



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

I understood all this only later. All through the 1930s Mea's arrival at our house in Scarsdale meant a party. Mea could put a few teacups and a plate of graham crackers on the table and make it a banquet: always my mother's best china, linen napkins, and a vase of flowers, even if it was dandelions from the yard.



Make-Believe

All her life she yearned for the gracious surroundings she could never afford. In someone else this might have been pathetic, but Mea had the gift of seeing elegance when there was none and making you see it too. She could draw us children into her world of make-believe as fast as you could say let's dress up, and Donn and Caroline and I adored her.

As soon as I could read, she began writing to me once a week in turquoise ink on pearl-gray stationery. In her letters as I grew older, Mea reminisced about her own growing up. The years in New Jersey, though less deprived physically, had been as lonely as those in the Bristol orphanage. The childless couple who brought her to this country lived in an isolated house where curtains were closed because sunlight gave her uncle headaches. Even in a stiffly posed high school picture dated 1906, I could see the large-eyed beauty Mea had become. Her aunt, possibly jealous, banished the teenager to a third-floor room and kept her in her own cast-off black dresses. The love-hungry girl grew into a love-hungry woman.

Grand Central

There were three brief, disastrous marriages, entered into by Mea, I suspect, at the first hint of affection, fled by each man in turn as Mea's need for love proved insatiable. From the first marriage had come a son, Richard. The father vanished at the outset of the pregnancy, and Mea had her baby in the charity ward of a Baltimore hospital.

I met Richard, twenty years older than I, only twice. He was a lifelong alcoholic; I can only imagine the pressure on him to be all that his mother needed. He'd disappear for years on end, then

show up needing money. Mea always provided it. She worked over the years as a bookkeeper, a secretary, a store clerk.

It was a wonderful day when I was old enough to take the train into Grand Central in New York, where Mea would be waiting at the top of the ramp. The apartment to which she took me changed through the years, but to each in turn went her few prized possessions. A pair of opera glasses that had been her mother's, odds and ends of china, a "splendiferous" crystal punch bowl, a teakwood box containing letters, and the gold locket.

The opera glasses and the locket, originally holding miniatures of her parents on their wedding day, had been kept in the safe at the Bristol orphanage until Mea came to America. The portraits of her father and mother had long since been eaten by mildew, and the locket had remained empty until, with Mea's picture in it, it came to me on my ninth birthday.

CATS

Mea's apartment was not our *pied a terre*, but one detail of our fantasy heaven it did possess. Cats. In every place Mea lived, there'd be an assortment of strays, picked up ill and starving from the city streets and nursed by her to purring sleekness. She kept a supply of flea powders, deworming pills, eye ointments, ear swabs, and grooming brushes. When a stray was too sick to respond to such ministrations, Mea would prepare a delectable meal -- cod roe or chicken liver -- with a powerful sleeping pill crushed in it, then stroke the ailing animal to its final rest in her lap.

Mea identified with all homeless creatures, and the cats in turn seemed to identify with her. Battle-scarred veterans of many a street fight, at Mea's they comported themselves as ladies and gentlemen, nibbling daintily from Royal Doulton saucers as though they'd never seen the inside of a garbage pail. Her place had that effect on human guests too. In Mea's apartment I was not an eleven-year-old in pigtailed and braces, but a refined young woman stirring her tea with a gold-handled spoon.

The Oak Room

Mea had one unvarying weekly ritual. For six days she might subsist on cold cereal, eating far less well than her cats. On the seventh day, though, Mea would take the subway in the afternoon to the Plaza Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street and, at ten past three, step into the dark-paneled Oak Room. Until that hour the room was a men-only lunchtime preserve. But when the room opened to women, Mea would be shown to her favorite corner table.

Her order was always the same: a Manhattan cocktail, a chicken sandwich, and a pot of coffee. And for an hour and a half, in the hush of white linen and attentive service, she would bind up the bruises of the week. The price of that Plaza lunch would have paid for half a dozen nourishing meals at the Automat, but with the money, Mea explained, she was feeding the soul.

Now and then I was invited to join her and had a chance to see the welcome the Oak Room staff gave her. It wasn't that they supposed her to be rich; she made no secret of her circumstances. The Plaza staff treasured her, I think, as I did, for her ability to take common clay and make us see porcelain.