

Rebirth

by Jerry Ratch

To be fair, I have to say I learned things from Lisa, certain things about sex and how to use my body effectively, to use what I had to the best effect, though it probably would have been true to say that about any girl who might have been the first girl for me, for I'd been quite naive when I met her. I've come to compare my experience with her to the shock of the birth process, as though I'd been dead for some time already before we met, and after Lisa I was reborn. Actually, that was the second time I was reborn, in a sense — the first being the day I came down with polio.

I went reeling back out to the West Coast to finish out the semester at UCLA. But I had changed significantly, and couldn't keep my mind on anything having to do with school. I got a "D" in a computer course. The next thing I knew, I started writing. In effect it was to save my life, for I felt as though I'd had a giant hole blown right through my mid-section, and all my veins and pores had been opened, and my life was flowing right out of them. I took up the pen to help stave off that empty, gutted feeling. I began to try to fill in my soul, to re-draw something which felt like it was missing from my body. It seemed like my ears had suddenly been ripped open as if for the first time, and I began to notice things going on in the world all around me, things I normally wouldn't have paid any attention to whatsoever, I'd been so shut down already to life.

I remember distinctly sitting in my apartment across from the campus at UCLA. It was a warm January night, with the door open to the noises of the street. There was a slight mist falling outside. When the cars passed up the street their tires made a swish as they passed over the sheen on the pavement, as though long strips of adhesive were being pulled from the road. There was the odor of iron that gets into the air with the first rains. All of a sudden I heard two sets of footsteps on the sidewalk below our balcony, which looked out over the street. Then a little boy's voice pleading: "Daddy. Daddy, wait. Wait, Daddy. Daddy! . . . *Daddy!*" The child

becoming more and more insistent, but the footsteps continuing up the sidewalk just the same, while the kid kept on with a plaintive note in his voice: "Daddy, wait! Wait for me, Daddy! Wait! *Daddy! Daddy!*" The little voice echoing up the street.

I took a pencil in my hand as I sat there slugging down one tall can after another of a cheap local Los Angeles beer called Brew 102. Dropping my lit cigarette into one of the empty cans, I heard it sizzle in the remains of the beer at the bottom of the can. I'd been broken open. All experience seemed to be coming at my senses, as if I were new to everything, and I took up my pencil in self-defense, as though it were a sword. I began recording what I heard in the night right outside the door, and I haven't stopped writing since.

After the semester was over, my friend Jeff drove me to LAX my last night in Los Angeles. I was flying back to Chicago to return the next semester to the Champaign-Urbana campus at the University of Illinois. It felt like I was going back in defeat. Inside I was barely hanging on to what little thread of life there was left in me. I can't say how I survived. I know I didn't feel so very good about myself right then.

I had almost zero self-confidence and low self-esteem, and that's probably being somewhat polite. I should have been put into the gentle hands of a shrink at that point, but in those days no one ever wanted to admit something like that, if you came from a working class background. It would have been considered a miserable sign of weakness, that you were sick, and no one I knew ever wanted to actually admit they might be in such a state of disrepair. It was never talked about, especially if you were a man. It simply wasn't done in those days.

My friend Jeff and I had been drinking from a jug of cheap red wine before he took me to the airport. I was afraid to fly. I had never done it before. I had always only driven in my car across the West to California and back, but after Christmas I had left my car with my parents in Chicago and took a train out to LA to finish out the semester. So, this was going to be my first flight ever.

Jeff had to push me down the ramp leading to the jet. We were both giggling from the cheap wine. After the plane took off, I was so out of it that I barely noticed anything at all. Things didn't seem so bad. It was smooth weather flying out of Los Angeles, even though it was January. Half way through the flight I awoke from my hung-over state and began showing signs of true panic. A stewardess came over, trying to comfort me. She offered me another pillow and a blanket. She wanted to know if there was anything she could get for me. I looked up at her. She was a sophisticated, pretty blonde woman. "This is my first time flying," I admitted.

"Oh, honey, you can relax. Everything's going to be okay."

"I'm a little nervous."

"You're doing just fine. I remember my first flight, I was just like you. Look at me now." She smiled at me. "You'll be just fine. You want something to drink?"

"I'm hung over," I said. "My friend had to push me on the plane."

She laughed. "Listen, honey," she said, "we're starting up a little card game in the rear. Why don't you come back with me and join us for a game of fish?"

That was what I did, and it took my mind off things. I saw the look, however — you can't mistake that sort of thing — when the stewardess noticed that I couldn't hold the cards in my right hand. Her eyes went back and forth from my hand to the cards lying flat on the table, back and forth inquisitively. "I had polio," I explained.

"Oh," she said. "That's too bad."

The plane started its descent somewhere over St. Louis, and I had to go back to my seat and strap myself in. We began to encounter some rough air as the jet was descending over Western Illinois. I had never felt such a helpless state before, such a sense of lack of control over my fate. The stewardess came by to check on how I was doing. The plane was bumping and bucking, and I could see the wings flapping in the turgid air outside my window.

She could tell how petrified I was. My left hand had a tremendous grip on the armrest. There was another huge jolt. "Oh, my God!" I said. The stewardess seemed unaffected.

"Can I get you another blanket?" she asked.

"I'd like my parachute now," I said.

A look of stupendous surprise came over her face.

"Why, honey," she said quietly, looking around at the other passengers, "we don't have any parachutes."

She reached down and tightened the buckle for me on my seat belt.

"We'll be through this short stretch of patchy air in a few minutes. You'll see."

She left me alone in my seat. I looked out the window of the airliner. The lights on the ground looked green coming in toward O'Hare Airport in Chicago. We continued bumping through the turbulent air all the way to the ground. It felt like we were on a freight car, bumping over every rock there was in the entire United States. I was terrified.

Dawn had begun spreading over the sky in an orange glow just before we touched down. Actually the pilot did a terrific job flying that crate, and it was a smooth touch down. I was elated to be heading up the aisle with my leather jacket over my arm to get off that deathtrap. The stewardess smiled, saying good-bye, and was as cheerful as ever. As I walked up the ramp from the plane, I spotted my parents waiting for me, and I let my mother mother me as much as she wanted. I was so glad to be back that I didn't resist her natural inclination whatsoever. I just let her be herself.

