

Wild Dreams of Reality, 12

by Jerry Ratch

I went out behind Parker's house and saw Darrell's tent set up in the grass. The flaps of the pup tent were open. I could see him through the mosquito netting. He had a Coleman lamp burning and lay on his back in his underwear on top of his sleeping bag. I felt like a damned burglar creeping around in somebody else's back yard. A couple of loud crickets kept chirping back and forth to one another, and the exotic odor of night-blooming jasmine wafted over me. My brother was reading a book in the garish light. I could hear a slight hiss from the gas that fed the flame.

Bending down, I moved the netting aside. "Psst, Darrell."

"Close that damned thing!" he yelled. "I got one mosquito in here already who's been biting my ass. One's enough."

"I didn't think they had mosquitoes around here."

"There's one enormous sucker right here in this tent.

Sounded like he weighed about five pounds, the last time I shut off the lantern. Sucker won't leave me alone. Ehhh!" he grunted, looking all around inside the little pup tent. He turned on a flashlight, shining it in each corner, along every crevice. "He's in here somewhere. I'll get that sucker." He started swinging with a rolled-up newspaper.

"Listen," I said, "why don't you come on inside the house and visit with me and Parker? She wanted to know if you're hungry."

"I'm not hungry."

"Just come on in for a few minutes. She wants to know what you look like at least."

"You know I can't eat."

"Just to be civil. Just a few minutes, Darrell."

"I'm not feeling very civil."

"Darrell, come on, will you?"

"Oh, for God's sake. All right, let me throw my pants on."

"What have you been doing all day?" I asked.

"I sure as hell know what *you've been* doing," he said.

After he got dressed I led him into the house, and he plopped down on the living room couch, which had a deep green blanket thrown over it. He looked like someone who'd been dragged in for an interrogation. There were enormous dark circles underneath his eyes. His eyes were brown normally, though you couldn't exactly tell for sure in this light. He looked like he'd been crying, or was starving himself. There was at least three or four days' growth of beard on his face, and he smelled rank. His orange tank-top looked as though he'd been wearing it since high school.

Parker and I pulled up chairs so that we could talk with him face to face, but it seemed to make him real uncomfortable. When he looked at us, I thought he was having trouble focusing. Possibly he wasn't used to the overhead lights.

"Would you like to use the shower or take a bath?" Parker asked him. "I'll bet you haven't had a chance to do that lately."

"You're right," he said. There was an awkward silence. A big moth hit the window behind him.

"So, what is it you do?" she asked.

Darrell shot a look at me. "You didn't tell her?" I shrugged.

"I grow mushrooms," he said. "I've got two greenhouses on my property out in Half Moon Bay. I raise exotic mushrooms and sell them to fancy restaurants."

"What kind of mushrooms?"

"Portabello and shitake mostly."

"I didn't know there was a business in this kind of thing."

"Business was booming during the heydays, not so long ago," I said.

"Yeah," said Darrell. "The economy's the shits right now though. Things have changed. So, I've developed," Darrell added, glancing at me, "a little sideline to keep things lively."

"What do you mean?" asked Parker.

"You know anyone interested in magic mushrooms?"

"The illegal variety?"

"I look at it as meeting people's needs," Darrell said. "I'm providing a service."

"You mean you're a drug dealer?"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders, rolling his eyes. "I guess you could say that."

Parker turned to me. "Are you two sure you're from the same parents?"

"What do you mean?" Darrell shot back. "It's as thick as blood gets between us."

"I don't know. You and Philip seem to be from two different worlds."

"Exact same blood," Darrell stated, "me and him." He looked at me in dead silence. "I saved his little ass once," he said. "Pulled him up by the hair out of Lake Michigan."

Parker looked over at me, and smiled.

"So, how come you're sleeping in a tent in my back yard?"

Darrell's face flushed. "Because my wife left me for another guy," he said, his voice beginning to rise, "and I got nowhere to go. Do you think I *want to be* sleeping in a tent, in Oakland yet?"

Darrell stood up, towering over us in the small living room. "You got a towel I can borrow? I could use that bath now."

Parker led him to the bathroom. She came back shaking her head.

"What?"

"You two seem so unlike one another," she said. "Has he always been like this, or is it just since his wife left him?"

"Well, he changed a lot when he got into the mushrooms, like I said, but this break-up with Vivian has pushed him way over the edge."

"He scares me, Philip. I can't believe you two are even related."

The next day after driving Parker to the airport in her van, I went out to eat supper at Oliveira's. I ate there alone, and enjoyed being alone. Then after awhile I wasn't sure whether I enjoyed being

alone that much, but I was alone for the night anyway. When I went back to Parker's place, Darrell was nowhere to be found. I put on some music, and that was when I realized there was nobody else in the entire house, and I could really crank up the volume. I could play the music as loud as I wanted.

Suddenly I was happy. The music echoed through the rooms, and I left the lights off and let the loud music roll as the night grew dark around me. I looked out a window and watched the last of the daylight in the west like an orange tangerine dissolving to plum. Then every imaginable gradation of blue, such deep blues from the east to the west. Evening star in the surreal air. While the night surrounded me, I stripped off my clothing and began a dance in the nude on the bare hardwood floor. Holding my hands in the air above my head, I turned dancing to the music, a wild free goat dance that I had learned in college. A free dance of the spirit let loose to dance the way it will.

I felt myself swinging loose as I danced, unable to remember the last time I felt this free. My penis swung about of its own volition, with my hands twisting above my head in the dark air, my entire body following their lead. I bent and dipped and stretched into the air following the way of the music. I realized I was smiling, and I let out with a tremendous shout, the air escaping from my lungs while my body writhed. *Laughter is close to pleasure*, I sang, *and one of the names for God*. I continued to dance the way a goat will dance. *Laughter is close to pleasure and one of the names for God*.

The following morning I was sitting at one of the outside tables at Oliveira's, when I saw Elizabeth drive past. She glanced over at me and sped off. It was as if she wanted and yet didn't want to be noticed. So I called her when I got back to Parker's place. I felt my heart racing in my neck. "Hi," I said, trying to be friendly, as though nothing had happened. "So, uh, how are you?"

"I've talked to my lawyer," she said, in her best icy upper-crust manner. "They'll be serving you papers tomorrow morning. I'm asking for alimony for the rest of my life."

Without thinking, the words: "To hell with that!" flew out of my mouth. "I'd rather leave the country than continue living as an economic slave. I've had it with that. I've thought about maybe going to Paris."

"*What!*" she yelled. "You can't leave the country, that's illegal. My lawyer won't let you leave the country."

"Now calm down, Elizabeth. They can't stop me from leaving the country, so you can just calm down. Let's try to reach an agreement without getting the lawyers involved in this."

I could hear the ice cubes in her glass. Then I spoke. "Can we talk about who gets which of the houses? I've got it figured out so that you could live for free if you moved into the Adams Street duplex."

She retorted, "No way! I'm not living in that dump! That's for students. My lawyer said I could get the two houses plus \$3000 a month alimony for at least five years. He said I could easily get that much. No contest!"

I gasped. "But that's everything we own! I'm not even making that much anymore. There's a recession going on, you know."

"Take it or leave it, Philip. That, or else it's go to court."

I calculated for a minute while the ice cubes continued clinking on the other end of the line. I felt a rush of guilt for having walked out on her. Huge drops of sweat went rolling down my neck and inside my shirt.

"Well, I've got to think about this," I said. "I've got to think about it."

"Philip?" she asked. "Do you, uh . . . you think you'll ever come back?"

I swallowed hard. "No, I don't, Elizabeth."

There was silence, then, "Oh-h-h!" I heard the breaking of glass and the click of the phone as she hung up.

Suddenly I felt like I had just stabbed someone. But I also clung to what I knew deep inside — that I'd felt bad for her long enough. It was time to start looking out for myself.

"Okay," I tried reasoning, "I guess I could live at the Adams Street duplex myself if I had to. At least I'd have a place to hang my hat."

I figured I could move into the upstairs flat, because the college girls who'd been there had recently moved out. At the same time however, I realized her son Jim would have to clear out of the downstairs flat. But, and this was important, there was no way I was going to pay her alimony. No way in the world. Not ever.

"Not a dime!" I said out loud, as if to impress somebody who was not there. "She could have the best house we owned, that was enough. Not one dime more!"

Just then the phone rang, and my hand reached out to pick it up. But I had to stop myself mid-reach, realizing this wasn't my phone. I let it go to the answering machine. A male voice came over the speaker, and I moved closer so I could hear it. The voice was just barely there.

"Hi, Parker, it's Samuel. I was wondering, uh . . . what you're doing tonight. I mean, if you're not already busy, maybe, uh, we could go to a movie or, uh, do something. . . ."

I heard Samuel cough, and clear his throat.

"So, uh, maybe give me a call if you have nothing else to do tonight. Okay? Bye."

Then the time stamp came on with its firm metallic authority. "Eleven - oh - nine a.m."

I sat down next to the phone staring at it. Samuel was asking Parker for a date. I realized just then that I was jealous of him. I looked at the row of clay pots filled with his plants along one wall of the living room, and suddenly I was tempted to kick them all over. But of course I couldn't, because how would I ever be able to explain that to Parker?

