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PARADISE FALLS, a novel in progress

CHAPTER ONE

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I shut away my marriage in moving boxes, said good-bye to my wife's brick house, and drove to California. My aunt Joan had died a few years back and had left me her one-bedroom cottage near La Crista, so I wrote the tenants and moved them out, and sped across the great plains to my future. I hoped to discover a new way to support what seemed then the fragile architecture of my soulless living.

I had heard that dogs, especially Irish Setters, do not travel without some difficulty, and not long after we had squared ourselves away in Aunt Joan's cottage, Missy had begun to moan through the night. It was a troublesome sound, greedy with sorrow, and I had begun to lose sleep, fearing that I'd have unseemly neighbors on my hands. The neighbors never materialized, and I began to wonder if Aunt Joan had made any friends here, or if she had gone out at all. The dog's moaning went on and on, and I would rise irritably, scratch my way through the want ads, tabulate and re-configure the extent of my savings account, and go back to bed.

In Indiana I had represented a chain of Chicago-based furniture manufacturers to three dozen retailers from South Bend to down-state Evansville. My father had given the territory to me when he passed into retirement in Miami. All I knew, I knew from him, and most of what I knew was to love the road and to stay on it no matter the hardships at home. Sondra knew all *she* knew when she married me: I had spirited her from the fog-beset, bottom land of Greencastle and shunted her into a comfortable city life she could not have attained otherwise. I had been a good salesman, but my career peaked and

waned, and in the end I could not sell her much about marriage. You have to have patience, see over the hills into the better times -- but Sondra said I had squandered all my priviledges. I lost the territory.

I don't stay down long, I just won't. After a month in California I adjusted to Missy's whine. I beat my inertia and went into action. First thing I did when I got out of bed for keeps was take a job selling time for KNOW, the classical music station in Santa Rosa. Selling is selling, and selling time, after all, is not unlike touting furniture. Beacham, the station manager, saw that straight away; he set me up with a Astro van and handed me a map to Sonoma and Mendocino, and I was in business. The van was outfitted with a cellular phone, and I'd set up calls in Sonoma while I drove up to calls in Ukiah. I'd stop at banks and chambers of commerce and automobile dealerships and leave my card which said, "Be in the KNOW." And late in the day, after dropping the van downtown, I'd drive the station wagon home to La Crista where Missy was yelping in the backyard of dead Aunt Joan's cottage.

Those were my worst hours. I would be a liar if I did not say it did me wonders to see her tail whapping away as I dragged out of the wagon and sat in the dusk on the backyard stoop. I was beat and deflated, too tuckered to head straight into the empty house and throw together a hamburger and a can of vegetables and wait for the news to cycle around the television. I listened to Mahler and Brahms in Joan's lumpy recliner and rubbed Missy's neck until I couldn't keep my eyes open, then I'd undress quickly in the dark and climb in the firm side of Joan's bed, furthest from the night stand. I'd set the clock radio to wake to KNOW, which first in the morning would issue bubbly flute concertos and overtures -- pull-on-your-socks music. Missy would wait at the foot of the bed and whimper, and once I let her out, I'd sit in the claw-footed tub with the shower curtain drawn because the steam worked better that way on my neck and shoulders, and then I'd dry off and sit naked in the dining room and eat my poached egg and swallow two mugs of coffee. For those first few months I sold time for KNOW and drove all

about Northern California and stayed lonely and did not fluctuate from this routine until Missy had begun to spit blood.

At first I thought Missy's gums were sore, but then I was in the yard early on a Saturday and saw pearls of blood on her dog-house pillow. Right then I carried Missy to the wagon and went into the house for a phone directory, which I read while driving north. There was a Klemma Veterinary in Paradise Falls. The ad said, "All Needs Met" and was accompanied by a Chinese character. I drove up there without stopping to call, without thinking really, Missy riding in the back, her eyes hopeful and mooning in the mirror. Beams of sunlight fell through the gaps in the eucalyptus trees.

Doctor Klemma's office was located mid-town in a brown adobe. A stand of redwoods towered overhead. The office was dimly lit by scented candles, and hidden speakers pumped in woo-woo music -- Zen chimes and the sound of wind. I was not happy with the furniture, either. Instead of a functional couch-and-chair combination, there were tasseled pillows, futons, and a Chinese screen. A hard-wood table took up the center of the floor and upon it lay health literature and pet-grooming magazines and a single chrome chime which rang out a bright F-sharp when I tapped it with the mallet. I had been in Northern California now for three months and could not abide by the grooviest things. It is easy to pick on the eccentricities, but I have to tell you that the Santa Rosa paper had a listing for a support group for people who had been abducted by spirit bodies.

There was a nurse's station, set behind a rectangle of sliding glass. I sat Missy by the table and I tapped on the window and when no one opened it, I rapped on the frosted-glass window of a door which led to the clinic area. No one seemed to hear that, so I knocked again and when no one answered, I peeked inside.

The door opened upon a scrubbed treatment room with a chrome table and overhead light. Redwood cabinets had been built into the walls and the shelves contained

packets and bandages and drugs in their wrappers. On one wall, there was a chart indicating acupuncture points for dogs.

“Excuse me,” I said, and still no one replied, so I went back to the waiting room and sat cross-legged on the futon. Missy came over and lay her head in my lap. I lifted her muzzle and unfolded a handkerchief on my trousers and then let her jaw drop.

The front door opened and a young, black woman in a turquoise sweatsuit strolled in with a Styrofoam cup in her hand. She walked with exquisite posture, as if she was carrying a glass of water on her head, and my eyes went straight to the red ear-rings that looked like tongues. There was a crystal of rose quartz set in a choker at her throat. She smiled when she saw Missy and me.

“Just one moment,” she said, and ducked behind the inner door.

When she opened it again, she had wrapped herself in a white smock and her blue fingernails looked like glowing stones beneath the latex surgical gloves.

“You’re lucky,” she said, “I don’t normally see animals today.”

“It’s almost an emergency,” I said, rising to my feet. I put out my hand and shook latex. Her hand was surprisingly warm and I held it.

“Missy’s bleeding,” I said, then introduced myself.

“Phillip Gathers what?” she said. It was an old joke that I had long ago decided to ignore. She raised her hand to my shoulder. “You bring her in, Phillip, and we’ll have a look. And don’t worry ‘til we know.” She held the door open for us.

“Even then, don’t worry.”

I thanked her, then felt stupid. Missy had crept up and was sniffing Dr. Klemma’s smock. There was a voltaic charge in the room, an iron-ore taste in the air. We went ahead into the examining room and I put Missy on the table.

“First, I check in here,” said Dr. Klemma, baring Missy’s teeth and drawing a finger over her gums. “You love this dog, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, and shuffled my feet.

“Well, she’s eminently lovable.”

Dr. Klemma swabbed the back of Missy’s throat. She held one hand on Missy’s neck and I couldn’t take my eyes off of those blue nails. All the while she was saying something to me about low-fat, high-grain-content pet foods and the need to brush Missy’s teeth, and I could not look at her. I felt the immense and overwhelming evidence of cancer. It was like seeing broad and interwoven beams across the expanse of a dim cavernous hall: the inevitable structure of mortality.

She was satisfied with the throat. Dr. Klemma asked me to roll Missy over, and she began kneading the dog’s stomach, her hands rocking gently.

I was trying to be cute. “I didn’t bring in my dog for a massage.”

Dr. Klemma went ahead anyway. “She doesn’t mind, do you Missy?”

My dog looked at me, then at Dr. Klemma. I just stared at those hands on Missy’s stomach.

“She has lumps,” Dr. Klemma said. She let go of my dog and turned to one of the cabinets and began rummaging, peeking into several of the small white boxes until she found what she wanted.

“Phillip,” she said, “brighten up. We don’t know anything, and the D-O-G can pick up on your fear. OK?”

“You have an idea,” I said. “Don’t you?”

She shook her head and the ear rings jangled. I watched her neck, watched the quartz amulet jump at her throat with each beat of her heart.

“If you want definite answers,” she said, “you’re going to have to go to another vet. There are plenty in Santa Rosa if you wait ‘til Monday.”

“No,” I said, deflated. “You tell me what to do.”

She handed me the white packet. “These are dyes,” she said. “Perfectly safe and organic. On Monday morning you feed two to Missy. She’ll like the taste of them. Come straight here and we’ll take images.”

“All right,” I said. My voice had trickled down to a plaint. I nudged Missy off the table and she sat at my feet, tail swishing.

We went out then, and when we got to the waiting room, I fished around for my checkbook and realized I had left it at home.

“Stop worrying,” said Dr. Klemma. She put her arms around me in a quick, professional hug, but just the same...

“Don’t scare Missy. Plenty of love and fresh water.”

“The bleeding,” I said, but Dr. Klemma shrugged and raised her open palms, and then she closed the door.

MONDAY MORNING I had already imagined that Missy was dead and had rehearsed in my mind burying her in Aunt Joan’s yard, busting up the wooden dog house afterwards for the fireplace. I had been out back just before dawn, walking the grass near the redwood slat fence when I noticed the crown of a Homburg hat just beyond the pickets. It was barely light, but I made out the tan crown with a yellow feather tucked in the hat band, and as I went one way, the hat shadowed me. I coughed into my fist -- a loud, false cough -- and the hat disappeared. A moment later I stole up to the fence and looked on tiptoe over the slats. There was the neighbor’s yard, black in shadows, the faint pink sunrise echoed on the surface of a swimming pool, and no sign of my hatted spy save the solitary light that burned beyond a narrow window.

I should have run after, but I am too, too fat. Some day it shall kill me.

I went back in the house and sat down to breakfast. I fed Missy the tablets and lay my hand on her neck so I could feel them going down. I sat in the warming sun and stroked her head until it was time to go.

As we drove to Paradise Falls, the sun lay behind the eastern hills and the redwood trees were black torsos against the muted woods. When I took Missy from the rear of the station wagon, I saw a spatter of blood on the blue carpet.

This time, a receptionist lurked behind the windows at Dr. Klemma's office, an Asian woman with an earnest smile who could have been in her twenties, or her forties; it was hard to say. She could not find an appointment for me and it was then that I realized I had left on Saturday without making one.

"My dog is spitting blood," I said, and the receptionist put her fingers to her lips. She nodded toward the waiting room where three people had already begun to tilt their heads our way. One of these, a middle-aged woman, held a spider monkey on a red leash.

"But it's true," I said. I turned to the visitors carefully arranged on Dr. Klemma's tasseled cushions. "She's dying."

The receptionist had disappeared behind the sliding glass window and a moment later, Dr. Klemma appeared at the door to the examination room. Her eyes were set together, blazing.

"Come right back, Mr. Gathers," she said. As I passed, she draped her arm around me and when the door closed behind us, she pressed those nails into my shoulder.

"Attitude!" she said. "My patients don't need dark energy thrown over them."

I wondered by her reference if she had meant the animals or their owners.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm scared."

"There's a difference between fear and negativity," said Dr. Klemma. "If you have no faith in anything, Phillip, at least have some faith in me."

Missy hopped up on the table, her eyes moist and seeking. As Dr. Klemma passed behind me, I felt a shudder in my body. She came around and ran her gloved hands again inside Missy's mouth, then she turned my dog on her back and began massaging her stomach.

"You could do this yourself," she said, "At home. Let her know that she's loved, whatever condition she's in."

I had tried to touch her over the weekend, but I could not stand the feel of those lumps, ranging like predators under Missy's skin. I could not stand it.

She stopped massaging a moment and looked me in the eye. I had to look away, look to the table where my dog lay happily attended.

Dr. Klemma reached over, pushed a lighted button on the side of the table and I heard a chime sound. "We're going to take some pictures of you," she said, wrinkling up her nose and smiling into Missy's face. "You can wait outside a moment, okay Phil?"

"All right."

The Asian woman passed me on the way out. As I closed the door, I heard the machines begin to whir and, moments later, through the transom I saw a blue light well up and throw Missy's shadow on the wall.

There was incense puffing away on the table and I sat on a pillow, cross-legged, a teenage girl in a green and red Grateful Dead shirt and torn jeans to one side of me and an elderly man in slacks and gray cardigan on the other. The man held a cat in his lap and his eyes were closed. The cat was meditating, too. The girl didn't seem to have a pet at all, but she had a plaster cast on her right arm, cradled in a sling. The woman with the spider monkey had apparently gone out.

"If your Irish setter dies, she'll have a nest in heaven," said the girl, quite uninvited. "I have a horse waiting for me there."

"I imagine he'd have wings, then," I said. "Like Pegasus."

"Don't be judgmental," said the girl. "When you do, you judge, and you're mental."

The elderly man with the cat opened one eye, then the other, and then he smirked. His face did a waltz.

He said, "I was married many years when my wife left me because I was temperamental. I had a helluva temper, and I was mental."

"What can you do?" said the girl.

“I bought Henry here.” He rubbed his knuckles atop the cat’s head and the animal purred like it had gravel in its throat. “Poor Henry.”

“What’s he got?” I asked.

“Fleas. You’ve never seen fleas like Henry’s got them.”

I had immediately begun to itch.

“Seems unnecessary to come here with that,” I said. “You can buy repellent over the counter.”

The man glimpsed at me as if it were I, perhaps, who was infested.

“Dr. Klemma rubs a tincture of Pennyroyal into his hair. Uses crystals, too, and Reiki. Last summer she did his past-life regression and found an evil thread in his soul matrix.”

“How unlucky!” said the girl. “Karma is as karma does. My horse fell on a log and broke my arm. She broke her own leg, too, and she died.”

I stood up and stretched, walked to the door and leaned my ear against it. I could hear only the soft whir of the air exchanger and Dr. Klemma’s voice, a distant coo.

The girl had begun to weep. “Dr. Klemma had to come out and put my horse down. I held her muzzle through it all, then Dr. Klemma drove me from Paradise Falls all the way to Santa Rosa to have my arm set. By the time we got back, the renderers had already gone.”

“That’s quite a testimonial,” I said.

I heard them coming and the jangle of Missy’s tags, so I opened the door and let my dog trot over to me. I knelt down and let her lick my face.

“Call in a week,” said Dr. Klemma. She hugged the X-rays to her chest.

“That’s a long time.”

“I have to send these to a specialist in Rochester. Please, I don’t think a week will change things. Meanwhile it’s a soft-foods diet for Missy. You can get that from Alexia on your way out.”

Dr. Klemma opened her arms and I moved into them. She held the X-rays and I felt them against my back. “Phillip,” she hushed, “Go easy.”

I thanked her, took my dog into the waiting room where the man in the cardigan had put his arms around the girl with the broken arm. The cat was sparring with one of the tassels. Missy growled. Good old dog, I thought, no matter what condition you’re in.

I led her out to the station wagon and gave her a bowl of water. Then I returned to the clinic to receive the diet from the receptionist and to settle the account. I hate unsettled things. The girl with the dead horse had apparently gone back with Dr. Klemma.

“You take care,” said the man with the cat of fleas.

WHEN I WAS a boy in Indianapolis, we owned a Boston terrier named Joe Louis who burst out the screen door one afternoon and raced under the wheels of a newspaper van. I was about ten. We lived on a busy street and after Joe Louis was smashed, mother no longer approved of loose pets. In those days, my father would come back from his sales junkets laden with baubles for my two younger sisters and me. He brought parakeets and gerbils and pennants from the ball parks he said he visited with his clients. Maybe it was true.

Usually he brought peace offerings for mother, silk nylons and painted eggs and something exotic for the pantry. Mother loved caviar to excess, and sturgeon and stuffed derma, a sausage made by filling animal intestines with vegetables. She especially liked calf brains, put through a meat grinder with chicken fat and carrots. And she loved kidneys sizzled in the pan with scallions, and beef heart, broiled or stewed in fricassee. She ate organ meats as if she was constructing a separate animal inside her.

“You have to have something to show for it,” she’d say, bemoaning the length of my father’s trips. And she swelled up to a hundred and eighty-eight pounds by the time I finished high school. She did not get exercise, and I don’t think she believed in going out

herself except to run the water on the lawn. She grumbled about my staying away from the house too long on summer days. So it was no surprise that following the Joe Louis episode, when father brought back a miniature Lab from his trip to Dayton, mother put the dog on a leash, and tied it to a doorknob. My sisters, who were two and six at the time, didn't mind a bit having Rooney chained to the bedroom door.

Every evening around five I took Rooney to the yard, let him have at the lawn, and cleaned up afterwards with a shovel. Set loose, he'd streak in wide circles under the ivy and through the rhododendrons, which broke mother's heart. How she'd scream at him. But the wild look in Rooney's eyes, his tongue blowing back as he romped, made me laugh all the more at the sheer insanity of the rules. Sometimes, I filled up the shovel and tossed his shit over the neighbor's fence.

Every so often, Rooney would get free and break headlong at the latched screen door. One Saturday when he was about six, when I was in high school and dismally studying math on the kitchen table, he gnawed through the leash just as our postman came to collect on a letter. Rooney stormed out the door, ducked beneath the screeching tires of a brown sedan, and fled us forever. I'd like to imagine that he found a pack of strays and they ran north into the hills of St. Joseph's county. But he could have died any old way, I suppose.

Once I grew up I took Rooney's route, the path of my father, dodging eternally on the road from outlet to outlet, driving seventy miles an hour with the windows down, even in winter, ranging from New Albany to Muncie, from Gary to Cape Girardeau, evading speed traps in Valparaiso, then home to Indianapolis, which by now my wife from down state was calling Indian-No-Place. I had come home from a furniture trade show in New Orleans with Missy, hoping the puppy would keep Sondra company. I was stupid. I was a lousy, hard-working husband. Unlike my mother, Sondra liked to go out a lot. She did not need Missy to keep her company, especially when I was gone, and when our marriage failed, she wanted nothing to do with the dog.

THE HOMBURG HAT appeared again following my visit to Dr. Klemma's. I was standing on the patio, talking with an advertiser on my cordless phone one starry evening just after dusk, Venus just beneath the lunar crescent. The client had no idea of what time costs. He was the owner of a building supply store in Jenner who was considering a premium slot during KNOW's morning schedule, and I was selling pretty hard, keeping the talk going so he wouldn't think too much and back down. You have to confuse people for their own good.

We were done and I would drive to Jenner the next day to get it all down on paper, and as I pushed the off button on the telephone, I saw Missy on her hind legs, scratching at a corner of Aunt Joan's fence. Then I saw the hat, moving in the margin of air between the pickets and the dangling leaves. I shouted, "Down, Missy!" and huffed to the fence, the phone in my hand.

"Stop, you!" Just as I glimpsed over the fence, Missy seized the phone from my hands and began tearing around the yard, the antennae sticking out one side of her jaw. Darkness had closed over the pines and across the lawns, so I had but a second to see the sliding glass door close in the neighbor's house and the curtains jerk across the doorway. A light flicked on in the window.

"Come here, dog," I said, "get over here, you shit." But Missy shook the phone in her mouth, and when I finally got it back, half the keys were broken off and the antennae was bent. I screamed at her and screamed, but she rolled on her back and dropped out her tongue and spread her stomach so I could scratch it, lumps and all. What could you do with her? I scratched around the lumps, holding my breath. I gave one last look over the fence at the bright window of light in the neighbor's house, and then I went to bed.

The next morning before driving to Jenner, I went out in the sun and peered over the fence. The sun threaded through the ripples in the neighbor's pool. The grass swept up from the edge of the pool and ended in a series of rolling tufts just beneath the fence.

The level of the turf came half-way up the fence, with respect to my yard, and I realized that the man who wore the Homburg hat could easily stand and spy into Aunt Joan's yard, and then crouch down when he thought I might be looking. It was creepy.

When I arrived at the radio station to pick up the van, Beacham was in rare brilliance. I was doing a splendid job, just splendid he said, cooing over a new putter. Nobody ever worked harder for the KNOW. He stroked a golf ball across the carpet. I received a two thousand dollar commission check and a gift-wrapped book, and Beacham advised me to take a few days' rest -- *after* I inked the construction supply contract at Jenner. I objected, but he said I looked like hell and you can't look like hell and represent a classical music station. Seventies rock, maybe, where the bands receive blood transfusions.

Vacation! I felt like I was being lowered gently into a well. I couldn't tell which was worse, abandoning Missy or staying home and watching the tumors grow. It felt heartless to try and board her. I did not know anyone with whom I might leave the dog besides Beacham, and I could not ask him because I certainly did not want my boss to know I had no one else to ask. So it came down to a five-day weekend at Aunt Joan's with my failing Irish Setter.

The soft-mush diet that Dr. Klemma had prescribed seemed to fire a reprieve in her. Missy sped about the house, rattling the floor lamps and knocking books from the shelves. She lapped like a drunk from the toilet. She had ceased moaning altogether, and sat at my feet like a Zen disciple, her tongue going in and out. Apparently, she had no appetite for the new telephone.

The first day I sat out back in the sun and read Beacham's gift-wrapped book. It was about the mountains and written by a poet who lived in forest-fire lookout tower. I couldn't keep my mind on it. The poems made me want to get up and move.

The following day we piled in the station wagon and drove to the Mendocino shore where Missy chased gulls and bit at the foam that hissed up on the sand. On the

way home we stopped by a blackberry field in Booneville and I counted crows on the telephone wires: twenty six!

Thursday we drove east past the petrified forest to see the geyser in Calistoga. It went off on a regular schedule. That night we slept in a tent and listened to billowing frogs.

Friday morning we stayed home. I said, "Missy, I'm bored and sad." I was ready for anything to change.

THAT AFTERNOON I could wait no longer, and I telephoned Dr. Klemma. She had dark things to tell me. "Missy has tumors throughout her viscera. Sorry. The reader in Rochester said that her spirit has no further interest in her body and it's ready to leave."

"Your reader in Rochester said that?"

"Yes, Phillip, that's why I sent the films to her."

"Damn," I said, "damn the whole cosmic yada-yada!"

I hung up, and when she phoned back a moment later, I let it ring. It had all gone out of me.

I walked out to the yard and not a second later I saw the peaks of the Homburg hat rising in the shadows of the pines. Missy raced over to the fence and began whining. I started for the fence, then changed my mind. I ran in my back door and chugged through the house.

I lumbered across Aunt Joan's front yard, around the corner, and up the street until I reached the neighbor's house and pounded on the front door.

A light burned over the porch and through the adjoining window a single light burned in the house. I rang the bell, beat on the door, then I rang the bell and beat on the door at the same time.

The garage door was open and I went into the empty two-car bay. There was a work bench with a drill press, chisels and a band saw, and on a wooden pallet stood a

washing machine and clothes dryer. A bicycle hung from a single hook in the rafters. I looked for another entry to the house. I went around and tried the door again, this time gripping the locked knob and throwing my weight against it. Then, I walked home, my asthma grinding in my lungs. The phone rang a few times before I switched off the ringer.

**BACKSLIDING INTO REMORSE** Saturday morning, I put Missy in the station wagon and drove to Paradise Falls. The road was edged with rime; wet moss draped the arms of the tress. I did not know if Dr. Klemma would be in her office or if I would have to scour the redwood village looking for her, but I was going to apologize, then get to the bottom of things.

The office was closed, though a solitary candle seemed to flicker through the misted window. I went across the parking lot to a bakery. There was a pay phone adjacent to a glass case of frosted doughnut holes. I found a listing for Nila Klemma, residence, and dropped in my quarter.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Let your dog die with dignity.”

“For heaven’s sake,” I said, “what does that mean?”

She said, “I will not pump that dog with pentathol and that’s that. Buy a gun, it’s easy. Or take her into Santa Rosa and find someone there to end your suffering. That’s what we’re really talking about, isn’t it? You’re the center of all pain and woe.”

I could not say anything to that. The clarity took me broadsides, and I felt as useless then as I had felt dull all my life.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’ve been utterly selfish.”

I could hear her breathing. “Where are you, Phillip?”

“The phone booth at the Paradise Cafe.”

“I mean,” she said, “where *are* you? Never mind, I’ll be over in a few minutes. Find us a table.”

I was trying a tall *latte* in a cup that said Paradise when Dr. Klemma walked in, dressed in her blue jogging costume and quartz choker, and took a seat beside me. For the moment, we just looked at each other and the surge was so intense, I wanted to lift my shirt over my eyes. For a while we did not say anything, and finally Dr. Klemma broke away. She went and bought herself a cup of coffee and then came back to the table. The cup had a lid on it.

“Okay,” she said, standing, “I see just where you are. Keep Missy on that diet and bring her back to me if she’s suffering. You’ll know it. And call if you need me.”

“I need you now,” I said.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said, her eyes sharpening. “Don’t start!”

“Dr. Klemma.”

She leaned across the table and pinched my earlobe. “Wake up, Phillip. Just follow directions and it’ll all work out. Missy and everything else.”

“You’re right,” I said, but my head was drifting and my hands felt pumped with helium. Dr. Klemma shook her head, then she turned with great care and walked out of the Paradise Cafe. After I drove Missy home, I went out to the yard and sunk into the chaise lounge.

There was still the afternoon, then one long, sun-smashed day of vacation to survive. Missy slept quietly on her side, the wind stirring her tail. I rubbed her belly with my toes.

I heard a crackling of leaves. On the strangest whim, I tiptoed past my snoozing dog to the redwood fence and surprised the shameless boy in his father’s Homburg hat just as he stole across his lawn for a look at me.

“You!” I said.

“You!” he said, “Mr. Serious!” He fell down on the grass and laughed wildly. Finally, he sat up and asked my name.

What else could I do?

“Phillip Gathers what,” he said. “Fat?”

“Very funny.”

“I gotta go, but I’ll see ya,” he said. “Wouldn’t wanna be ya.”

“Not funny!” I said as he ran off.

He stopped for a moment under the horse chestnut tree and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Then you better learn to laugh.”

After he had gone, I sat down in the grass and had myself a little taste of the truth. I let the sunlight fall on my face and shoulders, passing through me with an odd, compelling amperage. How was it that I could be near and remote at the same instant?

The wind blew its promise through the trees that since I had come this far, I would eventually come to feel everything.

As for Missy, there was no suffering. That evening she lay down in the pine needles and died. I buried her in the yard and went to bed. In my dreams it was warm under the moon-lit clouds when Dr. Klemma came to my door and kissed me on the mouth and carried Missy’s body to her car and closed the trunk. We stood in the street and she took my hand and I could not tell whether the pulse I felt in the bower of our palms was hers, or mine, or if there was a difference.

