



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

C. S. Lewis *Mere Christianity*



Unhappy

I was not a happy child.

It's strange how hard that sentence is for me to write. Not that it's untrue. Just that setting it down seems a betrayal of cherished parents.

It's Daddy who would have been most dismayed to read those words. Mother would certainly have disapproved of airing so private a matter. "I'm sure we all have our troubles, dear. No one wants to hear about someone else's."

But Daddy. . . Though he died more than fifty years ago, I can hear his cry of bafflement as though he were reading over my shoulder. Not happy! With a loving family, good health, material blessings beyond anything he dreamed of in his own childhood! He liked to relate how as a boy he'd be sent to the butcher shop, clutching the dime that was to buy meat for their family of nine. "Don't forget to ask the butcher," his mother would call after him, "to throw in the liver for the cat!"

They didn't have a cat.

How could a child as fortunate as I, fail to be happy?

How could I, years later as a young wife and mother, be anything but fulfilled and content? When in 1952 I was diagnosed with clinical depression, Daddy was outraged. "You have no right to be sad!"

He enumerated the reasons: "A husband who loves you, beautiful kids, a nice home. And you can have a steak anytime you want one!"

It was all true. That is the terror of depression, the dark mystery I could not explain either to him or to myself. *You can have a steak anytime you want one.* The words have become shorthand for John and me, for all the things that ought to make a difference and don't.

Eldest Child

Not that there weren't lots of happy times in my childhood. But as I trace the journey to heaven to its beginnings, a sad-eyed little girl too often looks out from the snapshots.

In her books Catherine Marshall often wrote of the carefree days of childhood. As Catherine's editor for over twenty years, I would often put a question mark by these passages. Even for youngsters less moody than I, I didn't believe childhood was tension free. The specifics of my experience are only variations in our common story.

Like Catherine, I was the oldest of three children -- the responsible *eldest*. "You're in charge now." In charge of getting the playroom picked up, the dishes dried, my brother and sister ready on time. But Donn, twenty-one months younger than I, and Caroline, two years younger still, were unaware of this hierarchy.

"Daddy and I are counting on you," Mother would tell me.

"But they don't listen to me!"

“Then set an example. Show them how it should be done.”

Donn and Caroline, however, were not interested in my demonstrations. It's hard to set an example of, say, correct table setting, when your pupils are outdoors throwing sticks for the dog.

Catherine's parents had counted on her too, she pointed out, and her brother and sister hadn't always cooperated either. "Why should that have made you feel bad about yourself?"

Why indeed? Where did it come from in me, this sense of not measuring up to some imaginary standard of perfection? What were these failures that loomed so large in my emotions? Though I wasn't good at team sports, I was a competitive swimmer. I was sure I was ugly, but photographs show a child who would have been pretty if she'd smiled.

Self Image

My sense of worthlessness must have come from some inner source that even now, after many years of psychiatric probing, I don't fully understand. Once, when she was in her eighties, Mother and I were looking through an old photo album. "We were always so proud of you!" she said. And I thought, *Oh, Mother, why didn't you tell me!*

She didn't, I'm sure, because in the 1930s praise was supposed to make a child conceited. Today's experts disagree. A child's self-confidence develops, in the words of Erik Erikson, under "the gaze of a delighted other."

Or perhaps my parents' delighted gaze would have made no difference. Perhaps a low self-image is part of the human condition, common to us all till God's unconditional love shows us a beauty in ourselves beyond all imagining.