

Luminous Nights, 5

by Jerry Ratch

It turned out that my brother's newly acquired building in downtown Pasadena, was what developers called a "see-through" building. That meant you could look from one side of the building all the way through to the other side, without obstruction. In other words, there were no tenants. Downtown Pasadena was going through the tail end of a downward economic spiral. Nobody with any sense went there anymore. The malls at the edge of town had usurped all the economic drive in the area. All that was left were drive-through burger joints, Salvation Army storefronts, and soup kitchens to feed the poor.

That, and the Great Harris Robinson.

He saw something in the future that apparently no one else did, and he picked the building up for no money down, it was all financing. He liked deals like that. Of course, how he was going to make the payments on the mortgages, was anybody's guess. But what did that mean to me? At the time, I was so uneducated in the real estate world, I barely knew what the word *mortgage* even meant. All I knew, was that we seemed to be the only people in the entire eight floors of building. Just as Harris had told me to do, I dogged his heels everywhere he went that day. But suddenly he started slumping in energy when it was only ten o'clock.

I followed him in the elevator down to the basement. He had a cot set up near a wall down there. He seemed real woozy, like a man who'd had way too much to drink. I watched him take off his suit coat and lay it across the back of a chair next to the cot. Wordlessly, he unlaced his shoes and took those off too. He didn't even try covering himself, but stretched out on his back in his white shirt, and slacks, and necktie, as if this were some sort of formal slumber party. Then he simply passed out.

"Harris, aren't you cold?" I asked. He didn't make a sound.

I pulled up a plastic lawn chair and sat down a few feet away. His face looked yellowish, and slack. He was only forty-one years old then, but he seemed way older than that. His face had taken on the wan yellowish look of an artificially preserved corpse, like Lenin in his tomb, or the exhumed waxlike body of an ancient Chinese emperor.

I sat with him for a good hour, while his body gathered back its lost energy. It was pretty eerie, sitting in the basement of a noiseless, vacant building in the abandoned heart of a nearly bankrupt town. It was like sitting at a wake. But then the Great Harris stirred, and rose. He put on his jacket, took in a deep breath, and said, "You're still here, Robbie? That's good."

That night they took me out to a restaurant for a dinner in my honor. It was considered a fancy restaurant by their standards in those days, but not the kind of restaurant we have today, like Chez Panisse or anything. L.A. didn't have that kind of thing in 1979. They had the Playboy Club in Hollywood, and a few other blowzy places, but that was about it. People there weren't into eating more delicately prepared foods. They were into good thick cuts of steak, lobsters that had been dead for a week, flown in from Maine, that sort of thing. Who needed vegetables? Vegetables were for people living up in Bezerkeley. Real men don't eat quiche, as they were fond of saying.

The girl sitting next to me was the secretary at Robinson Development, whom I'd met briefly earlier that day. Her name was Lynnette. This wasn't her real name, she'd long ago given up on that, but Lynnette was what everybody at the company called her, since picking her up at one of those famous swinger parties of theirs — and the name had stuck.

Lynnette had been assigned to sit next to me at the table. She had round dark eyes and long black hair. She was short, seemingly without breasts, and had an easy smile for everyone.

"I'm taking you home tonight after dinner," she said. "I'm driving **Robinson #2**, and that means you're going home with me."

After saying this, she gave my leg a squeeze under the table, letting her hand stay on my leg. I could feel the warmth of her hand right through the phony polyester material of my pants. Until then I'd been under the impression this stuff was more or less flame-resistant.

"I'm driving, so you can relax and drink as much as you want. You don't have to worry about a thing. I'm your shepherd for the night."

I saw Francine watching me. She never let up smiling. Her head nodded as Lynnette was talking.

"That's right, that's right," said Francine, "you're in good hands, little brother. We watch out for everything in this outfit, don't we, Harris? That's right. You're in good ha. . .a. . .a. . .ands," she said, with her long nasal A's.

After dinner Lynnette drove me to her apartment, which was in a huge old building just off Sunset Drive. She shut off the engine and got out, coming around to my side, and opened my door.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"I think I'm a little tired."

"You're coming upstairs with me tonight, Mr. Robinson #2. I've got my orders. I'm not taking you any further than this. I'm driving you into work in the morning."

"I can drive home."

"Please, Robbie, please. Can I take you upstairs with me? Just for tonight?"

"I can make it home. I know how to get there."

"You don't understand. Francine will be furious with me, if you don't stay here tonight."

"You mean, you're forced to sleep with me?"

"No," she said. "I want to."

"But if you don't?"

"It won't look good for me, with Francine. She expects you to sleep with me. But I want you to, Robbie, you look great. Please. Please, come upstairs with me. It will be good, I promise. And I like you."

"Lynnette," I said. The girl pulled me out of the car, and put her mouth on mine. She had warm lips, I remember, and a strong sweet mixture of odors. It was the kind of perfume that stays with you for hours afterward. The kind of scent that was meant to put a mark on you, to claim you as hers. Her mouth drank me in.

I pulled away. "Lynnette, I can't tonight. Just, not tonight. I can't. It's too soon. Maybe another time, but I need to get some rest."

"You can come upstairs and rest, can't you, if you're tired? Please, Robbie? It won't be good for me at all, if you don't."

I thought again about the unstable situation with my wife up in Berkeley. The truth was, I'd been afraid that no one was ever going to have me again, if we ended up getting a divorce. I wasn't exactly a pretty sight with my clothes off.

"Look," I told Lynnette, "my brother mentioned we were going out to some motel out in Palm Springs, for a mini vacation at the end of the week, some place with a spa and a huge hot tub. Maybe when we get out there. You can tell Francine we've got a date for the night. How about that?"

"I don't know what she'll say about that," Lynnette said. She looked disappointed. "Don't you like me, Robbie? Ain't I pretty enough for you? Just come upstairs with me, huh? Just for a minute. You'll like what you see, once I'm undressed. You won't be disappointed. There's not an ounce of fat on my body. I work out. Here, feel this." She made a muscle, putting my hand on her arm. I could feel something stir in me when I touched her flesh. She felt so warm, and human.

I glanced up at her building. It must have been eight or nine stories high. A row of towering palm trees stood along the curbside in front of the building. A name over the entrance spelled out, what else? — *The Towering Palms*. I thought: What am I doing here? She's just going to freak out when she sees me undressed. I had a few scotch and sodas in me, and didn't know for certain what to do.

She had such small hands. I was so pottsed that I began to whistle, as I sometimes do when I'm nervous.

Lynnette looked at me mysteriously. "I love a man who whistles."

She took my hand in hers. We went upstairs to her studio apartment. Fortunately, the sight of the cockroaches scurrying for cover when we turned on the lights, was precisely the cue for me to shoot out the door like a giant cockroach myself.

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Thursday evening everybody loaded into **Robinson #1**, and we drove all the way out to this fancy motel in Palm Springs. Each unit there had a big hot tub of its own, set in the ground. Tall palm trees surrounded the back of the compound. Each tree had a different colored spotlight trained on it, pointing up the trunk toward the giant burst of palm leaves at the top.

It'd been written in stone that everybody had to strip naked and get into the huge steaming hot tub, whose waters had been set bubbling by Jacuzzi jets. The night was still warm out, but wavering fingers of steam rose from the surface of the water into the night air, nevertheless.

My brother pulled his old tenor saxophone out of its beat-up case, which still had York High School Marching Band stickers pasted to the sides. The Great Harris sat down at the edge of the swirling waters with his legs dangling in the pool, and began playing a solo of *My Funny Valentine*. He could really play that thing. The tune sounded unusually melancholy and out of place in this setting, for some reason.

Everybody else had taken off their clothes, and they were already soaking in the hot tub, while I kept hanging back to one side.

"C'mon, little brother!" Francine sang out, with that abrasive nasal twang of hers. "Take off your clothes. Show us what you've got."

My brother kept wailing on his saxophone. I saw Lynnette and Francine watching me curiously. Never in my life had I stripped naked in front of a crowd of people. I realized I wasn't exactly in the midst of the most prized catches of humanity here, but still, this was not an easy moment. I wasn't too proud of my body — because of what the polio had done to me. It brought back images from my early adolescence that I'd been unable to erase from memory. Of times when my parents forced me to go to these god-awful Wednesday evenings at the Chicago Polio Swim Club on the West side of Chicago. This was when I was about eleven or twelve-years-old. How much I had come to dread the approach of those Wednesday evenings.

In the showers there, I would see them — the truly crippled, crawling across tile floors with the water beating down on them. Men and women whose undercarriages had been completely destroyed by this disease — dragging their useless legs along behind them, like squid out of water. Their upper torsos were huge. Their arms tremendous, bulging with muscles built up and overdeveloped, out of the necessity of having to drag around the rest of their body. Huge chest muscles derived out of over-compensation. Dragging themselves out of the showers to pool-side, so they could throw themselves into the overheated, chlorinated water. So they could become almost normal in the pool, and swim about the same as anyone else — once the rest of their body was submerged, hidden, almost forgotten.

And now here at the resort, I was expected like everyone else to completely expose myself. I still didn't feel comfortable undressing, even in front of my own wife, let alone strangers. And even with her, for a long time I'd been in the habit of walking around with a long sleeve shirt on until the lights were out and we were completely in the dark. The fingers on my right hand didn't work. I barely had enough muscle in the upper arm to lift the limb half way, before it gave out with the exertion. I'd grown used to hiding my hand in my pocket whenever I could get away with it. And I'd grown accustomed as well to reaching over with my good, strong, capable

left hand in order to shake hands, when I had to introduce myself — or to carry things — or to touch someone's neck.

Harris kept playing *My Funny Valentine* on his tenor sax, while he let his legs dangle in the swirling waters of the pool. His huge sad beer belly hanging out abundantly, like a pregnancy. The Great Harris played on, seemingly oblivious to everything. We were all getting pretty drunk.

My moment had come. I loosened my belt. The snakelike pants fell around my ankles. I stepped out of my underpants, and then I took off my shirt and felt the night air swooshing down over my body, with the barest of breezes. When I felt that, I felt a real thrill.

This wasn't so hard, I realized. This wasn't as bad as I'd thought.

I was standing beside the steaming water of the huge swirling tub. I felt Lynnette's gaze, traveling up and down my entire body. I saw her flex her hands, and glance down at them both. Then she reached up and crossed her hands, covering both nipples.

The next day, Francine made a call up to Berkeley. It was a friendly call, she told my wife, just to let her know that Robbie was becoming a company man, and wouldn't be coming back up to Berkeley anymore, if he wanted to keep his job with his brother. It was just a friendly call, she repeated, between girls. However, Francine drummed me right out of my brother's business, the minute she found out that I hadn't slept with Lynnette, as expected.

That was the end of that job. And that was also the end of my marriage. Inevitably, at a point like that in life, one begins thinking back on one's past. It was then, with the greatest bitterness in the world, that I realized what a enormous mistake I had made, when I left my old flame Gina back in Chicago — the only real love of my life — when I came out to California in the first place.

