

Grandpa Piper's Funeral

Why don't I remember my Great-grandpa Piper in life, only in death? Somewhere in the farthest reaches of my memory must be the sight of him standing by the barn, tall and gaunt, clad in worn overalls, with a welcoming smile and greeting for my mother and for me. Perhaps he patted me on the shoulder with his gnarled and weathered hand, commenting on how much I'd grown and asking if I liked my new baby sister. But I don't have the faintest whisper of memory of him in life, just vivid memories of him in death.

My mother's grandfather died September 21, 1959, eleven days past his 82nd birthday. I was just over four years old. We hurried up north when we received the news of his death, as did the Piper relatives from all over Michigan. Many of them were waiting for us at the split-stone farmhouse in Spruce, Grandpa and Grandma Piper's home.

It was a hot autumn evening; the air was heavy and humid. The sickly scent of too many cut flowers wafted out the side door, onto the stone porch where we stood, solemnly greeting my aunts and uncles and cousins. I smiled uncertainly at them, as my dad carried me through the door and into the kitchen. All the rooms were crowded and the heat was overpowering. My dad's shirt was already moist with perspiration and I felt the skin of my bare arms sticking to his neck. My dad murmured to relatives as we made our way to the double doors of the parlor. My eyes widened in surprise when I realized the doors to the parlor were open! Children weren't allowed in the parlor; the good furniture was in there and the wooden pump organ with the keys of ivory and the framed portrait of my Great-uncle Frank, the handsome auburn-haired boy who died of gangrene at age 18. I had only been in the parlor one time, with my mother, who held my hand securely so I wouldn't be tempted to touch anything. This time, though, the parlor looked different. Some of the furniture was pushed away, and the casket containing my great-grandfather was against the windows with the sheer curtains.

The casket was surrounded by flower arrangements, pretty but the smell made me dizzy. My dad walked up to the casket and held me tightly while I surveyed the situation. The coffin's lid was up and I looked at my great-grandpa, quietly reposed in death. He was in a suit, perhaps the one he wore to church, and his work-worn hands were folded on his stomach. His wispy white hair was arranged carefully over his scalp, and his eyes were closed under his glasses. I knew he would not need his glasses anymore and questioned my dad why great-grandpa had on his glasses. My dad replied that no one else could wear them and they would be buried with him. Great-grandpa's expression was neither happy, nor sad, but very still. Everyone was staring at me, to see my reaction. I tried to match the serious and contemplative nature of the others in the parlor. I hung tightly onto my father's neck as we turned from the casket and wove our way through the oppressive heat and the crowd of people until we were back on the stone porch. My dad set me on the smooth cement ledge of the porch and, feeling the slight breeze, I felt free of the solemnness of the parlor. I stretched out my arms and imagined myself a tight-rope artist as I balanced along the edge of the porch. I giggled and laughed as the adults smiled at me, far away from the casket in the parlor.

Lynn VanderLinde
September 14, 1996