



the glass jar: a fable

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God helps those who help themselves.
—Benjamin Franklin



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collecting nectar to feed their colony. The bee made a direct line for the window, entered a kitchen, and spotted a large glass jar that sat, open, on a counter. The fly followed.

The jar was mostly empty, but on its bottom sat a dark liquid that was the source of the enticing odor. The bee realized it was not nectar or anything like that, but a foreign substance that all the same seemed promising. It flew into the jar and approached the surface of the liquid gingerly; the fly barreled in also, and immediately plunged into the substance without the least hesitation. “It is a little weird, but delicious,” it declared, slurping the liquid. After some hesitation, the bee joined in the feast; however, it did not consume the liquid as the fly had done; instead, it used a long, straw like organ known as “proboscis” to suck up the liquid and store it into its “honey stomach,” a receptacle into which the bee saved the liquid for taking it back to the hive.

Both insects went about their business, nearly side by side, for a while. At length, the fly was full and the bee had collected a prudent amount of not-quite-nectar, so both decided to leave in search of new areas to explore. But they discovered that getting out of that jar was far more difficult than getting in. The bee looked out and could clearly see the surface of the counter, the open window above, and the solid blue of the sky even further off. So, it flew forward and smashed into the wall of the jar. A little dazed, the bee collected itself, moved a little backwards to gather momentum, and thrust again in search of freedom, crashing once more against some invisible wall in the jar with a loud “thud.” Stunned, it fell down into the liquid, and floated there for a while, recovering.

The fly found itself in the same predicament – its spherical eyes gave it a panoramic, almost circular view of the world, but it was a short-sighted one, so it was hard to figure out what was going on a few feet away. All the same, it had no problem detecting the light outside and headed for it.

The result was almost identical to that obtained by the bee. The only difference was that the fly did not move as fast or as deliberately as the bee, so the impact against the jar wall was not as dramatic. The fly grazed the surface of the wall, met resistance, and retreated and changed direction. However, it failed in its attempts to get out, time after time.

Insects of different species very seldom communicate with each other, but this was getting to be an emergency. The fly landed just next to the still groggy bee and asked:

“What do we do now?”

The bee shook itself a few times to brush away some of the liquid and responded frankly: “I don’t know. There seems to be some obstacle to our getting out, but I can see nothing barring the way.” “Neither do I,” replied the fly, “even though I can see in all directions.”

The bee puzzled over the problem a little bit and concluded: “Well, there is surely an obstacle, even if we can’t see it. We’ll have to use a scientific approach for overcoming it.”

“Scientific? What’s that?” replied the fly, who did not think much about anything other than finding food.

“Science is an organized way of getting possible explanations about the things that happen, and being able to test those explanations,” said the bee, a tad pedantically. “So, here, if we apply science, we’ll be able to find out the possible reason we can’t get out, and will be able to test the reason we found to see if it is correct.”

“Sounds too much like work. I always find my way around without what you call science” protested the fly. “‘i have no use for science” it declared with finality.

“Whatever you say,” answered the bee. “You do it your way, and I’ll do it mine.”



the bee was able to recoil from the wall unharmed. It noted that its progress had been barred after three wing strokes. What would happen if it aimed a little higher? The bee headed somewhat above the sun's location, and repeated the process starting from the same point, just at the middle of the liquid's surface. This time it took four wing strokes to hit the invisible barrier. "So, it reasoned, the barrier goes up some distance. Let me try again."

While the bee was patiently running its experiment, the fly was flitting around randomly – it would go up and down and would end up hitting something that stopped it, but would continue to move aimlessly sometimes near, sometimes far, from the liquid's surface.

After ten tries, the bee had been able to establish that the barrier went up a good distance, and it was not getting any closer to freedom. But now a new thought emerged: instead of breaking through the barrier, whatever it was, why not land on it and follow it wherever it went? So, with new resolve, the bee approached slowly the point of no progress, that by now required five full strokes to reach, and tried to press its hairy forelegs against the obstacle. After a couple of attempts, the bee succeeded. The obstacle was cool and smooth to the touch, but impenetrable. Now came the hard part, repeating the exercise just a little bit higher, to see if the obstacle had any holes through which it could squeeze.

The fly, in the meantime, had continued its random flight but had achieved no better results. Its spirals, however, were leading the insect higher and higher, until one random twirling brought the fly to the mouth of the jar; whereupon, letting out a loud buzz of victory, the fly emerged from the jar and disappeared through the open window.

The bee saw the fly vanish from sight and took note of the distance and angle of departure of the other insect. But, instead of flinging itself in pursuit of the other, now freed prisoner, the bee continued its methodic progress up the sides of the jar, until in a few more tries it, too, had reached the lip of the jar and, with some effort, had managed to fly away towards the hive, ready to gather more nectar elsewhere.

It did not take long for the fly to get hungry again, though, and as it flew around the garden, it was attracted once more by the enticing aroma that emerged from the open window. Flies have very short memories so that, even dimly aware that there was some problem with the liquid whose fragrance beckoned, the fly went in the jar for another repast.

In the interval since the fly's last visit, the liquid had begun to thicken. It was now darker and somewhat sticky, but the fly had not noticed or paid no mind to the change.

The fly was busy gorging itself when it perceived a disturbance in air, a sure sign of danger. It stopped feeding and sought to fly away, but its legs and wings had become sticky and flying was harder. After a while, the fly's movements became erratic, and finally it plunged back into the liquid.

There was a motion of the liquid around the fly that carried it downwards, and a quick descent into a dark cavity followed by a grinding noise and pain.

The fly's last thought before perishing was that it might have been wiser to pay attention to what the bee had done and, like her, employ some trick for getting out of its prison. But of course, doing so would have been beyond its capabilities.

As summer marched on, other bees and other flies applied themselves to the opportunities and challenges of the season, and most succeeded in their toils without getting in harm's way: for Nature looks after its creatures with great care, and helps most to those who know how to help themselves.



Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over ninety of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was released in February 2023.

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