



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*The journey to heaven leads past the place
where the dragons lie.*

Cyril of Jerusalem, 315?-386

As it turned out, the decision to make Paris our home base was swiftly overruled by an "impossible" pregnancy.



The Dragon's Lair

We'd scoured the newspapers till we found a cheaper apartment. In a single taxi trip we moved our possessions: two suitcases, two typewriters, a cardboard box of books, and another holding dishes, hot plate, and skillet.

The new place was a sixth-floor walk-up just off the rue St. Jacques: two tiny sky-lit rooms beneath a slanting roof on which John regularly bumped his head. The five lower floors were mostly occupied by Arab families. Floor by floor, as we circled up the stairs, we'd breathe in aromas of lamb and spice.

Our own meals we ate most of the time in a state-subsidized students' restaurant in the next block, where the eye of the rooster head might stare balefully from the bottom of the soup bowl. We loved Near Eastern food, though, and would sometimes splurge on dinner at a Moroccan place. Why, then, did the hallway odors in our building make me feel so strange? Queasy... More than once I reached the communal bathroom on the fourth floor barely in time to be sick to my stomach.

By the middle of March, I didn't even have to smell food to feel the waves of nausea begin. Climbing the stairs one afternoon, I had to lean against a wall till the dizziness passed. One of our neighbors, a large, cheerful Algerian woman who always called "Bonjour!" through her open door, came out and led me into her living room. Shooing cats and children off the sofa, she made me lie down.

"It's this way with me, too," she said, "the first few months. Especially when it's a boy. Boys are always more trouble."

The first months? When it's a . . . Was I--

I couldn't be! The gynecologist I'd seen in Geneva before we married had told me I could not conceive without surgery. Since newspapers of the day were full of Russia's latest "Five Year Plan," John and I

had decided on a five-year plan of our own. That long to launch our writing careers, then the operation and hopes for a family.

But at the end of March, as telltale signs persisted, I visited an obstetrician. On a day of squally rain, both John and I returned to the doctor's office to be told that the impossible had happened. But the baby, the physician went on, had no chance of survival. "Continuing the pregnancy threatens Madame's life too," he said as he filled out the admission form for the hospital where I could get the abortion.

We sat numbly in our apartment that night, listening to the rain on the sloping roof. The excitement we'd felt at the prospect of being parents had turned to confusion, which we confided in letters to our families that night.

Going Back

My father wrote back at once. In typical take-charge fashion he'd already lined up "the best obstetrician in New York." Return boat fare for two was enclosed. So once again we made that walk across the Seine to the Cunard-White Star office.

It was in the fourth century that a father of the church wrote of the dragons on the way to heaven. That's how we know we're on the true route, Cyril of Jerusalem advised his congregations: A dragon will roar from its hiding place only if it's being threatened.

My own dragons lay not in the life of a writer in Paris, but back in New York. In 1950 I knew nothing about dragons, still less about heaven. But I was on that journey nonetheless, as each of us is, knowingly or not. I know today that had we made our permanent home overseas as we intended, I would not have encountered those dragons that each of us must face. Not so soon. Perhaps not ever.

Or perhaps the One who designed us for heaven would have planted my particular dragons in another place under another guise. Perhaps there is no place we can hide where his love will not confront us with the creatures of our darkness. I only know that France was for me, and still is, a place without shadows, a place of perpetual student-hood, where I can learn and learn without ever having to graduate into the world of application. To go forward, I had first to go back.