

Luminous Nights, 8

by Jerry Ratch

Overnight Robbie had lost his youth. But since he was still only nine and his arm looked like a nine-year-old's arm, people didn't notice much at first, until he tried running. Or if he was introduced, and they went to shake his hand. He immediately learned to cross over and extend his left hand for the handshake — though it confused people when he extended his other hand like that. It was an awkward thing. A bewildered hesitation showed up on their faces. They'd look down at that hand, not knowing what to say. They'd keep staring at where the right hand was supposed to be.

The right arm never grew older along with the rest of his body. To forestall the moment of recognition, the fact of his difference, Robbie took to wearing only long-sleeved shirts, and stuffing the right hand into his pocket. He was standing at a crossroads in his life without knowing it — without understanding that he was at such a crossroads.

Then he went into a steep depression. Bess and Otto could see it, and they decided they had to do something. They said Robbie could have a choice. They were prepared to go out and buy him one of two sets — the choice was his to make — it was either a magic set, or a chemistry set.

At his brother's encouragement, Robbie went with the chemistry. Harris himself was about to take up studies to become a chemical engineer. But the truth is, this was not such a heavy-duty choice in Robbie's case. There may have been one, or maybe two, one-armed magicians throughout history, but he wasn't in a hurry to break a record exhibiting his disability in front of the world. Robbie chose to go inward instead.

When his parents brought home the chemistry set, he opened it up right away — but then didn't touch the thing for several months, mainly because he didn't know what to do with it. There were small brown bottles in there with red screw caps, labeled

things like Sulfur and Potassium Nitrate. They gave you a set of instructions. They let you in on such facts as the secret to making blue ink — pretty unexperimental things of that nature. Within the first half hour he grew bored. He wanted something more. He wanted to do something big with what was left of his life. He wanted desperately for his life to achieve meaning of some sort.

This was a pretty adult decision to reach at the age of nine, Bess said, but all of a sudden Robbie knew for a certainty that he wanted to invent new things. He wanted to make discoveries that would change the world. He wanted to unlock the mysteries behind nylon, and so forth. But he had also begun developing another side of himself that he didn't fully understand yet. That was the side that tended toward anger, and reckless self-destruction. So, it didn't take long before he obtained a book with a formula for gunpowder.

Then after chemistry and bombs, came model airplanes. A harmless enough hobby, one would think. This ought to have been a calming, peaceful way to soothe a soul that was swirling inside with an unspoken anger at God, and at the self.

Ought to. But didn't.

The pent-up explosive that was now packed into his little heart, was a true phenomenon for Bess to behold — when it would erupt as it inevitably would — taking out the frustrations at not being able, for instance, to hold a tiny delicate piece of balsa wood with his right hand in order to apply something as simple as model airplane glue.

As simple a procedure as that could become such a disaster that — after putting together nearly an entire model airplane — Robbie would plunge a hammer through its paper wings and its fragile balsa-wood body. Over and over Bess would be forced to stand aside in horror — bearing witness to this frightening rage inside her boy. Ultimately Robbie would stomp the thing to smithereens under his feet, because it became impossible to hit and smash everything with his narrow little ball-peen hammer. He grew fierce in his determination to smash every last part that had been

painstakingly assembled. His feet became weapons of destruction. With his feet alone Robbie could have killed.

After years of trying to deal with him on her own, Bess told me she nearly gave up. But she decided she would make one last stab at it. And she resorted to having Harris come home from college at Northwestern University to have one of those talks with Robbie — about changing the damaging course his life had taken — figuring maybe Harris was the only one Robbie would listen to. His brother seemed to be the only one capable of getting through to him.

That, she figured, was about the only thing that saved him from the total pool-shooting, cheap-hoodlum disaster course he was on, with his young punk buddies early on in high school. It was the second time that his brother would save Robbie's life. And Robbie always felt indebted to his older brother after that.

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Bess seemed drained and shattered, having to relive those days in her memory again. I didn't mean to put a burden on her that way. But the truth was that she and I bonded tremendously during the two weeks Robbie and I lived in her basement — while in transition between our two apartments. That was when she told me all about the business of Robbie's polio, and how his entire life's direction had changed at that point. But then she stopped. She looked at me and took my hand in hers. She was telling me all of this in strict confidence, she said. There was no way of knowing what Robbie's reaction would be if he heard us talking about him that way.

Each day we'd been sitting at her kitchen table. She would bake kolatchky, a Bohemian pastry with apricot or prune preserves in the middle. We discussed everything about him, and about his brother Harris. It's possible she may have told me a little too much about Robbie.

And yet I was getting that deep-level feeling of a true family as we sat at her kitchen table. I so wanted to tell Bess how it

made me feel inside when Robbie touched my breasts with that hand — with that delicate skin, which was so gentle that I started imagining what it would be like to have a baby touching me. How it thrilled me inside. I wanted desperately to tell her that but Bess wasn't, after all, my very own mother. I couldn't go saying something so personal like that to her about her son, I knew that. How his touch gave me a taste of the future. . . .

It made me picture in my mind what the blending of my face and his would look like. But I couldn't bring myself to tell her, it felt so wrong somehow. I had to keep this feeling like a secret inside, though the truth is that I desperately needed to blurt out everything to her. Still — I didn't.

Robbie and I went on to live together in our apartment in Northlake. I reached orgasm with him a total of 613 times, before we broke up. We used to count. We marked every one of our experiences down in a little bound black notebook I kept next to the bed.

Then one evening when I came home from the swing shift at the factory, I found Robbie and his best friend Andy drunk in the middle of the living room floor, both of them trying to do headstands. Robbie had been accepted to graduate school out in L.A. — and was going out there to live at his brother's place while he went to school. I took this news as though I'd been shot in the belly. I went into the bathroom and sat down on the toilet. Then I had to sit on the bathroom floor, and lift the toilet seat. I threw up, and kept throwing up until there was nothing left inside of me. My stomach kept trying to evacuate everything that had been in there. But nothing was left inside, even though my system wanted to keep trying. Finally, all I could do was to let my cheek rest against the cold porcelain of the toilet bowl.

This was the beginning of the end for us. I remember one night in particular, when too many ill winds seemed to be blowing together. It was on Christmas Eve. I wanted to take Robbie along with my little brother, to Christmas Mass at a big Catholic church down on the North side of Chicago. They used to have these pictures

of a five dollar bill on billboards all around the city, with the caption: "Take Abe to Mass." I can still recall Robbie saying: "Man! — How gauche can the Catholic church get?" It made him fume.

On the front steps before going into the church, we encountered a very drunken man, belligerent at any and all who were entering the church. He cursed out me, and then my little brother. I looked to Robbie to do something, before remembering that he couldn't — that drunk would have torn him to shreds. At the same time there I stood with my angelic little brother — who didn't look at all like me, but very much like my mother, with his pale blue eyes and blond Polish hair — looking at us to do something about this loud foul-mouthed drunkard, who stood cursing out God in front of us and our sacred church. My little brother kept looking up at Robbie and at me. "Do something," he seemed to be saying. But what could I do? What could anyone do?

Robbie turned his back on the drunk, growling, cursing under his breath. I could hear him getting angry, talking to himself. "Fuck. Shit. Damn it."

"Robbie!" I said. "This is Christmas Eve. My brother's ears. Please!"

"Oh, for Chrissakes," he spit out. "If I had a gun, I would have blown the man's brains out, that's all!"

Robbie hustled us up the stairs into the church, which was crowded with people jammed into long wooden pews. It was warm inside, while the wind kept blowing on the steps out in front of the church, carrying the drunkard right along with it probably to the next bar. We sat down among the faithful. There was activity on the platform in front of us where a priest was saying prayers in Latin, which sounded for all the world like he was saying: "I'm goin' to eat a Nabisco. I'm goin' to eat a Nabisco." The next thing we knew, a basket on a long pole was being jiggled in front of us. The change in the basket made a loud noise, as the man holding the pole stopped it right in front of Robbie's face. The man jiggled the thing some more. The basket hung there in front of Robbie and wouldn't go away.

Robbie looked at me. I put a dollar bill in his hand. "He wants you to put a donation in the basket," I whispered.

Robbie looked at the dollar bill that I'd put in his hand.

"That's coercion," he stated.

"Just do it. It's my money."

"That's not the point."

"Do it for me, Robbie. My brother's here."

He dropped the dollar bill into the basket, and the jingling noise quit. The basket moved on to the next person, who added still more money to the take. Most of the people around us looked pretty poor. This was not a rich congregation, by any means, but the Church managed to suck the ducats out of the people anyway. "Take Abe to Mass!" I knew Robbie was right — *it was coercion*. His dad used to make bitter jokes about this sort of thing. Otto thought the behavior of the Church was outrageous, which was why he never put his sons through any of that.

