



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Having settled that we should marry before Christmas, a question arose as we pedaled down the mountainside that day. How would our two sets of parents feel about this? We'd known each other exactly six weeks. Wouldn't both families, reasonably, want us to wait awhile?



The Letter

"We'll write them," John said. "Explain the travel situation."

And so our first completed joint writing project turned out to be a letter. They were bulky envelopes by the time we sealed them -- one addressed to the Sherrills in Louisville, one to the Schindlers in Scarsdale. Inside each one were twelve pages, six written by John, six by me, covering what we believed was any conceivable question a parent could ask. They were prodigies of polished prose, written and rewritten on our typewriters, then copied out by hand.

Together we biked to the *Bureau de Poste* and stood hand in hand at the window grille as the two momentous envelopes were weighed, stamped, postmarked "3 *Octobre* 1947," and whisked from view. Nothing to do now but wait for our families' reactions to so much good news.

It was only on our return to the States a year later that we heard the drama of the envelopes' arrival. It had never occurred to us that mail from Europe reached New York a day sooner than it got to Kentucky. . . .

Phone Call

My mother was surprised one noontime, she related, when she opened the envelope with the Swiss stamps, to see unfamiliar handwriting on half the pages. The water in which she was hard-boiling eggs burned away as she stood in the front hallway reading. She smelled the scorching pot, snatched it from the stove, and telephoned my father in the city.

It took Daddy only ten minutes to cross the street to Grand Central and catch the 12:46 to Scarsdale, where Mother met him at the station. He read the letter as she drove home, went to the phone without taking off his coat, and got the information operator in Louisville.

"Wait till this evening," Mother urged as he wrote down the Sherrills' number. "You're upset now and I'm sure they are too. Why, Mr. Sherrill's probably at work. Let's give us all a few hours to think about this."

"I can't think about something I know nothing about." He tossed the letter on the sideboard and mixed a rare midday Old Fashioned. "You say his father's at work-what kind of work? We know nothing about these people in Louisville. There are precious few facts in all those pages."

And so there were, I know today, rereading them. Not the kind of facts parents want. They were *our* facts -- ecstatic descriptions of one another's looks, talents, brilliance. Glowing plans for our future as travel writers.

Daddy's agitation, Mother knew, came in part from the hard lessons of his profession. A large part of his practice involved not headline-grabbing murder cases, but behind-the-scenes marital inquiries. Parents dubious about the "count" a daughter had met in some foreign country. Wires would crisscross the ocean between the Schindler Agency and affiliates in France or Spain or England until the identification was complete: *The Comte de Merveau, a.k.a. Sir Neville Burne-Williams, is one Henry Bates, born 1903 in Milltown, Kansas, wanted in Indiana on five counts of desertion and bigamy.*

Perhaps it was this that made Daddy's tone more confrontational than cordial when the two families met over the phone that evening. The conversation, as recalled by the four participants, went like this:

"This is Walter Schindler in New York. I want to speak to Lewis Sherrill."

"This is Lewis Sherrill."

"Mr. Sherrill, I understand that your son wants to marry my daughter."

A very, very long silence from Louisville. Then: "I believe you are under a misapprehension, sir. My son is in Geneva, Switzerland."

"So's my daughter."

And after we'd labored so hard over the letter, this is how John's parents got the news. Daddy's interrogation continued. "What line of work are you in, Mr. Sherrill?"

"I'm dean of the Presbyterian Seminary here. May I ask, sir, what your work is?"

"I'm a private eye."

The Question

When the mothers' turn came -- few households in 1947 had more than one telephone -- the talk was on a more personal level. The gentle southern voice from Louisville, my mother recalled, seemed to be summoning courage to ask a particular question. At last it came out.

"Are you, uh. . ." John's mother faltered, "that is. . . you and your husband, do you. . . are you Christians?"

"Why, of course!" said my mother, to whom "Christian" meant someone who donated clothes to the Salvation Army.

And four very relieved parents went to bed that night.

Oversight

The relationship between our two fathers, which began so inauspiciously, turned out to be one of life's happy ironies. Two weeks after that phone call, the Sherrills traveled to New York to meet my family. Before long a deep friendship grew between the two men -- the scholarly theologian with an alphabet of advanced degrees after his name, and the self-educated and agnostic New Yorker. It would be Lewis Sherrill, seven years later, who would officiate at Daddy's funeral.

It's the question John's mother asked during that telephone conversation, though, that tells me about the people John and I were in 1947. Even if our letter had reached Louisville before the call came from New York, she would have had to ask it. In the introductions that we thought covered everything that mattered, we'd never thought to mention religion.

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