



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

This is a book about discovery -- the discovery of a secret. It's the story of how heaven, which I used to think of as an imaginary realm-in-the-sky, has become more real to me than the ground beneath my feet. Real in the past, real for the future, and best of all, real right now. The book is also an invitation. An invitation to us all to look back, to look ahead, and to look around, and start discovering the secret today.



The Secret

Catherine's Secret

In the Italian city of Siena, I have a favorite place to stay. It's a small hostel just below the church of San Domenico. The no-frills rooms are small, and you have to go elsewhere even for a cup of coffee. What it offers is the best view in town. From the balcony I look across a ravine at the crenellated walls and towers of the medieval city.

Just below the balcony, however, is the site that means most to me. It's the birthplace of Catherine of Siena. *It's strange*, I think, gazing down at the narrow street where her father had his dye shop, *that this Roman Catholic saint should have so much to say to me* -- not only a non-Catholic, but someone to whom the very concept of "saints" was once an instant turnoff.

I get no help from the birthplace itself; the dye shop with the family home above it was redesigned as a shrine five hundred years ago. Some things, though, remain as Catherine knew them. San Domenico's is the parish church where she had her visions of heaven. I can still descend the steep-pitched street to the well at the foot of the hill where she went each day for water after her parents turned her into the family drudge for refusing an advantageous marriage. I follow her footsteps as she struggles up the slope with the heavy buckets.

It was only the first of the toils and conflicts that made up her life. As the Black Plague raged unchecked, most were afraid even to come near the victims. Catherine nursed them, consoled them, buried the dead with her own hands.

This was the fourteenth century, when Italian city-states waged bloody war on one another,

and timorous popes abandoned Italy for seventy years. As Catherine's reputation spread, she was drawn into the tumultuous politics of her time, even traveling to the papal court in France to persuade the pope to return to Rome -- only to see him followed by a pontiff so avaricious that cardinals held a second election, splitting Europe for decades between rival popes. Grief-stricken over the failures of the church, Catherine fell ill with what may have been infantile paralysis, and after weeks of agony, she died at the age of thirty-three.

A tragic life? On the contrary, said Catherine, her life was heaven on earth. "All the way to heaven is heaven," she declared, "for he said, 'I am the Way'"

It wasn't some carefree soul basking in good fortune who reached this happy conclusion. It was a traveler on a hard and uphill road, who found that the journey with Jesus was heaven, whatever the outward circumstances.

Sharing Stories

Catherine's secret was to see her life as a love story To receive each hour of each day, no matter how thankless and hard, as the perfect gift of the perfect Lover.

What if I could learn to do that! I think as I follow her steps through Siena's winding alleys. For since I encountered St. Catherine, I've met others, people living in today's world, who have. Who've learned to see in the particulars of their lives, even in pain and loss, God's very personal wooing.

For fifty years, through books and through articles for ***Guideposts*** magazine, I've enjoyed seeking out and relating these true romances. Anyone's but my own. I've shied away from telling my own love story, excusing myself because I'm a "private person." What's to tell, anyway? Once when my husband, John, and I were living in England, a local paper ran a series on "A Day in the Life." ***A day in the life*** of a Queen's Guardsman. ***A day in the life*** of a Schoolteacher. A reporter interviewed me for ***A day in the life*** of a Writer -- surely of all daily routines the dullest:

8:10 sit at desk

9:15 put on another pot of coffee

10:12 re-sharpen pencils

11:26 cross out everything written since 8:10

My work, it's true, has allowed me to meet people -- some famous, some little known -- with gripping stories to tell. Some of these are in this book. But suppose God wants us to tell the everyday stories too! Nothing is more important, writes Frederick Buechner in *Telling Secrets*, "than that we keep track, you and I, of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way, because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity that God makes himself known most powerfully and personally."

God making himself known. . . Perhaps this is the purpose of our separate stories in their endless variety Perhaps heaven is where we will recount, each to the other, millions and billions of us, the story of our individual journey to that kingdom and what we learned of the King along the way.

The story of my particular journey began, as I suspect most do, long before I knew I was on a journey at all. Least of all did I know its destination. It's only looking back that I can make out the way I've come and see that all along, the way was Jesus.

©Elizabeth Sherrill 2007