

ALLEGRA GOES UP

BY ROSEMARY NIXON



The school is big and old, two-storey. Allegra Gillis is in the Grade 2 classroom on the second floor. She has

risen. The Grade 2 classroom is down the hall from the smelly bathrooms, across from the Grade 4 classroom where Miss Novacosky swings down the aisles knocking children on the head with the stone of her engagement ring. Marigold sits second from the front in the Grade 4 classroom; Allegra sees her sister copying sums, tongue caught between her teeth, when Allegra heads out for recess. Rose is below, in the Grade 7 classroom with Mr. P. J. Sloan. June and Valerie are at the high school. Pyjama Sloan, the kids call him; when he talks he sprays the front two rows with spittle. Rose sits second from the front, and every night she packs a clean hanky in her wooden pencil case. Allegra's teacher is Mrs. Roberts. Mrs. Roberts is 80 years old and reads scary cowboy stories in Reading Time in an angry voice. Allegra sits at the front because she is a Robin. There are seven Robins. Lena is a Bluebird. Bluebirds read, but not as well. Aggie Falola is a Turtle. She doesn't even get to be a bird. Aggie Falola will never learn to read. Her legs are streaked with dirt where the pee ran down and dried. Aggie Falola whistles *L'il Liza Jane* while all around her

Turtles sound out the words. Winnie Peters is a sparrow. Sparrows are small in talent, but they have hope. This morning Mrs. Roberts lines up Garth Failer, Dougie Staganofsky, Stewie Hukalak at the front of the classroom, and whips them all at once with six loud thwacks from one yardstick, their bums aimed at the Robins in the front row. The whipping is swift. Mrs. Roberts values efficiency. When it's over, the boys amble back to join Aggie and the Turtles. You can't sink lower than a marine reptile with a toothless, horny beak. Dougie does the bird-walk, clutches his behind and winks at Allegra. Allegra prays nightly on her knees, Dear Jesus, please please pleasepleaseplease don't make me go to school tomorrow.

Jesus has a hearing problem.

Allegra is trying to figure out how to tell time. Mrs. Roberts has given her the paper clock with the movable hands, because she is too stupid to learn from the big clock on the wall where the time changes every second. She will be forced down to the Turtles. Mrs. Roberts orders Allegra behind the piano. Says don't come out till you can tell the time. It's dim behind the piano, there's no room. She feels Lena's sympathetic glances through the cherry wood. School goes on without her. Someone throws up. Allegra can't tell who. Now Mrs. Roberts is really cranky. Allegra holds her nose in one hand, her clock in the other, spins the

hands and sobs. The bell rings for recess. The children run out in a clatter. Allegra sticks her head around the piano, and Mrs. Roberts snaps, What's the time? Allegra knows good and well recess is at ten-thirty, it's at ten-thirty every day, but the veins on Mrs. Roberts' neck pulse, and Allegra stares at the maze of numbers on her crumpled paper clock and can't utter a word. So Lena goes outside without her, and Allegra stays in the throw-up classroom, pushing the hands around her sorry clock.

By the time recess ends, the janitor has cleaned up the throw-up and Allegra sneaks back to her desk in the skidding swarm of kids.

Social Studies. They are to draw a picture of the Queen. The Queen has no bad habits. She never chews her fingernails or picks her nose. The Queen of _____? Mrs. Roberts asks and the Grade 2 class chimes, The Queen of **England**. Our beloved _____? **Mother** Country! The Queen of England is also the queen of _____? **Canada! Our home and native land**, they chorus, except for Dougie Staganofsky who shouts, Queen of Rock and Roll and is forced to kneel against the blackboard. He gives Allegra an adoring look before his nose snubs the chalk dust. Dougie has kissed Allegra, out by the teeter-totters, twice, quick, on the lips, and he steals for her gifts from his daddy's store: ladies' white gloves that ride above the elbow, a

small bag of rice Allegra used to stuff a little pillow, chicken bones— Allegra’s favourite candy—and a picture of the Queen in a tiny frame. Allegra bestows on Dougie the tiniest smile and turns back to her Queen. Lena opens and shuts her desk drawer, twice, the prearranged signal. Allegra sneaks a stealthy glance and Lena hand-signals: Secret! Allegra thinks about the secret as she draws the Queen. The Queen has a long and slender goose neck. The Queen is more beautiful than Allegra’s mother, although Allegra would never tell her mother, who is good and kind and run off her feet looking after Allegra’s snitty sisters. And much more beautiful than Mrs. Roberts, whose face is wide and flat with a too small nose, and so small eyes, and dead brown stocking hair that the Grade 8 girls say got fried at the hairdresser’s. Slowly, the Queen turns into a secretive-looking Mrs. Roberts. A note

slaps onto the brown and yellow checkered linoleum at Allegra’s feet. Allegra’s shoe skids out and stamps it. Mrs. Roberts pushes her chair back and clambers towards Allegra, swollen ankles stuffed into her shoes like rising bread dough. As she reaches for the sole of Allegra’s foot, she is arrested by Allegra’s amazing Queen. “Get! Up!” Mrs. Roberts says in a terrible voice. Allegra’s going to pee. Mrs. Roberts rips the Queen from Allegra’s scribbler. Allegra stands, knees together, toes pointed

outward in a plié. The offending scrap scrunched under her foot. “Lift!” Mrs. Roberts orders. Allegra, forever hopeful, lifts the wrong foot. Not wise. Mrs. Roberts retrieves the note. “Foot in the air!” Allegra sinks into her desk, one foot airborne.



Winnie Peters titters. Aggie Falola wheezes. They can see her panties then. Aggie and Allegra have a history. Together they sobbed out Grade 1, snivelling through *Dorothy Jane of the Air*, and *A Time to Tell*, until Mrs. Edison would have enough and send them packing to the Grade 8 classroom where their sisters, Valerie and Ingrid, had to pull out their desk drawers and perch their bawling little sisters, for all the world like motorcycles with a side car. Such commiseration ruined their sisters’

moods, and did nothing to bring Aggie and Allegra closer. *Dear Jesus please please please pulleese don’t make me go to school tomorrow.* Mrs. Roberts bends with a grunt, scrapes up the grimy piece of paper, reads it, says icily, “Who is the bearer of this note?” The day is not progressing well. Allegra’s leg aches. She lowers it a smidgen, so her heel tips the floor. “Up!” hisses Mrs. Roberts. Allegra feels the sting of sobs way in her throat. Dougie Staganofsky’s neck is craned, his smudged nose shining; Allegra gulps; a sob burps out. Winnie snickers into her hand; Aggie wheezewheeze-wheezes. *Kindergarten baby! Wash your face in gravy!* Allegra circles her achy little foot and cries. Mrs. Roberts stares at Allegra, slams off to the back of the classroom, grabs the tin basin sitting in the sink, smacks it down beside Allegra’s

desk. Steel reverberates on lino. Before you can say Jack Robinson, Allegra finds her head shoved over the round tin bowl.

“I’m sick and tired of you wasting good salt water, Allegra Gillis. If you want to bawl, you bawl right into here!” And until a student rings the bell for noon hour, Allegra cries, neck cranked over the basin, her tears collecting in a salty film.

At noon the school yard is abuzz with who sent the note and what it contained. Garth sent it to Stewie

who airplaned it to Dougie but Lena intercepted. Allegra walks the tufted grass along the schoolyard fence, sniffing, Lena breathy and indignant beside her. Winnie Peters, who has no friends, trots grinning behind. The mysterious note says four words. Roy is a retard. Who is Roy? This is Lena's secret. Mrs. Roberts has a son, grown up, who's not all there. Imagine! But then no one is surprised. Roy doesn't live with her. Who would? Well. Anything we learn can and will be used against you. That afternoon *retard Roy, retard Roy* shimmies up and down the aisles, but no one moves his mouth, so Mrs. Roberts can't pick out the culprits. Surprisingly, Mrs. Roberts gets quiet, assigns them reading. Looks 100 instead of 80. Allegra cheers up immensely. Forgets to worry about the time. And just before the bell, Dougie Staganofsky sidles up on the way back from doing the brushes and shoves a sticky sugar-coated Juicy Fruit, unwrapped, into Allegra's palm.



Allegra's feeling holy, and grateful for it. On Sunday, Rose, Patricia Bontreger and Elsie Shantz got baptized. The Holy Spirit's flame ignited. You have to be 13, old enough to know what you are doing. The girls knelt at the front of the church in their lacy white dresses, and the preacher splashed water over their heads from a big white pitcher. *O Shepherd of Israel, hear us. Look down from heaven. Protect this vine that your right hand has planted. In the name of the Father, splish, and the Son, splish, and the Holy Ghost, splish, splish.*

"Our church dunks," Lena whispered to Allegra. Dunks? Allegra felt laughter spurting. Marion Weaver walked to the front.

"What's she doing?" whispered Lena.

"She's the chorister. She starts the song."

Marion blew into her pitch pipe,

and swung into *Love Lifted Me*.

Lena, ignorant in the ways of Mennonites, tight beside Allegra on the front pew, threw back her head and flapped her arms in response to Marion's three-four time. What could Allegra do but join the fun?

I was sinking deep in sin, they blared, arms flailing, far from the peaceful sho-ore.

Marion gave them "the look."

Very deeply stained within, Sinking to rise no mo-ore.

When the Master of the sea...



The day is not progressing well. Allegra's leg aches. She lowers it a smidgen, so her heel tips the floor. "Up!" hisses Mrs. Roberts.

At this moment, Allegra's father—who would have thought?—jumped from his place, marched across the church to the women's side, and dragged Allegra to the men's, Sunday shoes clattering, where she sat in disgrace, squished between her dad and Elmer Eister who smells like fried cheese. Right there all the fun swooshed out of Rose's baptism. Sunday before, Elmer Eister nodded off beside her father, his body sagging, sagging, until his head plopped right into her father's armpit. Stayed there. Her father got the giggles. He pretended he was coughing, but everyone could see his shoulders hopping. Nobody dragged *him* across the aisle to the women's side. The preacher

just preached on.

Allegra lies back now in her state of holiness, and sighs luxuriously. Her mother and June are in the kitchen making pickles. The dill brine splashing, the sealers clinking. Allegra's nostrils fill with the clean sharpness of the Holy Spirit.

Sunday night Allegra got saved. Again. Swept up in the swell of sobbing that filled the school gym. The visiting evangelist told the story of the girl and her boyfriend who sinned after Young People's on a Friday evening and were killed that night crossing the railway tracks outside Albuquerque. Forever lost. No time to repent. Allegra's kind of story. According to other evangelists Allegra's heard, these deaths have also happened in Michigan, Kansas and Steinbach, Manitoba. God will get you if you sin.

Allegra began weeping with anticipation before the unfortunate couple had yanked off their clothes, her anguish bubbling gustily as the boy forgot to put the truck lights on, so spent was he after his lust. Allegra wasn't sure what lust meant but it had a terrific sound. Wonderfully terrible. The evangelist hissed it like a snake. Lusst. Could Allegra be afflicted? Valerie's boyfriend was darting anxious glances at Valerie as she horked into her hanky. Allegra's weeping turned to sobs which climaxed in a hiccupping sort of howl as the couple reached the railroad tracks. Oh, Allegra wasn't alone. Half the high school gym was sobbing along with her. What a story! Catholics, Anglicans, United Churchers, Mennonites. All brought to their knees by sin. The visiting evangelist's voice swelled. The boy had barely hit the brakes before Allegra was propelled right out of her seat and down the aisle. The visiting organist, seizing the moment, launched into a harrowing rendition of *Just As I Am Without One Plea*, followed by *Kneel at the Cross*, but Allegra was already kneeling along with half the congregation, saved by the blood of Jesus. There were special counsellors on hand to pray

with the saved. When June got a look at the cute one with the bow tie, she was down the aisle in a jiffy, elbowing her way to his side, and all the sinners swept down the basement stairs on the road to glory.

The time before when Allegra got saved was a terrible disappointment. A pulpit exchange with the Baptists, no special music, just Allegra and her sisters singing *Submission* and *Pray On*. In fact the altar call came as a surprise. There was some discomfort: a Mennonite saved by a Baptist? Lena was busy sticking paper doll dresses on the bench back with Scotch tape, and wouldn't budge. Come on! Allegra had hissed and sprinted up the aisle. But from there the whole experience soured. Lena, preoccupied with fashion, stuck to the bench. Only Allegra, simple Annie Weir, and a few meek wives turned out. Allegra, on her knees in the basement, prayed for her promised burst of joy. Nothing. At last she gave up and skulked out of the basement into sunshine, only to find that, taking advantage of her absence, Phyllis Kauffman had invited Lena over for the afternoon. Is this how you thank me for being your little shining light? Allegra asked God resentfully that afternoon, flat on her back on her bed, legs climbing the wall, planning revenge on Phyllis and God. She would not get up off the toilet next time Phyllis had to pee. As for God, she would cut out His tongue so he couldn't roar his holy ordinances.

But this one's the real thing. Sweat on her palms. A glorious ringing in her ears. It is three days later, and Allegra still feels holy. She's a child of God. She *belongs*. She sits on the front porch trying, out of habit, to ignore the sunset, the sky resplendent with burnished oranges, blushes and greys. Sunsets strike fear into Allegra. Jesus bound to swoop out of the clouds and whisk away ready saints. And just who might be left behind? But tonight, as she perches on the step, drinking vinegar punch, a cloud forms itself into an angel with wispy wings and, as

Allegra gazes into that mauve and blue heaven, she feels a rush, feels her few sins of the day wash away like a river torrent. She in fact gets downright dizzy. To her mother's surprise, she goes to bed early and when she wakes up the next morning, her stomach dances butterflies. Saved by the Lamb. Allegra has not fought with Marigold since Sunday morning. She has not read Rose's diary since Saturday afternoon. She has swept the kitchen for her mother. Here her list of good deeds wears thin, but it takes a lot of concentration holding the posture of holiness; she can't always be *doing*. Allegra searches out the pictures in her little Bible, discovers it's easier to look holy with a dishtowel on your head. She ties one over her straight brown hair out behind the shed. Her sisters swing by on their bikes and shriek with laughter. It's hard not to fall back into a life of sin right there, but Allegra holds her dishtoweled head high and says, "Perverse lips put far from thee." Part of her Sunday school memory work, Proverbs 4:24. It gives her a heady God-is-talking-through-me feeling. Her sisters skid their bikes in dirt and tear out the lane. Allegra's ears sing. She's memorized Acts. She knows the Holy Spirit swooshes in with a noise like wind and water. She wanders to the house, enters the cool dark living room, falls on the couch. She can hear her sisters spinning off to the mile and back. June is stuffing cukes. A bee drones outside the screened windows. The jars Allegra's mother is washing clink and roll inside Allegra's head. Allegra listens to the clock tick, bee hum, kitchen scuffles, floats off, drowns in the summer heat, in the steamy pickle house.

Why aren't you playing, Allie? You're hot."

Allegra stares up in a stupor at her sister until June yells, "Mom, Allegra's hot. Should I take her temperature?"

By now Allegra, having dozed for 40 minutes, feels much better, if a little sweaty, but she loves being the patient and June's pickle-drenched hand feels good against her fore-

head, so she says in her teensy-weensy voice she's practised for school mornings, "I think I'm sick."

Allegra's mother appears in the doorway, "You okay, Allegra? The jars are ready, June. Be quick about it."

June runs for the thermometer, but Allegra sees its mercury glinting on the window sill above her, just where Rose left it yesterday when they played hospital. "Got it," she calls weakly, and pops it in her mouth. June shouts from a long way off, "Allie. Be back in three."

The sealers clank and the house grows steamier and some time later June emerges through a fog to draw the thermometer from Allegra's mouth. She gasps, turns it in her fingers, shrieks, runs for the kitchen.

A lovely reaction. Allegra stretches, curls her toes, and waits. Her mother charges through the kitchen door.

"Allegra. Sit up, honey. No, lie down. How could this be? June, call the doctor."

June's already stuttering into the phone. Allegra's sisters clatter in, dirty-elbowed, thirsty. "What's all the fuss?"

"Allegra's temperature is 105!"

"Is she dying?" asks Marigold, perking up.

And it is then that Allegra understands. She's so pure and holy that she's become an angel of the Lord, and God is going to take her from her dirty sisters to His golden city with many mansions. Her sisters will be left to mourn beside her little bicycle. A sob heaves Allegra's chest. They will gather Allegra's dolls, her train set, her plastic baking set, her meccano, create a corner of the kitchen for her mementos. She wails her thrilling joy into her sisters' suspicious faces. Her bursting heart. She's so holy she's being summoned to the Lord.

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