

“In the Realm of Fog and Trees”

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The reputation of La Vache Verte, which is at the corner of Saratoga Avenue and Heritage Oak road, is based on its food, which is the best in Silicon Valley. Saratoga is a small, wealthy town that blends into the woods at the foot of the coast range at the Western edge of the Valley. From Saratoga you can drive on southwest through the mountains to the coast and Santa Cruz, or north to the showcase Mountain Winery and on along roads that wind through redwoods toward San Francisco.

Unlike, say, Cupertino or Sunnyvale to the east in the open valley, the village of Saratoga has some upper-class history. At the beginning of the twentieth century rich people from San Francisco built large summer places here. They had heard how the wealthy on the East Coast went to Cape Cod to escape the heat of New York or Boston, but theirs was perverse emulation, for in the summer San Francisco is chilly and Saratoga hot.

James Phelan, mayor of San Francisco and the first popularly elected senator from California, built in Saratoga a villa, Villa Montalvo, with spacious gardens on a 175-acre estate in 1912. It now serves as an artist's colony and has a summer music festival. Saratoga's first music and drama performances were held in the Theatre-by-the-Glade on the hillsides of Saratoga Creek. These early productions launched the careers of Olivia de Havilland and her sister, Joan Fontaine.

When he'd accumulated enough money, a mountain of gold as he whispered it to himself, Hemadri Chandragupta, the CEO of Gold Mountain Hardware, who had begged on the street as a child in Bangalore, sleeping in doorways and under bridges with the other street children like piled seals, huddling against skinny cattle in the winter, built a 10,000-square-foot house hidden among oaks in Saratoga.

La Vache Verte is quite small, plainly and almost frugally arranged with simple decorations and tables set a good way apart. The walls are roughly stuccoed to suggest a French country inn, and a fauve painting hangs in the foyer, small but authentic. It shows a white cow painted green because she stands in the green light of a bushy garden. It was one of those large Western European cows, more robust than foraged with him on the streets of his youth. La Vache Verte is not an “in” place in the sense that Scott's, or The Lion and Compass, is an “in” place. However people go to those places, the players and dealmakers, along with the last stragglers from the old San Francisco society, along with an occasional Fleishacker or Sutro, unknown by name to Chandragupta, but recognizable by their softer manner. It is expensive. There is, of course, no music. This evening Chandragupta spotted the distinguished investor Vinod Khosla, who had a table with several other Indians he did not recognize. Khosla gave Chandragupta his full-featured and magisterial nod, which had always reminded him of pictures of Nehru, and then accorded him a sly smile on noticing his companion. Chandragupta noticed Andy Grove with a fashionably dressed young couple he did not know at a corner table. It was a village, like his

home village, in a way. Grove, who had recently retired, was beginning to show the softer look.

Chandragupta was no gourmet. His newly built house in the woods had a large kitchen with a white tile floor, and a microwave/convection oven, gas burners, dishwasher, all black enamel with chrome trim, a counter opening onto the dining room. He never used a food processor, but knew that his could do in a moment what the women of his village had done in hours grinding spices with meter-high, carved wooden pestles. A propane-fitted tandoori oven stood in a corner. His housekeeper kept it clean as a photo in an interior decoration magazine. The shelves were well supplied with the staples of his childhood: onions, lentils, and rice, some cooked by his housekeeper and stored in containers in the refrigerator, which also housed cartons of vegetable curries from a Cupertino chaat house he passed coming to and from his office. He did not think often about these conveniences because from the day he entered college he had turned his mind from an unacceptable past to a future he believe could erase it, but a sense of power warmed his heart because these basic things, some of which had been the goal of desperate and frightening struggle in his childhood world, and others unimaginably beyond reach, were now ready to his hand. Nor did he think of how when he was a young child his family had lived in one room and cooked in a round clay oven in the yard, or how even when he was on the streets he was never alone, but his isolated occupation of the vast house made him both powerful and at the same time lonely and guilty. He ate at home at random moments not according to mealtimes but according to the hours his passionate dedication to work demanded, standing beside the kitchen counter purposefully lifting chaat from white paper cartons with his right hand, perhaps while talking on his cell phone with his left. When he wanted to take someone to lunch he favored The Two Roses, a simulated British pub in the heart of Silicon Valley where he could eat bangers and watch junior coders play darts. He had brought this woman to La Vache Verte at her suggestion. Sitting opposite her at a good table, he felt a stern pride in dishes and wine that the waiter had suggested. He was a hale man of 50 with a florid, stern face set off by bulky black hair and brushy moustache. Chandragupta was well outfitted in a dark blue tailored suit, dark blue shirt and white silk tie — he had dressed for this evening as he would have to meet a lawyer from San Francisco.

His dark pupils, which always seemed to his companion to have a red spark of light in them, though this could hardly be a physical fact, turned alertly round under his until they rested on her figure. The woman in the figure was Anne-Marie Sutro. She had designed his bedroom.

She was mixed French and Vietnamese. Her mother was a Vietnamese actress, and her father had been a French film director. She was born at Cannes, but her parents were separated and she was living in Hollywood at age 13 with her father when he killed himself. Her father's family had gotten custody of her at first and taken her to her grandfather's lonely farm in the foothills of the Pyrenees where she had been cloistered until he died. Her mother had regained custody of her and sent her for a year to a girl's school in Southern California and then to Scripps College. Shortly after graduation she had married a wealthy young man from Saratoga who was attempting a career as a painter. The man and then the marriage collapsed and she had set up as an interior designer in Saratoga partly because a friend of hers from Scripps was working at Chandragupta's company. This friend had provided the

contact that led to her designing his bedroom and other parts of the house. His attitude towards her had been absent, formal, a little ceremonious. It provoked her and she had a predatory desire to bite into it, which even led her to make what seemed to her edgy design suggestions, thinking he would object. But he always went along and remained aloof until a few days ago he had invited her out. Now she felt detached from the whole matter, as if it were a sort of experiment, as if their wine glasses were laboratory glassware, their contents, the metaphorical color of blood, pigmented instead with some chemical indicator that would give them away.

One day, she took out her phone to ask him to take her away, but she only reached his answering service again. The message, not his own cheerful voice, but the voice like crumbling wax of some desperate machine, suggested he would talk to whoever called, and they would find together some promising outcome. 'Anyone who called'. She left him a message that she wanted a motorcycle ride. It was the third day she had left him a message, and he had not returned her call. She went into the bathroom to shoot up. Usually she could do it in her studio; that is where she kept her kit, but she was afraid Arlette and the Indian Woman would return. Arlette liked to take the Indian woman to see American things. Today they had gone to a museum in San Francisco. Anne-Marie used to go there with her husband in *his* car, a black Mercedes. They had asked Anne-Marie but she had felt too nervous, too keyed up. The Indian woman had never seen a shower before and always left the bathroom damp and musty.

Well, she would take care of herself. She called Hemadri at his office and asked if she could borrow his Maserati for a few hours. She had done that several times, just to drive in such a powerful, secure car on the winding roads among the redwoods. His secretary said he was not in and would not give his number. That Japanese bitch. It was the third day he had not been in. But Anne-Marie had his cell number and called. After many rings, just before she gave up, a stranger with a timid voice answered. They had a disorienting conversation with the stranger relaying his words to Hemadri and answering back. He was not paying attention to her at all. Some one would drive it to her apartment, and she could drop off the driver.

She wanted out of her apartment. She had done with it. She dressed in her smart but practical attire, a cream linen suit and low shoes, as if she were going to visit a client, walked downstairs, and stood waiting on the street before her building. Her apartment was on the top floor of a four-apartment building on a curving street in a wooded neighborhood. Bob had said it looked like a very large, white New England farmhouse. She knew the sound of the car before she saw it coming around the corner. Bitbucket was driving. He pulled up, got out and approached her with his curious gait that seemed as if his head came downward then swung back while his feet trotted first, then his head again, the keys bobbing in his outstretched hand.

"Dr. Chandragupta asked me to give you these. He said you would take me back to his house," he added apologetically. Anne-Marie slipped into the car, drew up the seat, and set out for the house she knew well. During the ride, Bitbucket asked her if she was a friend of Dr. Chandragupta's.

"I don't know what you mean," she responded.

“Oh, I only think Dr. Chandragupta needs friends. I think he doesn’t really have so many: two, one, Bob Lee - do you know him?”

“Yes, he was my friend too.”

“Well, he’s gone away, you know.”

“Who is his other friend,” she asked.

“Oh, gosh, I’m his friend,” he admitted embarrassed. “But I don’t think he knows it.” he added forlornly.

Anne-Marie reminisced that she had eaten once in a riverside inn called Le Cheval Vert near Paris. She said once “we” had been eating there and run into a friend from the states by chance. They speculated together if the names were a coincidence and then asked the waitperson. She answered she would ask the chef, but commented that the chef and the owner were both Vietnamese so it was unlikely. “Could you discourse with them in the language of their native land?” he asked her. Her eyes seemed to search his as if looking for a trap. “I have not spoken it, except to my mother, since I was a child. Why do you want to know?” she paused as if she did not expect an answer.

He wondered whom she had been with in the inn in France. He felt, if she would have him, she would be a pliant lover. But would she? She seemed fresh and pliable, like a dancer, but still there was that indefinable distance, like a goddess. And would she yield to him?

Her husband was from a wealthy family of this town and a painter. She was not divorced but had been separated for two years, she had explained in explaining her name when one of his engineers had introduced them, but she had never referred to the subject again. In his Silicon Valley life he wandered in his expensive car from one similar cityscape to another, as he had wandered barefoot as a child from one part of a dusty city to another. Longing to enter something, somewhere, not as confining as his native village but somewhere that tracked its own history in its streets, led him to build his house and then later engage this woman with a local name.

He was not in a hurry with this woman; moreover personal life moved at its own pace. He did not want to pester her for a decision; she should consider her options. If this were a business matter he might try to think out what her options were from her perspective, like examining the options of a customer, but the options of a customer lived in a matrix of engineering and business criteria that would rapidly light up in his mind, while personal decisions waited in the shadows. And he felt shadows in his past as well.

He glanced across the table again under drooping eyelids. Anne-Marie’s face looked soft, childlike, and dreamy; only her eyes were a trifle disconcerting, a trifle contradictory. There was something about her eyes that was out of keeping with the rest of her face. Sometimes they were almost brown; sometimes they were olive; and sometimes they changed to a hard, watery grey. When they were grey, they

disconcerted him. They morphed cold, he said to himself. They did not then seem to belong to the face of a very young and charming Eurasian woman, but rather to a heart grown ruthless in penetration and criticism of masculine foolishness, like a merchant's wife in Bangalore who had grown plump and batrachian sitting on the floor of her house, observing the comings and goings of a husband she had first seen after she at their wedding and of his friends as she served them meals. A doubt assailed him: was Anne-Marie frigid? He had heard that many American women were frigid, despite the blatant way they talked and dressed. There was an oddly persistent virginal quality about her, the obscure husband notwithstanding. His thoughts took a path after the shadowy husband. It would be very awkward if that fellow turned up and started making trouble. You could never be sure when undesirable characters would show up on the scene. Chandragupta's doubts sharpened; he could not afford to be involved in complications. He glanced around for Khosla, but they were seated at an angle where he could not see if the distinguished investor was still present. Maybe it would be better if Anne-Marie turned him down?

But now she was smiling at him and telling him a story about an old man who had opened and closed the locks in a canal when she had visited in England. Chandragupta had never been in England but often dreamed of going there. It seemed the cool place, somehow both lush and clean, where mankind must have evolved to live. Why had he never gone there? At first, he had been too poor and then reluctant to take time from his work. He loved to hear her talk about England and France; they enchanted him and dissolved his doubts about her. She was beautiful in the green dress with the hints of gold as if a golden stream flowed between it and her skin. How well the color suited her olive skin. He remembered how Khosla had turned his head when he noticed her. The heart of the CEO of swelled with tenderness, desire, and perspective proprietary pride. He now hoped that Anne-Marie would be his.

Anne-Marie Sutro was growing more and more bored. Everything was intended to please her; but everything was boring. She had chosen the restaurant because her husband had taken her here before they were married when it seemed that everything they did was in unquestionable harmony. He had said it was French, and they had shared the feeling, but now she realized it was only a kind of California French; the freshness of the vegetables asserted itself rather than contributing to the meal. The CEO's over-detailed anecdotes of business, or his obscure stories of gods with unpronounceable names, unrememberablenames, his large, swarthy face with the heavy eyelids, his laborious pleasantries delivered in a quick, singsong voice, oddly out of keeping with his weighty air. All the while his deep dark eyes under heavy lids watched her and everything with an abstracted patient alertness as if he were a cat, and big cats, tigers came from India, waiting to see the first telltale motion of a secret threat he knew waited him down the road.

She thought of an etching by Daumier of an haut bourgeois sitting in a nightclub with a demimondaine. The suggested image of herself as a demimondaine both humiliated her and gave her a sardonic pleasure, and a hidden satisfaction that she could enter that world in her imagination while the people around her remained preoccupied with spiteful things. The world had come so far without her. She wished she could take out her notebook. It was in her purse, but she dared not take it out.

She was in the habit of making sketches or writing brief outlines of stories about the people around her wherever she was. She remembered that she had seen the print in a book of his prints when she had copied each one, not in Daumier's style but in her own; she worked in pen and ink with hard black lines and jagged points. A friend from Alaska told her it resembled icebergs. Annemarie had never seen an iceberg, and told her friend her style covered up its tentativeness with agility. She had then drafted brief scenarios of a story of each print. Even while she was telling the CEO stories from the Pyrenees, she began to imagine what she would write if only she could open her purse. Her stories were usually of foreigners, or half foreigners, Americans in France, a half-French girl in England, a half-English girl in America. What was the story behind the nod from the Indian man with the large nose? Anne-Marie imagined that the man with the large nose knew some secret, held some secret over the CEO. The CEO had done something illegal or terribly humiliating in business, and the man with the large nose knew, and the CEO dreaded that one day he would use it against him. The couple in the corner, him with shoulder-length hair wearing a soft leather bomber jacket, her with bleached, spiked hair in a starched white shirt with a string tie, the two sitting with a short man in a black turtleneck. The CEO had recognized the man in the turtleneck. But wait; yes, he was right; the turtleneck was the real power of the group. She had not noticed him at first, thought he was some asshole tagging along for their energy. His hair was sharp, curly steel gray receding behind a domed forehead. Brightly watchful eyes — Jewish perhaps, no? — Yes. Her father's family did not like Jewish people. They said he had failed in Hollywood because Jewish producers stuck to their own. She felt detached from their feelings because of her Asian perspective but had absorbed some of it. The Jew in the restaurant had a Middle European accent, Hungarian? At first she thought the young people, fashionable and elegant but hard-up, maybe out of touch, maybe visitors from his home country, — thought they could exploit him, but, no, there was something stern and desperate in his brow. He could be vicious. Cold and vicious because he did not care about them, did not care about anybody. He would coldly and viciously destroy them, drive them back to the country they had fled, to two different countries for they had fled singly and only met in his shadow. Sometimes people degusted her so much she felt she could not go on living among them. At other times some one, it was always an individual, returned her to the joy of the world. Could this dark heavy, many with his reedy voice be such a person? She thought not.

She began to imagine the evening remaining before her. They might go to a party he had mentioned. They would go in his Maserati, which thrilled her — it had power and style. It protected them like the armor of a mighty insect; it wasn't the metal only, or the hard enameled surface only, but the image, the foreign, violent image. He had never offered to let her drive it, and she had never asked. The party would be at the mansion of an acquaintance of his who was a vice president of a software company, some one close to her age he said. He said there would be a pool and a hot tub and a courtyard where they could dance outside. There would probably be drugs. She did not fraternize with druggies; she had her own supply and kept her use to herself.

At the party they would speak respectfully to him, but briefly. Briefly because he was with a strange young woman or because he was a bore? Probably the latter. What would they think of her dress, so unlike her usual smart but practical clothes, of her carefully made up eyes and lips? People would start conversations with her about

what excited them, making money, about technical gadgets, about convincing people that selling technical gadgetry would benefit the world and make money. She hated how they lived in abstractions. She thought of her dolls. In a display case in her apartment she had 36 Thai dolls dressed in miniature but elaborate court dress, the only gift from her mother she had kept. When the other people at the party saw her attention depart they would gradually flounder and turn away, and she would silently long to sketch them. She had danced with him. He was heavy and danced as if he were watching the image of a man dancing on the screen and imitating its movements instead of feeling her movements. Or they might go to his place to watch a movie. He had a home entertainment center that was like a small theater, no, better than a small theatre because the large screen and wonderful sound were somehow both intimate and grandiose. They would go on to his bedroom, which was both his and hers— because she had designed it. She had given it three off-white walls and a ceiling out of some notion of plastered walls in rural India. Two of the white walls had windows. The fourth wall, uninterrupted by window or door, she painted it red like his car, for contrast, for courage, for blood. A few times she had borrowed his car. Just to drive. She felt she owed him something. She had a small tattoo of a car on her shoulder. He had not seen it yet. She had drawn the cartoon herself, long before she knew him, with jagged, peaky lines, but the body was filled with red, the color she had given his wall. In that room, perhaps on that bed the question would be asked.

Why not, as an experiment? If she were to experiment with being a demimondaine shouldn't she pay the rent? She had watched Titanic and an Indian musical in his home theatre. She had asked if he could get an Eric Rohmer movie, and he said he had. He would put his arm around her and kiss her, maybe several times. He would not go further unless she responded. Instead of responding, she might say to him, yes, take me to your bedroom. She might let him make love to her, as an experiment. She had experimentally sketched them in her notebooks. She could half imagine him, hulking, like a hedgehog eating, but she could only fill her place in the sketch with jagged pointy shapes like new frost. A sort of procrastination kept her from finishing the bottom part of the picture. Why should she go through all this? The very question gave her a sense of freedom.

As she struggled to drive as if in an ordinary car she felt herself once more enclosed in power and drove aggressively. Using the motor's capacity to change speeds delicately, she hurried towards downtown Saratoga and then into the winding roads that lead to the coast. Her fashionable apparel was like the armor of the car. As she approached the woods, wisps of fog began reaching over the freeway. When she left the freeway and entered the forest the redwoods enclosed her. The fog moistened the windshield and the wipers came on. She was not driving as fast as she might, partly because of the fog, but partly because she was now feeling contented even peaceful; there was no longer a need to hurry. The feeling was partly injected, of course, but it also had something to do with the fog and the steady motion of the windshield wipers, the absence of a final end. They kept her company as then cleared the broad sweep of thick glass, helping her to feel not quite immanent. The fog blurred the world outside the rigid glass.

When she paused at a railway crossing a group of people materialized from the fog beside the road, immanent but still unreal, as unreal as everything else. It was a

group of longhaired, exotically dressed teenagers, laughing and talking and singing as they wandered hand-in-hand or with arms about each other's waists, all of them obviously on top of the world, probably stoned. They reminded her of the musicians and she realized for the first time that she did not like the musicians. In fact, she despised them. Except Buzzword, of course. He was her friend. Probably it was one of them who had sent the message with the fake picture. She hated the way the computer people were connected through abstractions rather than her world of things she could see and touch. Why did Bob let himself get involved with them? Of course, he was like them, sometimes an artist, when he played his music, but other times caught up in abstractions. Why had she not realized it?

Ordinarily seeing young those people straggling all over, the road as if they owned it, being so sure of themselves, so relaxed and gay would not have annoyed her. Perhaps she would have thought of wonderful times she had had with her husband when she had first made him love her. Now, she so often felt depressed, insecure, and lonely, and with no one to talk to. But they did not disturb her much because they did not seem real behind the screen of fog. She remained perfectly cool and detached, even though they didn't try to get out of the way, and actually began to wave their thumbs demanding a lift. Of course, she could not have taken more than one of them in Chandragupta's car anyway. What did they mean? Her sketchbook was in her purse beside her and she thought of stopping and sketching them. In the past sketching would clam her, give her a sense of control of her environment, but now it seemed heartless. Control of her environment seemed heartless.

She made herself look indifferently at their silly faces surrounded by all that idiotic hair wet, snakelike strands, every face lacquered with fog, every mouth opening and shutting with breath steaming out of the clouds. They reminded her of Vietnamese dragon masks and also of the subhuman nightmare faces in some of Ensor's paintings. Those things were so far apart, and yet so alike. These faces grimacing at her through the fog had the unreal repulsiveness of walking and talking things that had once been alive and failed to sustain themselves. They would never displace her, as the Indian woman had. But they were only dummies; she aggressively felt nothing about them. It was just that she would have preferred not to have to look at them.

A dummy came up too close to her driver-side window. Through the fog, the painted dragon-Ensor face enlarged opposite staring straight at her, its mouth and eyes opening wider and wider in the grotesque caricature of incredulity. She passed on. She saw them in the rearview mirror lifting and hurling things at her and heard the thud of stones or dirt clods on the rear of Hemadri's car. As she dove on, some of them seemed to rise and float after her. One was the third soul of Bobby who despised her, another an Audrey who distrusted her, another of her husband who had drunk himself into a bodiless condition, another of her father whom she had never seen before, another of her mother good never seen her.

Dark lowered and she switched on the headlights. Then she remembered this foreign model had fog lights. They were illegal in California, but she preferred them. Groping among the dials and switches, which caused little swerves in her steering, she fumbled them on. They illuminated the oncoming road and looming redwood trees with an eerie underglow. She found she could turn off the headlights, which rinsed the road with a proximate golden color. It highlighted the liquorish dampness

of the pavement and brought the tree trunks closer. As she wound her way toward the coast, the trees were taller, with thicker trunks more thickly packed. She drove hard, devouring distance, requiring more and more strength in her shoulders to negotiate the turns. The trunks seemed to devour space. The gaps between them shrank and then disappeared. She could only see one rank of trunks behind another like an immeasurable fence. Now that she was driving down hill, approaching the coast, her shoulders began to ache. The fog thinned a little and there was a reddish or salmon glow from the failing sunset.

Driving alone in the falling darkness was like a dream to her. She dreamed she was entering a non-human realm, the realm of fog and trees. Hemadri's car slipped on the pavement. It left the road. It was turning in the air like the unkind, perusing shadows. It struck the wall of trees. The carapace that had protected her, crushed her life.