“’Is anything—not even happiness but just not torment—possible? No, nothing!’ she answered herself now without the least hesitation. ‘...All efforts have been made; the screw is stripped.’”

--Anna in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*

“’She’s writing a book for children and doesn’t tell anybody about it, but she read it to me, and I gave the manuscript to Vorkuev… He’s a good judge, and he says it’s a remarkable thing.’”

--Stepán Arkádyich Oblonsky, regarding his sister, Anna.

“’My writing is like those little carved baskets made in prisons...”

--Anna

The Governess and the Tree

Once, in the woods, a tree.

Once in the woods there was a tree with the power to tell the future. The children of the household yearned for its verdicts on their lives, but their governess was wiser.

Give me your tokens, the governess said to the children, and I will take them to the tree and ask your fortune. Then if the tree should become angry, it will be not you but I standing before it.

Though the children had never seen their governess smile in all the years she’d taught them their lessons, still they loved her stern face with a great and terrible love, the love of children and untamed things. So the children gave her their tokens: a riding crop, a scrap of fine white lace, and a ribbon.

The governess, unsmiling as ever, gathered the children’s tokens and put them in a pouch. Then she set off for the wood, promising to return soon with their fortunes.

But she had not told the children all. For the governess knew this tree, and in her own girlhood had stood before it with her heart full of hope. She knew that although the tree could tell fortunes, it was also a servant of the hag Baba Yaga, who often lay in wait inside it, and the governess had been seeking the tree these many years, for this tree moved from place to place along with Baba Yaga and her hut that stood on chicken legs.

The governess walked through the woods. The sun was setting, the time was neither day nor night, when she found the beautiful silvery tree and stood before it.

“I have come, gentle tree, to learn the fortunes of the children in my charge,” she said.

Hidden inside the tree, old Baba Yaga awoke from her nap and looked through a knothole at the governess. Now Baba Yaga’s fingers were of yellow bone with talons like a bird’s, and her eyes were yellow and her neck was as thin as a snake. She had teeth of metal for crushing the bones of those who trusted her.

There was something about the well-dressed governess with her erect posture that seemed familiar to Baba Yaga--the curls of dark hair at the temples, the small white hands. But Baba Yaga put on her sweetest voice and spoke through the tree to the governess, and the tree swayed its silvery boughs in welcome.

“Give me a token,” Baba Yaga said, in the dulcet well-bred voice that was agony for her to speak.

The governess held out the riding crop that had been given her by the eldest child. “Here, gentlest tree,” she said, “is a token from the eldest, a boy of eleven. He wishes to know his future.”

But when the bone hand of Baba Yaga reached through a knot in the tree, the governess, knowing who it was that reached toward her, did not step forward. “I am nearly blind,” the governess lied. “In this poor light I cannot see you. You must come to me to take the token, tree spirit.”

Baba Yaga hesitated. Something was familiar about this governess, but she needed another moment to recollect it. “Show me the other tokens,” she sang.

The governess produced them from her pouch. She held up the lace. “This is from a girl of nine who wishes to know what the world holds for her.”

Baba Yaga sensed all was not as it seemed, but she was greedy and the white lace gleamed in the twilight like a tissue of sewn pearls.

“Have you any other token?” she said, her throat aching with the effort of such modulated speech.

“Only this velvet ribbon,” said the governess, producing the ribbon and dangling it before the tree. “It belongs to a girl of seven. But her future will be told by me and not you.”

Angered at this, Baba Yaga at last stepped from the tree.

And indeed she now believed the governess to be blind, for all people recoiled when they first saw Baba Yaga’s form, but the governess did not flinch as Baba Yaga stepped toward her in the half-light. Again the hag thought there was something familiar about this governess, yet she knew not what.

The governess, though, knew Baba Yaga, and she was ready. For in her girlhood many years ago the governess, too, had learned of a fortune-telling tree that gave fortunes both beautiful and frightening, and she had ventured with her friends to the woods to seek its wisdom. And the tree had seemed to her to be kind, and it had spoken in such silvery tones that none could fail to heed it.

Yet although the friends that were with her that long-ago evening had been envious of the fortune the tree had whispered to her, which unlike theirs contained no hint of sorrow to furrow her brow, she herself had been displeased, for this fortune she had been given told of order and quiet and a love that was neither great nor terrible. The girl could not sleep that night for the feeling this fortune gave her, as though all the loneliness in the world were pressing on her heart from the inside, and she felt her heart grow cold and heavy as it beat on pointlessly in her chest, and it seemed to her that her life had ended when it had hardly begun. And so she had risen the next day and returned to the tree despite the pleas of her friends, for she was a bold child and much loved in her home--and because nothing had ever been denied her she had never felt the sting of reprimand nor the need for shame.

Reaching the tree for the second time in two days, she’d curtseyed and said to it, I seek another fortune, if you please.

And with a crack of thunder Baba Yaga had sprung from it, and the girl fell to the earth certain that she would die on that spot of fright.

Baba Yaga had just that hour eaten a full meal of six sheep and a hare, so instead of seizing the girl to eat her she laughed a laugh that shredded the air, and raised a bone finger. “If you wish another fortune,” she crowed, “then you may share mine.”

In that instant the girl was cursed, and though she ran from that place back to her home, from that day her life was altered, and at the mere sight of her, former companions knew she was no longer as they were. For when she opened her mouth to speak or smile her teeth were made of metal, this being the curse Baba Yaga had set upon her—that the girl’s beautiful face be forever marred by metal teeth such as those that gnashed in Baba Yaga’s own mouth. And there were other changes as well that had happened in the girl, although these could not be seen. All felt there was something unnatural now in her, and even her family faltered when defending her against the talk of society. A great shame seized the girl so that she wished to hide, but she defied it and went proudly abroad in the streets of her town as had been her custom, for in her heart this girl knew she’d done nothing but follow the path life had laid for her. Yet all doors were now closed against her, and when she had grown enough to set out on her own she had moved to a new village where none knew her, and she had taken work as a governess. Because she did not smile none saw her teeth, and because the children both loved and obeyed her, the presence of her forbidding countenance soon became a mark of distinction among the best families.

Now she stood once again opposite the hag Baba Yaga, no longer a girl but a grown woman, and the hag did not recognize her.

“The children’s fortunes?” said the governess in a quiet voice.

“Very well,” Baba Yaga said, and she spoke in her own harsh voice. But something about the governess made her uneasy, for she sensed there was some dangerous kinship between them.

“The first will marry and raise heirs and die a rich old thick-headed man mocked in private by those family who praise him to his face,” said Baba Yaga. “The second will perish in childbed. The third, whose fortune I will tell despite your foolish defiance, will refuse advice, marry poorly, and die of the consequences of this great and terrible love.”

The governess lifted her head. “I do not accept these fortunes.”

And then Baba Yaga remembered. For only one had ever refused her fortune. Yet it was too late, for the governess had tricked her into leaving the tree.

The governess smiled for the first time, then, and Baba Yaga saw her metal teeth, and a feeling Baba Yaga had never had shuddered through her, and the feeling was fear. Quickly Baba Yaga summoned her mortar and pestle, which flew to her from where they had been hidden. Stepping into the mortar, she shot high into the sky, steering with her pestle until she’d reached the lowest clouds, from where she planned to plunge down to destroy her opponent. But the governess stepped onto a fallen log and raised the riding crop, and at the governess’ bidding the crop beat the log viciously. The log flew high, carrying the governess into the dusk far above Baba Yaga, so that Baba Yaga could not see her amid the clouds. Then Baba Yaga dove under the cover of the treetops and called up her broom from its hiding place. Trailing it behind the mortar she flew high once more, and with the broom she swept the stars from the sky until all that was left was a terrible blackness--for Baba Yaga’s yellow eyes could see in the dark and she knew the governess could not, and she planned to attack the governess when she was blinded and finish her right then.

But the governess, flying on her log, took the scrap of lace, and as she ripped open the stitches each turned into a ball of pearly light, and these floated far and wide through the sky so the dusk was lit with their shine and Baba Yaga could not hide.

Never had the forest seen such a battle as then occurred. For the governess had cast off her shawl and now her metal teeth flashed and her own hands looked like bones in the darkness, and the two hags soared and cursed as they carried their battle from the sky to the land, and the forest floor shook with the boulders they threw at one another, and the fish jumped in the lake at the earth’s shudderings. And a madness overtook the governess and she taunted Baba Yaga with the suspicions that had been flung at her by society when she herself had been cursed: “In truth I have eaten the children with these teeth you gave me,” she screamed at the frightened Baba Yaga, “and I bring you these their tokens only to goad you, for it is you I will eat next.”

A terror such as Baba Yaga had never felt seized her, for she was with her equal.

From the edge of the forest, a goods train whistled as it rolled heavily toward the town. “You may have your first fortune back,” croaked Baba Yaga slowly, making a show of defiance. “The one I gave you when you were a child.”

But the governess refused. “You will give me another, to my liking.”

Then Baba Yaga was desperate, for she knew of no other fortune to give, other than the two she had already given the governess, and so she flew at the governess to kill her, but when she sank her claws into the governess’ smooth cheek the governess seized Baba Yaga’s neck and began to choke the life from her.

Yet the moment her hands closed on the thin snakeline neck, the governess herself began to struggle grievously to draw breath, and she remembered that she and the hag now shared the same fortune, and one could not die without the other perishing as well.

She released Baba Yaga, and Baba Yaga fled for the shelter of the fortunetelling tree. But finding in her pouch the last token, the governess threw the velvet ribbon into the silvery branches.

In all the years that the tree had been Baba Yaga’s servant, Baba Yaga had never given the tree so much as a string to wear. Now when Baba Yaga flew to its trunk it did not admit her, but for the first time closed itself to her no matter how the hag gashed its trunk with her teeth.

The two women stood in the wood. The wood breathed about them, the dusk thickened and the land sighed as it cooled, and still the two stood. Then Baba Yaga turned her back. She crept to the lake, where she planned to turn into a crow and make her escape. But before she did, she glimpsed her reflection in the lake’s still waters. There she saw the beauty that had been hers before she’d been cursed to be a woman shunned by the world, and there she saw the beauty that was still hers.

With a quiet moan of pain she turned into a crow and flapped into the dark.

The governess stanched and cleaned the blood from her face, and returned home. Upon her return the children were stricken by the claw marks on her cheek, but she shushed them and said only that a breeze had risen while she was having her audience with the tree and its waving branches had scratched her. The children stared at the marks and were uncertain whether to believe, but greed for their fortunes swayed the two elder and they pressed their suit, pulling the youngest with them despite the puzzlement on the child’s face. Together they crowded the governess, each beseeching in his own way: what is my fortune, dearest Nana. For this is what they had called her always, not knowing her true name.

The governess had ever loved these children, although their small concerns wearied her at times. And she saw that they wondered at the change that had come over her, though they had no words for it.

To the eldest she said, I have spoken to the tree and have earned the power to give you this fortune: You will have the fate of Baba Yaga: to have many servants who must obey you. Only mind they do not simply obey but also love you, for the time will come when you will need their love most of all.

To the second, she said: You will have the fate of Baba Yaga: to live without children. Tell any who woo you that you cannot bear a child, for there are ways to make this come to pass. So you will live and not die, and if a man marry you he chooses you alone.

Then the children’s mother, innocent and soft as a kitten, came into the room. Her hands worked reflexively at the sight of the governess, for she had never trusted the woman and had put her children in the governess’ care only on the strong advice of those in the best circle of society, who had praised the governess ever since she appeared in their midst and declared her severe intelligence and strange silent dignity fashionable. The children’s mother had employed the governess against her own better instincts, for she had ever found her monstrous, and she feared her.

So the mother watched closely now from across the nursery. Still the governess turned her back on the mother and bent over the smallest girl (it was she whose ribbon had won the heart of the tree). And to this child the governess said: You will be as I, and you will learn to fight for your fate, and you will reject two fortunes and make your own.

In the days thereafter, the riding crop became a large leather cloak, and the governess was always protected from even the bitterest cold in this outlandish covering, and all of society could recognize her striking figure from a distance. The pearly lace was never seen again, yet from that day onward the governess’ teeth were no longer metal but pearls. They glimmered the whitest white, and none who looked upon them could help admiring their elegance, though many thought it frightening, and in the privacy of sleep some found their dreams haunted more fearsomely by that glimmering smile than by all the metal teeth of the hag Baba Yaga.

But the ribbon she gave to the girl.