

Old Timey Superstition: Death Comes in Threes



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My grandfather died, then my uncle suddenly passed away within two weeks of each other, and immediately, a feeling of anxiety swept over the mountains of southern West Virginia as our entire family began eyeing each other – and some themselves – as we awaited the inevitable third death that seemed inevitable.

Dating back to my boyhood, when I remember attending my first “wake” all the way up to this past week, I’ve heard it said a dozen times over throughout the mountains of Appalachia — “They come in threes!”

Fortunately for our family, the unthinkable occurred and for whatever reason that almost forgone conclusion of a third funeral never occurred — at least not until everyone had moved on to other things and the memory of the two previously deceased relatives had long since passed.

While I’ll be the first to admit that those of us who grew up in the mountains of Appalachia are privy to some pretty wild superstitions, particularly when it comes to death, i.e., birds singing outside one’s window at night-

time means a death is coming... as does rocking an empty rocking chair; however, the “death comes in threes” notion is one that I tend to believe ever the more as I grow older.

I cannot count how many times I’ve seen this take place with my own eyes — Let’s not forget about the time Michael Jackson, Ed McMahon and Farrah Fawcett all died in the same week.

But why do so many people believe this and what are the origins of this mysterious belief?

Like a countless number of other Appalachian beliefs and superstitions, the notion of people dying off in threes can be traced back across the Atlantic to our European ancestors, who, thanks to an unshakable belief in the Trinity, began to see everything broken into sections of threes — tragedies, births, etc.

While there remains considerable debate as to whether folks in a community or family actually do pass away in threes, the reality is that if you’re in Appalachia, you simply won’t have to go too far to find someone who believes this — perhaps even myself!

The Three Deaths, an old Mexican belief

According to Mexican tradition, people die three deaths: The first death is when our bodies cease to function, when our hearts no longer beat of their own accord, when our gaze no longer has depth or weight, when the space we occupy slowly loses its meaning.

The second death comes when the body is lowered into the ground, returned to mother earth, out of sight. The third death, the most definitive death, is when there is no one left alive to remember us.