

ONE FOG-KNIT NIGHT

Bill Baynes

1.

Weldon

Weldon wasn't happy.

He lay with his whole company, his family and friends, more than a score of them, basking on the dock. Cinnamon, his favorite wife, was draped across his broad back, her pup right next to her. His brother Sergei stretched across his rear fins.

Burps, grunts, gaseous intervals, gossip – hard to tell one from the other. The tourists kept ticking their little lights. A normal afternoon on Fisherman's Wharf.

But Weldon was out of sorts. The flashes irritated him. He couldn't get comfortable. He could hardly turn his head. The big bull was as affable as the next guy, but this was truly annoying

He was sick of chilling with the sea lion colony. Every day the same individuals, the same quirks, the same habits. Everyone was totally predictable, right down to the next whisker twitch, the next belch.

He was bored with them, with all of them, with everything.

Nothing to do but perform stupid tricks for those grumpy, ugly humans looking down from the crowded pier. Odd colors, obnoxious odors – they irked him.

Normally he was the loudest, the biggest clown, the strongest wrestler, the wettest splash. He was the one the people came to see. It usually amused him to amaze them with his antics, his blares and boasts. Now he could barely muster a yawn. He had lost his bluster.

His mind was turning to chowder.

He lay there, glaring at the humans. They watched him and he watched them. They seemed so happy, most of them, but always so busy. They were always in motion. Didn't they ever get tired?

Weldon was. He was worn out from doing nothing, from being on the bottom, both physically and mentally. It was the most washed out, squashed and wasted, the tireddest tired of all.

He yearned for adventure. He needed something to do, something new. He wanted to go somewhere he'd never been, to meet someone he'd never seen.

But how can you meet anyone under a ton of sea lion blubber?

Cinnamon squirmed higher on Weldon's back. She always wanted to be on top of the pile. She was constitutionally unable (and certainly unwilling) to take her turn on the bottom like everybody else.

The nerve. Weldon liked the sun as much as she did. He felt he deserved a share. Monotony made him touchy. He rippled his back.

Her pup rolled across his neck and hit the wood with a wet thud.

Weldon was actually a pretty gentle guy, but he was big. Really B-I-G. When he belched, waves formed. When he sneezed, fish swam into rocks. At least, it seemed that way ... almost.

Jumbo, that's what Weldon was, and that's the way he expressed himself. His sadness was limitless, his anger volcanic, his boredom ... flat all the way to the horizon, uninterested, uninteresting, the yawn that ate all existence, mind-numbing B-O-R-I-N-G.

Sergei slid to the end of the deck and slapped Tomany, hunting for a little fun. They tussled and skimmed along their fellows' backs, grappling and slipping and grunting, until they both spilled into the bay. They made a considerable splatter, prompting a flurry of "ohs" and camera flashes from the sightseers.

Weldon wrinkled his snout and passed gas in comment.

Sergei sleeked back onto the dock and flopped across Weldon's rear flippers again.

"They're such losers," he snorted.

Mpff. What did he know? What did he think he was?

Cinnamon wiggled her front flippers and hit Weldon in the face. That did it.

Weldon had had enough. Just because he was the largest and the smartest didn't mean he wanted to take care of everyone else. Right now he was more inclined to take some time for himself.

Crowded, chowdered – he couldn't put up with it any more. He couldn't even snooze in all this confusion. Enough of all this sociability, this geniality, this creature closeness. .

"BAH!" he barked and made a massive shrug. "OOF! Off!"

Sea lions slopping in all directions, he erupted and registered his displeasure.

"ROAARR!!"

The humans applauded. Weldon shook his head in disgust, hurled himself off the pier and boogied down the bay.

He was a wonderful swimmer, fastest in the herd. He churned through the water, large enough to leave his own wake. Halfway to Alcatraz, he paused and looked back toward San Francisco.

He could hear a faint buzz that he never noticed when he was closer to shore. The people onshore swarmed like schools of mackerel with no predators to control them.

What was going on up in those hills? Were the humans enjoying themselves? All the activity -- so glittery and exciting, so inviting -- it seemed ceaseless.

It made him sleepy just to watch it all. He took a nap, floating upright with the tip of his nose out of the water.

When he woke, he swam alone for the rest of the day. It felt fine to be away. Separate. Radical.

He could feel the pull of the herd, imagine the familiar feel of sea lion skin sliding against his, but he resisted it. When was the last time he'd spent several hours apart from the cluster, not lying with everyone on a slimy dock or floating together in a raft of bodies?

After dark, he fed his fill. He bobbed in the waves of the Bay and stared at the city again. Slow time. He enjoyed the solitude. The fog was rolling in. He could scarcely see the soft twinkling lights.

After a while, he noticed that the buzz had died down. The lights had stopped moving, though they were still on. Might be the time to investigate.

He cruised toward shore, propelling himself effortlessly, completely comfortable in the water. He climbed on some rocks and inspected his surroundings.

Quiet. Empty. No people. No machines. It was pleasant and damp. It felt safe.

Weldon skidded down to the ground. He brought his hind flippers under his big body and leaned onto his front flippers. Swaying from side to side, he wobbled forward into the heavy mist.

He had some exploring to do.