

FIREFLIES



A short story by
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He's just woken up and feels cold. It's already October. He knows he should have been wearing pyjamas to bed, but he didn't want to admit to defeat by this long dark autumn. Once, he would have sought out his wife's warm body under the sheets and she would have snuggled up to him before dropping off to sleep again in his arms. Now, the idea no longer appeals to him. Neither does he feel any desire to reach out and touch her feet with his own. That had been one of their favourite games: four feet in search of each other in the warm darkness of the bed,

intent on tickling each other, like a litter of playful puppies. But he knows that if he tried to do that now, his wife would draw away, probably with a grunt of annoyance. Besides, her feet seem to have lost the warmth they once had. Sometimes he touches them by accident, and they bring to mind two lumps of cold marble. He can hear her snoring softly beside him: a sharp sibilant sound, like steam escaping from a pressure cooker. She is in a deep slumber, and he prefers not to disturb her.

He slips out of bed and fumbles for his slippers and dressing-gown. The cold makes him shiver. The window is closed tightly, but even so he can feel currents of air in the room, as if ghosts are hovering there. And the sensation of cold only increases as he shuffles along the dark corridor. He knows every inch of his house; he could wander around it in his sleep and never bump into a single thing. But tonight the darkness, hardly affected by the dim reddish haze creeping in from the street, is profound, so *heavy*, that the shadows seem about to transform into solid bodies. So strong is this

impression that he moves his right hand in front of his face as he passes along the corridor, like a blind man deprived of his stick. With his left hand he feels his way along the wall, counting the doorways – one... two... three – until he reaches the kitchen.

He tells himself he shouldn't drink so much. At least that way he would avoid this burning thirst, this putrid taste, that fills his mouth whenever he awakens in the middle of the night. He opens the fridge and is assailed by a cold breath of mildew. As he gulps down a pint of freezing cold water, he recalls that he never used to wake up at night when he was young. Then, his sleep was deep and unbroken, a long black gap that would last until late the next morning. Now, the nights have become a succession of changes, short periods of restless half-sleep alternating with nightmares, fits of anxiety leading to long periods of insomnia. He once went to see his doctor, who prescribed sleeping tablets, but he never took them because the instruction leaflet warned against their use with alcohol.

The icy water induces a stab of pain in a decaying tooth. He can't suppress a groan. He heads towards the bathroom to empty his bladder. Half way there, the phone rings.

He's so startled his heart begins to race. It beats against his ribs like a drum, and he can almost feel the pulsations in his throat. There's no sound more ominous, he thinks, than a telephone ringing in the middle of the night. It's about four o'clock. (He hasn't checked his watch, but alcohol always makes him wake up around this time.) He tells himself it's better not to answer. Bound to be some idiot who's dialled the wrong number. But the ringing continues with shrill insistence. He's afraid his wife will wake up. He runs to the phone and lifts the receiver, but doesn't speak.

"Antonio?", he hears someone ask. It's a female voice, young, expectant.

He's about to reply that she's got the wrong number. He also intends to make some sharp comment about people who disturb other people at four in the morning. But she doesn't let him speak.

“I know you’re there, darling,” she says, “I can hear you breathing. You don’t have to say a thing. I can still sense you beside me. It’s as if you haven’t gone, as if you’re still with me, smothering me with kisses and caresses. I still feel you inside me, my love. No. don’t say anything. I only wanted to thank you and tell you how happy I am, how wonderful our love-making tonight was for me.”

He puts down the phone, very slowly. As he does so, he can still hear the girl’s voice, like a soft humming drifting away. He feels his face burning with shame. He stands staring at the receiver while the seconds tick by. He realises he’s waiting, yearning for it to ring again. But nothing happens. Then he glances downwards, contemplating the sad erection poking out through the folds of his dressing-gown.

The pack of cigarettes is hidden behind volume five of the encyclopaedia. He left it there a year ago, when he gave up smoking, thinking it would be a good way to test his will-power. He takes out a cigarette and puts it in his mouth, where it feels

strangely alien. Almost at once his mouth produces saliva. The match flares into flame, creating a tiny toxic cloud. As he's about to light the cigarette, he thinks better of it, and goes out on to the balcony; he doesn't want to suffer his wife's reproaches if she notices the smell of tobacco.

It's almost unbearably cold outside and he begins to shiver violently, but he doesn't care. He finally lights the cigarette and inhales the first puff. The smoke makes him feel slightly dizzy, but also brings a pleasant sensation of abandon. Resting his elbows on the railing, he smokes in silence while in his mind he replays the woman's voice and words.

From windows and balconies all around him comes the wavering glow of dozens of other cigarettes, like fireflies swarming in the autumn night.



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