

Wild Dreams of Reality, 9

by Jerry Ratch

As we sat at the cafe, Darrell told me that he had to make a mushroom delivery to one of his clients in Berkeley. I never knew whether it was legal or illegal business he was on, and he made a point of not telling me, because he said it was better I didn't know.

I went upstairs to the pay phone. Searching through my wallet until I found Parker's phone number, I took in a deep breath, when I realized I was shivering hard with excitement. When her answering machine came on, again I took a deep breath. "Parker, you won't believe who this is. But you said to call when I moved out, and that is what I just did. This is Philip. I'm at Oliveira's right now. I left home — and I'd like to see you. This is weird . . . well, you know where to find me. Bye. This is Philip. Philip Janov."

I glanced around to make certain Darrell hadn't followed me upstairs, but apparently he'd already left the cafe to make his rounds. That was when I called Vivian out in Half Moon Bay. She was cool to me. "Please, Vivian," I said, "it would be nice if you didn't forget my brother's birthday party."

"Uh-huh."

"You forgot about the party already?"

"No. I did not."

I didn't believe her. "Good," I said.

"So, you'll be here then?" Vivian asked.

"I just said I would."

"Good," she said. "I wouldn't want to be the only one here." Finally she said it. "Philip . . . do you remember which day it is?"

What my brother suspected was true — she had not remembered his birthday.

"Yes, Vivian, I remember." I took my time, but then I went ahead and reminded her. "It's the 18th."

"Bring some hors d'oeuvres," she said, and hung up.

When I came back downstairs there was a crowd in the cafe already. They would come in clusters, a large crowd early in the morning before going to work, another crowd for lunch, and again after work when they came off the train, maybe to have a drink before going home.

That was when I noticed Parker sitting with a man in a short-sleeved shirt at a table beside one of the columns. The man wore horn-rimmed glasses and his hair was starting to go thin on top, though he only looked to be in his early thirties. Parker saw me right away. She took her time looking at me, and I felt the attraction again. This was the one — I knew it in my bones.

When she nodded in my direction the man swung around and took a good long look at me. Then he rose from his chair and walked toward me, stopping me in the middle of the cafe. He put out his hand. "You're Philip?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'm Samuel," he said. "I'm the one Parker told you about who might be looking for a real estate agent. Listen, I've really got to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"There's no way you're by some chance the same Philip Janov who was *a poet*, are you?"

"*And Realtor*," I said. I was flattered that anyone remembered my name, because it didn't happen very often. But I found myself adding that I was a real estate agent, as though I had to apologize for my existence as a poet. Which of course, in America was sadly true.

Samuel rocked back on the balls of his feet as if pushed physically. A rush of air burst from his mouth. "But that's impossible," he said. "I thought you had died. I mean . . . I read your book back in the '70's."

He clasped his hand over his mouth, and his face turned bright red. He looked back at the table where Parker was sitting, then all around the cafe. A sweat broke out where his hairline used

to be. He was considerably shorter than me, and I glanced right over his head at Parker, who was watching the two of us closely.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I've got no business— "

"I like the honesty," I said, stopping him. "Not so easy to find, out here on the Coast. But no," I laughed, but with that old slight bitterness at the edge of my laugh, "— no, I'm not dead. I'm getting more used to hearing about the event though. But I figure pretty soon I will have outlived all two hundred of my readers."

"Damn, it seemed like nearly everyone read *The Puppet* when it first came out," said Samuel.

"What did you think of the book?" I asked. I couldn't resist the temptation. We are all fools.

"Funny," said Samuel with a lift of his shoulders, "but too dark. It was too depressing. Everybody thought you would've committed suicide after writing that book." He studied me for a minute.

"I almost took a class from you at Berkeley when I was an undergraduate. You were that teaching assistant everybody talked about."

"Oh? What did they have to say?"

"All I can remember was that you were a skinny intellectual guy who always wore a ponytail, Levis, and a leather jacket."

I nodded, urging him to go on. That was well over fifteen years ago already, and it was like hearing about somebody else's life.

"I was a freshman then," said Samuel. "I remember signing up for a writing class you were teaching. But when I got a look at you, I immediately pulled out."

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"Because you had quite a reputation, and you looked like a wild bohemian," said Samuel. "I guess that kind of scared me. I wanted to be a success." He winced as he said this. He took out a handkerchief, mopped off his brow, then took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses carefully.

"So, Philip Janov," he said. His head bobbed up and down. "And now you're a Realtor too?"

"That's true — and, are you a success?"

Samuel totally ignored my own question. "Somehow, I can't believe it," he laughed. "You? Selling houses?"

"What's so hard to believe about that?"

"Well . . . you're a poet. Poets don't sell houses."

"Yeah? Doesn't everybody these days? Some of my best friends sell houses." When he didn't laugh I added, "America doesn't buy poetry."

Samuel stood blinking at me from behind his eyeglasses. It took him awhile to make up his mind about me. Then he said, "Well, maybe we can do some business. This is weird." I handed him a business card.

"What kind of property are you looking for?" I asked.

"I need to shelter some income," he said. "I'm getting killed on taxes. I'm looking for a rental house, something cheap, maybe in an out-lying area."

"How about something in Half Moon Bay?" I asked. "My brother lives out there. I'm heading out there myself on the 18th for my brother's birthday party. Maybe we could meet there and look at some rental houses. I think the prices are good. In fact, why don't you come out for the party?" I wrote the address and date on the back of my card. I wanted to make sure that Vivian and I weren't the only two out there for Darrell's party.

"I'll be there," he said. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Oh-oh, got to run," he said. "Always late. See you then, out in Half Moon Bay." He ran and scooped up a newspaper and some books from Parker's table. I noticed him lingering over her as if trying to make up his mind about something. He started saying something to her but stopped to look at his watch, then hurried out the door.

When I went over to her table, Parker didn't blink. She scrutinized me as though she were watching a hurt animal who could possibly still be dangerous. She said, "I see you met *Samuel*." I nodded. She sounded exasperated when she said his name.

Then she asked, "So, how are you doing?"

She laid down her pen, looked up at me, and waited. She was very appealing, with those large inquiring eyes of hers.

"Didn't you get my message?" I asked. I was still rattled about leaving home. "Oh, of course you didn't, I just left it on your machine."

"What message?"

"Parker, listen, do you think it would be okay if I sat down and joined you?"

"Well . . ." she hesitated. She glanced all around the cafe. "Well, all right, sure. What message did you leave on my machine?"

"Actually," I said, pointing, "why don't we go sit at that table outside? It's warm out, and beautiful."

We walked outside and sat at one of the round metal tables outdoors. I found myself staring at her bare arms, as spots of sunlight filtering through the leaves moved across her skin. For some reason I stared at the faint blue veins that were only barely visible. There was something mysterious there that I had to touch, just to feel grounded to the planet — to get the feeling that I was still alive. And that was when I boldly reached out, touching her on the arm. Parker looked surprised. She glanced all around.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I just had to touch you. I shouldn't . . ."

"Yeah, you shouldn't," she said. But she smiled.

I shook my head. "I couldn't help it. I'm sorry."

Parker's face was flushed. "Philip, I'm not sure it's such a good idea that we're sitting together here in public."

"But I moved out of my house."

"Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that?"

"Why don't you call your answering machine," I replied, "and check my message?" I leaned forward, touching her arm again, letting my hand stay there on her arm. I could feel the warm rush of her blood.

Parker took a good long look in my eyes. Her lips parted. Then I saw her foot begin to swing under the table. In a tense moment in real estate transactions, I've often noticed that people would begin swinging a foot when they relaxed their guard. It often meant they were starting to consider an offer.

She smiled, standing up from the table. "I'll be right back," she said. "I have to check my phone messages. Your message had better be there." I sat still and watched the crowd passing by.

When at last she came back to our little table, she was beaming.

"So . . . you did it. You moved out."

"Bet you never thought I would. Am I right?"

"You're right. I never thought you'd actually do it," she said, "but I'm glad you're here. So, where's all your stuff now?"

"Everything's in my brother's truck. He had to go on one of his mushroom deliveries. He drove me over here because my wife and stepson flattened all my tires when I was trying to leave. Can you believe it?"

"In the meantime, is it okay if my brother Darrell sets up his pup tent in your back yard, just for a night or two? We're going out to Half Moon Bay for his birthday party in a few days, so he won't stay long. He won't be a bother, I assure you," I said. "In fact, why don't you come out there to the party with me?"

"I can't. I'm going down to Los Angeles for the next few days. But tell me," she said, "where did you plan on putting your things?"

"You know, I didn't plan," I replied. "Frankly, until this morning I didn't know for sure I was moving out. You don't plan these things. You just do it. I thought maybe — well, can I put my stuff at your place?"

"Your stuff, or yourself?"

"How about both?"

"Whoa! You just came out of a long marriage," Parker said. "Don't you think you're hopping into things a little soon? You

need time to be by yourself. I've been on my own now for five years. You've got some catching up to do with the world of the singles. Things have changed, you know."

I must have looked hurt. She studied me for a minute, then she relaxed and smiled. "Okay, you can keep your things over at my house," she said. "But just for a couple of days."

"Can we go there now?"

"Not right now. I have to go down to my studio and work. I have a show coming up, and I'm on a real tight deadline." Parker wrote her studio address on a slip of paper. "You can come see my studio around seven this evening. I'm very happy you're here, Philip, but I have to go do some work."

Saying this, she touched my arm. My whole body moved in my chair. Touching her again, I let my hand stay on her arm, absorbing the electricity that ran through her. I could feel her soul as it surged through her body. I also felt the soul inside me rising up to the surface as it desired to get near her. Some essence flowed between us while we touched there in the sunlight, while the sunlight played back and forth over the surface of things. I heard a deep breath come out of her, and felt myself beginning to grow hard under the table. I reached down, putting my own hand on the inside of my thigh to calm myself.

"See you around seven," she said getting up. I watched the way her body moved through the crowd, gliding out of the cafe.

