OTHER PEOPLE

In that land they had their own notion of heaven, the traveller was told, and it was like this:

When someone dies, everyone who has ever loved them comes to a great hall and sits around a table and they talk about the person who died.

Obviously some people – who were great, or famous, or just well-liked – would attract a large group of loved ones, and thus a very big table would be needed. Whereas for others, who were not great, or famous, or liked, a small table would suffice.

The shape of the table did not matter either, because there was no one needed to sit at the head of it, nor did it need to be round particularly, as that assumed a discussion where everyone had an equal amount of things to say.

Do not, the traveller was told, get hung up on the table. It’s just a table.

Nor was the amount of chairs important. Even though each chair reflected one person who had known the dead, it was not considered significant if the dead person had had many friends in life, or many supporters, or subjects or employees.

What mattered, it seemed, was what was said. Not how many people remembered the dead one, or how they praised her or him, but what they said about them.

And not everything said was always good. The truth was valued more than eulogies. The traveller, who had seen how room there was for the truth at funerals and wakes, found this hard to believe.

“But we do not just value the truth,” said one. “We appreciate a lie if it is told with love.”

And she went on to recount the tale of a mother whose son had been a thief, and had in fact been killed when he fell off a roof while robbing a shop. The mother told everyone that her son had been a good man who always thought of others, and this obvious untruth had been well-received.

“Because,” said one, “Every statement, whether a lie or not, if sincere, adds to the picture.”

The picture of the dead one? said the traveller.

The picture of how others saw the dead one, he was told.

In that land, you were admitted to heaven if those who knew you – no matter how few, or how many, they were, and no matter how good, or vain, or wrong you were in the eyes of the rest of the world – could give, not a good account of you, but an account from more than one point of view. Not a full account, but one that was as it were from different angles.

Of course, some can have had no friends to speak for them, no loved ones because they hardly lived to be loved, but this too is taken into consideration.

As for the rest of the world, well - nobody can see the whole person, said one, but we can try. We can give an account of the dead one, and if love colours the truth, then that is part of the account, for if a faulty one is loved, then surely that is in their favour.

And then, when the accounts are given, the dead one is not judged, but is considered accounted for. Their life has been noted, and if it is not found lacking - in love from others, in any degree of affection – then the dead one may go on. And where they go to, and what happens there, we hope, will be influenced by the accounts given of them.

The traveller nodded. She had made her decision already. She was weary of travelling, and had decided to spend her remaining years with these people.

When her time came, a large table was brought into the great hall.

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