

Wild Dreams of Reality, Chapter 1

by Jerry Ratch

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I became a fool for Adrienne Parker the first moment I set eyes on her.

Whenever Parker walked into Oliveira's Cafe my breath would stop. I'd try turning away, then find my gaze locked on her face. Maybe it was her bare arms that I found so appealing, or else her long hair and then those muscular arms, but in truth it was the animal in her body as well. Definitely it was there, in the way she moved when she walked by. What I know beyond question is that I felt powerless under this spell — I was attracted by the pure feeling of being alive again, in my own body, in my soul. That's what felt so thrilling, because I had become like a dead man on the inside for the past dozen years. This new feeling was the oddest sensation. I wasn't at all sure which direction to turn, and I became trapped in a dilemma part way between something that felt spiritual and something that felt physical.

I remember the first day Parker and I began talking to each other. I came into Oliveira's to meet my brother Darrell, who would join me now and then when he was in town on one of his exotic mushroom deliveries. After picking an empty table, I cleared off the cups and saucers left by the former occupants, and set down my books. I couldn't help but notice the same woman who'd been staring at me lately, and

had to admit how much I enjoyed just being looked at. Frankly I'd been doing the same thing with her.

From the food debris spread in an open pattern like a flower burst all over the floor, anyone could tell there must have been kids at this table, so naturally I felt right at home. I took my time. Still, I could feel her watching me. As I stood brushing crumbs off the little table, I must have looked like a tall graying waiter. My matador ponytail, the small knot of hair behind my head, was something I was holding onto from my youth.

We'd been watching each other for several weeks already across the cafe, always at different tables and at various hours. There was no set pattern to the time of day either of us might be there. We observed one another, but we never spoke. Often she'd be sitting just a few tables away. Opened in front of her this time was a bound black notebook. Occasionally she'd scribble something in it, but it wasn't words. I could tell it was something else because her hand ran more intentionally on the page, longer than words would take. It was more like drawing. Thank God she's not a writer, I thought. "And, so what if she is?" I said to myself. But again I thought: *Thank God she's not a writer, that's all.* Still, she was magnificent, and I couldn't stop myself from staring at her.

Today I sat on the far side of the cafe, seemingly calm except for my eyes which were undressing her. She would glance away and yet each time, as if she were experiencing something physical, she was drawn back. She'd look down, but again my stare lured her in. This cat and mouse game went on for quite awhile before I caught myself.

To keep from scaring her off, I turned in my chair and watched across the street while a young couple dressed as quasi-punks, which was the fashion, were on a search in new cheap clothing to find the gaiety of life. They went from store to store. They seemed to be really living. Then after I

began concentrating more intently on the book in front of me, Parker snatched a moment, watching me openly, when I suddenly looked up and she was caught in the act. So, this one time — *one time* — neither of us flinched. That's how delicate things were.

As I was watching her, she laid down her pen and looked at me for a long, long while. Without looking away we had sex there with our eyes, and we both knew it and felt it. I felt it going all the way down through my entire body, and we let it happen. The animal of her body chased the animal of mine up and down the length of me, while the same animal in me raced up and down hers. We let it happen, and we let it go all the way through each other.

Our two souls intermingled warmly, thoroughly embracing one another. I was so sure of it. Then all of a sudden, I thought: Good God, what am I doing? — and looked away.

But when she got up to get a glass of cold water from a table that was next to an enormous burst of sunflowers, I could see all of her, the whole superb animal of her body. I took in everything from her bare arms right down to her tight capris. She was thin, having the grace of a creature that was comfortable with itself, that moved with its own surety. There was such a serenity to her that I couldn't tear my eyes away. It was like watching some supernatural animal that used its muscles to fulfill itself as it moved. Okay, I thought: Calm down, calm down now. I opened my shirt a little more at the collar and pulled at my necktie.

There was a whole pile of art books in front of me. Opening up one of the big books from which I'd been writing a series of pieces, I sat forward and concentrated on a painting by Paul Gauguin, but soon realized that my mind was still on her. When I finally got up the nerve to look her way again, she wasn't even at her table anymore, which startled me, and I found myself glancing furtively all around the cafe.

Nothing of hers whatsoever was on the table. Instead somebody else was moving in on it, and he began clearing away the debris of what she had left. Hold it, I thought, she'll be right back — what are you doing? The man taking over her table gave me a look.

I tried to gather myself, tried concentrating again on my notebook to see what I'd written the day before. I read through the piece nervously, crossing out a word or two as though I knew what I was doing, looking up now and then while I did this. Seeing she wasn't coming back so soon, I set down my pen and went to order a flute of champagne. Today there was a skinny young bartender with tattoos on his arms, and dreadlocks. He cracked open a bottle and poured the clear bubbling fluid all the way to the rim without spilling a drop. Reggae music played over the speakers as it always did when this bartender was working, and I sipped from the narrow glass, standing right there watching the world float past, waiting to see whether she was ever going to return.

Before long I started to think maybe — probably — I was imagining the whole damn thing. Probably she didn't feel a thing going on inside her. And maybe I shouldn't be drinking so many of these *caffè lattés* either. Instead, I decided on having still another flute of champagne. I felt my insides positively shimmering. I ought to be able to calm myself down, I thought. But in truth I was as confused about my life as I had ever been.

Purposely I drew in a deep breath, and tried having a good look around at Oliveira's Cafe. The espresso machine made the usual howling noise into the metal pot of steamed milk, and the heavy glasses clinked together. That's part of what I loved about this cafe. I think it had to do with the routines of life being lived. Always it seemed to be this way. In the mornings the flower sellers would set up their booth outside, while the freeway roared overhead just fifty yards away. The small wrought iron tables out on the sidewalk

reminded me of Paris. And Oliveira's made the best *caffè lattés* in town, smooth creamy *lattés* that were made with double shots of espresso without my having to ask. They didn't burn the coffee, and it didn't taste like dirty water.

First, there was the smell of strong coffee that woke you up. Then the taste of hot foam off the top of the glass, and then the coffee. It was something that established a great moment of calm at the start of the day, no matter what else the day might hold. That was how they lived their lives in Italy and in Paris, I reasoned, so why couldn't we live like that here in America too?

This place had become my home away from home. I'd grown used to coming here when I wanted to write, because I could watch people in fleeting unguarded moments, and feel life as it went by. Also the light had a Mediterranean quality to it that attracted writers, and artists like Parker. It took a certain kind of atmosphere, for one thing, and occasionally I felt like I could reach out and grasp an entire life in a phrase at this place, one gesture or a look. Inside the cafe, jazz, Reggae, or classical music played over the speakers, drowning out the noise of the traffic, and I would sit in the sunlight if I could get one of the tables near the large glass doors that swung outward.

I'd grown used to going out to cafes like this, because my house had been filled way too often with the small moving mountain of noise from having three stepchildren around the house, which normally meant at least three additional kids from the neighborhood — swelling the ranks to a minor army of disorder and confusion. Worse, I never had a spot where I could leave things spread out, so I could find my papers and pencils and pens where I'd left them. And even now, whenever I sat down and tried to write in the narrow little room that doubled as my office at home, I would bolt out the door and go to the cafe to be in the midst of life.

I left Oliveira's, passing the flower vendor's stall, the pasta shop, the wine shop, the fish store, and the butcher's. When I was walking past the produce market, the woman I'd just been intimate with was coming out. As I passed her by, I couldn't quite manage to say hello, but gave a slight nod, a small gesture that I hoped she would notice.

To my surprise she asked, "What's that you're reading?" She pointed to the books under my arm. "Aren't those art books?"

"Yes." Immediately I felt my face flush.

"Are you an art historian?"

"No, I'm not. Actually I write from them — I'm a poet. I write poems about paintings." Then I added, "And I sell houses. Both."

"Oh, really? That's a good combination. I'm an artist," she said, "and I've always loved real estate for some reason. I think I must have been a Realtor in another life."

"A Realtor from another life. Why didn't I think of that?" I joked. "Now there's something the world could really use. Really." She smiled, and I started feeling better about this. She had dark curly hair and the kind of high European cheekbones I found so appealing.

"So, do you live nearby?" she asked.

"Not too far away," I said. "How about you?"

"I own a duplex not far from here."

"Oh? Where's that?"

"Over on Lawton, just below College Avenue.

Actually, I have this friend, Samuel, who's been looking for a house. Maybe I could introduce you to him. I think he's looking for a new agent." She wrote down his name and phone number on a slip of paper, handing it to me.

"Is this . . . Samuel, your boyfriend? I mean, since you know his number by heart."

"Not really," she replied. "Just a good friend."

"Oh. Well, that would be great then. So, what's your name?"

"Parker. It's Adrienne Parker, but everybody calls me Parker. That's an old Chicago habit, and I guess it stuck. It kind of made us feel tough back there, to be called by our last name."

"Oh, of course you're from *Chicago!* I thought I knew that accent. I'm from Chicago too," I said. "And, so — are you tough?"

"Only on the outside. Actually I'm like a marshmallow on the inside," she answered. "So, what's your name?"

"I'm Philip Janov. Everybody calls me Philip."

Both of us laughed. This wasn't so difficult, I thought. But I paused looking at her, hesitating. My foot moved a leaf on the ground.

"You know, Parker — Parker, right?" She nodded.

"I've been wanting to talk to you for some time," I said. "I was never too sure how this sort of thing was done. I mean, I wondered if you were . . . attached."

"*Attached?*" she asked. "That's an interesting word, *attached*. Is that a poet's word?"

"I guess you could say that."

"No, I'm not attached," she said. "Are you?"

I deliberated and thought about what to say. "Only at the seams," I answered. It was a slight hedge. She was bound to catch me.

Parker and I were standing on the sidewalk, facing one another with the warm late summer sun beating down. Those large, deep eyes seemed to be looking right through me, and I could feel them drinking me in. I grew bolder.

"Do you want to have lunch tomorrow?"

"Sure," Parker replied without hesitation.

"Good." I could feel myself grinning, bubbling over inside. "Okay then. Yeah, okay . . . I'll meet you here at noon inside."

After watching her drive away, I mocked myself: "*Yeah, okay . . . Yeah, okay* – you sounded like a damn kid again!" My heart was racing. I'd never done this kind of thing before, since I was married, I mean.

I realized that I'd better not go home so soon with emotions like this written all over my face, so I went back to the cafe instead, taking a seat at one of the outside tables this time. You could feel the pulse of life as people on the sidewalk passed by, and I began feeling more engaged with the flow of it. And I let my mind wander along with the crowd, trying to calm myself down.

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