

Wake Up in Glory

MY BROTHER TAL SAID THAT WHEN HE DIED he would give me a sign. Once, when he was near death, he saw a hyper-white light at the end of a tunnel. He wanted to get nearer to it. As he moved toward the light, the light dimmed, and when he opened his eyes, he saw doctors and nurses, the bright operating-room lights ricocheting off everything stainless steel. It hurt his eyes when he tried to keep them open, so he closed them and woke up again in post-op, unaware that he had died on the operating table. He had crossed over to the other side for about twenty minutes before his heart could be restarted. Maybe it affected his brain. I don't know. But after that, Tal was always talking about that unearthly light, how beautiful it was, and how he could see the walls of heaven, and ghostly figures, maybe angels, and someone, a faded creature who looked like our younger brother Jack who was killed by an overloaded poultry truck. It was tottering from side to side while Jack lazily rode his bike back and forth on the dirt road in front of our farmhouse.

The night before Tal died, I had the sweats, needed a blanket, and I even put on flannel pajama bottoms because my legs were so cold. It was July, a hot and humid night in Monroe, Louisiana. I looked at the outdoor digital thermometer. It read 84 degrees at two in the morning. Just after nine o'clock I got a call from Tal's son, Dusty, that Tal had gone. The night sweats was not the sign I was expecting.

Tal's wife, Laura, had died in May. That was quite a shock. She was in good health, but one night she felt tired, had a terrible headache, and then she was gone. We thought Tal would go first because he had been so sick with diabetes, a chronic cough from years

of smoking, and a number of bouts with pneumonia almost every winter.

After the last operation, Tal talked about dying, that he was looking forward to it so he could see our parents again. He made it sound as though there was a constant party going on in heaven, where people were reunited with ones who had gone before. I wish I had that kind of belief.

Tal said, "When I get there, I will see Jack again and all my friends."

"How are you going to recognize them, and how are they going to recognize you?" I reasoned, "You're going to be dust."

"The hell I am. Whatever is there will be recognized, which is why I'm not going to be cremated. I don't want to make the resurrection any harder than it's supposed to be."

"But supposing you get killed when an oil tanker crashes into your car and explodes into flames. You're body won't last a second. All that's going to be left is a greasy cinder in the middle of the road," I said.

"It doesn't take a second for your soul to rise. There is no time in heaven. There is no time here, only light," Tal explained. "Time is just something you put on a wall."

"But Tal, supposing you don't believe that. I can't believe that."

"Well, T.C., it don't matter what you think or what you believe because someone's faith or lack of faith does not cause one ripple in the universe. It is the light of this world, and that light is the light out of this world."

There was no sense of arguing with him. Even if you happened to ask him how the crops were doing, eventually Tal would talk about vibrations and auras and synergies, and we all began to think that there was something not right about the boy.

After Laura's death Tal started going downhill. They had worked hard and kept the farm going when everyone around them was selling out to developers. They raised four children, two boys and two girls, out of that soil. They taught them right. Tal's children were the first in our family to go to college. After that they had families of their own, moved away, and came back home less and less.

They all showed up for Laura's funeral, and when it was over, a few of the children tried to convince Tal that he should give up the farm and move in with them. He wouldn't hear of it. He said he would be fine and that he had a lot of work to do because things have a way of falling into disrepair so easily. But two months later Tal was gone.

When Tal's children arrived with their children, we gathered at the old farmhouse, hugged and cried, and wandered around the place looking for familiar things to give us comfort. My wife, Kathleen,

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.
Landscape.
Woodcut, printed in
black, composition,
19⁵/₁₆ x 23⁹/₁₆, 1919.
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stayed away. Tal had scared her during his final months, and she didn't like to go back to the old house. She thought someone had put a spell on him or at the very least had given Tal the evil eye.

IT WAS HOT AND HUMID, and we didn't want to take too much time to decide what kind of service to have for Tal. A few of his children said cremation would be the best thing, quick and inexpensive, but I told them about Tal's feelings. I said that I knew what Tal would want, and that they should decide on the hymns, and I'll take care of things with McGimsey, the undertaker. We were too tired to discuss it for very long. Maybe it was the heat and humidity, the shock of losing Laura so unexpectedly, and then Tal going so soon after.

The children decided on *(There'll Be) Peace in the Valley, Amazing Grace*, and *When I Wake Up in Glory*. I added *Swing Down, Chariot*, which was one of Tal's favorites. I took care of buying the coffin—brass with fluted corners and a raised, diagonal cross across the divided coffin lid. I picked out the blue suit from the three in Tal's closet, along with a fairly new white shirt and a bright royal blue tie with little white sailboats on it. I brought the clothes to Barney McGimsey.

McGimsey had taken care of my parents' and Laura's funerals. He wanted to bury Tal in some official undertaker clothes, you know, the jacket and shirt with no back so you could slip them over a stiff body easier than with regular clothing. But I put Tal's clothes in McGimsey's hands and said, "I want my brother to look like himself. His own clothes will do fine."

Before I left McGimsey, I gave him some special instructions to take care of before Tal's waking hours the next day. At first, McGimsey scratched his head and said he wasn't sure, but then I handed him an extra twenty dollar bill and that seemed to clear things up for him.

The next afternoon just before four, my wife, Tal's children and grandchildren, and I gathered at McGimsey's Funeral Home. We spoke in hushed monosyllables and watched as the parking lot began to fill, then back up into the street, causing a traffic jam. I guess people wanted to say goodbye. After all, Tal had lived here all his life. He was a good man and had done a lot of good.

We filed into the room where Tal's coffin was surrounded by rows and rows of flowers and dozens of family photographs. I walked up to the open coffin and peered inside before I offered a few words to the crowd that had filled the pink-lit room. I said that my words would be brief, that Tal believed in a better place, and that he was ready to leave his body and go forward to what he always described as that bright unearthly light. This wasn't a time to grieve because Tal is someone who believed in the power of the Lord, and that he would finally walk into that powerful light and see once again all those people he had loved who had gone before. "So friends and family, when you see Tal for the last time, rejoice. He has gone to that great light."

I moved away from the coffin. People slowly began to approach the bier. First, his children, grandchildren, then his friends. They saw that Tal was ready to meet his Heavenly Maker. He looked terrific. When people peered into the satin-lined coffin, some gasped, others smiled. My wife gave me one of her looks. They saw Tal, his face fixed in a smile, wearing the blue suit, the white shirt, and the royal blue tie with the little white sailboats. Tal was lying in state, all dressed up with only one place to go. I saw to it that Tal was wearing a large pair of stylish Ban-Rays to make that final, great hyper-white light easier on his eyes. He wouldn't have to blink or turn away but could watch it coming at him, that *thank God Almighty light of this world*, leading to the other world, surrounding him, lifting him up and taking him home.

FRANK DOUSKEY's writing has appeared in the *Nation*, *Rolling Stone*, *Yankee*, *Down East*, *The New Yorker*, and *Callaloo*. He is working on a book titled, "A Wild Indolence Has Taken Me This Far," but it seems to be taking forever to finish.