

Wild Dreams of Reality, 8

by Jerry Ratch

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Darrell and I pulled into my driveway after being out all night long. A slash of sunlight fell across the purple Mexican sage beside my front walk. Except for the birds in the trees, there seemed to be an odd serenity to the air — until I spotted one of my white shirts dangling from a tree limb beside our opened bedroom window on the second floor. Then I noticed my things strewn all over the front stairs, and my heart stopped. My suits were tossed in a heap into an opened suitcase, and my computer lay on its side at the base of the poplar sapling I'd planted after I came back from Europe, in homage to the rows of poplars I had seen there.

"Oh, oh," said Darrell. He looked over at me in his truck. "Should I back on out of here?"

"No. No."

"It looks like you're in trouble, little brother."

"Yeah, and who do you suppose is at fault here?" I asked. I was feeling grumpy after being kept out all night long.

"Don't look at me," Darrell said. "It sounded pretty bad for awhile there last night between the two of you."

I nodded my head. "It's the worst it's ever been. She's furious that I won't drink with her anymore. She constantly goes around accusing me of having affairs now. Every other day she imagines me with someone new."

All of a sudden a tremendous scream and the sound of breaking glass came from inside the house. I had come to know that scream in the worst moments of my life with Elizabeth.

I got out of Darrell's truck, went up the stairs, and found her in the living room. She was sitting in her favorite chair, clutching a glass of white wine. A nearly empty bottle stood on the floor, and it wasn't even eight a.m. She had a stiff arrogant

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appearance, with the whitest skin I've ever seen — alabaster would be a better term. No, that wasn't quite it. Really it was more like garlic. And her hair was so white it seemed to have been powdered. She was like an antique creature from a different era with narrow untrusting eyes. Her blouse was buttoned up so tightly that her neck, which had grown wrinkled lately, seemed as if it had been squirted out of a small orifice.

She drew herself up in a long hate-filled look and snorted, "Where have you been?"

Immediately she stood up from her chair, taking one aggressive step toward me. In a flash, warm white wine hit my face. "*Where have you been!*" she screamed. Jars in the kitchen rang with her voice.

"Who have you been with, you fucker?" She screamed: "*Fucker!* Who are you sleeping with? I have a right to know!"

Elizabeth started to jump all over the place as each phrase shot out of her. "Vivian called," she said. "*It's her*, isn't it? I always knew it would come to this. Now you're cheating on me with Vivian! It's her! *I knew it!*"

I saw my oldest stepson, Jim Corke, lurking in the dining room beside the built-in cabinets. There was a shattered plate on the hardwood floor where he stood, and he was drinking a beer, I mean guzzling the beer. When he let out with a massive belch, our dog Tosca, a big black and white malamute, leaped to her feet right beside him. Tosca was devoted to Jim and only to Jim. She was only two steps away from a wolf and could be vicious. Beautiful but vicious. She'd take off a man's hand if Jim set her to it.

I could smell the awful sour wine sliding down my face, and I tasted drops of it hanging from my beard. Immediately I turned and spit out the taste.

"*Oh! Oh!*" Elizabeth sang out. "Oh, my God, how dare you! Get out, you filthy swine, get out of my house!" She let herself drop back down in her chair, and it gave a creak under her weight.

Darrell came in the door behind me. "You too!" she shouted. She narrowed her eyes on me. "I want you out of my

house right away. Take your drug-dealer brother with you, you scum! Get out of my house! *Get out, get out, get out!*"

"All right, that's it. I'm leaving!" I yelled back. I felt a rush of energy in my neck, and my mind went blank. "Darrell, let's get my stuff."

I stormed upstairs to our bedroom, where I found half my belongings already piled in a heap on the floor. Darrell started gathering groups of things into piles. We took armloads of my clothes, boxes of poetry books and all my notebooks, and began carrying everything down to my car. But all of a sudden when we went back up the stairs for another load, I heard the unmistakable hissing sound of air escaping from tires. I poked my head out the bedroom window. There they were, mother and son, letting the air out of my car tires.

Darrell and I practically flew down the stairs. I watched helplessly as all four tires on my old white Mercedes finished going flat in the driveway. Elizabeth went back inside the house. When I went in she had situated herself again in her exquisite wicker sitting chair, clutching both of its arms, her knuckles clenched hard and turning white. There was another full glass of white wine on the floor beside her. Jim was standing right behind her, glaring at me.

"This is it," I said. "I've had it."

I felt a rush of adrenaline, and suddenly I knew it was over. The fifteen years I'd stuck it out with her now were over. She'd screamed the ultimate threat — that I could pack my bags and move out — the one last time. This time something clicked like a switch inside. That was it, and I knew it. She knew it too.

"You mean you're really moving out?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is there any chance you'll come back?"

"Yes," I said, without thinking. I looked at her long and hard, but I was exhausted. There was no emotion left in me anymore.

"Good-bye, Elizabeth," I said, staring right at her, drained, shaking my head. I could feel tears tugging at the corners of both

eyes, trying to get out. Then I walked out of the room and down the front stairs.

"You're killing me, Philip!" she screamed. *"You're killing me!"*

Her shout echoed in the hall. It went right through my back and up into my neck, but I kept moving my feet mechanically. It seemed to take a hundred years to get down the stairs to the front yard. I took our malamute's head in my arms and began to weep, looking at her beautiful weird eyes that were like a wolf. "Good-bye, Tosca," I said. "I won't be back, sweet girl."

Darrell helped me load what there was in the yard into his truck. Then we got in and he backed out of the drive. The white shirt dangled from the tree limb like a signal of domestic surrender. I glanced all around at the big old houses with vines growing up their sides and at the old towering elm trees that created an arch over the middle of the street where the topmost branches touched. I pointed at the white shirt hanging in the tree and shrugged.

"There it is," Darrell said. He threw the truck in gear and with a lurch off we went, turning the corner on what was no longer my street.

Automatically as if in a dream I told Darrell to head over to Oliveira's Cafe. On the way there Darrell put on a tape of the Rolling Stones, turning up the volume, and I let my head loll half way out the opened window. My head felt thick. I didn't want to think at all.

I wanted not only *not* to think, I wanted to experience pure release and sound and freedom. I wanted to jam as much sound into my ears as possible so that I wouldn't have to think about my life, and I pumped up the volume on the Rolling Stones as far as it would go. Suddenly a shudder ran up my spine that lifted my head. *"Yeah!"* flew out of my mouth, projected out of my body like something physical, like a small piece of darkness that had to get released.

Just as suddenly I said: "God forgive me!"

Darrell grinned at me and pulled a fat new joint out of the ashtray. He lit it up and held it out for me. I didn't hesitate. I took a long pull on the thing, sucking in the smoke as deeply as I could.

"Listen, Darrell," I said, smoke seeping out through my teeth, "Vivian called. Elizabeth just told me."

"What!"

I blew out the puff of smoke I had taken in. "Elizabeth must be totally flipped out," I said. "Do you know she accused me of having an affair with Vivian?"

"Vivian called?" Darrell's face grew tight. "What did she say?"

"I don't know. Elizabeth was too caught up screaming. All she said was that Vivian called. That's probably what got Elizabeth out of bed and had her going like that. Otherwise she'd never get up at this hour. Never."

Again the pressure inside my chest released itself, and I felt the positive force behind the words: "Oh, *Yes!*"

The cafe was just opening when we got there. We ordered *caffè lattés* and sat down at an outside table. We were the only two there, but I knew the place would fill up quickly with the onslaught of morning commuters on their way into the City.

Cars were roaring by as always on the freeway fifty yards away. The sun was shining. It was a bright beautiful clear day with that famous Mediterranean quality to the light. The light shone against the bark of the trees across the street, bringing out a reddish undertone to the brown bark I had never noticed before. The long thin branches hung down like hair, swaying in the breeze with a slow underwater movement.

Suddenly I shrugged as though from a chill, feeling some of the burden of my life falling away from my neck and shoulders. I felt a little bit freer, and yet I could still feel the weight of the past as I stretched my shoulders. I twisted my neck all around to release some of the tension. I could hear the tendons grinding inside.

I began thinking back about the trip to Europe Elizabeth and I had taken. That trip had turned out to be the most important

thing that ever happened to me up to that point in my life. It was like getting a good splash of cold water in the face. For one full month I got the chance to break out of the congested surface of my own circumstance and look around at the world. I witnessed how people actually *preferred* to live life in Paris and Italy. How, coming home from work at the end of the day, they'd walk up the hill from the Metro station in Montmartre. They would pause a little longer amid the noise of the crowd on the sidewalk to look over the vegetables on the stands, the array of smooth purple eggplants next to oranges stacked in a pyramid. Then maybe head into a corner bistro for a beer or a glass of dry red wine. Or they would purchase a small basket of raspberries and a pint of fresh cream before continuing up the hill.

Elizabeth had either stayed in our narrow little hotel room, or else she'd insisted on going from one cathedral to another, where she examined only the most ancient and boring of church relics without ever — not once — a single nod to the living, breathing pulse of Paris, which surrounded us right outside on the street. No matter how beautiful the cathedrals, they only made me feel like an outsider. Worse, I began feeling the distance between us growing greater as she started returning, once she reached the age of fifty, to the Catholic roots of her girlhood.

I almost didn't come back, mentally that is, for I discovered that something enormous was missing from my life. Fifteen years had somehow evaporated, just grinding away at staying alive economically, and I woke up to the fact that I was stuck in a dead marriage, having raised someone else's small army of children. I felt like I had nothing to show for my life but a huge mortgage, and a stack of poems that nobody read.

Then suddenly the need to recover whatever was missing swept down over me like a driving rain — and I experienced the strong tide of my own blood sweeping me up unexpectedly as we crossed the border from Austria into Munich. Looking around at the faces I saw there, I recognized *myself!* People, speaking to me in their own native tongue, expected me to reply. I suppose they

thought I was their countryman, because you could see in my face that I was Bohemian. The border of Czechoslovakia wasn't that far away, where my roots extended back a thousand years.

The next thing I knew I'd found myself asking: What had backed me into the corner I was in? At some point that I couldn't even remember anymore, I had lost sight of myself while attempting to keep my head above water. Meanwhile I was supporting a wife and someone else's unruly children, and the waves had just kept coming. They were overwhelming, and I was getting no assistance whatsoever — let alone empathy — from anyone else in my family. Time kept going by and going by, and I always felt alone, struggling to earn a living. The kids were getting bigger, outgrowing their shoes and clothes, going through mounds of food, and I felt more and more like a long distance runner.

But they were never my own children. Elizabeth stepped in between us and interfered if there was ever a problem, or even if it looked like we might grow closer. I never felt anything coming back from them. All I ever did was keep my head down, driving for the goal that was in the future — always the future.

Maybe I was afraid that what I'd get would be worse than what I had. But also, I didn't want to desert them the way my own father had deserted us.

One day he just didn't come home. A week later we got a letter saying he had moved to South Bend, Indiana. A few more letters dribbled in, and then there was only the long unending silence. I remember how completely unprepared my mother was to go out in the world and make a living to feed us. Late into the night I would hear her trying to learn how to type on an old manual Underwood typewriter. I knew I didn't want to end up being like my father, no matter what.

But now, I found myself feeling like I was balancing on a high precipice during the calm before a hurricane — when all I wanted, really, was to see what it would feel like to do the normal things of life, like going out to have a pizza — but with someone

else. My marriage had failed. The love that was once there had vanished years ago. It was just gone.

Now here we were, Darrell and me, two brothers sitting in the California sunlight. How odd, I thought. We were at a turning point in both of our lives. Maybe neither one knew how immense this moment really was. Or else maybe we each knew inside how momentous it was, but we each had the code of silence that men often use as armor. Possibly we were more scared than either of us was prepared to admit.

I had always used alcohol to mask this silence. Darrell had used drugs. First the grass that was a constant in his life as far back as I could remember, then the mushrooms that he'd come to understand in graduate school with his studies in botany. For me the alcohol had gained an upper hand without me ever admitting it — until the day after my first disastrous lunch date with Parker. That was the deciding moment, the day I understood that I needed to regain some control. And that was the day I'd quit. I knew I needed to find some clarity, to find some small hope of repair. To come back to a sense of life — not despair, and darkness, and sure death.

That was the beginning for me. Already the veins in my feet didn't hurt as much, even though it hadn't been that long. Now when the desire to have a drink swept down over me, I took a deep breath, focusing on the moment ahead, just a few minutes away. I would look at my life and breathe and get through the next few minutes — just *get through* that period of time. And if I did, I'd feel slightly better. Each time I made it through that little spell, I felt better. Not only were the veins in my feet hurting less now, but my mind cleared up more each day as the constant haze started to dissipate. I began to see things vividly again. I could remember the names of people that I met. I could smell things, and feel things as if I were alive, really alive — not subsisting in a bottle of alcohol like a pickled specimen in a laboratory jar.

