

Part One

*...And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the canceled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing — nothing at all.*

- Archibald MacLeish
The End of the World

The seventy year old cab driver had taken a liking to his steady new customer; it didn't matter that Phillip was forty years his junior and seriously ill. On their return trip from a clinic in the city, Freddy was trying to make the ride comfortable. After he passed the small town of Ponderosa, he maintained his slow speed, wisps of volcanic ash eddying behind the cab's tires.

"Could you step on it, please?" Phillip said to the back of Freddy's grey head. "I need to get home." *To my carpet.* The taxi accelerated past alfalfa fields recently baled only the second time that unusual summer. The last mile seemed endless to Phillip as he tried to hold off the chill in his head by focusing on the diamond shapes woven into the seat covers. *No good, it's worse.*

Freddy hacked out a smoker's cough and turned into the rural housing development where Phillip lived. "Your appointment go okay?" he asked, his bloodshot green eyes checking his fair-haired passenger through the rearview mirror.

“What?” Phillip asked, annoyed by the interruption. He had one hand over his eyes. “Maybe you’d be better off if you didn’t worry about me.” *Crap, stop barking at him.* The taxi turned down Phillip’s street and sped up to his garage.

Just get out. He climbed down and walked stiffly as if it were his leg, not his arm, in a cast. Every muscle in his slight frame seemed to ache.

“You need anything, call me,” Freddy offered from behind, but Phillip was already moving slowly toward the garage.

All I need is my damn carpet. He wanted to hurry, but the house seemed to be agonizingly distant. In his languid daze, he forced himself to make one step at a time through the garage and into the kitchen.

When he finally got to his bed, Phillip tried to rid himself of the chill for the third time that day. Over the tip of his nose he traced the carpet pattern below scores of times, then fell into an agitated slumber that brought him an encore of a familiar nightmare. He watched a white cougar attack his father while a distorted caricature of their next-door neighbor laughed at the slaughter and said, “Me and your ol’ man was peas in a pod.”

Shut up, prick. The images faded and Phillip opened his eyes, realizing right away the chill hadn’t completely subsided. *Get rid of it.* He sat up, stared at the carpet again, but found only slight relief. *Damn, now what?* Phillip staggered out of the room and tried his father’s door. It didn’t open; he dug into his jeans pockets with his good arm, but the sluggish efforts were fruitless until his third attempt. The keys hefted like iron, blurring together in his hands until he finally opened the door.

He approached his father’s bed. *Maybe here.* Phillip sat on the edge, leaned sideways and drew his index finger slowly along the pile labyrinth in the ash-dusty yellow chenille bedspread. *This has to work — down, around, to the right, out, and in...* On his knees and one elbow, he traced the thin pathway until the chill receded some. Phillip became drowsier with each loop and a murky vision

of the neighbor materialized again. *Screw him; keep going — up, over, around, and in...* After several more seconds, his finger came to an obstruction, an old army revolver. *I shouldn't have left this thing here.*

Phillip picked it up to get it out of the way, but he held on to the loaded weapon and stared at it. *I never shot one of these. Just pull the trigger, idiot. He'll be out there sometime today, half-hammered, fooling around in his yard, nonchalant as hell. I wonder how cool he'd be if I—* The chill rallied at full strength; he put the fire-arm behind and returned to his course in the bedcover.

...up and over, around, and back again. Keep going — left and down again, back and around... In a couple minutes, the track brought him back to the pistol. *There's an omen for you. Such BS, Phillip. No, no it isn't; find the prick.* He grabbed the gun and left the room. The chill was there, but somehow he moved more quickly than he had for hours.

On a pastel spring morning, months before he met the cab driver, Phillip watched pink and tangerine clouds retreat and scatter from the sun, dissipating in the powder-blue sky. Taking advantage of his father's absence, Phillip sought some serenity in their expansive back yard. This was his time to enjoy the day — the early quiet, the crisp air, and the shade from the house over their open patio. Most other residents of the Ponderosa vicinity would wait for church to end or for the chilling influence of the mountains to burn off so they could begin sun-worshipping activities later in the day.

In ragged jeans and a faded green flannel shirt, Phillip stretched back in an aluminum chaise, his wool slipper-socks resting well short of the end of the furniture. His new black and white Ponderosa Panthers baseball hat was tilted back, and a swatch of dark blond hair spilled over his forehead, tickling his fair eyebrows.

Phillip swept the strands to the side and settled in with the thick Sunday paper, a cup of hot cider, and two plain cake doughnuts. Under his chair, rock music from a transistor radio thumped away in a soft, regular beat. He wedged a pillow gingerly behind his weathered, slightly sunburned neck.

After reading the headlines then starting on the sports, Phillip heard squawking from one of the flowering bushes that lined their back fence on both sides of a crabapple tree. He looked up to see a fat robin perch precariously on a lilac branch, bending some lavender blossoms to the ground. Phillip returned to the sports but decided he'd read enough of another "Miracle of Lake Placid" story. He began an article about his favorite team, the Portland Trailblazers, and their chances of winning the NBA championship as they had three years before, in 1977. Phillip lost his place moments later when an orange blur streaked by above the bill of his cap. Lifting his head too late to see the robin clearly, he noticed that the steady finches had abandoned his birdfeeder in the crabapple tree.

What's the deal? The cat must be around. He squinted at the tree and then reached over to a nearby chair for the bulk of the Sunday paper and plopped it onto the ground next to him. Recalling his father's decree to spray off the furniture and the patio, he brushed the chair's plastic straps with the ends of his fingers and then checked his hand.

It's hardly even dirty. So? He didn't want to anger Stephen and give him an excuse to cancel a doctor's appointment when he returned from the convention back in Chicago. Phillip had finally convinced him to have a mole on his neck checked and to get a physical while he was at it. Since he had failed for years to get his father to find help for his alcoholism, Phillip felt little compunction from a covert phone call he made to fill in the doctor on Stephen's addiction.

The chairs can wait till tomorrow. He finished one doughnut, sipped some cider, and then reached down for the front page.

Thank God there's only a month left. He would only have to steel himself from Stephen until the end of the school year and the beginning of his summer plans.

Phillip was finishing his sixth year of teaching science, health, P.E., and coaching basketball at Ponderosa Junior High. The week after school was over he would be off for the mountains as a low-wage research assistant on a summer project to investigate the population and range of the Canada lynx in the Northwest.

The news about the research came before Thanksgiving just after another development, Phillip's new relationship with Guadalupe Rosendall. He couldn't decide which was more unlikely, being hired for the project or having a girl friend like Lupe, whom he considered "out of his league" when they met. Taken together, his new girl friend and the lynx research allowed him hope that the balance of events in his life had taken a positive turn, but his optimism struggled against an underlying dread that Stephen waited at some sort of imminent fulcrum with an anvil in each hand.

Phillip caught himself in thought, still reading the news but not processing the words. *He'll pull something for sure to avoid the doctor. You've got two more days; don't even think about him.* He let the paper drop to his lap, drank more cider, then put his head back again and tapped his calf to the beat of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold." Enjoying one of the song's harmonica riffs, he was surprised to see a bank of steel-grey clouds blotting the western sky. The music cut off on the radio and he sat up, expecting to hear low rumbling in the distance.

The weatherman's wrong — he said hot and dry. Good deal; bring on the rain. Phillip stood up to scrutinize the dark front. There was still no thunder; it was completely quiet for several seconds until one of the robins screeched and then a high-pitched voice began stuttering on the radio.

"...uh, we're breaking in — yes, for some, uh, news — no, a news bulletin." The young disc jockey, apparently trained only to deal with pre-recorded programming, continued to speak incoher-

ently and seemed to doubt what he was reading. He finally got it across that Mount Saint Helens in the Cascades had a massive eruption and the ash was heading their way.

Phillip immediately rechecked the menacing clouds; they were already closer and darker, stitched with white heat lightning. *Good God, get the camera. Wait, who should know about this? Lupe — no, she's in town.* Feeling like he had to share the startling news with someone, Phillip moved toward the house, his head turned back to the looming gunmetal-grey horizon as if it were chasing him. He heard the whine of a grass trimmer next door; Phillip stopped and decided that even his father's obnoxious drinking crony would want to know.

2

The five thousand or so residents of the Ponderosa area had no medical specialists and no taxis, so, like Phillip, they sometimes found themselves with no choice but to hire a Four Rivers cab for a doctor's appointment in the city, forty miles away. Such inconvenience was anathema to a powerful faction who had pined for years for Ponderosa to become "a bustling small city." It drove them nuts that so many fellow citizens said things like, "This is a nice little farming town; folks around here would just as soon keep it that way."

Back in 1966, after the long-awaited arrival of their only fast-food chain restaurant, the boosters' pride in the new chicken joint spurred them on to new projects, starting with a motto. Since the valley was located an hour's drive from a small skiing resort, the local chamber of commerce began promoting Ponderosa as "The Aspen of the Northwest." A few irked citizens pointed out that it was pathetic to pretend to be some other place.

Undaunted by the criticism, the chamber decided they needed an attraction that was somehow related to the trees for which “the growing city” was named, though most ponderosas had long ago been removed from the valley. The stalwart western pines were still ubiquitous in the nearby hills and riparian zones, and a few survived on the ridges of basalt escarpments east and west of town.

After greasing the wheels of progress, the boosters and investors began planning for The New Ponderosa Ranch to be constructed southeast of town on the road to Ski-Eden. More than a dozen people spoke against the project at a hearing before the Redfield County Planner, who, to no one’s surprise, summarily decided the “Ranch” was approved.

Not long after that, two new signs went up at the city limits. One said, “OPEN NEXT SUMMER: THE NEW PONDEROSA RANCH - STATE RD 39 - MILE 21,” and the other, “WELCOME TO PONDEROSA - THE ASPEN OF THE NORTHWEST,” the latter with a logo of a pointy Christmas tree that resembled neither a ponderosa nor an aspen.

So, scores of pines were removed and underbrush was cleared from the land. Without consulting the owner of the rights to the TV western, the developers created a mini-version of a cattle town and the famous family’s spread, carefully avoiding use of the words, *Bonanza* or “Cartwright.”

The mock homestead even had sculpted dummies of the TV characters with trumped-up but unmistakable names like “Horse,” instead of “Hoss.” False-fronted shops on Main Street hawked cowboy trinkets and apparel; you could buy “Pa’s Mint Moonshine” ice cream at the Sarsaparilly Saloon, and there were other attractions like The Ol’Timey Arcade, Hop Wing’s Restaurant, and The Cattle Drive Miniature Golf Course.

They advertised throughout the West, once on national TV, and every visiting vehicle was decorated with “SEE THE NEW

PONDEROSA RANCH” bumper stickers. Most of the businesses ran only in the warmer months and by the second year they started going belly-up. The boosters couldn’t fathom why the world didn’t beat a path to the gates of *Bonanza* redux, and the grand scheme was abandoned. They kept Main Street as a ghost town and scaled back the enterprise to two active buildings: the Chinese restaurant and the Ponderosa Ranch Gift Shop and Museum — “ONLY ONE BUCK TO SEE ‘PA’ AND ALL THE OTHER DUMMIES UPSTAIRS.”

The vicinity’s only modern subdivision, predictably dubbed Ponderosa Estates, was to be the second jewel of local expansion. Two miles past city limits on the road to the ill-fated Ranch, the housing project covered most of an entire rural section and was divided into one-and-a-half-acre parcels — just enough room to convince prospective buyers that they would be in for some natural country living — but the elderberry, serviceberry, bitterbrush, bunchgrass, sage, cottonwood, willow, and the coyotes, prairie dogs, porcupines, jackrabbits, falcons, meadowlarks, pheasants, quail, rattlesnakes and skunks soon gave way to the bulldozers.

At first there were only a few models — three-bedroom ramblers with sprawling lawns to blend in with a planned three-par golf course. The next homes sprung up one by one with unrolled turf, spindly foreign trees, and great slabs of pavement. That initial energy was followed by years of declining sales, and the subdivision stabilized with as many empty lots as homesites. Sage gradually reclaimed the unsold acres, cheat replaced bunchgrass, and small critters and coyotes again made themselves at home.

Soon after the original “ranch homes” in Ponderosa Estates went on the market, Stephen Stark told his son that he’d asked for a transfer and they would be moving from Seattle, across the mountains to Ponderosa. Phillip was seventeen and reeling from his first experience with an immediate death — his mother’s — a few weeks before, but he didn’t complain about changing schools for his senior year. On a July weekend in 1968 they moved into one

of the last models built in the development. Phillip soon found work in town at the market and on days off he sought refuge from his father's worsening drinking habits by exploring the mountains.

As a child, Phillip Stark was Rockwell material for the Saturday Evening Post — thin and towheaded, with a mask of freckles beneath his azure eyes. By the time his senior year began, his face was free of maculation, his thick hair had darkened some, and he was in top shape from all the hiking.

He conformed enough to get along during his one year at Ponderosa High, but Phillip stuck mostly to his own interests and made few friends. His reasonably good looks and even some unexpected celebrity in basketball couldn't save him from occasional ridicule. Phillip's main "offenses" were reading unassigned books about animals and bringing in his collections of natural specimens to Advanced Biology, his only "A" subject.

In the eleven-plus years after the Starks settled into Ponderosa Estates, the land for the doomed golf course gradually turned even wilder than the vacant lots, and the subdivision eventually became a patchwork of tract homes, a few two-story places and, most recently, some doublewide modulars. Some of the newer landowners ignored the development's covenants for tidiness, which angered Stephen, who frowned upon anything less than a fairway-perfect yard.

It was Stephen's immaculate lawn that made Phillip hesitate after he heard the frantic announcement about the eruption. Before heading for the neighbor's fence, he recalled one of Stephen's parting edicts: "Remember to walk around to your damn birdfeeder." He had planted a long strip of new grass to replace one of the garden beds.

“Screw it,” Phillip said, separating two of the chest-high manicured arborvitae that surrounded the patio. As if crossing a creek, he long-jumped Stephen’s precious seedlings and then turned back to discover that his heels had trampled a few lime-green blades of grass.

Too bad; they’ll grow back. He rolled up his sleeves on the way to the fence then climbed up on a pile of old steppingstones his father put there to provide a boost over the planks. It always bothered Phillip that Mick Lewis, who was six-foot-four, could snoop into their yard any time he wanted. Like Stephen, Phillip was five-eight, and now his eyes, nose and mouth just cleared the top of the boards. He checked Mick’s nearby patio and pool, then scanned the half acre of weedless lawn until he spotted him trimming around his garden shed, unclothed down to the waist.

Though Lewis was slender below the midline, his shoulders and arms were burly, and his beer belly protruded over the front of the baggy swim trunks he liked to wear night and day. His black body hair made his tanned skin seem even darker, and from a distance he could pass for a tall, portly aborigine. Phillip didn’t know and didn’t care what Mick looked like face to face; he avoided and despised him for starting up drunken binges with Stephen, who once told his son that Mick referred to Phillip as “Steve’s fuckin’ ol’ lady.”

Lewis turned off the trimmer, walked across the lawn to the patio and picked up a beer. His two-story colonial with the forty-foot pool was custom built a few years after the Starks moved in. Now in his mid-fifties like Stephen, Mick was divorced with no kids and could afford the home because he and his siblings inherited a local dairy, though Phillip was sure he made a negligible contribution to the business.

“Mister Lewis,” Phillip called. *Mister?*

Mick took a swig from the can and looked at Phillip. “What do you want, kid?” Not caring if Phillip answered, Lewis put down

the beer and glared at a black stinkbug drowning in the shimmering blue water.

Kid — shit. Well, you had to tell somebody; what did you expect? “Those clouds up there.” He pointed over the wooden shingles on Mick’s roof. “It’s ash from the volcano.”

Not even looking up, Lewis turned away. “It’s a storm — see the damn lightning?” he said, reaching for a pool skimmer.

Asshole, suit yourself. Phillip jumped down and rushed to the house to retrieve a camera. On the way back out he stopped briefly to check the news on TV. They were showing the spewing volcano and talking mostly about mudflows and casualties, not the ash fall. By the time he came outside, the sky was still a brilliant spring blue to the east, but the oncoming iron-grey ash moved in from the west like a slow curtain of turbulent dry fog. He sat on the back step and hurriedly put on his shoes, watching the spectacle as he tied.

Phillip finished off the film with shots of the ominous slate clouds and the mute lightning, knowing the latter wouldn’t turn out. He inserted his only spare cartridge and cursed himself for putting off the repair of his old thirty-five millimeter camera. Next door, Mick’s lawn mower roared to life and then idled.

Idiot — screw him, it’s almost here. This’ll be incredible.