

The Frog Princess

In a certain land, in a certain tsardom, there lived a tsar and tsaritsa. They had three young sons, all of them braver and more handsome than storyteller can say or pen can portray. The youngest was called Ivan Tsarevich. One day the tsar said to his sons, 'It's time you were married, sons. You must each take one arrow, draw your stout bows and loose your arrows. Where your three arrows land will be where your three brides stand.'

The eldest brother's arrow landed in the courtyard of a nobleman; the daughter of the house picked it up and handed it back to him. The second brother's arrow landed in the fine porch of a merchant's house; the merchant's daughter picked it up and handed it back to him. The youngest brother's arrow landed in a foul bog – and was found by a croaking frog.

Ivan went back to his father and said, 'How can I marry a frog? A frog's no equal of mine!' 'Marry her,' said his father. 'Your fate is your fate – it can't be escaped.'

The three brothers married. The eldest brother married the nobleman's daughter; the second brother married the merchant's daughter; and Ivan married the croaking frog. After a while the tsar called his three sons together and said, 'For tomorrow I want each of your wives to bake me a loaf of soft white bread.' Ivan walked gloomily back, his bold head below his broad shoulders. 'Kva, kva, Ivan Tsarevich! What are you looking so sad about?' asked the frog. 'Has your father said something unkind?' 'How can I not look sad? My father commands you to bake him a loaf of soft white bread for tomorrow.' 'Don't grieve, Ivan Tsarevich,' said the frog. 'Go to bed and have a good sleep. Mornings are wiser than evenings.' She put

the tsarevich to bed, shook off her frog skin and turned into a fair maiden – Vasilisa the Wise. She stepped out onto the fine porch, clapped her hands and called out in a loud voice, 'Women! Servants! Bakers! Bake me a loaf of soft white bread by tomorrow morning – one like we used to eat on holidays in the home of my dear father!'

Ivan Tsarevich got up next morning and found that the frog's loaf was already baked. It was a loaf to take your breath away, more beautiful than pen can portray or anyone but a storyteller can say. It was embellished in many ways, and on each side of the loaf could be seen a gated city. Ivan was overjoyed. He took the loaf to his father. And along came his two brothers with the loaves that their own wives had baked.

First the tsar looked at the loaf brought by his eldest son. He turned it over, looked at it from all sides – and had it sent down to the kitchen. Then he did the same with the loaf brought by his second son. Then he looked at Ivan's loaf and said, 'Now this is bread. This is what I call bread. This is the kind of bread you eat on a holiday.' He ordered it to be served at his own table.

Then he said to his sons, 'Now I want each of your wives to weave me a carpet. And I want the carpets ready by tomorrow morning.' Ivan walked gloomily back, his bold head below his broad shoulders. 'Kva, kva, Ivan Tsarevich! What are you looking so sad about? Did your father not like the loaf I baked him? Has he said something cross or cruel?' 'How can I not look sad? My father thanks you for the bread and commands you to sew him a silk carpet by tomorrow morning.' 'Don't grieve, Ivan Tsarevich. Go to bed and have a good sleep. Mornings are wiser than evenings.'

She put the tsarevich to bed, shook off her frog skin and turned into a fair maiden – Vasilisa the Wise. She stepped out onto the fine porch, clapped her hands and called out in a loud voice, 'Women! Servants! Weavers! Make me a silk carpet by tomorrow morning – one like I used to sit on in the home of my dear father!'

Ivan Tsarevich awoke in the morning and found the carpet already finished. It was the most sumptuous carpet you've ever

set eyes on, more beautiful than in any dream, more beautiful than pen can portray or anyone but a storyteller can say. It was flecked with silver and gold and on it could be seen the entire tsardom – every city and village, every mountain and forest, every river and lake. Ivan Tsarevich was overjoyed. He took the carpet to his father. And along came his two brothers with the carpets that their own wives had woven.

First the tsar looked at the carpet brought by his eldest son. He had it spread out on the floor, looked at it carefully and said, 'Thank you! This is a carpet to lay on the threshold.' Then he looked at the carpet brought by his second son. He felt it between his fingers and said, 'Thank you! This is a carpet to wipe one's boots on.'

Then he had Ivan's carpet spread out on the floor. Everyone gasped. The tsar took it in his hands and gazed at it. He turned to his servants and said, 'And I want this carpet beneath my royal throne.' And then the tsar ordered his three sons to bring their wives to a banquet that evening.

Ivan walked gloomily back, his bold head below his broad shoulders. 'Kva, kva, Ivan Tsarevich! Why are you looking so sad? Has your father said something cross or cruel?' 'How can I not look sad? My father's asked me to bring you to a banquet this evening. What can I do? How can I show you to so many people?'

'Don't grieve, Ivan Tsarevich. You go first and I'll follow. When you hear loud cracks of thunder, say, "That's my little frog, riding along in her little box".'

Ivan went to the palace. And along came his two brothers; their wives were arrayed in all their finest clothes and jewels. The brothers looked at Ivan and began to laugh. 'Why haven't you brought your own wife along then?' they asked. 'You could have wrapped her up in a silk handkerchief and carried her here in your hands. Where did you find such a beauty anyway? You must have had to search every bog in the tsardom.'

Suddenly there were cracks of thunder. The palace shook. Everyone jumped to their feet in fear, but Ivan said, 'Don't be afraid, honest guests. That's my little frog, riding along in her little box.'

Drawn by six white horses, a gilded carriage drew up to the palace gate – and out stepped Vasilisa the Wise, more beautiful than pen can portray or anyone but a storyteller can say. She took Ivan Tsarevich by the hand and sat down with him at the oak table.

The guests began to eat, drink and be merry. Vasilisa drank her glass of wine and poured the dregs into her left sleeve. She ate some roast swan and dropped the bones into her right sleeve. The elder brothers' wives watched what she did, then did the same themselves.¹

When everyone had eaten and drunk, it was time to dance. Vasilisa the Wise took Ivan Tsarevich by the hand and got up. As she danced, she waved her left arm in the air – and out of nowhere appeared a beautiful lake. She waved her right arm in the air – and there, swimming across this lake, were seven white swans. The tsar and his guests were filled with wonder. Then the wives of the two elder brothers began to dance. They waved their left arms in the air – and sprayed wine over the guests. They waved their right arms in the air – and the bone of a swan flew into the tsar's eye. The tsar was furious, and he had the two women thrown out of the palace.

After that Ivan Tsarevich slipped out and rode back home. He found the frog skin and threw it onto the fire. Then Vasilisa the Wise came back. She looked round but couldn't see her frog skin anywhere. 'Ivan Tsarevich! Ivan Tsarevich!' she lamented. 'What have you done? If you'd only waited, if you'd only waited, I could have been yours forever. But now – farewell! If you want me, you must seek me beyond thrice-nine lands, in the thrice-tenth tsardom. I'll be with Koshchey the Deathless.'

She turned into a white swan and flew out of the window.

Ivan Tsarevich wept bitterly, then made ready, said farewell to his mother and father and set off where his eyes looked. He walked a long way, or maybe a short way; he walked for many a day, or maybe less than a day. Then he met an old, old man.

'Greetings, young warrior!' said the old man. 'Where are you going? What are you looking for?'

Ivan told him his story.

'Ivan Tsarevich!' said the old man. 'What made you burn the

frog's skin? It wasn't your own attire – nor was it yours to throw in the fire. Vasilisa the Wise was born smarter and wiser than her own father. Her father didn't like this, so he turned her into a frog for three years. Well, I'll do what I can for you. Here, take this ball! Follow boldly wherever it rolls.'

Ivan Tsarevich thanked the old man and set off after the ball. As he was walking through open steppe, he caught sight of a bear. He was about to shoot the beast when it said, in a human voice, 'Don't kill me, Ivan Tsarevich. One day I'll be of service to you.'

He walked on further. He saw a drake flying overhead. He had taken aim with his bow, he was about to shoot the drake, when it cried out in a human voice, 'Don't kill me, Ivan Tsarevich. One day I'll be of service to you.'

He walked on further. A hare ran past. He raised his bow and was taking aim when it said in a human voice, 'Don't kill me, Ivan Tsarevich. One day I'll be of service to you.'

Ivan took pity on the hare too. He walked on till he came to the sea. There on the shore lay a pike. It was dying. 'Ivan Tsarevich!' it gasped. 'Take pity on me. Throw me back into the sea.' Ivan picked up the pike and threw it into the water.

After a long time, or maybe a short time, the ball rolled up to a little hut by the very edge of the sea. It was built on chicken legs and it was turning round and round in circles.

'Stand still, little hut!' said Ivan. 'Stay as your mother made you. Stay with your back towards the sea and your door towards me.'

The hut turned round and came to a stop with its back towards the sea. Ivan walked in. There on the stove, on the ninth brick, lay a bony-legged baba yaga. Her nose had grown into the ceiling and the snout from it was hanging across the threshold. She had slung her tits up over a hook and was sharpening her teeth.² 'What's brought you here, my fine fellow?' she asked.

'What a slut you are! First you should give me something to eat and drink. You should take me to the bathhouse for a good steam. After that you can ask me again.'

The baba yaga gave him food and drink and took him to the

bathhouse. Then the traveller told her he was looking for his wife, Vasilisa the Wise.

'Oh yes,' said the baba yaga, 'I know all about her. She's with Koshchey the Deathless. You won't find it easy to get her away from him. His death lies in the tip of a needle. This needle lies inside an egg. This egg lies inside a duck. This duck lies inside the belly of a hare. And this hare lies inside a chest hidden at the top of a tall oak that Koshchey watches over like the apple of his eye.'

The yaga told Ivan Tsarevich where this oak grew, and there he went – but he had no idea how to get his hands on the chest.

Just then a bear came along and uprooted the tree. The chest fell to the ground and smashed to pieces. A hare leaped out and shot into the bushes.

A second hare shot after it, caught it and tore it apart.

A duck leaped out of the hare's belly and flew high into the sky. A drake swooped down and gave it such a blow that it dropped the egg it was carrying straight into the blue sea. This was more than Ivan Tsarevich could bear – he sat down by the shore and began to weep tear after bitter tear.

All of a sudden a pike swam up to the shore. In its mouth it was holding an egg. Ivan took the egg and went straight to where Koshchey lived. Seeing the egg in Ivan's hands, Koshchey began to tremble. Ivan Tsarevich began playing with the egg, tossing it from one hand to the other. Koshchey writhed and struggled and swayed from side to side. Then Ivan cracked the egg, took out the needle and snapped off the tip – and that was the end of Koshchey. Ivan went into Koshchey's stone house. There he found Vasilisa the Wise, and he took her back with him to his own land.

When they got back, Ivan's father invited the whole country to a banquet in their honour. After that they lived happily together for many years.