

Wild Dreams of Reality, 4

by Jerry Ratch

It was days before Parker and I could even get up the nerve to look in each others' direction at the cafe. We kept trying to avoid the other's glance. But after a time things began to soften between us. I could sense it the day the tension began to ease, and I felt her inquiring brown eyes staying with me longer than they should have.

And then there was her odor. It was the singular smell of her that made my insides ache — something she wore that reminded me of the Midwest and my youth. The familiar odor of lilacs drifted over me whenever she passed by. Even if my back was turned, I knew it was her gliding past. And before I knew it, I found myself dwelling in an odd land that'd been put on hold between two worlds, a kind of no-man's land where those who are in love with something forbidden, walk alone and in silence. No man has the ability to endure that for very long.

Several days after our initial lunch date, I couldn't stand it anymore. I went up to her table, and asked, "How are you doing, Parker? I see you're still here. I guess that means I don't own this cafe. I could've sworn I had title to the place, here in my pocket. Somewhere."

I began patting around all over my chest, looking through my pockets. I picked up a napkin on her table, and shook my head. "Can't understand where I put that thing.

"Can I sit down?" I asked. Though I was already sitting. She smiled.

That broke through the thin veneer of ice between us.

"I gave up trying to put you out of my mind," I said. "Can you forgive me?"

"Probably not."

"Give me another chance? I'll make it up to you, soon. You'll see. Things are really changing fast in my life."

She watched me for some time, and then she nodded her head. I grinned widely, and felt a breath of fresh air filling my lungs.

We chatted about nothing for awhile, until the subject of my marriage and stepchildren came up. Then I grew rash and asked her if we could go somewhere else that wasn't quite so public. I could barely contain myself when she agreed to go with me to a small park nearby. I was thrilled, strolling next to her past the shops toward the parking lot. I kept checking in windows to see if this were real, if it was actually me beside her. She was so sensuous, the way the animal of her body moved as she walked.

We drove to Lake Temescal, which was only a few minutes away. During the week there was hardly anybody there, and the park had a calm private feeling to it, with a small beach area for children. When we pulled into the parking area, I remember thinking to myself, *What if somebody I know sees me here with another woman?* And suddenly I saw my brother's green pickup truck parked off by itself. I wondered if I shouldn't turn around and leave.

We got out of the car and stood in the brilliant sun, looking all around.

Then I thought, *The hell with it — if he sees me, then let it happen!*

I took Parker's hand, and we began walking across the grass and along a path beside the lake. Out of the corner of my eye I kept surveying the grounds around us. I could feel the charged energy from her racing up and down the surface of my body, as she glanced at me almost shyly again and again.

I didn't know what the hell to talk about. I said, "You know, this reminds me of Paris."

"Me too," she replied, and she didn't look away. She had on a sleeveless cotton top, and I found myself staring at the lithe muscles of her arms.

I stopped on the path to admire her. "I have to tell you something, Parker — you are beautiful to look at. I love to look in your eyes. It's the oddest thing — I feel like I've known you before."

A pleasing smile moved across her lips, forming a beautiful crease at either side of her mouth. There was an enormous silence between us, and I felt a warmth for her that I had not felt for anyone in a long time. I thought: I would like it if I could keep that smile from disappearing. Every time she glanced at me, I felt at ease with life, at home. But at the same time I couldn't keep from wondering where my brother was.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just saw my brother's truck back in the parking lot, that's all."

"Here at the park? Will it mean trouble if he sees you with another woman?"

"No, it won't mean trouble — he would never say anything. But all of this is very new to me," I said. "I'm happy you agreed to give me another chance."

She breathed out. "Well, I have to admit I'm having a hard time with this."

"Then what are we doing here in this park?" I asked.

Parker set those inquiring brown eyes on me like a spaniel. "I find myself attracted to you, Philip . . . but I don't know whether to trust you now."

She looked away, then turned her attention toward me again for a long while. I searched inside myself for something to say that didn't sound ridiculous.

"I feel really torn," she said finally. "On the one hand, I'm very drawn towards something about you. But you already proved that you're capable of lying, with that bull about being *attached at the seams*. Is that a poet's joke?"

"That was a half truth."

"Aren't you supposed to be telling the whole truth?"

"That's for people on juries. Witnesses," I said, "and criminals."

"I thought poets told the whole truth and nothing but."

"They do, I suppose, if they actually know what the truth is."

"Well, the truth is you're still married," said Parker, "and I don't want to get into things with a married man. And besides there's a whole lot we haven't discussed. There's a lot about you I still don't know, and what I do know, I'm not so sure I like." There was a huge pause.

"I don't want to have sex," she said.

She hesitated, searching for the right words. "But I admit there's a definite attraction, I don't know what it is. Something in your eyes. It must be the poet in you. You don't seem all that bad, at heart." Those lovely creases appeared beside her mouth again, and she took her elbow in her hand for a moment. "I'd just like to see what it feels like to hold you. But no sex."

I caught my breath.

We began walking again along the path next to the water.

Parker laughed at herself. "I don't know what I'm doing here with you," she said. "No married men, and no men with children. It was one of my rules."

"How about stepchildren?" I tried joking.

"Your wife had three children, you said, from her first marriage?"

"Yes."

"That's some crowd," she said. "Why have you stayed so long, if you aren't happy?"

"I've been asking myself the same question lately. I wish I had a ready answer," I said, "but the truth is, I'm not sure. Maybe it's because of the way my own father left us — I guess that's a part of it. It wasn't so hard at first, but those kids never took to me. Then Elizabeth and I got so heavily into drinking that it clouded reality. We kept on sousing ourselves like it was coming out of a garden hose.

"Before I knew it fifteen years had slipped away. And now I have nothing to show for it — a stack of poems that no one reads, a couple of houses with big mortgages, and someone I barely know anymore in bed beside me."

Parker nodded and seemed to be thinking about this for a long time. Then I saw her smile again. Her eyes were warm and considered me closely. "Well, at least they're not your own children," she said. "That's something. And they've moved out of the house already, you said?"

"Yes, they did. And again last night I got into such a bitter fight with Elizabeth that I nearly moved out myself."

"What are the fights over?"

"Anything and nothing. She's really annoyed that I quit drinking, and she hasn't."

"You quit drinking? Just like that? How can you do that?"

"I quit right after our disastrous lunch date. I couldn't take it anymore, because everything was getting so out of control. Elizabeth and I would get into these cycles, and then the bitterness kept growing between us. Last night she drank a bottle and a half of wine, threw all of my clothes into a heap on the floor, and started screaming for me to get out."

Parker stopped and looked at me. "I can't believe you could just stop drinking."

"Well . . . there it is. That's what I did," I said. "And I don't think I'm going to be married much longer either."

Parker gestured with her hands. "That's what every man says. You're a poet. You can think up something better than that."

"Not when that's the truth," I said. "I was ready to get into my car last night and leave, but I was so exhausted from fighting that I fell asleep instead."

We started walking along the path, passing by a few Vietnamese people who were fishing in the small lake.

"Didn't you tell me that your parents weren't in Chicago anymore?" I asked.

"Right. They're in Los Angeles," said Parker. "They moved there about ten years ago. I panicked and got married when they left Chicago. I knew I was marrying the wrong guy when I was walking down the aisle."

"I wish I'd been even that aware of what I was doing," I laughed. "Then I wouldn't have wasted fifteen years of my life."

"Yeah — I only wasted five."

Giving a sweep of my hand at what surrounded us, I said, "Look at this, Parker. Exotic people fishing, and ducks on the water. It's like a painting, isn't it? It's like we're walking around inside a living painting, and time is standing still."

"Poets!" Her eyes seemed to be drinking me in, and an expression of pleasure broadened on her face. "Let's find some place where we can sit down," she said. "Some place on the grass."

We walked past the little sandy strip of beach down the path to a grassy area that was away from anybody else. We chose a place in the shade of a large tree. She removed a thin shawl she had tied around her waist, laying it out on the grass. "We don't need to ruin your shawl," I said.

"What would your wife say if you came home with grass stains on your butt?"

"Are you worried?"

"I've thought about it."

"So did I," I admitted, "when I saw my brother's truck. Then I figured: *Let it be.*"

"Is he that spooky-looking guy you're with every once in awhile? He's your brother? What's his name?"

"Darrell."

"He seems so . . . different from you."

"He's changed a lot," I said. "While I was still an undergraduate at Berkeley, Darrell switched to a graduate program in botany where he acquired a specialized knowledge of magic mushrooms, and now he has a going business in these things. He covers the illicit side of it with a more legitimate front of exotic

shitake and portabello mushrooms, which he raises in two greenhouses out in Half Moon Bay. That's where he was living until recently with his wife and daughter."

"What's he doing here?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes he makes mushroom deliveries around Berkeley and Oakland. Maybe he's just using the restrooms here. You never really know with him. He can be strange. Really strange. His wife booted him out of their house, and he's staying upstairs in my attic right now until he figures out his next move. But he's still my very own brother, who happened to save my life when I was little."

Parker smiled at me, and tiny wrinkles appeared at the corners of her eyes. "Well, I'll have to be sure to thank him for that," she said. And when she said those words, I thought I saw something light up in the future between us.

We both sat down on the spread-out shawl. I brushed up along her arm with the tips of my fingers touching her hair, drawing the dark reddish-brown curls out away from her neck. As I pulled her toward me, our mouths found each other. We enjoyed one another as if we were eating a delicious available fruit. We lay down with our bodies clinging together out of our mutual need and desire, and we lay together in the sunlight of the afternoon beside the lake.

The weather was warm, and I felt a spark leap between us. Not an electric spark but something quite different, something on the inside, something in the soul. Laying my arm alongside hers on the grass, I actually thought I saw the movement of electricity on the surface. I imagined seeing atoms rushing through her skin. It was the jolt of the life force inside, and that warm moist skin. Sex was everywhere in the air, the smells, the breeze, as it always is when it's warm and the flesh comes out like a blossom. So the human flower blooms. You could see it and feel it. There was a living presence being generated right there between us.

For a minute I sat back admiring her whole body, slowly taking her in as if to taste her, so that I could see her entirety inside,

and imagine her being naked. A light scattering of freckles played over her skin like a soft rain. The muscles in her arms were firm from wedging clay, because she was a ceramic sculptor. She had the body of a young woman. Her eyes were dark and had the immeasurable depth of humanity containing her soul, and they watched me no doubt questioning: *What am I doing?*

For nearly an hour we lay on the grass in one another's arms, fondling each other. I was hard the entire time, responding to her hand like I was meant to be there. I realized the compact size of her body fit perfectly with mine. It felt natural, like we were made for each other. Lifting her shirt just enough to see her nipples, I sucked on her breasts, and we lay there oblivious to the world. A long time passed before either of us spoke again.

After getting up and brushing ourselves off, we took our time walking back along the path by the reeds next to the lake. Families of Vietnamese were fishing at the shore. Wherever there was an opening in the reeds, which were as tall as they were, they would fish with their lines in the water. They had fish attached to a line through the mouth and gill in groups of five or six, in the shallows next to their feet. The wife, sitting with a tiny child nursing on one breast, while the husband and the older children fished. This was how they existed, on the fish they extracted out of this tiny lake. They were always there fishing, as they had been in Vietnam before the war. This was what they knew how to do in order to survive. There was something strangely natural, as well as out of place, about their presence in this urban setting.

Parker and I walked along arm in arm, with shadows and spots of sunlight traveling down our shirts as in a film strip. The birds in the trees overhead called to one another, and the light reflected on the ripples of the lake. Their short tails wiggling, two ducks paddled on the water, a mallard and a female turning in unison.

When we got back to the parking lot, Darrell's truck was gone. I breathed out in relief. I'd been wondering what I would say if we had bumped into him. With even the vaguest notion that

something might be starting to happen between Parker and me, I really didn't want to introduce them to each other.

She looked at me. "Philip, what are we doing?"

I feasted my eyes on her, and I had to touch her again.

"My marriage is rapidly coming apart," I said. "It has been for quite some time. Maybe this is exactly the catalyst I needed."

I let my hand lay on her arm, absorbing the energy that ran freely beneath her skin. It felt so good to be touching someone who was this alive. I thought — I'd been afraid I would never touch that much life again.

"I don't want to break up someone's marriage," she said.

"You're not."

Parker watched me for the longest time. I was in love with her, and I was in trouble. We both knew it.

We drove back to where we had left her blue van in the parking lot at Oliveira's Cafe. When Parker got out of my car, she leaned back in the window, and I caught the life in her eyes.

"You should know I'm very interested in you, Philip. Very much so. But. . ." My heart fell when she used that word. ". . . I don't think it's such a good idea for us to keep seeing each other like this, while you're still married and living with your wife," she said.

"You can call me when you move out."

