

# PANDORA

*by Constance McCutcheon*

One spring evening as she was cleaning out a long-neglected chest of drawers in the basement of her rented house, Peg spied a small orange silk bag pushed to the back of the bottom drawer. Puzzled, she drew the bright bag towards her. Even with the bag in her hands, she remained as puzzled as before. She had no recollection of it. She had no idea how it could have gotten there.

The bag was not empty. It contained a small, hard rectangular object which she slowly drew out, expecting the discovery of a used battery or a battered mint tin to snap the dimensions of the evening back to cleaning drawers. But, no, the bag yielded a second mystery: a polished wooden box that had no opening. A single decorative strip of tiny inlaid blocks of alternating dark and blond wood marked the top. That was all. No hinge, no latch, no crease or line to indicate the box could be gotten into. No opening anywhere. Although it wasn't a block of wood. That she could tell. It was hollow inside. It sounded hollow, felt light enough to be hollow, didn't drop fast enough to be solid. The box sheltered a cavity that was sealed up tight.

Although she didn't recognize the box, she had experienced at some vague point in the past this uncomfortable feeling—of being presented with an object that did not open and being challenged to

open it. She then seemed to recall that her annoyance and fear had been groundless. Nothing more. The experiences were familiar as was their sequence. She had had them before, and in that order. A strong sense of déjà vu made her senses swim. The dank basement sheltered cavern beyond cavern of cold treasure. She had seen the box before, had held it just so before, had long ago fingered it and wondered about it in the very same way she was wondering about it now. And for some reason she had forgotten all about it. Nor did she recall if the box could be opened.



“So I’m supposed to open this,” Peg remarked cynically, her quizzical look feigned. She examined the box reluctantly, fighting back her tears. Why did he do this to her all the time?

He nodded, his face beaming. Obediently Peg turned the box about in her hands, annoyed, sullen, already humiliated. She wouldn’t be able to open it, especially now that she had been challenged to do so. When faced with a mental contest of any kind, she became as stupid as a pigeon. And suspicion compounded her turbulent doubt now. Will was fooling her. The box didn’t open at all. He just wanted to see how long it took her to figure it out, wanted to see how long she would wrestle with an impossibility, her faithful diligence exposing her imbecility. Something very obvious about the box would have revealed to an astute observer at first glance that it couldn’t be opened. That’s what he was testing her for. Such an observer wouldn’t move a muscle except to sneer in Will’s face and rebuke the gift as a fool’s trap. Will was playing a mean joke on her, nothing more. Should she sneer at him now, before she was certain of all this? Or go ahead and be made a fool of and try? She had never seen him beam before, really happy, exuberant, full of joy. How could he take such shameless, undisguised delight in torturing her?

Then came the revelation: the box couldn’t be opened unless it was smashed open. That was the joke, wasn’t it? Gordian’s knot in oak, or beech. Will had presented her with a psychological teaser to trick

her into exposing her violent and angry nature. To show how ruthless, frustrated and full of hatred she really was. To admit how hopelessly defeated she felt and what a liar to boot in trying to hide it all her life. Peg was known for being easily reduced to tears. Of the tears she became openly ashamed and then she was capable of erupting in a rage that had shocked more than one unprepared bystander in the past.



After long, unhurried consideration, Peg put the bag aside. The dank, lumpy wall that ran behind the chest of drawers, curving away into cobwebs and dust no longer oppressed her, nor did the cold, dim dreariness of the room. The evening's chore was forgotten. She contemplated the polished box, smoothed her fingers along its edges, rubbed its surface, performing the movements softly, mechanically, as if it had all been done before, were all recollection, unconscious recollection.

Within short order, the top panel shifted slightly under her moving fingers. It was enough. She knew now. It opened. She pushed the panel back further and looked down. Beneath the panel, nestled in the darkness of the cavity, lay a walnut. A walnut. Strange. She looked away towards a lightless corner of the basement, frowning. Like the box panel, some recess of her memory had opened from which the fuzzy light of dreamy presentiment emanated. Her eyes returned to the polished box in her hand, its secret now disclosed. With the bag and box cradled carefully in the palm of her hand, she rose and quit the basement.

Stooping within the strong light of the dining room's single standing lamp, Peg lifted the walnut out of the box, smoothed her fingers over its hard, wrinkled surface, then surprised herself by lifting the top half. The fragile nutshell lid swung open, revealing its treasure. She slumped down into a squat by the low dining room table and covered her streaming eyes.



A walnut! A walnut for her Christmas present. Clever, never mind the disappointment. Hadn't she told Will repeatedly all she wanted was to hibernate with him forever where they could be snug and safe, peaceful and warm, hidden safe away from the world nestled within a walnut shell in the ground? Hadn't she said that to him? Now she had the walnut.

Or was he making her a present of the box, but felt uncomfortable giving it to her empty, been guided by that common, mysterious need to fill a vacuum with something, anything, that fit. And, though it had taken time, he had found exactly the right object, however improbable. The walnut filled it perfectly with so little room left over that it didn't even rattle in there. So she now had a pretty, simple box she couldn't use because it was filled with a walnut she would never eat and never remove because it fit in the box perfectly.

It was art. She couldn't deny it. And she was charmed by the notion of his vision which had induced him to compose such nonsense and present it to her. Yes, now that she had come to grips with the fact that this was her present, she could be charmed by it. It was utterly charming. Although ... well, she had wanted more. Much, much more. She always did, and she never got it. Or if she got it, it wasn't what she wanted anymore. Tantalus in reverse. Whatever she got, she well knew, was fated to go to waste because what she actually wanted was superfluity. She wanted more than she could even know she possessed, and wanted to know she possessed it. To be surrounded by miles and miles of possessions in the form of beautiful, unspoiled woodland and pastureland and arable acreage, that's what she wanted, and that's what she'd never get. She did not want exactly just enough, which was all this walnut had, but too much. Surely the gift was Will's constructive criticism of her, gently and wittily expressed so that even she could accept it? Her thoughts, on their way to darkening again, were interrupted by his excited cry:

"There it is, Sweetie! Your walnut shell!"

Peg smiled wanly at him.

“Your walnut shell! There it is!”

He was repeating himself. She had to respond. “Well, I know. I mean, I can see that. Thanks. Really. It’s just that I’m wondering what to—”

“The little walnut shell! Peace and quiet! There it is. Take it out!” He was scarcely able to contain his excitement. His eyes shone, his face was undeniably radiant.

With slow, mechanical movements, Peg removed the walnut from the box not knowing why she should take it out. There couldn’t possibly be anything under it, could there? A one-thousand-dollar bill, perhaps? After taking the walnut out and seeing there was no bill at all under it, she set down the perfectly empty box, curled her fingers around the small, wrinkled nut, stared at it, and began to feel foolish. Should she admire it? Surely that wasn’t what he wanted. His next instructions astounded her:

“Open it, Sweetie! Careful, careful. Open it!”

With the fear of being tested again upon her, she slipped her thumbnail into the crevice bisecting the shell and lifted slightly. The walnut opened easily like a tiny treasure chest revealing a minuscule vault picked perfectly clean and fitted with a world of regal dignity in miniature. Occupying the cavity was a tiny golden four-poster bed bedecked with a red coverlet. On the red coverlet, side by side, were two rice grain pillows and two slim blankets bearing the names of the sweet hibernators whose places they reserved: Peg and Will. Here was a haven for them during the cold winter months. Here they could snuggle, tiny and safe, mingling their breaths with their dreams for as long as the cold and the dark lasted.

A rare stillness crept over Peg as she gazed at the tiny, perfect chamber. When roused by his question if she liked it, she covered her eyes and bowed her head. Deftly, Will slipped the walnut out of her hand, returned it carefully to the box, put his hands on her shoulders and embraced her close and tight as if she were recovering from a shock.



“This was a bitch!” Will examined his handiwork for several moments, then held the walnut out for her to stare at. “That gave me the hardest time of all. That! I almost didn’t make it because of that!”

“Because of what?” She saw nothing but a perfectly formed walnut which betrayed no sign that it opened up onto a world of idyllic rest and leisure for two tiny royal occupants.

“Getting the thing to open and then close right, so you couldn’t tell it had been tinkered with. By a person who wasn’t a tinker! That’s me, Sweetie! So it looked natural when it was shut instead of completely lopsided and yawning. And I did it! Here’s how!” Grinning broadly, lazily, brilliantly, his head cocked, holding the walnut just next to his cheek, he pointed melodramatically to some spot on the nutshell. “A hinge! I built a hinge into the goddamned thing. Without ruining it! That is, without ruining this one. I ruined a lot of walnuts before I got to this one. Wish I had come to this one first. The hinge was the hardest part. I was beginning to think it couldn’t be done. And who was I going to ask? I already knew I was nuts. I didn’t need anyone else telling me that. And there’s no reference book on fitting hinges into walnuts. No handyman’s guide on that, Sweetie. And I was running out of time! I thought getting the names for the blankets was going to be the problem, getting them printed out small enough to fit. I was so glad I got that part right that I thought I was practically done. Then to run up against this! But look. It works. It works perfectly. I’m an expert on walnut hinges, Sweetie!” He opened it and closed it, opened and closed it, and then smiled again showing his large, milk-white teeth, grinning dopily, his head cocked, the walnut held close to his face. “All for you, Sweetie! Here. Examine. Scrutinize.”

Peg took the walnut and stared at the side he presented to her. One end of a tiny hinge was embedded in the top half of the shell, the other end in the bottom half of the shell, with the whole affair affixed with wire and glue so neatly that there was nothing to be seen of it when the shell was open. Only when the shell was closed could a nub of the hinge be seen rising out flush with the wrinkles of the shell, and only if looked for. No one not in on the secret of the walnut hinge would suspect that the shell harbored anything but virgin nut meat not yet exposed to the light of day. As she ran her

finger slowly along the nub of metal, he raised his hands involuntarily.

“Caa-reee-ful. It’s robust, but all the same ... be careful.” He took it back from her and stared at the tiny hinge again. “Fixing two halves of an empty nutshell so that they closed again perfectly, as if they had never been sundered. That was a bitch!”



No, Peg was the bitch and a few months later she and Will were sundered. She had liked him. He had been the closest approximation of the man in her life she had found so far. But she was young and not far enough along in her struggle against anger, frustration, self-hate, and suspicion to be able to recognize and accept his affection and companionship as the real thing. The approximation had been very good, the best so far, very kind, very loving. But it had quickly grown childish and obsequious—not Will’s fault. It was what she had wanted and required. A vast improvement over the drinking bouts and fisticuffs she had required and engaged in with earlier approximations. But she had grown out of the immaturity that required a Will. Should she deny it? To herself, no. To him, yes.

Uninformed of the circumstances, Will did not preternaturally shed the qualities for which she had picked him eighteen months before. He easily might have done so had she explained to him what she, however, didn’t know. But she wouldn’t have wanted him to change and become the real man in her life anyway. Unkindly complicating the matter was the fact that she had grown to dislike him. She identified him with her weaknesses. Eager to shed her weaknesses, she was eager to shed him.

Peg didn’t feel guilty about stepping so abruptly out of that life, just as she had never regretted stepping out of so many other lives before it. It wasn’t nice of her, she wasn’t being fair, but that’s the way it was. Cats kill birds. They are also reputed to have nine lives. She had never been able to change the way she was before, and she couldn’t change it now.

None of which obscured Peg's knowledge that she had no notion of who the real man in her life might be because, stupid and simple as it sounded, she hadn't met him yet. Nor did she desire to create an ideal male personality, as many of her friends had, against which each man she met would be measured. She did not want something so mundane as what as she herself could imagine. She wanted something breathtaking, she wanted revelation. Her star-sifting hoops opened out against the sky and she waited, alert, aquiver. By and by those hoops detected an enigma passing by, a fascinating enigma. The hoops widened, tensed, and sprang, absorbing the enigma just as they were absorbed by it. The two merged, silently and calmly for all the intensity, which thereafter never abated. It was the real man. And she, wonder of wonders, she was the real woman.

Afterwards, whatever remnants of hatred, anger, and suspicion were left inside her slowly dried up, leaving her psychology the sweeter and cleaner for having hosted the conflagration in the first place. Nor did she regret having had the anger, the hatred, the suspicion. It was inevitable that all that rancor accumulate over the years. Should she deny the reality against which she had been formed? Cats kill birds. And are reputed to have nine lives.

The circumstance of her first life had been bitter. As a girl she lived in a house where a masculine hate and violently repressed anger contended daily against a painfully thwarted but obdurate feminine patience, which locked the family into an arena of heroic Christian struggle that supplicated with sexual frustration. A loving daughter could only leave, as Peg had, and let whatever crap had developed desiccate, if only it would. And it had, freeing her from the tedious, torturous cycle on which swells she had risen and fallen for better and for worse all of that life. Her salvation had been her athletic nature which had involuntarily embraced the hard times like a wrestler, hugging the opponent tight to rest for the struggle that would inevitably resume. Her muscular focus had pierced her muddled view of it all often enough with the adrenergic admonition: this is it; hang on for all you're worth; ride, ride; when it's good be glad, when it's bad, you can hate it; go up, go down, go up, go down, but no matter what depths or heights you're brought to, be aware: this is it, this ride is all there will be.





Just as so many years before, so now Peg realized she couldn't possibly throw the walnut away. Such a masterpiece of ingenuity, workmanship and tender expression was something to treasure. But for that very reason it had to be gotten rid of, or hidden forever. What dreadful consequences would occur should Greg ever run across it? She shrank at the thought. She would have no hope of explaining it. There was no ambiguity about it. Any jealousy he might feel would be perfectly justified. She could only all too well anticipate it. Were she to find such an object in his possession—a secret royal bed bearing his name alongside that of his true love, not her—she would blanch and die. Peg's only response to Greg in such a case could be the blunt truth: the gift was precious for its sentiment and careful workmanship, but false because it did not reflect, nor had it ever reflected, her true feelings.

But why then had she kept it all this time? With every passing year, the task of justifying its preservation would only become more difficult, the excuse less credible. But throw the precious box with its secret walnut away? Impossible. Change it perhaps? Alter it slightly to make it true? The thought, seeded in an instant, sat deep and well, acquired warmth and a stabilizing weight. The nutshell with its two royal places would perfectly express the magic reality of her life with Greg if the tiniest of changes were effected. Hadn't Greg even mentioned hibernation once, saying he would go outside and cover himself up with leaves for the winter, committing to Peg the important assignment of bringing him out in spring for the months of warmth and sunshine? Wouldn't a nutshell be an agreeable alternative? She could change it with one simple touch. Will need only be replaced with Greg. Which, after years of disjointed efforts, strivings and feints, had actually been done.

Peg knew from Will's effusive explanations at the time that her only problem would be to print out Greg's name in letters small enough to fit on the blanket. Within minutes, after minor experimentation, she had produced the name in the right size. The name was wider because of the two 'g's, but that didn't matter. What did matter was that her label had clearer, darker letters than the existing labels. That only required, she reasoned, replacing both labels so that they

matched, and that was simple enough. Within minutes she had produced samples of both names.

Her next job was to remove the old labels. Simply pasting the new labels over the old would have been a shabby trick and dangerous. But as she set to work getting the old labels up, an insurmountable difficulty confronted her. They wouldn't go.

Quaking inwardly at her audacity, she managed to rip off part of Will's name with tweezers, but the 'll' wouldn't come up no matter how she poked or scratched at it. And her own name seemed to have become fused with the tiny red bed cover forever. In short order, she had hacked it through and through, shredded and defaced it, but removed no single portion of it. Fixed to the bed the old Peg remained.

She stared down into the little monument. The seemingly fragile shell was really very hardy, but the little chamber it held, all that painstaking, ingenious perfection, was wretchedly defaced. What to do. She could no longer cherish it the way it was now. Having gone this far, she would either have to throw it away or continue the invasion by pulling up the red bed cover and replacing it.

She groaned and reflected for some time, casting glances into the open nutshell at intervals to assess the complications she might encounter with such an endeavor. It looked easy enough. The red cover had been pasted on the bed, on top of which the labels and the two grains of rice had been affixed. The four gold posts of the bed and the bed itself needn't be disturbed if she worked carefully.

It took only a few moments of probing to discover that the red cover hadn't been pasted on top of, but was wrapped around the tiny platform, which set her squarely in front of the next challenge: she would have to pull up the bed itself. In deconstructing the nutshell she risked destroying the magic of the nutshell world, blinded by the foolish hope that she could put that magic back together with the simple reassembly of its parts. She didn't believe she could. It was a process she had never before performed. She was not a person to build up. She had only ever ripped down. And this particular world was ripped down. If she stopped at this juncture, the thought resurfaced with conviction, she would have to throw the walnut away.

With a tiny tool set consisting of the tweezers, pencils and sewing needles, she set to work coaxing the bed away from the wooden platform that anchored it to the bottom of the shell. It was difficult, close work. The glue had laminated the pieces together as one.

It was late in the evening before she managed to slightly dislodge the metal bed, a mere chip, without damaging either the wooden platform on which it rested or the walnut's precious hinge. Her flagging spirits revived. Carefully she wedged the tweezers into the tiny crevice just produced, pulled cautiously but steadily, twisting the tweezers slightly as she did so and, with profound satisfaction, felt the sliver of gold-colored bed come up and off in one piece. As the four bedposts snapped away, she saw that they were nothing more than so many more grains of rice painted the gold color of the bed. She marveled again at the architect's ingenuity and wit.

Examining the tiny plate between her tweezers, she saw that not only was it metal, but that it really was gold. She looked away catching her breath, then stood up suddenly and took an agitated turn about the room. Her fingers and her back ached from the cramped work. She stretched, then hurried into the kitchen to fix herself a cup of mild green tea and cut a sliver of a dense Italian chocolate cake she had baked using chestnut flour and thinly iced with melted semisweet chocolate. With her evening refreshment, she returned to her workplace within the narrow skirt of the standing lamp's strong light and cleared a place for her plate and tea cup with her elbows amid the scattered instruments and bits that made up the unusual contents of the half-demolished nutshell.

Resettled to her task, she applied the tweezers to the red cover only to find that it stuck to the gold sheet as tenaciously as the labels had stuck to it. Aware now that the gleaming piece of metal was a form of jewelry, she wanted to be very careful not to scratch it. If she damaged that, she would not be able to replace it. Her trepidation triggered frustration, then anger. The simple change she had wanted to make to the walnut world was turning out to be a task of prodigious tedium that was doomed after all. Again she sprang up from her chair and took another turn, visiting each of the room's dark corners, heaving and biting her lips. She returned to her work somewhat composed, but it didn't help. No matter how painstakingly she worked, what she was trying to do couldn't be done. The red cover wouldn't come up from the metal. A different

method altogether was required. She thought of water. The thing would have to be soaked for a good long time. That would soften it up. That would do it. In the kitchen, she half-filled a small glass salad bowl with tap water, dropped in the red-covered gold plate with its two partial names, slid the unusual composition into a corner to soak for twenty-four hours, and went to bed.

When she resumed her project the following evening, she was severely disappointed to find that the cloth had not loosened from the gold metal in the slightest. The whole thing was of a piece. Out of patience, she ripped at the cloth in a sudden, violent fit, now very willing to scratch and deface the metal. Right afterwards she would destroy the whole walnut world with one smash and be done with it. Which would have taken place, but for the accident that in that one reckless jerk she caught the corner of the cloth just so and in a single stroke had separated the tiny red cloth from the gold platform before she knew what she had done. The bare gold bed shone up at her at last, and she down at it, but dumbfounded. Something didn't register. Something about it was odd, something was not right. The bed wasn't bare. It had been stripped of its red cloth, but it was not bare, not empty. It was occupied. Engraved into the gold metal were two tiny, curly-lettered names. Two places had already been reserved there. There was a Will. But the other name didn't make any sense. There was no place for a Peg. The place reserved on that golden berth beside Will was for a Gretchen. Fortune foresaw a Gretchen lying in hibernation with Will. A Gretchen cozily tucked up and warmed forever from the fire and tender passion of a lover named Will. A Gretchen whose breath and dreams would mingle throughout eternity with his, undisturbed by any inkling that a Peg might exist, as indeed, granted the inviolability of the monument, she didn't. A Gretchen, indeed.

A sickening contraction shrank Peg down to size, that is, down to the dimensions that would permit her tumbling into the tiny shell to be incinerated by the scathing presence of an enduring Gretchen. A most unpleasant sensation, followed by a searing sensation, which was followed by the worst of all: rage mingled with the despairing knowledge that she had been duped because she was a dupe: her bygone sense of identity had been resurrected. Long, hateful moments passed before she had the presence of mind to remind herself that it was she who had left Will. Empty consolation. She reminded herself that Will hadn't been suited for her. Mocking,

empty comfort. She now knew why: he had been suited for a Gretchen.

The ugly reflection gave rise to another that, once realized, proved as persistent as it was obnoxious: the inspiration for the ingenious expression of devotion in a nutshell had been a Gretchen, not a Peg. Ho ho. Hadn't she suspected that from the beginning? Hadn't she sensed from the very start that Will was trying to make a fool of her by giving her a box that would not open? Her intuition had been right, but in suppressing it, she had corrupted it. Fool indeed. And now she had opened that box. Twenty years later. And had looked inside, and wished she hadn't.



Peg sat back down at the low dining room table and stared. The wooden box lay open and empty, the tiny pieces of the walnut it had sheltered for twenty years lay scattered across the table surface, unrecognizable. She had destroyed it. It had remained in her possession for twenty years safely forgotten. Within a day of discovering it, she had destroyed it. Her action had not been malicious or vicious. She had not destroyed it intentionally. She had tried to alter it, and in attempting that, had patiently, painstakingly, systematically reduced it to irrecoverable fragments. And thereby learned something that sobered her to her very core. And then she had, with cold intention, sundered the halves right apart and smashed the hinge with a few, heavy, careful thuds of a hammer.

She rose, left the room, returned with a wastepaper basket, held it just under the white surface of the dining table, and slowly swept the particulate damage into it, including needles, pencils, and tweezers. When her hand met the miniature gold memorial for Will and Gretchen, she hesitated. Then, with an adroit snap of her fingers, flicked it swiftly into the wastepaper basket along with the rest of the delicate debris. After long contemplation, she dipped down, shot her hand once or twice into the basket contents, came up with the empty wooden box and slid it back onto the table. That

she would keep. It was innocuous enough to safely serve as a reminder of her vanity.

Moved by a sudden inspiration, she abruptly exited the room again to enter the shadows and mild, ghostly aromas of the kitchen. There she rummaged about in the dark for some time, her hands knowing what they touched without her needing to see. After several minutes, she straightened holding a walnut close to her face. “I will simply always have to remember to replace you after a certain number of months,” she whispered to it. “And then I will eat you or bury you, whichever you prefer, for the great service you perform for me.” She pressed the wrinkled nut against her cheek, fitting it hard under the cheek bone and so conveyed it hurriedly into the dining room.

In her distraction, she slipped and nearly fell as she approached the dining room table. She caught herself awkwardly on the table, and the walnut, caught between her grasping hand and table, wrenched her fingers painfully. Her adrenaline surged and she whirled angrily to see what had caused her near fall. Gleaming up at her from the carpet lay the flat rectangular gold sheet that had served for so long as bed for three lovers, two true, one false once.

“You bitching waste ...” she seethed as she lunged to pick it up. But it wasn’t the same piece of metal. It bore no names. A single, short entry shadowed its surface. Had two pieces of gold been stacked into that bed? But no. Flipping it over, she saw the dreadful names again. It was the self-same plate of gold that had destroyed a composure she had painstakingly constructed these past twenty years. With an intensely unpleasant foreboding, she flipped the little sheet again and stared at what met her gaze: “1916.”

