Widow Fudge was widowed young. Her husband, a smiling sandy-haired broker, met his end on Highway 116, east of Jenner, near the mouth of the river, thanks to thick fog and a seven-ton ready-mix truck. The husband she had before that died in Montana, off up in the hills, an accident of some kind while elk hunting. She’d lived on her own these nine years or so as far we knew. She had a degree in history from the state university and a wicked way with retorts. She was forty-eight but looked younger. She had that sparkle and spark everyone likes and looks for in people. She kicked ass in chess; she was trim and fit from riding her bicycle. If anybody had a chance with her it should’ve been Reverend Bob, prince of perch fishing, truly a character, an actor in community theater, not even remotely tormented, so wry and dry in his hilarious way.

We met Wednesdays at midday to fish, Bob and Casper and Leo and me and a few other oddballs, on a dock on the north end of the bay alongside the less lovely marina. We sat on folding stools and
on ice chests and buckets, watching our bobbers and gossiping, discussing kids and grandkids and berating the government, lamenting above all the price of gas. We drank coffee or pop and hauled a fish up now and then and nobody kept anything, unless whatever it was was too big or too stuck to pass up. If you watched, around one or one-thirty, you’d see Widow Fudge curving down the hill on her bicycle. Down the steep grade she’d fly, past the saltwater taffy and kite shop and the quick-fill and Bodega Gallery, which offered tourist-grade art—fishing boats floating shrouded in fog, sea boulders battered by surf, gulls standing on pilings with foggy sunsets beyond. She’d hitch her bike to the fence in the dirt lot and head down the slatted ramp, carrying a bag she’d pull from her wicker bike basket, a bag of zucchini muffins or carrot bread or cookies usually, nothing too sinful, fixing the pins in her hair as she went. Even the dullest and deadest among us would brighten, hearing her step.

Well, what have you learned? she’d ask, addressing us all. Not one single thing, Lady Fudge, Reverend Bob would respond, shaking his head for the rest of us. It’s a whimsical world, he’d say—or something similar, equally philosophical. And add: What’s in the bag? Whiskey?

She’d scowl and ask who caught what. If the action was slow she’d ask what was the matter; clearly, she’d say, what we were lacking was drive. All the while she stepped along between us—Bob and Casper and Hammond and Leo B. Jensen and me and whoever (flannel shirts, windbreakers, Dacron vests)—and over and around the obstacle course of tackle boxes, bait bags, creels, and coolers. She didn’t exactly tower over us, either. She stood maybe four-foot-ten in her high-soled sneakers and jeans, hair piled in a windblown blond bun on her head. She’d accept a diet Sprite or a cup of black coffee from somebody’s thermos and tell us how worthless we were but she loved us anyway. Then she’d pull a hand line out of her purse—she didn’t own a rod or reel—and get a bit of bait and toss her baited hook off the dock with her bobber.

Somebody needs to get lucky here, she’d say. Guess it’ll have to be me.
What made things different today was the fact that I’d spent two nights at her house in Shell Beach. Tonight would make three. I’d had a termite tent thrown over my own place in Camp Meeker, and, well, Widow Fudge had a guest room, and insisted I stay, rather than go to the motel as planned. My buddies knew already, amazingly. Casper suspected and he’d opened his mouth, I suppose. But I’d had a sweet visit. We chopped onions and chilies and cilantro for salsa, the widow and I, and watched the news on the tube and did crosswords, there in her cedar cottage overlooking the sea.

What a sad pack of baboons, the widow said, settling down. Are we out of bait?

Reverend Bob scooted his bag her way, and the cutting board and knife. The sun shone bright, rare for July. Just a hint of fog. Casper asked Hammond how the work was coming. Hammond was painting his house on the inside in something called Amaranth Glow. Just now they were waiting for more. More amaranth paint. Casper asked Hammond, bloated red-bearded Hammond, how he liked his Viagra.

That’s idiotic, the widow said.

Why? Hammond asked.

It’s like putting a flagpole on a condemned building, she said.

We had an outgoing tide today, which meant less fish. Bob had caught one puny perch. The water’d dropped down the sea wall, fifty yards out. Barnacles and mussels gleamed on the creosoted lower slats and on posts and pilings. Even starfish were exposed. Pale purple, pink, and pale green.

So what do you know? the widow asked Bob.

Beer and chain saws, he said.

In that order?

Whichever.

He sat hunched over his knees on his yellow bucket, wilted somewhat, his vest off and top button unbuttoned. He was balding in front, with a philosopher’s forehead; his tidy gray ponytail lapped at his collar. Casper and Hammond sat to the right, and Leo beyond them, applying fresh bait, a section of anchovy, peer-
ing though his trifocals, grinning. He had his hearing aid cranked, evidently.

What made things different today was the fact that I’d landed in her bedroom after my night in the guest room. There’d been beer and salsa and chips and then snapper and salad and wine, the sun sinking into the Pacific, and more wine, then brandy. And then maybe four blurry words of a crossword and a fuzzy tussle on the living room floor, then bed. We were both embarrassed, I guess. She wouldn’t even look at me now. Add to this the fact that she and Reverend Bob were involved in a way; he’d called her house twice while I was there.

The thing was, Bob was my friend. We’d hung at the bar at Negri’s for years, hadn’t missed an Occidental Firemen’s Dance in a decade. He was my partner in crime, as they say. Overbearing, yes, and self-serving at times, but a friend I could count on. Before he retired he did construction, small-scale contracting; for a while I was part of his electrical team. He helped me put my retaining wall in, no easy job, and came to my aid when my wife Kay wigged out on Zoloft and decided, after thirty-three years of marriage, she’d had enough. He sat and listened, and listened and sat, and carted my pistol off finally, and poured the pain pills and shitty gin I had down the sink. He started Fishing Day at the Bay after that, looking for ways maybe to occupy me. To get me and us out to shoot the shit and soak up the fog and salt breeze.

A salmon boat boiled up the channel, dirty white with blue trim. It cut its engine and eased into the marina trailed by gulls. Its wake made our dock rock. I felt elated and faithless at once. I felt electrified crown to toenail. I felt like a cad. A kid came down the ramp, baggy pants, ball cap. Bob looked at Hammond and Hammond got up, groaning, and intercepted the kid. This was a private dock, but Bob knew Monty the owner. Bob had invited Leo and Hammond and most of the others. Casper was recruited by me. He lived down the hill from me, on the same road. He was the only friend I had besides Bob.

In the marina, off left, salmon boats were unloading. The bay
was almost unnervingly calm. Bob looked unwell. The widow unzipped the zipper at her collar, brushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. She had her lavender fleece on, beyond extra-small, something designed for a child, it looked like. The color was there in her cheeks, the faint raspberry swirl in gourmet ice cream. I felt her in every cell of my body. I felt her heat, her heartbeat. I could taste her violet-almond perfume. I had to keep looking away. I’d rehearsed something to say but the time never came. I was doing all I could to not look like I felt, to not melt through the cracks in the dock. You were gone before I woke up, I might’ve said. Or: what about Bob? I wasn’t sure at first in the haze if I hadn’t dreamt what we did.

A gull lit on the rail, cocking its head at my bait bag. Another boat churned in past the sea wall. We sat watching our bobbers. Leo slept, head slumped on his chest. Bob looked at me and kept looking. I looked back at him.

Did you or didn’t you? his look seemed to say.

My look answered his.

Casper got up off his collapsible stool, grunting. He stood facing Bob momentarily, then the widow.

Marion, where’s my cookie, he said. He eyed the bakery bag at her feet.

You haven’t earned yours, she said.

What about Leo B. Jensen? Leo asked in his rasp, waking up.

Catch a fish first.

He spurted something else I couldn’t make out. And then coughed. He’d smoked cigars fifty years of his life. No cancer, but his voice box was shot.

The widow’s bobber jumped, though she hadn’t been here ten minutes. She jerked her hand line.

Guess it’ll have to be me that gets lucky, she said.

Casper squinched up his face—something like a grimace.

Chuck’s the one’s got the luck, he said, looking at me.

The widow’s bobber grew still. Bob reeled in a couple of clicks, staring straight ahead. And then sighed.

Casper, you’re about as subtle as a salami, he said.
I drove north up the coast to the mouth of the river and followed the river inland to Guerneville, wanting to buy groceries, a blackberry pie perhaps and a red rose for the widow, and putty and bolts to fix her bathroom door. It took awhile; the winding two-lane was slow, and closer to town it was stop and go, stop and go, past the dusty redwoods and firs and dolled-up resorts, the wooden marquees and strings of colored lanterns, with here and there green glimpses of river. It was midweek, so no festival to blame, no jazz on the beach, no Stump Town dementia, no rodeo, no winery weekend mob, no convocation of gay bikers, black leather and biceps and painted-on tank tops. It was July on the river, simple as that. Guerneville was packed, crammed to the gills with vacationers up from San Fran or the east or south bay or out from Santa Rosa for the day to ditch the heat. It took me all but an hour to shop and check out at Safeway, to buy the pie and avocado and greens, the gallon jugs of drinking water, the pork loin and veal and can of cashews she liked, and for the ride home in the pickup, the chilled six-pack of Mickey’s. I slipped into Etter’s for hardware and heading west finally, cracked a bottle. At Monte Rio I crossed the bridge, hung a right, passed Bartlett’s and The Pink and wound south on 12, the alternate route, the long way, the back way, not wanting to get there too soon.

Let the widow wonder where I went, I guess I was thinking.

Or maybe not thinking: just doing what I did when I fell into things, which wasn’t often. I wondered what in the hell I’d done, what I was doing. It all felt like bewitchment and magic. I felt giddy and weird. And glad overall, yes, about the spell I was under, suspect as I might that the spell would dissolve, Bob or no Bob.

My town was less than a pause on the alternate route, just a carved redwood sign, Welcome to Camp Meeker!, and a tiny store and P.O. at the base of several steep hills, with narrow roads winding through the shadow-drenched canyons and up out of the dark. Occupying the main drag was the camp, sixty-three acres of wooded

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land and mosquitoes with a creek flowing through, reserved years in advance by organizations of Christians, student musicians, Republicans, psychics and spiritual healers, romance writers, student actors and Boy Scouts and Cubs and Campfires and Brownies. Dykes on Bikes, a lesbian bike gang from the City, rolled in for ten days several summers ago, but one of the bikers beat up a heckler, reconfigured his face for him and broke his knee and elbow; since then they’ve convened in spots a bit more remote.

My house on Tower Hill was still shrouded in its red and white covering. A great poison circus, it seemed, cheerfully deadly, if lopsided, drained. I stopped and gaped, window rolled down. They’d had to blast the place twice, my termite situation was grave. The tent would come off tomorrow; I could bring my plants and fish tank back Friday. I edged up to my mailbox and got my mail and curved down the hill again. In the deep dim at the bottom, on the redwood-frond floor of the canyon, Casper was waiting. He’d seen me pass going up; he stood in the road now in front of his house.

What? I said, rolling my window down.

Slow up, he told me. Critters got the right of way here.

Says who?

Some fuck squashed a king snake across the way yesterday. He pointed. Stain’s right there, if you care to see.

He still had the fishing duds on, the pumpkin-orange windbreaker and heavy khaki overalls, the green neon knit cap. His face was shaded with patches of black and gray stubble. Around us the cicadas were loud, scratching their electrical buzz.

I wasn’t up here, I said. I didn’t hit any snake.

You moved out or what?

Sure.

I told Bob you two should arm-wrestle for her.

A pair of jays swooped across in a blur of blue and lit above us somewhere, rasping and squawking.

Aren’t you hot dressed like that? I asked.

How?

It’s ninety degrees out.
I just got here. You left early, remember? You should’ve seen the run of jack smelt we got. Big one pulled Bob’s pole right in. Took us twenty minutes to fish it out.

Liar, I said.
The fish was still on it. Big fucker. Close to twelve pounds.
A truck came up behind us and braked. The jays scattered; I pulled my pickup to the shoulder. The truck lurched around and ahead.

Dick ass, Casper hissed in the dust.
I pushed the clutch in and said, See you later, I guess.

He glanced into the cab. The pie lay in its tin on my passenger seat. A plant sat beside it, a houseplant, deep green swirled with white, in a black plastic pot. A rose in the end had seemed a bit too romantic. A replacement, this, for the one the widow drowned in her den.

You see Bob?
When? I said.
Now. He come down just before you went up.
I have to go.
She ought to decide, you ask me.

He took a step back. And pulled his cap off, and did something like mop his brow with it. And said: Don’t squish any snakes as you go, Romeo. He had more to say, I could see, but by then I was gone, heading out into the sun.

She grew up on a ranch in Wyoming, miles away from anything, and had lived in Laredo, El Paso, Great Falls, and Fort Wayne. She moved here from L.A. with husband the second, the broker Fuchmueller, and for years rode back and forth to the university to study, a forty-five or fifty minute drive if it wasn’t too foggy. Broker Fudge had retired by this point but retained an office in Sebastopol to do the consulting and what have you. I met him at a wedding before the collision that killed him, and met her too, though he stuck out most. Another extravagant import, I think I remember myself
thinking. Regal but thoughtful, good posture, poised, a little lined but not balding, with that air of charity that comes of not having to worry about money.

So she got her degree and started an internet thing at home for her master’s, above all it seemed to keep busy, busy as she was buying and selling rental properties, coastal and inland, haranguing her property managers, e-mailing, shopping, doing her sit-ups and leg lifts and aiding in charities, of which there were many. Wednesday afternoons she fished, like I said. It was a serious pedal from her place to the bay, seven miles up switchback and down on roads with no shoulder, or barely any. Still, down the hill she’d come on her bike—she didn’t drive, never had—with a bag in her basket and fishing line wrapped on a stick. I didn’t know what to think those first weeks. She stupefied me. She was exotic, outspoken, good-looking, rich. She was tiny but didn’t take any shit, from us or anybody. She’d stamp the dock in her way and say, What a shit bird you are, or, You’re cute but you’re worthless, and dismiss the lot of us, sad pack of apes that we were.

Why did she keep coming back, pedaling through fog and chill wind?

At first I thought we were just another of her charities, Bob and Casper and me and the cronies, abuse us as she did with her peremptory statements and withholding of cookies. Then I thought she’d come to see Bob. Then I knew she’d come to see Bob, who carted her back and forth for a while to Sonoma State in Cotati, not far from where he worked remodeling condos. But now I didn’t know what I knew. Except that Bob had a wife, a decent sweet woman he’d been with since high school. And that he was my friend, pissed as I was about this thing or that thing he had done or said. He could be a monumental ass at times, actually. Even still, I was entwined in this now. I’d entered it willfully, conscientiously, selfishly. And not, as my conscience kept saying, to spare Karen, unstinting Karen, his wife.

So in my fumbling way I pursued her, I guess. I mean Widow Fudge. She rode with me back from the dock those times it got
nasty rainy. We went to The Tides and had clam chowder and coffee while waves slapped the pier underneath, her soaked bike in my pickup. We went to the Oyster Tavern in Marshall in May, way out of her way, and talked about Kay my ex and my son in Marin, popped again for selling illegal goods, ecstasy mainly and these pills they give kids to make them less twitchy. The widow didn't let on much as far as her own life was concerned. She wouldn't say a single thing about Bob. She liked keeping things light and abrupt, crass or uncouth or otherwise. It was like we were actors in some kind of backwater comedy.

Why history? I asked her that day, at the tavern in Marshall.
Because I’m so bad with dates, she replied.
I’ll be your date, I said, momentarily witty, like Bob.
She said, Like hell you will be. What’ll you do to impress me?
I didn’t have a quick answer for that. I might have shrugged, or took a slug off my beer bottle.
Well? she said.
I’ll wash all that salt spray off your windows. Somebody’s got to. She looked at me, both pleased, I think, and put off.
What else?
I’ll tie you up in your attic. For a week. You’ll be stuck there. She raised her eyebrows.
And then what’ll you do?
The waiter came and carried the oyster shells away on their plates and the carnage of fish bones—we’d ordered dinner. I’d painted myself into a kind of corner, talking this way. We’d had tequila, I’d gotten bold. I was afraid to imagine what I might say.
I’ll get down in front of you, I think I said.
And then what? What’ll you do?
Worship you.
She took this in even as she brushed it away, laughing. She leaned on her elbows, reigning over the mess on the table of limes and salt and little tubs of Tabasco.
And then I’ll get bored, she said. And then we won’t date. And then you’ll be history.
On up over the hill to Occidental I drove, past the Union Hotel and Negri’s and Tim’s, past the town hall and bank with their reconstructed frontier facades, on out of town past the goat farm and up Coleman Valley to my cousin Fred’s property and his sheet-metal shed. Fred was in Saskatchewan fishing, gone for six weeks; had his cats not made my eyes itch I’d have house-sat for him. I undid the padlock on the sheet-metal door, slid the bolt across, and started hauling water jugs in, plastic gallons of Safeway drinking water. I had twenty or more in the bed of my pickup. But before I got half of them in I heard an engine. I fairly leapt out of the shed again. And around the dirt bend came Reverend Bob, bumping along in his Ranger.

Figured you might be heading here, he said, pulling up. The dust settled around him, around us. His tall forehead shone, from the heat perhaps, or concern. He looked like he’d swallowed a rotten squirrel. Need a hand? he said.

You followed me here?

He got out and grabbed a pair of jugs and walked in behind me.

You passed me at the Arco. I thought you saw me wave.

Stepping into the smell in that shed was like stepping into a wall. Beyond the boxes of dishes and cookware, the clothes and towels and blankets and sheets, beyond my fish tank and bulbous bubble-eyed goldfish, thirty fat pot plants stood in tight rows, a blurry olive green woods. It was hotter than shit in that shed; the smell was layered and thick, obnoxious, intense.

Kids are looking good, Bob said.

Mostly, I said.

Actually they’d been in the dark three days now and looked a bit stunned. They were nodding a little, missing the grow lights. We gave each plant a drink, a half gallon roughly, more for the tallest and woolliest. I didn’t say anything and neither did Bob. He wore his Raiders tank top, gold on black, and jean shorts, rubber thongs.
He stood six-two or taller, with a hint of a gut on him and a beer drinker’s nose. He was a redneck turned hippie turned hick renaissance man, a connoisseur of slow living and a self-professed slouch, a fan of Joseph Conrad and Dickens, fond of young women but not fool enough to think he could bag what he couldn’t. We called him Reverend, but he wasn’t one and never had been. He’d been a vicar or deacon in a play at some point and somebody started calling him that: Reverend Bob. He did tend now and then to pronounce. To stand before an invisible crowd and expound, if not preach.

He glanced at my boxes up front. They were barricading the door, sort of.

They say termite gas won’t hurt your dishes.
So they say.
Or your clothes. It dissolves.
I don’t trust it, I said.

Thinking: Nothing comes and goes with no trace. It might be true, what they said about Vikane, this gas that was ending even now the last of those last termite lives. But it didn’t sound right to me, or possible. In this world there are consequences for everything. The termite squad knew a lot, but not all. The same went for Bob.

We emptied the last of the jugs and stood staring a moment. I sprinkled a pinch of food flakes in the fish tank. The fish moved toward the top leisurely, mouths working, eyes bugged, trailing their billowing fins.

Do what you need to do, Bob told me.
I have been.
I can see that, he said.

I’d had no choice but to transport the plants here, since I only owned a quarter-acre, neighbors on all sides. Bob’s house of course was off-limits. Karen, his wife, didn’t know and wouldn’t approve; they had too much to lose, and there were kids and grandkids around. It was either let my house, which I was planning to sell, go to hell, or forsake our harvest. Each of these plants would yield ten grand or more, come October. Two hundred forty thousand for me, sixty for Bob. He taught me all this three seasons ago. The Art
of Cultivating for Profit, along with the Art of Not Getting Caught. I bore the great share of danger, and watered and clipped. He came each week to inspect. He made the connection too, finally, met with the buyer, or buyers, and knew all the cops in town, and a judge.

He stood now facing a belly-high plant. Wielding my pruning tool, he severed a lower branch, then pinched some sticky tops, those skunky red-purple buds. He snapped the tips off another, sighing, and stuffed the tips in a Ziploc. He bent toward one more, inspecting. The wind rose outside. It shook the leaves on the bay trees and tan oaks and blew dust in the door. A little rude, this, on Bob’s part, if not quite imprudent—above and beyond the call it seemed of strategic pruning. He folded the Ziploc and stuck it in his shorts pocket. He smoked the stuff, unlike yours truly, averse as I was to burning up profits, and not fond of the drug. It made me feel more self-conscious and inward than I already was.

Worse, his proprietorial air lately upset me. These trees were mine, basically. I tended them, coaxed them with heat and light and nutrients, was watchful with water. I talked to them. I called them courageous, I said they were pretty. I dreamt about their safety, and mine. I felt something like physical pain seeing them manhandled thus. Indeed they were my kids. By this point I’d read all the books, had gone to the web sites, I’d talked to growers online. I knew more about the art now than Bob did. And I could tell he was less than pleased about this.

Aren’t I the one who’s supposed to be mad? he asked me.

He set my pruning shears down, sniffed his fingers. We looked at each other. For a moment I thought he might hit me. He tugged at his ponytail, looked away, and said, Isn’t that how it goes?

How does what go?

Jesus.

She’s not somebody you’d hang onto anyway.

Chuck, you’re an odd piece of shit. You know that? You might at least give a guy a chance.

We stepped into the hot breeze and dust. I jerked the bolt across and snapped the padlock.
To do what? I asked.
To tell you you’re a son of a bitch.
I pulled on the padlock to make sure it held. I’m sorry, I said.
Just ask her how her first husband bit it. That ought to do it.
Right.
I mean it. Have her show you her guns.
Tomorrow at midnight I’d have the shell back on my truck and
would cart the kids home. Two per garbage bag, each wedged gen-
tly in, each tipped on its side. It would be faster and safer with Bob
there to help me. But I could see now I’d be working alone. Which
was what I wanted. And had been wanting, admit it or not, for God
knows how long.

Later I carried the groceries in, called out to her, waited. I stood
on the deck in the wind, then stepped inside and called out again.
I checked her room and the den and guest room and gym and the
room she had her desk in and books and computer. She wasn’t
home. The lights were on and her bike had arrived; it stood askew
on its kickstand on the walkway outside. Her newspaper crossword
lay half-done on the dining table. And here was her pen, which
erased, and beside it the wineglass emptied of wine. It was maybe
an hour past sunset. The sky out her windows was pink, more like
flamingo and orange by the ocean horizon. I was staggered again by
the view. The sea and sky and whitecaps, the bent cypressess grip-
ing the cliff, the boom and thunder of surf—it all made my heart
hurt somehow.

Outside past the deck I followed the curving path through
clumps of ice plant and spike grass and the mini–sand dunes to
the cliff and looked over the edge for her. I looked both ways up
the beach, wind stinging my face. I saw cords of bull kelp with their
tasseled heads and shiny mounds of tangled sea grass and wet drift-
wood. I saw foam at the surf line, I saw a battered bleach bottle.
But no widow. And no footprints, either. Nobody’d been down
there at all. I glanced at her house, its cedar siding gray from the
weather, light twinkling out from the skylights and windows. If she was around I couldn't see her. A wave hit the cliff so hard I felt the shock where I stood. The heavy cypress beside me, misshapen and hunched in the way of cypresses here, grew not so much upward as back, stuck in the shape the wind blew it in.

I opened the garage as daylight faded and wheeled the bicycle up, propped it there among the dead fitness machines and boxes of pictures and knickknacks and papers and books. I wiped the mist off the thing and oiled it with some oil I found—the gears and sprocket were suffering, the chain corroded—and I tightened the brakes. It was a child’s bike, blue and hot pink, made for a little girl, a mountain-street hybrid with a blue and pink basket. It had a little horn, even, with the rubber bulb that you squeeze. All it lacked were tassels, the plastic streamers on the handlebar grips. Inside I got a beer from the fridge, one of hers—my Mickeys' were warm—and then thought what the fuck and poured a few shots of her gin in a glass for myself and sipped it, then swallowed it down.

The plan was that come winter I’d be buying the house I had my eye on in Jenner. A sweet, wide, open-beam place on the side of the mountain, views of the ocean and river mouth and wrecked dock and sandbar and bellowing sea lions. The plan was, even before we ever got serious, that we’d move in together out there, in Jenner, the widow and I, since it was bigger and closer to town, to cafes and shopping, but that she would keep this place on the cliff to, as she put it, escape when she had to from me. It was a kind of joke we had. A silly romantic plan, both a joke and not a joke. Less so for me, I think, than for her.

I called her name out again, and listened. I didn’t hear a thing but the wind, which rattled the windows. In her gym room I studied the controls on the exercycle and stairwalker and treadmill, beer in hand; then I washed up in her bathroom, the big one with its two sinks inset in marble and filigreed mirrors and whirlpool bath. I eyeballed the mail on the bar in the kitchen and tried to listen to the messages on her message machine, but they’d been erased.

In order to do it right, of course, I’d need a few more harvests.
Three would do it, I thought. My paltry retirement and social security wouldn’t cut it, even with the cash I’d get from the house in Camp Meeker and my bag of gold coins, which sat in a box in the vault at the bank. No, if we moved in together she’d meet my kids, she’d have to. I didn’t imagine she’d like them one bit. She wasn’t amused at the thought, I could tell, of my son and his mishap and six months to go still in jail in Mill Valley. She hailed from Wyoming, the high plains, not here. Not California, land of love and burnt bras and drugs, of just saying no to those who say no, of bee pollen and wheat grass and nutritional plankton.

Her guns stood in a rack in the hall closet, behind the raincoats and woolens, things hanging on hangers. I clicked the light on and, parting the clothing, knelt down to look. A twenty-two, chipped up somewhat, not new. A thirty-ought-six, newer, enough to knock a full-grown caribou down. And a shotgun; and an antique pistol of sorts, a relic, something Buffalo Bill might have used in his wild west show. I pulled the shotgun off and examined the thing. It was loaded, I noticed. All her guns needed oil. They cried out to be cleaned, this one especially. I unhooked the safety.

Where’ve you been? she said.

She’d snuck in behind me. I stood up too fast and banged my skull on the overhang. I didn’t drop the shotgun, luckily.

Here, I told her. I snapped the safety back and tucked the shotgun in. Where were you? I asked, following her out of the closet. I touched my scalp where it hit.

That’s what you get, she said, for getting into my stuff.

I like your stuff.

She noticed the pie on the counter, the plant in its pot and translucent coaster.

What a dear man you are, she exclaimed.

Dearer than Bob? I wanted to say. She had on a light pink sweat suit and tiny white socks, her hair swept up in a tail. My heart about broke, seeing her.

There’s lots more dear where that dearness came from, I said instead.
I’ll bet.
She pulled a pair of wineglasses out and the jug of wine from the fridge. The wind roared outside. Something clunked on the porch.
I’ll be heading home tomorrow, I told her.
What’s the hurry? she asked. She tipped the wine jug over the glasses, saw the beer in my hand, and filled just the one. White zinfandel from a screw-cap bottle. She filled it to the top, or all but.
You don’t want me to go?
Would you stay if I did?
I might.
She raised her drink and we clinked. Her wineglass, my bottle.
I like you, she said. But you’re sneaky.
I am not sneaky, I told her, and she said, Oh yes you are, and then tugged my head down and kissed me. And said, I like you sneaky, and let me go, then held me again.
At least I’m not bored, she said.
Then she led me off down the hall to the bed. Two days more would go by before I’d get myself home, though I would move the kids back the next night and feed and console them and settle them in. And for the life of me I couldn’t begin to decide who this Widow Fudge was, after five days and five nights in her house and more talk and jokes and kissing and bathing. She was a tiny wiry thing, unyielding as metal but not without softness, especially now with the wind in a rage and the sea screaming, her yellow pillows perfumed. Her guard dropped and something new and different, something deeper, shone through. I’d known her for ages it seemed, but in some other language, or landscape, or realm. In some ocean, or primordial hothouse, some bountiful celestial cell.

I was glad to be home, empty and weird as I felt at first. I got unpacked box by box and tended my plants and tried to call Bob, but Bob wouldn’t respond. I put fresh stain on my deck and front steps and touched up my trim. I scrubbed the place good and washed the
windows and raked and had more gravel delivered to make the drive pretty. The poison had made a clean sweep; not a creature was stirring, neither termite nor mouse. I put my house on the market, according to plan. The appraiser came and appraised. My place was worth more than I thought; the gay influx persisted and gay meant money and money meant higher prices for property. My attic was safe, I should say, from the prying eyes of appraisers. It was sealed tight. No light escaped. My kids had an air filter, too, potent if quiet; it sucked the smell almost completely away. The new owners would have to discover the entrance, the portal, the camouflaged door and secret stairwell Bob helped me build.

In the meantime, I went to the widow’s to eat or she came to mine. Now and then I’d stay over, but not often. We’d cooled some after my marathon visit, with backing off on both our parts, but I felt we were with it, I felt the richness increase. She was impressed by the fact that I had in fact done it. That I’d got the ball rolling toward Jenner, toward shedding this place with its echo of Kay, my ex, just like I said I would. The widow saw now I wasn’t all talk and no action. I was trading my dank deep woods for the coast. Granted, 1.5 million was slightly out of my price range for houses. But I could see my way now, and she could see I would show her.

I didn’t drive out to the dock to fish, and neither did Bob.

People came to look at my house. Then I had an offer, and another offer, all of this in ten days or less, and I accepted, and my house was sold. Sale contingent, that is, on seller remaining in said house on said property on Tower Hill in Camp Meeker until late October; seller would be purchasing upgrade and unloading dope.

On the verge of September, this was. Then we were into September, the days warm and fine, and Bob still didn’t fish, nor did I, though Widow Fudge did. None of this fazed her, oddly. The Bob problem came up a few times and she told me she and Bob were a passing thing. She said he was worthless, though funny. She said Bob was sneakier even and more shady than I was, as far as that went. And why do that to his wife? She told me he told her his mar-
riage was more or less over; she told me she told him she’d heard that one before.

I called my son Ted every few days as usual. I went to visit him twice; he sat behind glass at the compound, a very clean jail, in Marin. He swore to God he’d be good now, he would completely behave. I felt sorry for him, and sorry I couldn’t share tales of my kids with my kid for fear of making his delinquency worse, when to be truthful he’d worsened mine. I called Bob again and again and finally gave up. He wouldn’t answer his cell phone and must have instructed Karen not to pick up at home. I didn’t want a boss anymore; but I didn’t want things not to be right with us, either.

So when Casper came over I was willing to bend but was pissed also. I hadn’t done anything that awful to Bob. I didn’t steal his squeeze. She’d stolen me. I hadn’t done any nasty outrageous thing or acted in spite. I wasn’t a son of a bitch or a dirty shit or a bastard. He’d been wanting to hate me and just needed a reason, a bona fide cause. So I was sitting making lists in my kitchen when he knocked. Casper, that is. Knocked his unmistakable knock, both brash and unsure, as if he couldn’t say if this was the house but he’d go ahead and whack the door anyway. It was like nine, ten o’clock at night. He came in and sat down and I got him a gin. He liked his with fruit juice, not tonic.

He said he saw the sold sign out front, good job. How long would I be here for? Six or eight weeks, I said. Depending. Long as the gay boys don’t buy it and make it buttfuck central, he said, I don’t mind. I laughed and said, Don’t be an ass. He looked bedraggled as usual, rumpled and pinched, jeans and boots and dirty red cotton hood, not complacent but not willing either to squawk about the place he was in. He worked for the quote-unquote Sewer Authority, had been there twenty-four years; six to go before he retired. A seriously weird man, Casper. I liked him, and couldn’t say why. He lacked tact but endeared. He had integrity, bizarre as it was.

Fishing tomorrow? he asked, since this was Tuesday.

I’m kind of busy, I said.
Bob’s gonna be there, he told me. We hope.

So?

It’s been like a month. He was sicker than shit. Hammond and me went over to his place Friday. We told him he had to come down Wednesday. Or else. We ain’t catching shit now.

Try different bait.
He took a big slug off his gin and Cranapple.
Try tube worms, I said.
They hate my jokes, he said, spitting an ice cube back in his glass. Widow’s gonna brain me if you don’t do something.

I got the phone off the counter and gave it to him. And said, All right fine, call him, we’ll talk and this’ll all be okay.

Casper did as I said, pushed Bob’s numbers in as dictated. Then listened, looking like the phone might melt in his hand. I had half a heat on by this point and felt fairly bold, basking in the glow of my house being sold and newly pissed off at Bob. Pissed at Bob, that is, for staying pissed off at me. Pissed at him taking any chick he wanted and telling me about it in his woebegone way, as if the chicks weren’t his fault but just happened, like traps set to confuse. I was pissed at Bob for being Bob, basically. For groping my plants; for sneaking out on his wife the way mine had snuck out on me.

Bob didn’t pick up, but his voice mail came on.

Bob, it’s me, Casper, Casper said, and stopped, at a loss.
And Chuck, I said, leaning over.
We’re fishing tomorrow. With you, without you.
We need you, I said.
Hammond’s bringing a case just so you show. Case of Sam Adams, or Pete’s.

I’m bringing whiskey.
Chuck’s bringing whiskey.
Damn skippy.
Be there or be queer, Casper said.
Square, I said.
Queer.
Whichever.
We finished the gin and had corn chips and dip and finally I said I’d best get my buttocks to bed, and what about him, Casper, didn’t he work any more? No, it was Wednesdays off and Saturdays now; somebody had to keep the shit flowing Sunday. I could see he wasn’t wanting to leave. His little house in the flats was a mess, prone to mold and mildew, and he and his wife, a huge fat Mexican woman, didn’t have a thing to say to each other. Their daughter had moved off decades ago and rarely called. The last Casper knew she lived in Las Vegas.

Eventually he got up to go.

Seen any snakes? he asked.

Nope.

It’s cause they’re all run over now.

I had my hand on the doorknob; I might have yawned.

If I see one I’ll send it down.

You do that, he said.

I fed the fish and washed dishes and turned some lights off, then went up to check on the kids. To the left in my standing-room attic stood the black boxes, eight altogether, for getting seeds started. The hydroponic self-feeder matrix (my purchase) sprawled beyond that, a network of plant cribs and plastic faucets and pipes. Far in the back the air filter squatted, and beside it my dryer, a great gray and white thing, for the sake of quick curing. The kids quivered in ecstatic clumps, happy to bursting under their lamps, 600-watt, high-pressure sodium bulbs, each plant in its moist shit- and humus-rich pot. They were thicker and lusher than any we’d had until now, all electric-green buds, outlandishly fat, streaked with dark purple, mahogany, cherry. I checked each pot for too dry and too moist and read the pH and adjusted the humidifier. Nearly ready, they were. Less than three weeks till harvest. We needed our buyer, or buyers, lined up; Bob and I needed to talk. I noticed the temperature’d dropped, even up here. The night had cooled off with the fog. Not a problem, these kids were tough, were in fact full-grown adults; and true potheads said a little autumn chill at the end made the poison more strong.
At the outset, the thought of getting caught with my pot scared me shitless. I dreamt about SWAT teams descending, storming in with assault guns and armbands; copter beams scanning; tall, vengeful bonfires on which cops tossed my uprooted trees. But the fear had subsided pretty much. I was cautious, I did my research, and didn’t talk, didn’t boast about the harvest or haul. Unlike my son, I had no record, not even a traffic ticket these last twenty years. Bob had cooked up a story, too, in case we got caught. My ancient aunt in Santa Rosa was ailing, this was no lie, and needed pain medication, true also; the herb therefore was hers, and we were its caretakers.

For Bob, of course, all this was business. A way to boost his savings, sizable already, and have a few pounds to share each year with his friends and to smoke. For me it was different. At the start, the crops were a way to grow worthy of Fudge, to nudge up my net worth. To impress my intended, my golden beloved, though I didn’t dare then consider her that. They were all still this, yes, but now something else also. I liked standing neck-deep in my woods, telling the kids they were good, they were lovely and plump, outrageously pretty. I liked talking to Bob in code on the phone, when we did. The kids outgrew their diapers this week. Time to change. Can you come by with wipes? I liked the magazines, the web sites, the stoned friends I met online in chat, phantoms with routers and aliases; I liked the club I was in. I liked all the seeds, the names of the seeds and the plants they became. Isis, Voodoo, God’s Treat, Diablo, Durban, Pluton and Romulan Haze, Strawberry Cough, Nepalese Grizzly, Donkey Dick, Grape Skunk, Big Sticky. I was working even now to create my own breed, my own special kid, a hybrid never seen before on the planet, a cross between Thai Lights and First Lady. Fuma con Diós, it would be called, in honor of poor Casper’s wife. And of Kay, who I’d mostly forgiven, and all those who were needy.

I liked it very much, from seed to seedling to vacuum-sealed bag. I liked being sneaky. So much so that I had a problem. I’d been away from Kay for so long I didn’t know if I knew a way back—to live
with and love someone, truly. Despite pies and houseplants, de-
spite my very real wish to unite and not gnash my teeth here on my
own anymore, despite crosswords and toasts and wit and fresh fish
and the sound of the sea hitting land, the most forlorn and lovely
sound, surely, so lulling, known ever to woman or man.

By the time I got to the welcome–back party, everybody was
there: Casper and Hammond and Leo B. Jensen, the widow and
Bob, and Tom Russell too, the Vietnam vet, with his stare and
farting prosthetic leg. As promised, there were refreshments ga-
lore: a case of Pete’s Wicked Ale, a case of Bud Ice, a twelve-pack of
Coors. I tied my hooks and weight on and cast out, then uncapped
a Pete’s. The fog was thick, making things fuzzy; you could hardly
see who you saw down the dock. We had an incoming tide, higher
than usual, and with it came fish. Bob was landing one now, not his
first; he had nine or ten perch on his stringer, both rainbow and
silver.

Kinda too little to keep, Casper observed, standing near.

Bob tied the thing on his stringer—rope end into mouth, out at
the gill—and dropped the mess back in the bay. He’d lost weight, for
sure. He looked worn, vaguely addled, and pale, though not with-
out color. The foghorn was sounding, way out at the point.

Most of them’s babies, said Casper.

Where’s that whiskey? Bob answered.

Chuck, where’s that whiskey? Casper said.

I handed Casper the bottle in its brown paper bag. Casper
handed the bottle to Bob. Bob cast out again and his bobber dove
right off. He set the hook, reeled. Hammond was reeling in also,
pole curled toward the water. The fog thickened. You couldn’t see
boats, you couldn’t make out the sea wall. Leo sank on his stool, pole
in hand, drowsing, just beyond Bob. The widow sat on Casper’s
bright yellow cooler, wearing her fleece. The fog made her look
gauzy, ethereal, ghostly. She watched Bob uncap the whiskey and
drink. Old Overholt Rye. Something somebody might order in a western saloon, in Cheyenne or in Tombstone, home of the OK Corral.

   Bob, what have you learned?
   Too much, Lady Fudge.
   There's never enough of too much.
   Too much is too much, he said.

   The bay lapped at the dock. Bob added his latest perch to the stringer. The foghorn moaned. Casper had a slug of whiskey, made a face and chased it with beer, then handed the bottle to Hammond. The baked goods were already out of the bike basket and bag. Muffins this time. Carrot-bran muffins, it looked like. A paper muffin-skin sat by Casper’s foot, ridged, an ashtray for raisins, which he’d picked out. He didn’t like raisins; sweet balls of bat shit was the phrase that he used. I finished my Pete’s and started another and had a gulp or two of whiskey. I had no idea what I could or should say to Bob. He was still in charge here, still the crown prince of perch, impervious, if pale; and this was no place really to probe or make up. Just sitting here not saying anything, or not much, would help, I guess I was thinking. I was the same as I always was, he’d see, and not a conniving two-timer, the son of a bitch bastard he’d like me to be.

   Down the dock, Hammond laughed with Tom Russell, all but invisible. The fog kept swirling in. Time’s fun when you’re having flies, Bob sighed. The fish kept hitting. Casper ran out of anchovies and had to borrow from me. A gull was shrieking on a piling somewhere. I caught four perch and a hefty jack smelt and let them all go. Tom Russell’s leg farted. At least he’d have liked us to think it was his leg. Bob tipped the whiskey again, doing his Clint Eastwood routine. He held up his empty slimy bait bag.

   Looks like we’re about out, he said to me in Clint’s voice, with Clint’s face.

   Pretty near, I said, doing the cowpuncher partner.
   Winter’s coming. Got them crops bundled up?
   Yep.
Wife safe? Kids tucked in?
You bet.

Hammond and Tom sidled over, ready for another Bob drama. Widow Fudge grinned. Casper was beaming. Fishing wasn't fishing, evidently, without him, without us—without the Bob and Chuck thing. Leo was out, dead asleep, chin on chest, pole drooping.
Partner, Bob said, I hear you’re pretty good with your hands.
Better than some, I replied. Who said?
The widow did.
Widow who?
Fudge. She was hoping you’d, well, pull her out a tube worm.
Our audience roared. This was the way to melt conflict away, obviously. Just drown it in comedy, in burlesque and charade, and beer and rye whiskey. Even if it felt wrong to me; crass, vaguely vengeful, unkind.
I’ll get her the biggest tube worm she ever saw, I said.

More roaring. Cackles, guffaws. I got down on all fours in the fog and peered along the dock, the submerged dock edge, where tube worms lurked. I moved along, looking. Casper and Hammond backed out of my way.

Somebody get this man a saddle, Bob ordered.
What for? I said, my arm underwater now—I’d spied a clump, a worm colony.

For the lady. So the widow can ride.
Not funny, Widow Fudge said.
You ride well, I hear, said Bob.
That’s enough, said the widow.
There’s never enough of enough.
Enough, she said.

I tugged and tore at the dock, my shoulder and neck and then face in the water, and finally pulled a monster clump up, a foot across and half again as tall, a streaming bouquet of gray shanks topped with purple flowers, mock flowers; each was camouflaged at the top to look like a plant, rather than the very tasty worm it was. I unbuttoned my sleeve and wrung my shirt out, the part below the
elbow at least. I’d cut my forearm, I saw. My knuckles were bleeding. The salt water stung.

I hadn’t heard what else they said, the widow and Bob, but the widow looked pissed. Hammond and Russell had moved off a bit. You had to know Bob well to know he was drunk. He didn’t sink the way most people do. His concentration grew, he got philosophical, he took on roles, his nose got more red. He got sharper and clearer, like a blade getting whetted. And he got mean, I might add. He’d get meaner yet too, I knew, before he was done. I knew him; I knew how it went. He straightened on his stool, sighing.

Did I offend?

Just leave off, the widow said, popping the top on a beer.

I can leave, Bob said.

Come on, Casper said, eyeing Bob’s fish.

Robert, she said, if you were my husband I’d poison your coffee.

Lady, he answered, if you were my wife, I’d probably drink it.

He rose and slid the pole out of Leo’s hands and reeled it in. Then plucked a sheet of cheesecloth from his tackle box and wrapped Leo’s muffin in it, his untouched carrot-bran muffin, and swabbed the whole thing in the pool of yellow-green blood on the dock where we’d been cutting tube worms. He squeezed the biggest worm from the clump and tucked the purple anemone head in at the muffin’s one end and the creamy green tail at the other. It looked like a strange little sea snake that had swallowed something horrendously big—something it had no right to eat, and could not digest. Bob swabbed it all in worm blood again, and drew the pole back, muffin-snake dangling, and cast the thing out, out into the fog. The sound of the splash said it flew very far. Far into the channel, out past the sea wall.

In the meantime, right beside me, Casper was undoing Bob’s stringer, releasing Bob’s fish. I started to say something, and then didn’t. He’d bent down and untied and now carefully stirred the nylon rope, the close end. And off they went, slowly. Bob stuck the
pole back in Leo’s hands as before, and loosened Leo’s drag, and
looked up and saw what Casper was doing. What Casper did.

Fucker Casper! Bob said.

The fish had swum off, all except one, which was swimming side-
ways by the surface in a drunk sort of circle, its belly stark white.

They were babies, Casper said, standing up.

They were mine.

Well, now they’re nobody’s.

The gull was shrieking again. Other gulls joined in the shrieking.
Hammond and Tom hung in the fog past Widow Fudge, leaning in
like a silent ghost chorus. The foghorn was moaning. Somebody
was scraping and sanding somewhere in the marina.

Casper, you’re not only dumb but you stink.

Leave him alone, I said.

Eat shit, said Bob.

You men are behaving like children, the widow said.

He stinks. He smells like a cesspool. At least he could bathe.

You don’t eat them anyway, I said to Bob, meaning fish. They sit
in your fridge and they rot.

At this point Leo’s drag clicked, then buzzed. Hammond
whacked Leo on the back and woke him and Leo stood up. Leo’s
drag buzzed and buzzed. Casper looked like he might cry. And then
did.

You don’t know shit about me, Bob said, stepping across.

I know enough.

Boys, knock it off, said the widow.

Hammond tightened Leo’s drag and Leo tried pulling, looking
like this was all just daily routine, like he caught monster fish all the
time using bran muffins, deaf or not and half-blind, hair in his ear
holes. Casper was crying, wiping his face with his sleeve.

I’d had it with Bob, finally. With the way he succeeded without
even trying, and with not needing money and still taking mine,
king of the dock or my attic or Negri’s, wherever. I’d had it with
him tormenting Casper. Who did smell, okay, but couldn’t help it;
the sewer was in his pores, I suppose. Bob got first crack too at the widow. She’d have been mine otherwise, and we’d have been spared this. This ugliness. This ungainly wrestle.

What do you know? Bob said, standing next to me.
I know you’re not the boss.
And I know you’re not a thief. A backstabber.

Hammond took Leo’s pole from him and worked it a minute and handed it back. Leo pulled and reeled and reeled and pulled; just another day at the dock for Leo B. Jensen. He tottered momentarily. Hammond reached to steady him. He stuck a finger in Leo’s belt loop in back and held on.
Yes, I am, I told Bob.
We were both watching Leo’s pole now, and Leo.
Yes you are what? Bob asked.
A backstabbing thief.
No, you’re not.
I am.
Bob looked at Leo, then me.
You wish. You’re just trying the part on for size. It doesn’t fit.
About now Leo’s fish came into sight, easing out of the depths. A mighty thing, colossal, a fish to behold. A gargantuan halibut. A long flattened fat garbage can, way too big for this dock, or for Leo, or twenty-pound line.

Jesus tits! Hammond cried.
The thing rose to the top as Bob and I looked, drifting up leisurely, easy and graceful and slow, gray and brown speckled, its undercarriage shock-white, and got a load of Leo, its monofilament master and lord, and of us all, seven gaudy clowns crowding in, and did something like laugh, and shook its massive fish face sideways and snapped Leo’s line, and back down it went.

So once again Bob and I didn’t fish, though the rest of them did. For a while they all used steel leaders, and muffins and tube worms for bait. Maybe Hammond crowned himself interim king.
I don’t know. I didn’t go. I did call Bob to do what I could, though, or try. I felt bad, cut off and snubbed as I was. He’d been first and foremost in my life after Kay. My sun and nutrition, my principal staple. I kept calling. He wouldn’t answer, and then did. We talked on the phone finally. We had a week to go then till harvest, Bob and me and the kids.

He seemed ready partly to forgive and forget, as they say. We talked for ten or twelve minutes. But all wasn’t right. He came across sounding forced on the phone, falsely complacent. He was playing the part of a friend, it felt like, who’d forget and forgive, given time and genuine sorrow from me. He was playing the part while watching it and us from a height. Still, he said he’d be out Thursday next to help cut and dry and seal-a-meal parcels. It looked like we had three buyers this time.

Meanwhile the widow was stirring Power Bait into her batter and pre-wrapping the muffins in cheesecloth. They nailed a few halibut actually and a big stingray or two. Including a forty-pounder for Casper, which tried to slip off, they said, by the dock; but the widow had her gun out this time, her ancient Doc Holliday pistol, and shot the thing dead. Honest to God. And it slid peaceably up, too big for the net.

What I didn’t know was that Bob was making it up with the widow as well as with me. I learned all this later. Bob called and asked how she was, what had she learned, how life went with Chuck, what were our plans. She didn’t want to hate him any more than I did. The man was infinitely lovable, even at his nastiest. So she told him how she was, and called him an ass and told him Get a life and grow up, and told him what we were doing. And not long after that, just before harvest, she and I left for San Fran.

We hadn’t been anywhere yet except out to eat or to the dock or one of our houses. The trip was just what we needed, a sweet couple of days, even if she wouldn’t let me pay for anything. We saw a play at the Geary, a comedy, British, about men taking other men’s wives, brutally witty, men dressed in wigs and breeches and tights. We went to Fort Point and down to the pier by the seals, ate chocolate and
oysters and sourdough bread, and walked arm-in-arm over the bridge. The fog burned off as we walked and the whole glorious skyline came into view: Nob Hill and Coit Tower, the Ferry building, the Bank of America and the what’s–it-called building, shaped like a pointy pyramid—and way west, the cliff and sea coast and Palace of the Legion of Honor. For the first time in weeks I stopped thinking about him. About Bob, my ex-friend. I’d just bid on the Jenner house too, and was waiting to hear. Before we got back my bid was accepted. I’d just need to come up with the cash and be approved by the bank.

But what we found, coming back, changed all this. Changed everything. It was the last thing I imagined might happen. No, we didn’t come home to a fire, or flood, or cops swarming my driveway and house. We didn’t come home to news of Bob offing himself in his bathtub, or driving off the cliff in his truck, for the sake of lost love and friends. We were just stopping in to get clothes and shave cream for me, on the way to her place in Shell Beach. We didn’t come home to more termites, or Kay sitting naked at the kitchen table with a bib on. No. What we came home to was—

Burglars, I said.

Oh my God, the widow said, stepping in.

We’d driven nearly three hours north to find this. To find my front door smashed, my cabinets and drawers hanging open, my computer gone and printer and TV and stereo, though the speakers remained. They’d taken these, along with my gin and bourbon and half my CDs. But the job looked unfinished. They’d lost nerve, it seemed. Or more likely, had opened drawers and carted stuff off for show, for effect. I knew right away what they’d come for and who was behind it. I’d been smacked, it felt like. Kicked in the guts. And such was my heartbreak and shock, I headed for the attic too soon. The widow followed me. I tried to pass it off, post-lapse, but well, there it was.

What’s this? she said.

We’d scaled the stairwell, past the kicked-in little door, the portal, no secret now, and stood in the scatter of dirt and broken pots.
I couldn’t have told her not to come up; my goose was cooked either way. She examined my futuristic quick-grow machines. Grow charts hung on the walls. Stacks of magazines, tipped over, stepped on, lay splayed by her feet.

A science project, I said.

I see.

Guess they didn’t like it.

No, I’d say not.

And so it went. The whole ball game. They’d yanked every last one of my plants. My inconceivably beautiful plants. They’d even brought my garbage bags up from downstairs to stuff them in. The roll was unrolled on the floor like a long flat black tapeworm, or a funereal streamer. My stomach felt odd and my head went fuzzy. I thought I might have to lean over the john.

Maybe they liked it too much, the widow said.

Maybe, I told her.

We stood gaping at the mayhem a minute. I picked a leaf out of the dirt. And sniffed it, and held it.

This must have cost you, she said.

So I withdrew the bid on the house of my dreams. Our dreams, whatever those were: my dream of the dream the widow had, might have had, would keep having with me, both of us dreaming one dream. No house now. No dream. No wide wooden wraparound deck, no view of Goat Rock, no river flowing into the sea, no tracking sea lions with binoculars, the fat bulls with tusks, the pups they stepped on sometimes; no lines of migrating whales in the shimmering dawn. We were back to talk and no action and now she knew why. I’d improved my house, and spent a share of my gold on my new spiffy truck. There was no way the bank would approve me, not now. Not without that monster down payment I’d hoped to boggle them with.

What’s more, I think I lost my resolve, or heat, my forward momentum, right there and then. There in my attic, and after, driving out to her house. Maybe she’d have still had me, I think now. She might still have loved me, sneaky or not. She might have really seen
who I was and not let this lapse get between us. I believe she believed in me. But who can say? What’s certain is I lost luster suddenly, not in her eyes so much as my own. I saw myself as I was and didn’t like it. I saw something diminished. Something torn, something unwhole or undone.

So we did things less often. We saw less of each other. Finally she sold all she had and moved south, south to Cayucos, where the weather was warmer, the coast tamer, the hills less fierce on her joints and the wind less hostile to her skin. I suffered over this, yes, I felt stunted and fallow for weeks, but I wasn’t wrecked. Even before she left I was making provisions. By spring I was dating new women. I wound up with a woman from Graton with a twelve-year-old son, which seemed a good thing; later we moved in together. There was less trying on my part with her, less vaunting, less biting wit. But Widow Fudge got me started this way. She was my first post-Kay endeavor, and I loved her, odd love that it was. She got my courage up and whatever, got me back on the road of hoping to comprehend women. She opened the floodgates, set me loose on the tide, and in spite of my setback I’d still see lights in the dark I was in and go on.

In the end Casper was the only one left who fished. Wednesdays or not, it didn’t matter. Leo had a stroke at the dock one afternoon; they thought he’d choked on one of the widow’s white chocolate cookies. Hammond crashed his van into someone’s guest cabin in Guerneville and got his license pulled, his third or fourth DUI. Casper dragged me to Bodega twice a year or so nonetheless. The last time we went somebody said, Did you know this dock’s private, and Casper said, Yes, but we’re friends with Bob. And that settled that.

Casper stayed my neighbor too, though I sold my house and moved. I bought another house in Camp Meeker, on the same road, just higher up the mountain is all, with more sun and more view. The woman from Graton and I and her boy ate steaks and berry pies on my deck at dusk and slapped at mosquitoes and watched movies beamed in by satellite. And little by little I began to for-
get about Bob. To mostly forget about Bob. What had I learned? Plenty, and not nearly enough. He’s just a speck now on the glass of much clearer vision, I wish I could say. He still lives eight miles away, on his own hill, between the woods and the coast, and grates at me, though I haven’t seen him, except in passing, unspeaking. I wonder which new dupe he might be misleading now. Who the new dildo might be, and what the payment on his part will be for defiance.

I haven’t grown a thing either since I was robbed. I haven’t dared. I figured Bob would raid me again for the sake of his grudge. And Bob can nurture a grudge, it appears. But it’s been a few years, and spring’s coming. I miss it. Cultivating, that is. This house is bigger, more spacious, better ventilated, with more natural light. My woman from Graton was a hippie once too, not unlike Bob; and her son, fifteen now, smokes the stuff in his room and she doesn’t stop him—and wouldn’t stop me, or mind all that much, I’d like to think. Fall might be hard, I admit. I mean those late weeks of autumn. Those hours before harvest. I might not look like the type to sit in the dark all night with a loaded gun aimed, night after night, waiting. But I will if I have to, if it comes to that. And after all these years of waiting to cry I might just cry as I do it. As I play me in my life, not a pawn in some game, not a bit part in somebody’s drama, not prey to saviors or snakes or kidnappers. As I unseat him, as I erase him, as I blindly blow him away.
Problem is it’s cold outside, her fingers don’t work like they should, and she can’t think which secret pocket she stuck the keys in, if it was even this jacket. She finds her Kleenex, her toenail clipper, a red rubber bone. Todd, her dog, squirms on Edgar’s arm. Edgar has to set the suitcase down on the drive, though it’s wet.

Mom, let me drive, he says.
I told you no.
Todd yips, squirming again.
Well, let’s get in at least.
Hold your frickin horses.

They’re on their way to the hospital. To Kaiser, in town. Edgar isn’t happy about this. He’s been reading things on his computer as usual. A gallbladder’s like a tonsil, his computer insists. They don’t yank tonsils out anymore; that, they say now, was barbaric. The same goes for gallbladders—or it will, he says, when people wake up. But she does what her doctor says, period. She’s sick of
this burn and ache in her guts. She’s sick of yellow eyes, and the diaper. And Edgar’s no doctor. Her doctor’s the doctor.

She unlocks the car door finally. Edgar slips her bags in back and drops Todd on his plaid dog blanket. Todd snaps the blanket up with his teeth and shakes it, snarling, too cute almost for his britches. She turns the engine on, and the heat. Edgar stands brushing dog hair off his sweater, then gets in. He’s got his undertaker’s expression on, like he just sucked a half-dozen lemons. The fan blows cold air at her feet.

I hope we know the way, he says.

Edgar, don’t start.

Just so we don’t get confused.

I know what’s what.

But you get confused.

I do not get confused.

The last time something happened he took her car keys away. She had to call a locksmith and lie and say she lost her keys, could he make more, and the job wasn’t cheap. She had the guy make multiple sets, actually. She’s got keys stashed all over the house now; she can’t help but find a spare set, wherever they are, if it comes to that.

Let’s go, Edgar says.

In her day, a person warmed a car up. It doesn’t seem right to just get in and drive, despite Edgar’s facts, whatever advice he has to prescribe. Warming the engine, she tries to find gum, but the gum’s in her purse and her purse is in the back and she can’t reach like she used to, her body’s so stiff—but she needs it, the gum, since she smoked before, smoked in fact for forty-six years, she always smoked when she drove, but now she can’t, she quit, they made her quit, smoking, not driving, and only—

What? Edgar asks.

She tells him Gum. He sighs. Then leans back for her purse, belly pulling the buttons on his businessman’s shirt, his freckled bald spot pointing her way. Todd does his dance, grinning, pant-
ing, standing on tiptoe for Edgar, his little hands on Edgar’s shoulder. Simply too cute! That peach and cream fur on his face! Those bulgy eyes, and eye and lip liner! She paid a hideous price at the pet shop but what a sweet dog. And not stinky, no matter what Edgar says. Todd’s blanket might stink just a little. It smells like Todd. And Todd is a dog, and a dog can’t help but smell like a dog.

Edgar gives her the gum. She takes a stick and hands the pack back to him, saying, Gum? but he doesn’t want any. She stuffs the wadded wrapper in the ashtray. She checks her hair in the mirror, revving the engine. All she’d done that day was take a wrong turn and head for Sparta, or was it Rock Lake? She called her niece to ask where she was, and her niece called Edgar’s wife, who called Edgar, and there lay her error; she’d have to watch her ass be

I’m keeping it, she tells him now.
He looks at her.
The car?
My organ. Gallbladder.
You’re keeping your gallbladder.
Yes.
That’s very nice.
I got a coffee can out to stick in the freezer.
Good, Mom.
Your father’s tumor’s still in there, God rest his carcass.
Why don’t you ease up on the gas?
She lifts her right foot a bit and the roaring dies back. She looks at him. The fan keeps belting out air. Edgar stares out the windshield. The garage door is pale green, the same color almost as her dress, which she got for half price at Blair.

He’s a good son, it’s true. He calls to see how she is, he comes by to eat or help her clean house or mow and weed whack, he sprinkles the crystals under her rhododendrons. He brings videos over, which they watch, she and Edgar and Todd. He surprises her with bagels, or a cake from the bakery, or See’s candy. He says let’s do the garage, and they begin, but there’s too much to sort, all those boxes of pictures and papers and books and knickknacks, stools and plant
stands and lamps and who knows what else, dog toys, embroidery, kites, even his father’s golf clubs, God rest his dead ass, which she can’t quite give up. Who says it’s wrong for a car to just sit in the driveway?

He is a good son. So good he pisses her off, wielding his knowledge and youth, even if what hair he’s got left is gray as hers is these days. And that smartass computer! Or that tragic look he gets on his face—it makes her furious! Like this might be the last time he’ll see her!

I’ll be picking you up tomorrow, he tells her now.

She tips the rearview down to see Todd, who stands with his little chin on the window edge, making his nose prints.

In my car, I mean, Edgar says. I just don’t think you should drive.

She guns the gas again.

What’ll you do, take it to Fairfax and sell it?

Your organ?

My car.

He looks across, then away.

Well—yes. We did find a buyer, actually.

He looks both shocked and relieved, like this was exactly the thing he’d wanted to say but not the place nor the right time to say it. She turns the fan down on the dash.

You sold my car.

We got better than blue book. The money’s yours.

She looks in the mirrors and checks her seatbelt. Edgar stares straight ahead.

So it had come down to this. The next thing she’ll hear is her house is for sale. Isn’t that how the old story goes? Then it’s off to Rolling Acres or Greenbrae, assisted living with the bedwetting loonies, cold gruel and pills and turds flying, nonstop weeping and screaming. Todd will end up adopted, he’ll be beaten and kicked, left to sleep in his own piss in a cage. In the meantime, of course, she’ll be stuck. She’ll be at Edgar’s mercy completely. She’ll have to depend on Trudy, her neighbor, that fat old bitch, that battle-axe.
And on the van that comes to cart the pissants around, the geezers and drips and shit–butts with walkers.

She undoes the emergency brake, slips the shift knob down.
We don’t want you killing yourself, Mom.
Don’t you Mom me, she says.

She turns, tries to crane her neck to look but her neck is too stiff and they’re rolling now anyway, slipping down the drive backward, and maybe too quickly. She hits the brake hard. Instead of stopping short like a decent car should the thing jolts ahead, or does it, who can say, who can think in the cracking once the chaos begins? The garage door is kindling and the kitchen wall too, and now the wall to the den, but who’d notice, it happens so fast, who’d see the roof caving in, collapsing on plant stands and puzzles and shattered antiques, croquet mallets and kites, on eight generations of china in pieces, her water dispenser upended, the coffee can for the organ sitting quaintly upright. Besides, she’s got an appointment, and motherfuck it she’ll get there, by crook or by hook. Even if she has to circle back by Rock Lake, or Sparta, wherever. Even if there’s a truck dead ahead on the road, and there is, wherever she is, bearing down in the dusk, hugely floodlit, a truck loaded with logs or with ice, aiming straight at her, bearing down on the car, which is hers.