



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

If Mea was my closest childhood friend, another has been my closest friend ever since. As the most complex and revealing of all friendships, marriage more than any other shows us God. . . and

shows us ourselves. Without John my journey would have been unimaginably different. And it was a literal journey that brought us together.



The Glass Partition

It was August 16, 1947, the *Queen Elizabeth's* first night out of New York Harbor. From the deck a few days later I would watch England emerge through the mist, with that strange sense of coming home. But that first night I was mostly absorbed in finding my way around the huge ship.

When the dinner gong sounded, I followed a stream of passengers through a confusion of stairways and corridors to the Tourist Class dining room. A group fare for the passage had been booked by the University of Delaware for thirty-two Geneva-bound students from schools all over the country; in the large room I spotted several tables marked *Delaware Group*. I found a place at one of these and exchanged names with the others sitting there.

My seat happened to face the glass partition through which people entering the dining room could be seen. I was gazing idly at them, couples with children, men in uniform, a group of elderly women, when among the arriving diners I saw a tall, thin, sandy-haired man in his mid-twenties.

That is the man I will marry.

It was too sudden, too certain, to be a thought. It was simply knowledge. A fact, the way the glass partition was a fact, and the slow swaying of the ship. I sat dumfounded. I didn't believe in "mystic" experiences; they certainly weren't Unitarian and I would have been horrified to think I was having one.

"No!" I told the fact that confronted me. "Not yet! I can't get married yet-not for a long, long time!"

I supposed -- I hadn't really thought about it -- that someday I'd get married. But I had so much to do first! I wanted to be a writer. At Northwestern University I'd joined the black students' club, "the Quibblers," its only white member. I'd brought with me on the boat a thick folder of notes on our as yet unsuccessful efforts to open university housing to blacks. I planned to use the ocean crossing to write a

magazine piece about the dismal rooming houses, miles from campus, where blacks were currently shunted. I pictured myself a crusading journalist, a champion of the oppressed like Grandfather in the pulpit and Grandmother in the prisons.

Marriage meant giving up all that. This was the 1940s; all the married women I knew stayed home and "kept house."

"No!" I repeated to myself as the tall young man took a seat, of all places, at one of the Delaware tables. "I don't want to meet him yet!"

Today I believe that marriage to John was part of the Way laid out for me, the Way whose end is Jesus and whose hallmark is surprise.

The Bridge Game

There was one face among the students at the Delaware tables that I recognized, Jimmy Martin, also from Northwestern. He came over to my table after dinner that first night. "Let's get up a foursome for bridge," he said. "Ask your cabin mate and I'll bring mine."

And of course the person he brought to the card room half an hour later was the man I wasn't ready to meet.

"John Sherrill, Tib Schindler," Jim introduced us. "Why don't you two be partners?"

And so we have been, ever since. Before the ship docked at Southampton, I'd learned that John was from Kentucky, had fought in Italy during the war, and -- to my surprise -- that he too was an aspiring writer.

We were standing at the ship's railing the night I made this discovery, watching a silver highway of moonlight laid over the sea and talking about what each of us planned to do in Geneva. It was twenty-four hours after our decisive loss at the bridge table to Jimmy and my cabin mate, Lee Soelle. This evening John had suggested dancing, but after stepping three times on my new black pumps, bought for the trip and pinching anyway, he shook his head.

"Guess I'm no better a dancer than a bridge player," he apologized.

"Let's go out on deck."

As we shared our writing dreams, I learned that John too intended to buy a bicycle as soon as we got to Geneva. "I want to get out into the countryside. . ." he said.

". . . and write about the local people," I finished the sentence.

For three hours story ideas bounced back and forth between us, while across the dark water the moonlit path seemed to stretch to infinity.

"You know," John said, "a man and woman would make an interesting writing team. . . ."