



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Soon after Scotty's birth, John did take a stopgap job. At least this one was in the writing field, and it was only for a while, till we could get back to doing travel pieces. In December, with the baby two months old and every mail delivery bringing reminders of unpaid medical bills, John had answered an ad placed by a new little inspirational leaflet called *Guideposts*.



Guideposts

"A *religious* leaflet?" I'd asked dubiously when he told me he'd applied. "I know," he said. "Not something I'd want to do for long, even if I get the job."

Applicants were asked to supply samples of their writing, and in January the editor, a man named Len LeSourd, phoned to say that John was their first choice. John had made it clear on his application that he was not a believer. "You know what Len said?" John told me as he hung up the phone. "He said, 'That doesn't worry me a bit. If there's anything to the faith this magazine proclaims, belief will come in its own time.'"

And so we settled into the routine shared by millions of other young American couples in the 1950s. Every morning John caught an early train into the city while I did the breakfast dishes and hung a row of diapers to dry on the shower-curtain rod. We had a crib, a baby carriage, and a stack of bills. Every cent left over from John's paycheck, we'd agreed, would go into a savings account for those return fares to Europe. But months and then years passed, and there was never anything left over.

The White Picket Fence

Four decades later, in 1990, I attended a planning session for *Virtue*, a Christian women's magazine, at a mountain retreat in Oregon. The other editors were bright young professional women and mothers; one of them nursed her infant during the discussions. I listened for two days as they spoke of the pressures of juggling family and career, condemned our selfish, materialistic culture, and looked back wistfully at the wholesome world of the 1950s. I remember the startled circle of faces when I broke in at last with an emotional description of what the '50s were really like.

I was startled myself at the force of my feelings! Today's materialism, I heard myself say, is nothing compared to that of the '50s, because then it was unquestioned. In a decade when millions of displaced people in Europe lacked basic shelter, the American woman was praised for attending exclusively to her own little house in its segregated neighborhood behind its white picket fence.

The function of the 1950s housewife, I told them, was to *buy*. It was a new consumer culture of toaster covers and laundry whiter! *brighter!* than your neighbor's. One popular ad showed women discussing in shocked whispers a wife whose husband's shirts on the backyard clothesline revealed "tattletale gray." We were to keep a sharp eye on each other for all such evidence of imperfect housekeeping and nonconformity.

Because that young editor was nursing her baby during my outburst in Oregon, I used this issue as an illustration. Breast-feeding, when my children were born, was condemned as a holdover from an unsanitary past. Bottles and formulas were the modern way. "And don't forget," my pediatrician would caution, "to weigh him on the infant scales before and after each feeding." Infant scales sold for \$39.95 -- the equivalent of hundreds today.

"I tried anyway to nurse all three children," I told the Oregon gathering. "And I failed three times." If the baby was fretful, or if I had so much as a snuffle, the doctor would warn that my primitive insistence on breast-feeding was endangering my child's welfare. I was ignorant of everything about mothering, only holding onto some half-formulated notion of "naturalness." And the natural was to have no place in the dawning plastic age, when products were to meet all needs.

Today I understand better the reasons for all this. America had just fought a global war at immense cost in lives and resources. With husbands and sons home from foreign battlefields, every instinct drew us to our own needs. And the huge industrial capacity of the United States, built up to wage the war, had to find an outlet in consumer goods.

Massive output requires a mass market, standard products for standard customers. Today too I know that in the '50s there were many, many women like me, isolated in our look-alike houses, each guiltily believing herself the only one failing to feel the fulfillment the media assured us was ours.

"Listening to you discuss the problems facing women today," I told the group in Oregon, "I kept thinking, *Praise God, they're talking about these things!*" In the 1950s women were not allowed to have problems that could not be solved with the right purchase.

Housewife

My unhappiness in the '50s, of course, had personal causes as well. The landscape of our individual journey is always a mix of public features and private ones. In my case, the contrast between the wide world of travel writing and the confinement of housekeeping was too sudden, even if I hadn't been lugging baggage from childhood.

Dr. Kazan, the psychiatrist I'd begun seeing in 1951, helped me to see that the role of housewife held special menace for me. My mother too, I began to understand, had needed a barrier between herself and other people. Mine was that mythical door, hers was housework. Whenever, as a child, I'd tried to talk to her, she'd remember ironing she hadn't done or a room that needed vacuuming.

Since Mother had household help, I think I knew even then that housework was her way of hiding. I of all people should have empathized! Instead I blamed the cooking and the mending and the silver polishing for her unavailability. *I would never give importance to such things.*

In fact, I kept writing all through the '50s. But at a price! Scotty was five months old when I found an editing job I could do at home. Every few weeks the Updegraff Press would mail a book manuscript for

me to work on. The mail slots in the apartment lobby, however, were letter-sized; the bulky manuscript envelopes would lie on the floor in sight of inquisitive neighbors. Soon it was rumored that the inhabitant of 15A was "different" -- a fatal word in those days -- and the friendly greetings in the hallway ceased.

The harm of 1950s stereotypes, though, was mostly self-inflicted. It wasn't so much that others condemned me, as that I condemned myself. Except for those few months before and after Scott was born, I have always worked -- and until our youngest entered high school in 1971, I did it under a cloud of self-reproach. Combining career and family was a juggling act indeed, as the women in Oregon said, but for those of us who attempted it in the 1950s, it was a problem each one wrestled with alone.

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