Grasping for Details

by Jan Groft, *Northeast*, January 2000

Together the four of us stood at the side of our late sister's casket gaping at the shapely curve of her lips.

"They didn't put it on right," said one.

"It doesn't even look like her," said another.

"Let's tell Daddy. He'll get the undertaker to fix it."

Dolores was laid to rest in a pink knit Easter-looking suit, her hands draped with rosary beads and folded in front of her. Someone—whoever at the funeral home handles such details—had applied her cherry-colored lipstick the way one might assume a woman would, carefully outlining her lips then filling in. Our impatient sister herself had never made time for such frivolity; she merely swished the tube across her lips ignoring the curves, rendering her small, tight mouth into the shape of an almond.

Dolores. Our grandmother had winced at the name our parents had bestowed upon their second born. "Why Dolores?" she moaned, her accent thick, Italian."That'sa mean sorrow; that'sa mean grief. Why you gonna jinx her with a name lika that?"

And jinxed she was. A curvacious, plump teenager endlessly gnawing at the psoriasis on her hand, then a thread of a woman scouring the children's department for clothing that would fit her eighty-nine-pound diabetes-ravaged body, Dee died at age forty-nine on the day of Reagan's re-election.

"Who you gonna vote for?" my father had asked her, insistent about focusing on her future.

"Me," she'd whispered with one of the last breaths she took.

I've often pondered the detail of her lipstick toward which we four remaining sisters steered our pain. This is how we cope. We grasp for the tangible, the

physical, a place to park our grief, if only temporarily, a safe and familiar rest stop. And so a friend, upon her mother's death, reached for a damp cloth—as she'd done so often throughout the illness—and washed her mother's face. Another smoothed a comb through the cowlick in her father's hair.

The details are vivid from my experience as a young girl frequenting various funeral homes with my parents, both of whom came from large Italian families. Second

aunts, fourth cousins: death often shook our family tree. As a child, I typically had no meaningful relationship with the deceased nor even a passing knowledge without some prodding.

"He was the one who used to bring those long sticks of salami to the reunion picnics," they would say. "You know. You remember him."

Usually I didn't. But out of a sense of respect, taught at a young age in Italian-American households such as ours, I politely fell to my knees beside the casket, made the sign of the cross, and attempted to appear mournful. Inevitably, a husky aunt with flabby arms would press against me and assert, "Oh, how he treasured you. Go ahead, kiss his hand. Go ahead, it's all right."

Funeral home images pervade my memory like tombstones in a cemetery.

Black-suited men clustered outside, smoking Camels and laughing at one another's jokes. Red satin ribbons draping sprays of gladiolas like beauty pageant contestants vying for attention, their sentiments lettered in gold foil: FromYour Loving Daughters, In Loving Memory fromYour Son.Whispered invitations to the feast to be served afterwards.

And then, only after everyone else was gathered, the arrival of the twins, Aunt Frances and Aunt Angeline. The professional mourners, my older sisters dubbed them. The two of them looked like gray-haired Italian versions of Dear Abby and Ann Landers, petite but powerful, making their entrance from the back of the funeral home, wailing and waving their white crocheted hankies, their flags of sorrow.

"Oh no, oh my God, no," they moaned. Their cries grew louder the closer they drew to the casket. They flung themselves onto the kneeler. They grabbed a waxen hand of the deceased, held it in their own, bowed their heads into it. Another aunt walked up behind them, rubbed their shoulders to comfort them. And one of them, coming up for breath, would invariably turn to the aunt behind and through her sobs, she would ask,"Now whose brother was he again?"

After I moved from my hometown of Pittsburgh, I had to put a limit on the number of funerals for which I would return. Still, there was always a detail passed on to me. One obese cousin, according to my mother, weighed so much when he died that they had to remove the lining from the casket to fit him into it. A brother-in-law was buried with a couple of stogies in his pocket and a baseball mitt, courtesy of his grandchildren who remembered him that way.

I did, of course, return for the funeral of my oldest sister, Lena. In fact, another sister and I were traveling home for the Thanksgiving holiday. As we exited the PennsylvaniaTurnpike, before heading to our parents' home, we decided to stop and visit Lena at Forbes Suburban where she'd been hospitalized over the past weeks. It was then we were shocked at the sight of her empty hospital room, the disheveled sheets on the bed, the deflated bouquet of balloons dangling near the window and finally, the whisper of the on-duty nurse, "I'm so sorry …."

It was exactly like Lena—never wanting to impose—timing her dying with our trip home, thus sparing us the inconvenience of circling back along the Pennsylvania Turnpike later. Three days of viewing followed ... a family tradition, an Italian ritual, a Pittsburgh thing, I'm not sure which, but it's draining. The professional mourners had long since passed away, but on the second day of viewing, two women whom none of us recognized entered the funeral home. Dressed in bulky eggplant-colored coats and toting shopping bags from Hornes, they walked side by side toward my sister's casket.

"Oh, she's beautiful," one of them wailed.

The other tilted her head to the side. "And so young," she said.

"What did she die of?"

One of my aunts stepped forward from a group clustered at the side of the room. "Cancer," she frowned.

The two women shook their heads, made the sign of the cross, and on their way out the door, grabbed a handful of holy cards and threw them into their bags. We never knew who they were.

Every so often, I'll be driving in my car, and a detail of the dead pops into my mind like trick candles on a birthday cake that suddenly reignite. The detail of Lena's pink chiffon nightgown twirling around her like cotton candy in the making, as she pirouetted giggling between our connecting bedrooms. We were vacationing at the Hotel Hershey on one of our Sisters' Getaway Weekends, the rest of us tired and

begging for sleep. Lena with her unbound energy teased we were party poopers, that the night had just begun. Twirling and giggling. Twirling and giggling.

Or the detail of Dee drying the sink, scrubbing linoleum, tidying the cereal boxes on her pantry shelf. She was obsessed with cleaning. Her floor always sparkled; her windows were invisible. We'd be sitting at her kitchen table sipping tea, and suddenly she'd spy fingerprints on the wallpaper, a coffee mill pattern in oranges and yellows.

"Damn those kids," she muttered. "I just cleaned this place — now look at it!" She was on her feet instantly, working the smudge out of sight. Then holding the sponge, she turned toward the rest of us, her mouth drawn tight, her lips as straight as a pencil.

Jan Groft is the author of the award-winning book As We Grieve and a memoir, Riding the Dog, which is centered around the loss of her father. For more information: www.jangroft.com