

Wild Dreams Of Reality, 3

by Jerry Ratch

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The following day, I was so nervous that I decided to have a drink to keep a lid on my nerves. It wasn't even noon yet. They say that's when you know it's getting bad, and that drinking has become a problem. But I hadn't gone out with anyone in over fifteen years.

Early that morning I bolted out of the house because I didn't want Elizabeth to notice anything unusual about me. By eleven I couldn't hold out any longer, so I went to a bar called Krober's, not far from my house.

Once there, I broke a promise I'd made to myself to stick only to champagne, and started instead on a chardonnay they had open. It was an exceptional wine, buttery, thick, and dry, with overtones of lemon grass. It looked like captured sunlight as it clung to the sides of the glass. I felt my mouth aching to have another glass. I tried stopping after two full glasses, because I didn't want to be drunk on my first date with Parker, but then I went ahead and had another.

After swigging down the third glass of wine, I drove over to Oliveira's Cafe. Pulling into the parking lot, I was embarrassed to realize I was probably a little drunk. I peered into the rearview mirror, and looked long and hard at what I saw. I saw a face that was flushed. *This is the face of a drunkard!* I thought. It shocked me to admit that's what I was actually seeing. It was then that I began to examine myself more closely. I took out my wallet and squinted at the photo on my driver's license.

What ever happened to the handsome younger man with brown hair and happy mischievous eyes, who just ten years earlier was starting out on an adventure to sell real estate and make his

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fortune, while still writing poetry? How had I missed the mark so widely, that an entire fifteen-year swathe had been cut out of my life? Darrell tried warning me at that time, but never in my wildest dreams did I picture how difficult it would become to sustain it all.

I'd been too young and too naive to realize what I was getting into with an older wife and three stepchildren. I'd been single. I'd been a poet, responsible only for my own meager needs. I was desperate for some kind of family stability, needier than I had realized. But I'd taken on way more than I could handle. Then when it was too late, I didn't know how to get out of it and had kept right on drinking instead, trying to ignore the problem entirely.

Again I looked in the mirror. The sides of my beard were beginning to turn gray, pretty early for thirty-nine years. I didn't feel old yet, or ready for the grave. The last recession in the economy had done it. I had brown hair until then. I put away my wallet and checked the rearview mirror one last time. For a certainty now, I was beginning to see it. Something enormous needed to change in my life. I tried holding on to the moment.

Stepping out into the California sun, I went into the cafe, searching each table, but Parker wasn't there yet. So I slipped into the men's room and rinsed my face with cold water, trying to get rid of the flush of alcohol.

A few minutes later I seated myself at a little table near the big glass doors as Parker walked in. She came over to my table and slid into a chair right across from me.

"Hi, sorry I'm late," she said. "Have you been here long?"

"Just got here from across town," I replied. I couldn't help but smile. She looked so prime, ready to grasp life. "Do you want something to drink?" I asked.

"I'll have a *caffè latté*, thanks." She put her purse on the table and pulled some things out, leaving it open.

"I'm not very hungry," I admitted. "I had a couple glasses of wine at a business meeting, and I'm really feeling it."

"I'm not hungry either." She looked right at me. Her deep brown eyes were large and appealing.

Again I couldn't help smiling at her.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked.

"It's you."

"What about me?"

All I could do was shake my head. "So," I said, "where do we start?"

"Well, can I read some of your poetry?"

This took me by surprise. "Why do you want to read my poems?"

"Maybe I can learn more about you," she said, smiling.

I hesitated. I wanted to say 'no,' because I felt a little embarrassed about her reading these pieces, but finally I pulled out a manuscript from my book bag. I went and bought a *caffé latte*, then sat back down across from her at our table. Now suddenly it was *our table*. I had to suck in my breath as I rolled that thought over in my mind.

I watched her read. She had long natural eyelashes, and her nose was generous, the same as mine. Her skin had the same tone as well, and the eyebrows arched naturally over the bones above her eyes.

Her hair had a reddish undertone that had to be natural. A few especially long strands curved down along her jaw on either side of her face. Occasionally one of them would lift with a puff of wind. She smiled readily and naturally, as though she were comfortable with herself and could handle life as it occurred around her. But at the same time a solid lump was beginning to grow inside my stomach.

"Oh, this is all about women and sex." Parker looked up from the manuscript. "I thought you wrote about paintings."

"I do both," I responded. I realized right then that I should have given her the poems about Monet instead, something that wasn't quite so personal. It was that damned Gauguin I'd been

writing about, and his young girls. "I guess I'm just starting to learn about women," I said.

"What do you mean? Where have you been that you're just starting to learn about women now?"

"Well . . . I've been married for a long time."

"Oh, and you just got divorced?"

"No, not exactly."

"Separated?"

"No." I shook my head.

"You mean you're still married, then?"

"Yes, I am."

Parker blanched. "You told me you were only *attached at the seams*. Being married is not being attached at the seams." She looked at my hand. "You don't wear a ring."

"I never did."

"You're not available," she said bluntly. "And I don't deal with married men." She looked directly into my eyes. My tongue went running across my upper lip.

When I didn't say anything, she said, "Look, I'm attracted to you, and I think you're handsome. But you're not free, and I'm not going to waste my time."

She started stuffing everything back into her purse.

"I've got to go," she said.

"No, Parker, wait."

"No. Gotta go. Bye." Parker bolted from her chair and left me with my mouth gaping open.

"Yech!" I heard her mutter as she hurried out the door of the cafe. "I can't believe it. *Men are all the same!*"

I knew I had really blown it. I was wrong in not telling her immediately that I was still married, but I also knew she wouldn't have agreed to see me at all if I had. It was a horrible choice. There I was with the woman of my dreams, knowing the truth about me and being disgusted. I remembered how deserted and alone I felt at that moment, sitting there at the cafe.

Already with Parker there'd been the thrill of living again, the ecstasy up under the heart that lifted the soul. But then there was the chill, the direct knowledge that one is mortal. Already this was making me feel as if I were being gripped in a vise every moment of the day — indeed, it was beginning to make the nights seem eternal.

That was when I decided at the very least to do something about my drinking, and I just dropped it from my life.

