

# GLORIA SAWAI

Gloria Ostrem Sawai's first collection of short stories, *A Song for Nettie Johnson*, was published in 2001, when she was 68 years old. It drew immediate favourable attention, winning, among other awards, Canada's illustrious Governor General's Award. Prior to *Nettie Johnson*'s publication and Sawai's many awards, Sawai's short stories had been widely anthologized for many years including in the *Oxford Anthology of Canadian Short Fiction*, edited by Margaret Atwood. Sawai's most well-known short story, "The Day I Sat with Jesus on the Sundeck and a Wind Came Up and Blew My Kimono Open and He Saw My Breasts," has been published in anthologies not only throughout Canada, but also in the United States, Denmark, Spain, and Japan. Sawai was also a playwright.

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Gloria Sawai grew up in Saskatchewan, and moved with her family to Alberta when she was fifteen. She received a BA from Augsburg College, Minneapolis, and an MFA from the University of Montana. She worked as an English teacher at both the high school and university levels, and as a waitress, theatre director, and seller of industrial cleaning compounds. She also taught creative writing at the Saskatchewan School of Arts, the Banff School of Fine Arts, and Grant MacEwan University. She passed away in 2011.

Published in *A Song for Nettie Johnson*, "Mother's Day" explores a girl's resistance to the traditionally restrictive categories associated with growing up female in a small and conservative prairie town. The shocking act of the main character, Norma, exposes her hidden and "peculiar" ambivalence toward "everything ... about my body and sexual things"—the "everything" that, for Norma, emphasizes motherhood as the only means for a woman to express herself.

## *Mother's Day*

GLORIA SAWAI

MOTHER'S Day was on May 9 that year. On May 6 we had the blizzard and school was closed. On May 7 I was sick. I was sick until May 8, so I missed two days of school: May 6, the day of the blizzard, and May 7, the day I was sick. (May 8 was a Saturday so there was no school that day anyway.) On Mother's Day I found the cat. And on Monday, May 10, everything was back to normal.

I will begin with May 6, because that is the first day of all the days. I suppose I could even start with the night before, since I heard later that the blizzard commenced in all its fury around 11 p.m. I, of course, was sleeping at that time and knew nothing of it. But people talked about it for days and weeks and months afterward, so naturally I have quite a clear picture of how it all began.

It began with the wind. Even before I went to bed that night it was blowing. The snow had melted early that year, before the end of March, and although fields in the country were still wet and patched with dirty snow, the streets in town were dry and dusty. Every day we walked to school in whorls of dust and rolling thistles. Saskatchewan, as you know, is one of the three prairie provinces, and spring on the prairie is a dry and dusty scene indeed.

It is unlike spring in areas further south, such as the Southern States in the United States. I've read about spring in these places and seen pictures of it. In Kentucky, for instance, spring is calm and colourful and it lasts longer. In Kentucky there's more foliage: japonica, forsythia, dogwood. All these plants have lovely blooms and the blooms don't develop at the same rate. Thus the colours spread out over a longer period of time. My father subscribes to the *National Geographic*.

In Saskatchewan, however, spring is bare. And if I may speak candidly, it is quite lonesome. The lonesome period is between the time the snow melts and the time the grass turns green. (Weeds, I should say since we don't have much grass.) The lonesome period is the dry time when the ground is grey, trees (what few there are) are bare, and rubbish, buried for months under snow, is fully exposed. The lonesome period is usually filled with wind that picks up the dust, dead thistles, mouldy scraps of paper, and whirls them across the alleys and down the streets, with no thought whatsoever to what pleases us.

I was lying in bed when I heard the wind. It rattled the windows, whistled in the chimney. It grew stronger, howling about the house like a great enemy who hated us personally and our home too, down to its very foundation. That's the feeling I got, that it really was an enemy and wanted to rip us right off the ground we'd settled on.

I got out of bed and went downstairs to see how my mother and father were taking it. But they were sitting in the living room, reading, and didn't seem at all disturbed. My mother looked at me, her face shining under the rosy lampshade, and said it was all right, nothing to worry about. "Crawl back to bed, Norma," she said in a voice that was kinder than usual. So I did, and went to sleep finally wondering why there was such a thing as wind. Nobody likes it that I know of. No prairie people anyway. And why had God created it?

I do not question the existence of God, as my friend Mary Sorenson does, whose father runs the Co-Op Creamery here in town and who is an atheist. I can't deny what's right there in front of my eyes in black and white. But at the same time I don't condemn unbelievers. "Judge not, lest ye be judged," the Scripture says. Nor do I try to convince them. Arguments lead to nowhere. If you tell a blind man the sun is yellow and he doesn't believe you, what can you do about it? Nothing. Nevertheless, although my faith is firm, I wonder sometimes why certain things happen. Like the wind.

In the morning the sky was a whirl of grey and white. The snow was thicker than I'd ever seen it, and the wind still blowing, whining through the snow. I couldn't see the fence or garage from my bedroom window. Every inch of air was disrupted, uprooted, the snowflakes swirling about. Like refugees, I thought as I knelt in front of the window in amazement. Like lonely refugees without homes, wandering in the cold, looking for a place to settle, a quiet place where they could put their babies to bed and have some hot tea and visit one another for awhile. But they couldn't find such a place, so they wandered all in a frenzy, cold and lonesome.

I went downstairs in my pyjamas. There'd be no school, that I knew. My father was sitting in the dining room at his desk. He was playing chess, like he does on Sunday mornings and stormy days when he can't work. He plays chess by correspondence since he has no partners here in town. You may have heard of chess played like this. A huge map of the world is tacked on the wall in front of his desk. On the desk itself is a wooden chessboard, and on a table next to it, little recipe boxes filled with postcards. These cards have been sent to him from his playing partners all over the world. He even plays with one man in South Africa, and he has several games going on at the same time. Every time a player makes a move, he sends the move by postcard to my father. Then my father makes his move and sends a card back to the player. Sometimes it takes nearly a month for a card to reach another country, so you can imagine how long one game might last. But my father seems to enjoy this, keeping track of all his partners with little coloured pins on his map of the world.

My father is a very intelligent man, I must say, but he is not a man of faith. He does not attend church with me and my mother, not even on special occasions.

Even my mother doesn't attend regularly. Most of the time it's left up to me to uphold the family in spiritual matters.

My mother was in the kitchen, sitting at the table, drinking coffee and gazing out the window at the blizzard. She was leaning over the table, resting her elbows on the white tablecloth, holding the cup in both hands. Steam curled upward from the cup's brim. The whole room smelled of coffee.

She didn't even notice me come in, or stand there watching. On very snowy days or rainy days my mother abandons all her housewifely responsibilities and sits in front of the window all day, just looking out. We may as well forget about good dinners or a clean and tidy house on such days. She's completely engrossed by storms. In some respects my mother is a bit lazy. Nevertheless, I find her an interesting person. In this day and age it's important to observe nature and meditate on all its wonders.

"That's some storm," I said.

"There'll be no school today," she said.

"I guess not," I said.

I went to the breadbox and sliced two pieces from a loaf. I brought out the butter and jam. I knew she was not about to make any breakfast, so I'd do it myself.

I sat down at the table to eat my bread and watch the storm with my mother. I have a very good feeling about that day, nothing at all like the days that followed. The blizzard was howling outside. The snow was so high no one even tried to get out, and the air so thick we couldn't see beyond the porch. But the house was warm, and my mother was enjoying her coffee and my father his chess. Every so often he would leave his game and come into the kitchen to drink coffee with my mother. I knew they were both having a good day. As the Catechism says: "Let husbands and wives love and respect each other."

Later, in the afternoon, the storm ended. The wind ceased, the sky cleared, the sun shone. And everyone in town shovelled themselves out of their houses. I put on my boots and my new blue parka and walked downtown between the drifts, clean and sparkling in the sun. I went to see my friend, Esther. She was helping her father in the store, straightening tin cans of soup and dusting jars of pickles. We talked about the storm and what we should do for our mothers on Mother's Day. She thought she'd buy her mother a box of chocolates. I said I'd have to wait till Saturday to decide, when I'd have some money. Then I went home. And that night I got sick.

I woke up in the middle of the night. My head was hot, my chest ached, and my throat was sore. I felt damp all over and weak. I crouched under the blanket, shivering with cold and sweating. Then I got up. I turned on the hall light and walked down the corridor to my mother and father's bedroom. I opened the

door and saw them in the light from the hall. They were both sound asleep. My father was lying on his right side with his knees up. My mother was lying on her right side too, with her knees up. She was lying right next to my father, her stomach against his back and her legs fitting into his, fitting right into them like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I walked over to the bed and stood there. I touched her on her hair, but she didn't move. I touched her on the cheek and she twitched a little. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I'm sick," I said and walked out of the room and back to bed. In a minute she was in my room, leaning over me in the dimness.

"Norma? Did you say you were sick?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"All over."

"Here?" She touched my forehead.

"Yes."

"Here?" She touched my neck.

"Yes."

She turned on the lights. She looked at my face and neck. She felt the sheets and pillow. They were damp.

"You are sick," she said.

"I know."

She walked down the hall to the bathroom and came back with a glass of water, a washcloth, and a bottle of aspirins. She gave me an aspirin and the water. Then she washed my face with a cold wet cloth, and my neck too. She covered me up and brought in an extra blanket.

"You'll be all right," she said. "Try to get some rest."

I didn't say anything. I just turned over on my side and went back to sleep.

In the morning I was still sick. My chest was sore and my head ached. My arms and legs felt damp and heavy. My mother came in again and looked at me.

"I'll make a mustard plaster," she said.

My mother is not an ignorant woman by any means, but she is not a woman of science. She does not read up on the latest developments in medicine as my father does, even though he's only a telephone man. She prefers remedies handed down by her mother and grandmother and even great-grandmother for all I know. Mustard plaster is a case in point. If you're unfamiliar with that remedy, this is how it works: You make a paste of water, flour, and powdered mustard. I'm not sure of the proportions, but don't use too much mustard—it burns. You spread this yellow paste on a piece of cloth cut out to fit the chest it's going on. Then you lay another cloth over it and pin the edges together. You put this on the chest right next to the skin, and it's supposed to do some

good—I'm not sure what, except warm your chest considerably and make you sweat.

She came upstairs carrying the mustard plaster, holding it in her two hands like a rolled-out sheet of dough. When I saw it I began feeling embarrassed and wished like everything I hadn't gotten sick. I was eleven years old at the time, nearly twelve, and I was beginning to develop. I was the only one in my class beginning to show. Ever so slightly I know, but even so I wasn't fond of the idea that someone would see me, even my mother.

"I think I'm feeling better, better than last night," I said. "I don't believe I'll be needing the mustard plaster."

"You'll be up and on your feet in no time with a good strong mustard plaster," she said. She laid the bulging cloth on a chair and lifted the quilt from under my chin, and the sheet too. She unbuttoned my pyjama top slowly and gently, and I felt myself getting more and more embarrassed. She spread out the fronts of my pyjama top; then she lifted the mustard plaster from the chair and laid it on my chest, tucking it under my neck and partway into my armpits and down to my stomach. She pressed her fingers on it ever so gently and I felt the pressing on the soft places on my chest where I'd begun to develop. I stared at the ceiling and didn't say anything. Neither did she. It seemed as if she didn't even notice, but she must have. I don't see how she could have missed. She buttoned my pyjamas again and covered me with the sheet and quilt.

"Have a nice time in bed today," she said. "I'll bring you some magazines to read and some juice."

Maybe it doesn't make much sense to you how I felt about such things at the time. I certainly don't feel embarrassed now. But now I'm thirteen and in grade seven and I'm fully developed. My mother has explained everything to me, about my body and sexual things. So now I understand all that. I have no problems in that line. However, when I was eleven and just starting to develop, I felt quite peculiar about it. I didn't want anyone to know. When I was alone I'd sometimes look at myself in the mirror, without my clothes on. Then I'd put on a T-shirt or a sweater to see if I showed. I never wore T-shirts to school though. I certainly didn't want everyone gawking. I'd leave the T-shirts to the grade nine girls, Rosie Boychuck and her group. They seemed to enjoy letting the whole world know they were developing.

Anyway, I had a fairly pleasant morning after that, looking at *National Geographic* and at the Icicles melting outside my window, falling asleep and waking up and drinking juice. If you're not in pain it can be quite enjoyable sometimes being sick.

Then, in the afternoon, it happened. I can't understand to this day how my mother could have done that to me. But she did. She came upstairs in the

afternoon, when the sun was warm on my bed, and said she would change my mustard plaster. She'd make a fresh batch and after that I'd be finished. She pulled down the quilt and sheet, unbuttoned my pyjamas, and lifted the cloth from my chest. My chest felt icy cold, and bare. I pulled my pyjama top together quickly without buttoning it and snuggled under the covers. My mother left the room carrying the used mustard plaster, folded like a book, in her hand. I heard her walk down the stairs into the kitchen. I heard the cupboard door opening and some pots banging. I heard her chatting away to my father about nothing in particular. And I thought no more about it until I opened my eyes and saw him standing in the doorway. My father. My father holding the fresh mustard plaster. My father coming to put the new mustard plaster on my chest. I looked at him and felt my face getting hot and my heart beating faster. Was he actually going to do it? Open my pyjama top and see me? And press that bulging cloth against my chest? Had my mother sent him up for that? I felt my eyes sting and I knew I was going to cry. I felt the wetness press against my eyeballs and drip over the edges of my eyes down the side of my head, into my hair. I couldn't say anything. I just lay there and cried.

"You're not feeling well at all, are you," he said. "It's no treat being sick. But maybe this will do the trick."

He lifted up the quilt and sheet. He spread open my pyjama top. He looked down on my chest. I looked up at his face and saw his eyes open a little wider, and I knew he saw my development. It was pretty clear to me that he saw.

He laid the cloth on me, smoothly and firmly, and his hands were heavy on the roundness there. Then he buttoned my pyjamas and covered me with the sheet. He wiped my eyes with the edge of the sheet and told me I'd be better soon and not to cry and mother was cooking vegetable soup with dumplings for supper.

In the evening I felt better, and on Saturday I was fine except that I had to stay inside all day and couldn't go downtown to buy a Mother's Day present. My mother told me not to feel bad; if I stayed inside and got completely well by Sunday we could go to church together, to the special service.

On Mother's Day I got up early. I washed my face and combed my hair, I put on my green dress with the long sleeves and white cuffs and went downstairs to make breakfast for my mother and father. I set the table with the blue placemats Aunt Hanna had sent from Sweden. I boiled eggs and made cinnamon toast because that's what I'm best at. My parents were pleased with the breakfast.

After breakfast my father went to his desk to play chess with someone in India or Yugoslavia. And my mother and I went to church.

I do worry sometimes about my father. His indifference to spiritual matters suggests a certain arrogance. And you must have heard what the Bible has to say about that: "Pride goeth before a fall." Of course, my father is not the only

person who feels this way. Many people, at least in our part of the province, have no religious faith whatsoever. Men especially. Men seem to feel that religion is for women and children. And not even for all women. Some women they prefer without any religious faith at all. So they can have fun, if you know what I mean. But if a woman has children and has to take care of things, if a woman is responsible, if she has men and children to take care of, then she should have faith. That's what they think. Well, this kind of argument holds no water whatsoever, as far as I'm concerned.

We walked through melting snow to church, our rubber boots black and shining in the slush. When we got inside, Mrs. Franklin and Mrs. Johnson met us at the door and gave us each a carnation, a pink one for me because my mother was alive, and a white one for my mother because her mother was dead. She died five years ago. She had sugar diabetes, but it was a heart attack she died from. We pinned the carnations to our coats and walked down the aisle to the middle pew, right behind Mr. and Mrs. Carlson and Leonard, who's one year older than I am, and not very bright.

The text that Sunday was from the Book of Proverbs, written by King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, although he had a lot of wives. Mother's Day is the only time we ever hear it: "Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies."

After the sermon we sang a hymn we sing every Mother's Day. My mother says she could do without that song, but I myself feel it has a lot of meaning. We all stood up. Mrs. Carlson sang in her usual voice. Mr. Carlson didn't sing at all, just looked at the words. Leonard turned around and stared at me a couple of times.

*Mid pleasures and palaces, though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.  
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,  
Which, seek thro' the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere.  
Home, home, sweet, sweet home,  
There's no place like home,  
O, there's no place like home.*

That afternoon, I found the cat.

I had just come from Mary's house to see what she had done for her mother on Mother's Day. I knew it would be something clever because that's how she is.

The cat was in a ditch when I first saw it. A kitten actually, scratching at a little drift and meowing. It was grey and skinny, its voice thin and unpleasant. I leaned over the ditch, picked it up by the fur of its neck as I'd been taught to do,



and set it down on the concrete walk. But it didn't go anywhere. It didn't move. It just stood there by my ankle. I walked away and it followed me, meowing after me in its ugly voice. I didn't know what to do, so I scooped it up with my two hands, laid it on the crook of my arm and took it with me back to Mary's house. I stood in their porch and showed the cat to Mrs. Sorenson. She leaned against the porch wall, against a giant-sized pile of newspapers and magazines, and told me I should take it back where I found it.

"In the ditch?" I asked.

"Wherever you found it," she said. "Its owner will be looking for it."

"In the ditch?" I asked. "Will the owner look in the ditch?"

"It may be diseased," she said. "It's best not to bring it in the house." She spoke kindly but firmly. Mrs. Sorenson is not a cruel person, but she's no lover of cats.

I left Mary's house and went back to ask my mother if we could keep it. She said the same thing as Mrs. Sorenson. "Take it back where you found it."

"I found it in a ditch," I said.

"By whose house?" she asked. "It no doubt belongs to the people who live near the ditch."

"To Sorensens'?" I asked. "Mrs. Sorenson can't stand cats."

"Maybe another house," my mother said. "Ask at the other houses. I understand Mrs. Gilbertson has cats. But come home soon," she added. "It's nearly supertime."

I walked down the street, carrying the shivering kitten in my arms. I began knocking on doors. Everyone said the same thing: "Take it back where you found it." And I said the same thing too. "I found it in a ditch." Then they said maybe Mrs. So and So would like to have it. And I'd knock on a few more doors.

The last door I knocked on was Mrs. McDonald's. Mrs. McDonald had always seemed like a very friendly person to me. Whenever she saw me she'd ask about my parents. "How are the Hagens?" she'd say. She always called them the Hagens. "You Hagens are good people." So I thought this might be my lucky chance. Maybe Mrs. McDonald would take the kitten.

"Me?" she said, standing under the light in her front hall, rubbing her thin hands on the pockets of her apron. "Oh, no, honey, I couldn't possibly, as much as I'd like to, not with my allergy. But aren't you a precious one for caring so. Aren't you just the sweetest little girl, looking out for that poor animal. You are the kindest little thing," she said. I thought she'd said enough, but she went on and on. I stood in the doorway and listened to every word. "You're going to make a very good little mother," she said. "Just the best mother ever. Look at you with that poor thing. What a sweet little mother you are." I believe she finished right then because she started closing the door, quite firmly, easing me out on the step, still holding the limp and whining cat.

What happened next is what I'm trying to figure out. I've spent two years now trying to figure this out, but I'm not sure I understand, even now.

I didn't know what to do with the kitten, so I headed out of town on the dirt road that leads to Goertzens'. It was getting dark and windy and much colder, so I shoved the kitten under my jacket to keep it warm, and I pulled the sleeves of the jacket over my hands to keep them warm. I felt the cat under the cloth, pressing against my chest, its claws pushing back and forth into the softness there. I bent my head against the wind and stumbled through the ruts, my boots oozing down into the half-frozen mud. I didn't know where I was going, just leaving town with that ugly kitten pushing on my chest, nibbling at me, purring and pressing against me as if I were its home, as if I were the place where it belonged.

When I passed the correction line I looked back and saw the town lit up behind me, all the houses behind me with orange light shining out of the windows. I turned and saw the blackness ahead of me, the night dark and empty as a cave. I tried walking faster through the mud, the cat still clinging to the softness on my chest. Then I realized I wasn't going anywhere. There was no place to go. Only Goertzens', and that was too far—five miles at least.

I stopped. I stood in the middle of the road and pulled the cat out from under my jacket. I held it up by the fur of its neck, looked at it by the light of the stars and the snow that shone in the ditch. I saw its eyes glimmering, its small kitten eyes looking at me.

"You ugly cat," I said. "You stupid cat." Its eyes gleamed. "You don't know anything, do you. Not your father or your mother or even where you come from. You are so stupid." And I hated the cat. I hated its thin voice and its loose sickly body. I hated its sticky fur and thin bones under the fur. But most of all, I hated it dangling there alone, under the stars, watching me, waiting.

That's when I did it. I grabbed its tail and lifted the cat above my head. I swung it in circles high above my head. I swung it faster in big circles. Then I let go, and I saw its body, tangled and crooked, flip through the air and land in the ditch. I stepped in closer and looked at it—a small stain on the snow. I bent down and scraped at some stones on the road. I scraped with both hands until I found a big stone. And I lifted it up and hurled it down on the cat. Then I lifted up another and smashed it down. And the cat sank a little in the drift. And there was blood on the snow. When I'd thrown all the stones, I turned around and headed back to town.

I saw the lights of town in the distance, the orange lights from all the houses. I used to like going home after dark and seeing those lights. In winter, when it was dark at four o'clock, I'd walk home from school and look at the houses with light shining out of the windows. I'd think of children and fathers going home in the

dark. And when they got there, the house would be warm, the supper cooking, and the mother setting the table and humming. But that night, walking into town, it wasn't like that.

When I got home my parents had already eaten supper and were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

"You've been gone a long time," my father said. "Did you find a home for the kitten?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh? Where?" my mother asked.

"Some Ukrainians took it," I said.

"You mean you walked all the way past the tracks?"

"Only as far as Levinskys," I said.

"Did Mrs. Levinsky take it then?"

"No," I said. "But Mrs. Levinsky said she knew some Ukrainians who live on the other side of the Hutterites. She said they'd take it because they have a huge barn and a lot of other cats and fresh milk and hay, so the cat would be warm and comfortable and have friends. Mrs. Levinsky will take it there tomorrow."

"That was kind of Mrs. Levinsky," my father said.

"I thought so," I said and went upstairs to the bathroom to wash my hands for supper.

I didn't think about my experience that night. I was too tired. I went to bed early and fell asleep right away. But since then it's been on my mind. I've thought about it for two years now—what I did, and the orange lights. And I've wondered how I could have done that. And how there's no getting away from that. And how do you go on from there? What do you do next if you're a person of faith?

I know what the Buddhists would do. I've read about Buddhists in the encyclopedia. They think that if you know you'll do wrong by going places and doing things, then just don't go there. Stay where you are. Sit. Then you won't sin.

But I'm not a Buddhist. I think it's more like this. You go to places, knowing all along it won't be just right or true. There'll be darkness there, and some damage. But you go just the same. There'll always be some light. Pieces of it anyway. And you can notice that.

On Monday I went to school as usual. At recess I met Esther at our special place by the poplar tree and we talked about Mother's Day. I told her I made breakfast and went to church with my mother. She told me her mother liked the box of chocolates and they spent the day at Cutlers'. Her family doesn't go to church because they're Jews, not to synagogue either because there aren't enough Jews in our town to have one. They do celebrate festive occasions in their homes, however. Like the Passover. And Mother's Day. At least they do in

our town. I don't know if they have a Mother's Day in Israel or not. I know in Japan there's no special day set aside for mothers. Instead they have a Boys' Day and a Girls' Day. But the Scandinavian countries celebrate much the same as we do, at least in Norway, with flowers and gifts. I'm not sure what the customs are in Africa or South America.

But one thing I do know. And no one can argue against this fact, whether they're Communists, Christians, Buddhists, or Jews. There's no nation in the whole world, not a single solitary one, without mothers.

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