

The
HOUSE With
Chicken Legs
Runs Away

To *Les Enfants Terribles*. Trost!

The HOUSE With Chicken Legs Runs Away



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PROLOGUE

All my life, I have lived in a house with chicken legs. The house has carried me safely through forests, up mountains and along rocky shores. It has grown vine hammocks to rock me to sleep, leafy dens for me to read in, and – when I was younger – tiny stick creatures would sometimes leap from the floorboards to join in my imaginary games.

We have played hide-and-seek among tall trees, chased each other laughing through grassy meadows and swum together in seas sparkling with glowing plankton. And we've always talked to each other, in our own way.

Usually, the house listens to me and lets me know

what it is thinking and feeling through the shrug of its eaves or the tilt of its windows, the smile of its porch or the impatient twitching of its long, clawed toes.

We haven't always agreed on everything, but I have always felt loved and known that we have a special bond, because of our history and the ways our lives are entwined.

The house is a Yaga house – a place where dead souls come to celebrate their lives before being guided to the stars. I came to the house as a baby, to be guided, but I was too stubborn to pass through The Gate to the Stars. So, because I could not go back to the land of the living and would not go forward to the land of the dead, the house gave me enough energy to exist within it, on the threshold of life and death.

Baba, the Yaga who lived in the house, adopted me as her grandchild, Marinka, and I spent the first twelve years of my life as an apprentice Yaga, helping to guide the dead. We became a family: the house, Baba and me, and Jack too, of course – the jackdaw I raised from a chick.

We travelled the world together, throwing parties

for the dead almost every night, and when we weren't guiding, we read books, told stories, played games... or just sat together, wrapped in the warmth of each other's company as landscapes drifted by.

When Baba passed through The Gate last year, the house did everything it could to comfort me and give me a new life that would make me happy. I didn't want to become the next Guardian of The Gate, so the house helped me find an old friend of Baba's, Yaga Tatyana. The house grew together with Yaga Tatyana's house – which was old and broken – so that Yaga Tatyana could live with us and take over the responsibility of guiding the dead.

Then the house even gave me enough energy to be alive, for real. It settled here, in The Land of Lakes, so that I could be near my best friend Benjamin, go to school and meet other children and do everything I ever dreamed of.

The house has always been kind, generous, playful and protective. It has always taken care of me. Until a couple of weeks ago, when it began to change...



THE BONES CAUSE TROUBLE

My house has been behaving strangely lately. It started with the glowing mushrooms. Overnight, they grew all over the floors and walls. In the morning, their caps opened and clouds of glittering spores erupted, filling the air with an acrid, choking smell. Yaga Tatyana and I wore our headscarves over our mouths while we scraped the thick stalks away.

A week later, purple vines grew from the rafters. They were stippled with tiny, green thorns and followed us around the house, curling around our limbs and pricking our skin, leaving a stinging rash like nettles do. Jack squawked at them constantly, pecked at them with his beak and flapped his wings angrily whenever they snaked close to him.

Yaga Tatyana and I dressed in several layers of clothes to protect ourselves as we cut the vines down. The house fell into a huff then. Its eaves scowled and smoke puffed grumpily from the chimney.

Now, it's the fence bones causing trouble.

Since the house settled in this valley, in The Land of Lakes, the fence bones have stayed hidden in the skeleton store, which is tucked into the side of the house. Once or twice a month, the house stands up on its long, thin legs and walks to an isolated, faraway place, so that Yaga Tatyana and I can spend a night or two guiding the dead through The Gate to the Stars. At these times, the bones tumble out of the store so we can build the skull-and-bone fence that keeps out the living and guides in the dead. But as soon as we return to The Land of Lakes, where I have been trying to lead a normal life with the living, our responsibilities as Yaga become secret once more – here, we don't guide the dead and so the bones stay hidden. Well, they did until now.

For the last three nights, the bones have run out of the skeleton store after sunset and caused chaos. One of

our neighbours was out for an evening walk, and they scared him so much that he fell into a compost heap. Thankfully, Yaga Tatyana managed to convince him that it was a freak accident involving the wind and an old model skeleton she had kept from her days as a scientist.

Then the bones danced in the field between my house and my best friend Benjamin's house, which made Benji – the sheep I raised from a lamb – bleat so loudly with annoyance that he woke Benjamin and his father. At least they understand about the bones –



Benjamin and his father are the only people in The Land of Lakes who know this is a Yaga house. They helped me chase the bones back into the skeleton store, then Benjamin's father gave me a shiny metal padlock so that I could secure the door.

I don't understand how the bones escaped again last night, but they did. I woke to finger bones

drumming on my window and foot bones tapping on the porch steps. Yaga Tatyana somehow stayed asleep, so I crept outside to put the bones away myself.

It's almost dawn now, and I'm exhausted from hours spent trying to drive the bones back into the store. At least they've stopped running away from me. The early morning air is bitterly cold though – it feels more like midwinter than the start of spring – and I shiver as I wander around the dark and frosty field, gathering the scattered, lifeless bones into my arms.



Benji the sheep watches me curiously, occasionally nudging a tibia or a fibula in my direction, and Jack flaps to and fro, gathering some of the smaller bones in his beak.

"House," I say firmly, trying to remain calm as I carry another armful of bones towards the skeleton store. "Will you please tell me what is going on?"

But just like every other time I've asked the house about these strange happenings, the house ignores me. This time though, the house not only says nothing, but rises slightly and turns its back on me too.

I groan in frustration. I probably sound angry and I am a little, but more than anything I'm worried. The way the house has been behaving lately makes me feel like it is trying to push me away and I don't understand why.

Jack caws loudly and a knuckle bone he must have been carrying in his beak thumps onto my head. "Jack!" I reach up to rub my scalp and one of Jack's wings hits me as he rushes clumsily past. I turn to see him land heavily on Benjamin's shoulder.

Benjamin is dressed for school, a little untidily as usual. His mousy brown hair flops over his big brown eyes, his uniform is rumpled and his trousers are slightly too short after a recent growth spurt. Although we're the same age, Benjamin is taller than me now, and slim as a reed. His sketchbook is poking out of his pocket and there are grey smudges on his fingers, probably from sketching birds this morning over

breakfast. Benjamin loves birds and drawing – his dream is to become an artist.

"Hello, Jack." Benjamin strokes Jack's feathers softly, then turns to me and smiles. "Hello, Marinka. The bones got out again then."

"Yes." I tuck some of my red curls behind my ear, realizing I probably look even more dishevelled than Benjamin. "I'm trying to gather them up before anyone sees."

"I'll help." Benjamin picks up a skull rolling near his feet.

"Thanks. I don't want you to be late for school again though."

"You're not coming? I hoped you might today." Benjamin's shoulders droop a little with disappointment. "It's been ages since you have."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just..." I crouch down to gather a jumble of ribs. "I haven't been able to concentrate there lately. It's probably because of everything going on with the house. I need to stay here and figure out why it's behaving so strangely."

"Do you have any ideas?" Benjamin asks as we

walk towards the skeleton store, our arms full of bones.

I look at the house, its back turned towards me, and my throat thickens. "I've known the house all my life. I should be able to understand what's going on, but the answer feels just out of reach."

"I'm sure you'll work it out soon," Benjamin says gently.

"I hope you're right." We reach the skeleton store and push the bones inside. "I'll have another talk with Yaga Tatyana. Maybe look for some clues in *The Book of Yaga* or *Yaga Tales* too. Do you want to come over after school and we can look together?"

"Yes, please." Benjamin reaches up to stroke Jack again, then glances at the sky. It is paling to the blue-grey of a bullfinch egg as the sun rises behind the mountains. Benjamin sighs. "I suppose I should head off."

Jack squawks loudly and flaps up onto the house's roof, and I wave goodbye. "Thanks for helping with the bones."

"See you later." Benjamin turns and walks away,

and I close the skeleton store.

Needles of rain fall, so icily cold that they sting. I pull my shawl around my chest and head towards the front door. But the house rises and turns, just faster than I am walking, so that the front door keeps getting further away from me.

I walk faster. Then, as frustration gathers inside me like a storm cloud, I break into a run. "House! Why are you doing this?" I shout.

The house turns even faster and I stop in despair. "Please, House. I'm tired and cold, and now it's raining too!" A hot tear rolls down my cheek and the house finally halts. It lowers itself closer to the ground, then shuffles slowly back towards me.

The porch balustrade leans in my direction. It feels something like an apology, or at least an invitation. Relief flows through me as I walk up the steps to the front door. But the door is shut tight.

"House!" I push the door harder, but it doesn't budge.

Smoke plumes from the house's chimney.

"What is going on?" I ask for the thousandth time,

not expecting the house to respond. I place my palms flat against the house's door, close my eyes and try to feel an answer instead.

Life thrums through the wood, the familiar pulse of the house. My brow furrows. It feels different somehow. Fainter. I concentrate. The pulse is erratic and uncertain too.

"Ow!" A sharp pain darts through my fingertips. Thistle leaves are growing on the door, with long, pointed spines. I scowl at the eaves, but then my heart softens as I remember how the house's energy felt beneath my hands.

Maybe the house isn't trying to push me away – maybe it is trying to tell me that something is wrong. A heavy dread swells inside me with the realization. The house is struggling and it needs help.



TOADS AND BEES

Yaga Tatyana comes to the door and opens it easily. She looks up at the eaves and shakes her head. "House, you really should stop teasing Marinka. And, Marinka, you should have woken me to help with the bones." Yaga Tatyana ushers me into the warmth and I collapse into my grandmother Baba's chair near the fire.

Even after all this time, Baba's chair still smells of her – lavender water, bread dough, *borsch* and *kvass*. I breathe in her scent and, for a moment, I feel calmer. My worries ease and the sharp edges of my feelings smooth away. But then my grief swells and my eyes sting with tears.

It's been over a year since Baba stepped through

The Gate to the Stars. I thought my grief would get easier to carry, but lately it has only become more difficult. Yaga Tatyana says grief is like a toad in your belly. She says sometimes it sleeps, curled up, deep inside. But it can wake without warning, jump into your throat and expand with a painful croak at any time.

If that's true, then my grief toad woke sharply at the end of autumn, on my thirteenth birthday. In the morning, I went for a walk around the lake with Yaga Tatyana, Benjamin and his father, then we gathered in my house for a meal. It was lovely, but it was my first birthday without Baba and I missed her terribly. I missed her voice, her music, her dancing. Her hugs.

On all my previous birthdays, Baba always played a special song she wrote for me on her accordion. That day, I realized I would never hear it again, and I worried that the tune would fade from my memory, so I stayed up all night trying to recall every note and write it down.

Then, at the end of winter, it was the first anniversary of Baba's death. Yaga Tatyana suggested

we hold a small ceremony to honour the occasion and share happy memories of her. But when evening came, all I could think was how Baba's death was my fault.

Baba stepped through The Gate to help my friend Nina reach the stars. But if I had guided Nina sooner, she wouldn't have needed help. So Baba wouldn't have gone with her and she would still be here, with me, now.

If grief is a toad in your belly, then guilt and regret are a swarm of bees in your chest. They buzz around and around, unable to escape, and they sting, sharp and painful.

The evening of the anniversary, I couldn't speak. I went to bed early and thought of everything I should have done differently in those last weeks I had with Baba, when I made so many wrong decisions that hurt Baba and the house. And I realized there was nothing I could ever do to make things right.

A sudden loud, crackling sound pulls me from my thoughts. I look up to the ceiling, where the noise is coming from, and watch in horror as part of the thick beam above me crumbles into small pieces. I shield my face with my arm and flinch as the pieces hit me.

They are round and spiky, like horse-chestnut casings.

“House! What is going on now?” I climb onto Baba’s chair and press my hand against the crumbling part of the beam, as if applying pressure to a wound. Smaller, flaky pieces of wood, like sycamore seeds, escape through my fingers and spin downwards.

“Here, Marinka, tie this around it.” Yaga Tatyana passes me one of her shawls and I wrap it around the beam and pull it tight. The pieces stop falling, but I can still hear rustling, crackling sounds beneath the fabric.

“Oh, House. I wish I knew what to do.”

Yaga Tatyana offers me her hand. I take it and step down to the floor, then sink back into Baba’s chair.

“I’m so worried,” I say to Yaga Tatyana. “I think all these strange things that have been happening lately are signs that the house is unwell. But I don’t know how to help.”

Yaga Tatyana nods with understanding while untangling one of the spiky pieces of wood from my hair. “What does your heart tell you?” she asks.

I frown. Yaga Tatyana has been telling me to listen to my heart a lot lately. She says I should trust it to

guide me. But the trouble is, after all the bad decisions I’ve made, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to trust what my heart has to say.

Besides, Yaga Tatyana is an Ancient Elder, impossibly old and wise. I think we should be listening to *her* heart, not mine. But when I suggested this, the last time we spoke about the house, she said that I know the house better than anyone, and that young hearts can be trusted as much as old hearts anyway.

Yaga Tatyana moves to the fire, where a pan of *kasha* – buckwheat porridge – is bubbling away. She stirs it silently and I sigh, realizing Yaga Tatyana isn’t going to say anything else until I’ve thought about what my heart is telling me. This is her way of encouraging me to work things out myself.

I look around the front room, from Baba’s great cauldron hanging in the fireplace, to the big table where we serve the feasts for the dead, to the shelves that hold *The Book of Yaga* and all the volumes of *Yaga Tales*, and finally to the corner where most of Baba’s old musical instruments are still stacked – her violin, flute, accordion and more. Almost everything

in here is related to guiding, which of course is not surprising in a Yaga house.

The house loves the parties for the dead. They are its reason for being.

“Does the house need a guiding?” I ask finally. “I know it draws energy from guiding the dead, but since it settled here, in The Land of Lakes, we haven’t done nearly as many guidings as we used to. Perhaps the house is run-down and tired, and that’s why it’s struggling?”

“Perhaps.” Yaga Tatyana puts a lid over the *kasha* to let it simmer, then sits on her chair beside me.

“If the house needs a guiding, it usually stands up and takes us somewhere so we can do one,” I continue. “But it hasn’t done that in over a month.” I look up at the rafters. “Shall we go for a guiding tonight, House?”

Jack tumbles through one of the skylights, lands on my shoulder and squawks so loudly into my ear I wince. He’s clearly excited by the prospect of a guiding, but the house doesn’t show any sign of even hearing me.

Yaga Tatyana presses her lips together thoughtfully, then leans close. “Do you remember me telling you about my house growing old and retiring from guiding the dead?”

“Yes, but my house can’t want to retire,” I say quickly. “It’s still young.”

Yaga Tatyana says nothing and her silence pricks at my skin. I think about how I don’t actually know how old my house is – and I don’t know how old is old for a house with chicken legs either. I push these thoughts away.

“The house probably needs some encouragement,” I say decisively. “If we spend the day preparing a feast for a guiding, it won’t be able to resist. We can bake black bread and cook a cauldron of *borsch*. Fill the table with bowls and spoons, pots of sour cream and horseradish, glasses for *kvass* and spirit *trost*. The scents of a guiding will fill the air. And later, when Benjamin comes over, he can play music on Baba’s *balalaika* – he is getting really good at it now. Then the house will surely jump up and run somewhere we can guide. I know it!” I beam at my plan, feeling sure

it will work – or at least that it can't do any harm. "What do you think, House? You're bound to feel more like yourself after a guiding."

The house tenses and I hold my breath. I can feel it worrying, although I'm not sure why.

Finally, with a long sigh through its chimney, the house seems to relax a little. I smile, deciding to take this as a sign of agreement. "Thank you, House!" I turn to Yaga Tatyana, hoping for her approval. She continues sitting thoughtfully for a moment, but then a smile grows on her face too.

"Why not?" she says, rising to her feet. "You know I love a good party for the dead. Let's go and see what food we have in the pantry."



Yaga Tatyana and I spend the day preparing a guiding feast. Just as I'd planned, the scents of foods baking and bubbling fill the air, familiar and comforting, but full of excitement too.

Benjamin comes over after school and, after

getting permission from his father, agrees to come to the guiding with us – if the house does decide to take us for one. I tiptoe into Baba's bedroom, which is as she left it, apart from being draped in dust now, and I retrieve her *balalaika*. I keep it on Baba's bed because it was her favourite musical instrument, which she always played me lullabies on before I fell asleep. I tried to teach myself to play it, but I don't have the patience. Benjamin is very good with it though and he sits near the window strumming songs, while Yaga Tatyana sings.

The sun sets and my fingers and toes twitch with anticipation. Everything is ready. I just need the house to move. Minutes feel like hours. I stop myself from shouting at the house to leave. It needs to do this in its own time.

Finally, as stars twinkle through the skylights, thin green tendrils grow from the floor and walls. They thicken into vines that curl around the furniture and the loose items on the table and shelves, securing them in place. Then the house swings up onto its long, thin legs and a smile bursts across my face. I rush to

the window, slipping and sliding on the way, then sit beside Benjamin, so I can watch the view drift past.

The house walks steadily north, up and over the mountains, then breaks into a run as it reaches flatter ground. Benjamin plays faster. Yaga Tatyana sings louder. Jack flies around the room, squawking gleefully. The cauldron bubbles and bottles of spirit *trost* clink together like musical chimes.

I take a deep breath of the cold night air flowing in through the window and laugh with delight. It's wonderful to be moving again, heading somewhere new and unknown. The house runs faster and faster; my red hair blows in the wind and I fill with happiness and hope.

Tonight, we'll have such a party! The house will be refreshed and revived, then it will stop acting so strangely. And perhaps I will feel refreshed too. The grief toad and the guilt bees might go to sleep for a while. And all the worries I have now might drift away to the stars, like the dead at the end of the night.





THE LAND OF CASTLES AND GIANTS

The house settles on top of a tall mountain in The Land of Castles and Giants. A cold wind blows, rattling the roof tiles and making the house shiver. Yaga Tatyana puts more wood on the fire and finishes the preparations for the feast while Benjamin and I go outside to build the skull-and-bone fence.

I pull my woollen hat down over my ears and look up at the sky. It's vast and cloudless and bright with stars. Perfect for a guiding.

The skeleton store swings open and the bones tumble out. Benjamin and I gather an armful each and carry them a short distance from the house.

"There are some soft, peaty areas between the rocky bits." Benjamin pushes a femur into the frost-

sparkled ground with gloved hands.

"Good. The fence is always easier to build when the ground is soft."

Jack lands on a nearby skull and watches as we sink more bones into the earth and string vertebrae between them.

I glance over to Benjamin. There is a faint line between his eyebrows, which only appears when he's worried about something. "Are you all right?" I ask.

"I've been thinking about that other school again. I'm supposed to decide soon."

"It sounds really good." I smile encouragingly. Benjamin has been offered a place in a specialist art school. It's further away than the one we go to now, but I think Benjamin would love it there. He seems nervous about making the decision though.

"It does sound good, but I'm still not sure." Benjamin sighs. "It took me so long to settle into the school we're at now. It's only during this last year that I've finally started to feel like I fit in and made a few friends...and a best friend." Benjamin glances over to me and smiles shyly. "If I move school," he continues,