

Vasilisa the Wise and the Red Book

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In a certain land, in a certain kingdom, there once lived a merchant who had three daughters. The merchant was going to trade goods in a distant kingdom and before he left he asked his daughters what they'd like him to bring home to them as souvenirs from his journey.

His eldest daughter replied, "I want a bracelet made of the most beautiful colored jewels in the world."

"Okay, the bracelet will be yours," the father replied.

Then he asked his middle daughter what she'd like, and she replied, "A coat made of the most beautiful colored fabrics in the world."

"I will find you a coat such as that," the father replied. "And my youngest daughter, Vasilisa, what would you like me to bring you?"

"Father, I would like to have the red book that no one in the world has yet read from beginning to end," Vasilisa replied.

"That is all, Vasilisa? You don't want beautiful jewelry or clothes like your sisters?"

"No, father, just the book."

Vasilisa's two older sisters laughed and laughed at her. "Our silly sister!" they said. "Only wanting a book, how foolish is she!"

Their father left on his journey to trade goods and find the gifts for his daughters. He searched to every corner of the kingdom for the red book for Vasilisa, but he could not find it. The father came across an old woman and asked her for help.

The old woman said, "I can only help you if you can solve my riddle."

"I am a smart man, tell me the riddle and I'll solve it," replied the merchant.

So the old woman asked him, “What do people lose as they get older, gain as they get older, there is nothing in the world worth more than it, it is the most envied possession in the world, and if you aren’t born wanting it, you’ll never get it?”

“That is a tough riddle,” the old man replied. “But I know the answer. The answer is happiness.”

“I’m sorry, that is the wrong answer. I cannot tell you where the book is. Go home, there is someone there who knows the answer, and once you figure it out, you can come back and try again,” the old woman told him.

So the merchant returned home, whether it was after a long time or a short time it is not known. He presented his two eldest daughters with their gifts. They put them on and admired themselves in the mirror, thinking they were the most beautiful girls in the world.

The merchant turned to his younger daughter and said, “Vasilisa, I searched to every corner of the kingdom and could not find the red book that no one has yet read from beginning to end. I am sorry my little Vasilisa, I hope I did not disappoint you.”

“It is alright, father,” she replied.

The merchant then told Vasilisa about the old woman and the riddle. His eldest daughter, overhearing the riddle, said, “That’s easy, father. The answer must be money.”

“Of course!” the father answered. “I should’ve known, but the old woman was right, someone at home would have the answer.”

A few months later, the merchant was going on another trip to trade goods. He said goodbye to his daughters and again asked them what presents they would like him to bring home from his journey.

“I would like to have earrings made from the most beautiful colored jewels in all the land,” replied his eldest daughter.

The middle daughter said, “I would like a scarf made of the most beautiful colored fabrics in the entire land.”

“And what about you, Vasilisa? What would you like?” the father asked.

“All I want father is the red book that no one in the world has yet read from beginning to end,” she replied.

“I will try my best, daughters,” the merchant said.

The merchant went on his journey, whether it was a long time or a short time no one knows. Once again he searched to every corner of the thrice ninth kingdom and could not find the red book.

He found the old woman and she said to him, “I will tell you where the book is if you can answer my riddle. What do people lose as they get older, gain as they get older, there is nothing in the world worth more than it, it is the most envied possession in the world, and if you aren’t born wanting it, you’ll never get it?”

“I know the answer this time, old woman. Surely the answer must be money.”

The old woman laughed at him and told him to go home and find the answer, it was still there.

So the merchant returned home and gave his eldest daughter the earrings and his middle daughter the scarf. They tried them on and admired themselves in the beautiful colors in the mirror; surely no one had ever looked as beautiful as themselves, they thought.

The merchant then turned to Vasilisa and said, “My youngest daughter, I searched to every corner of the thrice ninth kingdom and could not find the red book. I then answered the old lady’s riddle, but was wrong again.”

The middle daughter overheard and told her father, “Well then father, the answer to the same riddle must be beauty.”

“Of course,” he replied. “I should’ve known that was the answer.”

The merchant waited almost a year before he went on another trip to trade goods. This would be his last journey, for he was getting old. So he told his daughters, “Tell me the most magnificent gift you want, girls. This will be my last journey and I want to make you happy.”

“I would like to have a necklace made from the most beautiful colored jewels in all the land,” replied his eldest daughter.

The middle daughter said, “I would like a dress made of the most beautiful colored fabrics in the entire land.”

“And what about you, Vasilisa? What would you like?” the father asked.

“All I want, father, is the red book that no one in the world has yet read from beginning to end,” she replied.

Vasilisa’s older sisters laughed at her and said, “Foolish girl, don’t you know there is no such book! Father would have found it by now! Ask for something to make you beautiful like us.”

Vasilisa still asked for the book. “I will try my best, daughters,” the merchant said. “Farewell.”

The merchant went on his journey, whether it was a long time or a short time no one knows. Once again he searched to every corner of the thrice ninth kingdom and could not find the red book.

He found the old woman and she said to him, “I will only tell you where the book is if you can answer my riddle. What do people lose as they get older, gain as they get older, there is nothing in the world worth more than it, it is the most envied possession in the world, and if you aren’t born wanting it, you’ll never get it?”

“There is no doubt in my mind that I know the answer this time, old woman. The answer has to be beauty.”

The old woman laughed at him and told him to go home and find the one who knew the answer and send them, instead.

“But old woman, I do not know who could have the answers. Both of my eldest daughters have been wrong, and even though she is my favorite, Vasilisa is still young and foolish,” the merchant cried.

The merchant returned home after a long time or short time and gave his eldest daughter the necklace and his middle daughter the dress. They tried them on and admired themselves in the beautiful colors in the mirror; surely no one had ever looked as beautiful as themselves, they thought.

The merchant then turned to Vasilisa and said, “My youngest daughter, I hope I did not disappoint you. I searched to every corner of the thrice ninth kingdom and could not find the red book. I then answered the old lady’s riddle, but was wrong again.”

“It is okay, father. I have known the answer all along. The answer is knowledge,” Vasilisa said.

“Of course, how foolish am I! I should have known that was the answer,” replied the father. “Now Vasilisa, if you still want the red book that no one has read from beginning to end, you must go on a journey to the thrice ninth kingdom to find the old lady and answer the riddle.”

So Vasilisa went on the journey, whether she traveled a long time or a short time, it is not known. She found the old lady in a hit and said, “Grandma, I am Vasilisa, the merchant’s daughter. I have come to answer the riddle and find the red book that no one in the world has yet read from beginning to end.”

The old woman smiled at Vasilisa and said, “Then tell me you little Russian girl, what do people lose as they get older, gain as they get older, there is nothing in the world worth more than it, it is the most envied possession in the world, and if you aren’t born wanting it, you’ll never get it?”

“The answer, granny, is knowledge,” Vasilisa replied.

“Very well, child, you are the first to answer the riddle correctly. Now walk down this road until you come to seven kingdoms beyond this one. Cross over the never-ending sea and find the highest tree in the world on that side of the water. In the tree is a snake, and in the snake’s stomach is a glass egg. In that egg is the red book that no one has yet read from beginning to end,” the old woman told her.

She then gave Vasilisa some food for her journey so she wouldn’t go hungry, a bowl and some water of life. “Now listen girl, when you break the egg, collect the glass and place it in the bowl, and when you are finished reading the book sprinkle this water over the glass. Good luck, Vasilisa the Wise.”

So Vasilisa began to walk down the road to seven kingdoms beyond and on her way met an eagle. The eagle asked, “May I have some food? I am hungry and have not eaten for days. I promise you that one day I will help you if you help me.”

“Well, alright,” said Vasilisa. And she gave the eagle some of her food.

Vasilisa the Wise continued down the road, and when she was at the fourth kingdom she met a cat. The cat asked, “May I have some food? I am hungry and have not eaten for days. I promise you that one day I will help you if you help me.”

“Okay, cat, here is some food for you,” said Vasilisa.

Vasilisa was almost to the seventh kingdom when she met a turtle. The turtle said to her, “I am so hungry, beautiful girl. Will you please give me a few morsels of food? I promise you that one day I will help you if you help me.”

Vasilisa thought about it for a while, for she was hungry and had not eaten all day and only had a little bit of food left. But then she said, “Okay, turtle, here is the rest of my food.”

After a long time or a short time, Vasilisa the Wise got to the seventh kingdom and the edge of the never-ending sea. She took one look and knew she would never be able to swim across by herself.

Then she remembered the eagle and called to it, “Oh eagle, it is Vasilisa the Wise! I need your help in crossing the never-ending sea.”

So the eagle came, picked Vasilisa up and flew her all the way to the other side of the never-ending sea. The eagle set her down on the shore and said, "I can take you no further, Vasilisa the Wise. Good luck on your journey."

Vasilisa walked on this new land until she saw the highest tree there was. She looked up and knew she'd never be able to climb this tree to the top; it was at least 27 miles high!

Then she remembered the cat, and called to it, "Oh, cat, it is Vasilisa the Wise! I need your help in climbing the highest tree in the world!"

The cat came, put Vasilisa on her back and ran her up to the top of the tree. Vasilisa stood on the branch and looked out; she could see the whole world from here.

She then saw the snake and said, "Hello snake, I am Vasilisa the Wise. I need the glass egg in your stomach so I can read the red book that no one has yet read from beginning to end."

The snake knew he must be looking at the smartest girl in the entire world. "Finally Granny has sent someone to claim the egg so I can eat again!"

So he coughed up the egg. But before Vasilisa could catch it, the egg fell out of the tree and into the neverending sea.

Oh no, Vasilisa thought. Now what will I do. The sea is over a thousand miles deep, I will never be able to swim to the bottom." Then she remembered the turtle and called to it, "Oh turtle, it is Vasilisa the Wise! I need your help in finding the glass egg at the bottom of the sea."

The turtle came to Vasilisa's side, she told him about the glass egg and he dove to the bottom. When he came to land, he gave the glass egg to her and said, "Here you go, Vasilisa. I promised I would help you like you did for me."

Vasilisa broke open the egg and took out the red book that no one in the world had yet read from beginning to end. It must have had almost a million pages because it was so heavy.

Then she gathered the glass from the egg and placed it in the little bowl. Vasilisa the Wise then began to read the book. Whether it took a long time or a short time, no one knows, but Vasilisa finished reading the book.

She then sprinkled the bowl of glass with the water of life like the old woman had told her to do. The glass turned into the most handsome prince in all of the kingdoms. The prince was very tall and had blue eyes the color of the never-ending sea.

He fell in love with Vasilisa the Wise as soon as he saw her and said to her, "You are the wisest and most beautiful woman in the world. You must marry me."

The prince and Vasilisa the Wise were married the next day. There was a huge reception with lots of dancing. I was there and drank mead and wine; it ran down my mustache, but did not go into my mouth.