

# Luminous Nights, 7

*by* Jerry Ratch

Robbie took me out to Fox River on his father's ski boat one day, as he often did — but this time it was my eighteenth birthday. That was when he opened up his robe and showed me all there was to show of himself, begging me to make love to him, saying he would perform one-armed handsprings if necessary to prove his love. And that was the day I agreed to take him home to bed with me. It had taken him an entire year to get me to that point. I'd been determined to hold out until the day I turned eighteen, and that was what I did. But then I gave in to the demands of my body and my life, and I took him home to my apartment in Chicago.

That summer we went on a trip up to Wisconsin. We drove all over that state in Robbie's Chevy. It was sort of like our honeymoon, though we weren't exactly married. Our camping gear was stuffed in the trunk and in the back seat. We drove all over the place, seeing the sights and camping out, and we had sex on nearly every square inch of Wisconsin. I had a map of the state from his dad's gas station, and marked a red "X" on every spot where we did it. There were X's all over that map when we got back. I remember especially one night when we were parked in a state park, trying the sitting position in the front seat. It got exceptionally steamy in there, so we got out of the car stark naked.

Robbie backed me up, standing against a huge tree in the dark, and then slipped himself up inside me. He had me put my feet up on the roots, which were sticking up out of the ground, so that my legs were spread. My bare back was hitting up against the bark with my feet spread against the roots — and I doubt if any man ever went further into any woman than he did that night. It was animalistic. I felt this tremendous lust doing it that way.

Then half way into it, he said it felt like he was having sex with the tree behind me — as if the actual tree itself were sensing this experience — him sliding all the way in through me, and blending with the life and the energy of this tall tree in the dark. Like it was

shimmering, or quivering, or it gave a shudder. I felt it too, the same as he did — it was just tremendous. They talk about getting together with nature, but I never dreamt this was how it was going to be. It felt like I was the mother of the whole earth.

Then we took an apartment out in a suburb of Chicago called Northlake, because I got a job at a factory there putting small squirts of milk and cream into those tiny containers they give you at hospitals and restaurants, when you need a dash of half-and-half in your coffee.

We played house while Robbie went to classes down at the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois. He worked at his dad's gas station on the weekends, and I worked the swing shift at the plant filling these containers. The women who worked there at that plant were mostly married, or divorced and remarried, or they had a long string of boyfriends. They would gossip all the time among one another about how much sex they were getting, and with whom, and in which position they had done it the night before. All this talk about sex all the time, eight hours every day, made me horny. I found myself missing Robbie terribly by the end of my shift. When I got home, I'd slip out of my clothes, and cook up something real fast. I'd stand around naked in the kitchen, trying to attract Robbie, waiting for him to finish studying his books. We'd wolf down whatever food we could, and then I'd tear off his clothes and try out every sexual position ever thought up or imagined by mankind, and then some. Every night we fell asleep in complete exhaustion.

Then one night something happened — I had to go and open my big mouth. I don't know what made me do it, anyway. It was just stupid.

"Oh, Robbie!" I started crying. I sat him down on the couch in the living room. It was the only piece of furniture we owned, except for a Formica dining table and four used chrome kitchen chairs. Robbie had a beer open. He looked dumbfounded from exhaustion. He'd been carrying a full load of classes at the University, and working half time as well at his father's gas station.

"Robbie," I cried, "I want to have your baby."

He put down his beer on the floor next to the couch. He just sat there, staring straight ahead.

After some time, I said, "The girls at work are always talking about their babies, and having babies, and they keep asking me when we're going to have one. Then I started thinking about it, and all of a sudden I just knew I wanted to have your baby. Robbie, I love you so much — I want to make a baby with you, and see your sweet little face in his. I took this photograph of the two of us, and tried drawing a picture of what our baby would look like, putting the two of us together. Do you want to see it?"

I'd taken some classes when I was younger, down at the Art Institute in Chicago, and had gotten pretty good at things like that.

Robbie just shook his head. At first I didn't realize he was shaking his head — No. I mistook it, and thought he was nodding his head up and down. It must have taken me five full minutes to realize that he meant the opposite. And then I felt a slight nausea wash over me — and inside I heard myself saying it over and over: Oh, no! What did you do? You fool! You are a damn, damn fool!

See, the problem was, before moving into this apartment in Northlake, there'd been a two week lag where we had to move out of my old apartment down near Lake Michigan. The new place in Northlake was being painted by the management company. We had nowhere to go, and that was when we moved into the basement under his parent's house out in Villa Park. It was just for that little two-week period. That was probably where the beginning of the end for us began — when I look back on it. It seemed like such a small thing at the time. But as things turned out, it was probably more like a light leak between two universes.

Here was what happened. Bess and I had that two-week period to get to know each other, and boy, did we ever bond! She never had a daughter to talk to, and I never had much of a mom, because it turned out my own mother was really only my step-mother — something I didn't find out until much later. It turned out, my father had brought me back to the States after his tour of duty with the Army in Europe during the occupation of Germany, right after the

Second World War. I didn't know about any of that myself, but would often be awakened in the middle of the night with my mother flailing her fists at my head, and cussing me out in Polish — "You slut, you whore, you little dirty bitch-slut-of-a-whore!" she kept saying, in that language that only I knew, and not my younger sister, or my little brother either. Except my mother knew I understood her. She knew.

Every night I'd be awakened, and she'd be pummeling my head with those hard fists. There was never an explanation of any kind. All I knew was that she couldn't love me, and then I needed her love even more, but I couldn't get it in the night under that barrage of fat flailing arms and fists, and the pelting hail of curses in that mother tongue of hers. Vile curses that no one should have to hear, coming from their own mother. I couldn't understand how one woman could have that much hatred in her heart for anyone. Still can't, even though I know more now than I did at that time. That must have been what Poland did to her, I guessed. I moved out of her house before I turned eighteen, and took night classes while working at the taxicab company to get my high school diploma.

So, that's how Robbie's mother became sort of like my replacement mom, my real mom. I felt like I could say anything to her, during those two weeks at their house out in Villa Park. She encouraged my artistic side too, and she even played the piano herself once in awhile. She let me use a wall in the basement to draw a charcoal mural. I drew Robbie's and my face together. Bess wasn't at all mean and bitter and prejudiced against everybody, like my own mother.

This started up a feeling inside me — like this was my whole new family. It became a consuming passion for me to get to know everything there was to know about them. I began to feel like I could crawl in under Robbie's sweet skin and see the world as he saw it. Even what it was like to have an older brother like Harris. I'd met Harris one time before he left for California to take an engineering job out there. I knew how close Robbie felt to his brother, so I asked Bess about him.

"Harris?. . ." Bess said. "Why, he's a lot like his dad. Those two are as thick as thieves, always were. Robbie's not like his dad. If anything, Robbie's more like me. Ever since Robbie got polio, he changed."

"How do you mean changed?" I asked.

Her head just shook. She looked down.

"Can you tell me a little about what was he like before?" I persisted. I was becoming a god-awful pain in the ass around there, but the truth was, I so loved Robbie that I couldn't help myself. I think Bess knew this. We were like each other in a lot of ways. She hesitated for awhile, but then her eyes grew deeper. She seemed to pull up something from inside. A smile started forward, but drew back for a moment. A frown appeared, then it disappeared.

"Well, before Robbie got polio," she began, "he was determined to be just like his brother. Everything Harris did, Robbie had to do just the same. Even though there were six years between the two of them, still Robbie felt it was his right to do absolutely everything his brother was doing — but at the same exact time. And so it seemed like he was growing up way too fast, and out of control. But once he came down with polio, everything changed for him. Harris and Robbie's lives pretty much took separate paths from that time on."

"Can you tell me how they're different?" I asked.

"Pretty much, I would say Harris went outward, and became social, you know — with this dance band he had, driving around in cars with one girlfriend after another. They were all chasing after him. Robbie, on the other hand — he went inward after the polio."

"I love your son so much, Bess, it hurts. So, maybe . . . would you mind telling me about the polio?"

"Oh, boy!" she said. Bess got a bleary look to her eyes, and sat down. It was like the energy just fell out of her.

"Oh, Gina," she blurted out, "I don't know!" I thought Bess was going to break out sobbing, and that would be the end. But right then, she dug down inside, and seemed to grab hold of something. She was looking somewhere in the distance.

She said: "Robbie was such a tough little guy, until the polio happened to him. That first night in the hospital over at Hinsdale, he almost died. It nearly frightened us to death. Otto's hair turned half gray overnight. Oh, that boy gave us a good scare!

"At one point during the night, my sister Helen sent a group of nuns over to the hospital to pray for him. They tried sprinkling holy water on his forehead, but suddenly he grabbed one of the nuns by the wrist, and begged her to put the water in his mouth. He caused a real stir with those nuns. They wouldn't go back into his room all night. They kept praying in the hallway outside his door, but they wouldn't go back inside his room. I heard one of them call him a little monster. It was awful, Gina."

I drew in my breath, asking why Robbie would ever do a thing like that. You'd never drink holy water. I thought everyone knew that. It's something that's supposed to be blessed by the Pope himself. You only sprinkle a drop here and there. The stuff is precious. It's not meant to be guzzled.

But Robbie grew desperate to drink something that first night, Bess told me. The kind of polio he got, was called Bulbar polio. It struck his throat, so he couldn't even swallow. The doctor in charge said that if he wasn't swallowing by the next morning, they were going to operate and do a tracheotomy. That meant they would slice open his throat and insert a tube in there. When Robbie heard the doctor telling them that, he threw a fit. He grew determined to start swallowing in order to avoid the knife.

"Did they operate?" I asked. "I never saw a scar anywhere on him."

Bess burst into a startled laughter. She grabbed my arm, and patted it, and held onto my hand like a good mother. "No way, he was going to let them operate!" She laughed heartily. "No way on this planet. That boy is determined, once he gets his mind set on something."

"So, what happened?"

"Well, he did the strangest thing," said Bess. "First thing in the morning, he asked where his brother was. He told us to show him Harris."

"Why?"

"Why? I asked the same thing: Why, Robbie? Because if Harris didn't have a slit in his throat, like a damned tadpole, he said, then he wasn't going to have one either. He was a real tough-acting little boy. Also, the little devil had gotten one of the nurses to slip him ice cubes during the night. He'd been sucking on them to prove he could swallow, to keep the doctors off his throat. They wanted to perform the operation first thing that morning."

"You're kidding!"

"The poor little tyke," she said. "He was half-frightened out of his wits. They had tubes sticking out of his arms. Equipment of all sorts whirring around him, doctors and nurses going in and out of the room all night long. He took a stand against all that. He just started sucking on those ice cubes. Sure, he spit up half of it, but he kept on sucking on those ice cubes all through the night, until they came to perform the operation in the morning. Then he convinced Otto not to sign the forms for the operation, insisting he could keep the water from an ice cube down. . . . And Jello."

"Jello?"

"The doctor made him eat some lime Jello they brought in," Bess said, nodding her head, "to see if he could keep that down. It was a real stand-off between Robbie and that doctor."

"Did he keep it down?"

"Part of it," she said. "He spit up half of it, but he kept down enough to convince Otto. Boy, does he ever like his Jello now. He doesn't like lime Jello too much, though."

"Anyway, that was when he told us that if Harris had a slit in his throat, then he'd go ahead and have one too, but not until we showed him the proof. Bring Harris to the hospital, he said. If Harris had gills like a tadpole, he told us, then Robbie would be a tadpole too — just like him." Bess shook her head. Her brown eyes beamed at me.

"Oh, Bess!" I cried. "That's so like Robbie!"

"But, Gina," she said, "we didn't even know where Harris was that night, for goodness sake. He played a saxophone, you know, and had a dance band, and was always out till all hours once he got his first car. We never knew when he was coming home. He had girls calling the house all the time, looking for him. We never knew what to say to any particular girl about where he was, or if he was out with anyone. We learned to just shut up about everything, and go along with things. He always had some plan or other going, that we couldn't even begin to keep up with. Oh, he was something! We couldn't keep track of all the girlfriends. He was very popular."

Then they put Robbie into a shared room the next night, Bess told me, because of the expense — and because the ward was becoming so crowded from the polio epidemic. They needed room for the new cases that kept coming in. That was the worst year of the epidemic.

Robbie's roommate was an emaciated boy named Tommy, who had to spend the majority of every day and the entire night in an Iron Lung — to survive. He couldn't breathe on his own for more than half an hour. The Iron Lung was a large mechanical tin can, basically, that they strapped the patients into, with their head sticking out one end and their legs sticking out the other. She said, when he was inside that thing, Tommy looked like a giant mouse who got caught in a trap.

"And did that thing ever make a noise!" she exclaimed. Bess had these large brown eyes that were expressive, brimming with warmth. She had the same brown eyes as mine, not like my mother's, which were cold and blue, and cut right through you. My mother didn't have it in her to be warm or friendly. Not that I could remember.

"I don't know who invented that mechanical device," Bess continued. "What a contraption! It looked like something created by the Acme Company out of a Walt Disney cartoon. It was that thing that gave Robbie these tremendous nightmares about his brother."

When Otto and Bess went to visit their stricken little boy the next morning, after he was moved to the shared room — the one with



Tommy — Robbie immediately asked where Harris was. He looked terrified, she told me, lying in his bed next to Tommy's Iron Lung.

"Why, honey, he's working at the gas station," she said to him, "so that Dad and I could come see you."

"He's still alive then?"

"Why, of course he's alive, honey. What makes you say that?"

"You saw him yourself? You're sure?" Robbie asked. He kept glancing over at Tommy's giant machine, which was making enormous wheezing noises.

"I saw him this morning myself," said Bess. "I made him scrambled eggs and toast and coffee. I had the darnedest time getting him out of bed, because he was out till all hours last night again, playing in that band of his. They had a job he couldn't get out of, or else he would have come here with us. Don't you remember us telling you that last night?"

"So then, he's alive? They weren't blowing holes through him with a cannon or nothing?"

"What? Why, honey, what makes you say something like that?"

Otto was gripping his brown fedora in both hands. Bess had never seen him cry before, like he did the night Robbie first went into the hospital. He'd been doing okay, until her sister Helen sent the nuns out from the city. That's when Otto lost it and broke down. She said he cried like a baby when they left and went down into the parking lot. He didn't want to let Robbie see him crying, she said. Grown men don't like to be seen crying.

Robbie had this dream, where someone had trained a cannon on Harris. Because of the noise that Iron Lung was making, he dreamed they were blowing holes right through his brother's chest. Boom, boom, boom! All night long, one after another. He said you could see blue sky right through his chest, through these round holes they were blowing through him, like in a cartoon.

Bess straightened up in her chair. I looked all around at the bright yellow paint on the walls of her kitchen. It had such a comforting, warm, homelike feeling. Hanging from the wall was an old plaque of two grandmothers, visiting. They were both sitting at a small table

in front of a fireplace, having tea. The ceiling fixture was of old, angular cut glass made in Bohemia, where Bess and Otto's parents came from. It was very unusual. It looked handmade.

"So, that's Harris," said Bess. "Robbie absolutely idolized him. Always, he was determined to be just like Harris in everything. But Harris was already on his way, looking out for himself by that time, and couldn't be held down worrying about Robbie. That was left up to me, I guess.

"Anyway, Gina, that was how Robbie outsmarted those doctors."

"Well, I think you did a great job with him, Bess. You must be very proud. Don't you just love that ornery streak in him?"

Robbie's mother gave me a strange look. Really it was more the kind of piercing look, the kind that goes searching right through you — maybe to try and see something no one can really see. She shook her head slowly.

"Oh, honey," she said. "I don't know. Sometimes I wonder how I got through those years." Bess looked down. Her head wobbled a little, as if she were saying no to herself, lost in thought.

"Robbie didn't trust what was happening to him during those nights in that hospital. I think maybe that's when he learned not to be so trusting. He grew suspicious of people. He sort of grew old, that first night — that's what I think. He became different. He told me once that he thought he was reborn that night. Sort of like he died, and came back as somebody else. Do you think that's possible, Gina?"

"To be reborn?" I asked. "You mean the way people get born again in the South, in a tent?"

"I don't think that's what Robbie meant," she said.

Then she added, "Also, Robbie thought something had happened to his big brother. You know, to Harris. . . . Oh my, Robbie had a mind of his own, all right. Boy, did we ever have fights after that, as he was growing up, I'm telling you! Anyway, he had a pretty high fever during the night, and was delirious. In the morning he thought we were hiding something from him. He thought something bad happened to his brother, and we weren't telling him. I think it made

him want to be his brother even more than ever. Though he never could be, after that.

"But you know, Gina? What was the hardest?"

"What was that, Bess?"

"The hardest part, to me, was losing both my babies at once."

I took both her hands in mine. "Bess, I've got to tell you, I love your little boy. I really, really . . . love your son, Bess. Thank you for giving him to us. I would do anything for him. I feel like he was meant for me, and I was meant for him. Do you think I could have your blessing?"

Tears welled up in those warm brown eyes. Her head continued on its long slow wobble, which I had come to know.

That was the first time, for me, that the only real mother I ever had in my life, wept for the loss of a son. It wasn't the first time for her, of course. And it wouldn't be the last.

