



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

If someone had asked me, that day as I put my things into the dresser drawers John had emptied for me, what the years ahead held for us, I would have answered without hesitation, "Travel writing!" Though my expose of racism at Northwestern had been turned down everywhere I sent it, we'd already sold a tongue-in-cheek description of Swiss customs inspection to the *Louisville Courier Journal*. We could look forward, we believed, to a lifetime of exploring new places.



The Travel Writers

How very accurate this forecast was to prove, I didn't know -- nor how utterly unlike what I expected. Travel John and I have certainly had, but the real journey has been the interior one. The truly new places we've visited have not been in South America or Africa or Asia, but along the road to heaven.

The Welcome

I had a foretaste of what our reception in that ultimate destination may be when John and I returned to the States in the fall of 1948.

I'd written my parents that John had grown a beard. It was very full and very red, and it seemed only fair, at a time when beards were a rarity in America, to prepare them. Daddy wrote back that we weren't to worry; he'd arranged for the Coast Guard to take John off the *Mauretania* out at sea and bring him ashore after dark. I was used to Daddy's brand of humor; John was not. Two hours before we docked he disappeared into the men's shower room. He emerged clean shaven, the upper half of his face deeply tanned from weeks spent biking through Italy that summer, his jaw and chin a sickbed white.

My parents, sister, and brother, waiting on the pier, took this two-toned apparition to their hearts anyway. And when the cat climbed into his lap that evening, his approval was official.

It was my welcome into his family, though, that I remember best. John's sister, Mary, had written me several times in Geneva. Now another warm note from her was waiting to greet me in Louisville--- Mary and her husband, a lieutenant commander in the navy, lived in Norfolk, Virginia. John's parents held a reception for us there in Louisville, where some of the guests, I thought, looked a little dubiously at this northerner the Dean's son had thrust upon them. Never, however, did Mother and Dad Sherrill

make me feel an outsider. My ignorance of their world of church and seminary, my total lack of domestic skills -- the sewing, cooking, entertaining at which John's mother excelled -- must have alarmed them. But they embraced me from the start as a second daughter.

I know today that this grafting of me into another family was a preview of an even more tremendous inclusion -- the believer's welcome into the family of God. And inherent in this hint of things to come was the fact that Dad Sherrill was blind.

Beauty

John had told me about being summoned to camp headquarters during his basic training in Texas, six years earlier, to learn that his father's eyesight was failing. From Camp Wolters he'd been granted a week's "compassionate leave" to allow his father to see him a final time.

I'd wondered how a blind man could continue teaching, but Dad's scholarship never slacked. I would come upon him in an unlit room, his fingers tracing the lines on a big Braille page. Because he believed his blindness would be a distraction in the lecture hall, he would stand at the lectern turning the pages of a book he couldn't see, calling on his exceptional memory for long verbatim passages. Once when I'd written an article about him, I received an irate letter from a seminarian who'd studied under Dad in the early 1950s, accusing me of lying about the blindness.

Certainly he seemed to see. He never failed to say something complimentary about my appearance. "You're looking so pretty today!" Or, "What a lovely outfit!"

Even now I have trouble believing that Dad never saw me. He *did* see me, an inner voice insists. He saw me and I was beautiful! And of course in a sense he did see me -- looked at me through the lens of his love. Saw as we're seen in heaven. Saw the beauty of his own spirit and accounted it mine.

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