

Wild Dreams of Reality, 13

by Jerry Ratch

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At 7:30 that evening my brother knocked on Parker's front door. When I went to let him in, sweat was running off Darrell's head like he'd been hit by a water balloon. The air was absolutely unmoving, and there was the smell of tar from the asphalt in the street, because it had grown so hot during the day. We only had about three or four days a year like this in the Bay Area. Usually the fog came in to cool things off.

"I've been wondering where you were," I said. "You won't believe what Elizabeth and her lawyer are doing to me."

"Did you call Vivian about my birthday party?" he asked.

"Don't you want to hear about my divorce?"

"I want to know what Vivian said. Did she even remember that tomorrow is my birthday?"

"I'm going to get stuck with the duplex on Adams Street," I said. I was annoyed that he wasn't interested in anyone else's life but his own.

"I want to know, Philip." Darrell stepped up, leering right into my face. "She didn't even remember, did she? Tell me."

I didn't want to say, because I thought the surprise of having a party would probably do him some good. It'd be better, I figured, to leave him hanging a little.

"Well, Darrell, maybe you ought to just go back out there, no matter what. I'll help you move your stuff into your shop out in the garage."

"My own birthday," he fumed. "The little bitch!"

"C'mon," I said. "Let's get in the truck and cool off. The drive will do us both some good. Wait till you hear what Elizabeth's lawyer said I should be paying her."

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Following the road over the San Mateo Bridge, we went west past the big reservoirs feeding into San Francisco, then up over the coastal range. While we were on that stretch of the highway, the partial moon rose up out of the heartland of California. You could see the big rounded part of it that wasn't lighted up. It had a peculiar ghost-like quality to it. When it was seen over a great distance from the back of the coastal range, it seemed enormous. Redder, and more suggestive of fecundity. On that night especially, it seemed sensual as it rose over the plains of the central valley asking its silent questions of man.

There was still some heat left in the air as we ascended the mountains with our windows rolled down. The breeze felt good rifling through my hair. Riding with my elbow sticking out the window in the night, I could hear the occasional sound of crickets at the side of the road and the occasional louder, deeper sound of frogs. The pickup truck groaned as Darrell swung it around the curves and it took in the energy it needed to climb another hill. He steered mostly with the heel of one hand, while the other moved back and forth between the gear shift and his mouth, so he could take hits off the joint that he held gingerly between his fingers.

"I haven't gotten any sleep at all," he said. "That big mosquito was in my damned tent again, keeping me up all night."

"There aren't mosquitoes around here."

"There was in my tent, I tell you. It was a big mother. I kept lighting matches trying to see him. Then the noise would stop, and I would try getting back to sleep, and then I'd start thinking about Vivian, and I couldn't get to sleep. Then that huge sucker would start dive-bombing me. I went through five packs of matches."

"I slept like a baby," I said.

"You make me sick, Philip." He breathed out heavily. "I'm getting pretty anxious about this homecoming. You know?" He tried to swallow. "But it's my home too, for Chrissake! What the hell!"

The faint smell of the sea began when we rose over the top of the ridge.

"Damn! Do you smell that? Take a whiff of that, Philip. Damn, how I've missed the sea. I miss the waves. Damn it."

The temperature of the air dropped suddenly, and a wisp of fog shot past the windshield. It got thicker and thicker as we descended the west side of the ridge. The fog around the coast was called nature's air conditioner. That was where to go if you needed to cool off, or if you were living life at a feverish pace and you needed to slow down.

But Darrell brought his inner turmoil along with him. No amount of fog would blanket his desire, his inner drive to make life conform to his will. He would continue to worry the bare light bulb of his obsession, while it burned before his memory like a moth that was destined to join that light, or die trying.

As we were approaching Half Moon Bay, the fog blanketed everything. It was dense and damp, blowing across the road like a white curtain in front of the head lamps of the truck. It blew in wisps, where we could see ahead for some distance, then it would close down around us as if we were inside a giant ball of cotton. Then just as mysteriously it would let up, but when it was dense and closed around us, we had to slow down to a crawl. All we could see were two or three reflectors on the line in the middle of the road, and the road would twist and turn as it dipped in and around the curves, going down the mountain. Then Darrell accelerated. I knew if he missed a curve and went off the road, we'd be dead. I caught myself holding my breath, hoping he was keeping a steady eye on the reflectors in the road. And I found myself counting them, stopping when I reached twenty for some reason, then starting over again as they kept whizzing by.

Finally he said, "Home in Half Moon Bay. Christ!" Darrell shook his head.

"Jesus, it all seems so far away from me. What did I say or do, Philip, that made it all go away like this? Can you tell me that?" He was looking at me. Suddenly he shouted: *"I'm asking you, for Chrissake!"*

I couldn't answer. I just watched him in the cab of the truck.

"You know what I need?" he said.

"What, Darrell?"

"I need to take some mushrooms, that's what. I need to figure out what one thing I might have done better. So maybe I can win her back."

He glanced over at me again in the light thrown back by the fog.

"Oh, Jesus! Would I take her back?" he burst out, surprised at himself. "After what she did to me? Would I actually take her back?"

My brother bobbed his head as he drove.

"Well," he allowed after a time, "under the right conditions, I might."

When we turned onto his street, Darrell down-shifted and twisted in his seat. "I can feel my heart beating," he said, putting his hand up to his chest. "I feel like a chickenshit teenager."

Switching off the head lamps, he drove the truck up the road. "Listen, did you just hear my Adam's apple creaking? I can't swallow, Philip." His eyes were bugged out. He looked sick. I thought of telling him about the birthday party. I thought that might cheer him up, but then I thought, no, no — a good surprise, that would be better.

That was when we passed by Vivian's car, which was parked at the side of the road. Suddenly he slammed on the brakes and I nearly went through the windshield. "God, Darrell!"

"The bitch," he said, "she never parks her car up here. *Never*. It's always hogging half the driveway. Something's up! Sonofabitch!" Darrell cut the ignition.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Isn't this your house?"

"You got that right, Jack!" he said. "Something's up! I can smell it!"

"Try to calm down."

"Calm down — my ass, calm down!"

He flung open his door and ran back to Vivian's car. I heard the squeak of the hood being opened, then a click as he shut it again as quietly as he could. Then he was back, panting like a lizard. He had one of her car wires in his hand, which he flung into the back of the truck. I looked at him and he grinned wildly. "That car ain't going — *nowhere!*"

It was eerie and silent and light in the fog. The smell of the salt was thick in the air, and it felt damp on my arm. The town of Half Moon Bay might as well have been the frontier for all the silence. As the poet Jack Spicer put it: *There is nothing else beyond us but ocean*. The faint old familiar sound of a fog horn drifted through the stillness, something I'd almost forgotten. It was actually comforting, like an unobtrusive moaning coming up from the bay with the slow rise and fall of the swells. It was a non-monotonous cadence because the waves were not totally predictable or regular, and the sound would come up from the water with what seemed like long and lonely pauses between them, as an occasional reminder that the sea was out there.

Darrell motioned for me to follow him. I got out of the truck and slowly, carefully we began walking in the fog down the gravel driveway leading to the shop in his garage and to the house. I trailed after him but no matter how lightly we tried to step, the crunch of the gravel under our shoes made an unbearable amount of noise. It was as if the fog amplified every move. Darrell stepped off the gravel and continued plodding through the grass. No sooner had he set foot in the grass than a ripe organic odor hit our nostrils.

"Dog shit!" he said suddenly. "Dog shit!" Then he grabbed my arm so I wouldn't move forward. He held his breath, listening.

I knew the garage where he had his shop was just ahead off to the right, so if we could make it there we'd be safe. But Darrell stopped abruptly, and I plowed right into him. Again he grabbed me by the arm, holding me there.

"It's Jeff's car," he said.

I felt my insides drop into my shoes. It was the unmistakable shape of a Saab convertible, and it *had* to belong to Jeff, and that got Darrell groaning. Bracing himself against a tree, he leaned forward and put his head against the bark.

"I'm going to throw up," he whistled through his teeth.

But he didn't. He held it back. He kept gulping for air, and sweat flooded over his forehead. Still he held it in. I massaged his back and his neck, feeling the tremendous tension humming in his muscles. I didn't know what to do. I had never encountered something like this head-on myself. Darrell kept swallowing and he waited. We both stood waiting in the darkness in the tremendous chill of the dense white air. The bark of the tree branded the skin of his forehead and slowly, slowly the nausea passed him by.

"I want to kill that thing," Darrell said at last. He leered at me. "I want to maim something. I want to hurt something real bad. Fuck it, Philip! I've had it!" He began looking around wildly. *"I want blood!"*

Darrell took out a pocketknife, opening the blade. He waved it in the air, then stumbled toward the Saab, which sat in front of the house like a downed silent bird. The car windows were open and there were no tiny glowing red lights, so we could tell the alarm wasn't on. People didn't really need to worry about alarms in Half Moon Bay. Nobody did anything to cars there.

He lunged at the soft black convertible top and stuck in his knife. Ripping it downward, he lunged again, sticking it in and ripping it down towards him. I could hear the knife going through the expensive material. Then he cut an enormous "X" in the very top, and actually started to giggle. He lunged again and again and again, until he lay against the car exhausted, breathing heavily, steaming like a horse in the damp white air.

Then moving forward to the hood of the car, he scratched a large "X" over and over in the dark red paint. But suddenly he stopped and looked at me.

"The engine's still warm!" he exulted. "Still warm! That means he just got here. Probably not that long ago, Philip. Uhh! — this is good. *This is* real good!"

We both stood listening to the engine ticking, as it cooled off in the night. "Go back to the truck and get my gun out of the glove compartment," he said.

"No, Darrell. Don't do anything stupid."

"Go get the damned gun!" he ordered, but in a whisper.

"No!" I said out loud.

"Shh!" He grabbed me by the shirt. "Do I have to go get that thing myself?"

"I'll have to stop you," I said. "Your daughter's in there too. Do you want her to witness someone getting blown away right before her eyes?" It took awhile for him to move, and I could see the turmoil going on within him. It was as if there were two people inside, going in opposite directions.

