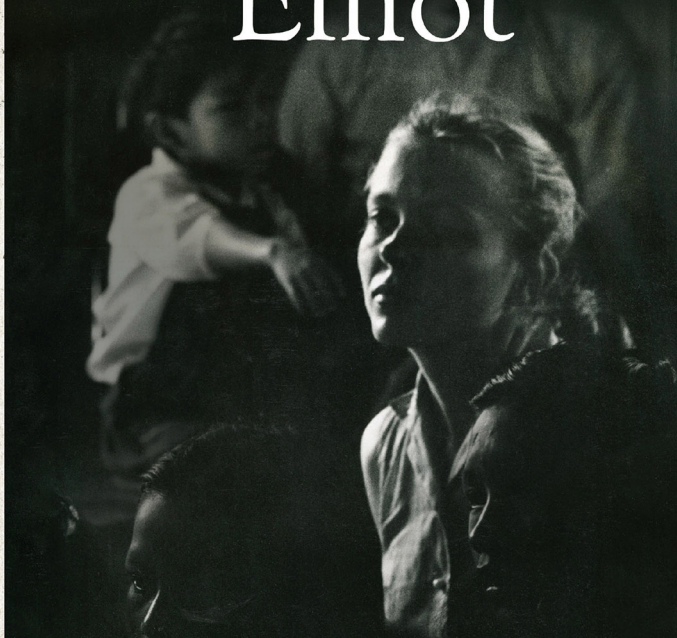


Elisabeth Elliot



These Strange Ashes

*A Deeply Personal Account of
Elisabeth Elliot's First Year as a Missionary*

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
www.revellbooks.com

Repackaged edition published in 2023
ISBN 978-0-8007-4541-7 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-8007-4546-2 (casebound)

Previously published as *Made for the Journey* by Revell in 2018

Printed in the United States of America

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:
Elliot, Elisabeth.

These strange ashes : is God still in charge? / Elisabeth Elliot.
p. cm.

Originally published: Ann Arbor, Mich. : Servant Publications, c1998.
ISBN 10: 0-8007-5995-7

1. Colorado Indians (Ecuador)—Mission. 2. Indians of South America—
Missions—Ecuador. I. Title.
F3722.1.C7E44 2004
266'.023'092—dc22
2004050944

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The image used on the cover shows Elisabeth Elliot in a worship service with Quichua sisters and brothers, eleven days after her husband, Jim, was killed by the Waodani.

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Author’s note: The names of some of the missionaries in this story have been changed.

For more information on Elisabeth Elliot and her books, please visit her website at www.elisabethelliott.org.

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my sister Ginny
(Virginia Howard deVries)
with love

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Preface

From time to time someone asks me which I think is my best book. I reply that it is a little like asking a mother which of her children she prefers. Each one comes at fairly high cost. One hopes that she has learned something through the production of each, but I doubt that either mothers or authors are the best judges of what they produce. Nevertheless, I confess to feeling a certain tenderness for this book. It tells the story of my earliest lessons in the sovereignty of God—three stunning ones, assigned to me in the first year as a jungle missionary. One of these lessons was solely an act of God. The other two were acts of lawbreakers. In all three, however, God let me hear His clear word: *Trust Me*.

Many times since that year in San Miguel de los Colorados the lesson has had to be repeated. It is not “natural” for me to trust God. It is my natural inclination to worry, to assume burdens never intended for me, to give way to discouragement and even fear. In speaking about God’s love

and sovereign care over us, I am often asked how we are to accept, as within the context of a loving Father's will, the evil that befalls us because of the sins of others. Is God the author of sin? Did He inspire the murder and theft that tried my faith as a new missionary?

The questions arise again and again, in my contexts, as people tell me of accidents to loved ones, of divorces, handicapped children, abusive husbands, economic disasters, betrayed trust, death. Bad things happen, and so often they happen to "good" people. Shall we assume we are at the mercy of mere chance, or shall we cling to the conviction that God is still omnipotent as well as all-loving? But why did an omnipotent Creator place in His universe creatures with the will to defy Him? Why did He give them in the first place freedom of will, power to choose, when surely He knew that their choices would be evil? Why is the power of causality granted to us, when we make each other suffer in consequence? The power to exercise the will has been delegated. It was delegated to us and God will not usurp it.

Most of the time we like the idea of our own freedom. There are times when we do not at all like the idea of the freedom of others. If we suffer because of their freedom, let us remember that they suffer because of ours. There is something else to remember also: Christ, who willed our freedom, suffered for all of us. Take a long look at what happened at Calvary. The agony there was of the just for the unjust. Why? To bring us to God. Jesus, even in the hands of His captors, was aware that the hour of darkness had its limits, set by His Father. Everything that happened to Him

was part of the *appointed way*, yet He said, “Alas for that man by whom he is betrayed.” The Son of God, helpless in the hands of wicked humans. What a strange thing. What a mystery Christians proclaim in their faith.

But it’s hard to see how that mystery makes much difference when we ourselves are in the pit. Then the why comes from a heart choked with disbelief. We look at the chaos and the destruction. We don’t look with much clarity at God. But His attention has not wandered. The Everlasting Arms have not let go their hold.

When Elisha’s servant went out early in the morning, he saw a force with horses and chariots surrounding the city.

“Oh master,” he said, “which way are we to turn?” Elisha answered, “Do not be afraid, for those who are on our side are more than those on theirs.” Elisha then prayed, asking the Lord to open his servant’s eyes. The Lord opened his eyes, and the servant saw the hills covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

The horses and chariots that the servant had first seen were real enough. He had good reason to fear, if that was all there was. They had no place to turn, it seemed. But for every visible reason for terror, there was an invisible and immensely more powerful reason for trust.

Those fiery horses and chariots are still doing God’s bidding. Still the Lord speaks that word to us wherever we are, whatever the forces that oppose us: Trust Me. Never mind the answers to the whys just now—those are Mine. Trust Me.

Over forty years have passed since this story took place. Nearly every time I have told it and tried to explain what

I think God wanted to teach me in it of absolute commitment and trust, someone has asked, “But why did God let it happen?” Someday they and I will be satisfied with His answer. Of one thing I am perfectly sure: God’s story never ends with “ashes.”

1

The Way In

It is unsettling to me now to know that people who are making a tour of South America can take a short, easy side trip and see the Colorados. They can go in a taxi from the city of Quito to Santo Domingo de los Colorados in a few hours and stay in a nice motel and have a look at a real Colorado Indian any day of the week. The Indians will even dance for you, I am told, or play their wonderful bamboo marimbas. This tells me that everything has changed. I expected things to change, but I did not expect them to change with such frightening speed. The Colorados did not want money twenty years ago. Not money or anything else back then would induce them to come out of hiding on a weekday into the white man's town to do what the white man wanted them to do. Some impression has been made on them, deeply and I am sure irreversibly, and they have been changed.

In the southwest part of North America you can see Indians doing things to amuse white people. There are still those who will “dress up” or dance or demonstrate pottery making or blanket weaving so the tourist will feel that he has been in “real Indian country” and has seen the way Indians live. It has taken a hundred years to bring things to this state. In South America, things have moved much faster. White men, of course, have been there for hundreds of years but had not touched most of the jungle. Indigenous peoples kept on living as they had always lived right on up until the middle of the twentieth century. But then things happened in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and they have all been changed. What the tourist pays to see now—is it the Indian I saw?

Dorothy and I, both of us single, both Americans, both students of linguistics, she from Texas, I from New Jersey, rode to Santo Domingo on the tailgate of a pickup. It was no side trip on a vacation tour. Each of us had prayed for years for God’s guidance to the place of His choice for our missionary work. We had lived together in a seventeen-dollar-a-month “walkup” in Brooklyn, New York, near a small church group of Puerto Ricans who offered us the free use of the apartment so that we could work with them and learn some Spanish. We were almost the only ones who spoke English in the neighborhood (Bushwick Avenue near what the conductor on the El called “Moitle Avenue”). There was heat in our apartment for a couple of hours a day, and we never knew which hours those would be. There was hot water usually between six and seven in the morning. The Rhinegold Brewery was right next door, and we smelled beer and listened to the

noise of trucks all day and all night. There were rats—large black rats, big enough to dump over the garbage pail in the kitchen. It was probably good training for us, living there, and we learned a little Spanish, too. But it proved to be only a smattering, and when we got to Ecuador we spent another six months at it in the capital city of Quito, living in luxury in comparison with our Brooklyn situation, in the home of an educated white Ecuadorian couple who knew no English.

But at last it was time to turn from Spanish studies to the work at which we had been aiming for so long—work with an Indian tribe whose language was yet unwritten. I hoped someday to reduce such a language to writing and translate the Bible. Two English women, untrained in linguistics, needed help in the Colorado tribe. They also badly needed someone to take charge of the school. Here was our chance.

We rode, as I said, on the tailgate of a pickup that belonged to a missionary whom everyone called ET who lived in Santo Domingo. He was a skinny, serious man in his thirties who seemed always to have time to spare, and, unlike most missionaries, never worried about money. He ran some sort of banana business along with his missionary work and spent a lot of time shuttling back and forth between the west jungle and the city. His wife Vera was, fortunately, an easygoing, good-humored woman who did more than her share of the missionary work and, I found out, sometimes went without eggs or some other minor luxury in order to pay off ET's business debts.

ET and Vera picked us up early one morning in September of 1952 for the day's journey down to Santo Domingo. We drove first around backstreets we didn't know existed,

ET banging on wooden gates and high walls (“I’ve got to pick up a letter here”), buying truck parts in tiny alleyways (“I told a guy I’d get these for him”), chatting with slick, disreputable characters in dark banana storerooms. He had contacts. There was no doubt about that. “Señor Eduardo!” a woman called from an upstairs window, and came rushing down to the truck to hand him a packet. “For my sister, please, Señor Eduardo, this little favor!”

We were supposed to “make the first chain.” The road to Santo Domingo, ET had explained, was narrow and winding, and twice a day a chain was opened to allow traffic to pass through, going down to the jungle. There was a chain at the other end of the road that was closed to maintain one-way traffic. The “first chain” at our end was at nine o’clock in the morning, but we were still bumping around the cobblestones of Quito at eleven. ET had lived long enough in Ecuador to have learned (perhaps he always knew) how to shrug off the demands of time. Mañana was always good enough. The two o’clock chain would get us to Santo Domingo by midnight or a little before. We did not like any of this, but there was nothing we could do but sit on the tailgate (because the truck was fully loaded with assorted cargo) and go where we were taken.

Shortly after noon, ET finished his rounds. We began the long climb up out of the city, winding around the deep folds of the mountain called Pichincha, where Spanish conquistadores had fought the Incas, higher and higher until we saw the city lying spread out as in a vast bowl below us, velvet slopes on every side, snowcaps gleaming beyond. Quito had seemed to me, when I had first arrived there six months before, an exotic

city where the race of time had been slowed nearly to a stop. It was a Spanish colonial city founded in 1534 and retaining still a certain grace from the Old World—whitewashed adobe houses lined narrow cobbled streets over which jugged carved balconies of lovely dark wood festooned with geraniums. There were delicate wrought iron gates with heavy handmade hinges and door knockers. The green squares and parks had fountains and statuary and some were bordered by graceful colonnades. In six months I had learned to love this city and thought of it as legendary, a city of the faraway and long ago, but as we looked back on it from the high mountain slopes on our way to the jungle, it seemed a last look at the twentieth century. Quito was civilization, and we were leaving it. I was leaving, too, a young man named Jim Elliot, who had studied Spanish with Dorothy and me. We had been acquainted in college, and in Quito he and his colleague, Pete, had lived across the street from Dorothy and me and had eaten two meals a day in the Arias house with us. Jim and I had walked in the pastures on the outskirts of town, had climbed Pichincha and seen the sun rise as the moon was setting over the city, had ridden the bus to the post office on many rainy afternoons, and had explored the byways of the old sections of town, practicing our Spanish on friendly shopkeepers and children. He was heading for the eastern jungle to work with the Quichua Indians, and I knew it would be a long time before I saw him or even heard from him, since we would be separated by the double cordillera of the Andes and communication was exceedingly slow.

The frontier lay before us. “Therefore have I set my face like a flint” were words from Isaiah that had held me steady

when I first decided to go to Ecuador, and they held me steady this time as well. Obedience to God was the reason for this journey.

It was a good thing for me to remind myself of the reason because, on top of everything, it was really great fun. It was an adventure and held the thrill of adventure, and if I put my mind on the things set before rather than on the things that were behind, I had no sense whatever of gritting my teeth and doing a thing I disliked. It was the thing I was made for and I was full of gladness.

There were sheep in some of the velvet meadows, and cows, and an occasional horse with an Indian rider. Adobe farmhouses stood here and there in a sheltered hollow or on a hillside by a running brook, screened sometimes by a comb of eucalyptus trees that had been planted to break the tearing Andean winds. Each loop of the cobblestone road brought us higher up the shoulders of Pichincha, and gave us ever vaster views of endless plain and mountain that stretched away north, south, and east. Cayambe was the snowcap to the north, a rounded mass that dominated the famous Otavalo Valley where the Indians live who make wonderful copies of English and Scottish woolens. Antisana, a series of tremendous snowy humps, stood between us and the Amazon basin to the east. To the south towered the near-perfect cone of Cotopaxi, glistening white at the top, spreading out in broad, smooth, black slopes of volcanic ash.

In the village of San Juan, at an altitude of 11,000 feet, we waited for the chain to be opened. ET explained that the cars were counted at the far end, and the number was reported by radio to San Juan.

It was very cold. Heavy drizzle was falling, called the *páramo*, the name also given to the high-grass country where this drizzle is almost constant. Sharp wind was blowing and people from other waiting trucks were standing about, the men wearing wool ponchos pulled tightly about their necks and shoulders, the women covering their noses and mouths with heavy shawls. There was a little shack where we bought ears of hot steamed corn, fried potatoes, and hard-boiled eggs. The corn had huge, soft kernels and was sweet and delicious. We warmed our hands on it as we ate. There were Coca-Colas for sale, some blackened bananas, a mineral water call *Aqua Güitig*, and jars of biscuits and hard candy. A radio was turned to its loudest volume, giving forth the nasal, five-note songs of the Andean Indians, songs sung in Spanish but echoing the loneliness of the bleak mountain country, the lostness of a people stripped and despoiled.

Far down the valley on the western side of the mountains we could see the great cumbersome banana trucks laboring up the steep grade, disappearing into the folds of the ravine, winding into view again, up and up. The sound of the gears reached us faintly. At last they rumbled over the top, coasted down a slight grade into the village, and came to a halt at the chain. Papers were examined, the chain was opened, and they came through and stopped for their corn and eggs and drinks. We waited again. More trucks came. More waiting. The man at the chain decided—we supposed he had counted the reported number of trucks—that the moment had come to let us through. But it turned out that the man was not terribly particular in his count, for we had not gone far down the road when the truck in the front of

our caravan came grill-to-grill with another truck on its way up.

“*Caramba!*” shouted the driver.

“*Caramba!*” shouted the other. “Don’t you see that I’m on my way down?”

“Don’t you see that I’m loaded?” And both drivers got out of their cabs, shouted, thrust clenched fists skyward, raved, and stamped.

There were supposed to be unwritten rules of the road: the loaded truck had the right of way, or the truck going downhill had the right of way. If the truck going downhill met one that was loaded (which was certainly the most common kind of encounter), there was no one to arbitrate and long arguments became the rule. Everyone enjoyed these. They broke the monotony of the journey and gave everybody a chance to look over the crowd in the other vehicle. The drivers and “conductors,” boys who usually rode on top of the load and were in charge of collecting fares and seeing to the baggage, loved the opportunity for oratory. Latin courtesies, subtleties, and passions were lavishly demonstrated, the passengers taking part as they felt inspired, and after a suitable interval a decision was reached. The orators leaped into the trucks, engines roared, and off they went again.

I had some idea of counting the horseshoe curves as we traveled. I could see eight or ten below us, but I soon realized the number was deceiving. The journey consisted of nothing but horseshoes, some of them cutting back into ravines much more deeply than appeared from above so that what looked like a single curve turned out to be three or four. The road was treacherous, without guardrails between us and the

sheer chasms on one side. On the other side the mountain rose straight up, and at times we bumped across the remains of a landslide that had been mostly cleared from the road. Sometimes a waterfall sprayed our legs or even our heads as we sat on the bouncing tailgate. Once a banana truck coming behind us stopped just under a waterfall. The driver was absorbed in doing something, heedless of the furious shouts from the riders on top who were getting showered with ice water.

Most of the ravines had rivers in them, rushing, clear and joyful, from the heights and plummeting over the rock walls below. There were bridges in some places, but in others the river ran straight across the road and we drove through it. Dorothy and I, having no warning, of course got our feet wet.

The country was wilderness. We saw not more than twenty houses, even though we could see for miles and miles across canyons to the opposite slopes. It was as though we had been dropped into an uninhabited fold of the earth.

The flora changed as we traveled, from alpine meadows to jungle. The forest on the other side of the ravine we were skirting had a draped, stringy, humpy appearance because of the masses of vines and air plants that shrouded the trees. Here and there, there was the burst of a palm or a banana tree, but the general effect was weird and, to me, unearthly, being unlike anything in my own world. It was a journey into a strange dreamland—from the colorful city of Quito, where the gardens were bright with flowers and the white houses dazzled your eyes in the equatorial light, into this deep canyon of grotesqueries, wetness, and increasing gloom. Clouds swirled around us for a time, and then we found ourselves

dropping below the clouds into a kind of misty twilight, finally into utter darkness as night fell and not a twinkle of light shone from any house or any star. A curtain had fallen. It was the end of one life. There was no sadness because of that ending, none at all that I remember now. There were both the hesitancy and the expectancy you feel when you have knocked on an unknown door. You do not know who will open it, or what you will see on the other side.

Late in the evening we found ourselves traveling at last over flat land. After all those miles of curves and steep inclines, it was as welcome as the sight of shore to a sailor. We passed through sugar cane and banana plantations. A wooden fence, a saddled and tethered horse, a tiny point of light, told us there must be houses nearby. Then we came to a few shops close by the road, with the din of radios and voices issuing from open doors. Life was being lived here, so far from civilization. People drank and sang in the shops, slept in the silent houses that we could not see behind the banana trees. Of the three foreigners who happened by on the road in the dark, one at least strained her eyes in imagination toward those unseen drinkers and singers and sleepers. "We've come. God has sent us, and we're here now. What will He do for us?"