

## Glass Spirit

By Lea Warren

She lived life like walking through a shop without a list. She stopped at the moments that caught her eye, and sometimes spent long moments studying an idea, only to plop it back haphazardly on its shelf before moving on to whatever was next on the aisle.

Her job was good, but not great. She fell into an associate level client management position shortly after finishing her degree—marketing and communications with a minor in studio art that she had yet to confess to her father. The company was a large one, and she was a number amongst thousands of others working for a conglomeration of companies to ensure workplace functionality and employee fulfillment. Sometimes the irony of her work—helping others find peace in their work when she found little—hit her hard. But the position awarded her with a benefit package that freed her from her father’s insurance at the age of twenty-two, and had supplied her with funds enough for her small home and ample travel ever since.

Her apartment was a small one-bedroom. It was not overly clean, but it was not dismal either. It was affordable, but not a steal; close to town but not completely central. It was closer to home than she wanted to be, but far enough that she could justify her long absences.

That was how things often seemed to go for Mara—adequate, acceptable. She took it and was grateful. Always, always grateful, even if not satisfied.

As she wandered down the aisles of her life, she knew she was looking for something, though what it was still eluded her. She picked up hobbies, friends, places, and lovers only to put them back where she found them and wander on.

Long hours spent sitting on her balcony with a brush and a wax paper pallet balanced haphazardly on her knee were her solace. A stack of unfinished paintings in the back of her closet were the only items on her invisible shelves that she returned to again and again.

Each night, she squinted through the dimness of her undependable florescent porch light, her mop of brown curls tied in a lose knot and stains on her jeans, struggling to coerce the paint out of their abused tubes—turned stale after being stored outside day after day in the summer heat.

She painted the things she didn't talk about. She put her thoughts into images that she sometimes didn't quite understand herself.

"They're lovely," her mother had once said when Mara risked showing a series of pieces to her. Mara had felt proud, but unsatisfied. Her paintings weren't lovely. Skilled, perhaps. But not lovely. They were dark, confusing, twisted. They often started as a study of color and light and grew into figures almost independent of Mara's will.

Tonight she was working late, caught in the feel of her brush against the canvas, meditative after hours of numbing work, answering worrying texts from her mother, and ignoring texts from her father.

It had started as a flash of gold. She didn't know what it was or where it came from, but it seemed to call from some deep dark part of her, as ideas often did. As the brush strokes grew though, it became apparent that the gold was in fact fluid. Then came shadows, then the glimmer of something new. White? No, Clear. The whisper of an image, an incomplete outline filled with the darkness surrounding it in the absence of the liquid meant to fill it.

By the time Mara realized what she had created, it was too late to take it back.

A discount Ikea wine glass—the kind with no stem—spilled over a mahogany table. Its contents gleamed on the wood, dripping off the sharp corner and beyond the base of the canvas. The kind of glass her father always cradled topped, off with cheap white wine.

In a moment, she was twelve years old again, sitting on the couch opposite her snoring father.

Mara's mother was in the bedroom, trying to fall asleep before her father inevitably rose and carried his snores with him into the bedroom. Her older sister, Sally was in bed, likely still awake but long since escaped from the discordance of their father's sleep.

Mara could judge how many bottles waiting on the countertop just by the volume of his snoring. The louder he was, the more glasses he'd filled and emptied in his nightly ritual. Each breath he loosed was painful to Mara, raking over her eardrums like nails against glass. She chanced a nudge with her foot in the vain hope it would quiet him.

For a second, there was blissful silence. But then, a grunt, a groan, like a wailing child, and an arm flailing at the disturbance, knocking that last, half-empty glass over. Mara watched it for a moment as it rolled over the table, almost willing it to fall and break. It stopped short though, its contents leaking over the table and onto the carpet with a moist plunking that was just audible between her father's breaths.

With a sigh, she closed her book and rose. She got a towel from the kitchen drawer, paying no mind to the stack of three empty bottles in the shadow of the overhead cabinets. As she bent to dab up the mess, her father groaned again, his hand flopping onto her head. His fingers searched errantly, calling for the glass that always filled them. She cringed away from his touch.

That was the night she emptied all the remaining bottles down the sink. The next morning she was met by her father, purple-faced and red-eyed, glaring down at her over her cereal.

"What did you think you were doing?" he asked her.

"I just wanted it to stop," she said. She still didn't completely understand what it was, or why it hadn't stopped. At least once a week her parent's raised voices pulled her from sleep. Too many times to count she had heard her mother plead with her father to stop from the other side of the door, Mara's worried ear pressed against the crack.

"If not for me, then for the girls at least," her mother said once. "Think of what this does to them."

“I’m not doing anything to them!” Mara’s father had answered.

“You think they don’t see it?” Her mother had asked, incredulous, angry. That ‘it’, as if the problem were a thing that could be separated from him, like a dark spirit plaguing her otherwise gentle father. It was never named, as though the naming of the thing would make it too real to bear.

“They’re kids! And there’s nothing to see.” Mara’s father said. But even through the wood of the door, Mara knew he was lying.

Now, as Mara’s father stared down at her, it seemed he was inclined to remain set in his belief that he was in the right and Mara understood nothing.

“Wanted what to stop?” He asked belligerently.

He was hung over. He was always hung over on Thursdays. Mara knew she had to tread carefully. But she was young, and sad, and scared of the many foreign faces her father wore.

“I want you to stop drinking, Daddy, please,” her eyes pricked as she prepared for his wrath. There was only silence. “I just, I’m sorry about the bottles, but you’re mean to Mommy, and Sally is scared of it and it makes me sad and scared too, and...please...I’m sorry I threw away the bottles.”

She stared at her cereal, and he watched her. For so many seconds that Mara started to count, there was a silence as tangible as the unspoken ‘it’ that she had finally named.

And then, to her immense surprise, her father’s arms wrapped around her.

“I’m sorry honey,” he said. “I’ll try to be better, I promise.” When he pulled back, there were tears in his eyes. She had never seen her father anywhere near crying before.

“You promise?” She repeated.

“Yes. I promise, I’ll try.”

And just like that, her heart lifted like the sun, her faith in her father restored. Of course he would listen. Of course he would be better.

She went to school that day with the light of the world shining in her.

And for a while, it was better. For the first few days, there was a quiet tension about the house. And then, a hope rising in her mother—more smiles, easier conversation. Sally didn't hide in her room that weekend. They all went to lunch and played UNO on the porch.

But then Mara's father had a glass of wine with dinner on Friday. And then two on Saturday.

And within three weeks of his promise, it was broken.

When he devolved into slurred retorts to her mother's timid requests that he go to sleep, Mara retreated to her room and fell onto her bed. She didn't cry. She thought about the way it had felt when her father hugged her like he used to when she was small, promising to be a better father. A better man. She thought about how he had promised, and how that promise had filled her to the brim with hope and trust and love. And she felt a small hole puncture her soul, and a little bit of it start to drain away.

It trailed behind her from then on, bits of her spirit leaking out, in the form of relationships, lost friends, stupid decision in college and soulless choices for work, all meant in some messed up way to appease her father, even now, after the last of her spirit was pressed into canvases that showed the very darkest parts of her. Bits of her fell on the path behind her, left to be picked up by whoever walked down her aisle next, collected like prizes and presented to her with a love that she no longer trusted.

Above her, the light flickered threateningly, casting the damp canvas in alternating shadow and shimmering light. Mara sighed and sat back, wishing that she could somehow reach into the painting and smash that glass to the floor, as if it were the source of her sorrow. As if the cut of its sharp edges, not the intangible pain of her father's failure, were what she was forever searching for a cure to. She tucked a strand of paint-saturated hair behind her ear, and dropped her paintbrush on the plastic table with a hollow clatter.