Luminous Nights, 2

by Jerry Ratch

The house where my brother lived up in the hills above Hollywood, looked like any other suburban house on any normal street Anywhere USA, except that once you got inside the house — spread out at your feet was a panoramic view over a canyon that was actually the back lot of a movie studio. We were way up above on a hillside. Occasionally at night you'd look down and see them filming a scene out of some movie. The actors and actresses could be seen carrying out little pieces of the plot. They looked like tiny stick figures way down below, lit up by these cold, bright arc-lamps. It presented a pretty eerie feeling at night as you sat in a hot tub high up on the cliff, watching a make-believe winter scene in the woods down there, with white stuff covering the ground. Meanwhile, the weather outdoors could be eighty degrees, and beads of sweat would be rolling off your forehead.

My brother met me at the door, barefoot in a red bathrobe, a drink in his hand, the straps tied in front around his beer belly, barely holding the robe closed. I was surprised to see that he too wore the same kind of long sideburns that Freddie wore. These things looked like they'd been either sewn on or attached with glue. Frankly I thought these things had gone out of style already by that time, except maybe in Las Vegas. When Elvis Presley had burst on the scene nearly a quarter of a century earlier, my own group of adolescent buddies immediately took up the look. As soon as we were able, we grew long sideburns and put butch wax in our hair. Whereas my brother's generation drew back completely from the onslaught of rock-and-roll, going instead the way of dance bands, sock hops, and flat-top crew cuts sported by the likes of the Kingston Trio.

This had honestly created a nearly unbridgeable impasse between the two of us from that time onward. The advent of Bob Dylan and long hair and dope only made things worse. Even though

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there was only this six-year gap between Harris and myself, it may as well have been the distance of a thousand and one years. It felt like we weren't even from the same era by then — that's how different we were in the way we came to view the world. In actual truth, you can blame nearly everything on rock-and-roll if you worked at it long enough.

But now here was my very own brother in 1979 wearing the same long sideburns, but with a razor-cut at the bottom for panache. For all I knew they'd taken up smoking pot around there as well. He took one long speechless gaze at me. "Jesus!" he said. "I can't believe it.”

He kept eyeing me up and down, then drew me in the front door by the arm, heading directly down the hallway to his bedroom suite while holding his drink out before him in the other hand. I got the smell of cheap white wine as we swept along the hallway.

We turned, entering a large bedroom with mirrors surrounding us completely, even on the ceiling. Smack in the center of the room was the bed — more like the enormous mother of all beds, bigger than anything I'd ever seen. It was raised up on a shag-carpet platform. The posts of the bed, which my brother had fondly named "The Arena," rose to within an inch of the mirrors on the ceiling. It looked like the posts would have risen even further if someone hadn't sawn them off just for this room, because of the eight-foot ceiling. The parts of ceiling that weren't covered with mirrors, instead had that nasty cottage cheese component plastered to it, with sparkles added to remind them of stars.

"I'm not supposed to be drinking this stuff right now," he said, when he saw me looking at him. He was keeping one arm extended up and away, as though he couldn't at any moment just bend his arm and take a good swig of wine.

"Okay," he started in on me, "get your skinny ass out of those Levis. I don't ever want to see you in those things again around here. Okay?”

He didn't wait for a response, but pulled me over to a deep walk-in closet, switching on the overhead light bulb. He hadn't put down his drink yet. His eyes seemed to be slightly crossed, probably from the booze, and there were huge dark bags under them. It may have been the pull chain of the light causing his eyes to cross, because it was hanging right in front of his face. In fact, it actually dangled in his drink. At the same time his hand was resting smack dab on top of his belly. This beer belly of his, you understand, extended away from his body more or less like a shelf that you could put things on. I wasn't used to seeing him this way, or for that matter, seeing anyone in this condition, especially up close in a closet. Myself, I could still look right down and see my, you know, *myself,* when I was naked. I think my brother probably had to ask someone, if he wanted to be absolutely certain that his was still there. I started to grow concerned about the way he looked, especially with those dark bags under his eyes.

"Are you sick?" I asked. He didn't answer, but kept picking through his wardrobe, passing up one suit after another.

"Harris, are you feeling all right?”

"Here," he said, yanking a tan leisure suit off a hanger and throwing it at me. "Don't you have anything other than Levis with you?”

"I never needed to own a suit.”

"Well, don't ever let me see you in anything like that outfit again. Jesus, I can't believe it. Look, you're in the real estate development business now, Robbie. Get out of those clothes and try this on. Here's a pair of pants. Shirts are in that drawer, there. Right now I've got to get dressed for an appointment. Meet me at the front door in 20 minutes, exactly. You've got a watch on you at least, don't you?” He kept looking me up and down.

"I want you to open the man's car door for me when he shows up," Harris said. "Understand? Coolly though. Real effortless, get it? We've got to give this guy a certain impression. So, hop to it and get yourself suited up. Later on when I get back, we'll be watching something on the big screen TV, then we're taking a hot

tub out on the deck, okay? All right. You're going to do just fine, Robbie — you're my brother. Jesus, I still don't believe it. Okay, see you at the front door in exactly 20 minutes.”

The Great Harris Robinson plodded barefoot out of the bedroom, and I stood watching after him. His hair had started getting streaked with gray. It looked like he had recently backed into a freshly painted door by accident. That's when I took a good look at the suit he'd handed me.

It was the first time I'd ever actually gotten this near a leisure suit. I remember distinctly the deadly, snakelike feel of the polyester material as it slid through my fingers. It felt like something had simply gone wrong in the manufacturing process, and they'd settled for whatever this stuff was, trying to put the best face on things. There was a pair of trousers with a belt of matching material stitched onto them, but white in color at the tips. I thought it looked, well, pretty silly.

When you loosened the belt, the pants fell off your ass more or less automatically. These things seemed to be built for action, whenever and wherever that might happen. After awhile, I guess you grew used to the feeling of the sleaze factor. The jacket was another matter altogether, though. I could have wrapped the suit coat around my body one and a half times easy, because the gut on my brother, which had always been big enough as it was, had gotten downright pendulous since he'd moved back down to L.A.

I found a yellow dress shirt at the bottom of the drawer, that approximated my size, and then I slipped into the leisure suit. The pants fairly flapped around my skinny legs. I had to bore a new hole in the belt in order to cinch the things tight enough to keep from tripping over them. Hastily I began trying on shoes to see what might come close to fitting, ultimately cramming my feet into a pair of foppish-looking brown and white shoes with canvas sides. These were the only things that came anywhere near fitting for the moment.

I looked at my watch and had a sudden moment of panic when I realized I couldn't tie my own tie, because of this problem I

had with my right hand. When 20 minutes were up, I appeared at the front door as expected. My brother took one look at me, and I could see his face actually flush red.

"Oh, here," he said, pulling me over to the coat closet. "Damn. I forgot.” He whipped a tie off a hook in the closet, and hurriedly began lashing the thing around my neck.

"Lift up your chin. Jesus, Robbie, snap out of it, will you?” He tightened the knot at my throat, so I could barely breathe. I smelled the heavy odor of mouthwash on his breath. It was Listerine.

"There you go, perfect. You're in the real estate development business now.” He looked down at my shoes.

"Tell Freddie to take you out tomorrow and get some shoes.” The Great Harris Robinson straightened himself up.

"So? What do you think?" he asked.

"About what?”

"About how I look.”

Frankly, I didn't know what to say. Here was a handsome, slightly graying business man dressed in a dark formal three-piece business suit, wearing those newer kind of darkening eyeglasses. We were standing right under a bright canister light in the entryway, so that his eyeglasses had grayed to something like prescription sunglasses.

"How do I look?”

"You look perfect.”

"Good," he said. "That's what I thought you'd say. In a minute you can relax, until I get back. This should take about two hours. If I'm not back by then, have them call the police.”

"What!”

"Joking," he said. "Just like Dad. What a great jokester we got there for a dad, huh? We were pretty lucky, Robbie, you know it? Pretty damn lucky when you think about it, with our folks. Have you been up at the house to see them lately?”

"No," I admitted. "Not nearly enough.”

"You should, you know, Robbie. They're not going to be around that much longer, and I can't get away from this business so easily, so you've got to take on more of the lion's share of it. Oh, that's right, I forgot. You're working for me now. Well . . .”

My brother's face went blank all of a sudden. There was a faint noise outside the door, that sounded like a tire rubbing against the curb.

"Okay," he said, "here we go. Open the door, little brother. That's the way. Here we go.”

At the curbside sat a gleaming new Rolls Royce Silver Arrow. I didn't realize the motor was still running, it was so quiet. Here was the prize of the motor world. I'd never seen one up close enough to be able to touch it. The glass was tinted, so that you could barely make out if there was life inside the vehicle. Then Harris strode out of the house, sweeping by me.

"Get the door for me, will you, Robbie?”

I hopped to the side of the gleaming car, and it seemed like I had barely touched the handle when the door swung open noiselessly.

I watched as Harris silently tucked himself and his briefcase into the leather seat on the passenger side of the Rolls. The leather squeaked quietly. He and the driver didn't shake hands or even acknowledge each other. It seemed like something that had been rehearsed ahead of time. Harris put his briefcase neatly on his lap and folded his hands, looking straight forward. I said good-bye to him. There wasn't so much as a nod in my direction, as I shut the door of the hand-made vehicle. It made a firm click, like a well-oiled revolver. Then the new Rolls simply glided away from the curbside without making a noise and vanished around a curve in the street.

Suddenly, without a clue as to why it happened, I got a vivid impression in my mind. As if I'd been given a crime-lab photo, I distinctly got the picture of Harris lying dead, dressed in his three-piece suit, face up in a ditch beside a deserted road somewhere. I had no idea where that picture came from, and I had no idea where

that road was. It was as vivid a picture as you would ever get in your head about that sort of thing.

I went back inside the house. I shut the door against the night, allowing a great chill to run its course up my spine. My shoulders raised involuntarily into something like a shrug, while the chill vanished into goose bumps over my shoulders. The hairs along my arms were standing straight up. I rubbed myself fiercely, then glanced at my new self in the hallway mirror, before marching like a puppet toward the bedroom to which I'd been assigned.