

Wild Dreams of Reality, 5

by Jerry Ratch

That was the night that everything began to happen. It must have been past 3:00 a.m. when Darrell came down from the attic right into our bedroom. I lay nearly paralyzed with guilt beside my wife, trying to get to sleep. Elizabeth had staggered to bed early after another bottle and a half of wine. I was having trouble with the odor of the alcohol that came reeking from her as she lay sleeping on her back with her mouth open.

"Psst!" Darrell said. "Philip." He shook my arm.

I looked over at Elizabeth, but she was totally out to the world. I scrambled from the bed, and he led me out into the hall.

"For God's sake," I whispered, "what are you doing?"

"I'm going out to find Vivian. I know she's out there somewhere with that bastard Jeff, and you're coming with me. I don't want to hurt anybody, but I know they're out there. I can feel it in my bones."

"Shit, Darrell. This isn't funny."

"I know we can find them," he said.

"What are you going to do if you find them? Then what?"

"Just come on!" he said, yanking me by the arm. "I've got your clothes in the living room all ready to go." He jiggled his car keys and I looked behind me.

"Get dressed, let's go!" He was shivering and looked like he hadn't changed his clothes in days. I hadn't been paying any attention to his comings and goings.

We crept down the stairs and I dressed silently in the living room, looking all around while I did. Now, here was a whole roomful of the orderly stuff of settled life. Nice things actually, no argument about taste. Pakistani and Turkish rugs on hardwood floors. Large ferns, matching gray couch and armchairs, intermixed with fresh white wicker. Lace curtains, of course. But the

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perfection was somehow sterile, as if you couldn't actually sit down here. After I dressed, Darrell and I left the house like a couple of teenagers slipping out to a secret midnight party.

Once outside I glanced around at the big houses along the tree-lined street. Most of these homes were owned by people with high-powered firms in the City. I felt out of my league here. And now the economy was descending in the spiral of a deepening recession. The properties we owned were beginning to swallow us alive.

I sniffed at my clothes. "Whew! I need a shower."

Darrell tried to laugh. "I haven't had a good shower in who knows how long."

"Why not? I left a bar of soap for you."

"Somehow every time I look at the bathtub, I don't know, I just can't bring myself to get in." He laughed. "I stink like a bitch in heat. Heh, that's funny. Vivian's the bitch in heat — I stink!"

"How's Leslie taking all this?" I asked. The minute Darrell had met Vivian on the beach in Half Moon Bay, he proposed. He got her pregnant before the wedding sheets had dried, and she gave birth to a sweet flaxen-haired daughter named Leslie, who was the exact image of her mother. Their daughter was now eight years old.

"It's pitiful," Darrell said, exasperated. "My poor little baby doll, she's really confused. What the hell, I'm confused. I keep telling her: *Mommy doesn't want Daddy to sleep in the same bed anymore right now*, and she'll say, *Then can you stay awake in the same bed?* She just doesn't understand. Vivian runs off and goes sailing out on the bay with Jeff. She stays out till all hours and doesn't pay any attention to whether Leslie is okay or not — as long as she can have her *Fun*."

He opened the door of his pickup while I was looking up at my house. "Get in," he ordered. He fired up the engine, and off we went into the night.

"I began to suspect Vivian was sneaking over here to see her lover because a month ago I caught her in a big lie," Darrell said.

"What happened?" I asked. I kept thinking inside that I really needed to be telling my brother about how desperate my own situation had gotten now here at home — that I was on the verge of leaving Elizabeth. But I couldn't figure out how to say this to him.

"I discovered this unpaid parking ticket," Darrell said, "that came in the mail from Berkeley."

"Did you say anything?"

"She simply lied. She lied right to my face, Philip!" He started getting more excited.

"Darrell, watch where you're going!" I said. He whipped around the corner. It felt like the truck was going to turn over and I grabbed hold of the door handle.

"She denied ever getting a parking ticket," he said, unfazed. "It was incredible. Her face flushed bright red with the bold heat of the lie. I knew she was capable of small lies, but this was different." Darrell looked at me instead of at the road.

"Getting caught at it that way only infuriated her," he said. "You know what she did?"

I shook my head.

"It made her just want to run further away, that's all. Go sit somewhere, so she could think up yet *another lie* — the little bitch!"

"Darrell," I said, "slow it down here." We were near a cafe in the Elmwood where I used to hang out before Oliveira's opened in the Rockridge. This was before I met Parker.

Then I thought about Parker again and her eyes that were so deep, making me feel warm. But then I thought: 'What makes you think she's going to ever take another look at you, you fool, when you can't even get up the nerve to leave home?'

Darrell surveyed the cafe, which was open all night, visually going over each table looking for his wife. Then gunning the engine, we took off with a squeal of the tires that I didn't think

possible out of his truck. Looking over my shoulder, I saw what was left of the moon staring down at us, and a warm gust of air lifted the hair off my forehead.

"Another lie, and another," he continued. "The whole world is rotten, rotten to the core. What the hell has happened — is it so fucked out there? You know, I really admire you, little brother."

"Me?" I said. "You're joking. I—"

"It's always a lie with Vivian," he cut in. "She tells any lie she can, just to buy herself some time so she can dream up some weak excuse, some other half-truth that may seem possible to her little mind." He laughed a terrible, bitter laugh.

"That's when she went and told me she's been driving over here to Berkeley to Jeff's import shop — because he has the best prices on beads and silver. So, I had no choice but to trail her ass to Berkeley.

"Her and those stinking little beads she buys, and those ankle bracelets she makes. Can you believe it? She calls that junk Fashion Art. Fashion Art, my ass! It's just an old hippie craft. I told her, 'You're no artist.'

"Then she says: *I am so an artist!* It pisses her off so much that I won't let her call herself an artist in public. What a damned joke, Philip — trying to call that junk Art!"

I couldn't get a word in edgewise with Darrell. He didn't want to hear about me or any of my concerns. This was my own brother, who'd sat me down once when I was still in high school and gave me one of those talks. You know, about cracking the books if I ever wanted to go to college at all — the kind of talk that turns your head around 180°. But he was so needy I couldn't get in a word about my own situation, and it was beginning to get on my nerves. Still, I realized I was probably just as needy as he was, maybe more so.

"We should go back and get some rest. You're chasing after her like a dog in heat, for God's sake."

"If I could just catch a glimpse of the two of them riding together in that bright red Saab convertible of Jeff's —

"Just *looking* at that car makes me angry!" he snapped. "Every time I hear the sound of a Saab engine, I stop and my blood runs cold. It just galls me, Philip."

Darrell kept staring straight ahead through the windshield of the truck, his head jerking every now and then to one side. "It makes me nauseous," he whistled through his teeth. "A pit opens wide in my stomach. I only wish now that I'd shot the bastard the first night I found them together. It was at a restaurant in Pacifica. I had my gun with me and could have done it then, but I . . . didn't. .

"There they are!" he shouted, putting the accelerator to the floor. My head lurched back, hitting the window behind the seat.

"Where? I can't see them."

"Right there up ahead. Up ahead." The engine was groaning.

I strained to see anything I could down the deserted street. There was a slight sheen on the pavement from the moisture in the night air. I was starting to feel a big lump in my stomach. "I don't see anything. Darrell?" I glanced over at him and saw his fists tighten around the steering wheel, but then he let up on the gas pedal.

"I wanted to ask Jeff to his face right there," my brother went on, suddenly calmed, "if he was sleeping with Vivian, but I didn't. I wimped out. Well, that ain't ever going to happen again. I should have shot his ass then and there and gotten it over with.

"My insides feel like they're stretched wide over a huge empty pit inside, whenever I think about them riding around town in Jeff's red convertible with that pink scarf of hers flying in the wind — *flying in the wind!*" Darrell stared at me hollow-eyed. "I can see her long hair in my mind a block away, Philip."

And suddenly he asked me: "What is it about her that attracts men this way?"

I could say nothing. I couldn't help thinking I was doing nearly the very same thing Vivian was doing, right under my own wife's nose.

"I'm positive, Philip!" he said. "Jeff is sleeping with her and I know it for a fact. My insides know it. I feel it in my stomach and in my chest. In my balls. I got a sixth sense about Vivian, and I follow that sense. I'm never wrong. *I am* like a dog."

We drove wildly around the streets of Berkeley looking for any glimpse of them. Darrell drove us past Jeff's shop, but they weren't there. We drove past Jeff's house, which was on the north side of town, but they weren't there either. Then we drove across town to the cafe back in the Elmwood district on the south side, where he said he knew for a fact Jeff hung out. It was the same place where I used to go myself. I probably sat at the table next to the guy a hundred times. Again, back down to West Berkeley we went, to the industrial area where Jeff's shop was.

"Ohh," Darrell groaned. "This is eating me up, Philip. I feel like a heatseeking missile. I get a sense where she is, and I can just *see them!*" He turned to me again in the cab of the truck. "I just saw them now."

"Oh, shit. What do you mean, you saw them? Where?"

"I saw them," he repeated. "I just saw them."

We drove past a doughnut shop and I smelled the sweet smell of the sugar hanging in the air. Two young guys in white aprons and white hats were lifting a rack out of a vat of oil. You could see the streams of oil driveling off the lumps of dough on the rack. My stomach began growling.

"God, Darrell, come on. You're scaring me with this stuff already."

"I'm losing weight," he said. He kept cutting from one subject to another.

"People are beginning to ask if I'm sick," he said. "They won't say it to my face, but I can see it in their eyes. They're wondering if I have AIDS. But I can't eat, that's all. All I do is sit down at the table and pick through the food like a bird. I know I

have to eat something, but when I sit down, all I do is peck through the plate of food like I'm hunting for seed.

"But there's no hunger here. My insides feel numb and thin, like they've shrunken. There's no room anymore for food. It's just anguish, Philip! Anguish! Do you know what that *means* — when you're hanging on inside, like from a cliff? *Anguish* — and a wasteland left vacant from disgust. No food on earth can fill that void —

"I've got to stop!" he blurted out. "I've got to get some rest." But he couldn't stop. It was like his insides kept urging him on and he knew he was right. I tried saying something to him, but he cut me off again.

"The soul's all shriveled up inside. I feel it, eating itself sick with the filthy air of jealousy. It's this jealousy, and that's all, that's driving me insane. It's just *pure jealousy*. It's driven me here to Berkeley with its nose in the air, sniffing after Vivian's pretty little ass. Pure simple jealousy — and it's got itself caught up inside my chest. It's lodged up inside here like an *actual Thing*, Philip — like a substance. I can't get it out. Oh, shit!" he gasped. He pulled over to the curb all of a sudden. "Oh, God, this hurts. This hurts so much."

His head slumped against the door post. I reached across the back of the seat, squeezing his shoulder as much as he would allow, trying to calm him.

