



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

I never did find a literal door to hide behind. At home, until I was fourteen, my sister and I shared a bedroom. When I entered high



## The Locked Door

school, my pleas for a room of my own prevailed at last, and Caroline was moved into a small study next door. The study, however, had no closet, while the bedroom had two. It was eminently sensible, the only practical arrangement, for Caroline to keep her clothes where she always had.

To a younger sister, of course, a teenager's room was irresistibly attractive. In and out she would come. A sweater, a hair ribbon. Back and forth: "I forgot my slippers." Sometimes when the door opened for the dozenth time, I would secretly cry

Once I actually locked the door. When Daddy learned about it, he took the key and hurled it out the window. He didn't need to tell me I was acting selfishly, "begrudging your sister one little corner of that big room!" I'd called myself far worse things than selfish. I longed to be a different kind of person, sociable, outgoing.

The strange thing about my distress at Caroline's right-of-access is that she and I were allies in most things. We were, and are, best friends, as close as any sisters I know. That even Caroline could not enter my room without my selfhood being threatened tells me how fragile that self was.

A few years later my yearning for barricades would create tension in my marriage. As for becoming a Christian, when that horizon opened before me, this of course was out of the question. I'd met a number of Christians by then; they were the most mingling, more-the-merrier, wide-open door people I knew. . . .

### The Goat Woman

In 1987 John and I rented an apartment in Normandy. In the afternoons we'd get in the car and ramble down the country lanes, past cows grazing beneath the region's famous apple trees, turning right or left, headed nowhere in particular.

Within a few miles we'd be thoroughly lost, and empathizing with the Allied soldiers who fought their way across this terrain in the weeks after D Day. Millennia of passing feet and wheels have worn the roadways low, while the woven-hedge fences have built the banks ever higher, so that you travel through sunken green tunnels with never an overall view of the landscape.

It was about 5:00 one afternoon when we passed, scrambling down one of these steep banks through a gap in the hedge, the most extraordinary human being we'd ever seen. She was barefoot, dressed in an assortment of rags that flapped about her almost to the ground, long white hair streaming to her waist.

John braked the car and we looked back, embarrassed to be staring, but wanting to be sure we'd really seen her, so much did she seem a figure of fairy tale. We saw now that she carried a short stick with which she was herding three goats across the lane.

What could give us an excuse to speak to her? "How about asking directions?" John said. We could tell her -- truthfully enough -- that we were lost.

The lane was too narrow to turn the car around, so John began backing up: "I hope this doesn't frighten her away"

On the contrary, seeing us returning, the goat woman hurried toward us. I rolled down my window to meet a pair of inquisitive brown eyes peering through the wild tangle of her hair.

"Pardonnez-nous, Madame," I said. "Please excuse us. We're trying to get home and we're lost."

I don't know what I expected to hear from this strange individual -- medieval Latin if she answered at all!

"Mais non!" she exclaimed in lilting French. "But no! One is never lost. One cannot be lost! All roads lead to Rome!"

Her lively eyes were darting about the car, front seat, backseat, taking in binoculars, bottled water, the details of our clothes. If we were curious about her, it was clear that she was just as intrigued with us. We'd bought the car in Germany, and she must have seen the D on the license plate.

"You're German! It is good to travel far when one is so young!"

As John was then sixty-four and I, fifty-nine, we liked this view of ourselves. She would have been as glad as we, I think, to keep the conversation going, but the goats had sprinted up the opposite bank. She gave us directions to the nearest town, then clambered after them and disappeared through another break in the hedgerow.

For a moment we stared after her, still not quite believing the encounter. Inside an ungainly body in its fluttering rags was a mind rich with experience and eager as a child's.

*One is never lost. All roads lead to Rome!*

They did once, of course, in this area, those astonishing paved ways built to carry Roman legions to

every corner of the empire. But that evening in 1987, the phrase said something different to me. I heard my own voice: *We're trying to get home and we don't know the way.* Heard the goat woman's answer. *One is never lost.*

What if even the wrong roads we set out on -- my childhood need to hide, my neurotic competitiveness -- what if even such byways can lead us home in the end? What if all roads lead potentially, not to Rome, but to heaven? Not that any route I choose will take me there, but that nothing can happen to me that Jesus cannot turn into an avenue of grace.

*One cannot be lost.*

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