

Four Relatives and a Funeral

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By RICHARD C. WALD

In the last year of her life, my mother had accumulated bladder cancer, emphysema, osteoporosis, macular degeneration, heart problems and an apartment in North Miami Beach. But there was nothing wrong with her hearing.

During one of my last visits with her, when she was mostly confined to bed, I went to see my Uncle Sidney, a large, wonderful man who lived in a nearby condominium and always had something funny to say. "You ought to plan for a funeral," he said. "Your mother is not going to live forever, and chances are you won't be here when she dies." So a few days later, as I was sitting in her dining room with him, the doorbell rang and in came the man who had sold Uncle Sidney a funeral on a prepaid basis. Mother was in the bedroom, and I was extremely uncomfortable.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

"The guy who plans the funerals," Uncle Sidney said.

"I'm not dead yet."

"That's why we're only planning," he said.

"Hello, Mr. Forstate," the funeral planning man said.

"Tell him hello for me," Mother shouted.

I had just started to sweat when Aunt Flo walked in. She was slim, smart, intense and blunt. Also, she never knocked. She had a key. "Who's this?" she asked Uncle Sidney. She meant the funeral planning man.

She knew who I was.

"He's the funeral planning man," Uncle Sidney said.

"Great," she said, "I can get some ideas." "Hey, Flo," my mother shouted from the bedroom. "Don't let him buy anything expensive."

"Don't worry, Lilly," she said.

The funeral planning man gave me a sheet of paper with boxes to check off.

"Where will interment take place?" he asked.

"In New York," my mother shouted. "Ship me back." "We'll all wind up there together,"

Aunt Flo said. The seven brothers and sisters had not only lived close to each other in New York; they owned a cemetery lot in common.

The funeral planning man asked about cremation.

"What's the point of that?" Uncle Sidney asked. "Well," said the funeral planning man, "If you are cremated and you have your ashes scattered, you can save about \$1,500." "I've always wanted to get out to Yellowstone National Park," Uncle Sidney said.

"You want your ashes scattered in Yellowstone Park?" Aunt Flo asked. "No. But with the \$1,500 extra I could have taken Frieda for a visit to Yellowstone."

"You wouldn't like it," my mother shouted. "It's empty." The funeral planning man said the only real expense after cremation was a \$150 urn.

“But if I’m going to be scattered, why do I need an urn?” Aunt Flo asked. “You have to put the ashes in a nice receptacle,” the funeral planning man said.

“But I’m going to be emptied out in a few days,” she said. “How about a big two-pound coffee can?”

The funeral planning man turned to Uncle Sidney, who said, “Let’s talk about caskets.”

“Don’t spend a fortune, Richard,” my mother shouted. “A plain pine box. That’s all.”

“Would you like rounded corners?” the funeral man shouted to her.

“What are rounded corners?” I asked.

The funeral planning man turned to Uncle Sidney and said: “Rounded corners are a little nicer. The pine has a little better finish. It looks better.” “Dead is dead,” my mother shouted. “I’ll take the rounded corners,” I said.

“Martinson’s,” Aunt Flo said. We looked at her. “I have an old two- pound Martinson’s can.”

The funeral planning man smiled at Aunt Flo. She said, “Give him the rounded corners.”

We got through the rest of the long list very slowly. By the time the evening was over, all the boxes were filled in. Aunt Flo said she hadn’t really learned anything but she was going to talk things over with one of her daughters. I felt like an infant with a splitting headache. My mother wasn’t getting around much, except for a little shuffling about the apartment. When I said goodbye, she was in bed, lion-hearted, but a much smaller figure than she had ever been. She smiled brightly at me and said, “Don’t worry, Richard — I’ll leave you my grandchildren.” And she did.

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