

Mercury Unbound - 4

by J. Mykell Collinz

We're traveling west through Texas, near Lubbock, in the semi-arid South Plain section of the Llano Estacado, commonly known as the Stacked Plains, a series of geographical subdivisions with distinct physiographic features. We've elevated almost imperceptibly to over three thousand feet above sea level on an enormous plateau with clear, expansive blue skies. Far down the road in front of us, mountains lay on the western horizon. Massive dark clouds to the north signal a thunderstorm brewing over the Texas panhandle. Sandy's connection to the Internet is starting to annoy me. His obsessive compulsion to be involved in the flow of information is clearly apparent to Sister Helen and myself.

"I'm from Alberta, Canada," he says, "Due to the steep rise in global oil prices, they're gearing up to develop the local tar sands, an area larger than the United Kingdom which contain most of the world's supply of bitumen, a particularly sticky form of petroleum that needs to be heated or diluted before it can be pumped. The USA will be its prime consumer once a pipeline is in place to deliver it."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Sister Helen interjects: "To reduce US dependence on foreign oil?"

"We need to keep that carbon in the ground," he responds:

"Scientific models have been warning us for years, if the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide exceeds three hundred and fifty parts per million, our life support system on this planet is in danger of collapsing. We're at three ninety right now. And, what do you know, the Arctic is rapidly melting, the atmosphere is getting steadily wetter, and the oceans are turning sharply more acidic."

I reach into the back seat for his MP3 player to plug my ears with music. He acknowledges his approval with a nod and continues talking, apparently unconcerned I'm not listening to him.

Sister Helen glances my way and smiles as she turns her head to comment over her shoulder, seemingly delighted with Sandy's data-chatter.

The music, Antonín Dvořák's 'New World Symphony,' the second movement, 'Largo,' immediately alters my mood. As tears begin to flow, I turn my head to look through the passenger side window. Memories of my husband's death from cancer, and the months leading up to it, rush into my consciousness. I'm unable to block them out with my usual mechanisms. Along with Sandy's presence, the music has opened my heart to feelings again.

