

Wild Dreams of Reality, 6

by Jerry Ratch

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We headed to an all-night diner called Norm's, on Broadway in North Oakland, to get some food. Darrell remarked that his hands were trembling and said he realized the adrenaline in him was probably wearing thin. Then suddenly he said he couldn't remember where he'd just been for the past five minutes. He swerved over to the curb stopping again. We'd been driving down College Avenue in the heart of the Rockridge, but he had no recollection of driving at all until just then.

"Get some food," I told him. "Get some food in you." He shook his head, started from the curb, and kept on driving to Norm's.

The diner was half filled with the loose ends of humanity that stayed up until five in the morning. We picked a booth by the window. The light in the diner was a dingy yellow, and the seats were that lobster-red vinyl that could only have been installed sometime in the 1950's. The place had probably never been closed once since it opened. It had never been scrubbed down or had its interior changed, but had stayed the way it had been in the early dinosaur car era of huge tail-fins and greasy slicked-back hair and sideburns. Now fashion had caught up with Norm's and it was back in vogue again. I saw my brother watching a young waitress moving in and out among the tables.

He winced when he first caught sight of her. "Oh, my God," he said. "It's Vivian." He swallowed, gawking at her like a high school punk with pimples on his face. "Look at her, will you? Is that her? Is that Vivian or what? Philip?"

"What?"

"I'm asking you. Am I wrong? Just *look* at her."

"Oh, for God's sake, Darrell." I looked at the girl and saw a gum-chewing teenager with long straight bleached-blond hair pulled back harshly into a knot behind her head. A long ponytail dropped from there all the way down to her butt. In Chicago when we were younger, we would go out to all night diners like this and hang out bothering the waitresses. A girl like this would have wowed us out of our chairs. But we were grown-ups now and this was California. This was not such an uncommon sight out here. The young girl had a set hardness around her mouth whenever she could get herself to stop chewing her gum for a second. There was a tightness there that you could tell even now, would develop into a serious furrow of lines later on.

"She's young enough to be your daughter," I said. He ignored me and kept on ogling the girl, trying to catch her eye.

"Same long straight hair," he went on, "pulled back. See how it kind of swishes from side to side as she walks, hitting her ass? That's Vivian!"

"Not so loud. It's not Vivian, for God's sake."

"*Look* at her. If that ain't her when I first met her, then who is it?"

Darrell related the image of Vivian in his mind as she lay, her long limbs wrapped around him, spread out on the bed naked with her flaxen hair splayed out on the pillow. "She has almost no pubic hair, you know," he said. "Did I ever mention that?"

I nodded. He certainly did, about a hundred thousand times.

"I can see it now," he went on. "It's so thin it's almost not there. The lips of the vulva purse upward like something living by itself, always desirous of something new, something unknown."

I had to take a good look at my brother. I thought he was beginning to hallucinate maybe from one of his mushrooms.

We sat watching the waitress with the ponytail swishing behind her while she moved in and out among the tables, and suddenly Darrell told me he could picture Vivian lying beneath him

crying, sobbing, begging him to get off her because she was smothering.

"The waitress is just like Vivian," he said. "Exactly like Vivian, except younger. She has the same kind of front teeth that protrude slightly like she needed braces when she was a teenager. Look at her, will you?"

Finally the waitress came over to our booth with a menu. Darrell said, "You look a lot like someone I know." This is always a mistake.

"Yeah?" replied the girl. "Who's that, your wife?" She smiled, snapping the gum in her mouth. She had a yellow pencil behind one ear. "I'll be back in a minute," she said, walking away.

"There but for the age goes Vivian," he said, slamming his hand against the tabletop. "Vivian was exactly like that waitress when we first met, I'm telling you. The mouth that's always open there with her front teeth showing, as if the mouth needs to be open in order for her to breathe. It gives her an innocent appearance, sort of, doesn't it? But she ain't innocent, that one," he said. "Oh, no. Look at her. She's open to almost anything, she's never able to make up her mind absolutely, that one. That's because she has to always have *Fun! Fun, for Chrissake, Philip! All for fun!*" His jaw was setting tight.

"Darrell," I said quietly, "get a hold of yourself." I laid my hand on his arm.

When the waitress came back to take the order, Darrell calmed down and kept her talking for a while. At one point she stopped and asked, "Listen, how old are you anyway?"

"Forty-three," he said. "Why?"

"You're old enough to be my dad." And she walked off.

"The little bitch!" he erupted. "She's just like Vivian!"

A few minutes later we noticed her bending over to put some dishes away under a shelf. That was when Darrell shook his head and had to look away. Something swept over him, you could see it, and he began choking up. The breath gave a great heave inside him, and he turned his face away from the spectacle that was

there inside the restaurant. His mouth puffed outward. Suddenly Darrell got up without ordering and left, and I ran after him. We got into his truck. As we were driving away, I scanned the long lit-up plate glass window of the diner and noticed the waitress glancing out the window as she passed by the empty table where we'd been sitting. Then her head snapped forward, the long ponytail swishing behind her, and she was gone from view.

He was mumbling to himself almost non-stop now. I began to worry about him. I could see how much we had changed, how differently the directions of our lives had taken us. It was then that he drove us down to the industrial area of West Berkeley, pulling up across the street from Jeff's shop. The red Saab was parked in front. Everything was silent. Shutting off the lights and the ignition, we remained sitting there in the seat of the truck like two lizards on a rock. With the window rolled down we sat listening without making a move, and Darrell's eyes remained fixated on that red Saab convertible with its black top raised. It seemed so vulnerable now, like a bird that had fallen.

All of a sudden Darrell said, "I want to kill it. I can taste the bitterness leaving its little trail in my mouth. Philip? I want to maim that thing. I want to kill something."

Pulling open the glove box, he took out a gun and my heart jumped into my mouth. My brother raised the barrel of the .38 to his nose and took a good long sniff of the piece.

"Damn, Darrell, put that thing away!"

"It's the yellow sulfur of death," he said. His eyes were bugged out. "Do you know how close I came to using this gun once, Philip? Did I ever tell you about that?"

"Darrell, put that thing away now."

"It was in the middle of the night," he said, "five years ago. Me, Vivian, and Leslie were driving down Highway 101 to Los Angeles on a badly needed vacation."

"Darrell, I —"

"Shut your fucking mouth and listen." He gripped my arm.

"We'd come very close to breaking up, see, after being forced into bankruptcy, because one of her little jewelry ventures went bust. Our nerves were shattered. We were tearing at each other all the time, like vicious animals. We went to a marriage counselor, and patched things back together, and decided we'd get the hell out of town. All we'd been doing was busting our asses working seven days a week. We could barely remember who we were."

I kept an eye on the pistol in Darrell's other hand. He was holding it with the barrel pointing straight up.

"It was night-time," he continued, "and we were traveling in the passing lane down the highway somewhere above San Luis Obispo, when a huge big-rig truck pulls up even with us on the right hand side of our pickup, and the big-rig blows its horn. Vivian looks, and the guy blows his horn. It seemed somehow obscene. And then for Chrissake, Vivian waves at the guy! So I down-shift, speeding up. But the big-rig caught up, honking his horn loud and long. Then I throw on the brakes but so did the big-rig, and suddenly the big-rig moved over into our lane nearly ramming the fender.

"I yell, *That sucker almost slammed into us! What are you doing waving at him?*

"I hit the brakes hard, and swerved over to the right-hand shoulder, and stopped our truck. But the big-rig pulls over and stops up ahead too. That's when I see the cab door open.

"I leaned over, opened the glove box, and took out my pistol.

"I told her, *Get down on the floor. Get down and cover up Leslie.*

"Vivian yells, *Darrell, what are you going to do?*

"I tell her, *Shut up and get on the floor! Don't budge!*

"I opened the door and got out of the truck, rolling down my window. Crouching behind the door, I steadied my arm. Then, I cocked back the hammer on the .38.

"I shouted, *One more step, fucker, and you're dead meat! I've got a gun!*

"That stopped him. He stood there for a very long time without moving. There were no other cars on the road. My mouth dried up, and I felt sick. I stopped breathing, but I could feel my heart pounding away in my chest.

"It was so quiet on that road I could hear a cow chewing its cud. Headlights showed up behind me, throwing shadows against the open door. I saw my own damned shadow jumping up and down like a fucking candle burning my ass.

"I sighted down the barrel of the gun. I could see him, a bearded man in a flannel shirt, standing there in the roadway. Then the guy spins on his heel and walks back toward his rig."

Darrell turned to look at me. I let out my breath. "God, Darrell, God! You could have been slaughtered!"

My brother looked like a madman. "I would have killed the guy," he stated. Darrell stared right at me in the truck. "I would have done it. He only had about two more steps left to his stinking life. That was it. I had to do something, Philip. It was my *family!*"

