



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

What a difference it would have made if I'd known that "the place where the dragons lie" is on the road to the joys of heaven! In 1950, though, I was still traveling unaware...



The Note

I came upon Mother's note recently, saved with other cards and notes that came following the baby's birth. Affectionate and cheerful, it is not, after all, the shattering document my memory had made it. Two things, I think, made my reaction to it so out of proportion.

One was my immaturity. This was long before I could see my mother as a rounded person, with her own childhood history, her own strengths and needs. The other was the hours of unassisted labor the previous day—hours that neither she nor John, not even Dr. MacKenzie, knew anything about.

All summer I'd been reading about the then-new concept of "natural childbirth." Apparently the staff at the hospital in Manhattan had not. "If you want to do it without medication," said the nurse on the maternity floor when I arrived at 2:00 A.M. on October 2, "then we can't help you." She took me to a small room, gave me a gown, got me onto a high hospital bed, raised the metal sidebars, and left, shutting the door with a decisive click behind her.

And on that bed I thrashed as the hours passed and the pain worsened. Whether they couldn't hear my screams or thought that such agony was what these peculiar natural childbirth enthusiasts expected, I never knew. The pain was multiplied by terror. Alone in that steel-barred bed, I became convinced that it was impossible for a baby to squeeze through a two-inch gap in solid bone. The baby and I would die together!

Downstairs in the waiting room, John had been told that it would be twenty-four hours before the baby came. In the dismissive way fathers were treated then, he'd been told to go home. "We'll call you in time to get back before she delivers."

Three days earlier he and I had moved from the brownstone to a better apartment at the same rent in Fleetwood, a twenty-five-mile train ride from the city. Perhaps the hospital really didn't think the baby would come that day, but when the phone rang in Fleetwood at 3:00 that afternoon, it was Dr. MacKenzie, who'd arrived himself barely in time, to tell John that a healthy little boy had arrived.

"Your wife's fine too," Dr. MacKenzie said.

And so I was, in that miracle every mother knows, transported in a single instant from pain to joy; I held little John Scott and would gladly have done it all ten times over.

But the hours of lonely terror, as I say, doubtless exaggerated my reaction to what happened the following day. I had chosen this particular hospital for its "Rooming In" option: Utterly inexperienced, I wanted to solve the mysteries of diapering and baths before heading home. With the baby in my room, only the same two visitors could be admitted during the five-day stay then standard after childbirth. It would be John, of course, in the evening hour, and for the afternoon one I'd asked Mother to come.

I'd put a fresh gown on Scotty the next day for the first afternoon visiting hour, when a nurse's aide came in with the note.

Darling,

This is such a busy week that I've nobly given up my visiting privileges to John's mother. I know how fond you are of her, and isn't she the lucky one to see baby Scott before I do! We're all so thrilled at the news! Much love,

Mother

I understood—my mind did, anyway. Mother and Daddy had just moved from the house in Scarsdale where they'd lived so long to an apartment in the city and were still settling in. She was busy. But somewhere inside, another, older voice was crying, Where is my mother!

The Visitor

In any case, I burst into tears, and at that moment Mother Sherrill stepped through the door.

John's parents had also recently moved to New York City, where Dad Sherrill had taken the Chair of Religious Education at Union Theological Seminary. Mother Sherrill stopped in the doorway "You were expecting your mother," she said.

And because there was no use pretending, I simply nodded, and the tears passed as I enjoyed her delight in her first grandchild.

But... sitting in the armchair holding Scotty after she left, I reflected. Mother Sherrill was also a very busy person. She too was moving into a new home and just that week had started teaching a class at Barnard College. Yet each afternoon on the stroke of the 2:00 visiting hour, she appeared in the doorway with fresh flowers or a book or a box of scented soap.

Where is Mother? Some deep anxiety, some ancient wound, had been pried open, and spells of depression, sudden, overwhelming, were part of the new look of my world.

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