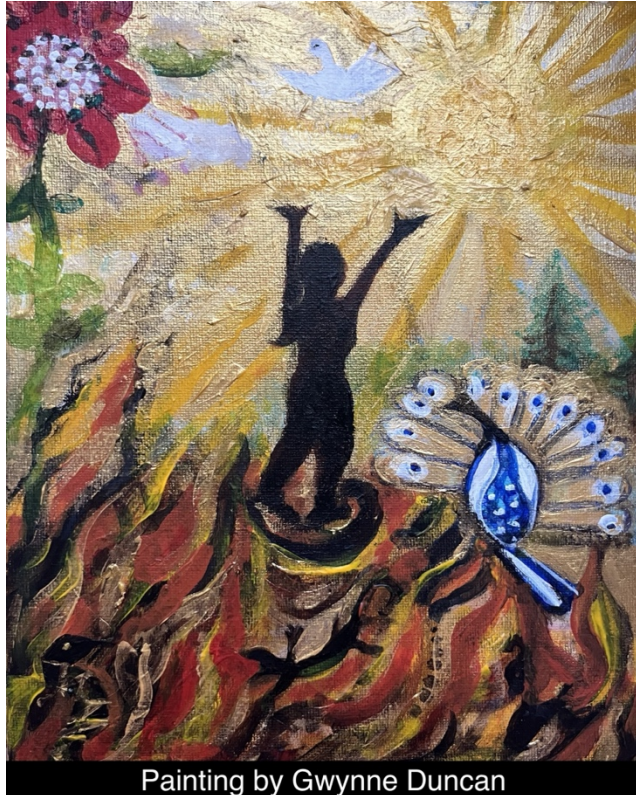


The Fire Inside Me

Alyssa

She was only a child, but the world didn't treat her like one. The adults who were supposed to protect her looked the other way. The system that was supposed to keep her safe left her exposed. And the monsters who preyed on vulnerability? They saw her, but not as a person, not as a little girl with dreams and a future, as an opportunity. She didn't



Painting by Gwynne Duncan

have the words for it then. All she knew was pain, confusion, and survival. She learned quickly how to read a room, how to mask fear with a straight face, how to make herself small enough not to be noticed, but strong enough to make it through the night.

Years passed, and this became her life as she knew it. Nobody knew, or if they did, they never said anything. She carried the weight in silence, wearing a mask so well that even those closest to her couldn't see the cracks underneath. The world kept spinning, and she kept surviving. But there were nights when her past would knock on the door of her peace, reminding her of everything that had been stolen.

And yet, something inside her never broke. Call it stubbornness. Call it faith. Call it fire.

Then, one day, in her mid-twenties, around 24, she met someone who didn't see her as broken or a damaged teenager or a case file. This person saw her. Not just her story. Not just her pain. But her light. She made her feel safe, comfortable, seen... and for the first time in a long time, normal. And something shifted. That little girl inside, the one who had been running, hiding, surviving, she finally felt safe. And when that happened, everything changed.

That was the beginning of her healing. And it lit a new fire inside her, not just to survive, but to advocate. She began speaking up, not just for herself, but for every child still caught in silence. She stepped into spaces most survivors never reach, policy meetings, nonprofit organizations, group homes, community panels, support groups. She looked the same people that work for the system in the face and said "The problem? The problem is people just like all of you who are not being held accountable! Why are we failing the kids who need us most? Why are we waiting until they're broken to show up?"

She realized child trafficking wasn't being handled with the urgency or depth it deserved. It was being treated like a one-time event instead of the long-term trauma it truly is. She knew healing doesn't end with a rescue, it begins there. And most of the programs meant to help didn't understand that. So she became the one who did. She worked with survivors, helping them rediscover their power and give inspiration. She built relationships with caregivers, service providers, and grassroots leaders, offering her lived experience as a guide. She didn't show up as a case file or an academic, she showed

up as proof that healing is possible, but only when people stop trying to “fix” survivors and start listening to them.

She became the voice she once needed. It wasn’t always easy. Some didn’t believe her. Some were uncomfortable with her truth. Some thought she was too passionate, too loud, too determined to stir up change. But she didn’t care. She wasn’t doing this for praise, she was doing it for the girl she used to be. And for every child still waiting for someone to care enough to stop and say, “You don’t deserve this. You are worth protecting.”

One day, she stood in front of a room full of decision-makers. Her voice didn’t shake from fear, it shook with power. With truth. She ended with this: “I didn’t survive just to move on. I survived to make sure nobody else has to feel invisible, unheard, or unimportant the way I once did. This isn’t about saving people. It’s about giving them a chance to save themselves, and to have support throughout their journey to healing. It’s about standing beside them, believing in them, and building systems that actually protect them.”

And that’s exactly what she’s doing. Because when you survive something meant to destroy you, you don’t come back the same. You come back with fire, and some fires are meant to light the way for others.



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