Mercury Unbound - 8

by J. Mykell Collinz

I met Sister Helen shortly after Dan, my husband, died of cancer. When I'm with her, I feel I've reached a place at rest. The world travels around us. She selects direction and rate of progress. She can even make it stop. Her current interest is saving the Amazon rainforest yet she's in no hurry for it to get here.

Sandy, the tall, lanky hitchhiker we picked up in central Texas, is at the wheel of the Land Rover, Sister Helen is in the front passenger seat beside him, I'm in back. The border crossing at El Paso will soon be arriving. I'm apprehensive about Mexico, all the violence. Sandy is a big, strong young man. Sister Helen is a big, strong woman in the prime of her life. Nothing scares them. I'm frail in comparison, past my prime. Death scares me. They laugh when I say that.

"Listen, Sue," Sandy says, "the violence, it exists, but it's not random, it's organized. The low level criminals, so called, we can deal with them. I know people, places to stay."

I'm getting that feeling again, like I'm high on something. But I haven't taken any drugs in almost a year, not since Dan started his chemotherapy treatments. Sister Helen gives me the feeling. Now I'm getting it from Sandy, too, along with flashes of paranoia. Should I be this happy, enjoying life so much? Do I deserve these friends I have around me now? Are they perfect angels, helping me cope with life? Or am I fooling myself into thinking they are?

While Sandy's busy driving, Sister Helen's paraphrasing information for him from his laptop computer: "It's the largest park completely within a city's limits. It divides the city of El Paso into different sections. It also borders El Paso International airport and Fort Bliss."

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"Bliss?" I wonder aloud: "There's a fort named bliss?"

"It's an army base," Sandy replies, keeping his eyes on the road.

"It's named after William Wallace Smith Bliss," Sister Helen adds: "A Lieutenant-Colonel who served with Major-General Zachary Taylor during the Mexican-American war. He died at 38 of yellow fever in 1853. The army officially changed the name in 1854 from Post of El Paso to Fort Bliss. A century later, in 1955, his remains were brought to Fort Bliss from a cemetery in New Orleans."

What remains, I wonder, thinking of Dan's buried body. He said he wanted to be cremated. His brothers wouldn't let me do it.

The line of traffic at the border moves quickly. When the inspectors in uniforms arrive, they seem distracted by something coming up behind us. One of the inspectors leans down to look in the back and, when I make eye contact with him, his beautiful smile is so reassuringly sincere, I'm sorry to see him go.

As we welcome Juárez, Sandy remarks: "I wouldn't want their job. I like moving around too much."

"They seem happy," I respond.

"Happy?" he says: "I don't know where you get that. Are we talking about the same people?"

"They have a job," Sister Helen interjects: "In that sense, I'm sure they're happy."

The uniformed inspector's smiling face lingers in the forefront of my consciousness as I attempt to analyze its significance. The force of its impact seems out of proportion, like something in a dream.

Our subsequent immersion in Juárez adds to the mysterious atmosphere. The street level architecture and density of population make it feel more human scale, more livable and lived in, compared to cities of its size in the States.

We park the Land Rover to walk around, stretch our legs, and find something to eat. I don't feel out of place, like I thought I would. People smile when they see us. Some even put their hands together and bow, acknowledging our shaven heads and Buddhist nun clothing. Tall, blue eyed, blond haired Sandy looks like the Canadian cowboy he is, in white tee shirt, Levis, and high-heeled boots.

Its dinner time and the restaurant is crowded yet we're given a table after only a short wait. The people at the tables around us, a mixture of adults and children, seem happy and content. I want to say something about them but I decide to hold the thought until after we've eaten. Sandy speaks to the waiter in Spanish. Sister Helen understands him but I do not.

Our food arrives almost immediately, brought to us from the kitchen on a side table, with maize tortillas for eating without utensils and everything necessary to fill them. I grab a warm, round, flat bread, pile it with beans, rice, vegetables, salsa, and guacamole. I pass on the beef, chicken, sausage, and cheese as I reach for the avocados, tomatoes, onions, lettuce, bean sprouts, hot peppers, and juicy slices of spicy squash. I wash my food down with a thick and foamy, locally brewed beer. It perfectly compliments the orchestration of flavors saturating my taste buds, it stimulates my digestive enzymes, and it contributes to my overall satisfaction with both the atmosphere and the meal.

We leave the restaurant and return to our vehicle in darkness. I reclaim the back seat. Sister Helen takes her turn at the wheel of the Land Rover. Sandy navigates from the front passenger seat. He knows a place south of Juárez where we can spend the night. When I

lean back and close my eyes, subliminal emotions fill my heart with anxiety. Their voices become abstract sounds without meaning as my consciousness turns inward. I miss Dan, the life we had together, the world in which we once lived. This new world without him is threatening to overwhelm me.