



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

At the end of April, John and I left Paris for Cherbourg to board the very ship on which we'd met. Because the port was still choked with wartime wreckage, the Queen Elizabeth was anchored offshore. From the pier a gangplank led down to a launch that ferried passengers to the ship.



Rough Crossing

It was a breezeless morning, the gentle swell of the water imperceptible to the eye. Yet as my foot touched the deck of the launch, my stomach rose into my throat. I dashed for the railing and was violently sick. All the way out to the Queen I leaned wretchedly over the side. "It will be better on the ship," John kept saying.

It wasn't better. We found a couch where I lay down while he got our cabin assignment. Then he helped me down to C Deck and into the stateroom's lower bunk. And there I lay for the five-and-a-half day crossing. We'd looked forward to a sentimental revisiting of the lounge where we'd met over a bridge table, the deck where we'd first talked about writing. But nothing could have been less romantic than this trip! Even to turn my head on the pillow brought waves of nausea.

The ship's doctor came several times to urge me to swallow some water, but the tiniest sip brought on the terrible dry retching from an empty stomach. "Pregnant women should not sail," the doctor lectured, as if I could disembark in mid-ocean.

As bad luck would have it, the crossing that spring was unusually rough, setting some kind of record for broken bones and dishes. At one dinner seating John, an unforgivably good sailor, was the only passenger in that huge Third Class dining room.

"I had two helpings of salmon and two—"

"Stop!" I managed to rasp before a fresh spasm gripped me.

The Water Bottle

Several times a day, as the doctor had instructed, John would hold a moist towel to my lips. The rest of the time I lay staring at the bottom of the upper bunk, understanding as never before my mother's misery, pregnant with my brother, making this same trip twenty-one years earlier.

Dehydration brought on a strange delirium. On the top shelf of the refrigerator in Scarsdale, Mother kept a bottle of ice water, a narrow glass jar with ridged sides and a red metal cap. Water would bead on the outside and run in little rivulets down the ridges. I could see that bottle, two feet away... Again and again, in the closest thing to a hallucination I've ever experienced, I reached for it, ran my fingers down the cool moist glass, unscrewed the red cap, lifted it to my lips...

Daddy was on the pier as John led me, ill and wobbly, down the gangplank. "As soon as the doctor gives the go-ahead, young lady," he announced, "I'm taking you down to Florida to get some sun." Mother was already down at her parents' home in Miami Beach, he explained. Both John and I were grateful, at that point, for Daddy's

authoritative ways. John's priority was finding a job to pay the upcoming doctor's bills, and I was incapable of thinking so much as an hour ahead. It was days before the ground stopped rising and falling beneath me. No wonder my seasick mother had groaned at the sight of an active toddler!

As promised, Daddy had secured an appointment with a leading obstetrician. Leaving John in the waiting room of Dr. Locke MacKenzie, I was passed from nurse to nurse, disrobed, gowned, and introduced to a dignified man with gray-streaked hair who performed a swift examination. A few minutes later in his consulting room, Dr. MacKenzie gave a nine-syllable name to the anatomical problem that had brought us back to the States.

Babies Are Small

"Nothing to be alarmed about. No reason why you won't have a perfectly healthy baby" He handed back the letter I'd brought from the Paris doctor. "Frenchmen tend to be hysterical. Your father says he'd like to take you to Florida. That's fine. I'll need to see you in a month."

Dr. MacKenzie had risen and was holding out his hand. I suppose I shook it, but since the words "healthy baby" I'd wanted only to rush to the waiting room with the news. John and I walked down Park Avenue two feet above the sidewalk. We were going to be parents! With the Paris doctor's bleak prognosis, we hadn't allowed ourselves to think past the pregnancy.

"Early October," John repeated the due date. "We should probably wait a month or two after that, don't you think, before heading back overseas?"

I agreed. I knew nothing about babies, but it made sense to wait a few weeks before traveling with one. That an infant would in any way alter our lifestyle did not occur to us. How much room could someone that small take up? Maybe back in Paris we'd want to find accommodations with a bathroom on the same floor, John acknowledged. And maybe not so high up in the building, I added, thinking of six steep flights carrying . . . whatever it was babies needed. Bassinets, diaper pails, bottles—we were innocent of such things. To us a baby was a miniature person with correspondingly miniature needs.