The Day I Sat With Jesus on the Sun Deck and a Wind Came Up and Blew My Kimono Open and He Saw My Breasts

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When an extraordinary event occurs in your life, you’re apt to remember with unnatural clarity the details surrounding it. You remember shapes and sounds that weren’t directly related to the happening but hovered there in the periphery of the experience. This can even happen when you read a great book for the first time—one that unsettles you and startles you into thought. You remember where you read it, what room, who was nearby.

I can still remember, for instance, where I read Of Human Bondage by W. Somerset Maugham. I was lying on a top bunk in our high school dormitory, wrapped in a blue bedspread. I lived in a dormitory then because of my father. He was a very religious man and wanted me to get a spiritual kind of education. To hear the Word and know the Lord, as he put it. So he sent me to St. John’s Lutheran Academy in Regina for two years. He was confident, I guess, that that’s where I’d hear the Word. Anyway, I can still hear Mrs. Sverdren, our housemother, knocking on the door at midnight and whispering in her Norwegian accent, “Now, Gloria, it is past 12 o’clock. It is time to turn off the light. Right now.” Then scuffing down the corridor in her bedroom slippers. What’s interesting here is that I don’t remember anything about the book itself except that someone in it had a club foot. But it must have moved me deeply when I was sixteen, which is some time ago now.

You can imagine then how distinctly I remember the day Jesus of Nazareth, in person, climbed the hill in our back yard to our house, then up the outside stairs to the sun deck where I was sitting. And how He stayed with me for awhile. You can surely understand how clear those details rest in my memory.

The event occurred on Monday morning, September 11, 1972, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. These facts in themselves are more unusual than they may appear to be at first glance. September’s my favorite month, Monday my favorite day, morning my favorite time. And although Moose Jaw may not be the most magnificent place in the world, even so, if you happen to be there on a Monday morning in September it has its beauty.
It's not hard to figure out why these are my favorites, by the way. I have a husband and five children. Things get hectic, especially on week-ends and holidays. Kids hanging around the house, eating, arguing, asking me every hour what there is to do in Moose Jaw. And television. The programs are always the same. Only the names change. Rough Riders, Blue Bombers, whatever. So when school starts in September I bask in freedom, especially on Monday. No quarrels. No TV. And the morning, clear and lovely. A new day. A fresh start.

On the morning of September 11 I got up at 7, the usual time, cooked cream of wheat for the kids, fried a bit of sausage for Fred, waved them all out of the house, drank a second cup of coffee in peace, and decided to get at last week's ironing. I wasn't dressed yet but still in the pink kimono I'd bought years ago on my trip to Japan, my one and only overseas trip, a 300-dollar quick tour of Tokyo and other cities. I'd saved for this while working as a library technician in Regina. And I'm glad I did. Since then I've hardly been out of Saskatchewan. Once in awhile a trip to Winnipeg, and a few times down to Medicine Lake, Montana, to visit my sister.

I set up the ironing board and hauled out the basket of week-old sprinkled clothes. When I unrolled the first shirt it was completely dry and smelled stale. The second was covered with little grey blots of mould. So was the third. Fred teaches junior high science here in Moose Jaw. He uses a lot of shirts. I decided I'd have to unwrap the whole basketful and air everything out. This I did, spreading the pungent garments about the living room. While they were airing I would go outside and sit on the deck for awhile, since it was such a clear and sunny day.

If you know Moose Jaw at all, you'll know about the new subdivision at the southeast end called Hillhurst. That's where we live, right on the edge of the city. In fact, our deck looks out on flat land as far as the eye can see, except for the back yard itself which is a fairly steep hill leading down to a stone quarry. But from the quarry the land straightens out into the Saskatchewan prairie. One clump of poplars stands beyond the quarry to the right, and high weeds have grown up among the rocks. Other than that it's plain—just earth and sky. But when the sun rises new in the morning, weeds and rocks take on an orange and rusty glow which is pleasing. To me at least.
I unplugged the iron and returned to the kitchen. I’d bring a cup of coffee out there, or maybe orange juice. To reach the juice at the back of the fridge my hand passed right next to a bottle of dry red Calona. Now here was a better idea. A little wine on Monday morning, a little relaxation after a rowdy week-end. I held the familiar bottle comfortably in my hand and poured, anticipating a pleasant day.

On the deck I pulled an old canvas folding chair into the sun, and sat. Beauty and tranquility floated toward me on Monday morning, September 11, around 9:40.

First He was a little bump on the far, far off prairie. Then He was a mole, way beyond the quarry. Then a larger animal, a dog perhaps, moving out there through the grass. Nearing the quarry, He became a person. No doubt about that. A woman perhaps, still in her bathrobe. But edging out from the rocks, through the weeds, toward the hill, He was clear to me. I knew then who He was. I knew it just as I knew the sun was shining.

The reason I knew is that He looked exactly the way I’d seen him 5000 times in pictures, in books and Sunday School pamphlets. If there was ever a person I’d seen and heard about, over and over, this was the one. Even in grade school those terrible questions. Do you love the Lord? Are you saved by grace alone through faith? Are you awaiting eagerly the glorious day of His Second Coming? And will you be ready on that Great Day? I’d sometimes hidden under the bed when I was a child, wondering if I really had been saved by grace alone, or, without realizing it, I’d been trying some other method, like the Catholics, who were saved by their good works and would land in hell. Except for a few who knew in their hearts it was really grace, but they didn’t want to leave the church because of their relatives. And was this it? Would the trumpet sound tonight and the sky split in two? Would the great Lord and King, Alpha and Omega, holding aloft the seven candlesticks, accompanied by a heavenly host which no man could number—descend from heaven with a mighty shout? And was I ready? Rev. Hanson in his high pulpit in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, roared in my ears and clashed against my eardrums.

And there He was. Coming. Climbing the hill in our back yard, His body bent against the climb, His robes ruffling in the wind. He was coming. And I was not ready. All those mouldy clothes scattered about the living room. And me in this faded old thing, made in Japan,
and drinking—in the middle of the morning.

He had reached the steps now. His right hand was on the railing. Jesus’ fingers were curled around my railing. He was coming up. He was ascending. He was coming up to me here on the sun deck.

He stood on the top step and looked at me. I looked at Him. He looked exactly right, exactly the same as all the pictures: white robe, purple stole, bronze hair, creamy skin. How had all those queer artists, illustrators of Sunday School papers, how had they gotten Him exactly right like that?

He stood at the top of the stairs. I sat there holding my glass. What do you say to Jesus when He comes? How do you address Him? Do you call Him Jesus? I supposed that was His first name. Or Christ? I remembered the woman at the well, the one living in adultery who'd called Him Sir. Perhaps I could try that. Or maybe I should pretend not to recognize Him. Maybe, for some reason, He didn't mean for me to recognize Him. Then He spoke.

“Good morning,” He said. “My name is Jesus.”

“How do you do,” I said. “My name is Gloria Olson.”

My name is Gloria Olson. That’s what I said, all right. As if He didn’t know.

He smiled, standing there at the top of the stairs. I thought of what I should do next. Then I got up and unfolded another canvas chair.

“You have a nice view here,” He said, leaning back on the canvas and pressing His sandaled feet against the iron bars of the railing.

“Thank you. We like it.”

Nice view. Those were His very words. Everyone who comes to our house and stands on the deck says that. Everyone.

“I wasn't expecting company today.” I straightened the folds in my pink kimono and tightened the cloth more securely over my knees. I picked up the glass from the floor where I’d laid it.

“I was just passing through on my way to Winnipeg. I thought I'd drop by.”

“I've heard a lot about you,” I said. “You look quite a bit like your pictures.” I raised the glass to my mouth and saw that His hands were empty. I should offer him something to drink. Tea? Milk? How should I ask Him what He’d like to drink? What words should I use?

“It gets pretty dusty out there,” I finally said. “Would you care for something to drink?” He looked at the glass in my hand. “I could make you some tea,” I added.
“Thanks,” He said. “What are you drinking?”
“Well, on Mondays I like to relax a bit after the busy week-end with the family all home. I have five children, you know. So sometimes after breakfast I have a little wine.”
“That would be fine,” He said.
By luck I found a clean tumbler in the cupboard. I stood by the sink, pouring the wine. And then, like a bolt of lightning, I realized my situation. Oh, Johann Sebastian Bach. Glory. Honor. Wisdom. Power. George Fredrick Handel. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He’s on my sun deck. Today He’s sitting on my sun deck. I can ask Him any question under the sun, anything at all, He’ll know the answer. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Well, now, wasn’t this something for a Monday morning in Moose Jaw.
I opened the fridge door to replace the bottle. And I saw my father. It was New Year’s morning. My father was sitting at the kitchen table. Mother had covered the oatmeal pot to let it simmer on the stove. I could hear the lid bumping against the rim, quietly. She sat across the table from Daddy. Sigrid and Freda sat on one side of the table, Raymond and I on the other. We were holding hymn books, little black books turned to page one. It was dark outside. On New Year’s morning we got up before sunrise. Daddy was looking at us with his chin pointed out. It meant be still and sit straight. Raymond sat as straight and stiff as a soldier, waiting for Daddy to notice how nice and stiff he sat. We began singing. Page one. Hymn for the New Year. Philipp Nicolai. 1599. We didn’t really need the books. We’d sung the same song since the time of our conception. Daddy always sang the loudest.

The Morning Star upon us gleams; How full of grace and truth His beams,
How passing fair His splendor. Good Shepherd, David’s proper heir,
My King in heav’n Thou dost me bear Upon Thy bosom tender.

Near—est, Dear—est, High—est, Bright—est, Thou delight—est
Still to love me, Thou so high enthroned a—bove me.

I didn’t mind, actually, singing hymns on New Year’s, as long as I was sure no one else would find out. I’d have been rather embarrassed if any of my friends ever found out how we spent New Year’s. It’s easy at a certain age to be embarrassed about your family. I remember Alice Johnson, how embarrassed she was about her father, Elmer Johnson.

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He was an alcoholic and couldn't control his urine. Her mother always had to clean up after him. Even so, the house smelled. I suppose she couldn't get it all. I know Alice was embarrassed when we saw Elmer all tousled and sick looking, with urine stains on his trousers. I really don't know what would be harder on a kid—having a father who's a drunk, or one who's sober on New Year's and sings *The Morning Star*.

I walked across the deck and handed Jesus the wine. I sat down, resting my glass on the flap of my kimono. Jesus was looking out over the prairie. He seemed to be noticing everything out there. He was obviously in no hurry to leave, but He didn't have much to say. I thought of what to say next.

“I suppose you're more used to the sea than to the prairie.”

“Yes,” He answered, “I've lived most of my life near water. But I like the prairie too. There's something nice about the prairie.” He turned His face to the wind, stronger now, coming toward us from the east.

*Nice* again. If I'd ever used that word to describe the prairie, in an English theme at St. John's, for example, it would have had three red circles around it. At least three. I raised my glass to the wind. Good old St. John's. Good old Pastor Solberg, standing in front of the wooden altar, holding the gospel aloft in his hand.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God
   And the Word was God. All things were made by Him
   And without Him was not anything made that was made.

I was sitting on a bench by Paul Thorson. We were sharing a hymnal. Our thumbs touched at the center of the book. It was winter. The chapel was cold—an army barracks left over from World War II. We wore parkas and sat close together. Paul fooled around with his thumb, pushing my thumb to my own side of the book, then pulling it back to his side. The wind howled outside. We watched our breath as we sang the hymn.
Gloria Sawai

In Thine arms I rest me, Foes who would molest me
Cannot reach me here; Tho' the earth be shak-ing,
Ev-ry heart be quak-ing, Jesus calms my fear;
Fires may flash and thun-der crash,
Yea, and sin and hell as-sail me,
Jesus will not fai-l me.

And here he was. Alpha and Omega. The Word. Sitting on my canvas chair and telling me the prairie's nice. What could I say to that?

"I like it too," I said.

Jesus was watching a magpie circling above the poplars just beyond the quarry. He seemed very nice actually. But He wasn't like my father. My father was perfect, mind you. But you know about perfect people—busy, busy. He wasn't as busy as Elsie though. Elsie was the busy one. You could never visit there without her having to do something else at the same time. Wash the leaves of her plants with milk, or fold socks in the basement while you sat on a bench by the washing machine. I wouldn't mind sitting on a bench in the basement if that was all she had. But her living room was full of big soft chairs that no one ever sat in. Now Christ here didn't have any work to do at all.

The wind had risen now. His robes puffed about his legs. His hair swirled around his face. I set my glass down and held my kimono together at my knees. The wind was coming stronger now out of the east. My kimono flapped about my ankles. I bent down to secure the bottom, pressing the moving cloth close against my legs. A Saskatchewan wind comes up in a hurry, let me tell you. Then it happened. A gust of wind hit me straight on, seeping into the folds of my kimono, reaching down into the bodice, billowing the cloth out, until above the sash, the robe was fully open. I knew without looking. The wind was suddenly blowing on my breasts. I felt it cool on both my breasts. Then as quickly as it came, it left.

I looked at Jesus. He was looking at me. And at my breasts. Looking right at them. Jesus was sitting there on the sun deck, looking at my breasts.

What should I do? Say excuse me and push them back into the kimono? Make a little joke of it? Look what the wind blew in, or something? Or should I say nothing? Just tuck them in as inconspicuously as possible. What do you say when a wind comes up and blows your kimono open and He sees your breasts?
Now, I know there are ways and there are ways of exposing your breasts. I know a few things. I read books. And I’ve learned a lot from my cousin Millie. Millie’s the black sheep in the relation. She left the Academy without graduating to become an artist’s model in Winnipeg. And dancer. Anyway, Millie’s told me a few things about bodily exposure. She says, for instance, that when an artist wants to draw his model, he has her either completely nude and stretching and bending in various positions so he can sketch her from different angles, or he drapes her with cloth, satin usually. He covers one section of the body with the material and leaves the rest exposed. But he does it in a graceful way, maybe draping the cloth over her stomach or ankle. Never over the breasts. So I realized that my appearance right then wasn’t actually pleasing, either aesthetically or erotically—from Millie’s point of view. My breasts were just sticking out from the top of my old kimono. And for some reason which I certainly can’t explain, even to this day, I did nothing about it. I just sat there.

Jesus must have recognized my confusion. He said—quite sincerely I thought—“You have nice breasts.”

“Thanks,” I said. And I didn’t know what else to say so I asked him if he’d like more wine.

“Yes, I would,” he said, and I left to refill the glass. When I returned, He was watching the magpie swishing about in the tall weeds of the quarry. I sat down beside Him, and watched with Him.

Then I got a very, very peculiar sensation. I know it was just an illusion, but it was so strong it scared me. It’s hard to explain because nothing like it had ever happened to me before. The magpie began to float toward Jesus. I saw it fluttering toward Him in the air as if some vacuum were sucking it in. And when it reached Him, it flapped about on his chest which was bare because the top of His robe had slipped down. It nibbled at His little brown nipples and squawked and disappeared. For all the world, it seemed to disappear right into His pores. Then the same thing happened with a rock. A rock floating up from the quarry and landing on the breast of Jesus, melting into His skin. It was very strange, let me tell you, Jesus and I sitting there together with that happening. It made me kind of dizzy, so I closed my eyes.

And I saw the women in the public bath in Tokyo. Dozens of women and children. Some were squatting by the faucets that lined
one wall. They were running hot water into their basins and washing themselves all over with their soapy wash cloths, then emptying the water and filling the basins several times with clear water, pouring it over their bodies for the rinse. Others, who’d finished washing, were sitting in the hot pool on the far side, soaking themselves in the steamy water as they jabbered away to each other. Then I saw her. The woman without the breasts. She was squatting by a faucet near the door. The oldest woman I’ve ever seen. And the thinnest. Skin and bones. Literally. Just skin and bones. She bowed and smiled at everyone who entered. And she had only three teeth. When she hunched over her basin, I saw the little creases of skin where her breasts had been. When she stood up, the wrinkles disappeared. In their place were two shallow caves. Even the nipples seemed to have disappeared into the small brown caves of her breasts.

I opened my eyes and looked at Jesus. Fortunately, everything had stopped floating.

“Have you ever been to Japan? I asked.
“Yes,” He said. “A few times.”

I paid no attention to His answer but went on telling Him all about Japan as if He’d never been there. I couldn’t seem to stop talking, especially about that old woman and her breasts.

“You should have seen her,” I said. “She wasn’t flat chested like some women even here in Moose Jaw. It wasn’t like that at all. Her breasts weren’t just flat. They were caved in. Just as if the flesh had sunk right there. Have you ever seen breasts like that before?”

Jesus’ eyes were getting darker. He seemed to have sunk further down into his chair.

“Japanese women have smaller breasts to begin with usually,” He said.

But He’d misunderstood me. It wasn’t just her breasts that held me. It was her jaws, teeth, neck, ankles, heels. Everything. Not just her breasts. I said nothing for awhile. Jesus, too, was not talking.

Finally, I asked, “Well, what do you think of breasts like that?”

I knew immediately that I’d asked the wrong question. If you want personal and specific answers, you ask personal and specific questions. It’s as simple as that. I should have asked Him, for instance, what He thought of them from a sexual point of view. If He were a lover, let’s say, would He like to hold such breasts in His hand and play on them with His teeth and fingers? Would He now? The
woman, brown and shiny, was bending over her basin. Tiny bubbles of soap dribbled from the creases of her chest down to her navel. Hold them. Ha.

Or I could have asked for some kind of aesthetic opinion. If He were an artist, a sculptor let’s say, would He travel to Italy, and would He spend weeks excavating the best marble from the hills near Florence, and then would He stay up night and day in his studio—without eating or bathing—and with matted hair and glazed eyes would He chisel out those little creases from His great stone slabs?

Or if He were a curator in a museum in Paris, would He place these little wrinkles on a silver pedestal in the center of the foyer?

Or if He were a patron of the arts, would He attend the opening of this great exhibition and stand in front of these white caves in His purple turtleneck, sipping champagne and nibbling on the little cracker with the shrimp in the middle, and would He turn to the one beside him, the one in the sleek black pants, and would He say to her, “Look, darling. Did you see this marvelous piece? Do you see how the artist has captured the very essence of the female form?”

These are some of the things I could have said if I’d had my wits about me. But my wits certainly left me that day. All I did say, and I didn’t mean to—it just came out—was, “It’s not nice and I don’t like it.”

I lifted my face, threw my head back, and let the wind blow on my neck and breasts. It was blowing harder again. I felt small grains of sand scrape against my nipple.

Jesus lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly.
While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is nigh...

When I looked at Him again, His eyes were blacker still and His body had shrunk considerably. He looked almost like Jimmy that time in Prince Albert. Jimmy’s an old neighbor from Regina. On his twenty-seventh birthday he joined a motorcycle club, the Grim Reapers to be exact, and got into a lot of trouble. He ended up in maximum security in P.A. One summer on a camping trip up north we stopped to see him—Fred and the kids and I. It wasn’t a very good visit, by the way. If you’re going to visit inmates you should do it regularly. I realize this now. But anyway, that’s when his eyes looked
black like that. But maybe he'd been smoking. It's probably not the same thing. Jimmy Lebrun. He never did think it was funny when I'd call him a Midnight Raider instead of a Grim Reaper. People are sensitive about their names.

Then Jesus finally answered. Everything took Him a long time, even answering simple questions.

But I'm not sure what He said because something so strange happened then that whatever he did say was swept away. Right then the wind blew against my face, pulling my hair back. My kimono swirled about every which way, and I was swinging my arms in the air, like swimming. And there right below my eyes was the roof of our house. I was looking down on the top of the roof. I saw the row of shingles ripped loose from the August hail storm. And I remember thinking—Fred hasn't fixed those shingles yet. I'll have to remind him when he gets home from work. If it rains again the back bedroom will get soaked. Before I knew it I was circling over the sun deck, looking down on the top of Jesus' head. Only I wasn't. I was sitting in the canvas chair watching myself hover over His shoulders. Only it wasn't me hovering. It was the old woman in Tokyo. I saw her gray hair twisting in the wind and her shiny little bum raised in the air, like a baby's. Water was dripping from her chin and toes. And soap bubbles trailed from her elbows like tinsel. She was floating down toward His chest. Only it wasn't her. It was me. I could taste bits of suds sticking to the corners of my mouth and feel the wind on my wet back and in the hollow caves of my breasts. I was smiling and bowing, and the wind was blowing in narrow wisps against my toothless gums. And then quickly, so quickly, like a flock of waxwings diving through snow into the branches of the poplars, I was splitting up into millions and millions of pieces and sinking into the tiny, tiny holes in His chest. I was like the magpie and the rock, like I had come apart into atoms or molecules or whatever we really are.

After that I was dizzy. I began to feel nauseated, sitting there on my chair. Jesus looked sick too. Sad and sick and lonesome. Oh, Christ, I thought, why are we sitting here on such a fine day pouring our sorrows into each other?

I had to get up and walk around. I'd go into the kitchen and make some tea.

I put the kettle on to boil. What on earth had gotten into me? Why had I spent this perfectly good morning talking about breasts? My
one chance in a lifetime and I let it go. Why didn’t I have better control? Why did I always let everything get out of hand? Breasts. And why was my name Gloria? Such a pious name for one who can’t think of anything else to talk about but breasts. Why wasn’t it Lucille? Or Millie? You could talk about breasts all day if your name was Millie. But Gloria. Gloria. Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-oria. I knew then why so many Glorias hang around bars, talking too loud, laughing shrilly at stupid jokes, making sure everyone hears them laugh at the dirty jokes. They’re just trying to live down their name, that’s all. I brought out the cups and poured the tea.

Everything was back to normal when I returned. Except that Jesus still looked desolate sitting there in my canvas chair. I handed Him the tea and sat down beside Him.

Oh, Daddy. And Phillip Nicolai. Oh, Bernard of Clairvoux. Oh, Sacred Head Now Wounded. Go away for a little while and let us sit together quietly, here in this small space under the sun.

I sipped the tea and watched His face. He looked so sorrowful I reached out and put my hand on His wrist. I sat there a long while, rubbing the little hairs on His wrist with my fingers. I couldn’t help it. After that He put His arm on my shoulder and His hand on the back of my neck, stroking the muscles there. It felt good. Whenever anything exciting or unusual happens to me my neck is the first to feel it. It gets stiff and knotted up. Then I usually get a headache, and frequently I become nauseous. So it felt very good having my neck rubbed.

I’ve never been able to handle sensation very well. I remember when I was in grade three and my folks took us to the Saskatoon Exhibition. We went to the grandstand show to see the battle of Wolfe and Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham. The stage was filled with Indians and pioneers and ladies in red, white and blue dresses, singing “In Days Of Yore From Britain’s Shore.” It was very spectacular, but too much for me. My stomach was upset and my neck ached. I had to keep my head on my mother’s lap the whole time, just opening my eyes once in awhile so I wouldn’t miss everything.

So it felt really good to have my neck stroked like that. I could almost feel the knots untying and my body becoming warmer and more restful. Jesus too seemed to be feeling better. His body was back to normal. His eyes looked natural again.
Then, all of a sudden, He started to laugh. He held his hand on my neck and laughed out loud. I don't know to this day what he was laughing about. There was nothing funny there at all. But hearing Him made me laugh too. I couldn’t stop. He was laughing so hard He spilled the tea over His purple stole. When I saw that, I laughed even harder. I'd never thought of Jesus spilling His tea before. And when Jesus saw me laugh so hard and when He looked at my breasts shaking, He laughed harder still, till He wiped tears from his eyes.

After that we just sat there. I don’t know how long. I know we watched the magpie carve black waves in the air above the rocks. And the rocks stiff and lovely among the swaying weeds. We watched the poplars twist and bend and rise again beyond the quarry. And then He had to leave.

"Goodbye, Gloria Olson," He said, stretching from his chair. "Thanks for the hospitality."

He kissed me on my mouth. Then He flicked my nipple with His finger. And off He went. Down the stairs. Down the hill. Through the quarry, and into the prairie. I stood on the sun deck and watched. I watched until I could see Him no longer. Until He was only some dim and ancient star on the far horizon.

I went inside the house. Well, now, wasn’t that a nice visit. Wasn’t that something. I examined the clothes, dry and sour in the living room. I’d have to put them back in the wash, that’s all. I couldn’t stand the smell. I tucked my breasts back into my kimono and lugged the basket downstairs.

That’s what happened to me in Moose Jaw in 1972. It was the main thing that happened to me that year.