



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

All praise to Him who now hath turned my
fears to joys, my sighs to song, my tears
to smiles, my sad to glad.

Anne
Bradstreet

Ever since that December day, I've looked at paintings of martyred saints -- those scenes of fire and rack so favored by medieval painters -- with new understanding. The flames rise,

the arrows pierce, the branding iron burns, and the saint gazes rapturously into heaven. "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," St. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about our life in two realities.



The Valley

I wonder in fact if it isn't the painful times that bring heaven closest. I think of Molly Shelley, discovering God's love on a hospital bed. Corrie ten Boom finding heaven in the hell of a concentration camp. John seeing Jesus in an ICU. Its in the valleys, not on the peaks or the level stretches, that a light from heaven so often bursts on the path.

I know a man for whom it happened literally that way -- a sudden, life-changing stab of light in a dark, dark night. Max Ellerbusch was showing me around his comfortable home in Cincinnati. "And this is Craig," he said, lifting a photograph from the living-room table. A five-year-old boy with curly blonde hair and an irresistible grin smiled out at us from a silver frame.

This was the child who, on the Friday before Christmas eighteen months before my visit, had blown a good-bye kiss as he headed out the door for the last day of kindergarten before the holidays. At the school crosswalk, a block from home,

he'd waited, as his father reminded him each morning, for the crossing-guard's signal. The car came so fast the guard had to jump backward to keep from being killed too. The driver never stopped.

"When they told me Craig was dead, I was plunged into a blackness I can't even describe," Max said. His wife, Grace, was stunned with grief. But for Max it was more than grief. Raised in a loveless home, he'd seen little to be glad about until his own four children came along. Craig especially, with his infectious joy, seemed to say, "It's a wonderful world!" And then ...

"All the anger I'd carried from childhood focused on the driver of that car."

Police made the arrest twenty-four hours after the accident. George Williams (not his real name), fifteen years old. His mother, raising him alone, worked a night shift. While she slept on Friday morning, George had cut school, taken his mother's car keys from her handbag ...

Max spent Saturday on the phone -- lawyers, police, newspapers --demanding that Williams be tried as an adult. "I wanted to go to that jail and strangle the punk who'd killed our Craig."

Light

It was late Saturday evening, a day and a half after the tragedy, the blackest hour of the night, the blackest time of Max's cheerless life, when the lightning bolt from heaven fell. For a second sleepless night, Max was pacing the hall outside his bedroom, when... the dark little corridor was suddenly ablaze with light.

"Bright as the sun. Brighter! Brighter than any light on earth could be." And in that unearthly brilliance, Max's grief, his rage, his lifetime of bitterness, vanished like goblins imagined in the dark. "It was pure love, that light -- an overpowering, all-encompassing love that I knew had to be God. I knew in that instant that Craig was all right -- better than all right! And I was all right, and everything, everywhere was all right."

Everything except the future facing George Williams. In that same light-struck moment, Max saw a confused, lonely boy as much in need of a father as Max was of a son. He burst into the bedroom where Grace too was sleepless. Max's words tumbled over themselves. "Christmas is coming. We can send presents. Go to the jail. Tell George we love him ... "

And love him Max and Grace did. They asked for and got his release, and though at first George was afraid to meet them, the Ellerbusches' soon became his second home. After school he'd stop in to work with Max in his instrument repair shop or join the family for a meal around the kitchen table. George was there the afternoon of my visit, a gangly teenager with an outbreak of acne on his forehead, helping his "little sister" with her homework.

I kept up with the Ellerbusches over the years, as George grew up and started a career and family of his own. But it wasn't just a fifteen- year-old's life that was transformed in that heaven-lit moment. The Max Ellerbusch I know is an outgoing person, demonstrative in his love for his wife and his children.

"That wasn't me at all," he says. "If you'd known me before this happened, you'd wonder, *What's bugging this guy?* I had a chip on my shoulder the size of a log.

I have to take his word for it -- and Grace confirms it. "He was so uptight he'd grind his teeth in his sleep."

And the transformation came, not when all was well, but in the deepest valley of his life.

The Hymn

They never last long, these flashes from heaven. Maybe here on earth we can't endure such brightness for more than an instant. One Sunday morning at St. Andrew's Cathedral in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1999, the opening hymn was about angels:

They sing because thou art their Sun;
Lord, send a beam on me;
For where heaven is but once begun
There alleluias be.

The author knows that light from heaven! I thought. John Mason knows that a single beam from that Sun will change a life. One ray, and we join the chorus that forever sings, "Alleluia!"