



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

On a July Sunday in 1995, John and I walked down the hillside from our B&B in England's Lake District, following the church bells to the picture-postcard village of Hawkshead. The sermon in the ancient church that day was on friendship.

#11

The Wax-Faced Doll

The outcome of our spiritual journeys, declared the preacher, Canon Southward, depends in large measure on those who travel with us. He gave as examples two writers, Charles Kingsley and Robert Burns. Asked to explain how he'd maintained his productivity over a long life, Kingsley answered, "I had a friend." And Burns, dying of alcoholism at thirty-seven, accounted for his self-destruction in identical words: "I had a friend."

"Friends matter!" Dr. Southward summed up. They provide guidance, for good or ill, along our path.

A parade of faces rose before me as we climbed back up the hill. Friends who've been good guides, others bad. And some who've been both.

One face in particular. . . Because I've come to believe that in every relationship Jesus shows us both something of himself and something of ourselves, I want to draw the portrait of my earliest, most problematic traveling companion. One whose influence was both healing and, I know today, deeply harmful.

The Locket

I keep it in my dresser drawer -- a tiny leather box with a frayed satin lining. Inside the box is an old-fashioned gold locket that opens to display two oval frames. One oval holds the photograph of a handsome woman in her late forties standing beneath the flowering magnolia tree in the yard of our house in Scarsdale. In my nine-year-old handwriting in the facing oval are the words *Pied de Terre*.

The worn leather box, the antique locket, the not-quite-right French, sum up for me the woman in the photo. Her name was Mea Ada Arthuretta Ivimey, and though there were nearly forty years between our ages, she was my closest friend from early childhood until my marriage to John.

Pied de terre -- when I took French in school, I discovered the correct phrase is *pied a terre* -- was our secret password. Literally "a foothold on earth," the phrase signified, Mea explained, one's own set-aside space.

The hideaway I sought!

It was our fantasy that when I grew up she and I would have such a place. We spent blissful hours designing it. Sometimes our *pied a terre* was a cottage in a hidden garden, sometimes an apartment in London or Paris, but wherever it was, it was filled with books, cats, and a few -- only a few, Mea insisted -- exquisite things.

Today I know that we were doing what people have always done when their present life is unsatisfactory: inventing a heaven. How much of Mea's life was lived in imagination I only understood as I grew older. To me as a child, she was simply one of the family, a friend of my parents before I was born, a beloved presence at every Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthday celebration.

Her own family story, however, was a tragic one. Born in Bristol, England, Mea's sole memory of either parent was of sitting beside her mother on a high four-poster bed, playing with the long auburn hair that spilled across the pillows. Mea, age three, was caressing the silken strands when there was a shriek from the doorway and she was snatched from the room. It was years before she realized that it was her mother's deathbed onto which she had unwittingly climbed.

The Empty Chest

There was a father in faraway India who died only a few months after his wife. Three-year-old Mea was placed in a Bristol orphanage. There her days were spent in a large gray-walled room lined on three sides with small chests. The chests, one to each child, were for whatever playthings the youngster might have arrived with. Mea's chest was empty. These were the 1890s, when the inequalities of life were not contested.

Mea would watch the other children reach into their chests and draw out a jump rope, a top, a jack-in-the-box. She'd tiptoe to hers and throw up the lid, trying to make it give up treasures too. This I'm sure is where Mea's skill at make-believe was born. Over the months her empty chest held one imagined delight after another. A dollhouse. A Noah's ark. A stuffed dog.

By her fifth birthday the imaginary contents of her chest had taken a single shape. The chest held a doll. A typical sawdust doll of the era, with china hands and feet, golden hair, a red mouth, and blue eyes in a lovely wax face. So firmly did Mea come to believe in her that she was genuinely puzzled each time she lifted the lid and found the doll absent.

Then in 1896, when Mea was six, came amazing news. In far-off America authorities had discovered an uncle who had not suspected Mea's existence any more than she his. He and his wife were on their way to England to take her from the orphanage to a place called New Jersey.

Matron's Office

The day came when she was brought to the matron's office to meet her aunt and uncle. She scarcely saw them. Her shy upward glance was stopped by something in her aunt's hand. It was her doll. No mistaking it: sky-blue eyes and flaxen hair, a blue satin dress. Mea reached for the doll without a word. The man and woman from America were strangers. The doll she knew.

On the carriage ride to the hotel where they were to wait for their boat, Mea never took her eyes from it. In the dining room she stabbed her food blindly, afraid to look away lest the doll vanish as it always had from the chest. She climbed into the strange bed, clutching the doll tightly, and fell asleep with it pressed to her heart.

In the morning the six-year-old eagerly drew back the blanket. But -- what was the horrid thing on the bedsheet? There was the pretty dress, the dainty china hands and feet, but where the beautiful face had been, crazily cocked blue eyes stared from a shapeless white mass. The warmth of Mea's body had melted the wax.

She was staring at the ruined doll in grief too deep for tears when her uncle appeared and with a penknife carved a new face in the wax. Mea loved the odd-looking doll for many years. But the story of the child who had held the thing she loved too close was to repeat itself throughout Mea's life. Again and again she crushed love by clutching it, distorting relationships as her needy embrace had once distorted a doll.