



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

It is God to whom and with whom we travel, and while he is the End of our journey, he is also at every stopping place.

Elisabeth Elliot

To know that good will come -- this is to perceive heaven around us here and now. I have a friend who learned to do this in a salty land indeed. For fifteen years Barbara Holmes suffered excruciating back pain that nothing relieved, not medication or acupuncture or biofeedback or eight surgical operations. In her pain Barbara learned to listen to God and to write down his promises.



## The Question

In 1996 she had a miraculous healing. Long before this, though, good had come to Barbara in that ability to hear God. She continues to write down the messages she receives "because I know they're not just for me."

She didn't know I was writing about journeys when from her home in Delaware she sent me the message she'd heard on March 10, 2000.

The path you see is crooked and bent and crowded with weeds. And you feel detoured and confused. But the path you see as crooked, I see as straight. In spite of the obstacles, I see you on the path headed straight to me. Do not despair about the crookedness. For in the bends I place great blessings.

John and I did not know about the "blessings in the bends" as he began those monthly checkup visits to the third floor of Sloane-Kettering. It became a kind of ritual. Always both of us together. Line up Mrs. Coolidge. Take a fistful of coins for the parking meter. No silent prayers, in those days, for the others waiting with us. Just: *That woman... the whole side of her face... what if ...*

Go with John at last into one of the cubicles with its wall charts of head and neck anatomy. Watch, scarcely breathing, while Dr. Catlin adjusts the light on his metal headband and grips John's tongue between squares of gauze. Practiced fingers probing the neck. "Okay. See you in a month." And to celebrate, calamari at a restaurant on Second Avenue.

## Train Time

In March 1959, two and a half years after the surgery, the time between checkups was extended to six months. That was the summer of the long car trip and the decision to attend the gray stone church near the Indian.

When the date for the second six-month checkup rolled around the following March, we broke our routine for the first time. It was Parents' Day for Scott's fourth grade. His story about a ferocious wolf was up on the wall, he informed us, with *six* stars on it.

"You've got to be there," John told me. "Silly for both of us to spend all afternoon sitting around a waiting room anyway."

I drove him to the train station -- there'd be no one to keep running out to feed the meter. "Call me when you know what train you'll be coming out on," I said.

He phoned around 5:00. "I'm catching the five-twenty," he said in what he probably supposed was a casual tone. "Gets to Mt. Kisco at six-sixteen. "

John is the world's worst actor. Before he got three words out, I knew that the news, this time, was bad. He was to enter the hospital next day for a second operation.

Again, the boon of things to do. Go to the phone, cancel dates. One call was to *Guideposts'* editor, Len LeSourd, to tell him we wouldn't make the editorial meeting that week. Early the next morning Len's wife, Catherine Marshall, telephoned. Could we come over for a few minutes? The LeSourds lived around the corner.

Both John and Catherine have written about the conversation that morning in the LeSourds' family room. Driving over, John and I expected the usual commiserations, a promise to pray, perhaps an offer of help with our kids, the same ages as their three.

## The Leap

Instead, Catherine put to John the question that all his life, growing up in a clergyman's home, writing stories of other people's faith, attending St. Mark's Sunday after Sunday for the previous six months, he had avoided confronting.

"John," she said, "do you believe that Jesus Christ is God?" It was an immensely important question, she went on. Perhaps the only question that mattered. "An eternity in heaven hinges on your answer."

I kept my eyes fixed on the dark TV set across the room, the screen as black as my fears. I didn't want to think about heaven! Heaven was what people talked about when someone was dying.

"I'd feel like a coward," John answered Catherine. "To come running to Christ with my tail between my legs when I'm scared."

"John," Catherine said urgently, "that's pride. That's wanting to come to God in your own time, your own way. Maybe this is Jesus' time, Jesus' way."

It wasn't writing Christian articles that made someone a Christian, she continued, or going to church, or living a moral life. It was answering that question. John brought up a lot of arguments, and Catherine was buying none of them. At last I reminded him of the time. We'd asked for an appointment at 9:00 with the rector of St. Mark's.

John thanked Catherine for her concern, and we hurried out to the car. We'd gone about half a mile toward the church along winding Millwood Road when John broke the silence.

"Well, I've done it."

"Done what?"

"What do they call it? Making a 'leap of faith'? I believe that Jesus is God."

For another half mile neither of us spoke. "Wha does it feel like?" I asked at last.

John thought for a moment. "I guess it feels a little like dying."