

R.I.P.

by Robert Lamb

When I was about ten years old, a black woman named Claudia Thompson kept me during the day while my parents worked in the Seminole Cotton Mill in Clearwater, South Carolina. This was summertime; no school. I grew very fond of Claudia, and in concert with my mother's disapproval of bigotry (without her even knowing what the word meant), Claudia's love and kindness immunized me forever against racial hatred, though in that place, in that time, prejudice against blacks was part of the white child's cultural legacy. I still remember my shock and disgust upon hearing a man, white of course, proclaim in earnest, ignorant fervor that "Niggers are just like dogs; they don't have souls." Poor, benighted son-of-a-bitch. I swear, I've come to suspect that truth is in inverse proportion to the certitude of the declaimer. But I'm straying from the subject.

Claudia's older sister Shirley "passed over" at home one Saturday after lingering for days in a coma. Her funeral was scheduled for the following Monday, and of course Claudia would attend. Trouble was, Monday was a workday for my parents. So when neither Mother nor Claudia could find somebody else on short notice to keep me, it was decided that I would accompany Claudia to the funeral, a graveside service in a church graveyard way out in the country.

Joined by other mourners, we rode there in the afternoon on a church bus that looked old enough to have hauled spectators to Calvary, but it struggled heroically over the rough country roads, wheezing and bouncing until it delivered its jostled cargo to The Great Awakening Baptist Church. I remember it all as if it happened only yesterday.

The church, a simple one-room wooden building in dire need of paint, sat on a bare patch of ground in the middle of a big field under a blazing hot July sun. Off to one side was a graveyard that stretched from a ravine at one end to the sky atop a small rise at the other end. I see that graveyard now as nothing less than a topological metaphor, a suggestion of Hell in one direction, of

Heaven in the other, and I realize how overheated my ten-year-old imagination must have been in witnessing these strange surroundings, this unfamiliar ceremony, this somber ritual.

We parked in front of the church, got off the bus, and walked toward a knot of people, mostly black, but a sprinkling of whites, about fifty yards away, Claudia's right hand gripping my left, and her other hand holding a limp handkerchief to wipe her tears. She had cried softly during the whole ride out to the graveyard, and her sobs increased as we made our way toward the open grave.

I didn't know it then — this was my first funeral — but much about this ceremony was unusual. Never again would I see an open casket at the grave site. Never again would I attend a funeral where all the mourners encircled the open grave. And never again would I attend a funeral where the dearly departed didn't depart, after all. At least not to the Great Beyond.

I need to pause here to say that as late as the 1940s, it was still possible in many parts of America to bury a body without exciting official attention and oversight. Doctors were few and often busy somewhere else in the county when Death came calling. Hospitals were even fewer and often too far away, and no way to get there quickly anyhow. Thus it was common to die at home in bed and then be laid to rest somewhere on the old home place or in a country churchyard, often without the aid of a mortician. That was the case with Claudia's sister, and here's what happened.

As the preacher, a tall, distinguished man of ebony hue, gave his eulogy, we stood bunched in a circle of fifty or sixty mourners around the casket, a homemade, unlined and unadorned wooden coffin that still smelled of freshly sawn planks. The casket sat upon a lowering device a foot or two above the yawning grave, the body visible from head to foot, and nearby, on the ground, lay the coffin lid, and on it a hammer and nails awaiting employment.

Speaking with soulful conviction, the preacher assured the bereaved, as I realize now they always do, that they need not worry overmuch about Shirley's death, for she was not in fact dead but

only sleeping, and would, “in that great gettin'-up morning,” rise up to meet her Maker.

Well, never have a preacher's words been revealed as the Gospel truth so quickly, so dramatically. As if on cue the “corpse” sat up! Yes! Claudia's sister Shirley sat up in her coffin and looked around, obviously bewildered, the expression on her face as legible as words: Where the hell am I? What the hell is going on here?

To say that pandemonium ensued is to feel how limited is the load-bearing capacity of mere words. Those in front, nearest the grave, recoiled in horror, falling back like wheat in a high wind, while those in back surged forward to see what was causing the commotion, and then quickly reversed field when they saw Shirley sitting up, eyes open, head turning this way and that. The overall effect was of people caught in a human riptide of panic. Cries, ejaculations, and curses filled the air.

“Great Caesar's ghost!” the preacher gasped.

“Good God Almighty!” a woman's voice screeched.

“Jesus Fucking Christ!” another shouted.

Then, because people were pushing and shoving so hard this way and that, some of the mourners fell against the coffin, screaming, while others toppled into the open grave — and screamed even louder.

Not to worry. They scrambled furiously out of the grave and away from the coffin when they saw that Shirley was climbing out of her casket. At that, the mourners, old and young alike, broke and ran, scared out of their wits, streaming this way and that down through the field, but mainly toward the woods about seventy yards away, probably because it was downhill.

Claudia, bless her heart, was leading the pack, having left me behind to fend for myself — I, who was too ignorant to be afraid. For all I knew, this was how funerals were supposed to be conducted. But I remember being surprised that old people could run so fast, especially with walking canes, one even on crutches. Of course, all adults are old to a mere child; still, I knew I had never seen Claudia

move much faster than molasses in January, and she could have been no more than forty.

No matter; all of them ran even faster when Shirley, still bewildered, I guess, saw everybody else running and figured she'd better light out, too. And when those fleeing saw Shirley running behind them, and even gaining on them, they somehow found the strength to run even faster, and soon disappeared into the woods amid the sound of crashing branches.

Seconds later, in something of a daze, I stood near the grave alone except for a distinguished-looking old black man who stood nearby as calmly as if waiting for a train.

When I looked at him, puzzlement showing on my face, I'm sure, he chuckled and said: "You're not going to run, too?"

I didn't know how to answer. Was I supposed to run? Should I have run? I said the only thing I could think of. "You didn't run."

He smiled, shrugged. "No need. He pointed in the direction of the woods. "They think they saw a ghost. But there's no such thing as ghosts. It was just a woman waking up from a coma. Just in time, too." He stepped forward and held out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Dr. Jamison. I believe you're the Blakes' little boy. I saw you come up with Claudia." He laughed. "Before she took off."

I nodded. "Yes, sir." I shook the hand. "What's a coma?"

"State of unconsciousness. Sometimes it looks for all the world like the person is dead. No detectable heartbeat, breath, or signs of life. Just like Shirley. I got here early and looked at the body. She was stiff as a board. Fooled me, and I was a doctor for fifty years. Understand?"

I nodded, but all this was news to me. Until that very day, I'd never seen a dead body. Still hadn't, now that I thought of it.

"Will she be all right?" He knew I meant Shirley.

He laughed. "If she doesn't kill herself running." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on. I've better give you a lift home."

We began walking toward a Model-A Ford, black of course, parked near the church. "What about Claudia?" I asked.

He laughed again. "I'll bet we see Claudia on the way back to town.

He was right. We'd gone maybe a mile when we saw both Claudia and Shirley, shoes in hand, trudging wearily on the red-clay road toward town. Their clothes had gotten ripped in the woods, their hair was a mess, and they were gleaming with sweat. I would never again see two sisters happier to see each other again — alive, that is — but they were dog-tired, that's for sure.

The doctor stopped the car and said with elaborate politeness, "Would you ladies like a ride to town? Better to rest in peace in an old Ford than back there in the graveyard, eh, Shirley?" He laughed. Shirley managed a weak smile. Claudia did, too.

The sensational story of Shirley's narrow escape from being buried alive swept the county, of course, and both Claudia and I were entreated again and again to tell about it to those who weren't there. We both left out the part about Claudia's running off and leaving me. After all, I had been in no danger, thanks to the kindly doctor, and Claudia had always been good as gold to me, anyhow, far too good for me to want to get her into trouble.

All this was years ago, of course. Last time I heard, Claudia was dead, died at fifty or fifty-five of a heart attack. I'm no expert on souls, black or white, but I'll tell anyone this: if there is a Heaven, Claudia Thompson is in it.

And Shirley? Last I heard, Shirley was still fit as a fiddle. Had buried three husbands and was engaged to marry again. To a man ten years younger than she.

