



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Mea was the sensitive and sensitizing person to whom I poured out my childhood woes, my adolescent insecurities. While my mother recoiled from intimacy, Mea invited it. She was my confidante, my "Big Sister," as she signed her weekly letter.



Siren Song

From Mea I learned about compassion for wounded things and the uncrushable human spirit. But I also picked up other messages, ones that still whisper in my inmost ear. Mea completely agreed that I was different from other people. Not only different, better. . . finer, more deeply feeling. My brother and sister, while Mea loved them, lacked my "perception." My father had a noble spirit, but dealing with crime had dulled it. As for Mother, she was a wholly conventional kind of person --attractive and charming, of course, but utterly incapable of understanding a personality as profound as mine.

These messages were delivered in a thousand ways over the years, not, I'm sure, with the conscious design of alienating me from my parents, but out of Mea's own deep need to be central in someone's life. By my teens I even understood something of her need and the role I'd been assigned in filling it. But I listened anyhow, like sailors in the Greek myth to the siren song luring them onto the fatal rocks. To the self-rejecting young person I was, Mea's words were music indeed.

Friendship's End

I listened, and at some deep level I believed. The message could not have taken root unless the soil received it. Belief in a mysterious "superiority" always grows, I suspect, out of a deep insecurity

In the inevitable adolescent conflicts with my parents, Mea became the go-between. She alone understood me, she alone could interpret my rarefied thoughts to them. Mother and Daddy may not have grasped my exalted nature, but they perceived only too well the harm Mea's appropriation of me was doing. What bitter confrontations went on among the three of them -- once so close -- I was never told. I knew only that by the early 1940s Mea came less often to the house in Scarsdale, and finally not at all.

The loss to her was enormous, another in the lifelong pattern of abandonment by those she loved. Her sorrow was so intense that I became even more fiercely loyal, going each Sunday to the corner mailbox

with a letter to her, receiving hers at the home of my high school friend Ann Beveridge.

From college I could correspond openly. From Europe my junior year, I wrote that I'd met a twenty-four-year-old man named John Sherrill who I was sure would love her as much as I did. All my letters from Mea went into the teakwood box that is on my desk today. Rereading them now, I'm amazed at the closeness of the relationship between a woman nearing sixty and a teenage girl.

It did not, of course, continue this way, at least on my part. John did indeed enjoy Mea's company when at last they met -- her pluck, her gaiety, the aura she could weave around the most ordinary event. With John, though, I was encountering an intimate relationship that did not clutch.

The Train Station

I remember meeting Mea's train at the Chappaqua station near our home north of New York City one day in 1963. John and the children and I had been out of the country for a year; this was her first visit since our return. Stepping off the train, seeing me after an absence, Mea's hands flew up as though to ward off a physical blow.

"Oh!" she cried. "Don't look so much like your mother!"

She may not have known what she was saying, but I did. I was to have no history, no family, to be solely the creature of her own making. How unconsciously we all do it -- define another's identity to fit our need! But by 1963 I'd learned that God's fathering does just the opposite: On the way to heaven we become ourselves.

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