

# Wild Dreams of Reality, 2

by Jerry Ratch

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2

All of a sudden I felt a hand on my neck. I jumped up from my chair and turned to face my brother Darrell, with his surprisingly white shock of hair, the result of all the drugs he'd been experimenting with, back in his mid-twenties. He was even taller than I was, well over six feet.

He stuck out his chin. He hadn't shaved in days. "Who's your friend?" he asked.

All I could do was shrug. I felt the blood rushing into my face. He knew he'd caught me at something.

"You two looked pretty chummy," he said. "Exotic-looking woman. One of your real estate clients?"

"No, she isn't, Darrell."

I looked at him in the brilliant air. He wore an earring in one ear, and baggy, brightly colored clothes that seemed too young for him — and he was even four years older than I was. He was a lot skinnier than the last time I saw him, and he looked haggard, with about a three days' growth on his face. In the past he'd been nothing but derisive of my beard. Now, this was a man who had always been particularly aware of his appearance. I thought I noticed him shivering, which was odd because it was hot out.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Sure, I'm okay."

I watched him trembling. He gawked at me without blinking. He stood too close, and I was forced to look up to him.

**"Darrell, what's the matter? Are you sick?"**

**"I'm not sick," he said.**

**We stood in the California sun. We were in the heart of the Rockridge neighborhood just over the border from Berkeley. I thought I got a whiff of something foul and realized this was raw sweat coming from my brother. He'd always been fastidious about bathing, sometimes two, even three times a day. Darrell went overboard on that sort of thing. Recently he admitted to me that he had to be more sure of himself once he'd slipped past the age of forty, because his wife was ten years younger, and he felt like he had to keep up with her.**

**The next thing I knew, I heard a low wailing moan. My brother's mask started cracking around the edges, like clay drying in a speeded-up film. Darrell was about to turn forty-four. We were supposed to be throwing a party for him out in Half Moon Bay, where he lived with his wife and daughter, but now he looked considerably older than that. He looked tired and worn down, even diminished.**

**Suddenly he caved in, stooping way over and clutching his stomach. Grabbing hold of his arm, I helped straighten him up until he was back to his full stature, but I could see tears starting at the corners of his eyes.**

**"Darrell, would you cut it out now and tell me what's wrong?"**

**He groaned. "You got room for me to stay a couple of days?"**

**"Stay? You mean at my house?" I thought he was joking. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he felt like bones, but Darrell shrugged my arm off, raising his hand as if to say, *Don't touch me!* He didn't actually say it, just raised his hand in a violent manner and had that look, with his eyes bugged out.**

**"God, Darrell, what's *the matter?*"**

**He shook his head back and forth.**

I put my hand on his shoulder again and picked a small brown leaf off his shirt. He winced.

"Come on," I said. "Darrell?"

"Oh, shit! Oh, shit — Vivian's seeing somebody else!" he blurted out. "I just know it's this guy Jeff, who's got an import business here in Berkeley. Philip, I need help. You've got to keep me from *killing this guy*. That's all I can think of anymore."

"Holy shit!" I let out.

"I don't want to end up in jail," Darrell said, "but I don't know what else to do either. She keeps saying their relationship is only platonic, and that there's nothing physical — but she can't sleep with me anymore. Philip, he's *fucking* her, I just know it!"

He stared at me wide-eyed. I kept stammering, "Holy cow, holy shit!"

Darrell's head was scrunched down between his shoulders like a vulture, as though he were trying to armor himself against things.

"This is killing me," he spit out. "I've got no one else to turn to." He took a step closer. The raw odor of sweat grew more intense, and he towered way over my head.

"When did this all happen with Vivian? I thought you guys had patched things back together."

"I thought we did. Yeah, damn it, *we did!*" he gasped. Darrell hesitated, but then it all came spilling out.

"But out of nowhere one night she didn't come back until dawn, and she came creeping down the driveway in the fog like a criminal. We fought about it for days."

I tried saying something, but Darrell held up his hand for me to shut up.

"Suddenly a couple nights later, she was weeping right underneath me, saying she was suffocating — that she couldn't make love with me, and didn't love me anymore, and that she wanted to go out with other people, and have *Fun* —

***Fun, for Chrissake! That she missed having Fun in her life. .***

**. .**

**"So . . ." Darrell sucked in his lower lip, which had started quivering. "I've been sleeping in the shop out in the garage ever since. I shit out in the woods like a damned animal, Philip!" He hawked up a loogie on the ground.**

**"I can't understand what happened. I was . . . I was busting my ass so hard." Darrell grabbed me by the arm. "Philip — I'm serious, you've got to help me here. Remember, it was me who pulled you up by the hair out of Lake Michigan."**

**When I was four years old, a wave had knocked me over, pinning me to the bottom so fast I didn't have time to breathe. My brother reached into the water and pulled me right out by the hair, dragging me up on the shore and pumping out the water I had taken in. He was in the habit of bringing up this incident whenever he needed something from me.**

**He extended a finger and pushed my chest. "So look, don't go giving me any of your lip!" He gripped my arm tighter. As thin as Darrell was, he had a real hold. He leaned in close to my face. His breath was foul, like a cheese.**

**Darrell came to town now and then to sell shitake and portabello mushrooms to fancy restaurants, a business he actually used as a cover for the magic mushrooms he was growing right in the same greenhouses. But he also sometimes imbibed the magic variety and when he did, he could achieve abnormal feats of strength. When he was like that, he could become very strange, and it was as though he were somebody I didn't know at all. As if he weren't even my own brother. But of course, he was.**

**"You've got to help me, Philip," he insisted. "I'm afraid of what I might be forced to do here." He was cool when he said this, but he was trembling.**

**"Philip?" he begged. "C'mon, damn it!" he yelled. "Philip! What kind of brother are you?"**

**I threw my hands in the air. Just then he reminded me so much of our father. "Okay, okay!" I said. "You can stay in the garret up in the attic, but only for the next few days. It'll drive Elizabeth nuts that you're up there."**

**Darrell tried putting on a smile. It came out twisted though. "Oh, it's gonna drive Elizabeth nuts!" he mimed. "She's already a damned nut job."**

**"All right," I said. "What the hell. But she's going to absolutely pass out when she sees you in her house."**

**"Oh, for Chrissake," Darrell shot back, "it's your house too, you idiot."**

**"Not in her mind, it's not. She's back in her element there. Lawyers, doctors, executives. I don't feel comfortable around those people. We never should have moved to that neighborhood in the first place."**

**"Oh, to hell with them!" Darrell erupted. "You can't let people like that get to you."**

**"Yeah, right. I can hardly wait to see Elizabeth's reaction," I said. "She's going to explode. She's been simmering lately as it is."**

**Darrell quieted down. He looked at me. "Has it gotten that bad, little brother?"**

**Involuntarily I nodded. I could feel the good weight of his hand as Darrell dug his thumb into my collar bone like my father used to do.**

**"What in the hell went wrong, Philip?" he asked. "Life just sucks, and that's about all, doesn't it? What in damned hell went wrong?"**

**"I never have been able to quite figure it out," I answered. But right then I brightened up. "But you know something, Darrell? What would you say if I told you I've met someone who—"**

**"Ah, shit, Philip, don't tell me!" he cut in. "You too? Sonofabitch, I can't believe it! It was that woman in the parking lot, wasn't it?"**

**I didn't even have time to nod my head. He didn't want to hear about it. He was a lot like my father in that respect, always was. But the odd thing was, there was this nagging feeling inside of me that I needed his approval in everything.**

**"Okay!" he yelled. "Just don't tell me this kind of chickenshit, for Chrissake!" He fumed for a moment. "My own brother, even. Look, just *don't tell me this kind of bull roar!* Come on!" Darrell pulled me by the arm. "Let's get out of this phony shithole. I haven't had any sleep. I need some damn sleep."**

**Everybody I knew got into an argument with Elizabeth sooner or later, often huge bilious arguments full of sound and fury, literally. That included Darrell. Elizabeth looked down on what he did to make a living. She didn't like it whenever he came by the house, which was why we'd taken to meeting lately at the cafe. Elizabeth and I argued over the matter numerous times in the past, and I'd grown weary of arguing already. She was suspicious that something bad would happen with Darrell coming around.**

**But I ended up feeling like I had to defend him, even though it put me in a contrary position inside. I'd begun to feel the calcification of my wife's notions taking over, choking off the veins of life, in myself as well, and that was bothering me. She was ten, almost eleven years older than I was — it seemed more like half a generation to me. She was now fifty. I would roll that number over and over in my mind. I think it had as much impact on me as it did on her, when she had actually turned fifty.**

**I remember her insisting when we first got together, that our age difference would one day come between us. Yet somehow for fifteen long years I'd managed to stick it out in**

that family. But she had succeeded in alienating anyone who ever tried making friends with us, and I remembered feeling more and more estranged from the rest of the human race while she kept getting older. It was actually more of a mental aging than physical.

Often I would hear her say she didn't want to be friends with people, that she didn't need anybody other than her three boys, and that she'd had enough of people in her life. However, long ago it was her own boys who'd shut me out of the inner core of their family. And I came to feel like a stranger in my own house.

The kids never once called me Dad. In the early days how I used to long to hear them say it. But right off, they came to regard me pretty much as their natural enemy. Maybe the one who was responsible in some odd way, for the fact that things had gone horribly wrong with their family in Middle America, before they'd ever come out to California — certainly long before I married their mother.

Now, as soon as we got inside the house, Elizabeth started ragging on me. We went right by her, keeping our heads down.

"Wait just a minute, mister. You get the hell back here — you!" she shouted. I kept pushing Darrell up the stairs, ahead of me. "Where do you think you're going? You've got your nerve, bringing him in here."

Darrell glared back over his shoulder at her. I felt him struggling to turn around, but I kept shoving him up the stairs.

"Just leave us alone, for God's sake. Darrell needs help."

"I'm going to call the damned police," she threatened.

"Will she do that?" he asked.

"No. She's just blowing off steam."

**I managed to get Darrell situated in the garret in my attic, something I'd originally built for myself as a haven in which to write. I knew I'd have to assure Elizabeth that he wouldn't disturb her in any way, and that he'd certainly be gone in the next few days. I gave him the extra key, and he immediately collapsed on an old ratty couch I had up there. Instantly he fell asleep. I put a bath towel and washcloth on the floor beside the couch, and stood looking at him for some time. He looked like an awkward teenage boy who had somehow aged dramatically. Sometimes it seemed so amazing to me that we could even be related by blood at all. But there it was — you didn't get to choose your own brother in real life.**

**When I came downstairs, I tried avoiding the subject, but Elizabeth wouldn't let it go. She thrust a bar of Ivory soap in my hand, and demanded that I run back upstairs and leave it for him to bathe with. Her lip lifted, and her nose went straight into the air. "It's bad enough," she said, "that we have to use the same bathtub as him. Uhh!"**

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