The Fog

When the fog wraps itself around you in Monterey there is no describing it. Words fail. What can you say? I'm not even going to attempt it. There's a feeling, however, of safety in the Monterey fog. It's a gentle hugging by the elements. Cars emerge through it on the highway, slowly, in miniature traffic jams, dropping down off the mountain into Carmel Valley on the way to Big Sur.

Going to work isn't a big deal in Monterey County; it's like the peeling of old paint off the walls: it just happens. It's something you do and you're glad you have the right to do it, that you're allowed, that it's permitted. Dropping into Carmel Valley, the road narrows and, unlike in Los Angeles, drivers don't battle to be first in line, but compete to give way one to another, like human beings in a time capsule where courtesy has been preserved as possessing value.

Ginger Patousky, a six foot three, two hundred twenty-six pound, blond entrepreneuress of Monterey's 'Valiant Effort' bookstore, guided her 2003 VW bug down the hill. As she passed Carmel Valley Road and curved off to the right, her eyes dropped to her lap. Her one hand, the one not on the steering wheel, lay placidly, its long, crimson fingernails neatly manicured and painted. It was a dainty little mitt that used to

crash into line-backers when she was quarterback for a Southwestern university college team twenty years ago. That was before she discerned she was not really quarterback material. Her high, taut breasts might be manufactured, and her meaty arms and muscular back and legs might, from at least a half block away, look tough for such a dainty lady. She was in truth, however, an immensely sensitive soul with a heart of, if not gold, at least bronze. It would probably have been of gold but for the pain of being what she was, a pain she carried with delicate aplomb when dealing with others whose well concealed disapproval she clearly recognized but graciously ignored.

Her lapped hand reached into her purse, lying on its side in the navigator seat, and she plucked out a stick of Dentyne. She popped it into her mouth and began to chew. She turned on the radio, switched channels through several variations of the American theme, and settled in on a classical piece; it happened this morning to be Beethoven's violin concerto. She was concerned. Barry Barrigan, her boy friend, had not called as he promised, and she wondered if he had been successful or had failed. The silence implied failure. If not failure, it implied an obstacle had arisen in their joint project to adopt a child.

She had met Barry on the gridiron when he was line backer for a neighboring state's college. Their relationship hadn't developed quickly, but after three seasons between their sophomore and senior years, they had both noticed something across the scrimmage line: a non-competitive twinkle of the eyes. One day Barry had called to ask if she'd like to have a cup of coffee at Starbucks. He was in town to see a musical. And that's how it started.

The army had rejected both of them, and the navy, and the air force, so they were both free to pair up, which they did. To avoid complications with old teammates they figured would never understand, they had agreed to hide away on California's central coast. This had been going on now for seven years and, rather than slacking, it had become serious in both their minds as they learned to appreciate one another's more intriguing qualities. Yes, of course, sex had been there in the beginning, and remained, but the relationship was not about sex; the relationship was about things they had discovered were hard to find. Old fashioned things like caring, empathy, appreciation for one another's differences, resiliency, and patience. It was a good relationship. It

developed love, kindness, and integrity. Neither was on the forefront of the sexual revolution. It was irrelevant to them whether they were married or not. They understood the obstacles in the world, and felt no need to take a public stand. Theirs was a quiet stance, not a defiant one.

Barry was smaller than Ginger, although she was the more assertive, the more masculine, if a term is needed.

"Big Patousky," Barry said, "you're my rosebud, my delicate, delicate rosebud."

"Oh, Barry," Patousky always murmered when he said such things. "Let me feel your muscle."

"You little witch, you," Barry said, and gave her a hug.

This is not a real moment we're talking about, not a specific moment, rather. It's a prototype of many moments they shared; it's a reaching out for a description so you may get some idea of them. Physical descriptions don't mean much. Patousky, as I commented, was a blond or, if I didn't say it I'll say it now: she was a blond. But that was a wig. She was really a brunette, more an auburn maned thing. Although big, she was still lean and muscular, her waist cinched in by a little girdle that made her hips and shoulders look larger, that gave her breasts some sense of credibility. Her teeth were even, but not exactly white, more like golden rod. She had lean ankles, had had when playing football, and they had grown leaner as she aged.

Barry was shorter by a few inches, broader, thicker, stockier. Flaming red headed, he had big ears that stuck out on either side, but not distastefully. He had big feet too and big legs. His hands were lean and delicate, however. Sensitive hands. While Patousky tended her antique books every day, Barry was a lineman for the phone company, drove his truck all over Monterey County, preparing phones for people as far away as Big Sur and, sometimes, when a local was missing with a cold or some other illness, in Gilroy, where he always enjoyed the deep whiff of garlic that camouflages the air.

Patousky checked her cell phone to make sure she hadn't missed a call. Barry was in San Francisco, where the adoption agency kept its office, and where various governmental bureaus maintained a presence..

This instant the phone rang. She hesitated, but quickly pressed the talk button.

"Yes."

“It’s me, Babe.”

“Yes.”

“Ah…”

“Yes…?”

“Oh…”

“Yes…”

“It’s no.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well, we suspected, right?”

“We did.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m halfway back on Highway One. I thought I’d take the slow way home, to think about it.”

“Don’t think too hard, darling.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Are you OK with it?”

“Hey, guy, we know the rules. We break the rules, we have to live with the rules.”

“We could fight.”

“Maybe, but not yet. Let’s think about it.”

“All right.”

“You want me to pick up something on the way home?”

“Sure. A bottle of cheap champagne and a filet mignon. I’ll fix us a super supper. A fixer upper.”

“Of course.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

Patousky continued the drive on Highway One toward Big Sur. She

had with her a signed copy of John Steinbeck's 'To A God Unknown,' which she was delivering to Patty Kowalsky, the ancient, invalid grandmother of Tommy Kowalsky. As she drove along, she came to the point where, off to her right and forward, sitting lonely on the coast, the navy lighthouse broadcasts its pungent beam over the ocean. The air was clearing here, the fog not so thick, the lighthouse not as necessary as it sometimes was.

Barry returned to mind, and she equated somehow their relationship to the lighthouse, and was wondering whether that made any sense, but noticed as she drew closer to it, the coastal mountains obscured the island, which - piece by piece – began to disappear. The thought of Barry faded and, as she cruised off markedly to the left down into the valley preceding the side road approach to the lighthouse on the island, both island and lighthouse disappeared. The view of the valley filled her mind and pushed all thought of Barry from it. It took a few seconds, as she dropped swiftly into the curve over the bridge, to realize she was simply here now driving along the coast, observing the Cyprus trees, the sky, the ocean, and the speed sign, which at the curve to the left announced thirty miles per hour, and that it was all right, as it should be, for it was what is.

Sand dunes to the left, golden as the midday sun in the morning mist, rose up to the sky. Deep, dark orange flames of growth she'd never identified by name, cascaded over both sides of the rode like gargantuan balls of fire plummeting down the hill to the sea. When she'd come around the curve, the island reappeared, suddenly, ten times as big as it had been before, and Barry's image instantly reentered her mind. The island's mountain was so like a pregnant woman's belly, containing the baby she knew she wanted, she wondered why it was so and why she had been burdened with this desire that she knew was biologically impossible and politically problematic. There was no answer to this, she decided for the hundredth time, as painful as that was.

The rider on the high bluff to the left lightly rode his trotting horse along the coast. She considered what he might be thinking, and she knew that whatever it was, it was a reflection of the same thing she was thinking. It was a piece of fragmented existence. And both their unanswered questions still remained. They were as prevalent as, now off to the right between her and the sea, the cattle who synchronously accompanied her Dentyne habit, so gently nipping with their teeth the grass and chewing.