

Vassilissa

Van Badham

Her Legacy

VASSILISSA WAS ONLY eight years old, so she wasn't really sure why her mother's skin looked so much like wax. Her mother's straight hair had once been the colour of copper and chestnuts, but against the hospital pillow, under the fluorescent light, it looked rusty and green.

Her mother's hand felt like wax, too.

Vassilissa's father was out of the ward, fetching them cups of takeaway tea.

"In the drawer next to my bed—there's a box," whispered her mother. "Please get it out."

Vassilissa retrieved a pine box from amongst tissue packets and unused phone rechargers. She offered it to her mother.

"It's for you. Open it."

Inside was a wooden doll, female in shape, curled as if sleeping.

Her mother said: "My body is broken, Lissie. I'm dying. I won't be coming home—but if you keep my old doll in your pocket, as long as she's with you, I am too. Whenever you need help, find a place where you can't be seen; give the doll something to eat, and tell her your secrets."

"But, Mum—!"

"Never let anyone know she exists," said Vassilissa's mother, pale head sinking into the pillow, her eyes closing. "Not your father, no-one. This blessing is only yours, because you're my only daughter."

Van Badham

Vassilissa put the strange wooden doll into her pocket. Her mother gave her hand a limp squeeze, and fell asleep.

She never woke up. By the time Vassilissa's father was back in the room, her mother was dead.

* * *

Vassilissa's hand clutched the doll in her pocket as she and her father stood in the soundless hospital room. They stared at her mother's waxen face, then at the rosemary the nuns tucked into her folded hands, then at her soft, dead smile.

They drove back from the hospital, their faces sticky with silent weeping. Relatives met them at their house, tidied things, made phone calls, brought Vassilissa food she didn't want to eat, poured her father undrunk tea.

Only the night following her mother's funeral, once a last loud friend of her father's had stumbled his way out of their house and her father clambered up to bed, did Vassilissa emerge from under her quilt with the doll in her hand, pad down the stairs, and rustle through half-empty packets of biscuits that the funeral guests had left behind.

"It's not much," Vassilissa said, placing her mother's gift on the table, pushing crumbled cookies towards it.

This was the first time she'd examined the doll since it had gone into her pocket. Its wooden body was a tawny spectrum of grained wood; its threaded hair was every colour from grey through blonde, brown, red and black. "I . . . I miss my mum," Vassilissa said, and cried.

At first, Vassilissa thought a glint on the doll's face was the reflection of her tears, but a second glint resolved itself as light shining from the eyes of the doll waking in front of her. The tawny ripples of the doll's wooden skin swirled into the colour of human flesh and a tiny woman reached for the biscuit-pieces. When she smiled at Vassilissa, the doll's eyes sparkled like sunlight on water.

"Sadness is always crueller without sleep," said the doll, "get back into bed—I'll sing you into a soft dream. The days will be hard without your mum, but every morning you will wake up a little stronger."

Vassilissa didn't speak even as she did what the doll had told her. As she nestled into the covers, the little doll sang into her ear about nightingales and emperors; Vassilissa slept so well, she almost believed the talking doll had been a dream.

Vassilissa's father spent months crying. Sometimes, his friends would come over at night, after Vassilissa was in bed. The men played cards, drank beer, and were clumsy. They'd smash chips into the carpet and spill drinks onto the floor. When she knew they were gone, Vassilissa would tiptoe downstairs to find her father sometimes slumped at the table, or in an armchair staring into space, clasping a forgotten beer bottle. She'd lead him back to his room; when his door clicked shut, she'd scurry around the kitchen making meals of abandoned pizza crusts and cola to offer to the doll.

"Dad forgets the house has to stay clean . . ." Vassilissa would say.

The doll would swallow her last crumbs and leap to her feet. "You go to bed. I'll clean everything up, and be back in your pocket by morning."

Climbing the stairs towards bed, Vassilissa would often see the doll grow herself to the size of a woman, with hair that spilled to her shoulders. By morning, the house was always clean and breakfast ready on the table—although Vassilissa's father never seemed to notice.

Vassilissa attended school but had no energy for the robust games of her classmates; she immersed herself in books. Her father returned to work. The months passed; he cried less often, there were fewer late nights and card games. He spent more time on his computer and sometimes his phone. Some nights they watched television. Other nights, he went out, leaving Vassilissa with a sad-eyed relative or two. When she was very lonely, Vassilissa would retreat to her room and ask the doll to tell her stories.

Vassilissa had already turned twelve by the day her father collected her from school and drove her back to their house, where a strange blonde woman stood in their kitchen, tearing meat from a barbecued chicken.

Vassilissa froze with confusion, but her father embraced the woman like she was no stranger. "We're leaving sad memories behind with this house. I'm quitting my job," he announced. "We're moving to a farm in the country; we'll grow our own food and be a new family, and you'll have a real mother at last—"

"My real mother is dead!" cried Vassilissa.

"Not anymore," the strange woman said, grinning.

* * *

Her father wed the woman. Vassilissa's new family included the bride's two teenage sons as well. They were lumpy boys who grunted rude

Van Badham

jokes and delighted to tease a book-reading girl. They said she was ugly. They said she was stupid. And, from the very second the removalists' vans left the family to themselves in a dusty farmhouse on a cold, rocky hill, the boys said these things whenever they could.

The farm was so remote that Vassilissa could not attend school. Her stepmother promised to teach her lessons, but was lazy—while her husband and sons worked outside, the stepmother set Vassilissa endless tasks to clean the cluttered farmhouse. If Vassilissa did not comply, the woman would beat her.

Vassilissa wanted to tell her father about the lack of lessons and the beatings, but he was preoccupied with his farm. Also, the two were never alone; her stepmother or the boys had her always in sight.

The only friend Vassilissa had was her doll; in her tiny room at the farthest corner of the house, Vassilissa whispered to the doll, which spent most nights completing the stepmother's tasks so Vassilissa could sleep.

Months of this became years. Vassilissa was seventeen when her father announced over breakfast that business called him to the city. The situation was complicated, he explained, his stay was indefinite. His daughter farewelled him with tender sadness and nauseous anxiety.

That night, as Vassilissa crept out of her room to the feed her doll, she struck the unexpected sight of her stepmother and brothers gathered in the kitchen around a single candle, speaking in hushed voices.

"Vassilissa's aunt died," explained the stepmother, "she's inheriting houses, land and money. She's a minor, so he's guardian of the lot. He's in the city, meeting lawyers."

"If something happens to him," said a son, "does it all go to you?"

She shook her head. "If she should die before her eighteenth birthday, then it goes to him—which makes it good as mine."

"It's very easy to have an accident on a farm," a brother shrugged.

* * *

Vassilissa was cold with fear by the time she made it back to her bedroom. "What do I do?" She begged her doll.

"You do as the opportunity presents," replied the doll, "you're safe while you have me."

Even so, Vassilissa was careful at breakfast. She was careful at tea. While she cooked dinner she was careful . . .

. . . and then every light in the house went pop. All was dark.

“Vassilissa . . . !” Called one brother.

“Where are you, Vassilissa . . . ?” Called the other.

Her heart pounding, Vassilissa snatched up a loaf of bread she knew was in front of her . . . and ran.

She clattered blindly towards the front door, and kept running. The house was dark, but the sky above was a blue glow of stars. She found a driveway, a road, and then a highway. When the approaching lights of a black car trapped her in its beams, she panicked. She veered, stumbling into the dark thicket of a state forest. She pushed herself onward through sticks and branches and leaves until she tripped forward and her feet found the edge of a road . . . and the headlights, now, of a red car.

The car did not stop, it passed—and Vassilissa realised dawn had broken. She followed this road until a third car passed—a white one—and turned into the driveway of a house that looked made of shadow, even in what was a sudden, glittery daylight. The white car parked in a garage; the red and black cars were also there.

Vassilissa approached the house’s door. Before her hand had even posed to knock, the door was flung open by an old woman with wild white hair and a face as grooved as a walnut.

“Your story’s already known to me, child!” barked the old lady. “But this is my house and if you want to stay here, you’ll clean and you’ll cook. Because that’s easy work, you’ll also list everything I own. If it’s not done by twilight, I’ll call your brothers to come dine, and we’ll eat you.”

Vassilissa nodded, and watched the old lady walk to the red car and drive it away.

The moment she disappeared, Vassilissa fetched the doll from her pocket, and fed her some bread. “Just prepare dinner,” said the doll. “I’ll do everything else.”

When the red car returned to its garage, the sun dipped into twilight, and Vassilissa welcomed the old woman to a clean house, a feast and a folder fat with itemised lists. As the old lady sat down to eat, Vassilissa saw through the window the black car reversing from the garage. Night had fallen.

“Good work,” said the old lady, perusing the folder. She clapped; three pairs of disembodied hands crawled from the wall and sported the folder away. “If you want to stay here tomorrow, you’ll clean and you’ll cook. Because that’s easy work, you’ll also dig out the jewels in

Van Badham

my mountain's mine. If it's not done by twilight, I'll call your brothers, and we'll eat you."

Vassilissa made her bed by the hearth; when the old woman was asleep, she fed bread to her doll. Smiling, it set to the old woman's tasks.

The next day proceeded as the last. The old woman left and returned in the red car, the sun went down, the house was clean, a feast was presented . . . and a pile of gemstones as tall as a pig sat on the table. Outside, the black car rumbled past, and night fell. The old lady shoved her fist into the diamonds and rubies and fuchsite, and said "Well done." She clapped, and the three pairs of hands carried the gemstones away.

But the woman turned on Vassilissa. "Why don't you talk, child?"

"Can I ask questions?"

"Questions often lead to no good. If you know too much, you get old too soon."

Vassilissa pointed to the window. "Do the cars and their drivers bring the dawn, the day, twilight and night?"

"You've guessed this already," said the woman, "but such servants cannot hurt you. Ask other questions."

Vassilissa remembered the old woman's warning; she was silent.

"Ask me!" howled the lady. "Ask about the disembodied hands!"

"If I know too much, I'll get old too soon."

The old woman glowered. "Did you know that if you'd have asked me about them, they'd have appeared and torn you to pieces?" She glanced around the room. "What allows you to pass impossible tests?"

"My mother's blessing," Vassilissa replied.

The old lady reared "Out! Out! Back to your murderous home—there are no blessings in this house!"

"Night has fallen and I can't see my way—"

"Then let my last girl be your lantern!" The old woman stabbed a poker into the fire and scooped out a bobbing lamp—she hurled these things at Vassilissa.

The young woman caught the poker's handle and held aloft its lantern—a burning skull with raw fire in its eyes.

Without a word, Vassilissa left the house and navigated by lamplight along the road, and through the thicket, over the highway and back to her family's farm on the hill. She believed in her mother's blessing, but

she hoped that her father was now home; she had new strength to tell him the truth.

It was dawn as she approached the farmhouse; she was shocked to see her brothers and stepmother run out to greet her. "Thank god!" cried her stepmother, eyes fixed on her glowing lantern. "Since you've been gone we've had no heat at all. We couldn't cook or eat or warm ourselves!"

"Give me the lantern!" bellowed one brother.

"No, give it me!" bellowed the other, snatching at its handle.

Vassilissa released the lamp as the brothers grabbed it from her hands. Sparks flew as they struggled with it; one ember caught her stepmother's hair, another the roof of the house, others her brothers' sleeves. Vassilissa turned back to the road; behind her, she heard the skull laughing as brothers, stepmother and farmhouse caught alight on that rocky hill, and burned to ash.

* * *

Vassilissa walked along the highway until she reached the outskirts of a town. She noticed a white-haired woman tending a cottage garden, and asked if there was enough room in the cottage for her to board there. "I'm good at cooking and cleaning," said Vassilissa.

"And much more than that," said the lady, "yesterday, you outwitted my sister." The lady had a rosy smile that bore the same bones as the witch in the woods. "Those who are smart enough to do so are rarely so brave, those brave enough rarely so smart."

Vassilissa clutched her pocket. "I had help. My mother left me a gift I have relied on many times."

"Then your mother certainly believed you were worthy of receiving it."

Vassilissa laughed. "My family tried to kill me. My house has just burned down. I have no education. My father has my money, but I don't know where he is."

"Then you've finally arrived at your beginning," said the old woman, smiling. She guided the young woman into her cottage, and made her a cup of tea.