

# Me, Jesus, and the Epistemology of Age

Norma E. Depledge  
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

**I**T WAS THE NIGHT OF MY FORTY-FIFTH birthday when one thing led to another until, at three o'clock in the morning, I found myself on Lawrencetown Beach in a sports model car with the sunroof open, mist drifting in from the Atlantic, seats reclined, sweet, sweet music on the stereo, and a boy who was young enough to be my ... neighbour's ... son breathing fiercely, though not altogether unpleasantly, down my throat.

Billy, I believe was his name. Or Brent. Bevan. I think that was it. I did ask him ...but his answer was blurred by the mist rising off my vodka so I missed the details of our conversation. Then later, in the throes of our various purposes, to bring up the question of name seemed like bad form. In the end, I decided that, given the setting, a more generic term of address such as "Oh Jesus" was adequate.

Things didn't go well with Kevin. That's it. Kevin. Kevin was his name.

Kevin was most anxious to get it on, to use his words; but as my head cleared, I found myself being forty-five instead of the svelte eighteen I had been only an hour or so earlier and the whole ontological question of time and matter (as in, What time is it? What is time? How old am I? What the hell does it matter?)

pressed itself upon me. And the answer that kept coming was, "You're forty-five. It matters. It really matters."

Kevin had, by this time, extricated his extraordinarily tight bottom from his equally tight jeans and was in a rather vulnerable position, shackled at the knees by denim. So when I said, "Uh, Kevin, look, I'm sort of having second thoughts about this. What do you say we call it a day?" he, arguably thinking along parallel ontological lines said, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Look, Kevin," I said, cranking my neck to the left as I fought for air. "I think I'm quite a bit older than you."

"I'm twenty-eight," he said. "How old are you?"

"Oh Jesus," I said as I struggled to return my skirt to below waist level.

My father had been saying he was old ever since I could remember. He'd sit at the dinner table in silence, staring off into somewhere else. After supper, he'd sleep in the chair in front of the TV, little more absent than when he was awake. He walked like he was tired — aged. He said it wasn't easy having to face the fact that he couldn't get down in the hack to throw a rock anymore. I couldn't remember back to when he could.

Bo Clapham, white-haired, newly divorced and the same age as my father, was sixty-eight when he married Gloria Marvelous, twenty-one and a half, going on twenty-two. I remember them coming into the Legion, her ballooning with pregnancy, him stepping crisply, knife-creased legs, spit-polished posture, ushering before him his unwaning virility.

It was a November 11th night when Bo Clapham walked into the Legion and my father changed. In that instant he could have thrown third rocks for Ed Werenich. So could the other old men. Old men. Who, before Bo arrived, had all been staring off into somewhere else, muttering back at the present. They didn't look up when Bo came through the door. They didn't have to. They didn't need to see him. They could feel him. Their breath stopped. The very air that grumbled around their ears quivered, flattened against chests, kissed scalps making the soft down of hair tremble. It wasn't Bo who did that to them. It wasn't Gloria. Singly, they were merely two more Saturday night drop-ins. What did it was their union. Their sex. Publicly proclaimed. What did it was holograph images suddenly, violently pulsed through minds, thrusting, panting. It was the act that her pregnancy announced. Bo stood at the door, ram-rod stiff, ready to receive homage, and he fired in the old men a burning, a lust, not for Gloria Marvelous, but for the heat she stirred in Bo Clapham. Suddenly, my father was also stiff. He had power. And he resented, even hated, those who had sapped it out of him. He banged his hand down on the table. "What do you want to drink?" he demanded. His voice was commanding, excited, threatening. He seemed expansive and dangerous. And absolutely foreign. He strode across the room to the bar, erect. His eyes never grazed Bo Clapham or the beautiful Gloria Marvelous

but he was with *them*, not with us, not especially, with my mother. The room was now separated into two camps, roughly divided by sex. There were the doers, the conquerors, the heroes of war and peace; and there were those of us who dragged them down, who ate their food, fettered their strength, drowned the fire in them, drained away their freedom, chained them to too narrow lives. One could cross over the line for a while, if she were young enough, awed enough, and she would, for a while, be welcomed, like a trophy, or a camp-follower, until her thickening toenails, her crepe-skinned empty breasts betrayed her for what she really was. I put my arm around my mother's bowed shoulder and avoided her eyes.

"Kevin, I've changed my mind. I don't think we should do this."

"Come on," I heard indistinctly, the sound padded by the tongue in my ear. "I'll come a couple of times, you'll come a couple of times. It'll be great."

"I'm too old for you, Kevin."

"What difference..." breathe, grasp, "...does it make?"

"It makes a difference."

"Why?"

"I'm no Gloria Marvelous," I muttered.

"What?"

"I just can't," I said. "Jesus. I just can't."

I first met Sally at a Continuing Ed. class. Lotus 1.2.3 Introduction. It was her thirteenth course through Continuing Ed. She took classes there because she'd finished high school seventeen years ago, had taken a one-year secretarial course, worked for a bit and then got married, so she felt there was no use trying to take accredited courses because what did she know except thawing out T-bone steaks and her husband agreed. When I met Sally, she was setting up a detailed household budget so that she'd be able to see where

expenditures were overlapping, or where spending was simply frivolous and then they'd be able to save god knows how much just by being careful in the right places and money meant a lot to her husband. Sally told me that her husband was very good about her courses. He never complained — even though it was he who paid for them. She said he was the kind of man who felt it was nice for women to have interests, and he thought the budgeting would give her something worthwhile to do and he was for it as long as she didn't get obsessive about it and nag. He couldn't tolerate a woman who nagged. Sally said he tried to remember to give her the cash register slips when he picked up a few groceries or bought a new CD player or a couple of golf outfits or donated the booze for his curling club smoker. (He liked to donate things. He said he could afford it so why the hell shouldn't he? It made him feel good.) He had pointed out to her that the household budget was pretty small potatoes for a man like him. He had important things on his mind. He owned the number one automotive dealership in the city. He had thirty-odd men working for him. Thirty families looked to him to put food on their tables. He ran a business. So he virtually never remembered the sales slips and Sally had to factor in an unknown X of about a thousand to fifteen hundred dollars a month. Lotus is a powerful program.

I like Sally. She tried. She tried and tried and tried.

Her husband, Ernest Stanhope, owned, as I said, a car dealership. He also owned half the main street, the Stanhope mansion and all its contents, two sons, who were only five and six years younger than Sally, and her. When I met her, she was hoping that he would find her a little job in the business, now that the boys were grown. He'd set them up, one in automotives as manager of a dealership in a town

down the coast and the other in farm equipment up in the valley, so now Sally had nothing to vacuum up after, except the cats. She'd settle for a little receptionist's job, answering the phone, filing, that sort of thing. She couldn't get a real job since his hours were so flexible, him being the boss, and so she had to be able to drop everything without notice if he wanted to take off for Florida for the weekend or to come home for an hour mid-morning. And anyway, she said, she didn't have any skills or education. I was hoping to god she'd leave him. So was Jesus.

There was a tap on the window of Kevin's car. It was Jesus, kneeling on all fours on the hood, filling the windshield. His hands were planted on the glass just above the wipers and his arms were bent sharp at the elbows so he could smile in past the rear-view mirror. He was wearing a cop's uniform and was out of breath. It's a long walk out to Lawrencetown Beach.

Kevin unplugged his tongue from my ear, spun his head to the left so he was face to face with the face floating above his dash, unhanding my breast, sucked in air, choked and plunged for his pants. He began hauling on his jeans with convulsive heaves that cracked his knees on the dash. Jesus climbed off the hood on Kevin's side, stood patiently by the door until Kevin was zipped back in, then nodded for him to roll down the window, which he did. He poked his head inside, looked me right in the eye (there's nothing shifty about Jesus), and said, "I think it's time we talked."

"You know this guy?" Kevin asked, turning to me, non-plussed.

"It's Jesus," I said.

"Huh?" Kevin grunted, his eyes locked on mine as he wrestled his wallet out of his back pocket and began shuffling through it.

"ID won't be necessary, Kevin," said

Jesus. "Just step out if you would."

"What'd you say?" Kevin insisted, ignoring Jesus and glaring at me. His eyes dropped down to my thighs and began a quick but detailed crawl upward to my face, apparently searching for a clue to the ever-elusive female mind in the irrational flesh of her body.

"It's Jesus," I repeated.

"Step out of the car please, Kevin," Jesus interrupted.

"Who?" Kevin's tone suggested that he wasn't in fact interested in an answer to that question. "Who" was a sort of shorthand, a macro that carried the conventional intonation for "You don't really believe that do you — 'cause if you do, then you better get out of my car. Now."

"Out," said Jesus.

Kevin's head spun toward Jesus, back to me, back to Jesus again. "Are you a cop?"

"I can be," said Jesus. "Now step out. There's a good fellow."

"Are you or aren't you?" Kevin's voice cracked. He seemed to be getting agitated.

"Step out of the car please."

"You're not a cop. Who are you? Do you know this guy?" he asked, turning to me again as he pushed the button to roll up his window.

Jesus rested his elbow on the window ledge. The gears in the electric mechanism slipped and clutched, making the kind of grating metal sound that constricts the ventricles of a vanity-plates owner, but the glass didn't move.

"It's Jesus," I explained once again.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Kevin cried out, spinning around. "Get your elbow off!"

"Would you mind stepping out of the car please?"

"You..." but before Kevin could finish, Jesus had opened the door, placed his hands gently under Kevin's armpits, lifted him out of

the car, sat him on the roof, and slipped in behind the wheel himself.

"So how have you been?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, good," I said.

"Do you mind?" said Jesus, ducking his head past Kevin's legs which were dangling beside Jesus' shoulder and craning his neck so he could see Kevin's face. He smiled up at Kevin in a friendly way, gripped Kevin's ankles in one hand, and flipped his legs up in the air, ducked inside and closed the door before Kevin's legs could swing back down, rolled up the window, and adjusted the sunroof against the Atlantic mist.

"Heh!" Kevin coughed in disbelief, leaning down over the windshield, jaw dropped. His voice squeezed off as the window snugged into place.

"Thank you," said Jesus with a nod to Kevin through the glass.

"Now what is this thickening toenail business?" he asked turning back to me.

"It happens," I said.

"It happens?" His voice said that was no answer.

"It happened to my mother."

"Close your eyes," said Jesus. "I want you to meet someone."

Nell perched on a bar-stool at the treble end of a grand piano. Her crutches were propped up against the wall behind her. She'd broken her leg skating on the pond with her granddaughter who was home from classes in Toronto for Christmas. Nell was a big woman. She laughed loudly, grabbed the throat of a song, filled its body with her own lungs. She was at O'Leary's Bar with her mate, Virgie, celebrating. The bar was *theirs* because Nell had captured it. Last night was the first night Virgie had gone to bed, gone to sleep and woken up eight hours later for nearly two years. No pills. Nell was the person she'd phoned at eight o'clock in the morning with news that she knew most people would yawn

at. Nell had slammed down the phone, grabbed her boots and stumped up the street, still in her house coat. She dropped her crutches at Virgie's door and held Virgie in an embrace that nearly crushed her and they laughed and cried together, blue varicose veins and tufts of sleep-squashed hair uncovered and unapologetic in the public hallway of an apartment building.

"Now watch this," said Jesus.

A fat man with a splotched, ruddy complexion squeezed up to the piano between Nell and Virgie. He tapped his foot to the music and sang enthusiastically off key. Nell shifted for him, smiled his welcome and, at the chorus, grabbed him by the waist and cried out, "Here, let's have a dance."

"Come on, Virgie," she laughed, hopping on her good leg. Virgie slid in under Nell's arm and the three of them bobbed around in a circle, breathless as first buds.

"Nell has thickening toenails," said Jesus.

Kevin, still leaning down from his perch on the roof, peered through the windshield and rapped on the glass. "Hey!"

Jesus pushed the button on the armrest and lowered the glass a couple of inches.

"You can't do this," Kevin complained. "This is my car." He rapped again. "You can't do this."

Jesus smiled at Kevin. "Be right with you," he said, and rolled up the window.

Jesus was in the same Lotus class as Sally and me. He came for the first time on the fourth night. The instructor called him Hey Zeus. Jesus let it go although later he told Sally and me, "People are often uncomfortable calling me by my proper name for some reason."

I let that go.

Sally said, "I've had that happen myself, mostly when I meet someone with a name that I think they'd be embarrassed by themselves. Like 'Shrug,' or 'Burf.'"

"Oh." Jesus stopped to consider that. "But I'm not embarrassed by my name," he said when he'd thought it over. "What's in a name anyway?"

What's in a name? Really. I didn't like to say, Who do you think you'd be if they'd called you George? A name is like an age. It acts. Independent of you. It makes you a particular thing whether that's what you really are or not. Forty-five creates me. Even if nothing else changed, I wouldn't be the same if I were called eighteen. Just as Sally wouldn't be the same if she and the main street and the Chev/Olds dealership weren't all called Stanhope. Would we? We couldn't keep the names, keep the numbers and not be defined by them, could we? Sally tried. To the extent it was possible, she dressed Smith — wore cotton, rayon, things that hadn't required a blood sacrifice. But she couldn't get away from it. Couldn't get away from being Stanhope. She was subsumed by it, dwarfed in it — just like she was in the big fur coat.

Mr. Stanhope bought her a full-length Arctic Wolf that was worth ten thousand dollars and which she put in storage. She told him it was because it worried her to death to think of brush-cutting its voluptuous hairs on a Sobey's shopping cart. So he bought it insurance. What could she do, she said. So she wore it, when she wore it, with the collar pulled up like a bank robber. And hurried. But it came right along with her, just like forty-five. She couldn't escape it.

Jesus didn't do a miracle to impress Sally and me. Bless him for that. Stories about him doing tricks get out of hand. The way he behaved when Sally and I met him was perfectly normal. He could have been anybody.

It was the night after our third class. Sally and I were going for a coffee. Neither of us noticed him when we got into the car, until he said, "Hi, I'm Jesus." He just materialized out of nowhere. Or maybe he was already there. The problem is his name. It does things to the way you *know*. It makes you make assumptions that you would never make about anyone else. "Jesus" doesn't just name him, it creates him, so things that would otherwise be pure hoey get reified. Sally and I were both dumbstruck. Neither of us saw him sitting there though I think we did look in the back seat before we got into the car. Regardless, Jesus just chatted in a friendly way and put us both at ease. He suggested that we go to his place for coffee, so we did.

That sounds coy. Someone my age cannot be coy. She can calculate, but she cannot be gullible. That's the cruel thing about labels. Forty-five transmutes gullibility into calculation. It transmutes artlessness into art. You can't get out from under it. It leaves a film on every line you write. Nobody would believe my lack of motives when I say that what happened happened. They'd say, in a "significant" way, "She's forty-five," and as far as they are concerned, that would explain it. The truth is, simply, a friend and I met Jesus and went for coffee at his place, and that's all there was to it.

He was living in a walk-up at the time. His robe was long and pink and blue, exactly as I remember it from the colouring book forty years ago. (That's another thing I like about Jesus. There are no surprises. He's exactly what you've been expecting. Which, I sup-

pose, is the point of labels. They keep the world stable.) Anyway, his robe kept tripping him up on the stairs. "Why don't you get something a little more nineties?" I suggested. "I mean, I like the caftan, but I'm just thinking of the inconvenience — and I would think people would tend to stare, not that it's not very nice. It is."

There it is again. Coy. Not falsely modest, but falsely ingenuous. I know it. I admit it. Why did I do it? I did it because although knowledge, maturity, even wisdom, if they come to a person at all, come quite incidentally to the passage of time; they get lumped in with all that is *caused* by the passage of time. Post hoc, ergo propter hoc. The next step, post hoc again you might say, is that "she is knowing *because* she is forty-five" becomes "she is forty-five because she is knowing." So she mustn't appear to be knowing, because if she does, she will also appear to be forty-five.

So? Why the fixation on forty-five? After all, what is forty-five except a collection of artificial divisions of a dimension which has been defined as linear and which might not in fact be linear at all?

The reality is, forty-five has nothing to do with dimensions or durations. It is not an abstraction; it is a concretion. Forty-five is your value. Or lack of it. Once they've got you by it, you can't get away. It's sagging breasts and the first thickening of toenails. It's "at your age, at your age."

So, I chirped, "I like the robe, but I'm just thinking of the inconvenience — and I would think people would tend to stare, not that it's not very nice. It is. But you know the way people are, especially with foreigners. Not that you're a foreigner. But you know what I mean."

I suspect that's what prompted him to say, once we were inside the apartment, "I think I'll slip into something a little more comfortable." That made my breath catch, I'll tell you, but as it turned out, Sally and I had nothing to fear. What's there to fear from Jesus?

When he came out of the bedroom, he'd changed into a Christian soldier outfit. "I find this less conspicuous," he explained. "I wear the traditional on a first meeting. Just so that people will recognize me. I discovered that without it, some folks don't believe who I am. I had one woman throw chicken stuffing at me, and a gang of Knights of Columbus chase me out of a lodge meeting and try to stab me with a banner. Decaf or regular?" Jesus was making us coffee.

"Decaf," we both answered.

"Banana loaf? Cookie?"

"No thanks."

Jesus served the coffee in mugs, cream and sugar on a tray. It had a very nice, hand-made doily on it with Mother applied across one corner.

"That's nice," said Sally. "Did you do it yourself?"

"Yes," said Jesus.

"You're very good," I said.

"Yes, I am," Jesus agreed.

"Jesus?" Sally began.

"I know what your going to ask," Jesus butted in. "I just wanted to meet you."

"Me?" said Sally.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I see the little sparrow fall, it meets my tender view. If I so love the little birds, I know, I love you too."

"Really?" said Sally.

"Yes," said Jesus.

The Stanhope mansion overlooks the harbour. Sally and I only ever went there once for coffee. After that, we went to Tim Horton's because in the Stanhope house I felt like I was breathing air straight from Ernest Stanhope's mouth. He pumped it into me by mouth to mind desuscitation. It carbon monoxid my brain.

Ernest was home the morning we went there for coffee. I remember him. I also remember me. He was cheerful as a vacuum cleaner salesman. I was mindless as a Barbie doll. He talked about welfare mothers not paying their utility bills and draining the government while he and I financed them to lay around and watch soaps. I knew what I contributed to welfare mothers and thanked god I didn't have to try to live on it. And I'd be willing to bet that Ernest Stanhope's overall contribution to Revenue Canada and the welfare state wouldn't offset the interest he doesn't pay on the incentive loans he got to set up even one of the businesses for his two boys, but I didn't say that. I smiled and nodded. My mind went over to his side. I didn't hear a single protest from inside my head. No voice said, "I marched on Parliament to object to this kind of putooey." I fed on his words. Like a pâté de foie goose whose head they pull back to shove a tube down its gullet and hose food into it, gorge sugar down its throat, exhale it into its entrails until its liver bloats.

And did I blow up?

No, not me. There's the paradox. It was Ernest Stanhope who blew up. Even as I sat there listening to him, he expanded. Some miracle! Jesus could take a lesson. Stanhope became so puffed up that the walls bowed out. When he was finished feeding, he left for his office, but his fumes didn't go away. They

took up all the space in the house. Sally paled until she was as vincible as a goosedown feather. I must have gone home because when I look back on that part of the memory, I can't remember being there at all.

The night of my birthday, when Jesus and I stopped at the Stanhope mansion on the way back from O'Leary's to Lawrencetown Beach, the walls of the house had sucked in upon themselves. So had Stanhope. He sagged in a chair in his living room, his body folded with the stretch marks of a deflated balloon. Sally was by then long gone.

Jesus sat behind Kevin's steering wheel looking at me as if he'd come to the end of a story and all the details had proven something. I was disappointed, and said so. I expected more of Jesus. I felt depressed. I rolled down the window and stuck my head out into the wet Atlantic air. Kevin was stretched out across the roof of the car. "Hey Kevin," I called. "You might as well get in. We're just wasting our time in here."

He slid off the roof and peered suspiciously through the open window. I opened the door, folded myself into the dash and pulled the seat forward so he could climb into the back.

"Oooh," Jesus groaned. "Sometimes I feel so inadequate."

"Forget it," I said. "We are what we are. You're Jesus, Sally's Sally, and I'm forty-five. There's nothing we can do about it."

"But Sally left Stanhope. She's not being defined by him anymore."

"She thinks she's not, but that's because she's only thirty-three. Give her time. She will be. And anyway, what do you know? You're only thirty-three yourself."

Jesus sighed. "But I've been thirty-three for two thousand years."

"Be grateful," I said.

There was a thump just over our heads.

"Excuse me." A voice came in through the sunroof. "Excuse me. Up here."

Jesus and I looked up. It was Sally.

"Sal," said Jesus. "What are you doing here?"

"Look, Jesus," she said. "Can I speak frankly?"

"Please," said Jesus. "Do."

"Well, ..." Sally said. "Just a sec. I gotta get comfortable." She pushed herself up onto her knees and wrenched on the glass slider so the opening would be wider.

"Agh," Kevin winced, shooting forward with impotent hands outstretched. "It's *electric!* Don't reef on it!"

"Oops, sorry," said Sally.

"Here, let me get that," said Jesus. He pushed the sunroof button.

"Oh Jesus," moaned Kevin, slumping back against the seat.

Sally shrugged apologetically and stretched out on the roof again. Her face hung like the moon in the sunroof hole.

"Look, Jesus," she said, "I don't mean to doubt your omnipotence. Let's face it, you've got a long list of credits to your name, and god knows, you certainly helped me out, but for all the fact that men have certain competencies in some areas, there's an awful range of jobs that they quite simply can't do. Apart from the lack of skill and complete inability to think clearly in certain situations, they don't have the credibility. I don't mean to deprecate the things you and your father have done, but this job needs a woman, Jesus. So I'm here."

"But it's not like I'm an amateur. I mean, I pride myself... I've been doing this kind of



thing for two thousand years,” Jesus whined.

“But have you been doing it well?” asked Sally.

“Look,” she said in a conciliatory sort of way. “Why don’t you and Kevin wait here. Get to know each other. Bond a little. We’ll be back. Have you been introduced?”

“Not formally,” said Jesus, peevishly.

“Kevin, Jesus,” said Sally, sticking her arm through the hole. “Jesus, Kevin.”

“Jesus Christ?” said Kevin, still clearly doubtful, yet undeniably impressed.

“Yes,” said Jesus, slightly less peevishly.

“*The* Jesus Christ?”

“Yes,” Jesus repeated with somewhat more emphasis, even with a glimmer of enthusiasm.

“You mean...” Kevin started.

“The original Christmas baby,” said Jesus, pulling himself up straight and sounding thoroughly interested.

“Jesus,” Kevin breathed. “Who’d a thought it?”

Jesus smiled buoyantly and extended his hand. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you, Kevin,” he said. Jesus is resilient.

“Hey,” said Kevin. “Likewise.”

Clearly, they were warming to each other.

“Nice car,” Jesus said, just to make conversation. “Do you own it?”

“Buying it.”

“What kind of payments do you have to make on a job like this? I’ve been thinking about getting an import. All the walking is taking it out of me. What’s your feeling about...”

It was 5 a.m. and long past closing time at the Legion when Sally ushered me in through the back door. The only lights were the red, exit sign and the recessed lighting behind the bar. I squinted in the unaccustomed dimness.

“What are we doing here?” I whispered.

“These are people you’ve known,” she answered. “It’s time you rethought them. The woman at the bar, do you remember her?”

It was Mrs. Sparrow, the only divorced person I ever saw when I was a kid. She was sitting on a stool at the bar, but she was unfocused. My eyes seemed to be refusing to adjust to the light. I squinted to try to make the picture clear, but the Legion faded, shifted. The bar-room ran together with a kitchen, my mother’s kitchen. The two images dissolved into each other, streamed together around the figure of Mrs. Sparrow. Coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, audacious, outrageous, she perched on the step-stool at the table in our kitchen. Storymaker, weaving a tale of correspondents and adultery and clandestine photographs, building a court case. Three times she married Mr. Sparrow. Three times divorced him, back when only photographs and eye-witnesses could have freed her from conjugal bliss.

The flash lasted only a few seconds. Then the kitchen slumped and quivered like undulating seaweed, and dissolved. We were in the Legion again. Mrs. Sparrow, her wild-blond hair faded to grey turned toward me, eyes still mischievously bold, laughing into the eye of my memory. Slowly, teasingly, she hoisted up the hem of her skirt, chuckled in the shared-secret way she always had, and revealed, strapped to the outside of her leg, a little Brownie that had three times saved her from a fate worse than bliss.

Mrs. McGuire was thirty years a school teacher. Brought up three kids. Had six grandchildren. She was skilled at taking initiative, gifted at getting things done. She was putting up pictures. Out of a box, she took a framed

photo of Mrs. Sparrow and her camera and hung it on the wall of the Legion between the Past Presidents plaque and the photo of Colonel and, later, Mayor Henry Jenks laying a wreath at the war memorial.

Sally nudged me. "You remember Mrs. Slovak," she said, nodding in the direction of a little woman who stood uncomfortably several feet from the bar, far enough away to be clear of it yet near enough not to be out in the middle of the room. I squinted at her.

"She used to be the seamstress," Sally reminded me.

Mrs. Slovak was no more than five feet tall, small featured. She had prim grey hair, a prim print dress. Her back was Pentecostal straight. Ever suspicious of places that smelled of smoke or beer, she seemed braced against the red fumes of the exit light that swirled around her. Beside her, her two children, grown now. Annie on her right, Jackie on her left, protective of her as she once had been of them. By herself, she had bought a little house, fed and clothed the two children. In later years when Annie came of age, she bought a car and, at forty-seven, learned to drive. Grade five education and self-taught. Mrs. Slovak was the town's female counterpart of Emile Ludlow, the tailor. What's in a name? Seamstress? Tailor? Forty thousand dollars a year. A pension. Security. The offer of a partnership in the business. That's what's in "tailor." In "seamstress," there's none of those. In "seamstress," there's only grit, courage, determination, backbone. All that one needs for greatness.

Mrs. McGuire waved to Mrs. Slovak. "Emma," she called jovially. "For land sake come in and make yourself comfortable." She

turned again, rummaged in her box. Then she climbed up on a chair and placed Mrs. Slovak between the H.M.C.S Fury and the 125th Regiment, ship and men standing at attention, Mrs. Slovak whisking by, primly, in her hard-top convertible.

"Isn't that Marla Grand?" I asked Sally, as a stocky strong-looking woman entered the room. "What's she doing here?"

The woman came in through the Legion's front doors, holding the arm of Hansel, her boy. Forty-eight years ago, she, whom no one had ever known to have a boyfriend, gave birth to Hansel, illegitimate son. Mr. Grenich, in whose law office she worked, did not fire her, an omission that was generally attributed to the corruption of morals that too much college can effect. "I remember seeing her when I was a little kid," I explained to Sally. "She used to walk back and forth to work or to do her shopping, shamelessly, according to the minister, straight as a pope, unflinching, and pertinacious enough to protect even a bastard."

Faces turned toward her as she stood in the Legion entryway. Nell and Virgie stumped over as soon as they saw her. They pulled her into the room, took her coat, linked their arms around her waist. Nell, as always, was singing. They made a quick twirl around the floor. Mrs. Slovak drew back as if she were affronted, about to leave, when Mrs. McGuire noticed Marla and called out, "My land, it's Marla Grand. Dear girl, I haven't seen you for twenty years. What a wonderful treat. And this must be Hansel. He looks exactly like his father. I always thought he did, though he's taller than his father was, don't you think?"

As suddenly as she had turned to leave, Mrs. Slovak turned back. Decisively she took

off her coat, pulled up a chair at the bar and announced, "I've decided to stay."

"Good for you," said Mrs. Sparrow and gave her a beer. Then she changed her mind, went behind the bar and poured Mrs. Slovak a sherry. "I think you'll like this better," she said.

Mrs. McGuire hung Marla Grand on the wall between the Regiment's Silver Anniversary framed needle point of the Virgin Mary and an eight by ten glossy of Sergeant-at-arms, His Worship, Judge Grenich — in whom there was a striking resemblance to Hansel.

Linda Hastie lay in a hospital bed in the middle of the parsimonious Legion dance floor. A special apparatus held a beer conveniently close so that she could drink it through a straw if she wanted. A three-corner scarf hid a scalp nudged by chemotherapy. She ordered and organized enthusiastically as the exit light dimmed and went out and the recessed lighting behind the bar clicked off. The room was in blackness except for the flicker of a carbide lamp. Linda led the way through the stream passage of a cave, deeper and deeper underground, an expedition of exploration, through domed rooms whose maw consumed our light, along water-polished tubes. She climbed a chimney, searching for a lead. Powerful, nimble, weightless. Bum hanging out into space, she wound her right leg around the lip of an overhang, froze in a gunpowder pose and called down, "Last chance to get a crotch shot of Catherine DeNeuve." Mrs. Sparrow whipped out her Brownie.

Mrs. McGuire hung Linda Hastie's proud rear-end between Prince Phillip and a Rear Admiral who appeared to be saluting Linda directly.

An old woman emerged from the dimness of the Legion cloak room. She walked toward

me, swaying from side to side on her terrible broken feet, feet with thickened, boney toenails. She held the hand of a little girl who looked up at her as if she were the very best thing.

Mrs. McGuire put my grandma's picture right beside the queen. "There," she said with approval. Then she turned up the music and announced, "I think it's time we danced. What do you say, Linda?"

"Come on," Sally said to me. "Why don't you and I go and ask Gloria to dance. No one here knows her."

"No," I said. "You go ahead."

She danced with Gloria Marvelous and they held the baby between them. Mrs. McGuire sat on the edge of Linda Hastie's bed and Linda and she drove around the perimeter of the dance floor, conducting with their feet and singing. My grandma danced with the little girl, and Mrs. Slovak and Marla Grand danced with each other and with each other's kids and then all five of them danced together.

"May I have this dance," I asked.

"Oh yes," said my mother. "Do you want to lead?"

"You lead, Mum," I said. "Like the old days."

"All right," she answered.

She led past a baby carriage on a dirty dusty road, past a pink swimsuit and a rented summer cottage, past maple walnut ice cream with caramel sauce and the Ed Sullivan Show, past tear-streaming laughter in a grocery store, past tears and past angers, past silences, past fears. We danced until our feet hurt.

I didn't notice Jesus and Kevin when they sneaked in. They said afterwards that they stood in the shadows for a long time watching (Jesus is always trying to pick up pointers, he

said, and Kevin was just curious.) No one seemed to mind. Mrs. McGuire asked them to drag in an old wading pool filled with warm water. It wasn't until they were pulling it in, slopping water on the dance floor, that I became aware of them. In fact, it wasn't until Sally said, "We've got company."

All of us helped to drive Linda's bed up to the side of the pool and to lift her into an armchair. Then we all took off our shoes and socks, Mum, Sally, me, Marla Grand, Kevin, Mrs. McGuire, with her arthritis, Nell, with her varicose veins, Gloria Marvelous, with feet still young and uncalloused, Linda Hastie, with her pallid skin hospital white, Mrs. Slovak, toes all boney, Grandma, with bones gnarled and crippled and hurt, Jesus, with the scars of holes. We sat in a circle and soaked our inscribed feet.

Before it was over, Mrs. McGuire helped me to put up a picture of Sally with Jesus in his cop uniform on one side of her and Kevin on the other, standing on the beach in front of Kevin's car. And above the door, where the picture of a commanding officer used to be, I put the photo of my mom, grinning, in the middle of a wading pool in her bare feet.

That was the night of my forty-fifth birthday, but unfortunately, not everything I told you is true. Jesus didn't save Sally. In fact, the jury's still out on whether or not she's saved. And,... well..., I like Jesus, but I wonder if he'll step aside so willingly to make a space for what Sally knows; or maybe it's just that I think there are plenty of people who would go to some length to stop him from stepping aside. As for what Sally knows, let's face it, Sally's not sure herself that she knows what she thinks she knows. For that matter, neither am I.

About the photograph of my mother that now hangs above the door of the Legion, ...my mom's not grinning. That's the thing that's the untruest. Actually she looks scared, like for her it's too late for all this. And like she's failed once again, failed me, by not being able to change it.

But it was true in the story. While I was writing it, it was all true, and surely that's a start. That's why, near six o'clock the next morning, just as the dawn was breaking near Lawrencetown Beach, as the mist was drifting in from the Atlantic, Kevin — who, don't forget, is some woman's son — and I drove silently and not at all unpleasantly in our separate, though no doubt not lasting, peace.