



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Eternal Form shall still divide  
Eternal Soul from all beside  
And I shall know him when we meet.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

in **Memoriam**,

*on the death of his closest friend*

The catechism, that distillation of Christian belief, includes in the tenets of the faith this common inheritance of hope. In that passage which describes the "new existence," heaven is where we will not only know God in his infinite fullness, but will "fully know and love *each other*." To know each other again, and better than before--what a promise of fulfillment to come!



Nor will the fellowship of heaven be limited to those we've known in this life. In that realm where space and time cease to matter, the catechism continues, we will be "united *with all the people of God*." All the people we've wished we *could* know! What a wish list each of us could draw up. On Len LeSourd's list, St. Paul. On mine, Grandmother Schindler.

Who else is on my list? To start with, those I *almost* got to know here on earth. Like C. S. Lewis ... It was 1963 when John and I arrived for an interview with him at The Kilns, his modest brick home in Headington, just outside Oxford, England. We parked out front, reminded the children that they'd promised exemplary behavior, and went down the front walk to the door. "By all means bring your children," Lewis had written. "I have a big garden."

The door was opened by a tall gray-haired woman --housekeeper, secretary, nurse, relative -- we never knew. "I'm so dreadfully sorry," she said when we'd identified ourselves. "Dr. Lewis is not well. He's had no address where he could reach you."

We left our travel schedule and wishes for his swift recovery. But, as with Henri

Nouwen's illness, Lewis was dying.

And yet ... even when the news of his death reached us three months later, I could not shake a sense of anticipation -- a kind of on-tiptoe excitement about an encounter just ahead. How silly, I told myself, to keep looking forward to something that wasn't going to happen! Heaven played no part in my thinking then; I felt I was reacting like a child who won't accept "No."

But I've had the same sense of continuing expectation after other disappointments since then. About Nouwen. About others whose schedules never worked out with ours. *We have a date!* that inner voice persists. *We're going to have a special time together!*

I think now that it's the sort of eager anticipation we're meant to have about all those meetings an earthly lifetime can't encompass. Beloved figures like Lewis and Nouwen, of course, will have millions waiting to meet them. If heaven ran by an earthly clock, there'd be long lines stretching from their doorways. But heaven's "time," I suspect, is very different from ours -- not only endless, but simultaneous. "Yes, I'm free to see you right now," Lewis will say to me and to all the others -- and meanwhile be able to close his door and savor his cherished solitude. I want to ask him about solitude...

I can hardly wait!

## The Visit

*And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?  
Acts 2:8 RSV*

In heaven, how many millions and millions of such meetings are in store for us! Surely one of the graces of eternity will be the ability to communicate across barriers of culture, language, and millennia.

A foretaste was provided on the Day of Pentecost, when worshippers in Jerusalem "from every nation under heaven" were astonished to understand the speech of men from Galilee. To Egyptians they seemed to be speaking Egyptian, to Romans, Latin. Medes, Libyans, Cretans, Arabs: "we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

Whether the miracle occurred in the mouths of the speakers or in the ears of the hearers, I believe it was a preview of the perfect communication of heaven.

We had a fleeting glimpse of this ourselves one January day in Czechoslovakia, when that country was still a Communist stronghold. In a Citroen with Dutch plates, John and I had been visiting Christians in various countries behind the Iron Curtain. In Vienna, before we set out, we'd been given a trove of small personal treasures -- photos, letters, a few bars of chocolate -- to take to an address in Prague.

The sender was a Czech evangelist who'd had to flee his apartment in the middle of the night, leaving behind a wife and three daughters. Tears stood in his eyes as he explained

through an interpreter what this secondhand contact with his family would mean to them all.

### *Maxi Coat*

In Prague we parked the Citroen, as always, far from the Christian household where we were headed. The car, only two years old, drew an admiring crowd wherever in the Communist world we went, and could draw unwelcome attention to a local family. Street directions memorized, we set out on foot.

Alas for our effort to be inconspicuous! I was wearing a maxi-coat. The ankle-length style had appeared years earlier in the States, but in Prague it was apparently new, even more of a sensation than a late-model car. Pedestrians stopped and stared, drivers slowed down to look.

Nothing for it but to return to the car after a little pantomime of photographing the statue of an overweight man on an elegant horse. We drove half a mile, parked again, and set off once more, without the coat. There was no feeling at all in my legs by the time we reached the address and climbed to the apartment on the third floor. To our immense relief, the door opened to our knock. If the family had been out, we could scarcely have left a note on the door for all to read, even if we'd had a language in common.

But the wife and the youngest daughter, age nine, were home. Their excitement at receiving the few small things we'd brought was wrenching to see. As the woman served us a coffee-colored drink, she pressed us for every detail we could remember about her husband's health and spirits. She gave us a hundred oral messages, as well as a hastily written letter, to take back to him. The girls' school reports, photos of a nephew's baby, small all-important family news.

Outside again, John insisted I wear his coat back to the car. "What happened in there?" he asked through chattering teeth. "What did she say? What did you say?"

I looked at him in surprise. "But ... you were there," I said. "You heard everything."

"I heard a lot of excited conversation. It sounded like German." We stopped, oblivious for a moment to the cold, and stared at each other. I don't understand German, let alone speak it. Yet for almost an hour, the woman and I had somehow been conversing.

It was a little gift of God, John and I decided, to this family whose faith had cost them so much. But to us, too, it was a gift -- a hint of what may be a normal encounter when spirit meets spirit, and the curse of Babel is undone.