her sister's screams, only to catch a fleeting glance of Koshchey the deathless carrying her off on his horse. The merchant and the middle daughter came soon after and asked Maria what had happened and where her sister was. When Maria told them about how she had seen Koshchey ride off with her, the middle sister scoffed, saying "Our sister is one of the best riders in this land,

there is no way anyone, not even Koshchey the deathless could catch up with

her." and stomped off. The merchant, although shaken by the thought of Koshchey the deathless being on his land, put one arm around Maria and assured her that his eldest daughter had probably just ridden to the nearby

kingdom for the day. Maria was sure of what she saw, but returned back to her

chores.

A terrible storm raged over the home that night and violent winds blew through the cottage. The merchant and his wife and two daughters rushed around in haste, attempting to keep the candles from blowing out, but to no

avail. One final, strong gust blew through the closed shutters of the cottage

and extinguished every candle the family had been trying so hard to keep lit.

The merchant's wife, who had become very angry that her eldest daughter had

not yet returned, turned to Maria and said "Go to the forest and find us some

fire". Maria began to protest, but thinking the better of it, agreed and went

out into the storm and into the dark forest. For a long time or a short time,

Maria wandered until she came upon Baba Yaga's hut. The hut stood on two

chicken legs and was surrounded by a fence made of human bones, and on the

spikes were human skulls, each with their staring eyes fixed on Maria as she

approached. Though she was frightened, Maria stood her ground. Just then a

terrible noise resounded through the wood; the trees crackled and the dry

leaves rustled; and Baba Yaga drove out in a mortar, prodding it on with a pestle, and sweeping her traces with a broom. "Fie, Fie! I smell a Russian smell! Who is here?" Maria bravely walked over to Baba Yaga and, bowing to her, said "It is I, Maria, Grandmother, my family has sent me to get some fire". Baba Yaga replied "I will give you fire if you do chores for me. What else do you want to ask of me?" Maria had been thinking all this time about her eldest sister and wondering if Baba Yaga had seen her or Koshchey ride through the wood, but didn't dare to ask. Maria swallowed her fright and asked "Grandmother, I have lost my sister, and I fear for her life in this storm. I was wondering if you had seen her." "I have, child. I saw her just a day ago. If you wish to find her, come inside with me." Maria obeyed and when inside the hut, Baba Yaga told Maria that when she was done cleaning the front yard, preparing dinner, and washing the linens she would understand how to find her sister. Maria did as she was told and after preparing a meal fit for ten people, washing the linens, and cleaning the front yard, she returned to Baba Yaga's side and said "Oh Grandmother, I have done all the chores you told me to do, now I wish to know how to find my dear sister." "My child," said Baba Yaga, "Your sister has been captured by Koshchey the deathless, and

he has carried her through these dark woods to an island in the middle of a

vast sea. There he holds her prisoner and will do so until she is rescued."

Then Baba Yaga went to her spindle and took a long piece of golden thread

from it and gave it to Maria. "What you must do is simple. When your sister

goes out to the field to sew tomorrow, Koshchey will come for her as well.

You must hide far up in a tree, out of Koshchey's sight. When he rides in to

take your sister, drop a part of the thread down by him and it will get stuck

on his shield. Then drop the other end of the string and it will show you a

path to where he is holding your sisters." Maria took the thread and began to

leave the hut, forgetting all about the fire for her house, when Baba Yaga

stopped her. "Your task isn't done, my child. In order to get the fire you

have requested you must remain here until tomorrow morning. And to get the

fire, you must reach into my stove." Baba Yaga was scheming this whole time

about how to get Maria into the stove so she could eat her. Maria was no fool

and immediately figured out what Baba Yaga was up to, and so she devised a

plan. She went over to the stove and began reaching her hands high into the

air and then low by her feet, never coming near the flames. "No, No!" Said

Baba Yaga, "You are doing it all wrong!" "Then show me, Grandmother, show me

how to grasp the flames". Baba Yaga walked over to the stove and shoved both

her hands into the flames, and just as she did this, Maria ran behind her and

pushed her in. Maria slammed the stove door and grabbed the golden thread

from the table and ran out the door. Maria then tore one of the bones out of

the ground, went over to a small fire that was burning in the front yard, set

it on fire, and ran off into the woods.

What Maria did not know was that the prince from the nearby kingdom was just

then riding by the hut, and was immediately taken aback by her beauty (even

though he only caught a glimpse of her running off). He decided to follow her

through the woods until she reached her own home.

By the time Maria reached her front door, it was almost daybreak and the

storm was completely over. She burst into the cottage, gasping for breath,

and threw the bone into the stove, where a massive fire roared to life. The

merchant thanked his daughter for her efforts and suggested that she rest

while he rode into the nearby kingdom to search for his eldest daughter. The

door to the cottage was barely closed when Maria's mother strode over to her

and said, "You were late with the fire. Now go to the field where your sister

is sewing and begin husking the corn in the barrels. I am going with your

father into the kingdom, and if it isn't done when I am back, you will suffer

the consequences!" Maria did as she was told and went to the field. To her

surprise, there were eleven barrels of corn to be husked! Maria began to

despair but then thought about her sister, she had almost forgotten about

Baba Yaga's warning! Maria climbed a tree near to her sister not a moment too

soon, because just then Koshchey rode in and grabbed her sister. Maria dropped one end of the thread, and then the other, and climbed down the tree.

There in front of her was a golden trail leading deep into the woods, and

without a second thought, Maria was off.

Still in hiding, the prince had witnessed this entire ordeal, and decided to

follow Maria into the dark woods.

Maria traveled for a long time or a short time into the forest, until she

came to the very edge, and a vast sea. She could make out an island just on

the horizon and saw a fisherman in a boat near shore. She yelled for him to

come pick her up, and just as she was running for the boat, she tripped on a

large lobster. When Maria stood back up, she thought that she might be hungry

when she reached the island, and went to kill the lobster. "Don't kill me!"

The lobster said. "I can be of use to you later". Maria decided to spare the

lobster, and jumped aboard the boat.

When she reached the island, Maria walked for a long time or a short time,

and finally reached a cottage. She peered inside and saw her two sisters doing chores and cooking, but there was no sign of Koshchey. Deciding it was safe, Maria snuck in the back door. Her sisters ran over to her and praised her for being so clever. "He will be back soon, he is only out hunting." Said the eldest sister. Maria instructed her sisters to try to find out where Koshchey's death was, and hid outside in the trees. Just then Koshchey flew in saying "Fie, Fie! I smell a Russian smell that was not here before". The eldest sister ran over to him, threw his arms around his neck, and said "Oh my dear friend, you were flying through Russia, and you yourself stink of it! We were so worried, we thought wild beasts had devoured you." "Foolish woman! Your hair is long but your wit is short. I cannot be killed by mere beasts", replied Koshchey. "Where is your death then?" The middle sister asked. "It is in that spoon on the wall." He answered, and went to bed. The next day, Koshchey went out to hunt again, and the sisters reported to Maria what he had told them the day before. Maria knew immediately this was a lie, and told the sisters to try asking again tonight. That night Koshchey returned, and this time the middle sister greeted him with kisses and fondling, and asked "Where is your death hidden, really?" Koshchey was beginning to suspect something was going on, and again smelled Russian, so he charged outside and

found Maria hiding in the bushes. He brought her inside with the other sisters and said "All of you have hair that is long, but wits that are short.

I have figured out your plan and captured your sister. Now, since I have you

all, I will answer the question you have been longing to know. My death is

hidden in an egg, that is buried beneath the only oak tree on this island."

With that Koshchey went to bed, and the sisters mourned for themselves.

Outside the cottage, the prince had been listening to every word, and rode

off to find the oak tree. It was located on the farthest shoreline of the

island, and upon discovering it he began to dig. For a long time or a short

time, he dug until he grasped in his hand an egg, a rather slipperey egg,

that flew out of his hands and into the sea. The prince sat down and wept,

for now he could never save his beloved Maria. The lobster heard his sobbing

and said, "Why do you cry prince?" "Because I lost the egg that was the only

way to save Maria." The lobster remembered Maria from earlier and dove into

the sea and retrieved the egg for the prince. After thanking the lobster

several times, the prince galloped off the Koshchey's cottage, dashed in, and

struck Koshchey in the forehead with the egg. Immediately Koshchey fell over

dead.

The prince asked for Maria's hand in marriage right then and there, and to

his surprise, she said "no". "I have to finish my chores at home, or my mother will punish me!" She cried. The other two sisters decided that since

Maria had saved them both they would go home and do her work for her, thus

allowing her to go off and marry the prince. Their wedding was a grand feast

with the entire kingdom present. I was at the feast too, I drank mead and

beer there; it ran down my mustache but did not go into my mouth.

The End