

Luminous Nights, 9

by Jerry Ratch

Both of us agreed we needed to break up, and have some time apart before we ended up killing each other. Before Robbie left Chicago to begin classes out in California, he made a promise to me — that he intended one day to return and marry me.

He said he had no way of supporting me while he went to school. That it was impossible to take me along with him out to the West Coast, because he would only be sleeping on a couch at his brother's house. That was what he told me. The insides of the whole universe seemed to be falling out of me, the night he told me that. I felt lost.

I knew it was possible he might never return.

We had come to experience something close to violence in the battles that would erupt between us — major battles that took the breath away from those who knew us — whenever they witnessed one of these events. For the next half year, we kept trying to go our separate ways. But occasionally one or the other of us would break down, and make that phone call, and we'd reunite for an extremely erotic afternoon or wholly erotic night — before retreating to our separate corners once again, to try going on with our lives.

And so, one last time I called. It was on his birthday in August of 1968, which was also the summer of the famous Chicago Democratic convention, when Mayor Richard J. Daley called in the National Guard to quell the riots that erupted in the streets that year. I knew Robbie was packing up, and was about to leave the next day.

It was the kind of hot, lyrically humid Midwestern night where it never seemed to cool off until after midnight, which always made things extra sensual. It made the skin more palpable. Touch became more exciting than usual. Lightly your skin would stick to

the other's skin on contact, as though the skin itself wanted to blend.

Inside my own voice I could hear that special huskiness that registered deep need and desire, something I knew Robbie had come to understand over the two years we'd been lovers. I knew inside that he couldn't help responding to this special sound — even in the midst of our fights that went beyond ordinary mortal battles, into an area mixing sex with sweat and rage and tears. I listened as Robbie took a deep breath on the other end of the line.

"Can we go out one last time before you leave?" I asked. I could hear distinctly his breathing, which seemed unusually calm. "I have a birthday gift for you."

"Oh, a gift?"

"It's something very special, and I need to give it to you in person. In your car."

"Oh, and it has to be in my car yet?"

"Of course in your car, stupid. In one of our special places, where we used to go park. How about the Naperville quarry, or out on the Fox River in your dad's boat?"

"And it couldn't be something closer by, could it?" Robbie could be terrifically sarcastic.

"Fine!" I said. "I didn't think I would become just another one of your cheap dates so soon."

"So soon!"

There came one of those deadly silences from the past, that seemed to creep between us sooner or later. To me it came to be known as the Chicago Freeze — a particular Midwestern brand of non-communication between men and women. I had seen the parents of our generation participate in it way too often. It was what made men seem hard. Sometimes stupid. It was not inherited. It was something that was learned by all of us, I think, and something that had to be worked at, in order to be unlearned. It wasn't a pretty trait.

"I'm sorry, Robbie," I said. "I didn't mean it to sound like that. You know how I am. I promise to keep my mouth under control. Please, Robbie. Just this one night?"

"Why, Gina?"

"It's something I know you will like. When can you come get me? I'm ready right now."

"Gina, I'm packing. It's late already, and I've got to be on the road first thing in the morning."

"That's why I called you tonight. It's your birthday gift, and I have to be there in person to give it to you. You're going to love it, Mr. Robinson. You are going to love it."

"Gina . . ."

"I love you so much, Robbie. You have to grant me this one last desire. It's something I promised my mother."

"Oh, your mother now! I always thought your mother hated me."

"It's not you she hates, you fool, it's me. It's just that she knows I love you like no other woman ever loved anybody else on this planet, that's all. I always thought she was jealous of me. Though she says she doesn't believe in that kind of thing."

"*What does* she believe in?"

"Marriage, and children, and duty — and that's all. She's angry at me, because I was never able to pin you down in marriage. She got real angry when she found out that we were actually living together in sin."

"*In sin!* There you go again with that *sin* stuff."

"Those are her words, not mine. You know I love you more than any other woman ever will, my sweet, sweet Robbie."

"Gina, honey . . ." He hesitated, but he hesitated too long, and I knew it. "When I come back, Gina . . . I will come back for you someday . . . I'm going to marry you."

I believed this when he said it. I loved him, and I knew how much he loved me — but we were like explosives and detonators in the presence of each other, with the eroticism and the

malice of it. It would have never worked between us, and we both knew it would not.

"Come over and pick me up, Robbie. Make it as soon as you can. I need to see you this one last time. Please?"

"So, what's this great gift? Is this something your mother put you up to?"

"Get serious. My mother would be happier if I never saw you again, and I went out and found some nice Catholic boy, and had a hundred and fifty children. Even then she wouldn't be happy."

"Oh, shit," he said. "I shouldn't have picked up the phone."

"I hunger to kiss your sweet lips, and plant kisses all over your face," I said, breathing into the phone with that especially low gravely element in my voice that I knew he couldn't resist. I knew how to make him hunger for it. "Just one more time," I said, "— then you're free to go out to your stinking California."

He had to know now what kind of a gift I had in mind.

"Robbie, please, I can't stand the thought of your going without seeing you this one last time."

"We've already had our last time," he said. "About a hundred and ten of them."

"You're going to love it, Robbie." I heard his breath on the other end of the line, and then I thought I heard him whine just a little way up in his throat. I loved it when he did that.

"I'll be waiting in the park across the street. I'll go out there right now, Robbie, and wait until you come get me. I'll be right by the pond by the willow tree. I'll go anywhere you want. Or will you just come to my door? Whatever you want. Okay, honey?"

You could hear that breathing of his across the hot August night air. I touched that air and waited, counting the fine hairs along my arms. I was living, at the time, in the next town over from his, in Lombard.

"Okay, baby? Will you come over and get me? Right ne-e-ow!" I yowled, imitating my cat Caesar. It had always been a joke between us, that we used. Instead of pet names, I took to imitating my cat. "Please?"

"Okay, Gina," he said. "When should I come over?"

"Now," I said. "Oh, Robbie, oh, baby, you are so dumb," I said. "You have no idea how much I love you."

I was twenty years old. We drove out to a park that we'd been accustomed to parking in and using for sex, when we were still a couple. It had always been exciting to do it in the back seat of his car, especially on hot summer nights with the windows rolled down, sweating on each other and listening to those special, funny sucking sounds that wet flesh makes against your lover's wet body — intermixed with the smell of sex, and the smell of the trees that the wind carried, and the smell of ragweed and of earth in the Midwest.

When we got there, I told Robbie not to move. I began undressing him slowly, purposefully, stripping off one piece of clothing at a time.

"You just sit there like a little boy, and don't move. Just let me undress you." After I had removed everything, I said, "Now — I want to memorize your body. This is for the future — for us both."

I looked at him in the faint light. There was an extraordinary look in his eyes, an animalistic hunger I remembered from before, when we were on our honeymoon trip up in Wisconsin where we had sex all over the map, all over history and back. Where we had the experience of mixing ourselves together so thoroughly that it seemed like we were both becoming a tree — which itself seemed to be having sex along with us up behind me, while I had my bare feet planted on top of its roots.

I realized Robbie didn't mind being looked at this way. That it was me who had cured him of the shame of visualizing his body. I didn't look at him as anything but my earthy and heavenly lover — not as a cripple in any sense of the word, not in my eyes. Then I peeled off my own clothes and went down on him, first with my mouth, then I mounted him.

Very close to the end of our love-making, in the muted light from outside, I could see well enough to notice for the first time — as I faced him dead on, sitting straddled on top of him — that his nose was slightly askew. I wondered if everybody's nose was this

way. I couldn't help but reach up and touch my own face, and then I touched his. His eyes were closed. I made a serious movement with my hips — and that was when I felt the first lunge of the human sexual oil coming into me — out from Robbie, into the world of my body.

"You're so stupid," I said. "Robbie?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you think, while you're out there at that big graduate school in California, are you going to miss me? . . . At all? . . . A little, once in awhile?"

He didn't answer. I was breathing heavily, my chest heaving with it. So was he. I could feel a small trickle of tears running down both of my cheeks. He tried to stop them with his fingers as he looked at me quietly, but the tears just ran around them and continued dropping from the bottom of my chin, intermingling with our sweat. I have to admit, I remember every one of my nights with Robbie. They were luminous in my mind.

I told him, "I bet you do, you damned fool. You have no idea what you're throwing away. None at all."

"Come with me, Gina," he said, trying to get his breath.

"You can get a job out there."

I laughed, and then he laughed, and I felt the laughter all the way up inside me. "My mother would make sure my little brother hunted you down," I said. "Anyway, you know as well as I do — it would never work."

"We might be able to make it work," he said. Still and ever, I thought, still and ever the youth-filled, rolling, laughing, ambitious soul of the romantic. I felt ridiculous, but utterly calm, as the hot liquid of my own tears kept running down both sides of my nose.

"Why, Robbie? Why do you have to go all the way out there to stupid California? Why?"

"Because my brother Harris is already there. He paved the way for me and for my parents. They're heading out as soon as they sell the gas station, when they retire." But then Robbie closed his

eyes and sighed a great heavenly sigh. I could feel him slipping out of me. And it was all over between us — again.

"It's stupid," I said, "stupid . . . what will become of us."

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I couldn't get over Robbie. I wanted somehow to understand what had gone wrong. I began to suspect that I had become Robbie's mother, in a way, when I'd learned maybe a little too much about him during my two weeks staying in the basement at their house, because I'd also learned how to get under his skin. I had absorbed without thinking, how Bess could rankle him — how to get to him. Without quite knowing I was doing it, I'd learned how to alienate him the way a mother can sometimes alienate her own child, even when she means well.

Soon after Robbie left for California, I agreed to marry another man I met, but it was totally on the rebound. He asked — and I simply agreed, that was all. I didn't really think about it, and he was completely wrong for me. I knew it when I was walking down the aisle. Just before the wedding, I went out to Villa Park to see Bess one more time. Just to try and get some understanding of what I did, that made it all go wrong between Robbie and me.

"Why didn't he want me to have his baby, Bess?" I had to know.

"Oh, dear," she said. She hung her head.

"Why didn't he want me to, Bess? Did he ever say anything about us to you?"

"Oh, honey."

"So, he did, then?"

"Oh, I don't know, honey. Come here." She tried holding me.

"What did he say, Bess? I want to know. You can tell me now."

Bess looked up at me. She was considerably shorter. "He loved you, honey. He told me that. It's just. . ."

Then I could feel my own shoulders shaking against her forehead. "There, there," she whispered. "There, there."

"What was it?" I asked. "Was there something I did that was. . . What, Bess? I deserve to know. I loved your son so much, it hurts. I have to understand what I did. Bess, please tell me. I need to know this much about him at least."

"Well, honey . . . I think all he ever wanted out of life was to be exactly like his brother Harris. But then he couldn't, because of the polio.

"Maybe," she sighed, "maybe he didn't want to bring a child into the world — who might have to go through what he had to. It was too painful for him, that's all. Not being able to compete at things like the other boys. You should have seen him struggling to keep up with baseball, and track, and basketball. He had all that pent-up anger inside him, that he never could let out. I tell you — it was something. You should have heard the all yelling and the swearing at things — just at objects! He'd get into such a fury. My God, and the arguments we used to have!"

Bess let her head wobble freely now as she stared down at the ground.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know. A mother shouldn't have to go through that either, but I guess you have to, that's all. That's part of it too. I guess it just is."

