

Little Black Burial Dress

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(This first event took place when I had lived in this world all of 18 months. I can tell you the story because my parents and Mary my older sister, who was 6½ at the time, told me about it when I was old enough to understand. But first, a little background.)

It was early fall, 1929. We were living in Western Ukraine, in the outback village of Malatyn.* Kirill (patronym: Stepanovich), my father, was born in Malatyn and, at the ripe old age of 25, was its "mayor." Vassilysa (maiden name: Dovgoletz), my mother, was from the village of Pustomity, a couple kilometers west of Malatyn. Both of my parents were a mature 18 when they married. Mary and my older brother, Andrew, and I were all born in Malatyn, in the house on the northeast corner of the one and only intersection (of two dirt roads) in the tiny village. My younger sister, Helen, and my younger brother, Kenneth, were born in Saskatchewan. The Soviet border was 10 kilometers east of us. Our part of Ukraine was under Polish occupation at the time.

Well, one day, I got sick. And I didn't get any better. In fact, I got worse. And worse. And worse. From all appearances, my stay on planet earth was to be short-lived. My parents stoically prepared themselves for my apparent demise. Back in those days, there was no medical care available to us peasants, and many children died, often from unknown causes. When the last frayed thread of hope split, my mother knew what she had to do. She sewed me a long black dress in which I would be buried. And, it was my kind of dress. Plain. No frills. (Even then, my mother knew what suited me.)

While I was dying, someone told my folks about a doctor in another part of our county. So, my parents dutifully hitched a horse to a wagon and off we rumbled. My beautiful mother held me while my handsome father "drove." My pretty and caring sister, Mary, came along for the sad and bumpy ride.

As it turned out, the "doctor" was a quack, who normally applied potions and whispered superstitious spells. In my case, he did neither. He took one look at me, pinched my pasty cheek and told my parents to take me home and prepare for the fateful funeral. Much later, Mary told me that during our return ride, I was already a picture framed in death. Anyway, we made our way back to Malatyn and prepared for my imminent interment.

Needless to say (but I'll say it anyway), for some unknown reason, I didn't die from that nameless sickness. Little by little, I got better and, when I was strong enough, I just naturally wore my funeral dress in the house and outdoors. It was the current custom in rural Ukraine (as well as in other Eastern cultures) for little children of both sexes to wear dresses, and not much more. It's true that all of the other children wore some other conservative color - at worse, gray. I proudly wore my bright black gown. As a matter of fact, I posed in it for my passport picture the following year. I wore it on the ship, crossing the Atlantic. I lived in it.

That maxi dress became a midi, then a mini. Actually, I wore it out. I am sure no one ever got as much mileage from a burial dress as I did.

* I have visited Malatyn twice. The first time was in the spring of 1989.