



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

[They] acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.



The Altarpiece

- Hebrews 11: 13-14 RSV

"Heaven" is the name seekers through the ages have given to this spiritual homeland. For the first thirty-some years of my life, *heaven* and *the Land of OZ* meant much the same to me -- fairy-tale places dreamed into being by people whose life in the real world was hard. Very nice for those who could console themselves this way, but not, of course, for rational people.

How I've been drawn-unheedingly, unknowingly, even unwillingly -- to a very different view, is the story of this book. Heaven, I believe today, is not only real, but more real than anything else. Real not just in some disembodied post-death existence -- though it will continue to be real then too -- but real today, right where I am. Heaven, I believe, has only one time.

Now.

And only one place. *Here.*

The Mountaintop

"Place" of course isn't the right word, just the only one we have. A *place* suggests a fixed location where -- however distant -- I can imagine someday arriving. Above the altar of our church in Mt. Kisco, New York, is a painting of the Mount of Transfiguration. Against a sky of gold -- always in Christian art the symbol of heaven -- Jesus holds celestial discourse with Moses and Elijah, while Peter, John, and James look on. As these three recall it later, their rabbi's wind-tanned face began to shine with glory, "and his clothing became dazzling white, far more glorious than any earthly process could ever make it!" (Mark 9:3 TLB).

At that transcendent moment it must have seemed to the three fishermen that their days of homeless wandering were over. After years of trudging the dusty roads behind their footloose leader, hadn't they reached the very courts of heaven? This was it! They'd arrived!

"Shall we put up shelters for you and Moses and Elijah?" Peter asked excitedly. Move in, stay right here?

But of course they hadn't "arrived" anywhere. Heaven is nowhere that can be fixed on a map. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the journey for Peter, John, and James had just begun.

The Valley

Heaven is nowhere. But it is also everywhere. At any moment the mist may lift and we may find ourselves in that unknown, well-known land. "So it was *here* I was headed, all along!"

From heaven we can look back and see the changes and chances of our lives as the pathway leading straight to where we stand in joyful wonder. The losses, the seeming detours, the things that most puzzled and distressed us --

why, they were the very route by which we came.

And still the way, Jesus the Way, leads on. Away from the mountaintop where we seemed so close to heaven, down into the valley of shadow and struggle. *Why must it be like this?* we wonder. Over the years I've asked hundreds of spiritual pilgrims about the hardest moment of their journey. And for most of them it's been the period immediately following some glorious revelation of God's love.

Why? Why can't we live always in the peace and joy we tasted so briefly? Why should we have to keep stumbling on, forever led away from the heavenly vision?

I believe it's because the heaven to which Jesus is taking us is so very big. From earth we can see so little of that eternal landscape, and he wants to show us so much. "Don't stand there gazing. You haven't seen anything yet!"

The Picture Frame

Probably because I have no artistic ability of my own, I love going to museums, letting the perceptiveness of artists show me beauties I would otherwise miss. Some years ago I was at the Johnson Art Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina, when a group of children from a school for the blind was shown through. Curious, I followed along behind. What could these sightless youngsters enjoy in an art gallery?

The sculptures! For this tour, *Don't Touch* rules were suspended; with murmurs of discovery, the children ran sensitive fingers over shapes in marble, steel, wood. One curly-haired little girl, seven or eight years old, was full of questions. "What's over there?"

"Paintings," the docent told her.

"What's a painting?"

How, I wondered, *would her guide answer?* Taking the child's hand, the docent led the little girl behind the rope that cordoned off an enormous canvas by Morris Louis. It was a starkly abstract composition: bold streaks of blue, orange, green, against a white background. What could colors mean to this inquisitive young mind? How do you describe "orange" to someone who's never seen a pumpkin?

As I watched, the docent placed the child's hand on the frame at the bottom of the painting, then slowly led her the length of the picture. At the far end, the youngster gave a nod of satisfaction. "Big!" she said.

I think often of that scene. I am that child, it seems to me. For a lifetime I've been doing as she did, tracing the lower rim of heaven, guided by the One who sees the picture in all its vivid color.

"Until you can see," he tells me, "I cannot show you what's inside the frame. But if you will take my hand I can bring you close, let you touch the border and learn that heaven is large enough to encompass all that ever happens to you -- yesterday, today, tomorrow."