

Charlie

By Jenny Butler

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Had you not seen the sunshine in the desert, you would rest easier in your cell. A tiny space, 'eight by twelve', cold bars touching warm skin, but if you close your eyes you can see the sun rising over Mojave's vastness and you can feel the warm sand between your toes, the heat radiating upward through you.

Lying in the steel bed anchored to the ceiling and by its base, on the mattress that resembles a gymnasium floor mat, looking at steel walls, steel bars, steel-upon-steel structures, you find irony in the fact you used to play steel guitar. They assume every steel knife in their world must have belonged to you or you must certainly have given them to others.

In this cold lockup, you remember laying on the cold floor of the valley amid the scanty shrubs dotting the immense expanse of night. Nocturnal thoughts, like the scorpion's yellow-brown self with his scorpion-thoughts, scuttling past. He chases venomous spiders, but he has venom too, a theme that pervades your life: venom against venom, fight fire with fire, an eye for an eye, a life for a life.

You recall the sight of the roadrunner running up the canyons, sprinting toward his sunbathing spot; his life impulse is to run forward, yours away, away from memories, harsh realities: abandoned, spurned, whipped, beaten, raped child-body. You were shitting blood when you should have been at the prom. But, you learned from the pain and emerged unbroken from the belly of the beast – hurt and scarred but not broken, still an intact you.

You could have gone up to Tinseltown, worn fancy clothes, stood in corners of Malibu mansions sipping Dom Pérignon from an elegant narrow flute and talked of the latest contract and their money games. You could have been among the vapid actresses, the My-Me egos, gone with the Yeah-Yeah-Yeah and Hey-Hey-My-My in their rooms blindingly lit up like Christmas trees; wasted kilowatts and wasted creative energies. You came out of the blue and into their black. But you preferred to be with the ranch-hand and the bikers with a glass of whisky, listening to stories round the fire, some grim but some funny. You've always liked to stand with people who stand with themselves. You didn't need a contract because you lived in the music and you didn't need to be an actor because you were a real person that lived in a movie-set. You chose not to live in the lie they live in and you didn't turn your face away from the truth, not like them.

Oh, but when the lights went out in Hollywood and the sheen became matted with blood, when the grime seeped into the glitz, the sparkle stamped out, the glam flattened into darkness, you were the one, the singular self, to blame! All fingers pointed at you and every tongue wagged and the monster took form in their minds and together they made it emerge and take shape in this world.

And they fed that monster and they put him on the cover of *Life* and *Time*. And you, the self-same you, got instead a Lifetime. The monster got the glory and the fame and you got shackled, cuffed, fat hands push you down, a kick in the mouth, a bucket of urine in your face, pepper-sprayed in the eyes, and third degree burns. They hold up their mirror and you'll keep reflecting, redirecting the monster back at them, the projection already lodged in the brains of the masses.

They separate Abraxas into them being the good and you the evil and the little man, barely 5'2", becomes larger than life, a gigantic looming fear. Fearing the fear itself inside themselves, they are shocked in their looking-glass-world, horrified by the echoes of their own voices, looking-glass-people devastated by the reverberations of themselves.

Moved from one cage to another, the story of your life, and now the Security Housing Unit where you are segregated for your protection, or so they say. It was once the converse, when the flower-children looked to you for protection, a safe place to be, to the father who had no father. A boxcar hobo turned saviour, but you never actually said that you were Jesus returned. In confusion, they grappled in their darkness, turned to you to lead them into light. And so you shared your rainbow-thoughts with them, the whole spectrum of its colours, and you planted seeds and you tried to help the mind-gardens grow on this dying planet. Not a magical mystery tour so much as a dumpster-dive in and a creepy-crawl out and not a yellow submarine but a painted black Chevrolet school bus, but it was a happy time.

In solitary, you don't descend into despair's depths but instead you focus, move the spirit up and oscillate out. Solid barred doors locked from the outside can't stop your travels. There is a universe inside your cell, a cosmos inside your head, and the guards are oblivious! To them it is one day, but you have lived one hundred years in that time. Aloneness and immobility is not motionlessness.

Like a grain of sand in an open sky, your spirit starts to move about. The body is still, of course, not having moved at much more than a brisk pace since late November 1969! But the spirit is free, always has been, now motioning out, traversing the calm air over Death Valley, and observing them from your vantage-point of nowhere. The mass is changing now and you are going clear, a clean spirit, the very you-ness of you. The flesh encasement dies in the same moment your double-helix-self begins its ascent, upward into the night sky swirling and spiralling up further still and latching onto the great celestial spiral. Your spirit moves fast now, too fast to fathom, flies out and merges with the great whorled vortex and you rejoice as a spiral within the spiral: you are home. You love this home and in love there is no wrong.

Awash with stars, their colours like an acid trip, you feel your energy motions melding with the star energies and you feel a comfort in knowing we were all stars once, every man and every woman. A star explodes and you are a supernova of bursting light-energy and you dance this cosmic dance. A tranquil repose on the moon's edge now, pale light emanating beneath, dreaming dreams you haven't dreamt yet. You feel pure peace and you can, finally, rest. Rest easy, Charlie.