



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

And while we blithely planned our future in Europe, closer at hand the dragons lay in wait. The first one to creep from its cavern in the unconscious was the old wish to barricade myself from the world.



The Landlady

In Florida one night I had an excited phone call from John to say he'd found a furnished apartment on Manhattan's upper West Side, only a short bus ride from Columbia University where I'd enrolled for the summer semester to complete my college degree.

The apartment, he went on enthusiastically, was the entire top floor of a private home. Access was through the family's living quarters on the lower floors, but the landlady, Mrs. Connors, had assured him they would not be disturbed by our comings and goings. "She's awfully nice -- says she'll put milk and eggs in the refrigerator the day I move in."

Though the decor, he added, was not what we would have chosen, running to fringed lampshades and pastel prints of Jesus, the rooms were large and sunny. We had a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two bedrooms. When Mrs. Connors learned I'd be going to school, she'd had her husband and son carry a desk upstairs.

I returned to New York in early June. "If you give me your grocery list," our obliging landlady offered, "I can pick up things for you while I'm out."

The list I gave her grew shorter each week, as she kept our larder supplied from downstairs. Several times a day there'd be a cheery

"Yoo-hoo!" from the stairwell. "I baked an extra loaf of bread while I was at it," or "It was just as easy to double this casserole recipe."

When she discovered I was pregnant, Mrs. Connors's solicitude redoubled. Her own daughter and grandchildren, to her grief, lived in far-off Minneapolis. Now the good Lord, whom she seemed to know very well, had sent me in her place. She had a crib in the basement -- the good Lord had told her not to throw it out -- that her husband would bring up when the time came. She'd been loaning me her vacuum cleaner; now she insisted on doing our cleaning.

The Door

It was, to all appearances, the perfect apartment. Unlike the one in Paris, it had walk-in closets, its own large bathroom, abundant hot water.

What it did not have was a door.

Nothing to define where the Connors's space ended and ours began. A door might not have discouraged our benefactress; she could have knocked as well as yoo-hooed. But before long that missing door loomed in my mind till it was bigger than all the place's pluses.

Meanwhile John had a more serious problem to deal with. Two large New York newspapers had recently gone out of business; longtime journalists were taking jobs as typists and proofreaders. On his feet all day job hunting, one more out-of-work writer in a market glutted with them, John had more on his mind than my inability to accept the friendly overtures of our landlady.

"I was just lucky to find this place," he'd remind me. Housing of any kind in Manhattan was hard to come by; something this size for what we could afford with an occasional article sale was unheard of. "If you'd just go half-way to meet her -- ask her up for coffee now and then."

But it wasn't now and then, it was all day long. Both John and I were still writing three hours a day, John at night and I, theoretically, after school. As long as my typewriter clacked away, Mrs. Connors stayed downstairs. But a moment's silence drew her like a magnet.

I took to going to a luncheonette after classes at Columbia, working there on a yellow pad until the waitress asked the third time if I was going to have anything else. I sat on a bench on the concrete island in the middle of Broadway, watching the house till I saw Mrs. Connors go out. Why was it so impossible for me to accept her well-meant attention? Still suffering bouts of nausea, I should have been delighted to have so caring a neighbor.

Flight

Impossible for me, however, it was. The root of my need for private space was too old, too inaccessible to logic. Week after week I enumerated to myself all the advantages of that apartment. As I had since childhood, I condemned myself as selfish. Antisocial. I'd never cried a lot, but I did now, at almost every yoo-hoo from the stairs.

Mrs. Connors commiserated. All pregnant women had crying jags. I mustn't sit up there by myself. "Come on downstairs! Bring your sewing. You don't? Well, I'll teach you!"

When does behavior cease to be rational? One August day after Italian class, without any prior intention to do so, I walked into a brownstone with a "Room for Rent" sign in the window and left ten dollars to hold the space till evening. It was the afternoon of Mrs. Connors's weekly canasta game. It took me two hours to pack and carry books and suitcases downstairs. I left two notes. One to the Connors, thanking them for their many kindnesses and pleading the three flights of stairs as the reason for leaving. The other -- much harder to write -- to John, with the address of the brownstone.

It took the week's food money for a cab to transport our belongings to the new location. The single

room -- up four flights -- looked out on a brick wall. It was hot, threadbare, and shared a bathroom with two other rooms.

But it had a door.

If I was baffled by my own precipitous behavior, John was more so. Despite the patriarchal language of our marriage contract, we'd always before made decisions together. And here I'd moved us, bag and baggage, without even a discussion.

"We'd paid through September!" he kept saying when he arrived, bewildered and angry, after another day's fruitless pavement pounding. "Why couldn't you have stuck it out just a few more weeks?"

How could I explain it to John, when I didn't begin to understand it myself?

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