

Luminous Nights, 3

by Jerry Ratch

Ever since we were kids back in Chicago, the Great Harris had always been my own personal hero and the one to whom everyone in our family automatically deferred when it came to matters of business. It seemed as if he could do no wrong. But in the early 1970's after my parents sold their gas station and retired, moving out to California to be closer to my brother and his first wife, and their only grand-daughter Terri — that was when Harris had invested and lost the majority of our family's money, including a small savings of my own, in a humungous land pyramid scheme up near Lake Shasta. This was not so very far from a dormant volcano — a volcano yet! The thing has even taken to letting out with a rumble now and then lately, sort of like Mt. Etna in Italy.

Then the man whom Harris had entrusted with our family's money just up and vanished. All of a sudden we were left holding title to this nearly worthless piece of land way the hell out in the sticks, and there in a puff of metaphorical smoke went all our dreams of getting rich quick — which Harris, like the true salesman he was, had more or less promised to us. Next he moved my parents into a minuscule in-law apartment with cheap wood paneling in the basement underneath his house up in Berkeley to give them shelter, since they had practically nothing left anymore from their retirement nest egg.

We were all just plain dumbfounded when this had happened. We were absolutely sick at heart. My brother admitted to me that he may have gone through a brief period of temporary insanity right after that. He went out looking for this man who had bilked us out of everything we owned, intending to do who knows what — and actually confronted him one day in a parking lot in Oakland. Harris took the man by the lapels of his jacket, but then just looked at him coolly as if to say: *I could have had you*. Thank God he never encountered the man with a weapon or anything.

After that Harris seemed to lose his nerve. At the corporation where he worked as a top-level engineer, his immediate supervisor tapped his phone, listening in on conversations in which my brother was trying to get rid of these worthless plots of wilderness — all during normal business hours. Now, you've got to understand that Harris was trying his damndest to salvage some of the losses he had created for our family. But then his boss confronted him with the tapes of his conversations, and the next thing he knew they boosted him right out of the corporation.

What a humiliation! Harris stated categorically he would never again go back to work at a large corporation because of all the in-fighting and back-stabbing politics there. From then on he insisted on working only for himself, the same as our father had done, though the Great Harris would never even consider working in something like a lowly gas station. *Imagine, me in a gas station!* I overheard him saying once to Francine, his secretary at the corporation. I didn't dare mention this to my dad. I think it would have literally broken his heart that his favored boy thought so little of that kind of business.

But the truth was, my father totally agreed with everything Harris ever did because he was, after all, the Great Harris. It was like they had some kind of unspoken, unwritten pact between them, something that had occurred before I was even born. Never did I hear my father speak, not once, about the phenomenal blunder of sinking practically everything our family owned into such a goofy venture as a land pyramid scheme, something that sounded flatly too good to be true — though I myself went right along with it, mind you — the idea that we were all going to retire and never have to lift a bona fide finger again!

Then there was the small, difficult matter of the Great Harris leaving his comfortable home in the Berkeley hills, early in the 1970's — to our family's tremendous surprise. He'd abruptly run off on an extended fling with his secretary, leaving behind his little eight-year-old girl Terri. And leaving behind Beryl, his high school sweetheart, who by then had taken to drinking large quantities of

cheap pink Chablis wine. They'd met originally back in the York High School marching band in Elmhurst, Illinois, when they were both still teenagers.

I remember seeing poor Beryl, near the end of their marriage, buying pink Chablis a gallon at a time at a discount liquor store. She'd grown to be pretty enormous by then, and could be seen pattering around Berkeley wearing a flowered two-dollar moo-moo and floppy pink slippers with this puffy cotton material that made it look she had two dead bunnies strapped to her feet.

There were enormous dark circles under Beryl's eyes at all times. At the liquor store where she'd run up a pretty hefty account, I watched her one time rigidly trying to limit herself to a single gallon per trip. She lowered two full gallon jugs of this wine into one of those pint-size liquor store shopping carts, then plucked the second one up out of the basket, and shoved it gingerly back on the shelf, after carefully lecturing herself under her breath.

"No, Beryl," she muttered, "that's just one at a time. That's a good girl."

She especially loved Gallo Pink Chablis, though the stuff practically ate away directly at her heart and mind like battery acid. That and a carton of Parliament cigarettes, the ones in the blue and white package. I can't ever remember seeing her without a lit cigarette in her hand, ever. She'd learned early on to hold the things up in the air around her daughter Terri in the most delicate manner as if it were some kind of magic wand, waving it around whenever she noticed the smoke gathering into a cloud. In the other hand, around the house at any rate, (along with these pink curlers she rarely took out of her hair,) there was nearly always a tankard of pink Chablis wine.

Now, this was not just your standard wholesale shocker, I have to say, when Harris walked out on them. It was enormous — it was huge in our family — it had an impact. I don't think my mother ever quite recovered from this sudden departure. That kind of break from the norm of family life was pretty much beyond my mother, having herself been married and faithful to her one man — Otto —

since she was a teenager. Her head began literally wobbling from side to side. Her eyebrows were raised in a kind of permanent surprise after that, and she seemed to be staring straight off into space as if at a tiny, spinning, personal black planet which no one else but her could see.

Then to top things off — to give it all a kind of Hollywoodian veneer — practically fifteen minutes after his divorce from Beryl was final, the Great Harris stepped onto a plane and flew off to Hawaii to get married to this dumbbell secretary, Francine, with whom he'd been having his wild fling. Apparently this had been more than just your standard affair. Francine turned out to be a real honest-to-God, rollicking hick, who came out of the back woods of Oregon originally. It wasn't until much later that the two of them, purely at the bidding of Francine, dared to show our family the photos from their wedding. They got married in a blowzy nudist ceremony at the house of some friend of hers out in Hawaii.

I remember distinctly the look on my mother's face when they showed her the pictures from the wedding. Mom's head was wobbling pretty much nonstop from side to side by then. She wasn't even making an effort to keep the problem under control anymore. Here was a glossy photograph of her first-born son, the Great Harris, with a Hawaiian lei around his neck. His pronounced beer belly was hanging right out there for anyone to see — obscene enough for most folks — not to mention what was plainly showing down below.

But my mother had the honest curiosity of a giraffe, and couldn't keep from staring at the photograph. Her head, wobbling from side to side the way it was, seemed to be scanning the entire situation, taking in every square inch of every possibility of her son's life from childhood right up until that very moment. Maybe in fact she saw something beyond somehow, but she never uttered a word if she did.

I know my own reaction. A wholehearted wave of disbelief shot through me, and it sort of woke me up. I suddenly got the feeling I didn't really know who in the living hell this guy even was

anymore in this semi-pornographic photo. I mean, I knew he was my own brother, the Great Harris, but come on! I felt like I didn't know who this guy *really was* any more than the next man who might come walking up the street with his clothes still on.

And I suspected that my mother must have had just about the same jolt of recognition that I did, or more exactly non-recognition. I saw a certain look pass over her, like someone seeing their family dog in an entirely new light after having been bitten in the hand by their mutt.

To me it felt like I should consider the possibility of asking — Did I ever really *have a brother* at all?

But I imagine to my mother, the feeling might have been more like — Did I *give birth* to this person?

And then there was Francine. Apparently this was the woman of my brother's dreams. She also, wearing the requisite Hawaiian lei in this naked wedding photograph, but her low-swung breasts were hanging all the way down to her navel. Her navel itself appeared to be about as round and deep as a shot glass. There was this smear of gaudy fluorescent pink lipstick, for which she'd become famous in our family — we had taken to joking about it privately. And down below, a ripe black slash of pubic hair prominently displayed for everyone in the world to see, while the proud couple descended a flight of stairs somewhere out in Waikiki.

To Harris this was the girl with the *sweetest muff in the world*. I would hear him saying that often, as if he'd awoken one day and discovered some truly terrific unholy mantra. But I also heard a sound of real urgency to his voice — as though earnestly needing to reassure himself that he'd made the right choice. He didn't use the word *muff*, of course. That's my word. I didn't want to embarrass myself right here.

