



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*The world will never starve for want of wonders,
but only for want of wonder.*

G. K. Chesterton

Seeing what's there, seeing heaven, starts with getting the focus right. But there's a second half. The mind must comprehend what the eyes take in.



Seeing

The Los Angeles detective agency did not succeed. With too few clients in California and the New York office busier than ever, Daddy drove the family back east. And on the way we visited the Grand Canyon.

Daddy held out the promise of the three-day stopover there as a consolation -- to Mother for a second huge packing chore in six months, to us children for another change of school. As we climbed into the Packard and drove away from the rented house in Westwood, he talked up the natural wonder awaiting us.

Listening, I formed a mental image of a steep-sided vertical cleft in the earth. As I imagined it, the Grand Canyon was about three feet across and bottomlessly deep. A slit in the ground plunging straight to the center of the earth.

As we neared the lodge on the canyon rim, my heart hammered so hard it hurt. For hours we'd driven through a desert moonscape. Hills, valleys, multicolored rock, barren and beautiful. Just the setting, it seemed to me, for the awesome phenomenon we were about to see.

"Here we are!" Daddy announced, pulling into the parking lot. We walked beneath some stunted pines to a rocky ledge overlooking the widest valley yet.

Sculptured rock formations filled the space between the plateau where we stood and another plateau, miles away.

But ... where was the Grand Canyon?

The mesas rising from the valley floor before us were rust and pink and tawny yellow, somewhat more varied than those we'd been driving past all day. Still, it was simply another western panorama, more scenery of the kind we'd been looking at. I mumbled something about going back to the car for my diary; I didn't want the others to see me cry.

Seeing

If we had left then, if that afternoon had been the whole visit, this disappointment is all I would remember. But we spent two nights at the lodge. Next morning we followed a trail part of the way down, that afternoon drove to another vantage point on the rim. And slowly, little by little, hour by hour, I began to see the Grand Canyon.

Immense, overwhelming, vast beyond comprehension, it had simply been too big to take in all at once. This time it was not a question of optometry. With my new glasses, shape and color, depth and breadth were perfectly visible. Seeing, in this case, meant, in part, letting go of a preconceived image -- that three-foot-wide slit in the earth. And in part, letting mind and spirit expand to take in something grander than anything imaginable.

By the third day, as we walked to the rim for a final view of the Canyon, I was too filled with wonder to join in the family's enthusiastic appreciation. I felt tears rise again, fogging my glasses. "I think you're coming down with something," Mother said. "You're sniffing and you haven't said a word about our lovely stay here."

I had no words. Years later I would hear a phrase at the start of a church service: "God is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him," and understand why I had been dumbstruck in that place.

"Help us to find God," the disciples asked the elder. "No one can help you do that," the elder said. "Why not?" the disciples asked, amazed. "For the same reason that no one can help fish to find the sea."

Joan Chittister

Why can't I see heaven around me today? Is it my nearsighted spiritual vision? Is it some preconceived notion about what heaven should look like -- an ethereal realm-in-the-sky, perhaps -- so unlike the real thing that I fail to recognize it? Or ... is heaven simply too close, too all-encompassing, for me to perceive?

I remember crossing the border into Spain after dark one November day. John and I had been driving south along the Atlantic coast of France since daybreak and were eager to reach the Spanish town of Fuenterrabia where our map showed the only "lodging" symbol in the area.

On the map Fuenterrabia looked only a short way past the border, but mile after mile passed and we hadn't come to it. The only road sign our headlights picked out said "Hondarribia" -- too small a place, apparently, to be on the map. Finally John turned the car around. "Let's go back to Hondarribia," he said, "and get directions."

Hondarribia turned out to be a sizable place, evening rush hour in full frenzy. "I'm surprised there's no hotel here!" I said.

The Signpost

On a traffic island we spotted a signpost, arrows pointing to town names in every direction. To a chorus of irate honking, we circled the island three times.

Fuenterrabia was not on the signpost.

For another quarter hour we wandered aimlessly through the congested streets, until at an intersection we spotted a policeman directing traffic. John stopped the car, bringing on a fresh outbreak of honking, while I rolled down the window.

"*Disculpe, senor,*" I brought out my meager store of Spanish, "we're trying to find Fuenterrabia."

With a flourish of a white-sleeved arm, the officer set the traffic flowing around us and leaned down to the window.

"Fuenterrabia," I repeated. "We're looking for Fuenterrabia."

A look I could not read came over the policeman's face. Anger? Sorrow? Lips pressed together as if to prevent a word escaping, he straightened up. Lifting his right arm, he stabbed his gloved forefinger with an emphatic gesture toward the ground at his feet. Once, twice, three times.

"Here?" I said. "This is Fuenterrabia right here?"

A final vigorous stab and he turned back to the tangled traffic.

It was our introduction to the Basque separatist movement. "Of course he wouldn't utter the word 'Fuenterrabia,'" a friend in Madrid later explained. "That's the Spanish name for the place. In Basque it's 'Hondarribia.' "

Not only did patriotic Basques refuse to speak Spanish, our friend said, they removed Spanish-language road signs as fast as the government could put them up. "Spanish maps are no good in that area."

In Fuenterrabia/Hondarribia, sure enough, we found a hotel room, sampled the delicious local octopus, and in the morning attended a church service packed -- though it was only a Tuesday -- with fishermen singing their full-throated Basque hymns.

But when I think of that city, it's a white-clad policeman I see, pointing at the ground where he stood. *This is the place. You're in it. You're already there.*

Why don't I see heaven? Perhaps because I'm looking for signs to somewhere else instead of examining the place where I am right now.