



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way.*

*William Blake*

Like Molly, the British novelist Philip Toynbee began to see only after he was diagnosed with cancer. "I stopped several times," he wrote in his journal after a walk, "and looked at a single tree as I have never done in my life before. Intense happiness."



### The Prison Yard

A month before he died, he wrote, "Wet leaves of sycamore after a heavy shower, and the sun glittering on them ... Such things I now look at with renewed intensity and happiness -- not because I may not see them for much longer, but because they are of immediate significance: almost direct manifestations of heavenly light."

The sacred in the commonplace... Corrie ten Boom was another who "took off her shoes." Corrie could detect heaven in the grimmest places! In fact, the book John and I wrote with her, which we titled *The Hiding Place*, in some foreign editions was called *Heaven in Hell*.

Having experienced the depths of human brutality in a Nazi concentration camp, and having detected heaven even there, Corrie forever after looked for -- and found -- heaven wherever she was.

I went with her once to Scheveningen Prison in Holland, where she spent the first weeks after her arrest for the "crime" of sheltering Jews. With liberation, Scheveningen had reverted to its prewar function as a men's penitentiary, and Corrie was often invited there as a chapel speaker.

"I love talking to these men!" she said as we waited just inside the formidable gates of

this maximum security facility "I tell them, the gates of this prison are locked and bolted, but the gate of heaven is open wide!"

Massive brick walls hemmed in the yard where we stood. With a little cry of delight Corrie pointed to a spot high above my head. A fragile-looking white flower had somehow thrust its roots between the bricks, somehow found moisture and nourishment as it stretched toward the sun. "Oh, I must tell them about that! I must tell them that new life can burst even through prison walls!"

She shook her head wonderingly "How can people be so blind? Heaven is everywhere you look!"

## The Blackboard

I'd like to see always like Molly, like Corrie. But glimpses of heaven come for me only sporadically. I look up from my word processor right now... Doubtless heaven is before my eyes, but all I see is a pile of unanswered letters and a window screen that needs replacing.

Like all people with poor natural vision, I'm familiar with the phenomenon of failing to see what's visible to others. I remember as a first grader going to the front of the music room after weeks in school and to my amazement discovering a blackboard. From my seat I'd mistaken the board for a dark wall. I stepped closer. A treble clef in white chalk! Staff lines, notes!

*How, I wonder today, could I have sat every Thursday in that room without suspecting that more was going on than I perceived?* The music teacher must have been writing on the board all along. The chalk must have squeaked. How could I have missed it?

And even having discovered the blackboard, it never occurred to me that I should be able to see it from my seat. To read what was on it, obviously, you walked up to it.

Mistaking one's limited vision for the whole picture ... Today I know that we who are spiritually shortsighted do the same. If anyone had asked me, at age six, I would have said of course I could see every-thing in the music room! A blackboard in school, heaven here in my study. Right before my eyes. Unseen.

## Car Trip

It wasn't till I was twelve that my poor eyesight was finally detected. How much longer I might have gone on, satisfied with my partial world, I don't know. But in the summer of 1940, our family traveled by car from New York to Los Angeles -- a long trip on two-lane roads! Daddy had never forgotten the beauty of California as he'd seen it in

1906; now at last the Schindler agency was to open a West Coast branch.

Somewhere on that long drive, he apparently noticed that I never commented on the scenery. We three children and the cocker spaniel shared the backseat of the big black Packard. I wrote in my travel diary, invented long hair-raising narratives to keep Donn and Caroline entertained, read *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* -- and never looked out the window.

Daddy began testing me. "Read that sign up ahead."

"What sign?"

As soon as we got to California, my father assured me, alarm in his voice, I'd go to an eye doctor. I couldn't understand his urgency. What you don't see you don't miss ....

## Glasses

It was Mother who took me to the optometrist in Los Angeles, then to an optician's to choose among uniformly hideous frames. Like most twelve-year-old girls, I was newly aware of my appearance. The past year in school I'd also become aware of boys. I wanted to know more about them, and as soon as some of them got as tall as I was, I was going to try.

Wearing *glasses* would spoil everything. No designer frames then! Glasses really were made of glass -- heavy, thick, metal- or hornframed, ugly. They could get me glasses, I decided, but they couldn't make me wear them.

In a few days the ominous things were ready. The optician fitted them, leaning across the counter, then slipped them into a brown leather case. "Have her wear them around the house," he said to Mother, "until she gets used to them."

As we walked to the car I took the bulky things from the case -- Mother had picked the horn-rims -- and slid them curiously over my nose.

The next instant I almost fell backward. As stunning as a physical blow, the sidewalk sprang at me from the ground. I raised my head. People leaped toward me. Hard-edged buildings crowded close. Everything was nearer, brighter, firmer than it could possibly be.

It was a day or two, as the optician warned, before I could move confidently with my new vision, knowing I wouldn't bump into the objects rushing toward me. But there was

another adjustment that took longer. Seeing the world as it looked when I took the glasses off. Indistinct rooms, blurry landscapes... had I really believed this was reality?

A pair of lenses, two slivers of glass, and the world came into focus for me. Fantasies of glamour forgotten, since age twelve I've reached for my glasses as I open my eyes in the morning, removed them only after switching off the light at night.

And did I really believe, all those years when I was unaware of the Way I walked, that this physical world was the whole of reality? Like the blackboard in a schoolroom, how impossible it seems to me now that I could have missed the obvious.

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