

Maya Hernandez

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: American Heritage School, Plantation, FL

Educator: Diana Adams

Category: Short Story

The Glass Jar

The Glass Jar

“Hello?” Fiona called into the heavy silence.

Shadows engulfed her grandmother’s house, allowing no light to leak through the papered windows. To her left, a chandelier laced with cobwebs cast crystal blotches of darkness on the mahogany table. To her right, fabric couches were torn and moth-eaten, keeping each other company in the otherwise barren room. The house seemed dead.

Fiona ventured deeper, her footsteps leaving no tracks in the thick layer of dust. “Hellooooo?” she called again, unease creeping into her voice.

Her mother had seemed nervous, bordering on terrified, when instructing Fiona how to retrieve the jar.

Feefee, she’d said, hands twisting and writhing of their own accord. *You must be quick—in and out. Don’t bother knocking, there’ll be no one there.*

And there hadn’t been. Fiona glanced behind her one last time before moving into the narrow hallway. There were no pictures on the walls; it was like no one lived here at all.

Fiona entered the kitchen. Timeworn, honey-stained cabinets lined all four walls, barely leaving space for basic appliances.

Her mother had leaned forward, an intense expression on her face. *It’s important you remember this next part because there will be glass jars everywhere, and we need a specific one.*

She opened the cabinet above the stove with trepidation. Empty mason jars crowded the tiny space.

Look for the jar that smells like pineapple.

Fiona eyed them in confusion. How was she supposed to smell anything if there was nothing in them? And why would her mother send her all this way to retrieve an empty jar? With a sigh, Fiona recalled her mother’s desperation. She reached for the first one, finding it unexpectedly weighty, and took a cautious sniff.

The rich scent of chocolate flooded her senses teasing her taste buds. Fiona held it back in surprise; the lid was still sealed. Carefully she placed it on the counter. One by one she lifted the rest to her nose. Lemons, sea salt, strawberries, turmeric...

Pineapple? Fiona had interrupted with a frown. It was her stepfather’s favorite.

Of course pineapple! her mother said indignantly, a bit of her old self shining through. *Grab it and go.*

Fiona moved on to the adjacent cabinet. Apple pie, green tea, olives, freshly cut grass...

What do you need the jar for? Fiona had asked hesitantly.

Her mother inhaled deeply, pain and indecision warring in her eyes.

It will... help us. Help us to feel him here again. Quiet tears rolled down her cheeks and she hurriedly swiped them away with a watery smile.

Fiona was determined to do this for her mother. She hadn’t been the same since her second husband died of a heart attack, and if she said the jar would help, Fiona would try. Although she didn’t see how it would. Personally she felt they would both be better off without the rotten man.

On to the neighboring cabinet. Cotton candy, peppers, cherries, soap...

When her mother came here to ask for the jar, her grandmother had refused. And for some reason, her mother was convinced that when told she was banished and could never step foot in the house again, it was fact. So she’d sent Fiona to do it. But the quiet house, the potent yet empty jars, her mother’s anxiety... it didn’t sit well.

Next cabinet. Roses, coffee, bananas...

Pineapple.

Fiona frowned as she held the glass jar in her hands; it was as unremarkable as the rest.

One last thing, her mother had said, returning to a serious tone. *Don’t. Open. The jar.*

The only thing that kept Fiona from disobeying that direct order was the urgent severeness in her mother’s eyes at

the possibility. And the distant horror.

So she clutched the jar and made a beeline for the front door, eager to exit the lifeless house of the grandmother she'd never met. But in her haste, Fiona failed to watch her step. She scurried outside and tripped on a loose cobblestone, falling violently. The glass jar flew from her grasp and skittered across the ground. It didn't shatter. Painfully, she pulled herself up and slowly paced to where the jar lay on the brittle yellow grass. She stared down at it in bewilderment. It was glass. It should have broken.

Fiona bent down and scooped up the jar. She examined it closely but spotted no cracks, scraps, or other injuries. Impulsively she spiked the jar like a volleyball. It bounced up and she caught it in both hands.

Her fingers roamed the glass. Her feet shifted their weight. Her lips rolled over her teeth. Fiona was a curious girl and could only resist so much. She shoved her guilt and apprehension deep down and gave in. She pried off the lid.

Isabelle sat at the kitchen table and wept messily over her husband's picture. This was not the first time she had done this today. When she woke up that morning and glanced to her left, she cried. When she'd gone for a jog and glimpsed the Skinners walking hand in hand, she had turned around, gone home, and cried. And now, when she had gone to Jack's favorite farmers market for the first time since... Well, she came home and cried.

Isabelle supposed she shouldn't have pushed herself to go to the market, not today. But she wanted to have pineapple in the house when he came back.

She had everything ready. Jack's body was preserved by the spell she'd performed upon his death, and the ingredients were assembled and waiting for her at the graveyard. All she needed was the jar.

A ribbon of guilt tightened around her heart. Fiona was a smart girl. As long as she followed her instructions exactly, she would be fine in that wretched house among all those jars...

She blew her nose and scrubbed at her puffy eyes. Maybe she should check on her.

Isabelle chanted the incantation and entered the void. The Eternal Nothing spread out before her, sparkling with billions of points of light.

In an impressive and carrying voice, she spoke her daughter's name. Nothing happened. She said it louder, the timbre of her voice stronger. Again, nothing happened.

Her eyes snapped open in horror. What had happened to Fiona?

The girl had not moved. She stood in front of the house holding her jar, brown hair fluttering gently in a breeze, blue eyes focused on nothing.

Out of thin air, a stringy woman with blond hair and matching blue eyes appeared next to the weathered mailbox at the end of the driveway. A moment later Isabelle was running towards her daughter.

"Oh, Feefee!" she cried. Isabelle gently removed the jar from Fiona's hands and held it to her nose: peppermint. A heartbroken howl escaped her lips and tears pricked her eyes. Jack was gone forever. But Isabelle closed her mouth and clamped down on her grief for now. She muttered another incantation and opened the jar under her daughter's nose.

Fiona blinked at a familiar face, dizzy with confusion.

"Mom?" she murmured weakly. "What—"

Her mother threw herself onto Fiona and began to sob in earnest. Instinctively, her arms went up.

"Mom, what happened?" Fiona asked in alarm. "What's going on?"

Her mother pulled away, frantically swiping at her cheeks. "Nothing now, it's okay honey."

Fiona stepped back. "No. It's not okay." Her memories were becoming sharper and she was growing more and more upset. "What was in the jar?"

Her mother paled. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

Fiona glared at her, then at the opened jar. "Tell me."

They gazed at each other, Fiona with an open challenge, her mother... searching.

Whatever she saw toppled the wall that had kept secrets from Fiona her entire life.

"I'm a witch. So is your grandmother, but we think it skipped a generation. As for the jars, your grandmother collects souls in that house. She stored your father's in one, although why she agreed to do that and then not give it to me, I don't know—" She cut her rambling off with a huff. "Jack's soul was encased in the jar until you opened it, despite that I had told you not to—" Fiona bristled despite everything—"and released it. Then *your* soul was trapped inside until I put it back."

Fiona stared at her mother in silence. It was impossible. It was *insane*. And yet, it made sense. Her mother had always been peculiar, able to do and know things she shouldn't have. But this, souls trapped in jars—

"Wait, what were you going to do with it?"

Her mother blanched and stuttered. “Um... well...”

Rage sparked. “You were going to bring him back weren’t you!” Fiona yelled. Her mother said nothing. “You were! I can’t believe this! After everything he’s done, you wanted to raise him back from the dead?! Do you realize how *crazy* that is??”

“What do you mean ‘after everything he’s done’? He’s done everything for us—”

“No he hasn’t! He’s a washed up loser who gambles and drinks away all our money. He gave himself that heart attack the way he lived,” Fiona bit out.

Hurt and anger mixed on her mother’s face. She never saw clearly when it came to Jack.

Fiona sighed, the fight going out of her. “Look mom, he was no good.” She opened her mouth to protest, but Fiona held up her hands. “He was no good, yet I know you loved him. But he’s *gone*. He’s gone now,” she said softly. Her mother shrank away from the words. Fiona said them again; she needed to hear them.

“He’s gone, mom.” Fiona took a cautious step forward. “He’s gone.” Her mother whimpered. Fiona wrapped her in a hug.

The glass jar fell from her mother’s hands and shattered as she returned the gesture.