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Pandora's Box

by Olivia Sprinkel

“Everyone, at some time or another, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” Pandora was musing as she picked at her dinner of lentil shepherd’s pie in front of her computer screen. Pavlov arched an eyebrow in response, his face caught in the chiaroscuro of the blinds. Pandora liked the effect, it added some depth to the screen. She wondered when they might get 3D goggles that would help to give a greater illusion of being in the same room. Perhaps they already existed.

“Pandora, are you still there?”

She heard Pavlov’s voice. “Oh yes, I’m still here, just lost connection momentarily.”

“You were saying about a banquet of consequences? You mean like the passengers on the Diamond Princess? That was a banquet of consequences for sure.”

“Well, for sure. But I’m thinking in broader terms. Before those people got on the cruise ship. Before they served themselves to their buffet banquet. We’re all sitting down to a banquet of consequences now.”

Pandora continued. “Let’s say you were given the choice of having a burger and losing your job, or giving up the burger and saving your job, what would you choose?”

“I’d give up the burger, obviously,” said Pavlov. He pushed the remains of his noodles around on the plate, staring at them as if they were tea leaves which might reveal something about this hypothetical choice he had to make.

“That’s clearly the choice that we would make at an individual level. But it’s not the choice that we are making as a society. We are continuing to choose the burger, and we are at risk of losing not only jobs but lives. Not to mention liberty and contact with each other. But it seems to be a trade-off that we are prepared to make. Swine flu, bird flu, all originated in factory farms. The next coronavirus could easily come from there.”

Pavlov put down his fork. “Really?” The rest of the noodles would go cold.

“We live in a way that we are isolated from the consequences of our actions – until we aren’t. If it’s not factory farming that causes the next outbreak, it could originate from wild animals, like coronavirus. Two-thirds of disease outbreaks originate in animals, and we are more likely to come into contact with them if they’ve lost their habitat.”

Pandora paused, drank some water. “The result of isolation from our actions such as those that lead to deforestation or how we treat animals is then that we have to live in isolation. Cosmic karma?” She inflected her voice into a question to soften it but it wasn’t a question really.