



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Our Creator would never have made such lovely days, and given us the deep hearts to enjoy them, above and beyond all thought, unless we were meant to be immortal.*

*Nathaniel Hawthorne*

I think all of us are given foretastes of that bliss from time to time. I believe we should see them as very personal "windows into heaven" and store them away in memory for those times when heaven seems farthest away.



When my mother's mother was growing up in South Dakota in the 1880s, she kept a hope chest. The "chest" in Goggie's case was an old brown carpet bag. In it she placed a quilt, a lace doily, an embroidered pillowcase, beautiful things for the home she hoped one day to have. When snow blew for weeks across the prairies, or the wheat fields shriveled in a summer drought, she'd draw the treasures from the chest and look beyond the discouraging present.

I never had a physical hope chest, but I keep a spiritual one now to aid me in cultivating the neglected virtue of hope. One of the treasures stored there is the graveside service following the funeral of my friend Molly Shelley. Molly could hardly wait for heaven! Having encountered God's love through the shades of green in her own backyard, she experienced it also in rain drops. Squirrels. People's faces. "God couldn't love me enough to give me all this, if it wasn't to last!"

On my last visit to her home in Pennsylvania before her death from cancer at age forty-four, I found her stitching red and yellow felt balloons on a rectangle of blue cloth.

"My shroud!" she told me eagerly:

Balloons were to be the theme of her funeral. "At the graveside everyone will have one. When they release them they'll soar up, up -way up till you can't see them anymore. But

you'll know they're still there ... flying free ... just out of sight!"

### *Homecoming*

Molly was bed-bound by then and in great pain; I had to take care not even to brush her mattress. Like Mary Stuart, I thought, when death released Molly "from this my hard prison," she too would sing, "my spirit soars upward to thee."

Molly was also in emotional pain. Leaving a husband and six young children! Trying to prepare them for the grief she could not prevent and the future she could not share. But as we worked together on the funeral leaflet -- with balloons, of course, on the cover -- she couldn't hide her excitement at the still closer relationship awaiting her. "Thank you for coming today," began the letter from her that opened the service, "to celebrate my returning home to our Father."

Celebration. Release. Coming home. Previews of the joy to come are given us in many ways. For Molly it was the beauty of the "commonplace" world around her. From her I learned to fill my hope chest with ordinary sights and sounds. Moments, for example, when the small routines of living seem to flow without effort -- when I experience what our friend David Manuel calls a "graced day." The news item I wanted to hear is on the radio as I tune in. The person I've been trying to contact phones *me*. A car pulls out of the parking place as I drive up. It's a day when the timing of many schedules seems to mesh like notes in a symphony, when in the humblest event I "catch the universe in the act of rhyming."

My hope chest holds childhood memories, too. Like the Christmas when I was six and our family went to Florida by train. The view from the window was bleak as the Silver Meteor crossed New Jersey that mid-Depression year. Miles of rusting freight cars, grimy snow, rubbish-strewn tracks.

I woke in the morning puzzled for a sleepy moment by the jiggling of the berth. Then I was wide awake and staring openmouthed. In the night we'd entered another world. Pastel buildings, huge, slow-flapping pelicans, pinwheeling palms ...

The dazzlement of that moment has never left me, and suggests what the astonishment at heaven will be, waking after sleep to find ourselves in a different land.

### **The Driveway**

*You were not created for Pleasure, you were created for Joy.*

*Thomas Merton*

Among such "everyday" memories, my hope chest holds one exceptional treasure. Why it should have been given me I've never understood, nor how to describe it.

It was a Friday afternoon in September 1967. For six days John and I and other staffers had been holding a workshop for the winners of *Guideposts'* first writers' contest. Seventeen men and women from all around the country had joined us at a conference center in Rye, New York. Modeled after the French chateau where its owner was headquartered during World War I, Wainwright House has a book-lined library and green lawns sloping down to Long Island Sound. It had been the perfect setting for a week of interaction with some very talented people.

A few minutes earlier we'd waved our good-byes as the workshoppers departed. Now John and I too were going home, heading down the chateau's broad gravel drive, John at the wheel of the car. I leaned my head back against the seat, gazing at the first hint of fall in the poplars lining the road at the end of the driveway.

And then, in the most vivid visual instant of my life, the scene in front of me broke apart. I no longer saw trees and a gravel drive. For an astonishing moment I seemed to be looking at the underlying substance of the universe.

The autumn light splintered into a billion shimmering fragments whirling in a kind of primordial dance. Even as I watched, I knew I could not be seeing motion that fast -- or particles that small. *Atoms are immense.* It wasn't a thought but an observation. Even parts of atoms --protons, electrons... *They're all too big to know about this.*

I was not only witnessing a scale unimaginably small and motion impossibly rapid, I was seeing a state of being unlike anything I knew. I was looking at laughter itself. I was seeing the fundamental structure of creation, and that structure was joy.

John turned down Stuyvesant Avenue, the vision ceased. A mile, two miles ... "Tired?" he broke the silence as he pulled onto Interstate 287.

No! Simply speechless, groping for a way to tell him what I could not possibly know and yet did know.

"Nothing exists," I said finally, "but joy."

John turned to stare at me, then wrenched his attention back to the highway.

I described as best I could that momentary sighting of a reality beyond sight. It was knowledge, not emotion -- to feel the joy I'd seen would have blown the human frame to bits. And the knowledge has stood unshaken, in all the ups and downs of all the years since, a kind of bedrock of certainty beneath all passing sensations. The base of everything, now and forever, is good beyond imagining.