

The Need To Tell Somebody

by Jerry Ratch

He just had to tell somebody. Anybody.

So he called up his publisher, L., who agreed to meet him at Oliveira's for a drink. It only took about ten minutes to walk there from his big duplex in the Elmwood, where he was still living with his wife among the rich folks he couldn't stand to be around. He got to the café before L. and managed to find a small table in the middle of the café and ordered a flute of champagne, which had become his custom now that he was on the verge of giving up drinking. It was a classy race to the finish.

L. was also a poet like he was and a very good poet and she was intent on success and worked at it all the time, and she was very successful at what she did.

Parker, the girl he'd been staring at for the past few weeks was there as usual, at a table against a wall. But then she noticed a woman in sunglasses who appeared suddenly at his table. This woman was terribly thin and seemed nervous like a bird, and she sat right down with him at his table. She seemed to know him, but was very thin and very nervous and she never removed her sunglasses, as if she were hiding or was famous and didn't want to be seen, or else her eyes hurt and she couldn't take off her sunglasses in any kind of light, although it was not very bright in the café, since it was now late afternoon. Soon the workers from San Francisco would be descending the stairway from the BART platform on their way home like a pulsing, exhausted human flood.

And then Parker realized she was jealous of this woman and she was suddenly feeling possessive, as though this woman didn't have the right to just come in and sit down with him, even though this might have been his wife, but she didn't think so from

his behavior because, she thought, he seemed to be happy. He was laughing and very animated and engaged with her and he made the woman laugh out loud, and then he got up from the table and ordered a glass of white wine. Parker looked at him as he stood there at the bar, tall, thin, handsome, with some gray in the beard on his chin, and nicely dressed too, and she felt herself be attracted to him, and she purposefully packed up her things in her huge purse, putting away her small sketchbook and pencils, and she got up and left the café. But then she came back into the café and sat down at her table again, and pulled out her sketchbook and a pencil.

"It's the fin-de-siècle," said Philip, "and things are changing. Yuppiedom is dead. Something's changing, you can feel it in the air. All of Europe is changing. People everywhere. Do you realize this is the first time in the lives of our generation that you can actually feel that we may not be obliterated by a nuclear holocaust? That there may be a tomorrow? This is the end of Negativity!"

"Yes," said L., "and there's all the more reason why they should buy our poems."

Philip got up and sat back down again. He looked around over his shoulder at the table where Parker sat looking at him.

"L., would you mind switching chairs with me?"

"Well, no. Why?"

"There's a girl over there I've been staring at for weeks now, and I just have to sit where I can see her, okay?"

"Uh, sure." L. got up and they switched chairs and L. laughed a deep throaty laugh.

"Sex is in the air," Philip said. This made L. laugh again, that signature throaty laugh of hers that was endearing to those who knew her. Philip traded glances with Parker across the café and he smiled and raised his flute of champagne in a toast toward L.'s glass of white wine. They clinked the edge of their glasses together and Philip finished his flute of champagne.

"Do you want another glass of wine?" he asked. "I need another flute."

"Okay," said L. "Why not?"

When Philip came back to the table with the new drinks, L. asked, "Who is this woman you're staring at?"

"Someone I've been attracted to."

"But you're married," said L. in an astonished or rather mock-astonished voice.

"So what?" Philip said. "Can't you be attracted to someone else, even if you are married?"

"Well, yes."

"And anyway, Elizabeth and I are having enormous battles nearly every night now. It doesn't look good." Then Philip said to her, "I had a mistress, you know. Did I tell you this?"

"No-ooo," L. said, slowly shaking her head as if in mock-disbelief, but steadily looking at Philip from behind those dark sunglasses. This was her look of disapproval, mixed with the desire to hear more, the need to hear more, to hear it all.

"Yes," Philip said. "That's what I meant when I wrote: '*Lead a dual life.*' Besides the fact that I work a job and I write. But also I want to lead a dual life in love as well."

"Well, how can you do that?"

"Obviously it's not so easy. My lover left me to go back to her husband and I was thrown out of love and that is the subject of this new manuscript I'm working on: Black Wheat."

Philip looked over at Parker and he looked at her for a very long time. Then L. shifted in her chair and Philip looked at her and smiled and he raised his flute of champagne toward her and toward Parker, both.

"I can't help it," he said. "I discovered I didn't love Elizabeth anymore when I had this affair with another woman. Now I can't go back. I'm attracted to other women. One should somehow be able to lead a dual life."

"You can't continue to live a lie," said L. "It won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't have enough room to love and create and love another."

"It is necessary to live, love, and create — all three," Philip said. "Make a living, have love, and make art."

"All three?"

"Yes, all three."

"Yes," said L. "But certainly not maintain a dual love life as well. It's too much. It would take away from your art. I think you need to discuss this with somebody. A professional. You are trying to take on too much."

"Well," said Philip, "I am going to see an analyst. I've got an appointment next week."

Philip took something like a small museum catalogue out of his book bag.

"Look at this," he said. "It's a catalogue from the Beaubourg in Paris. Look at these photographs. They're incredible. They made living sculptures out of the Degas' 'The Little Dancer of 14 Years.' They used real people with their hair plastered down and they smeared their bodies with oil and made a movie of them in the various positions of Degas' 'Little Dancer' sculptures. I have to get back there to Paris and see this film."

"That's corrupt," said L.

"That's virginal!" Philip retorted without even thinking. "Let's do a co-play and I'll say: They have this film in Paris of Degas with people in the positions of The Little Dancer of 14 Years. I have to get there. And you say: That's corrupt. Then I say: That's virginal!"

"That puts me in a bad light," said L. "You have to get the context."

They both laughed at this. Philip raised his glass to hers and drank from the flute and he looked over at Parker's table, but now she was gone.

"Well," said L. "I have to go."

"Sure you don't want one more?"

"No."

"Okay," said Philip. "See you."

“Bye,” said L. and she left the café. And Philip realized he had no choice but to go home now.

