

For his coffin, many years before, I weaved him a sorochka. Or shirt, we say. Some say it's for the wedding. Others – that it's for dying. Sorochka from *sorok*: forty jobs to be done about it. Not that you sow flax, uproot it, dry it, scutch it, heckle it. Flax's always been a lot of work. Good thing that flax isn't afraid of frost and you can sow early. Pests won't get at it. We had good soil, so the flax grew tall. When I was little, I would swing on a flax plait, because grandpa dried ropes on a kitchen beam. In Belarus we used to say: "no flax, no life". Though flax itself doesn't have much of a life, a hundred days, if that.

On long autumn evenings neighbours would come to my mother to spin. My mother sat at the spinning wheel too. The spindles whirred and tapped against the floor. You had to have nimble fingers, and a feel in them. My mother was old, but she could spin so thin, I'm telling you, thread like a spiderweb, like a ghost. So even, not even the tiniest knot. And when she made linen, the neighbours would go, 'What linen, incredible, such linen out of flax'. Thick and soft-soft, like silk. They wrapped it around themselves, wondered what to sew. The thinnest was for shirts. For tablecloths, skirts; women embroidered wall hangings. The thicker kind was for runners, sheets. Coarse linen, the worst, rough and scratchy, was for potato sacks. Grandma sewed drawers out of it, but they itched something awful. She often dyed them dark blue, the white ones soon got dirty. You wrapped linen around candles and put them into the hands of a dying person. Old biddies would sit by kerosene lamps hanging from the beams, pale light flickered on the ceiling, and they spun and told stories. Long evenings, nothing to do, at least you had something to listen to. About ghosts, witches. There used to be plenty in the countryside. About the devils that gathered in the old abandoned mill. About the birdlike nocnitsas that prowl about at night. Or strigas with huge claws. If they suspected the dead person will be a striga, they poured sand into the coffin or put in a little bag of poppyseeds, so that he kept busy with counting the seeds, not tormenting people. Are you afraid of ghosts? Eh, you don't want to admit.

Well, and then – it's late, time to go home. If a woman lived nearby, that wasn't too bad. Mother or father took a lamp out front, shone a light, stood there until the door squeaked in the next house. But the ones that

lived far away, Antoś and Ignas – he grew up as tall as a tree – had to walk them.

But... Into the coffin? A rosary! A holy picture! I put it on the sheet! And a handkerchief. A prayer book is a must. I don't have black shoes, but some others will do. Not in colours. Not in white either. And a shawl, a shawl too. So they put it on my head. It looks so beautiful when it hugs the face. Ah! Saint Helena, my patron! There she is! I've prayed to her so much all my life. Even for better crops, she does that too. Maybe that's why our potatoes were always huge, like cobblestones.

Excerpt translated by Marta Dziurosz



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Selected works

Boznańska. Non finito, 2019

Krótką historia o długiej miłości, 2018

Stryjeńska. Diabli nadali, 2015

Czarny anioł. Opowieść o Ewie Demarczyk, 2015

Papusza, 2013

Marlene, 2009

Foreign language translations

Kuzniak's works have been published in Italy, Slovakia and Lithuania

Selected awards

The Magellan Award (2012, 2019)

Nike Literary Award (2016) – nomination