



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Our eyes do not see you, but we have this excuse:
Eyes see surface, not reality.

Rumi

"This is the kingdom of heaven!" Father Brinckerhoff's words launched me on a lifelong experiment: trying to discern heaven right where I am.



The Waiting Room

Sometimes it's easy. Driving through the Rocky Mountains when the aspens are turning yellow. Stepping into St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, the wall behind the altar thronged with saints ascending. In such places heaven seems to shimmer just behind the visible world. In others...

One of the tough places for me is Memorial Hospital in New York City, where John and I go for his annual cancer checkup. The world's premier cancer center, Memorial is a bewildering complex of buildings on Manhattan's upper east side. The Head and Neck department is on the third floor of Sloane-Kettering. And there, in a waiting room facing a row of examining cubicles, John and I have now spent some three hundred hours.

"Waiting" room is right; never less than two hours, often as many as four, while nurses and doctors, adept at avoiding eye contact, emerge briefly from one cubicle and disappear into the next.

What makes this place an especially unlikely precinct of heaven is that in this unit everyone's medical problem is visible. There are bandaged eyes, swollen cheeks, lopsided jaws - in John's case a scarred neck and a partially missing ear. There we sit, patients and family members, isolated in our separate fears.

Tables hold magazines, but few people pick them up. Some talk in lowered voices, some hold hands. Most simply stare, unseeing, at reproductions of Van Gogh apple trees on the walls.

Fellow Patients

I pretend to look at the pictures too as I study the people in the room. Today on our right are two bearded Hassidim with long sideburns and flat black hats. Father and son, I decide. To our left sit an elderly black couple. Beyond them two women in saris whisper over

the bandaged head of a little boy. Old and young, we gather in this room from all over the world. In that way, at least, Memorial Hospital is like heaven. No nation or race excluded.

Patient records today are computerized, but in a drawer of the appointment desk is one old-fashioned file card, ragged with years of handling. "We wouldn't throw John's card away for anything," the receptionist tells me. John is one of the survivors, in his late seventies now, in his midthirties when we first sat in these chairs.

As I gaze surreptitiously about the room, I am praying for each of the patients waiting with us, that they too will live to become as familiar with this third-floor room as we are.

"What can you tell me about that person?" my detective father used to test my skills of observation. "Look at hands first, then posture, then clothes." As I pray I try to picture homes, families, occupations. My mental images are guesswork, of course, but one thing I can spot for sure: those arriving for the first time. They clutch an instruction sheet from the admitting office downstairs, often pinned to a sheaf of records from other institutions. Their eyes widen at the sight of the surgical scars on their fellow patients, then look swiftly away. Watching these newcomers, my mind goes back to our own first time here, when we knew nothing about cancer, still less about prayer, only a chill, mind-numbing fear. . .

The Mole

It was in January 1957, almost three years before that first Sunday at St. Mark's, that I'd noticed a small mole on John's left ear. When I pointed out that it was growing, he shrugged. Trying to get John to a doctor was like trying to get the

children to eat liver - wasted breath. At last, going for an insurance checkup, he promised to get it looked at.

"What did the doctor say?" I asked that evening.

"It's nothing. He said he'd remove it for cosmetic reasons if it bothered me."

Cosmetic. If there's a word that can make a stubborn man dig his heels in harder, I don't know it. Week after week I watched the angry-looking growth darken. Week after week my "pestering" got nowhere. With kids ages six, three, and one, he pointed out, we had enough medical bills without running to a doctor out of vanity. Psychiatry bills, too, kindness kept him from adding: I was seeing Dr. Kazan at this point three times a week.

Finally in September, because I kept bugging him, John had the thing off in a brief office visit at our local medical center. "Satisfied?" he said when he came home with a Band-Aid pasted to his ear.

It was a good day all around. Dr. Kazan had just that morning agreed that I could stop taking the medication I'd been on for nearly two years.

The Phone Call

Two days later I answered the telephone. It was the doctor who'd removed the mole. He'd like to see my husband. Yes, right now. And, uh - perhaps I could come with him? Well, bring the baby along.

At his office a mile from our home, the doctor shoved a lab report across his desk. As a matter of routine, he explained, he'd sent the tissue for a biopsy. It was malignant melanoma, a particularly fast-spreading cancer of the lymph system. If it couldn't be checked, John might have as little as three months. He'd made an appointment for John that afternoon with a specialist at Memorial Hospital.

Practical steps. Phone the baby-sitter. Collect the tissue sample from the lab. Pick up Donn at nursery school. Leave a note at Mt. Kisco Elementary: "Mrs. Coolidge will come for Scott today."

By 3:00 John and I were threading our way for the first time through Memorial's maze of hallways - so like the unmarked road looming ahead in our lives. Don't

look down it! Take a step at a time. Find the right department, fill out the forms.

John was seen by the chief of Head and Neck, Dr. Daniel Catlin. Three days later, Dr. Catlin removed a slice of John's left ear and the lymph tissue on the left side of his neck.

John remained in the hospital for a week. Both our fathers were gone by then, and I didn't yet know my heavenly Father. So I reached out to my grandfather, up from Florida for his annual end-of-the-baseball-season visit. The day after the surgery I poured out to him my fears, the uncertain prognosis.

Papa

"I'm seeing a doctor next week too," Papa said. "I have an acid stomach. My doctor in Miami gave me a prescription, but I don't believe it's helping."

On and on, the recital of Papa's ills, Papa's medications. My beloved grandfather - at age eighty his world had narrowed to the horizons of his own needs. It was a growing-up passage for me, just then when so much growing up was asked. To see Papa not as I needed him to be, but as the central figure in his own story, with a childhood, a young adulthood, failures and successes. In time it meant a deeper, more adult love for him, but that night it was another of life's props knocked away.

Looking back, I see the tremendous good that flowed for both John and me from this terrible time. See, for example, how our props, one by one, *must* be left behind on the Way that is Jesus. To put our faith in anyone or anything else is to let go of his hand.

"What seemed when they entered it, to be the vale of misery," C. S. Lewis writes about the souls in heaven, "turns out, when they look back, to have been a well. And where present experience saw only salt deserts, memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water."

In the Desert

But that "present experience," that salt desert time, when one has no suspicion that there *is* a heaven! The simplest daily act was clouded in fear. Tucking the children in at night - would they grow up without a father? Stepping into the supermarket, not so long before a place of terror -- what if the panic attacks returned? None of this could I share with John, of course. My job was to be

upbeat and encouraging and run the water in the sink to mask the sound of crying.

Even out of this, good would come: a lifelong empathy with the partner in a crisis - the competent, smiling, supportive one with the hollow place inside. That very month I happened to be writing about a munitions worker who'd lost his hands in an explosion. I remembered how during the interview I'd thanked his wife for the coffee, turned to her for details of his rehabilitation, and not once asked what the upheaval in their lives had meant to *her*.

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