

END OF THE LINE
Chaper 17

PHANTOM SPIES, PHANTOM JUSTICE —

Elizabeth T. Bentley, Harry Gold, Roy M. Cohn, Irving H. Saypol,
Judge Irving R. Kaufman, J. Edgar Hoover,
and the Rehearsal for the Rosenberg Trial

or

How I Survived McCarthyism

By Miriam Moskowitz

She said her name was “Liliana “ but the guards called her just plain “Lily.” She said she wasn’t picked up for drugs, as were many of the women who landed here that summer of 1951. “Here” was the Federal Reformatory for Women in West Virginia – when I, too, was a “guest” of that institution.

The traditional darby was that if the FBI – and not the local police – picked you up for a drug-related crime you knew you were going to do time, but you got better food at a federal institution and they didn’t push you around so much. Or put their hands all over you, or make ugly remarks, or slip into your cell at night with a promise they’d let you go in the morning if you didn’t squawk. But life was never like those local goons promised, the women said..

She was a pretty woman underneath all that make-up, you could see that, but her pale, round face sometimes seemed vexed with ghostly memories . Her frequent expressions of apprehension alternated with a breezy false confidence and it betrayed less worldliness than she may have wanted you to think she had. She kept patting her graying hair -- now streaked with fading, bottled yellow – as though for reassurance – although she was as well turned out as any newly arrived prisoner could be who had just been through a humiliating arrest procedure. Her lumpy frame, all five feet of it suggested a personal timing somewhere between the late thirties and defiant middle-age. But it was her manner that set her up for trouble – it was “elegant” when elegance among us got you relentless ridicule. She minced her words, she sounded at times like a transplanted foreigner, English upper class perhaps, but then she would forget and lapse into down-home regional speech so you knew she was faking. The women dubbed her, “Lady Lily.” And she wasn’t laying out her life for anyone. Odd, I thought; what secrets was she hiding?

I guessed she might have signed checks that weren’t hers or wrote a few on an outdated account; The government doesn’t like it when you write checks without your own back-up funds. Or she got advance payment for expensive goods she never delivered. Or stole some one’s mail or drove off in someone’s car without bothering to get the owner’s permission. Or some other federal offense, probably reckless, doubtlessly unlawful and perhaps desperate. There were no stock manipulators or Ponzi scheme artists among us then in 1951, nor did these women ever get to fracture bank laws. Most of my sister inmates were poor and would be poor when they were freed because that’s what they were born into.

If they were white and lucky and had had some schooling, they were saleswomen at local retail stores or landed routine office jobs. Women of color cleaned houses or public buildings or they tended the elderly or they worked on farms. When they were arrested – white, brown or black – it was usually for a crime of street economics – boosting, theft, turning tricks, swindling, perhaps some creative combination. It was never a big-money crime. When they finished serving their time and returned to home base they faced legal barriers if they applied for public housing – and they found it almost impossible to keep a job because government agents kept tabs on them and exposed their past. Punishment for an initial wrong never seemed to end...

But none of this seemed to be Lily's problem so, mildly curious, I waited with the others for her to tell us what had brought her to these hallowed grounds. I expected she would tell it like many had done, embellishing the story and exaggerating not a little. And in her version she would have been innocent and falsely charged, and truth to tell, that was not beyond the realm of possibility. We had all had our own experiences and there were a few among us who had truly been sacked by the law: the arresting officer who was not above planting evidence, the paid witness who lied, the ambitious prosecutor who was never so concerned about seeking justice as he was about racking up a tally of convictions, the harassed probation officer with too heavy a caseload to have time to hear your story, the bored judge impatient for his political patron to get him a judicial assignment with greater prestige and a more generous pension plan – and the hearing was routine and the conviction foretold.

Lily seemed, as though by resolve, not to understand that she was now doing time. Five years of it, even with time off for good behavior was a lot of time and her release date was far into the future. She just waved it away and never tried to make peace with being here. Most of us, after the gates had slammed behind us realized that the only way to survive was to buckle under, forget or at best put on hold the dreams we once had, and never complain because everyone here carried a load and no one wanted to share yours. You could make a ceremony every night before you climbed into bed by marking off the day on a calendar, ritually counting the time left and always double-checking your arithmetic so that if you needed to think about it during the night or the next day, you knew instantly how much time you still had to do. "I've done five months and two days, and only fourteen more months to go..." but if you

had a lot of time, like years, marking off the days seemed hopelessly forever, so you never even looked at a calendar.

Truth: this prison was bearable if you were a short-timer and if you kept reminding yourself it would truly end someday. It was not like jail which was usually just a holding pen – dirty, smelly, crowded, with no privacy, a narrow cot or bench to sleep on, terrible food and overrun with mice or rats. Here, except for being separated from loved ones and friends and a way of living intimately connected to the world, except for the intractable monotony, the waste of it all and the meaninglessness of how you spent your days, except for the postponement of living, except for the lack of freedom to meander, to stop everything just to dream, except for the reminder in a thousand ways of your pariahhood, except for the institutional aura, the heavily-gated isolation and the obsessive surveillance, except for all that – you could survive. You had a room in a cottage, one of ten, and that cottage housed nineteen other women all doing time and all of them trying to cope.

Your room was small but private and if you made up your mind you could do this time without tearing yourself apart. If you needed to shelter yourself from the harsh reality of your surroundings you could close your door and shut out this world. Or try to. The cottages were set in an oval around a grassy field and an inmate crew kept the grounds manicured. Visitors – social workers, criminologists and such – thought the place was “picturesque.” The food was a lot of beans or black-eyed peas and pasta, sometimes flavored with a fatty slab of bacon. Or it was something called “stew” with wilted vegetables floating in an over-seasoned sauce. But sometimes there were biscuits and that was a special treat. The prison complex, itself, was set in a hollow at the foot of a mountain, far from any built-up area and it was surrounded by a tall, sturdy, barbed wire fence. If you made peace with the place you could survive.

When Lily first arrived a few of us, dredging up human instincts that had somehow not withered in the harsh ambience of this institution, made small, friendly overtures. She brushed us off as though we were chaff. We shrugged, now forewarned and thereafter kept our distance. Tempers here were short, emotions raw and frequently out of control, and you learned to steer clear of complicated personalities. And Lily was complicated. She seemed to meet her problems head-on and then vanquish them with a wave of her hand. “I’m not going to be around here long,” she announced grandly. “Bugsy will get me out.”

Bugsy? Bugsy Siegel? Yes, that Bugsy.

Most of us had heard of Bugsy Siegel, although he had not been headline news for a while. He was the legendary gambling crook who kept the police in Las Vegas frantic even though he regularly paid them off. Siegel was also that tricky master of the slots who so successfully engaged the whole of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service as well as the U.S. Treasury Department looking to collect back taxes on some of his gambling loot, and the FBI, for years, had been itching to get its hands on him for running a constellation of illegal rackets.

“I’ll be out of here soon,” she said. “You’ll see. Bugsy will get me out and then I’ll laugh at all of you.” Her special person, her man, Bugsy Siegel, would take care of everything. He would send her money for commissary and one day, soon, he’d come to get her and she would be free!..

We were incredulous and she enjoyed that – she’d be out of here soon because Bugsy would arrange it. “How?” we would ask and she would smile mysteriously, “Oh he has ways...”

We were not impressed. “She’s gone,” we thought. “She’ll keep saying that until the last day of her time.” And we began to feel a trickle of compassion for her; doing time under the best of conditions is not easy; we had our own problems keeping sane and steady, and she obviously was in trouble even before she got started.

She never seemed to care that some of the women were making fun of her over her “Bugsy” chatter and her grandish manner, and she ignored the cruel comedy some of the women generated at her expense. I knew this was going to escalate; sooner or later someone would dump some sticky spaghetti on her. Or trip her or shove her in an isolated corridor or decorate her room with obscenities. Rhodie, who had the room next to her, tried to tell her to tone it down – she wasn’t impressing anyone anymore – but Lily was stubborn. And after a while Rhodie stopped trying. She had her own problems and they were getting at her through the letters she got from home. Her mom was sick and the social worker was concerned about placing her baby in a more stable environment. And Rhodie would have no say about when or by whom that decision would be made. Or where this magical “more stable environment” would be. She fretted about it incessantly and thrashed in her sleep over it and Lily and her foolishness were just not Rhodie’s concern.

As though she sensed she was overdoing the foolish chatter, Lily stopped coming to the day room after supper and sat alone in her room in the evening with her door closed.

But things changed.

On a balmy evening in September, a few months after she arrived, Lily decided to join some of the other women to go up the hill to the institution schoolhouse for a class in office skills. A local church-affiliated volunteer was teaching it. For Lily this was new; she had never before participated in anything. We watched Mrs. Smith, the officer on duty that evening, carefully check and clock out Lily and the other women as each went through the door. When they returned at the end of the class, they were checked back in but Lily did not come to the day room as the others did; she had gone to bed, they said. At 9:30 in the evening we turned off the radio in the day room, put away our reading, folded our knitting -- and crossed another day off the calendar. We hurried to wash up, then scattered to our rooms to be locked in for the night.

When Mrs. Benton, the day shift officer, unlocked us in the morning I sensed something was awry and made a beeline for the communal bathroom. There the conspiratorial whispering turned into an exultant roar. "She's gone! Lily's gone! She made bush!"

Suddenly we all had a newfound respect for this inmate. Lily had performed an age-old trick; she had lumped her pillow into the shape of a human body, draped it with a nightgown and covered it over with a blanket so that, in the dark, it looked like a sleeping form. Smith, the night shift officer, had turned off the corridor and room lights with a master switch at 10 the evening before, and then checked each room with a flashlight before locking it for the night. Lily's room was now dark, so Mrs. Smith saw what she thought was Lily, as usual, curled up, already asleep. Benton took over the morning shift and when she unlocked the door at six a.m. what she saw was reality -- no Lily!

I was mildly sorry for Mrs. Smith; she was tolerable if you kept out of her way and if you didn't create any problems. Probably now she would lose her job. But I got swept into the group exultation; one of us -- I was now "us" -- had broken out of this place and was free! We went to breakfast -- the mess hall was across the field -- and

saw on their faces that our sister inmates from the other cottages had heard the news; they were awed and gleeful, too. The somber expressions belonged to the staff. We were careful not to giggle too obviously or show how much we relished Lily's knockout trick because they could take out their frustrations on us in sneaky ways.

We went to our assigned jobs but all day long it was hard to contain our giddiness. We whispered and laughed and said, "Good old Lily!" and we were almost as happy as if we, ourselves, had made bush. In the meantime, the grounds were suddenly overrun with men from the Bureau of Prisons or perhaps they were FBI agents, and as we passed them on our way to and from work we made fun of them and hooted derisively. One of us had made them look helpless and foolish and there was no containing our glee.

The institution was now emotionally split into two opposing camps and you could feel the antagonism. One side – the staff and the administration on whom this would reflect badly, in concert with the whole system of American justice – all arrayed against us, and we, a phalanx of traditional losers, never before united, and totally without practical resources but drawing strength and unity from one inmate's idiotic trick – we were the other side. This was new. There had always been an embittered undercurrent of hostility among us – an inmate who took out her unhappiness on other inmates; one who imagined insults from her peers which sometimes morphed into retaliation; a sometimes ugly display of unreasoned belligerence – and it kept discord among us unending. But in this one dazzling event it was our shared moment of unified joy; and because of its impossibility we cherished the victory which a harebrained woman had handed us. And she was now our hero and we were captivated by the boldness of what she had done.

The next morning brought more of the same; Lily was gone – Bugsy Siegel must indeed, have come to get her! How did they ever arrange this? Mail was censored, there were no cell phones and it took a crises to get permission to use the warden's telephone. Even then, the call was monitored. We were baffled but we were carried away that one of us had made hash of the whole United States Prison system. Lily's victory became uniquely our's. And the third day was like the first two; there was balm in our souls as sweet as a baby's smile. As the staff's frustration increased, as those long-faced investigators crawled all over the place, our delight in their humiliation became boundless.

The fourth day was our undoing.

They found Lily hiding in a small, rundown church not a quarter of a mile from these grounds. When she had returned from that evening class she was at the end of the line when she got herself checked in. Then she stepped back unnoticed into the dark and slipped out of the cottage before Mrs. Smith had a chance to lock the outside door. Lily then headed up the hill; she crept under the barbed wire fence, suffered scratches and gashes and torn skin and -- the ultimate insult -- she sprained her ankle because she couldn't see the rough terrain. She hobbled in pain up to the road and as far as the church and then could go no further. She found some food in the refrigerator at the church, then waited for her ankle to heal, but in the meantime the barbed wire wounds were becoming infected and she couldn't maneuver to wash them. There was no Bugsy Siegel.

We couldn't imagine how she ever thought she could make this work alone, without outside help. She had no cash, she wore telltale prison garb and she was a stranger in this area. Our joy turned to anger – at Lily for having been caught. We fumed; “That idiot!! She could never have made it – she didn't plan it right -- whatever made her think she could get away with this?” We carried on as though Lily had handed us, each personally, a searing defeat. All that good feeling we had enjoyed now mocked us; it jeered at us and made us feel like fools. And we choked with fury with appropriate language... Lily had made bush -- an impossible feat -- was free for four days and was caught right outside the prison gate. Dumb broad! We had desperately wanted her to make this institution -- and the self-important, simpering bureaucrats, the whole benighted prison system with its entrenched office holders and political appointees and its skewed sense of justice – look like a pack of fools. We had tasted her victory and it had become ours. How dare she renege on that implicit promise and snatch victory away from us by getting caught!

They took her to the infirmary, cleaned her up and the next day shipped her to St. E's, a hospital for the criminally insane. We never saw her again. And of course, there never was any Bugsy Siegel. Belatedly, we learned he had died four years earlier – before Liliana ever sashayed into our lives.