

Vasilisa

A traditional Russian Fairy Tale

Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom there lived a merchant and his wife and their beautiful daughter, Vasilisa. However, even the brightest of skies may become overcast, and misfortune stepped over their threshold at last.

When Vasilisa was eight years old, her mother fell ill, and feeling her end was near, she called Vasilisa to her bedside and gave her a small doll, and said, "Pay attention to my last words. Take very good care of this little doll and never show it to anyone. If anything bad happens to you, give the doll some food and ask her advice and she will help you out of all your troubles." Then the mother kissed her daughter farewell, and died.

The merchant sorrowed and grieved for a time, then he married again. He had thought to give Vasilisa a second mother, but he gave her a cruel stepmother instead, who was jealous of Vasilisa, who was good and beautiful. The stepmother had two daughters of her own, two of the most spiteful, mean and hard to please young women that ever lived. They each gave Vasilisa endless work to do, hoping she would grow thin and haggardly. "Fetch the wood, don't be slow! Start the fire, mix the dough. Wash the plates, milk the cow! Scrub the floor, hurry now. Work away, don't take all day!"

After milking the cow, Vasilisa would secretly take the doll out from her pocket and say, "Come little doll, drink your milk, my dear, and I'll pour out my troubles into your ear." The doll listened and always helped her in her work, so Vasilisa completed all her chores on time, and every day grew more and more beautiful.

One day, Vasilisa's father had to go on a long journey, and that night when the wind was howling, the stepmother and her daughters planned to get rid of Vasilisa. "Girls, we must all work," said the stepmother, and she gave one daughter wool to knit, the other lace to sew, and Vasilisa yarn to spin. Then she opened a little window so that a gust of wind blew out their only candle.

"Someone must go to Baba Yaga's house and ask for a light," she said. "Not I," said the eldest, "My knitting needles shine in the dark." "Not I," said her sister, "My needle is bright enough to see by." Then they both shouted, "Vasilisa is the one. Go this minute!" And they pushed her out of the house.

The dark night and the dense forest were all around her, and Vasilisa took out her doll, and fed it a crumb from her pocket, saying between sobs, "O my dear little doll, they are sending me to Baba Yaga's house for a light, and Baba Yaga gobbles people up." But the doll comforted her and said, "You will be alright, and I will take care of you."

Vasilisa walked all night, and as the sun rose a red horseman upon a red horse rode by. She walked until the second evening and arrived at a clearing where Baba Yaga's hut was standing. The fence around it was made of human bones with skulls on the fence posts.

Then darkness fell and a black horseman upon a black horse arrived, stepped off his horse and entered the house. Vasilisa was struck with horror and stood rooted to the spot. Soon all the eyes in the skulls began to glow, and in the clearing it was as light as day. Vasilisa trembled with fear. The bushes began to rustle, and Baba Yaga appeared riding in a mortar, steering with a pestle, and wiping out her tracks with a broom. When she stepped out of the mortar and reached the door, she sniffed the air, and cried out "I smell a Russian, who's there?"

Vasilisa said, "It is I, Granny, my stepsisters have sent me for some light." Baba Yaga smiled, and her giant teeth were shining like knives. "I know you. You must work for me first, without complaints for three days, and if you don't, I'll have you for dinner."

In the morning when Vasilisa woke up, a white rider upon a white horse rode by and daylight came. The witch gave Vasilisa hard chores to do and left the house. Vasilisa had to clean the house and go to the corn-shed and separate the mildewed corn from the good seed. When the black rider returned each night, the witch also arrived and checked all the chores were done. Baba Yaga then call for her faithful servants, whereupon three pairs of hands straightaway appeared in the air and ground the corn. Vasilisa then had to cook the meal, and the witch ate enough for ten, whilst Vasilisa just got a crust of bread, which she shared with her doll once the witch was snoring in her bed.

On the third day, Vasilisa and her doll did enough work for ten maids. That night Vasilisa asked Baba Yaga a question about the three riders, and Baba Yaga told her that the white was her day, the red her sun, and the black her night. But Vasilisa did not ask about the hands.

"Now answer me," growled Baba Yaga, "The more work I give you, the more work you do, how can that be?" Vasilisa told Baba Yaga that it was her mother's blessing that helped her. "Is that so? Then get out," cried the witch, "I don't want any blessing in my house." Baba Yaga pushed Vasilisa out of the door and took a skull with burning eyes from the fence. "Take this skull, its eyes will light your stepsister's fire."

Vasilisa thanked the witch and ran home through the forest. When she arrived it was still night and her stepsisters rushed out and began to chide and scold her. "What took you so long?" When they went into the house the skull's eyes fixed themselves on the stepmother and her two daughters. But when they tried to hide from its burning glare, the eyes followed them everywhere. By morning they had turned to three heaps of ashes on the floor. Only Vasilisa was untouched by the fire and she buried the skull in the garden.

Vasilisa locked up the house and went to the nearest town where an old woman who had no children of her own gave her shelter, and there she lived waiting for her father's return.

One day Vasilisa wove a piece of cloth to thank the old woman for her kindness. The weaving was so delicate and beautiful that the old woman said she could not keep it for herself, and decided to give it as a present to the young Tsar. The Tsar was pleased with the cloth and loaded the old woman with gifts in thanks.

But when he ordered shirts to be made, he could find no seamstress who could sew such fine linen. The old woman was summoned, and the Tsar said, "You were able to make this linen, you must be able to sew it too?"

"It was not I, your majesty, but the work of a girl named Vasilisa, who is living with me," the old woman replied. The Tsar ordered that Vasilisa make the shirts. When the old woman returned, Vasilisa told her, "I knew all along that I would have to do this work."

Then Vasilisa locked herself in her room and stitched and embroidered the shirts so beautifully that when at last he saw them, the Tsar was astonished, and asked that Vasilisa be brought to the palace so he could reward her with his own hands.

When the Tsar saw Vasilisa, he fell in love with her and asked her to be his wife. The wedding was celebrated at once and Vasilisa took the old woman into her home. When Vasilisa's father returned, he was overjoyed with her good fortune and lived in the palace too. And Vasilisa lived a happy life and always kept her doll in her pocket.

KNOT DOLLS

-for storytelling characters.

Use op-shop machine knit jumpers. Each piece of wool has a different 'give' or stretch, but for a 9cm doll
cut three rectangles:

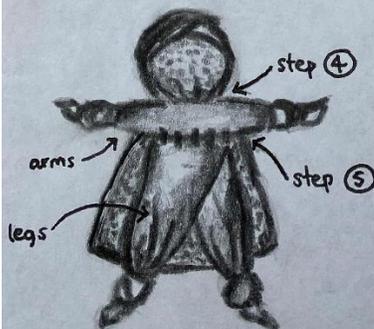
- 1) head and body: $19 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ cm
- 2) legs: $14 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ cm
- 3) arms: 10×2 cm

① Fold in at centre of head/body.

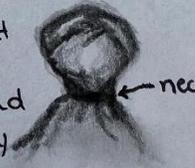


= under side

② Tie a knot at centre... not too tight.



③ Bring front and back together and bind tightly at neck.



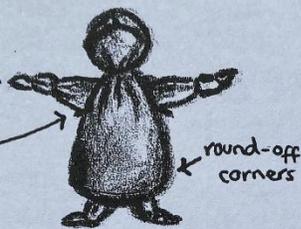
(use a long, double-thread and it may do for the entire sewing ahead!)

④ Tie loose knots for hands, lift up front of body and sew under neck area.

⑤ Tie loose knots for feet, fold legs in half and sew (legs slightly apart) to lower edge of armstrip.

⑥ Adjust hand and feet knots to desired position and tighten. Trim hands and feet to desired gesture: raised high for a young or lively character and low for serious one.

⑦ Catch at front and back for baby or make a waist for adult.



Girl



Gnome

Knot Doll pattern © Kim Billington 2001



COUNSELLING
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