



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

"The church affiliation of the husband will constitute the church membership of his dependents," I quoted our marriage certificate. Since John had been raised in the Presbyterian church, we started there. Then Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Church of Christ, and so on, some thirteen churches in four towns, a couple of Sundays at each.



The Search

At first we tried going as a family, but with children ages five, two, and three months, I spent most of the service retrieving crayons from under the pew. So John started going one week, I the next, then comparing notes.

"Really friendly people."

"They certainly made me feel welcome."

"They couldn't have been nicer."

Sunday after Sunday, outstretched hands, smiling faces, and... "Where shall we try next?" What we were looking for we didn't know, just that we weren't finding it.

What we did find was a new verb, fellowship. "So glad you could fellowship with us today" We were invited to fellowship at coffee hours and discussion groups, potluck suppers and Thursday night couples' clubs. We were pressed to attend men's breakfasts and women's luncheons.

The end of the experiment came for me six months after it began. I was leaving a steepled, white-clapboard, Norman-Rockwell-painting of a church, trying to recall the points in the sermon to repeat to John, when a woman in a red felt hat seized my arm. "The church fair is next month will you make an apron?" she asked. All one sentence.

She must have thought I was either deaf or dim-witted as I blinked at her without a word. The truth was, I was fighting tears. It was not yet a year, at this point, since the days when I'd been afraid even to step past the door of the little room upstairs, and my confidence was still fragile.

Will you make an apron? evoked my losing battle to acquire the skills "every" woman of the 1950s possessed. Sewing especially... when I tried to poke a piece of thread through the miniscule hole in a

needle, it frayed into a hydra-headed monster.

I don't remember how I answered the lady in the red hat. I do know I almost ran to the parking lot, away from the smiling people, away from the outstretched hand of fellowship. John kept up the church search for another month, but the impetus had gone out of it for both of us. Our Sundays reverted to yard work and the New York Times.

I believe, in fact, that writing for a religious publication made our spiritual journeys harder. Working with Christian subject matter acted as a kind of inoculation: exposure to a safe dose of the germ to prevent our coming down with the real thing.

Exposed we were, constantly. We knew secondhand about reaching the bottom of the pit and finding God there. About miraculous supply. About the inner voice that guides. We'd lived all these things vicariously as we helped people put their stories on paper.

And on paper, for us, they remained. The challenging sermons we'd heard during our six months of church hunting had lost the force of impact. We had been immunized.

The Telephone Call

The road to heaven, for both John and me, was a different one.

On the northbound side of the New York State Thruway in the Bronx is a gas station that I never pass without recalling a snowy January night in 1957. The station is closed now, its fieldstone walls disfigured with graffiti, but I still see it as it looked on the winter night we pulled in to use the telephone.

John and I and other Guideposts staffers had attended a Salvation Army fund-raiser where the speaker was the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Henry Knox Sherrill. After his talk we joined the long line waiting to shake his hand. John mentioned the coincidence of the name, and he and the bishop briefly compared family histories.

It was after 10:00 P.M. when we walked to the parking garage and got in our car. While we were at dinner it had begun to snow

"Could be bad up our way," said Norm Mullendore, Guideposts' art director, as he climbed into the backseat. Norm lived near us, forty miles north of the city.

It was bad even before we got out of Manhattan, snow mixing with sleet, traffic crawling. By the time we reached the Bronx, we knew we wouldn't make it home before midnight as we'd promised the sitter. "We've got to call Mrs. Coolidge," I said.

Norm thought there was a gas station not far ahead. "If it's open." At last through the sleet pelting the windshield we saw the welcome lights of the station. "Tell Mrs. Coolidge just to open the sofa and go to bed," I called as John got out of the car.

He was inside the station a long time.

"Maybe the phone lines are down," Norm said.

At last we saw John coming toward the car. Instead of getting in, however, he simply stood there in the storm. Norm rolled down the back window "Couldn't get through?"

"I got through. Mrs. Coolidge had a phone call from my mother. Dad died at 9:30 this evening."

For a while there was only the sound of ice crystals pinging against the roof of the car.

But . . . we'd been with Dad two days ago! Sixty-four years old, excited about the upcoming semester at Union, he and Mother had taken the train out to our house Sunday afternoon. As always, I'd served my one confident casserole: kidney beans, sliced potatoes, crumbled bacon, tomato soup. I could hear Dad's warm, deep voice, "I always look forward to this."

Dad couldn't be dead!

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