



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Parting is all we know of heaven
-and all we need of hell.*

Emily Dickinson

But if Becky's death, for her, meant a fuller life, for her parents, for all of us mourning a loved one, death means a terrible emptiness.



Park Bench

Some years ago, I sat on a bench in a waterside park in Singapore, watching grade-schoolers performing acrobatics.

"My son," the young woman next to me said shyly as a small boy scrambled to the top of a human pyramid.

A new group ran onto the field and my bench mate turned to chat.

Though Singapore's population is Chinese, the official language is English. Where was I from? she asked. America. Did I have children? Three, I told her, all with families of their own. Which one did I live with? Not with any, I said. Then where did I live? Well, my husband

and I lived in New York. Scott's family was in Nashville, Donn's in Miami, Liz's near Boston.

"Nashville ... Miami ..." she struggled with the unfamiliar names.

"Are they very near your street in New York?"

They weren't in New York at all, I explained. Liz wasn't too far, I went on, a five-hour drive. But Nashville was over a thousand miles away and Miami nearly fifteen hundred.

Distance

On the lawn, little girls were somersaulting over one another with wonderful precision. When I turned back to my companion, I was startled to see tears in her eyes.

"So far! So far!" she cried. "Oh, when will they be back!"

Through this warm-hearted stranger I got a sudden look at modern American life as the anomaly it is in human history. I saw John and me forever packing suitcases for too-brief visits. Most family highlights -- a son's music gig, a grandson's big baseball game -- happening where we cannot be.

In tiny Singapore, where you can't go fifty miles without leaving the country, the generations live side by side in a pattern old as humanity. In our huge and restless country, the pattern is broken. I thought of my grandparents in Florida and California while I was growing up in New York. Thought of my own grandchildren's first steps, the first words, all of which I had missed. Thought of all the missing parts of ourselves, the empty, aching places a mobile society won't even let us acknowledge. And I too started to cry.

Passersby may have wondered why a young Chinese woman and a middle-aged American were weeping, arms around each other, on a bench in a public park. But I knew. We were grieving for a sorrow old, too, as humanity. We were grieving for the ache of separation.

Tana Toraja

Death of course is the ultimate separation. The words we substitute for "dead" say it nonetheless. Absent. Passed away. Departed. It's a departure so final that many cultures resist it, keeping the dead physically close, including them in the round of daily events.

One of the memorable times of my Indonesian trip was a visit to Tana Toraja. These mountain people on the island of Sulawesi bury their dead in niches carved high in the limestone cliffs. In one sheer rock face, Caroline, Alan, and I counted a score of these alcoves. The height of a man, two feet deep, and as much as sixty feet long, they were fronted with wooden railings like balconies on a tall apartment building.

And the railings were lined with figures. Wooden effigies of the people interred in the hollowed-out rock behind, they stood shoulder to shoulder, twenty or more in a row, staring down at the living community below: Jeweled, turbaned, clothed in their best, keeping untiring vigil. It was the most haunting scene of the trip, that silent, watchful throng above us; though we knew they were only wooden carvings, we found ourselves speaking in whispers.

Periodically, relatives dress the effigies in new clothes. They bring them little gifts and ask their assistance with problems. In Tana Toraja and many other parts of the world, the dead are anything but absent.

The Bible sternly cautions against any such deliberate invoking of the departed. Yet many people have shared with me their conviction that a deceased spouse, parent, child, was present at some meaningful moment -- unsought gifts of grace. These subjective experiences tell us nothing about the life of our loved ones in the world beyond, but

everything about our refusal to accept death as the wiping out of personality.

Our identities survive, universal instinct assures us; human ties forged here will be resumed hereafter. It's one of the mercies of age, I find, that the afterworld fills with familiar faces. When I first tried to picture heaven, forty years ago, its golden streets were inhabited by vague, faceless beings; today they're thronged with friends and family.

Breakfast in Texas

Different as the contents of each hope chest are, in this one way our hope of heaven is alike. We want to be again with those we've lost! When John and I invite others to play our heaven game, everyone's "perfect" world-to-come begins with joyous reunions.

He and I stopped for breakfast one morning in a small town in Texas where a row of pickups parked outside a cafe promised a substantial meal -- grits, biscuits, scrambled eggs, patty sausage. A large table next to ours was occupied by five or six men in bill caps. Soon the screen door banged open to admit a newcomer.

"*Here he is!*" one of the men called out, as they scooted chairs around to make room.

There was an emphasis in the phrase that I hadn't heard before -- that stress on the word "here." So glad, so welcoming. *He's here at last! Things are right now! The circle's complete!* Over the next half hour, men left the table, other men arrived. And each entrance was greeted with that same triumphant cry: "*Here he is!*"

Ever since that morning, I've pictured diners at heaven's great banquet table, looking up eagerly as each new arrival approaches.

"*Here he is! Here she is!*" We've been waiting for you! The wedding feast is better because you're here!

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