

Samantha R. Glas

Champagne
Glasses

a short story



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Samantha R. Glas

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Spring 1950

C*hampagne glasses spill over, and gold jewelry twinkles in the neon lights flickering through my mother's dusty floral curtains.* The way we're dressed, you'd think we'd invited President Truman himself to our party. My green dress, velvet, hugs my sides tightly enough that I can't relax my stomach and walk away with my dignity intact. It lived in my closet for years, stuffed on the top shelf to collect dust with my dreams. Today is the day I brought them back to light.

The room is dim because we unplugged the lamp to power a record player instead, and the neon sign across the street casts the room in an emerald glow. The swing tune sweetens the air and fills my veins with piano trills and triumph. This cramped little den has, for tonight, become a vast marble ballroom.

In the midst of the party, my eyes are drawn to my husband. My beloved man with stars written in his beloved face. The second man I've ever loved. The buttons in his plaid vest are practically screaming for release against the holiday weight their wearer has denied for four months. He's dancing. He's trying to make me laugh again; it's working. I love him.

Mother herds a little girl out of the room and "back to bed at once, young lady, at once!" My brother Tom Nichols whoops at no one in particular; he is drunk already. Laughing, I shush him; Penny is going to bed, I say. I want to get drunk myself in mere celebration. I won't. I can't risk losing a single memory of this glorious day to alcohol.

The record gently introduces us to a crooning love song. Unexpected for a party setlist, but it's Tom's record, I think, so who knows who the artist is?

The lovely man in the plaid vest catches my eye, and mirroring my smile, he comes over; to dance with me, undoubtedly. He has to step around a table laden with books stacked haphazardly in my mother's attempt to form my first initial, *N*. Despite her efforts, it doesn't match any letter in the English alphabet as far as I know. Moments like this are why the cliché "it's the thought that counts" was created.

My husband takes my hand in his, and his smile glitters in the sharp green light of the room. He has to lean close – tall as he is – to whisper in my ear.

"Are you happy, love?"

Winter 1943

Snow attacked the street corner in pockets of white bullets. A chill ran through me, just beneath my skin. I looked up and down the road. My great-grandmother's gold watch on my wrist told me with each shaky tick that he wasn't late; I was painfully early.

Stop checking the time. He'll be here.

If only that weren't true.

I stuffed my hand into my threadbare wool coat pocket. The velvet box inside brushed my fingertips and once again sent shockwaves of guilt shooting through the pit of my stomach. I drew my hand back out into the cold.

Less than an hour later, I treaded home through the blizzard with forty pounds of guilt on my shoulders. Partly for the light in his eyes that died when I slid the ring box across the table before the waitress had even taken our orders.

But partly as I knew the ring was still in my bathroom drawer, resting between a pink rag and a scrap of a magazine page with the handwritten address to the nearest pawn shop.

Autumn 1943

He was always in the library. He could've slept between the shelves for all we knew, using *Pride and Prejudice* as a pillow and *War and Peace* as a bedside table. Leonard Stone was his name, and he refused to let me call him Leo. It is for that exact reason that I think I shall call him Leo for the remainder of this story.

Leo. Wannabe poet with wannabe philosophies. He carried the quality of a time traveler, in that you'd be stunned to hear him tell a timely joke or share his take on the latest political

unraveling. He thought he'd change the world. He didn't; not the whole world, anyway. Only mine.

Back in his school days, I wasted every afternoon waiting in the library. Just to see if he would turn up again. I didn't think, then, that I was particularly sweet on him, though I suppose I admired him. His intelligence was dazzling in my young eyes.

Sometimes he came; sometimes not. But when did, he always seemed to expect me. Oftentimes he brought me coffee. I didn't care for coffee, but for Leo, I'd have learned to like anything.

On one of those afternoons, Leo paused in his reading aloud. The trance in which his tone had put me broke. My surroundings regained clarity. I asked him, what's the matter?

His chocolate-like eyes flicked up to meet mine, and I swear my heart grew three times its size. And like the snake in the garden, he told me he knew what was best for me.

Winter 1943

W*hy did you do it?"*

My fingers, curling the telephone cord, trembled. "I had to, Leonard."

"I paid for that ring," said his static-fueled voice on the other end. "And you turned me down."

"I know."

"It wasn't yours to sell."

"I haven't sold it yet."

"Give it back, then."

"I can't."

He swore, muffled, as though he'd turned away from the receiver to say it.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Why can't you?"

"It's –" I cringed at my own awkward tone. "Complicated."

"It wouldn't be complicated, if you weren't being so difficult."

My words spilled out in a rush, like the coffee he used to pour me during those long, cloudy afternoons at the library. "We're set to lose our home. My mother and I. The bills are in stacks and we can't pay a single one."

That seemed to silence him, if only for a moment.

"You need the money."

I nodded, though I was alone in the cramped little den. "Please, just – let me keep the ring. We need it."

"You know," he said, dangerously thoughtful in tone, "if you'd married me, you wouldn't have to worry."

My heart had begun to pound. "Leonard –"

"You'd live with me, of course, but your mother would keep her home. I'd make sure of it."

I bit my lip. Glancing up, I caught sight of my mother on a stepstool in the kitchen, packing bowls into a box. The eviction notice had dug fresh crevices in the lines on her face. She paused to sigh before packing away her soup bowl with the hand-painted daisies.

Leonard's voice crackled in my ear. "Come now, let's be sensible. Just marry me already."

Spring 1944

What a swell couple!”

I smiled as the photographer said it. He bent over, peering through his little camera at the couple posing on the church lawn. Leo put his hand on my hip. *Flash*, and the moment was captured, doomed to forever haunt the frames lining the hallways of every distant relative in both our families.

What a swell couple we must have been, indeed. Leo had old money, which turned into new flowers and new suits. Fluffed pink bouquets freckled the tables at the reception. Gold earrings weighed heavy in my ears, and my hair was tangled in the buttons on the back of my bodice. The military medals pinned to Leo’s chest, whose honors I couldn’t recall, reflected one last pinch of sunlight before a break of rain prompted us back inside the church.

It comes back to me in waves, like melodies fading in and out of earshot. Church bells faded into slow love songs as we danced through the living room, furniture pushed aside, curtains peeled open for all the world to see. Mr. and Mrs. Stone. The youngest and wealthiest couple in town.

Leo spun me to the tune, and he told me he loved me with inordinate affection. But when I turned around, he had faded away. I stood alone with the crackling radio speakers spitting lyrics into the still air.

We were apart for much of our marriage. Which I try not to blame entirely on him, even now; there was a war, after all, and he had a duty to fulfil.

I had duties myself. I kept his – our – house clean. I entertained his friends’ wives on Tuesday nights, even the vile women who said, thinking I was out of earshot in the kitchen, that I didn’t “match with” their society. As time wore on, I even carried his baby.

To combat restlessness during my pregnancy, I poured over books in any spare moment I could. Just to have something engaging to talk to Leo about whenever he should've come home. But the books on his shelf were stiff. I often woke on the sofa with my nose still buried in a volume thicker than my thigh.

I took on a new genre that I overheard the ladies talking about one evening. They laughed when I admitted I'd never read a novel in its entirety. Which is why I told nobody when I grew incensed by the thrilling narratives that unfolded between the pages of my newest novels. Without a shelf of my own, I kept my favorite books in a stack beside our grand fireplace. Days would pass where I would speak to nobody. But these fictional friends spoke to *me*.

It was a great, big house I lived in during those days. Lots of echoes.

Autumn 1944

I *don't know why he left.*

I reminisce too much for my own good. Dancing in the living room and sipping coffee at midnight. The nights spent riding in his Cadillac without a destination, the might of the full moon bouncing off the shiny red hood. Wedding photos in gold-trim frames. I blinked. When I opened my eyes I saw myself, round-bellied in my eighth month, hauling boxes into my mother's house.

I've run myself dry of excuses that hold any kind of resemblance to reason. That was the hardest part, I think: all the time spent searching for constellations in a starless sky.

Spring 1945

S*unlight poured through stained glass windows twice my height, surrounding me on all sides.*
Puddles of purple and red and blue settled on my church shoes like the aftermath of a rainbow storm.

The choir, tucked away somewhere hidden, rumbled their hymns. Latin words reverberated through the room and gave the impression that the choir filled every wall. The chanting roll nearly drowned out little Penny's fussing, and my mother's soft cooing as she bounced her on her knee.

I perched on the pew, stiff. Hands folded against my polyester skirt. Leg bouncing. Breathing deep, I welcomed the choir's noise after such a long absence from their voices. I'd choose this over the silence in which I'd been living.

Much of those days have fled from my memory. But I recall the exhaustion; oh, I was so tired. I hadn't heard so much as a syllable from Leo, but I had spent many a restless night building an image of his new life without us. Perhaps he had a new dame; or three. Maybe the three dames would learn about each other and confront Leo together. Perhaps they'd kill him.

I tossed the thought from my mind. I was in church, after all.

I straightened in the pew and Penny had begun to lean toward me, arms up. I took her from my mother. My girl had eyes the size of sunglasses lenses and brown as melted chocolate. She got that from her father. Frowning, I bounced Penny on my knee till a smile broke across her plum cheeks.

How that man could have left his daughter, his own blood, is beyond me. If you held a pistol to my forehead and told me to leave Penny alone for a mere twenty minutes, I'd tell you to pull the trigger.

Something poked my leg; my mother was handing me a Bible. I drew Penny to my belly to make room for the Bible in my lap, and she planted a little hand on the cover. Feeling the pages prompted a smile from both mother and daughter. I'd used to treasure reading so dearly. But of late, my novels had had the same purpose as untouched vases on a mantelpiece.

My eyes drifted to the stained-glass windows, honoring God in all their vibrancy. Wouldn't it be swell to pick up my old favorites again?

I ran my fingers up and down the gold foil Bible pages.

Perhaps reading could provide me the rest I craved.

Penny grabbed my thumb. Her entire fist couldn't wrap around my finger. I looked up just as the choir finished their chant, pitching the room into a powerful silence for the moment my mind gave me the idea I'd needed for months.

I could read my books, sure.

Or I could write one.

Summer 1945

T*he war ended, and I missed it because I was locked in my room writing.*

Oak desks, balled-up papers, and smudged typewriter letters filled my days and lingered in my pillow thoughts. Characters and settings and colors, vibrant, clear. Ideas didn't merely come to me; they assaulted my every sense. They slapped me in the face and then kissed me. I had no choice but to pour my soul into them.

Writing had become an ever-welcome distraction, a blanket to wrap around my shoulders during those cold nights. But the blanket had holes.

My mother often found me with my head on my desk, too weak to rise. Coffee and tears stained my typed pages around me. I found it difficult to revisit my work, because I'd read a page I'd written on a particularly rough day and relive it over again.

"Think of Penny," my mother said one night, after having brought me a plate of cheese when I hadn't felt like eating all day.

I chewed. Swallowed. "What about her?"

Mother leaned into the doorway of my bedroom. "She sees you, you know. She sees how you're hurting."

I nodded. "She's young, though."

"True. She may not remember seeing you in pain." She met my hesitant gaze. "But she'll remember how it made her feel."

She left me with that. The clock ticked and it felt like its hands were swinging a hammer between my eyes. In the tight silence, a stream of sunlight crept through my half-open green curtains almost reluctantly, like a child lingering in the doorway before asking a question. The ray spilled awkwardly over my typewriter keys. I could have laughed to myself at the timing.

As clouds shifted, the sun guided itself past my desk. A green film settled over the room. I spun around in my seat; the sunlight had hit an old medicinal bottle just right, casting the room in a viridian radiance. The cracks and labels from the bottle painted shadows along the walls and ceiling.

I can't attest to knowing so much as a scrap of information about the correlation of colors and light and psychology. Those things are far from my forte. But I can say that, for the first time since Leo left, my lungs allowed air in without complaint.

Winter 1945

Forty-one rejection letters filled my desk drawer. Thirteen of them were addressed to my real name, and twenty-eight to the androgynous name I chose for myself when it occurred to me that editors had little interest in pushing a woman to publication.

“Just your initials? No full name?” My brother Tom lit a cigarette and leaned back into Mother’s old chair. After coming home from overseas without a dime in his pockets, Tom had moved in with us. Our poor mother.

I perched on the arm of the sofa. “And I’m using *P* for my middle initial, after Penny.”

Tom took a drag. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because I love her?”

“The pen name. Why’d you use the pen name?”

I fidgeted with my beaded bracelet. “I don’t want these editors to know my sex.”

Tom scoffed in a cloud of smoke. “Plenty of women have been published. Austen. Shelley. Others I can’t remember.”

I got up and snatched the cigarette from his hand. “Do you have to do this in the house?”

Tom scowled. “Didn’t have a choice. It’s been snowing for hours.”

I resumed my seat on the sofa with a sigh. “I know women have been published before. But they were –”

“What?”

“They were *good* writers. Real writers.”

Tom sighed and coughed a little. “Look. If you don’t believe you’re a good writer, an editor won’t either.” He scratched the back of his neck. “No wonder you’re still getting rejected.”

A bubble of anger rose in my chest. I looked down at my lap before the bubble could pop.

Tom continued, “Use the fake name if you want. I won’t lose sleep over it.” He swung his feet up on a footstool. “There’s no such thing as a fake writer. You either write or you don’t.”

I looked up. Suppressing a sigh, I got up and gave him his cigarette back.

Spring 1947

D*uring this time, I’d begun to fall for someone again.*

My life hadn’t grown easier as the years passed, as my daughter grew up and my book seemed further from publication than ever. But the day-to-day things had become more manageable. Routine was my dearest friend in those days. Tom had taken on metalworking to support us. I schooled Penny at home, much to the chagrin of my traditionalist mother. Like clockwork, I sent out three query letters a week.

But then my consistent, half-content life was disrupted by a wonderful bump in the road.

Downtown, the trees that lined the street had begun to regrow their leaves. As the sun crept toward the horizon, a chill slid through my spine. Opening my book bag on my shoulder, I dug through plastic-covered library books for my cardigan – and then we met.

Literally. We crashed into each other, books and coffee flying on the sidewalk.

His spilled coffee on my dress warmed me up, at least. I stood there a bit dumbfounded. In a fumbling sort of awkwardness, the strange man dropped to the ground to retrieve my books.

“I’m sorry, miss. So sorry. Are these library books? Oh, they’re soaked. Goodness me. I’ll pay the fine if they’re ruined – that was my –”

“Don’t worry about it, please.”

He stood with the books in his arms. His eyes flicked to the coffee on my dress and he opened his mouth, undoubtedly intending to resume his apologetic monologue, till his gaze

reached mine. He lingered there a beat longer than he probably should have. He cleared his throat with a pink flush on his face, and if I'm honest, I had to swallow a smile.

"I'll pay the dry cleaning, too," he said, looking away now.

"Don't worry about it," I said again, because I found myself too flustered to form a new sentence.

"Can I make this up to you in some other way?" He met my gaze again with a half-smile. "If you're not in a rush, there's this bakery right up the road. Real swell joint. Best cookies on this side of town."

I hesitated. My family expected me home. But something about this man – I couldn't place it. I didn't want to leave without learning his name.

"Are you certain?" I said.

He nodded enthusiastically. "Let's go; it won't take long."

"So long as it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all, miss." He carefully put my books back in my bag. "I've got to get myself a new coffee, anyhow."

I caught myself laughing. Not at his words, but at the twinkle in his round eyes.

His name was Cal Saint, and there couldn't have been a more appropriate name for him. He gave me his coat to cover the coffee stain. He bought me gingerbread cookies, three for me and one to bring back to my daughter. He didn't fidget at the idea that I had a daughter and no ring. He made eye contact when I spoke and nodded along without interrupting. He was impressed to hear that I was a writer.

He worked at a shipyard: his father's business. He was a welder, he said, and he had the forearm burns to prove it. He hadn't bothered to chase a degree, and he "didn't regret it an ounce."

His birthday was four weeks after mine, and he loved to inform me that he was an entire month older than I am.

He asked for my address, and strangely, I wanted his too.

Was it a date? I don't know. But when he walked me home, I had a blush drawn on my face in permanent marker.

Summer 1947

Cal was the first person I told when a letter from an editor arrived in my mailbox, and my mother doesn't let me hear the end of it. The letter itself wasn't unusual; I received many. But this one. This one didn't begin with, "Your book holds promise, *however...*" This letter, unlike all the others, opened and closed with promise.

I stood on my mother's front porch and allowed the tears to break loose. Penny, standing at the height of my knees, tugged on my trousers in her tiny fists. I stroked her snow-white hair, though I could scarcely see her through my tears.

Time sped up and slowed down all at once. I recall the moment in slow motion, but in the heat of it, my heartbeat made my hands tremble and my breathing hitch. I had no time to lose.

I scooped up my daughter and set off. I'd been to Cal's house thrice by this point, and my feet mapped out the path on their own. If my body were to possess an autopilot system, that is precisely what kicked in.

He saw me coming before I could set foot on his modestly manicured, summer-green lawn; he must have spotted me through the window. He often liked to sit by the window overlooking the street. He stood in the doorway and looked at me with eyes rounder than teacups.

"Is this your daughter?"

I looked down at Penny on my hip, and she looked back at me. I'd forgotten that Cal hadn't met her yet. In the sentiment of that milestone, mingled with the emotions tied up in the editor's letter in my pocket, a single tear ran seared down my hot cheek.

"My book was picked up."

Cal was a man whom, at that time, I'd barely known three months. But he hopped out of the house, letting the door swing and slam behind him, and wrapped us in an embrace. Then he pulled back abruptly, indicating Penny.

"Is this okay?"

"Yes."

And he hugged us again. His sweater smelled like cotton and roasted coffee beans. I breathed as though those breaths were my last.

We didn't separate until Penny began to grow fussy. He offered me a tissue; I'm certain I looked like a blubbering fool, standing there on his front lawn in my house shoes with my daughter on my hip. He held Penny while I wiped my eyes, and she grabbed at his chin with her chubby hands. What a stark contrast, if I were to compare. Leo hated to see my tears. If I cried, he would leave the room.

He said he knew that this was coming soon. "Didn't I say you'd reach a breakthrough real soon? I *told* you you would." Then I showed him the letter; he finished reading and looked up grinning. He said he was proud of me.

I invited him back to my house for dinner. For the first time, Cal met my family. My mother, seemingly a bit overwhelmed by the combined excitement of having an author for a daughter as well as that daughter bringing a man home, insisted on a celebration.

It was humble. My mother and Penny cooked meatloaf and rice. Tom brought Cal to the drugstore with him and came back with sparkling cider and a brotherly sense of approval.

“He’s a good egg,” Tom said in my ear at dinner, a little too loudly. I shushed him. Cal took a drink, but I caught a glimpse of the smile that graced his sweet face.

The gentle celebrating lasted hours. Cal didn’t leave until one in the morning. I walked him to the end of our pathway. The streetlights emphasized his smile in the dark. Silence spanned between us for a long while; we knew. We both knew. Words weren’t needed.

A croaking frog interrupted our quiet. We both laughed, and as we did, an inside joke bloomed. To this day, he still makes frog noises to wake me up in the middle of the night. Some nights I just groan and roll over. Other times, I croak back louder till he kisses me into silence and we fall asleep with matching smiles.

I didn’t know that at the time. All I knew in the moment was that, standing in my mother’s pathway in the middle of the night, I felt more okay than I had in years.

Spring 1950

D*arling?”*

The record stutters a little, then resumes. My senses return. Tom is trying to sing along to words he doesn’t know. My mother herds a giggly Penny out of the room. Cal’s hand fits like a puzzle piece into mine. Copies of my second book, bound in tender green and printed with my name – my *real* name – are stacked on the table.

Like my first release, it will grace every other shelf from here to New York City. It’s a simple book, I think, though Cal vehemently disagrees. It’s romantic. Soft. A little sappy. Leo would have hated it. Good.

How quickly that humble celebration, three years ago, crossfaded into the sparkling, vibrant, champagne-filled party my mother has put on tonight. I hadn't expected all of this fuss over my book; it's my second release, after all. Perhaps that's why it tastes so sweet.

I look up. I shake my head a little.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Cal squeezes my hand. "Are you happy?"

I meet his soft gaze. And I smile.

End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha R. Glas is an author, blogger, and coffee-drinker with a passion for writing and a love for Christ. She released her first short story “Gingerbread” in 2019, and she is in the process of finishing her debut novel, *The Girl Who Frosts the Cakes*. She also writes poetry and nonfiction. When she isn’t writing, Samantha can be found having coffee with friends, taking walks around her college campus, or desperately trying to keep her plants alive. Read more from her at writinglikeaboss.com and follow her online @glasauthor.

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