



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Part III

Heaven Before Me

Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.
Luke 10:20

*And even thou, most gentle death,
Waiting to hush our final breath,
o praise him!
You lead back home the child of God,
For Christ our Lord that way has trod.
St. Francis of Assisi*

"All the way to heaven is heaven," St. Catherine declared, and looking back on my journey, I've found it to be so. *Heaven behind me*, before I thought about such things at all.

Heaven around me -- the growing awareness of a larger reality. But *Heaven before me*? What can I know, this side of death, about the journey's culmination?



#53 Heaven Before Me

I can study the Bible. Ponder the insights of saints past and present. Recall my own intimations of that larger world. As I've done all this, have I found answers that satisfy me? A few. But more than individual answers, what I've gained is the conviction that the life begun in heaven here, continues there. Wider, fuller, brighter even than our hopes.

The Basement

How differently I once thought of death! You died and that was the end of it. Belief in an afterlife was mere self-delusion. My introduction to the foolish notion had come not in church, but in the basement of the Louvre Museum.

I remember roaming its dimly lit corridors, peering at four-thousand-year-old mummy cases and wishing that, of all the subjects I could have chosen to study in Paris in the fall of 1949, I hadn't picked "Burial Objects of Old Kingdom Egypt". I'd been learning, in a French history course, about Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. Thanks to Napoleon, the instructor said, the Louvre had the greatest collection of Egyptian antiquities outside Cairo.

But when I'd enrolled at the School of the Louvre to explore these treasures, I'd discovered that the museum's classes were all for specialists. "Burial Objects" -- of the catalogue listings the one that sounded most general -- consisted of an analysis of the probable original burial site of a certain alabaster jar, and a demonstration that the third leg of an acacia-wood stool had been repaired in antiquity.

So having paid my tuition, I wandered wistfully among the acres of unlabeled exhibits -- this was long before the installation of today's user-friendly Egyptian wing. Every now and then I'd come upon a white-bearded classmate musing over the inscription on a sarcophagus lid. I was not only the sole female taking this course and the youngest by decades, but apparently the only one who did not read hieroglyphs.

To receive course credit, each student had to write a paper based on an original piece of research. My project, I decided, would be to determine whether the dozens of sphinxes lining the walls all curled their tails to the right.

Yes.

It was far too simple an observation even to think of submitting to the eminent Egyptologist at whose arrival in the lecture room all rose reverently. But my survey of sphinx tails led to the same discovery about the other artifacts in those basement rooms. These were standardized products. They were not art objects; the goal was not originality. The beautiful things placed in and around Egyptian tombs were tools for use in the next world.

It was my introduction, as I say, to the preposterous belief in life beyond the grave. And such unquestioning belief! Here was a brilliant civilization devoting the lion's share of its energy and wealth to preparations for a mythical afterworld!

Fairy Tales

Armed with books on ancient Egypt from the nearby stalls along the Seine, I continued my solitary explorations in the Louvre basement. Egyptians, it seemed, could prepare so minutely for the next world because it was going to be just like this one. Only, of course, requiring longer-lasting materials. One book showed photographs of the huge step pyramid at Saqqara, not only the largest building ever erected up to that time, but the first one made of stone. All around it, in an immense stone city of the dead, were offices, storehouses, stables, workshops, temples, officials' dwellings. It was an exact

replica, on a far vaster, more permanent scale, of the merely temporary mudbrick city of the living nearby.

The more I read, the more the subject of an afterworld took on the appeal of a fairy tale; over the next few years, I traced quaint ideas about it through many cultures. What a universal idea life after death apparently was! Universal, too, to place it in an earthlike setting. From our hunting ancestors who buried their dead with bows and arrows, to the Chinese emperor interred with an army of life-sized clay soldiers, the afterlife was to be a continuation of this one.

People took along their horses, dogs, servants, wives -- often killing them for the purpose. They brought food and cooking pots. The ancient Greek took a coin for the boatman who would ferry him across the River Styx.

If one's deeds in this life were good, the next life was conceived as pleasant. For Native Americans, the Happy Hunting Ground. For Greeks and Romans, an endless banquet. It would be the world they knew, minus its negatives. To the desert dweller, paradise was a watered garden. To the Norse warrior, Valhalla offered glorious battles with wounds that healed overnight.

Studying myths of the afterworld became for me a kind of hobby.

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