



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* Romans 14:8

Reading Lewis's words, I thought of an interview John and I had had some ten years before. Martin Luther King Jr. was uppermost in my mind just then anyway: three days earlier this thirty-nine-year-old Baptist pastor had been murdered as he stood on the balcony of a Memphis motel. Few men in our time, I thought, had left a greater mark on their corner of the earth than he had!



My overwhelming impression on meeting him, however, had been of a man "occupied with heaven." When John and I had arrived at his home in Montgomery, Alabama, in November 1958, he was recovering from a near-fatal stabbing. Two years earlier he had spearheaded a boycott of Montgomery's segregated buses, the first large-scale civil rights action in the twentieth century. Though his weapons were nonviolence and love, a storm of hatred burst about him. Thirty or forty threatening phone calls and letters a day, his wife and baby daughter threatened, his home bombed.

For a full year, Dr. King had refused to quit. When bus segregation ended in Montgomery, he wrote a book about the effectiveness of peaceful protest. He was in a department store in New York City, signing copies, when a deranged black woman plunged a razor-sharp letter opener deep into his chest.

### *Lunch*

By the time of our visit two months after the stabbing, he was allowed to leave his bed for meals, and he and Mrs. King had invited us for lunch. Two memories of the meal stood out. The first was my introduction to collard greens, about which my kindest thought was that it must be an acquired taste. Since the end of the meal meant the end of

the interview, however, I accepted a second helping ... a third ...

The other memory was the experience, equally new to me, of meeting a man who cared passionately about conditions in this world because his citizenship was in another. About passion for justice I'd learned from Grandfather, about a world beyond this one I had not. This was when heaven for me was still in the realm of myth; Dr. King's lack of concern for his own safety seemed incomprehensible. He had no doubt, he told us, that in another place, on another street, in another town, the knife or the bomb or the bullet would find him. Meanwhile, he would not avoid public places, would not carry a gun, would not wear a bulletproof vest.

I looked at this twenty-nine-year-old man -- a year younger than me -- at his little daughter Yoki, just turned three, at thirteen-month-old Martin Luther King III, and wondered where such serenity came from.

As I followed Dr. King's successful battles over the next ten years, I'd think of Grandfather's unavailing appeals for racial justice, of my own failed struggles at Northwestern, and wonder what his secret was.

"Like anybody else I'd like to live a long life," he said in Memphis the night before he was shot. "But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."

That he was a fallible human being, he knew all too well. But that didn't concern him either. His hope was not in himself. "I want to hear a voice saying to me one day," he declared in that same fateful address on the eve of his assassination, "I take you in and bless you because you tried."

### *Apple Blossoms*

*We are ... heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting kingdom.  
Book of Common Prayer*

For Dr. King, the hope of being "taken in" to a realm of eternal blessing was the anchor that held him steady. How I wish I'd been a believer when I had a chance to talk to him about heaven! How I'd like to have asked over the collard greens how he envisioned that future existence.

I didn't ask, though. All I'm sure of is that he did envisage it. Unknowable though the real heaven is, and far short as all human conceptions of it must fall, we cannot hope for something we can't imagine at all.

In November, 1972, a young man from a writing class I'd taught in Uganda came to New York on a journalism internship. Concerned about how Kiloto would handle the cold, I'd bought and borrowed a winter wardrobe for him.

But cold, it turned out, was not the problem. The problem was Kilot's reaction to gray skies and bare-branched trees. Uganda is a land of year-round color -- vibrant flowers, jewel-like birds.

"I cannot remain in your country," he would say. "I cannot live in such a place."

"This is temporary!" John and I kept telling him. "Soon everything will be different. Trees will leaf out. Flowers will bloom."

Kiloto could not conceive of such a transformation. Mental images of the beauty-to-be, so clear to us, were absent for him. Kiloto had never seen an apple tree in blossom. He went home in January.

No anchor held for him.

### *Reluctant Traveler*

Hope needs images, needs to know about apple blossoms. I discovered this for myself a couple of years after Kiloto's experience when I visited my sister in Indonesia, where her husband worked with the Agricultural Development Council. Caroline and Alan had planned a wonderful car trip for me. "The Puncak!" they told me excitedly. "Imogiri! Yogyakarta! Ujung Pandang!"

I looked at them blankly. The unpronounceable names told me nothing.

Then we set out through the most beautiful countryside I'd ever seen. Temples, rice paddies, terraced green hillsides. At our first overnight stop, the bougainvillea at my window framed the symmetrical purple cone of a volcano. It was so breathtakingly lovely that I pleaded to stay on.

Caroline shut her suitcase and carried it to the car. "You'll enjoy Borobudur even more," she said.

I was sure I wouldn't. But of course that colossal ninth-century Buddhist temple rising from the plain like the many-leveled mountain of Dante's heaven is one of the vivid memories of my life.

And so it went at each stopover. Me hating to depart. "Oh, do we have to leave?" Caroline and Alan practically dragging me away, to take me over my protests to a still more wondrous place.

I've wondered if the departure called death isn't a little like this. *Do I have to go so soon? Can't I stay just a while longer?* These places, these people, this beauty, I know. Of heaven I have formed no picture.