

# Wild Dreams of Reality, 7

by Jerry Ratch

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We sat in Darrell's truck in the deserted silent world of the down-trodden industrial area of West Berkeley, where no one in his right mind went at five in the morning. "Put the gun away, Darrell," I said. "I mean it."

"I can't help but keep thinking about her hair," he said, ignoring me. "It was like wild grain separating in the wind. There's the down along her arms, the fine hairs that you can only see under a lamp. And almost no pubic hair at all. I can't take my mind off it, Philip. I know this is sick . . . but she's my wife, for Chrissake!

"Then sometimes I hear a voice that says, '*Not anymore.*' And that's when I say it to myself over and over like a mantra: *It — ain't — over — yet!*"

Darrell said this with a growl, each word bitten off in anger.

"Wait a minute," he said suddenly. "Vivian's car isn't here, damn it! Maybe they hid it somewhere and drove around town on their big joy ride and then came down here to Jeff's shop to sleep in one another's arms." Darrell's eyes rolled in his head.

"He could be in there enjoying my wife, while I'm right here, right outside their door. I'm that close to scattering their brains all over the walls while they sleep together." Again I put out my hand, letting it stay on his arm. Darrell caught himself. "But I'm that far away — a whole world away."

My brother looked at me. "I only have to cross one thin street on the map of the world, Philip, open one thin door and blow away the degrading image of her sleeping in another man's arms. That would wipe it out of my mind forever. That would end it." Darrell began murmuring to himself again, as though I weren't even there.

He opened the door and got out of the truck. Standing on the barren street, he breathed deeply and started across the pavement.

"Darrell!" I shouted. "Darrell!" I got out of the truck and went around to the driver's side. I was going to start honking the horn if I had to, if anything started. I looked all around at the bleak empty wasteland of a street that was lit up only by the light of a sodium-vapor lamp.

The door to Jeff's shop was painted deep red with the numbers 2101 stenciled on it, otherwise it was blank without even a peephole so that you could see who was outside without opening the door. The only light available was from that strange orange-yellow street lamp. I saw my brother testing the doorknob, which appeared to be locked. Then he must have realized he couldn't just knock on it, or ring the buzzer. Obviously they wouldn't answer at this hour.

Leaning his head against the door, he seemed to be listening hard and long, pressing his ear to it with the side of his face against the numbers 2101. Then he put his hand up to listen harder, and I could plainly see that was the moment he realized he was still holding the gun. I took a few steps toward him and stopped. Until that night I didn't even know he owned a gun. Starting toward him again, I got half way there before something stopped me.

Darrell stared at the barrel of the gun for a very, very long minute, when all of a sudden I pictured him using the pistol on his own head. The image of him as dead, being dead a minute from now, slipped past my mind and floated in front of me.

I heard the noise of his death in my mind, and saw his blood sliding down into the darkened red of the door, sprayed all over the stenciled numbers, and I witnessed his body slumped down against the door. Then suddenly his life came back, and he was right there with his ear pressed against the door, focusing on the barrel of the gun in his hand.

My brother was still alive, with his ear pressed against a cold door in West Berkeley. "Vivian probably isn't even in there, Darrell," I said. That helped break the spell, for both of us.

His hand dropped, and I myself saw the breath rushing back into him, the living air that seemed to have left his body for so long. I thought I heard him laugh at himself, and I breathed deeply. I was happy to see him back among the living.

"She's not in there," he said, as he came toward me. He looked back at the door once more.

"She's probably on her way back to Half Moon Bay already." Darrell smiled to himself. "She'll go sneaking down the driveway and into the house again before dawn, trying hard not to wake me out in the shop — going back like a good little mother to take care of our little Leslie. Now, won't she be up at dawn smiling, whisking around the house putting things in order, and tidying things up for the coming day?"

I nodded. I was hoping the spell was broken for good.

"No, not exactly," he said. "She never did that — I did that."

Darrell laughed again. "But the one thing she can't change is our little girl. Vivian may want to go out on her joy rides and go sailing out on the bay with her Jeff and have Fun, but by dawn she still has to go home, because there's always our little Leslie. And if she doesn't want me to get custody of our baby doll — if push comes to shove and it comes down to a divorce — *then by God, she'd better be home by daybreak!*" He said this in about the meanest manner I'd ever heard him say anything.

"Come on, Darrell." I looked around and shivered. "This place is creepy. Let's get out of here." I pulled him by the arm toward the truck.

A wry smile turned up on one corner of Darrell's lip as we walked back past Jeff's car toward the truck. He noticed that the window had been left open a little on the passenger side of the Saab. "Ah, here we go! Now this — this is just like Vivian," he said.

"Always the window is open. It's always *got to be open! Open*, for Chrissake!"

Suddenly he unzipped his pants, pulled out his penis and — standing on his tiptoes — began unleashing a huge stream of piss through the narrow opening of the window. We could hear it pouring heavily onto the leather of the bucket seat. With that, he started giggling.

He stood relieving himself into his enemy's red Saab, when suddenly the car alarm went off in the early morning predawn air like a big zany wounded flying animal. We both ran for his truck while he was still trying to zip up. He pitched the gun onto the front seat and started the ignition, throwing it in gear, just as a guy with a mustache and a ponytail came running out of his door with no shirt on, brandishing a huge sword of some sort. Darrell flipped him the finger as we careened out of there. Jeff's car siren wailed on and on.

We drove around the block in wider and wider circles. Intermittently Darrell was smothering pure crazy laughter and then growing serious, and back to laughter, and then very serious again until we finally hit University Avenue. Instinctively he turned toward the sea, driving down University to the Berkeley marina. When we couldn't go any further, he pulled over to the curb beside a bench that faced the sea and got out of the truck, taking the gun with him. I followed him to the bench, where we both let ourselves fall in a heap.

A buoy sounded its slow rhythmic familiar knell as it rose and fell with the waves. Darrell's shoulders rose, and the breath inside him left his body in one long agonizing sigh. "Oh, God," he exhaled. "God, God, God, God."

That was when a sea gull drifted past, not that far away. Looking up, I saw the thing actually look at us as it went past, squawking as if it had something to say. Suddenly I realized that I'd seen its whiteness. The gray light of dawn was just beginning above the hills to the east.

Slowly Darrell fondled the gun. "I might toss this thing into the sea," he said. "I think I might do that. But," he added, nodding his head amiably, "maybe I won't."

That was all he did. Think about it. Then he stuck the gun in his belt and leaned back against the bench. I thought at last that maybe he had calmed down, and that was when I decided I had to get my ass the hell out of there, and go find Parker. I realized it for a certainty right there on that bench, sitting next to my brother — that Parker was the one being I was really meant to be with, and I decided to tell him all about her. I couldn't keep it to myself anymore. After all he was my brother. If not him, then who?

"Darrell, I have a confession to make."

"You don't love Elizabeth." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

Instantly I wondered if Darrell could read my thoughts. "It's that apparent?"

"It's written all over you." He smirked. "You and Elizabeth never were the right fit. She's crazy, that woman. Frankly I don't know how you ever put up with it as long as you have."

"Well," I paused. "There's more to it than that."

"Uh-huh." I could see his back stiffening.

"I'm in love with another woman. Her name is Parker."

"Ohh. . ." he groaned. "You too. You too." He leaned back away from me, staring at me like I was a criminal. A long time had passed since we could tell each other the truth about things. Maybe too long.

"Parker!" he blurted out after some time. "What kind of name is that, Parker?"

"She goes by her last name, like we used to back in Chicago. That's where she comes from, the same as us. Darrell, I'm really in love with her, I can't help it."

"It's the woman at the cafe, isn't it? Am I right? The one you were gaping at. I'm right, ain't I? I know I'm right!"

"You're right. And she's an artist too."

But I realized right then I'd just made a huge mistake, using

the word: *"too."* Because in his mind I was comparing her to Vivian.

"Oh, another damned artist yet!" he exploded. "Like Vivian, I suppose. I always thought you were jealous of me when I met her."

All of a sudden Darrell started up, completely changing the subject — looking out across the water — as though he were in the middle of a sentence. "Then there's my shop," he said. "I just hang out in there now like a bat. For Chrissake, it's killing me not to be able go in there like I used to every ordinary day, and tend to my mushroom business. Life was so perfect then, so ordered and neat. I was in control of everything. *Damn it, Philip!*" He struck the flat of his hand against the bench. I jumped. I was getting edgy and irritated, I was so tired.

"Oh, for God's sake, why don't you just go back out to Half Moon Bay and live in your damned shop?" I said. "Sleep out there. It's so much better anyway, since you modified it with the windows and the lights. Who needs a damned house? Don't go back into the house. To hell with Vivian! It's warm enough out — just go bathe in the ocean, since there's no plumbing. You can come and go out there as if she didn't exist."

Darrell looked at me, dumbfounded. "But. . ." Then he quit talking, and you could see his eyes sinking inside. Quietly he absorbed the thought of that statement like an oyster absorbs sand. The smallest flicker of a smile occurred at the corner of his mouth, and his lip lifted slightly as he uttered, "Uh-h."

"Besides," I said, "if you moved out of the property altogether, you'd lose some rights. The one who moves, loses. You quickly find that out in real estate. Although frankly I'm beginning to wonder what all the fuss is about in owning anything at all."

Darrell looked exasperated. "What? You're a real estate agent. How can you say that?"

"How? I'll tell you how. All these years I've struggled, struggled like hell to keep a roof over our heads. Then I struggled even harder keeping up rental property too, so I could have a

retirement. And for what? What has it all boiled down to, if I've wasted my life? All that property, all that struggle — it's meaningless to me now. It's sick! Anyway, I figure I can always be a renter again."

Darrell said flatly as if he had memorized something, "I can't be a renter again."

"Why not?" I asked. "What's wrong with renting? More than half the world are renters. All the wars in history have been fought over property and who owns it. I remember seeing a sign once spray-painted on a building in New York City that said: *All wars are fought over land; and then the noise is gone, and the blood dries up; and the land doesn't care.*

"And you know what?" I said. "Who needs it? You can go rent somewhere else. Why lose your life and your spirit over land? Why die for one small parcel of dirt in Half Moon Bay, or Berkeley, or anywhere else for that matter?"

"That's fine for you to say — but I got dumped!" Darrell snapped, pounding his hand against his chest, his face turning purple. Spittle flew from his mouth. "I got dumped, *and I want revenge!* I ain't giving up that land for *no one!*"

I tried letting him cool down. He had the same temper problem my father had. Some time passed before he said, "Philip?"

"Yes?"

"I want you to do me a really big favor. My birthday is coming up. Forty-four years. Can you believe it already? Forty-four. Will you do me a very big favor, little brother?"

"What?"

"I want you to call that bitch," he said, "and make sure she doesn't forget my birthday party."

"Oh, shit."

"Please?" he begged. "I'm your only brother."

I took in a good deep breath of the sea air. He had worn me out, chasing around after Vivian all night. "Okay, Darrell," I said. "Of course. Of course."

"Just so she doesn't go running out somewhere on my birthday," he said, "and have *Fun!* "

For a long while we sat in silence in front of the broad flat plane of the sea in which everything was level but for the waves. The sun rose behind us. I smelled the fresh smell that comes with the wind, which pulled at our shirts. For quite some time I sat immobile and stared at the constantly changing nature of things, the sea and the sky seeming to churn and to boil.

I had never allowed myself to do this enough in the past. Life went by in a blur, and I did not live it. A man won't see it go by if he doesn't take the time once in awhile to sit in front of the sea, or a river, or a big open field, to let his mind air out like this. He might wake up eventually one day like I did when I was in Europe, earlier that year. There I saw my ancestors in the faces around me, seeing how they enjoyed their lives day by day, living their lives intensely. I saw that they knew how to live, love, and relax. They enjoyed life as it occurred — not the Future, only and always the *Future*. I saw the Future, and knew it was not meant for me.

I thought about my life and that of my brother, who was obsessed with his wife Vivian. And I thought about the fact that I was married to someone I probably never should have been with in the first place. And then I thought about Parker. I understood that I desperately needed to change something, something enormous in my life — because for me it was not working. I looked over at my brother who sat there trembling, maybe from the wind that was blowing in, or maybe from the adrenaline racing through his body. He was so unable to let go of things that I thought it was going to kill him.

And that was when apparently from somewhere inside I heard the words. . . *Follow your heart.*

My head jerked back, and I had to look all around to make sure I hadn't overheard somebody speaking nearby. There was nobody but Darrell and me, sitting on the bench by the water. It was full daylight now. My watch said seven a.m. already. Sea gulls sat on the water feeding. I knew it was going to be impossible to sneak



back into the house without Elizabeth seeing us, and I grew afraid of what was coming.

