

# Luminous Nights, 6

*by* Jerry Ratch

I had an apartment not far from Lake Michigan, where we could stroll to one of the beaches. It was close to Lincoln Park. This was in the mid 1960's. We had to walk up to the fourth floor, and on those steamy hot Chicago summer nights in August, sometimes I would strip off my top before we even got in the door. I lived with my Siamese cat, whose name was Caesar. Caesar was crazy. He'd get a running start from across my little one-room apartment, take a flying leap half-way up the opposite wall, and climb scratching with his claws the rest of the way to the ceiling, before dropping to the floor. The ceilings in that building must have been at least eleven feet tall. Maybe twelve.

This was one hell of an athletic little monster cat. Caesar became psychotic from never being allowed to go outside, and grew jealous when Robbie moved in. He started behaving like he wanted to kill something. Whenever I got into the bathtub and drew the shower curtain, Caesar would leap at the other side of the curtain with his claws extended. One time he shred the thing from the top all the way to the bottom, nonstop. He was a completely crazed cat who wouldn't let us go to sleep, and he was driving me and Robbie nuts right along with him.

Ultimately I realized if I ever wanted to get any real rest, I would have to get rid of him. I took him down to the beach one day, wound up, and threw Caesar out into Lake Michigan. As he left my hand, his claws ripped all the way along the backside of my arm, opening up a two foot section where blood came running out like I'd been cut with a butcher knife. Caesar swam right back into shore, and I took him up in my arms and back home to my apartment, and I loved him even more.

My body had to grow accustomed to the size of Robbie on our first night in bed together. I should say nights — multiple nights — because it took a whole week of nights, getting used to him. All he

could get into me on the very first night, was just the head of that thing. I think he was as startled as I was by the tightness of me. He was maybe even more unprepared than me for the pain his penis could cause to a virgin. I mean, because he was as skinny as a wet noodle, but I remember vividly moving all over the place in my bed, wriggling around, trying to stifle my groans. I told him it was all right when he stopped for a minute. We were both panting like lizards, but he kept pressing ahead, and I let him.

He was driven to make love to me by then because he was terribly in love with me — and too, because I'd made him wait a whole damn year for it. Until I was legal, was what I told him — legal tender. He would never let me forget that. He'd keep telling me how much he was in love with me. His voice was ragged with the need for love, you could hear it, but to his credit he didn't force the issue. Then I reached eighteen and gave him everything. I unwrapped the shiny bright package of my virginity. I accepted him fully and completely. I always wanted this to be perfect. That is, nothing's perfect, but I'd hoped it would be that way.

Then I loved seeing his body, his whole body. I made him take off his shirt, and wanted to see him entirely naked. I wanted to make him feel whole and loved and complete. I couldn't get enough of him then. I would have carried him around inside me, if I could've figured a way.

Every night we had sex until about four a.m. I'd call from my dispatcher job every day, complaining that I couldn't sit down because I was so sore. "I can't even sit down here," I would complain. But I'd be laughing when I said this, I was so happy after all those years of not having a man, and wishing with all my might and soul to have this man, and imagining in my bed at night what it would be like to sleep with him when it happened. And then it did — and you know, I felt the whole world change.

Over the phone Robbie could hear my boss making wisecracks in the background, a roughneck guy with a porker belly, who smoked cigars all the time. He'd been in the taxi business forever. But I didn't care, I was so proud to have a lover. I bragged

about Robbie to everyone I knew. I told my girlfriends in my old neighborhood near his dad's gas station, all about him, told them he was going to college at a big University. He was very smart, I said. I showed him off to my little sister like a prize rooster. Robbie kept saying he was no prize and not a rooster.

I was so much in love with Robbie, it ached. I worried sometimes that I told him too much, and he would start taking things for granted, or that he wouldn't love me. No one ever loved someone as much as I loved Robbie. Except maybe his mother, Bess — because I never saw a woman love a man as much as she worshipped her Otto, her husband of fifty years ultimately! And when Otto died, I thought it was going to kill her outright, but you know what? It didn't. . . .

I know the way Robbie's parents met. Bess told me all about it when we were at their house one time. But that was not how Robbie and I met. I guess it must be that things are a whole lot different and maybe modern, even haphazard, the way people meet these days. How we met was this.

His older brother was already living out in L.A., and I know how Robbie was trying to fill his brother's shoes around his dad's gas station. I remember distinctly the first day I saw Robbie working there. A whole gang of us were piled into this guy named Joey's car, who had a part-time job at their gas station. It was on the North side, on California Avenue a couple of blocks up from Humboldt Park, where they had a lagoon. Joey was Puerto Rican, a real hot-dogger, dark-haired pretty boy who loved riding through the neighborhood around there with all the girls he could pile into the back seat of his green Plymouth convertible like we were his trophies.

We pulled up to the pumps for gas. Joey was getting set to take the whole gang of us, me and my loud-mouthed girlfriends, down to the Lake at North Avenue beach. I had on cut-offs, and a bright orange tank top that showed off my mid-riff. I was proud of how flat my stomach was. I was real muscular, stronger than most men. Other than rock hard stomach muscles, and my arms, I didn't

have that much to be proud of on top — but you show off what you've got. That's the way we did it around there anyway.

Robbie came out from the garage, wiping his hands in a peculiar way. He had on a long-sleeve shirt. I remember thinking — Now what the hell do we have here? It was hot out, and I'm about ready to tear my top off already, and along comes this guy wearing a long-sleeved shirt! But I tell you, he sure was beautiful to look at.

Nice and tall, skinny, handsome, with a brown mustache and a little goatee. I'd never known anybody who wore a goatee. I always thought only beatniks or something wore them, but Robbie was no beatnik. He was just a college boy, wearing what college boys wore at the time. And he was tanned just like his dad, from being out in the sun all summer. This was because they had a ski boat out on Fox River, which was about forty miles west of Chicago. You'd go right out straight west on North Avenue until it became a highway out there, beyond this town they lived in called Villa Park. That was only twenty miles out, but it was out in the damned boonies, to our way of thinking.

I never even heard of Villa Park until then, except on a bottle of Ovaltine. Anything beyond Austin Avenue or Cicero was pretty much a mystery to our crowd. I didn't think it would even show up on a map. I made him prove the place existed to me. I pictured, you know, like real villas or something. Well, they didn't have any villas out there, I'll tell you that. It was just another suburb like any other, except there were these big elm trees that are all gone now from a disease.

I was a city girl. Robbie came from this burb. We may as well have been from opposite ends of the earth. We all used to make fun of him for that, until he left for California. That was a pretty big deal back then, California. Everybody I knew abruptly quit making fun of him then. That was considered pretty serious, to be going to school out to California. Shows you what we knew.

So anyway, here's this whole gang of us sitting along the top of the back seat of this hot-dogger Joey's convertible, each one of us vying for top bird, seeing who could be more raucous and more

loud, when up comes this tall skinny dude wearing his long-sleeved shirt. This shut just about everybody up, except me. I kept it going with the noise, the partying, whooping and shouting. I wasn't about to let a college boy with a goatee keep me from having fun.

He put the hose in the tank and opened the hood of the car to see about something under there. That's when I hopped out of the back seat to check this guy out.

"Ay, caramba, this boy's got some ass!" I yelled to the girls. I wanted to keep the party going. We were having a ball until he stepped into the picture. I could see every one of my girlfriends checking him out. Lori opened up her blouse even more than it already was, and it was nearly always open, letting her cleavage spill out all over the place. She kept leaning forward, and directing herself like a heavy sunflower toward wherever it was that Robbie walked around the front of the car. She was getting pretty annoying, if you ask me.

I poked my nose in under the hood while he was checking the oil, or whatever he was doing.

"What's with your hand, there, college boy?"

"The name is Robbie," he said coolly. "I had polio when I was nine."

I looked at him, and something struck me about him. He had sad, beautiful eyes, a little toward the green side, like sea water — they sort of looked inside me. It was like he looked right in and took what he wanted. I didn't know what to make of it exactly, but I knew one thing — something about him made me tone it down a notch. I realized right off, he wasn't impressed by all the noise. This was the way we normally got attention in our neighborhood, but this one here seemed unfazed by all the antics. I stuck out my hand. "I'm Gina," I said. "Want to come down to the beach with us?"

"I can't. I'm working."

"Listen, college boy, I don't ask nobody twice. I know your dad runs this place, and you can take off any time you want."

He looked right at my stomach muscles, then he stood up tall and straight, looking me up and down. I could feel myself getting

flushed all over when he did this. It was like he had hands in his eyes, but nice slow hands with a quiet touch.

"Aren't you jail bait?" he asked.

"I'm just about seventeen. But I'm old for my age."

Robbie let out a laugh. There was something about this guy, I don't know. He intrigued me.

"I get off work at nine," he said. "Come by, and we'll go for a ride in my car."

"What kind of car you got, college boy? *An Edsel?*" I said this real loud, so all my girlfriends could hear. They hooted when they heard me say that.

Robbie simply pointed over toward his car. It was stunning. It was a gleaming white over silverpine-green, souped-up '55 Chevy that looked so sleek and cool and fast that I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"What you got in it?" As though I knew anything.

"A 327, three deuces and a four speed, positraction 411 rear end, and cheater slicks."

Joey started up the motor on his Plymouth jalopy, and everybody yelled for me to pile into the back seat.

"Sure you don't want to come with us down to the beach at North Avenue? I don't ask nobody twice, college boy."

"That's the second time you asked."

"See you," I said. "We're outta here." I slapped my stomach muscles hard and waved, blowing kisses as we pulled on out of there, with Joey's tires squealing under the viaduct where the railroad tracks ran overhead.

I showed up at the gas station at nine o'clock on the dot that night — and that was when the rest of my life began. We got into that souped-up car of his, but never even made it out from behind his dad's garage. We started to neck, and made out for three hours straight. I never got so hot in my life. Could that boy ever kiss! I must have explored every inch — I mean every inch, of his body. I couldn't keep my hands off him. I never realized that thing on a man could get so big, for one thing. I was sopping wet inside my

jeans. I reached a point where I knew I'd better pull back, or it would be all over for me, and I would have to go confess something really big.

