

Mercury Unbound - 6

by J. Mykell Collinz

I lost weight during the last few months of Dan's illness and my health showed signs of decline from neglect after three weeks of day-and-night home hospice leading up to his death. Sister Helen became my antidote for hopelessness and despair. I bonded with her fearless attitude, her supportive nature, her almost six-foot-tall, two-hundred-pound, sturdy frame. I felt rejuvenated when I cut my hair, shaved my head, and started dressing like her in simple two piece outfits, top and bottom, resembling what Buddhist monks and nuns wear, made of natural fabrics, colored with natural dyes in various shades of gray and black, brown and orange.

While traveling across the country together, through the Midwest farmlands, the prairies, and onto the high plains, two bald headed women dressed like David Carradine in Kung Fu, it surprised me how genuinely friendly people were to us and how basically happy they seemed with themselves. Considering all the trouble in the world, I could understand why they might be worried about strangers. But I did not see worry: except in corporate media news reports, which I mostly blocked out, until we picked up Sandy in Texas.

We're approaching Clovis, New Mexico, and he says: "I wonder what's the unemployment rate there."

"I don't even want to think about it," I tell him.

"Most people are like that," he replies: "They don't worry about things over which they have no control. The eighty to ninety percent who still have a job aren't worried about the other ten to twenty percent. However, even though the percentage may be relatively small in comparison to the overall population, the actual number of people who find themselves having financial problems due to unemployment or under employment is very great."

I reach into the back seat for his MP3 player again, for the snug fitting rubber earbuds to block out everything except the music.

The next selection, a strange piano piece, starts slowly, quietly, and then abruptly becomes much louder. The tiny window display on the MP3 player reads:

Liszt, Piano Sonata in B minor.

I don't like it but I can't stop listening. It doesn't fit my mood, or the high plains landscape, or the early evening, pink and blue, pastel colored sky.

What nature of mind conceived this, I wonder, as I close my eyes to listen more intently, imagining myself playing this strange music on a grand piano, working the keys with both hands, creating clusters of notes, each clear and distinct, strong and energetic, ascending and descending in lightening quick bursts, exploring mysterious yet hauntingly familiar scales.

I hammer two-fisted block chords emphatically, keeping time with the bold and innovative rhythms by swinging my head and shoulders, experiencing intense levels of emotion, bordering on a delicious madness. The music tempo slows, becoming melodic, meditative, and dreamy, with periodic bursts of agitated sonic energy: again, the madness. Or is that genius?

Dan thought he was a genius. He had a dual personality, triggered by alcohol. We'd get along just fine when he was sober, humble, loving and kind. But after a few drinks, he thought he knew everything. It was impossible to convince him to stop drinking. I'm not perfect either, of course. I drank right along with him at first, I chain smoked cigarettes. But I managed to quite when my lungs signaled distress. That was the beginning of a major break in our relationship. I stopped going out with him to bars, restaurants, and parties where people drank and smoked.

He started having minor urinary and digestive problems before they detected the cancer in his lungs and then in his liver. Our three children were all doing well in their studies. We had a son and a daughter in college and a son in high school getting ready for college. Our house was paid for and we had money in the bank. For a while, it looked like he might make it. But after the final chemo, although his lungs showed improvement, his liver did not.

Dan wanted to be cremated. My inlaws wouldn't listen to me. It goes against his religion, they said. Now I worry about his body in the ground. I don't want to be buried or cremated. I don't want to die. The music transforms into a voice of protest, into a dance on the edge overlooking eternity.

As the last rays of sunlight outline the western horizon in scarlet red, the tiny music player in my lap becomes silent again.

