



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee.*

- Augustine of Hippo



## The Homecoming

I stood at the railing of the boat deck, staring through the drizzle as the coast of England drew near. It was 1947. I was nineteen, a college junior headed for the University of Geneva in Switzerland, recently reopened to foreign students after the war. The *Queen Elizabeth* would dock at Southampton before crossing to France.

All along the railing homecoming passengers were pointing out landmarks through the mist. I took off my glasses and rubbed them again with a rain-soaked handkerchief. Land was on both sides of us now as we glided up the Narrows, the *Elizabeth's* deep-throated horn blasting a continual warning to other ships. From fishing boats and cargo ships came answering toots and whistles as the world's largest ship steamed into homeport. The man next to me at the railing, a morose-looking Englishman with the limp right sleeve of his raincoat tucked into his pocket, broke out with the first words he'd uttered: "Couldn't raise this hullabaloo during the war. She had to creep in after dark. No lights. No horn."

### *First Sight*

At Southampton the dock swarmed with stevedores and black-helmeted bobbies. As tugs eased the great ship into her berth, I gazed past the waterfront at the clustered rooftops of the town, war damage still evident in rubble-strewn lots.

And suddenly; unaccountably; I burst into tears.

The one-armed war veteran, as I took him to be, turned a startled face to me. "It's all

right, Miss. Civilians were moved inland." And then, as I continued to sob: "Why; this is nothing, Miss! Wait till you see some of the spots Jerry really got to. Wait till you see London."

But it wasn't the bombed-out blocks. For years I'd seen newsreels of devastation far worse than this. I stabbed at my eyes with the useless handkerchief, trying to explain. . . what? A reaction so strange, so totally illogical, that I didn't understand it myself.

In a well-meant effort to reassure me, my companion launched into an upbeat description of England's postwar recovery. Below us, gangplanks were hoisted into place. Satisfied that he'd stopped the flow of tears, the man left to join the other disembarking passengers.

His kindness, however, was misplaced. The tears were not for sorrow but for joy. I was crying because I was home at last.

### *Found*

The sense of coming home to a place I'd never been. . .

Where could such a bizarre reaction have come from? It was my first trip anywhere overseas. What I could see of the town was foreign-looking -- small houses, big gardens, cars of unfamiliar make traveling on the wrong side of narrow streets. Yet I recognized the place as though I'd been looking for it all my life.

Or -- as though it had been looking for me. In some unfathomable way, I had been found. And till that moment I had not known that I was lost. . .

Since then, I've returned to England many times, and always with that inexplicable sense of homecoming. Is it the books I grew up with, I've wondered -- *Winnie the Pooh* and *Mary Poppins*, the Brontes, Shakespeare? Or could it be some kind of ancestral memory -- those many-times-great-grandparents who came from England?

How to explain it, even arriving by plane, herded with hundreds of other half-asleep passengers through the anonymous corridors of Heathrow Airport: that swelling of joy, that welling of tears. *I belong! I belong!* The apologetic demur to sympathetic strangers: "No, I'm all right. Really"

### *The Preview*

Really all right, in a way I cannot explain, but which I've come to feel, has a parallel in the life of the spirit. It was so similar, that spiritual homecoming when it happened to me

many years later, so filled with the shock of recognizing a place I'd never seen, that I see my experience on that ship deck as a kind of foretaste of a bigger reality.

Since then I've talked to others who've had a similar reaction to some unfamiliar landscape. The explanation for all of us, I think now, lies not in the past, in childhood books or family history, but in the future. I believe that everyone is given this mysterious affinity for some physical *place* as a kind of preview of the true journey home. The place is different for each of us, but the promise is the same -- *you have a homeland*. You will not always be a wanderer. There is a place prepared for you, and when you get there you will say, "I have lived here always."

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