



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

John had gone back to the station to call his mother. Back in the car he reported their conversation. "They went out to dinner," he said. "The restaurant wasn't far and you can never find a taxi when it snows, so they walked back to the seminary. They read for a while, Dad in his leather chair with the Braille Bible in his lap. Then Mother went to the kitchen to make cocoa. When she came back with it, she thought he'd fallen asleep "



Without Warning

Mrs. Coolidge had volunteered, John said, to stay overnight. We drove Norm to Fordham Station to catch a northbound train, then turned the car around and headed back to Manhattan. *What can we possibly say to Mother?* I agonized as we followed the snowplows back into the city, too stunned to speak much even to each other.

Why, this coming weekend Dad was going to baptize Liz!

The ritual meant nothing to John and me, but since Dad kept asking about it, we'd settled on her first birthday for the service.

It was 1:00 A.M. when we found a parking place on 116th Street and took the elevator up to the apartment in McGiffert Hall. Two students at the seminary had moved Dad from the library onto his bed - he was a light sleeper and he and Mother had separate bedrooms. The undertaker would arrive at 8:00 in the morning.

Speechless

John and I had come, but as I feared could find nothing of comfort to say. The Sherrills had never been huggers or touchers; they expressed love with words. On that terrible night words would not come for any of us.

"You've got to get some sleep, Mother," John said at last. "There'll be a lot to do tomorrow."

Mother came to the door of the guest bedroom with a nightgown for me. For a long while I lay awake, wondering why such verbal people as the three of us should find that words deserted us when they were needed most.

I was waked in the predawn dark by a shriek. I ran into the hall to find Mother sobbing in the kitchen doorway. I put my arms around her — the first time I'd ever done so. Her alarm had gone off at 6:00 as always, she said when she was able to speak, and she'd gotten up to start the coffee.

"I was tiptoeing," she told me. "He sleeps so lightly, you know. I was trying not to wake him."

The Visitor

It was just before 7:00 when the door buzzer sounded. I opened it to see Reinhold Niebuhr standing in the hallway. I sighed with relief. A fellow professor at Union, this renowned theologian would have the consoling words John and I had failed to find.

"Come in! I'll go get Mother."

Translator of the ancient German "serenity prayer," Dr. Niebuhr was known for his gift of phrasing: God grant me the serenity to accept those things I cannot change, the courage to change those things I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference. *What eloquent words this man will find at a moment like this!* I thought as I returned with Mother and John.

With the four of us seated in the living room, I waited eagerly for Dr. Niebuhr to begin speaking. A minute ticked away on the antique clock. Two minutes, while my expectation mounted. At last, with knobby arthritic fingers, Dr. Niebuhr reached for Mother's hand.

"Well, Helen," he said -- the very first words he had uttered.

Silence fell again. Five minutes ... ten full minutes went by, and still this gifted speaker had not shared his words of wisdom.

Silence

The clock chimed a quarter past seven. Something remarkable was taking place among the four of us. As the stillness of the room seeped inside me, a wordless communion seemed to enfold us all. When the clock sounded the half hour, Dr. Niebuhr stood up and let himself out.

And still John, Mother, and I sat silent. A staggering question was taking shape in my mind. Dr. Niebuhr's silence--was it ... about God? Had he brought with him something about faith that could not be said? Something about presence? About being?

Our being here last night.

A nightgown.

A hug.

These weren't religion, these were ... just things people did. Was God those things too, things beyond language? For six years now, at *Guideposts*, I'd pressed people to talk about God. I'd put their words - thousands and thousands of them-on paper. Could God be found outside of words?

Not until the undertakers arrived at 8:00 did any of us speak, and then only to deal with the logistics of death. Later, other words would come. Words of honoring and love that John and I needed to speak in their time. Letters would come from across the country and the world, even a note from Bishop Sherrill saying that he'd read the news in the *Times* and recalled tracing family roots the night Dad died.

The question remained with me, through. A question about silence, chosen over words by one of the great wordsmiths of our century. Two years later, silence would be the door through which I would step into the courts of heaven.

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