

The Yellow Butterfly

By Matias Travieso-Diaz

I am Calliope, poetess and sometimes scrivener. My second cousin Pandora begged me to write down her story, for she has no letters and hears that falsehoods are being spread about her and the nature of her sacred mission. There may be an error here or there. But what I am about to tell is essentially true and important.

Long, long ago, there was a war between the old gods and the new ones—a drawn out, monumental squabble in which almost all deities and their allies were involved. This was before my time, so I do not know all the details; but it came to pass that one of the old gods, a giant called Prometheus, chose to fight on the side of the new gods and assisted mightily in the defeat of his relatives, for which he won praise and gratitude from the victors. My father Zeus, the leader of the new gods, promised to grant Prometheus any wish of his as a reward for his invaluable help.

Prometheus, seeing that the earth was barren, asked Zeus for permission to create life to populate it. Zeus asked how Prometheus proposed to do this, and Prometheus replied that he did not know yet but he would think of something and hoped that neither Zeus nor any of the other gods would interfere. My father, in his usual bombastic way, declared: "By my sacred thunderbolt, I vow that neither I nor any of the Gods will interfere with your creations, save in case of dire need."

So, after a lot of thinking, Prometheus set out to make all living things, animals as well as plants, and fashioned man out of a mixture of clay, water and fire. He endowed all animals, and even plants, with instincts that assisted in their survival. However, he was not satisfied with the man he had created, Epimetheus, for he was a dullard and lacked independent will and initiative. In order to improve his handiwork, Prometheus sneaked into Olympus and stole a spark from Zeus' thunderbolt using a giant fennel stalk. Then, upon touching the stalk to Epimetheus' brow, Prometheus granted the first man intelligence and spirit. Touching the stalk to the ground, Prometheus started a fire and taught Epimetheus how to kindle and extinguish it.

Zeus was extremely angry at Prometheus for stealing a spark from his thunderbolt and at man for daring to use it. Fire, up to that point, had been his exclusive property, and he shared it with no one, even the other gods. The story that makes the rounds in Olympus is that Prometheus was seized and chained to a rock in a remote mountain for all eternity. Every morning an eagle sent by Zeus descends on him and eats his liver bit by bit, causing Prometheus unbearable pain. As night falls, the liver regenerates, so it can be ravaged the next day.

Zeus was also angry at Epimetheus, but recognizing that man was innocent of Prometheus' deeds and remembering his oath, decided that his revenge on man had to be subtle so that it would not appear he had reneged on his vow, making him lose face: because gods are very touchy about their image, particularly my father. He ordered that another human being, a woman, be crafted from earth and water and that she be endowed with beauty, grace, and intelligence. That was Pandora, the first female. She came out of the depths of the earth in a trance, carrying with her a large covered iron jar. As she completed her ascent to the surface, she became conscious. She then heard a thundering voice that ordered her to possess and guard the jar but never open it, for terrible things would happen if she did.

Zeus was perhaps counting on Pandora's curiosity to drive her to open the jar leading to man's demise, but she never did. That was just another instance of the male gods underestimating us females.

Pandora became Epimetheus' wife. They had many children, who in turn coupled with one another and had a multitude more. The land was plentiful, and could support the increasing human population.

Epimetheus remained vigorous and, when the excitement of his marriage dulled, began lusting after some of his daughters and grand-daughters, and started neglecting his duties to Pandora. As time passed, Pandora began to reproach Epimetheus: "You don't bring me flowers anymore. You spend all your time cavorting with your daughters, which is bad form, and neglecting me, which is even worse."

Epimetheus dismissed his wife's complaints: "Silence, Pandora. This is women's lot in the world; get used to it." He then continued acting as he pleased. Pandora didn't dare rebel, for she was innocent and believed what her husband told her.

It was then that Pandora had an unexpected visitor. He was tall, handsome, glowing with vitality, surrounded by an unearthly aura; he wore winged sandals and a winged cap, and carried a satchel and a winged staff on which two snakes were coiled. He announced himself self-importantly: "Greetings, woman. I am Hermes, messenger of the Gods."

Pandora cowered at the appearance of a divinity and remained silent, shaking like a leaf in a storm. Hermes noticed her terror and continued in a somewhat less portentous tone: "The Gods have seen your suffering and sent me to offer help."

"What... what do you mean?"

"It is known that your husband Epimetheus is behaving badly, taking his pleasure with younger women and forsaking his duties to you. Is that not the case?"

"Yes, but..."

"It is not for us gods to meddle in human affairs, but I must mention that the solution to your problem lies in your own hands. Within the jar that has been entrusted to you there are many things, good and bad. One of the good things is Fidelity, a blessed spirit that protects married women from neglect from their husbands. If you release that spirit, harmony will return to your household and those of your daughters, and the sacred link between spouses will forever remain unbroken."

"But how do I set Fidelity free? The jar is very big and, as you said, is full of things that should remain captive."

Hermes gave her a tight smile. "You will have to be very careful on how to retrieve Fidelity. First, you must go to the river, capture a crab, and tear off one of its pincers. Then, opening the jar with the pincer just a tiny bit, you must summon Fidelity and, when she shows her head, grasp it gently, pull her out, and immediately close the jar. Release Fidelity so she can fly into the air, and she will do the rest."

"It does not sound too complicated. Are you sure it will work?"

"I give you the word of Hermes that if you do as I have described, Fidelity will be released and will help you and all of womankind to retain the place they deserve."

Pandora thanked Hermes profusely: "It is very kind of the Gods to send her their messenger with the solution to my problem. May you be blessed forever." Hermes bent his head in a sign of modesty, bid her farewell, and disappeared.

I wish Pandora had talked to me before proceeding further, for I know Hermes to be a faithless male: a lying scoundrel, indeed the god of thieves and false witnesses. As it was,

Pandora went to the river looking for a crab to capture, though she had no fishing experience or tools. However, she found by the bank of the river a huge oak tree whose branches almost touched the waters. Leaning on the side of the massive trunk was a three-pointed bronze harpoon fixed onto a long pole. Either intuition or a touch of divine insight told her that she could use this spear to impale a crab, should she find one. And, as if driven by the same divine forces, she saw a large crab lying immobile by the water's edge.

Pandora managed to spear the beast and puncture its carapace a couple of times. She hoisted the dead crab and, laying it on the ground, smashed it with a rock. She then tore a large claw from the corpse and took it back to her hut, where she kept the jar with her other possessions.

Remembering Hermes' instructions, she lifted the jar's lid just a little bit and called out: "Fidelity, come out to be freed." No sooner had she started to open the jar, however, there was a loud rumble and a shade, made of darkness and fog, burst out and grew to fill the room.

Without hesitation, Pandora slammed the lid back on the jar, for that spirit did not square off with her expectations. She was assuming Fidelity would be a lithe, benevolent looking shade, who would spread her diaphanous aura around her and cover the entire world. Whatever this spirit was, it did not look the least bit benevolent.

Pandora faced the shade and asked timorously: "Are you Fidelity?" The reply came after a harsh burst of laughter: "NO! My name is Khaos. All that exists was once within my substance, and in time the heavens and the earth, the gods, and other immortals escaped from me and scattered over the universe. I have been trying to regain all that I lost using disorder and turmoil as my weapons. When the old gods sought to bring down the new ones, I fought with the old and was imprisoned in this jar. Now that you have freed me, I can proceed to upsetting all that is and absorb it back into my being, bit by bit." He then disappeared in a vast cloud of smoke.

Pandora wrung her hands in despair. Had she lost the chance of freeing Fidelity? Should she try opening the jar again, this time very, very carefully, and summon her?

She thought she heard a familiar voice in her head: "Come on, give it another try. Do as I told you."

Fear and desire battled in her heart. At the end, she opened the lid of the jar only a tiny bit, while again summoning: "Fidelity — please come out! Quickly!!"

There was a hiss as of hot water escaping out of a fissure, and a stentorian cry: "I am free!"

A column of smoke rose and coalesced into a menacing figure made of red mist that held a gigantic spear. Brandishing the weapon and stabbing at the open air, the newcomer shouted: "They imprisoned me so there would be an end to War. But now that I am free, I will pitch man against man, god versus man, god fighting god. There will be carnage and spilled blood until the end of time!" Then, before Pandora could do anything to stop him, he seized the jar from her hands, shook it, yanked the lid off, and called out: "Death! Famine! Anger! Hatred! Come out and join me!!"

With the lid removed, there was a tumultuous whoosh, as not only those spirits summoned by War surged out, but Envy, Lust, Greed, Malice, Arrogance, Fear, Disease, and other banes whose names the world would get to know later, streamed out and dispersed in all directions. Pandora was never able to determine whether Fidelity had been among the escapees, but to this date there are no signs that, if she exists, she is working to preserve marital harmony.

Pandora beat her chest in self-reproach. She had failed in her duty as custodian and had

allowed all sorts of calamities to spread throughout the universe.

She then looked inside the jar to see whether any captives remained. There was still something lying on the bottom: a butterfly, yellow with deep blue fringed wings and forked hindwings, large and shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. It fluttered restlessly inside the jar, searching for a way out. Pandora reached into the jar seeking to grasp and free the insect but was halted by the voice of Hermes, which instructed her again:

"Let it be, woman, and close the jar. This butterfly is Hope and if it escapes nothing will be left to help mankind bear its woes."

"But if this thing Hope stays trapped, how can it be of any help to mortals?"

"All they need to know is that Hope exists and is never lost unless humans themselves let go of it. Men and women must use the fire stolen from Heaven to toughen their spirits, and in turn Hope will help them overcome the calamities they will meet."

"You lied to me, and tricked me into opening the jar so that the evils of the world would be released. Why should I trust you now?"

"Zeus feared that, having been touched by the sacred fire, humans had the potential of becoming great and one day threatening Olympus. He caused the ills in the jar to be released so that man would face all sorts of challenges and adversities and fail to rise up to them. Ultimate destruction of the human race would thus be accomplished, as he intended.

"But then Divine Hera brought fairness, if not justice, to her consort's heart. She pointed out that in attempting to erase all of humankind, Zeus was being unfair to the innocent half of the population: for it is not the females who wage wars and challenge heavens; it is their men who do. Women nurture and preserve the species and in their unassuming way honor the Gods, and do not deserve unjust punishment.

"Hera shamed Zeus until a compromise was reached. Zeus agreed that if men and women ultimately disappear, their demise will be by its own doing, and their end should not be hastened by depriving them of Hope, so he sent me to stay your hand. Now, we shall leave you to your own devices, without further help or hindrance from the Gods but warded by Hope, and perhaps the kindness and good sense of women will prevent or curb their men's excesses."

Pandora slammed the jar in anger at the burden placed on her and her kind by the Gods. The jar did not break. Calming down, she came to terms with what she had to do. She composed a simple message: men will survive only if they learn to honor their female companions and let themselves be guided by their spouse's wisdom. Women must be loving and patient and always remember they are the means chosen by the Gods to ensure that the gift of life bestowed on mankind by Prometheus does not go to waste. Both men and women must strive against adversity and learn to overcome it. And they must all praise and worship Hera, Mother of the Gods, who brings peace and harmony to the world.

Pandora is now gone but her message, as memorialized in these wax tablets, is for all to read and remember. I am burying these tablets in a cave under Mount Ossa, which is sacred as the site of the battle between the gods at the beginning of time.

May men and women find these tablets and, following their message, learn to live wisely and never give up Hope in the face of all obstacles.

The End.

About the Author:

Matias Travieso-Diaz was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to creative writing. His stories have been published or accepted for publication in over fifty paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts, most recently the *Grantville Gazette*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *Red Room Press* (YEAR'S BEST HARDCORE HORROR VOL. 6), and *The Copperfield Review*.

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