



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life!
Such a Way as gives us breath,
Such a Truth as ends all strife,
Such a Life that killeth death.

George Herbert

Marc Hall was waiting for us in the wood-paneled rector's study at St. Marks. Urbane, scholarly, he spoke eloquently about the role of faith in the crisis confronting us.



The Side Chapel

"I was wondering," John broke into the flow of words, "if you could say a prayer for me. I mean, for God to heal me."

The Reverend Hall looked - just for a moment - taken aback. "Why, of course," he agreed. He picked up a *Book of Common Prayer* from his desk. "There's a prayer right in here for such occasions."

For a while the only sound in the room was the turning of pages. "Here it is. 'Unction of the Sick.' Let's go into the sanctuary."

In the shadowy church Edgar Hilliar, the organist, was rehearsing, sonorous chords echoing from the stone walls. The Reverend Hall stepped behind the communion rail in the small side chapel while John and I knelt on the long needlepoint cushion. In front of us, above the altar, a Tiffany window depicted St. John's vision of the glorified Christ in heaven. The morning sun on the glass illuminated the words above Jesus' head. *I Am the Resurrection and the Life.*

Raising his voice above the organ, Marc Hall began to read. "I lay my hand upon thee, beseeching the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ ... " A priest reading

a prayer from a book, John who'd been a Christian perhaps fifteen minutes, and me, wondering if the bathrobe I'd washed for him to take to the hospital was dry yet.

"... that all thy pain and sickness of body being put to flight ... "

The Touch

Marc's voice boomed out in a sudden silence from the organ. " ... the blessings of health," he concluded more softly, "may be restored to thee."

Suiting his action to the words, Marc shifted the prayer book to his left hand. "I lay my hand upon thee," he read again as he placed his right hand on John's head. Beside me I felt John's body give a jerk.

And unaccountably, I began to cry.

Edgar Hilliar was playing again. John stood up, Marc Hall stepped out from behind the railing. Wonderingly, I saw that both of them were fighting tears too. There was an awkward silence, some mumbled farewells, no one meeting another's eyes.

We drove home in silence. Later John told me that at the touch of Marc's hand a bolt of intense heat coursed like an electric shock down the side of his neck, stopping there, searing, burning, then traveling clear to the soles of his feet.

It was hours before he could speak about it. In silence we packed his suitcase for the hospital, each wrestling with the knowledge that something extraordinary had been present in that chapel. Something we couldn't name or describe, a reality that fit nothing we knew.

When Dr. Catlin operated the following day, in John's neck where the newly discovered lump had been, he found instead a tiny heat-shriveled residue. Not a tumor, but something more like a cinder.

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Waiting

Whether I fly with angels, fall with dust,

*Thy hands made both, and I am there;
Thy power and Love, my love and trust
Make one place everywhere.*

George Herbert

"All the way to heaven is heaven." But to know this when things go wrong takes a faith we didn't have. This second surgery, the one that was to produce such good news medically, was for both John and me, living through it, a kind of hell.

I remember sitting in the busy visitors' lobby of Memorial Hospital's surgical wing, watching the clock on the wall circle through the slow minutes of the operation taking place somewhere on the floors above. Surgery was scheduled for noon and would take an hour and a half, maybe two hours, Dr. Catlin had told me, depending on how much he had to remove. He would phone the desk here in the lobby when it was over to give me a report, probably around 2:00.

Two o'clock came. The seats in the lobby changed occupants. Three o'clock. How radical was the surgery turning out to be! At 3:30 I spoke again to the crisp and efficient lady at the desk. Yes, she had my name. Yes, she knew where I was sitting. I returned to my corner of the leatherette sofa, not daring to venture even as far as the coffee machine in the hallway for fear of missing the doctor's call.

Four o'clock. The crowd in the lobby had thinned. Dr. Catlin must simply have forgotten to phone. John had to be in the Recovery Room by now! There was a new face at the desk. She was sorry, she did not have that information. At 4:30 from a phone booth in the hall, I called Dr. Catlin's office. The doctor was not in. No, there was no message for Mrs. Sherrill. I called the office again at 5:30 and got his answering service.

'The office is closed. You can call tomorrow morning at nine.'

The Battle

My desperation must have sounded in my voice. Protesting that she was not authorized to do so, the answering service operator gave me Dr. Catlin's home number. A woman answered. No, the doctor had not come home. No, she didn't know when to expect him.

It was five past 6:00 when I was summoned at last to the desk in the lobby. It

was Dr. Catlin, who'd left the operating room ten minutes earlier. The neck surgery had gone well. "But we had a little trouble on the operating table."

John had been sedated, he went on, and the anesthetist was inserting the breathing tube into his throat, when both John's lungs collapsed. Dr. Catlin had done an emergency tracheotomy. From the exhaustion in his voice, I understood that a life-and-death battle had been waged over John's unconscious form. While I was wondering why he did not call, Dr. Catlin had been fighting for John's survival. Only at 4:30, about the time I began calling his office, when John's vital signs were normal again, had the actual surgery begun.

The Light

And John? He woke that night in the Intensive Care Unit to the worst pain he had ever experienced. From a hole in his throat and from both sides of his chest poked plastic tubes. Around him machines whirred and bubbled. No one thought to explain to him that the multiple incisions were not, as he of course assumed, because the cancer had spread throughout his chest.

Morning came; the pain worsened. And the second night, into the midst of the pain, strode Jesus.

He came as light, piercing the wall of the room. Light impossibly bright. Alive, conscious, infinitely knowing, infinitely loving. Two days earlier John had acknowledged, without understanding, that Jesus was God. Now, still without understanding, he saw him.

And John did what seemed inevitable in that luminous presence.

He asked help not for himself but for others there in the ICU - an old man who could not stop coughing, a young man who moaned. The coughs and the cries stopped.

John's own pain did not go away: It simply ceased to matter in the wonder of an all-encompassing new relationship.

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Later, John wrote about this experience. In response he's received some eighty letters over the years describing similar events. What strikes us most about

them is that the Light, without exception, appears when the darkness is deepest.

"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it," the Book of Revelation says of heaven, "for the glory of God is its light" (Rev. 21:23 RSV).

John was in heaven that night, and he was in the surgical wing of a cancer hospital, and it was the same place.

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