Night Fever

By Will Ludwigsen

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Charlie could've been out ten years earlier, you know.

There was this guard at Terminal Island, a college guy named Wayne DeVore, and he tried to "rehabilitate us" with his head full of sociology, asking us about our families and how we got there. He had no business being a guard in a federal prison, but that still doesn't mean he deserved what happened to him.

DeVore sometimes patrolled the block by himself at night against regulations just to talk music and philosophy with Charlie, and that's how Billy Hindle got the idea to clock DeVore upside the head with a broken brick to put him to sleep for a couple of hours. It wasn't exactly a well-executed caper or nothing: Billy swung a little too hard and crushed the man's skull into something that looked like a wedge of cheese.

We grabbed the keys and let Charlie out because, after all, he'd been the bait. I wasn't sure how far we'd get with him carrying that fucking guitar, but we made it through six sets of security doors, across the yard, and down to the docks before anybody seemed to notice. It was a terrible storm that night, I remember.

When me and Billy start shucking off our shoes, Charlie looks out over the water and says, "Where's the boat?"

"The boat?" I says. "What boat? We're the boats."

Then the siren starts to grind and the footsteps of the guards start to patter in our direction.

Charlie looks at me and then out at the water and then me again and he says, "I can't swim."

Charles Manson can't swim. Who'da thought?

They caught me and Billy three days later in Arizona but they got Charlie right away, standing there on the dock with the guitar on his back, watching us go. They gave him another ten years.

Sometimes I wonder what would be different if Charlie got out when he was supposed to. But then, he'd probably be as big an asshole in the 60s as he was in the 70s.

From *The Making of Charlie: A Prisoner's Testimony*,
by Ronnie Provus (with Veronica Levy). Farrar and Straus, 1983.

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Yes, Charles Manson's New York of 1977 had its seedy side. When he was released from Danbury Federal Correctional Institution on January 9, Manson rode the bus to a city where 149,000 violent crimes would be committed that year. The so-called Council for Public Safety, comprised of police, firefighters, and other public employees, produced the helpful pamphlet "Welcome to Fear City" to warn tourists away during Mayor Beame's public service cutbacks. There was graffiti and there were muggings and if you saw something called "The Lion King" advertised in Times Square, it wasn't for children.

Yet it's easy to overstate the squalor of the city, exaggerated now for mythic effect and exaggerated then from a fear of the increasing diversity in the streets. If there was graffiti on the subway cars, it was because new voices had something to say. There were new kinds of people loving and living in new kinds of ways. Some of them were doing new and dangerous things.

Some of them were having fun.

From "White Supremacists Can't Dance: The Mediocre Music of Manson," by Leslie Van Houten. *Rolling Stone*, December 1997.

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I came to New York to dance, though not in the way I ended up doing it for Charlie. I started ballet lessons when I was four. My mom drove me the hour south into Indianapolis at least twice a week for twelve years through school for a hundred recitals and fifty performances, not to mention all the classes. Everybody told me I was graceful, beautiful, and amazing, which I believed until about ten minutes after I arrived in New York after high school.

Coming to New York from Indiana is like sailing across the ocean and hitting the Sargasso Sea; it's dense and you slow down, and all you can do is row. I rowed to schools that didn't want me and dance companies that didn't need me. I rowed to jobs at bars and restaurants. I rowed from roommate to roommate, hoping one would make enough for half the rent of a little sixth-floor apartment in the Lower East Side.

The place scared the crap out of me, I'm not going to lie. Everybody makes a big deal out of how dirty it was with everything from newspapers to cars heaped in the streets and under bridges, but what freaked me out the day I arrived was seeing a playground with no grass. None at all. There was a swing set and a merry-go-round, but the ground was just pale cracked pavement. When kids jumped off the swing at the highest it would go, they'd land with this awful "whap!" of their sneakers like someone beating out a carpet.

That's not what playgrounds are supposed to sound like.

Everybody seemed scared or angry all the time, which is really the same thing. That's something Charlie told me, one of the few true things.

I stayed anyway because I thought if I didn't, it was all over for me. My father had picked out the spot I'd stand behind the counter in his pharmacy for the rest of my life (or until a husband took me home, which he'd have been just as happy with), and I could see it in the linoleum fifty years later on the day I'd die, all worn down to the gray.

I got a job at a bar on Reade Street but I was still auditioning and going to parties where artsy people went. I couldn't get into many of them, but a girlfriend took me to a club called Infinity in the Village, this old envelope factory with columns inside and a giant neon penis on the wall. Sometimes famous people came, she said, and all you had to do while waiting was dance.

So I danced that 4/4 beat through fifty songs a night that all sounded the same. But then there came this…hymn, that's what I'd call it, a hymn. All the nervousness went away and I moved with a powerful abandon I never knew I had in me. It was my song about my life, and it was called was "Dancing Queen."

I know I wasn't the only Dancing Queen in 1977, but it didn't bother me. What I wanted was to be special but part of something, if that makes sense. There was something about the people in that club – like when we all moved at once we didn't have to be scared or angry anymore. Infinity felt like a secret place where we were hiding from the rest (though there were plenty of drug freak outs and bathroom beatdowns).

That's where the idea started in me, the one that Charlie stoked: there were a few people in the world who got it, whatever "it" was, and they had to meet in secret like spies in enemy territory. While the blind dumb zombies marched by on the streets, the Special Ones listened to their tribal music, took their tribal communion, and danced their tribal moves.

Everybody called it disco, but I just thought it was dancing.

From *Disco Aphrodite: A Manson Girl Speaks Out from Prison*,
by Violet "Aphrodite" Wensinger. Doubleday, 1981.