

Mercury Unbound - 2

by J. Mykell Collinz

I may not have Sister Helen's winning smile but I want to be like her. And I want to be with her. So I cut my hair, shave my head, and dress like a Buddhist nun, wearing gray, self-crafted garments made of coarse natural fabrics.

I'm in my forty-fifth year and, to be honest, I've never been a glamorous woman. I tried the makeup, the hairdos, the fancy dresses, everything the fashion experts suggested. But I did not enjoy it. The person I see in the mirror now looks more like me. Which is a sign I'm progressing in the right direction. Before claiming my present freedom, I raised a family, nurtured three children through school, and put up with a philandering husband.

"We make the world better for ourselves by helping others," Sister Helen tells me and I want to believe it.

She doesn't like flying so we travel the highways in a leased vehicle on our way to the Peruvian rainforest area of the Amazon Basin. I'm spending time looking through books for clues of what to expect when we arrive there. In one of Ann Patchett's books, 'State of Wonder,' the main character is a woman of my age group from Minnesota on her way to a remote part of Brazil and, as her plane touches down, the woman imagines every insect in the Amazon lifting its head and turning a slender antenna in her direction.

I cringe at the thought of an infested jungle and, with that image firmly implanted in my imagination, I skim through a second book, 'In the Jungle With Herzog (It's Personal).' Werner Herzog directed an epic film on location in the Amazonian jungle entitled, 'Fitzcarraldo,' released in 1982. He claims to have seen an indifferent universe everywhere he turned while living and working there.

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An infested, indifferent universe?

Sister Helen laughs when I mention it.

"And that's just for starters, dear," she says: "Prepare yourself. This is not an easy task. Do tell me if the journey is becoming too much for you."

I'm seeing a different side of Sister Helen. Her assumed exactitude in every detail of conversation, her superior tone of voice, her condescending smile. You're not always right, I want to tell her, I'm entitled to an opinion, too. What makes you think you're so special? But I say nothing because I know she needs me as much as I need her.

