

Luminous Nights, 1

by Jerry Ratch

It happened almost overnight. There were long lines of cars at every filling station. There was anger, open hostility. Cars were backing into one another in line, trying to jockey for position. I don't think anyone could believe this was really happening to us. It was the fall of 1974, and the very first gas crisis had hit the United States, and things had changed.

I remember the look on one man's face when he finally pulled up to the gas pumps, after waiting in line for nearly an hour in his car. He was fuming. It was like seeing one of those classic black-and-white photos out of a back issue of Life Magazine. His face bulging with animosity.

"How much is that gas — 50 cents?" He fixed his eyes on me. He swelled up, growing red as a beet. *"I'll never pay 50 cents a gallon!"*

With that he put his car in gear and roared off burning rubber like a teenager, in a cloud of blue smoke. I always wondered where that man went, because my gas station — Robbie's #1 Premium Brand — had the cheapest gas prices in the entire Bay Area at the time.

Finally, by 1979 there was a terrible inflation in the economy that was spiraling completely out of control, the kind that wrecked peoples' lives, with interest rates rising way too fast. Corporations were going under left and right, largely the result of these steadily increasing oil prices. Suddenly one day the whole thing caught up with me too, and I lost my only means of survival — this gas station which I'd bought earlier during the Seventies, after my brother Harris had gambled away nearly all of our family money on a land pyramid scheme up in Northern California.

That era, the 1970's, was what they used to call the *Me Generation*. It was something that came about in direct reaction to all the moral indignation toward everything you could think of — a position my own generation had taken up in the Sixties. It sounds

funny when I say My generation. I say this, even though there was only a six-year gap between myself and Harris — because it really seemed like we were an entire generation apart. It gave people like my brother a great headache just to think about the things over which my own peer group had worked up a concern during the decade of the Sixties.

I grew catatonic and lay around on a couch with the shades drawn for about two months, after losing my business in the spring of 1979. Meanwhile the bills kept coming in waves, piling up and falling over in stacks. My wife threatened to leave me, which truthfully by that time had become an almost weekly ritual with her. The pressure kept mounting, and the next thing I knew I was practically hemorrhaging with desperation. Finally I called up my brother, who was now running a real estate outfit called Robinson Development Co. down in Los Angeles — after having gotten divorced from his first wife, and married to his secretary Francine — and in the nude yet, of all things. They'd moved down to L.A. right after this naked wedding of theirs, which was held somewhere out in Hawaii.

But to my amazement Harris didn't miss a beat when he got on the phone with me.

"Listen, little brother," he said, "your timing couldn't be better. Get your butt on the next jet down here to L.A. You're going to work for me. I've been feeling so overwhelmed lately around here. Your timing is just sensational!" He made a clucking noise way back in his throat, like a chicken would make. "Sen-sation-al!"

The Great Harris offered me a job starting at \$300 a week. That was a lot right then to me. I remember I was barely able to believe my ears. I wrote down the figure on a slip of paper and showed it to my wife, who said a little too loudly: "Take it, you flaming asshole — or else I'm out of here right now!"

I tried remaining cool over the phone. "Okay . . ." I managed to utter. "That sounds acceptable."

I shut my eyes, thanking God and my good luck to have a brother like Harris. Except for that little matter of his second

wedding in the buff, he had always been considered the responsible one in our family. So, that same night I packed my bags for a flight down to Los Angeles.

The man who picked me up at LAX, whose name was Freddie, was the go-fer in my brother's organization. Freddie was definitely a company man, sporting these long rakish sideburns, throwing his skinny legs out in front of him like a hot shot when he walked.

"Yeah, boy, you sure are one lucky sonofagun," he told me, "to have a brother like the Great Harris. I just think the world of him. Myself, I'd hit rock bottom, I'll tell you, before I met him. He picked me up at a swinger party and put me right back on my feet. That sonofagun. I could only dream of having a brother like him. Shee . . . it. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be gabbing so much. It's a bad habit of mine. Just go ahead and cut me off anytime."

It was really something to see Freddie throwing himself forward in that jerky manner, as if to assure everyone around him he wasn't a laggard. In truth, Los Angeles was a very different place from San Francisco then. Probably they should have cut the state in two a long time ago. Freddie smoked one cigarette after another and looked hungry all the time, as though he weren't being fed enough. Either he purposely wore his hair in this shag style made popular by a movie actress at that time, or else he was sadly in need of a haircut and couldn't afford one.

My mouth literally fell open when he pointed out my own last name on the license plate of this big black Lincoln Town Car he was driving. It read: **Robinson 1**. Freddie put my suitcase in the trunk. He even opened the passenger door for me. But when he started asking questions about my training in real estate, that was when I clammed up. I didn't know whether or not to admit anything to Freddie. He was the kind of guy that you'd meet at a bar, who would open up his entire life to you after two beers and a shot of whiskey. The fact was, the Great Harris hadn't told me what to say about my circumstances. My brother's offer of employment meant

the difference to us between going hungry and living in the lap of luxury.

All I could think was, keep as quiet as possible about exactly how much I *did not know* about real estate — keep Freddie guessing. I'd been given a new lease on life. I was starting out to learn the whole business. But the unavoidable fact was, that I was completely out of money and ideas. I was living on credit alone with no foreseeable way to pay it back, and I was scared, scared in an existence sense now — about everything.

While he drove, Freddie leaned forward to one side and kept looking over at me as we sped along the freeway toward the Hollywood hills. The big Lincoln Town Car was hugging the center divider in the far left lane. We were cruising past other cars on my right as if they were standing still in their lanes. In the side window, lit up in a pale greenish light, I saw the reflection of my own drawn, tense face, the whites of my eyes as wide as a cow's going to market. My dark beard had been trimmed for my new position in life.

"Could you slow it down a little, Freddie?" I asked. "I've been on enough jets today."

"Yeah, sure, boss," he said, "no problem."

Freddie let off on the pedal, backing it down to about 80 mph.

"Say, isn't that brother of yours something though? You sure are lucky he's giving you a job and everything. That sonofagun saved my damned life, is what it is. There isn't nothing I wouldn't do for him. He's number one in my book. Numero Uno. So . . . you read the book yet?"

"What book?"

"*Looking Out for Number One*, of course. Everybody who joins the organization has got to read that book. It's required reading. *Looking Out for Number One*. It's either read that book or go directly to jail. And this ain't Monopoly we're playing here, if you know what I mean. Say, if you ain't read it yet, I'll lend you my copy. Your brother lent me his own copy hisself."

I shook my head. Freddie saw me doing that out of the side of his eye. He must have had an enormous peripheral vision. Way too much attention was being paid to me and not enough to the freeway, as far as I was concerned. We were still really flying. I saw the speedometer pushing up past 90 mph again.

"So," ventured Freddie, "how much is the boss starting you at? You can trust me not to tell nobody else."

I concentrated on looking out the side window at the bright lights of the city, and the greenish lights up in the hills. I hadn't been down to Los Angeles since just after completing college there nine years earlier. Nothing seemed to have changed at all. The nights were warm and had the continual feeling somehow of luxury, as if luxury itself simply oozed right out of thin air. We kept passing rows of tall unmoving palm trees that were lit up from the base with multi-colored spotlights. I remembered John Lennon once describing L.A. as a place you just stopped and got a hamburger, passing through on your way to somewhere else — and yet here I was back again. The L.A. basin seemed to have this uncanny power, as if an enormous whirlpool were sucking everything back into its vortex.

"Not that I'm being nosy or anything," Freddie added. "If it's none of my business, just say so, okay?"

A millennium seemed to be passing between us.

"Yeah, boy, sonofagun!" said Freddie. "That brother of yours — he sure is something else, all right."

