

## The Firefly Jars

Daniela Pérez de Ruffinatti\*

Behind grey, bulky clouds, a timid sun struggled to emerge. A weak ray of sunlight briefly cast her shadow on the icy sidewalk, among the tide of people. Cassandra hated cold ears and noses, and how winters seemed stubbornly entitled to drag on forever. She would always say that the only winter she actually liked was the one composed by the talented Antonio Vivaldi. Ironically enough, whenever she indulged in listening to Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons', especially as the first chords of the winter began, a summer-like, warm sensation ran through her entire body.

After a few hours away from home, a set of keys jingled impatiently in her coat pocket. As she trudged down the block, the gentle clink of two brand-new bottles of vodka she carried in a shopping bag made her lips crave it. A recent *fait accompli* from which she derived a feeling of bittersweet satisfaction called for a private celebration. The outdoors overwhelmed her just as much as being indoors did. Feeling suffocated, she quickened her pace; home was only a few yards away. Clink...clink...clink, with every step, like a tireless glass metronome.

Inside her apartment, a gloomy atmosphere prevailed. A thick layer of dust covered all surfaces; in the sink, dirty dishes balanced in a crooked pile, longing for the cleansing touch of hot water. An unmade, empty bed awaited her. Only a variety of expired food products inhabited her refrigerator. Her unbalanced diet, which consisted mostly of take-out food, alcohol and heavy smoking, had suffered drastically throughout the past few months. At the farthest corner of her bedroom, in a soundless plea for music, a dusty violin rested flat on the ground, untouched. In the living room, the TV was always on to drive away the deafening silence that terrified her.

Opening a window to let some air in seemed a good idea, but she just could not make herself to do it: the sofa and the new bottle of vodka had lured her in. She reproached herself for not fighting back unhealthy habits. On the coffee table, a cigarette burned slowly in a crammed ashtray, next to a half-empty glass of vodka. From the window, people's busy lives seemed much simpler than hers did, or so she wanted to believe. Back on the sofa, she topped her tumbler up, quenched her painful memories and, clutching her knees to her chest, she buried her weary head between them.

Half a pack of cigarettes later, her swollen eyes glistened with tears as she paced up and down the room, mumbling. "What else could I've done? This has gotta be the right choice. Yes, I've finally made things right," she sniffled between sobs, unable to make up her mind. An uncontrollable urge to numb her whole body overcame her. Secrets and words unsaid piled up at the back of her throat, choking her. Feeling short of breath, she coughed dryly. A heavy burden had oppressed her chest for a long time.

After rubbing her hands impatiently and cracking every possible knuckle, she pulled out a crumpled-up plastic bag of pills from inside a glass jar in the cupboard and studied it thoughtfully –she kept a stash in almost every room

---

\* 2º mención especial del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría cuento (2018).

of her apartment. These are Heaven-in-a-pill, a friend had told her once. With one of these, you take a nice round trip to Heaven for a few hours and forget about all the crap that troubles you... but with more than five at a time, well, let's say you'd be buying the one-way ticket. She knew it well.

Standing in the middle of the living room, Cassandra gulped back the tears and acknowledged her bitter reality. She covered her chapped lips with a bony hand and let out a long, muffled sigh of defeat. In front of an invisible, though judging audience, she popped a 'round-trip ticket to Heaven' in her mouth, gave a deep bow and faked a big, toothy smile. This bit was not new to her. She found herself unable to recall a time in her life when smiles had been purely innocent and genuine.

A wave of unpleasant memories flooded her mind. Come on, Cass, be a good little girl and gimme a big smile, or people'll think you ain't happy in this house. Oh, come on, baby girl. Let's see those pretty white teeth ya' got. A coarse, adult hand, strategically on top of hers, had accompanied the words that, even years after, still resounded in her ears, making her cringe in disgust at the very thought of them. Raised to oblige, to pretend, to keep silent; those were the principles by which she had lived her life. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she had not truly grinned in ages. What should have been someone else's shame had unfairly become her own; she wondered why.

In a last attempt to emerge, a determined sunbeam made its way through the clouds and glinted on her prism tumbler, filling up the wall behind her with tiny sparkles of colored lights, brighter than a hundred fireflies.

As the apartment began to darken, yet another cigarette glowed quietly in the stuffed ashtray, blowing slow wreaths of white smoke, until it was consumed. She wished to slip through the crack between two windowpanes, towards the veiled sun and be gone forever. "Everything will be fine. It's gotta be," she chanted mechanically, yet not believing a single word she uttered. "If only they had believed me... All would be different now." Shadows lengthened, and the sparkles of light on the wall faded away.

The fake, drug-induced sense of numbness and peace to which she had become addicted kicked in, making her slump on the nearest sofa. Her skin looked pale as snow; her limbs, lifeless. The lustrous, auburn curls and the bright, hazel eyes people used to compliment her on had long before lost their lively shine. Her once cute freckles had turned into clumped-up brown spots on her protruded cheekbones. The distant hum of cars coming from the street lulled her. She dozed off.

The timid sun finally gave up and remained trapped behind the bulky clouds.

With the weight of desperation, night fell upon every creature, regardless. A quiet blackness came down, heavy as lead. Her breathing slowed down, as did her heart rate. While unconscious, her dream-like hallucinations blended into a calm, comforting oblivion: she hovered in a soft, purple haze that eased her aching spirit, and danced around old musical scores she used to play, riddled with treble clefs that swayed on five-lane paths packed with crotchets and quavers. Whole hours went by. The endless chattering and laughter from the TV continued.

The insistent ringing of the telephone snatched her out of her deep daze. Clumsily, Cassandra staggered across the room and managed to make a grab at the receiver. A rush of adrenaline shot down her spine as she opened her eyes wide and gasped in distress. “No way! No! Don’t you dare blame me for this,” she hissed with fury, clenching her teeth. Glaring angrily into the black void in front of her that seemed to engulf her soul, she listened grudgingly. “There were countless hints... and it breaks my heart to realize that you all simply decided to turn a blind eye... but now it’s done. No one will ever again suffer as I did,” she reminded her judgmental interlocutor. Her hands were shaking; her heart pounded in her chest with the force of a thousand secrets trying to break free. She felt sick to her stomach.

A whirlwind of irreconcilable thoughts sharp as tiny splinters of broken glass circled around in her head, digging deep in her brain. Her head felt ready to tear open. Repeatedly banging the receiver against the wall, she growled, “You’re losing sight of the bigger picture, here... No, it’ll not be on my conscience. I haven’t done anything wrong.” She hung up abruptly. It was not long before the phone started ringing again, piercing her core. She answered reluctantly. “And now you, too?” she blurted out in despair. “This is too much! And you know what? I don’t need to put up with this.” This time, she slammed the phone down for good. Coping with the past had never been her strong suit; her drug addiction was proof of it. A sudden, growing sense of alienation overwhelmed her. When she looked at her hands, her thin arms and legs, they did not feel her own anymore.

Cassandra stared blankly at her distorted image in the bathroom mirror before opening the medicine cabinet to look for a stash of pills. She had lost track of time. Nervously, she rummaged around it for a moment. Running her index finger along the contour of her profile, she desperately tried to cling to the last standing shreds of who she was. It was already too late. The haggard stranger in the mirror gave back a slight, approving nod. She knew it very well: one pill should be enough to ease her pain. However, as if tricked by her own hand, she grabbed a handful and washed it down with a big, cleansing gulp of vodka, straight from the bottle. Along with it, she swallowed the shame, all the fake smiles she had ever been forced to give, the secrets and words unsaid. Her bed caught her as she flopped down.

By then, the sun had gone to try its luck halfway around the world.

To her blurry eyes, the streaks on the wooden ceiling of her bedroom transformed into salty ocean waves she could taste at the tip of her tongue, and bright-colored kites that floated carelessly in a clear sky. With every blink, new images and sensations sprang into life. Laughter and music from afar resounded in her head. The memory of violin recitals at school and long-lost friends saddened her. A tender, invisible hand soothingly stroked her long, auburn curls and caressed her sunken cheeks. She lost herself in the moment and allowed her inner child to mourn her biggest loss: her innocence.

Familiar voices and smells lingered in the stale air: family gatherings around crackling campfires at the beach during summer vacations, and feasts of grilled-cheese sandwiches in the yard, after many successful firefly chases with her siblings. Her jars of fireflies were always the brightest; she never got tired of hearing everyone say she had a talent for it. Secretly, she preferred

to believe she had managed to capture tiny particles of sun that it had shed as a gift to her.

However, one by one, like the bugs in her jars whenever she opened the lid, memories flew away and vanished into the dawning room as soon as they passed through her mind, allowing her spirit to feel a little more liberated, a little less caged. Shame stepped outside its human host and, shaking off its lethargy, finally freed itself. Following the pace of the music in her head, Cassandra drew big airy smiles with her index finger, like a delusional orchestra conductor who refuses to accept that his golden era already belongs in the past. With every breath, the oppression that had weighed her down for so long began to lift. Suddenly, she felt herself slowly rising towards the ceiling, completely disembodied, as her burden grew increasingly lighter.

A gust of wind flung a window open, while clouds drifted apart and let the morning sun pour its renewed light upon each corner of the room. Outside, naked trees rustled their branches in the brisk wind like wavering, intertwined staves. The glass on the coffee table emitted no more refractions; not a single wisp of smoke curled up from the ashtray. Eventually, the music in her head waned, leaving her virtually empty. As always, the TV was on, though the broadcasting had not started yet. Even though the apartment was in a complete, oppressive silence, it did not seem to bother her any longer. After a few brief gasps, her chest flattened out and her pallid limbs relaxed. Exhaling her last breath, Cassandra closed her tired, hazel eyes and, for once in a long time, smiled an innocent, genuine smile.