



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Both heaven and hell are banquet halls, tables piled high with food. In hell, however, everyone is starving; the spoons are three feet long and people can't get the food to their mouths. In heaven the spoons are three feet long, too, but a great feast is underway. The diners feed one another.

Anonymous
"The Two Banquets"

We have our individual reasons for feeling that heaven cannot be meant for us. One of mine is my selfishness.



The Nurse Who Cried

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante set down the most elaborate conception of the afterworld ever written. So detailed are its descriptions of hell, purgatory, and heaven that many of his contemporaries in the fourteenth century believed he'd actually made the imaginary journey he describes.

In the *Inferno* Dante encounters the souls in hell. Though he meets a wide variety of people in its gloomy landscapes, all have one quality in common. Each one believes himself the center of the universe. In each of hell's nine circles, the damned assail Dante with their ongoing feuds, their self-justifying accounts of what went wrong. Nothing exists outside their thwarted desires, their wounded pride. It's chilling reading!

The Paraplegic

August, 1968. It was Liz's turn to go with me on an interview trip, but as the two of us set out in the car for Springfield, Pennsylvania, I had misgivings. How would a twelve-year-old react to meeting Dick Riley?

"Of course, bring your daughter along!" Mr. Riley had said over the phone. Still, Liz was a child who wept over limping dogs. And from what I'd heard about Dick Riley ... "You mustn't be alarmed when you see him," I tried to prepare her.

Sixteen years earlier, in a fall from a ladder, the man we were going to see had been paralyzed from the neck down. Years of rehab had restored partial use of one arm. So that with this crippled arm he could shift himself in bed, his lifeless legs had been amputated. "You mustn't stare," I told Liz. "Or act sorry for him."

Dick Riley's wife, Mary, welcomed us at the door and led us to the room where Dick was propped on pillows in a motorized bed, surrounded by the files of his accountancy business. On that summer afternoon a sheet was the only bed covering, too smooth, too flat, where his body ended abruptly at his hips.

Mary brought us all ice tea, then took Liz out to the garden while Dick told me his story. He'd been only twenty when the accident happened, married, with a baby on the way. The house painting firm he was working for had assigned him a three-story home that week.

"I was foreman on the job, bossing men twice my age."

In the front of the house was a single small window high up. The company rule for third-story work was one man up, one to hold the ladder, but that would mean calling one of his crew off the job at the back of the house.

What was one dinky window! "I was Mr. Independence." Dick raised the extension ladder and scrambled up. With his putty knife he loosened one corner of the window screen, then reached for the other. He saw the side of the house slide past his eyes, heard the ladder slam to the ground a second before he did. He tried to stand up. He saw his hand six inches from his face. He tried to move it ...

The other workmen, hearing the crash, came running from the back of the house. At the hospital, doctors gave Dick only hours to live. Mary came, and the minister who'd married them and in whose church, two years earlier, Dick had accepted Christ. Together they thanked God that this very day Dick would be with Jesus in heaven.

But the hours stretched into days, then weeks, and Dick did not die. "It was worse than death. I was a living person trapped in a corpse."

The only thing he could still do was talk. And talk he did, aggressively,

outrageously, trying to provoke anger, argument, anything to prove to himself that he could still impact his world. The hospital nurses were "clumsy," "stupid," "lazy." But instead of hot retorts, he received only kindness. He redoubled his attacks. If independence was the best word he knew, pity was the worst.

Hearing

The point of his greatest despair, he told me, came when it was clear that, instead of dying, he might live on in this condition for many years. "Instead of the fall sending me to heaven, it had landed me in hell."

And like the denizens of Dante's hell, Dick's sole preoccupation was himself. He hadn't even noticed the face of the young nurse laboring over him one morning, struggling to get the sheet out from under him and get him turned. "Of course she was doing everything wrong, and I was telling her so."

And then ... he became aware of another sound in that room. A strange sound in that space filled to overflowing with Dick's problems, Dick's needs. "It was the very first sound I'd heard -- really heard -- since the accident."

The nurse was crying.

Dick listened, staring at the wall he faced when turned on his side. He could not turn his head to see her. But looking at the wall, he was suddenly aware of her as a person. He pictured her setting out for the hospital that morning, leaving behind her own problems to take on a particularly disagreeable patient. He thought about the physical strain of the job, heard the carping cruelty he was adding to it. And he said,

"I'm sorry."

Just two words. But they were the passwords out of hell. For a moment Dick had felt concern for someone else. Other moments followed. One by one he got to know the hospital staff. The birth of his son, Dicky, enlarged his world still more.

Then his employer's insurance ran out and Dick was moved from a private room into a ward. All around him were the needs of other people. He still lay paralyzed in an unresponding body, but no longer in the prison of self. Motionless as he was, Dick found something to give each of his fellow patients. A joke. A smile. A prayer. A listening ear.

Citizen of Heaven

"You know who Jesus says goes to heaven?" Dick said. "The guy who reaches out to the sick, the hungry I can't find a single word in the Bible about independence."

Dick continued reaching out. First in the rehab center, today with family, friends, and clients. "The more I can give to someone else, the more God can give to me. His joy, that's what Mary and I know, every day of our lives."

Dick didn't have to die, I thought, to enter heaven. Mary and Liz came in with flowers from the yard. When he learned that Liz would be starting junior high in a couple of weeks, Dick asked what he could pray for. Sixteen-year-old Dicky came in from a baseball game, and his dad demanded an inning-by-inning replay.

"Do you know what strikes me about your experience?" I told Dick as we got up to leave. "Its *when* you found this joy." I was remembering Max Ellerbusch, pacing the floor after little Craig was killed. "It was when you heard somebody cry."

Loss. Injury. Tears. Unlikely doorways to heaven, yet there was no mistaking where Dick Riley made his home. "Mom," said Liz as we headed home along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, "what did you mean about Mr. Riley? What was so awful? I mean, I saw about his legs and everything, but gosh, why would anyone feel sorry for him?"