

Beyond Henry

~ Gary Marks

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Chapter 1

I always wanted to name a boat.

I have names already picked out, but until I buy a boat and see the boat there's no way to know which one is right.

Two of the names I have picked out are, When Fired Fish and There Goes My Inheritance.

I have others.

When telling some girl I meet about my boat I imagine she asks me the name of the boat.

The problem is, why would she ask me something like that? The kind of girls I want to meet don't even know boats *have* names.

I'm not interested in girl sailors. Or girl boat-makers. I'm just looking for a girl who, when I tell her I have a boat, gets excited about it, and she's pretty and kind, and doesn't get seasick.

Living in the city without a boat is hard. City parties are good for those in the mood to party. But for the most part I don't like the way cities smell. Cities smell like a place where no one cares about people.

Even if you're the mayor. As soon as you walk outside City Hall you can smell that it's just not right. Why not go to back inside and tell the city council -- you know what, it smells here! We need to do something about it.

But mayors and city council members are mostly useless.

The ocean is the one place where the air still smells like it should. You breathe in sky-sea -- with land nowhere in sight -- and you want to scream yes to some cerulean God. You want to pound your chest and inhale until your lungs feel like they've just

been born. You want to name your boat a good name, a solid serious name, and never go back to the city again.

Luckily I could afford to sail forever. After I got fired from my job as a waiter I was looking for a new line of work when suddenly this lawyer finds me and tells me my Uncle Riverton -- the last of the Vandeclore family, otherwise known as the Prince of Walnut Creek, died, and left me a small fortune of three point six million dollars after tax.

I was his favorite nephew, because I loved going out on his boat with him, sailing around and under the Golden Gate Bridge in the late summer. Everyone else in the family either hated the water or wanted to go out on his million dollar yacht and drink champagne. But I loved the sailboat. I loved the water spraying up into my face, and the effort it took to fight through the waves and wind to find our way home.

So if I ever did buy a boat it wouldn't big and gaudy. It would be a simple cabin cruiser. I thought about naming it, Riverton, Otherwise Known as Prince, after my uncle. But the name is a little long.

Chapter 2

The girl I met despite not having a boat was Valerie.

Valerie worked in a fish store. I like fish. So I went in. She was setting up a display on a small ladder and the first thing I saw were her bare feet. Because she hated wearing shoes. And they were really nice, so I looked up. And she looked down at me looking at her and said, "May I help you?" I loved her voice right away. It was soft and feathery; a "I would never hurt you" kind of tone.

I said no. Because I didn't need any help. I only came to look around and then leave.

So she kept setting up the display and I looked around at the fish but honestly I couldn't keep my eyes on them. She was wearing a pair of jeans that were pretty tight. I could never wear jeans that tight. No guys can/should. And the other thing I kept staring at was her belt. Because even though it was just an ordinary brown belt, her shirt kept rising up above it when she lifted something and I was hypnotized by her how soft her skin seemed to be.

She climbed down from the ladder and came over to me. No one else was in the store. I mean, fish stores aren't like Starbucks, or a Jewish deli, where there are just tons of people hanging around all the time. A fish store is the kind of store where you either buy some fish and leave, or you don't go there.

"Are you looking for something in particular?"

"No, I'm just curious. I like anything having to do with the ocean."

"Well these are all fresh water fish. They only live in fish tanks."

"I'm planning on buying a boat."

"That's nice. What will you name it?"

At that very moment we heard a loud crash. The tank in the display fell from a height of about five and a half feet and smashed onto the floor in thousands of pieces. Fortunately there were no fish in the tank. So no one died.

She began to walk towards it but I said, "Wait, you're not wearing any shoes!"

I saw tears forming in her eyes. "They're going to fire me."

"Let me help you. Do you have anything to clean this up with?"

At that moment a fat man whose face actually reminded me of a fish came in and asked what happened and when Valerie said she hadn't secured the tank to the shelving because she went over to help me instead, and that I wasn't interested in buying fish, I was just looking, he took her into the office and fired her on the spot.

We left the store together. I reminded her to bring her shoes.

At the bus stop I told her I had a car and would be happy to drive her home. But she said. "Honestly, I don't know you well enough."

Then she added, "But I don't want to go home right now. So if you want to walk around the city with me for a while, you can."

The walk, which I now refer to as "The Walk," changed my life.

Chapter 3

That walk was the first time the city smelled more alive than dead to me. Through the gloom and dust -- a smell that reminded me of the taste of steel, I could also smell fresh bread from bakeries, and fragrances coming from outdoor flower stands.

Coincidental graffiti created by unknown artists seemed to mirror our conversations as we walked. One graffiti painted in red simply asked, or stated, "**WHAT'S THE POINT?**" This mirrored the conversation we were having about why people bothered even wondering about the meaning of life.

Another graffiti painted in green said, "**MONEY SUCKS.**" This went well with our conversation about why someone who graduated with a degree in philosophy felt compelled to work as a fish store assistant, and what exactly was the main lesson learned from such a formative experience?

I liked the expressions on Valerie's face as she spoke to me. Her voice was steady and soft instead of full-voiced and confident. Her thoughts were so complicated at times I couldn't keep up with them. Even when I knew what she was saying was right.

Her basic life philosophy was to be in a constant state of disbelief. In her view, she had been lied to by parents and teachers, and teased and tricked by her two brothers her entire life.

She'd watched her girlfriends get swept off their feet, then dumped.

And some of her brothers' friends had been talked into joining the army or navy or Marines, and had gotten their heads blown off in Iraq. So she logically came to believe that believing anything could be very dangerous.

She wasn't about to fall for fakes either. I couldn't talk her into believing things about me that weren't obvious, even on the first day. There was no room for me to build a likable identity through past events she wasn't sure occurred. I was simply who I was in front of her.

For instance, I started talking about wanting a boat, and how navigating the waves made me feel like I could escape everything. When I was out there on the water it was the only time I felt like I wasn't scared of anything.

She said, "Seems to me like you're pretty much scared of everything."

There was no explanation as to how or why she happened to come to that conclusion. But it made me laugh when she said it.

I began to realize on our long walk that I was very comfortable with her way of seeing the world: She didn't automatically believe in anything people defined as reality, and I didn't want to live in it.

Chapter 4

Valerie had blonde hair with a thin blue streak on one side, and jade green eyes. I am using the word jade not as a cliché, but to say that the color was something you would find on a very expensive necklace -- sparkly, watery, almost impossible to look at directly without feeling like you'd looked beyond where you could or should.

Her clothes reminded me of an off-Broadway production of Peter Pan. One of her green tops was purposely frayed at the sleeves and neckline.

We were both unemployed. We had both gone to college on our parents' money. She now had a degree in philosophy, which qualified her to work in a fish store. I dropped out at the end of my freshman year.

I inherited three point six million dollars. She inherited Friedrich Nietzsche.

I found a reason to call her every day after the day we met.

We would play tennis in the fog and then eat lunch together. Or we'd go to the 24 hour gym at three in the morning and work out, and sometimes sneak into the women's sauna together.

The first time I told her I loved her she said, "I'll believe you if you can define love in a way that makes sense to me."

I was considering how to answer her when she interrupted, "Henry, don't make things up. Humans have a nasty habit of turning the infinite into the infantile. Let's not do that."

Chapter 5

Anyone who has been to college knows it has a way of mangling and contorting the known world. If you really do want to *know* it, it starts to turn into something like:

$$y = \frac{1}{x} \int_1^x \frac{e^t}{t} dt, x^2 y' + xy = e^x$$

Parents, girlfriends, everything you were once so sure of, are suddenly replaced by complex but empirically provable twenty-step equations.

Sometimes smoking weed will help solve it. But sometimes it just makes things look like this:

$$y = \frac{1}{x} \int_1^x \frac{e^t}{t} dt, x^2 y' + xy = e^x$$
$$y = \frac{1}{x} \int_1^x \frac{e^t}{t} dt, x^2 y' + xy = e^x$$

. . . . In other words, it makes it twice as hard to figure out.

It can take hours for you to recover, but by then maybe you've had the realization that the make-believe game the professors decided to call reality is, from a deeper perspective of math and science, debatable.

So -- was Valerie's constantly-questioning way of seeing the world invalidated after these snot-nosed professors tried to shove these long-enduring equations into her brain?

Hardly. She became a philosophy major.

This basically allowed her to use equally irrefutable logic to questions their point. And that pleased her.

This became very frustrating when we argued from time to time, because she was worse than a lawyer. Lawyers try to trap you, but there are usually ways around the traps. True philosophers never try to disprove your point. Instead they offer so many other possible versions of the truth that all your main points start to evaporate into the fog of possibilities and basically become meaningless.

Where that would leave me at the end of an argument was even worse than if I had lost and apologized.

She would then offer some lopsided compromise that I no longer had any good reason to turn down but that she always seemed to get the better of.

Still, I was finally in love for the first time in my life -- whatever love was.

And I didn't feel like I needed to buy a boat to be happy.

Chapter 6

During my short tenure at college I picked up the guitar one day and found my way inside of it. After that day I would play and sing every night in the stairwell of my dormitory. The guitar and I would echo off the hallowed halls and walls and spiral off the metal steps. The tones sounded important and commanding in my private echo chamber. I was lord and creator of the stairwell.

Dragging my guitar around through the gray streets after I dropped out in my freshman year, it became a part of my arms and hands. The strings were like six beautiful eyes. They would let me look out from them from time to time.

I also kept a notebook where I would carefully and proudly write my first poems.

I named the book, *Book*.

I wrote the name on the black front cover with White Out.

I wrote it with my hand purposely shaking, so it looked like it was written by a ghost.

Chapter 7

The best time Val and I ever made love was on a high school soccer field one summer night. I was amazing. I really was. The star-smudged sky watched diffusely, while the wind applauded, and Val shed a tear, sighed, and said it was good.

When we found out she was pregnant we traced the conception date back to that night.

I asked her to marry me but she said she didn't believe in it.

I asked her to live with me but she said she couldn't exist without alone time and that she would not want to give up her apartment.

I asked her if she was willing to have the baby, and she said yes. Then she miscarried.

After she recovered and we were back to having fun together I told her I still wanted to have children with her. I was all in.

She said no. She enjoyed living in a world free of anything real. Children were far too real. So was I.

Chapter 8

One night she took me to an alumni party and we were entertained by a professor who was so funny I thought he should be doing stand-up comedy. He stood in front of me the whole time while looking directly at Valerie. He told us about his life:

"I was born a humad. Let us not mistake this for the ancient Jain community from Rajasthan. I am talking about the madness inherent in heredity.

"By the time I was twenty I followed The Third Way -- my mind and emotions were discombobulated. So I followed the immediate needs of my body. Hence my life descended into becoming, simply and humbly, a Bohemian. I married and divorced in an appropriately short amount of time. Then I became a professor teaching at a college unranked by all known college rating systems, world-wide.

"After I was dumped by wife number two because of my putrid professor's salary and my inability to keep up with her afternoon and evening drinking rituals I became a ghost to myself. Noting this, I decided to create a new religion, which I called Boo-dism. Boo-dism was a combination of the words, *boo* and *dismal*.

"To join my religion all you had to do was go around scaring people with your fears and negativity. Negativity was not just part of our ritual, it was a total life commitment. Every Christmas we would have our own concurrent holiday represented by the Negativity Scene, where we would put a cradle out in the front yard with flowers all around it, but it was actually a coffin. We would then go around singing to the neighbors, screaming our favorite Emo songs, a capella.

"On New Year's Eve we would drink to the final year of our existence, believing in our heart of hearts that the politicians

could not possibly keep us alive for another 365 days. Until then, any drug was a very good idea.

"We considered drugs holy sacraments, necessary to temporarily erase reality -- much like faith does in the more hopeful competing religions.

"Those truly dedicated to our religion became Swat-me-s. A Swat-me dressed in his or her bathrobe and went around trying to freak people out as much, and as permanently, as possible, disrobing when necessary. This often occurred when someone in the congregation would make a particularly frightening and preposterous prediction, such as Trump winning a second term. What else can one do when faced with that kind of nonsensical future except take off your clothes and stand erect in stunned silence?"

I remember one other thing he said that night, which felt very odd to me and made me quite angry at the time. He looked directly at me and said right in front of Val:

"I know you clearly, my friend. Henry is your name if I remember correctly. Yes?"

I nodded.

"Like most men who don't want to know themselves, you want love without the relationship. . . She's a dream to you. Just as you're a dream to yourself."

The professor / priest had a name: Dr. Edward Hatcher.
I will remember his name always.

A few days after his drunken monologue Valerie told me she had met someone.

It turned out to be him.

Chapter 9

Val tried to let me down gently but I didn't understand what she was trying to say.

So she closed her eyes and kissed me platonically on the cheek. "I'm not sure you know it yet, but we're breaking up."

I said, "Oh."

The last thing I said to her is, "I won't forget you."

Letting go is a paradox.

Because the only way to truly let go is to constantly let go -- over and over again.

So you never really can.

Chapter 10

The Ferris wheel was lit up in the distance like a blurry white candle, ready to revolve meaninglessly, until the switch is pulled.

We turn away from the window, turn down the bed, silently thinking without touching, hearing the machine-gun trucks rattling by on the street below -- dark skeletons screaming across the wet streets just before sunrise.

I awoke alone. You were dressing, getting ready to leave. Suitcase at the door.

I made a wish long ago. I wished for you.
Genies were flying out of the bottle.

Chapter 11

I traveled far inland, all the way to winter.

I hiked the hills, first snowfall, and turned where the river cuts across, and bent my knees at the shoreline.

The distant sun began to warm my shoulders. A blue sky appeared through the taffying clouds.

A single rose grew through the frozen soil and interrupted, "Did I mention my sun?" it said. "It always returns to me at dawn."

"Mine isn't coming anymore."

"Why?"

"I guess the energy burned out."

"How will you survive? And how did you get here? Aren't you rooted to the shore like me? Did the wind bring you?"

"No. I have leg-wheels. They are kind of like a sail but on land. I move at will, in any direction. But this time I moved because she did."

"Who?"

"Valerie"

"As in Valerian?"

"I don't know."

"Valerian comes around every summer. She smells good. I love her."

"Define love."

"Why?"

I nodded. "How have you survived the winter?"

"What's winter? This is simply my time. I ask no questions like that."

I laid down next the rose for the night, there at the river's edge. The first unfaithful night of many in a life of wandering.

Chapter 12

My daughter is in the next room playing piano while I write this in the dark.

The sun went down. I had no time to turn the light on because I found myself so hypnotized by the sound of her music, and the lyrics she sings -- her voice, like an angel whispering -- and the darkness seems to lift.

I keep writing as the light dims deeper to pure night, and I fall all the way down here, to this lonely space where I dreamed you up - my daughter, playing piano. Goodbye. Farewell, dream.

Sun rose cherry in a whipped cream sky. I awoke in a curled ball beneath blankets that had mostly fallen away.

The streets melt into a cooked marshmallow gray. I sit in a cafe eating a bowl of peaches, typing away, fighting logic. I'm typing verses no human will ever see unless they steal this metal mouse trap I'm tapping on. I lost *Book* long ago.

Chapter 13

Naive was the wrong word for Julie Elk. Native might be better, since she lived in a teepee. The teepee was hidden in a downtown park. She would bathe naked in a creek each morning. Her bright eyes shined with benign drugs. She wore multiple colored wristbands on her right wrist. She had a small tattoo -- inky words -- written on her left wrist. But she kept moving her hands too fast for me to read it.

When we first met I tried to talk her into coming back to my apartment. But she said, "If you want me to show you how to get home, follow me."

She took me by the hand and walked me back to her teepee. I stayed the night. We bathed naked in the creek the next morning.

I left one week later, only to find my apartment had been broken into and all my stuff was gone.

Chapter 14

My moment of freedom had finally arrived. I had been robbed. I had nothing left in my life, except most of the three point six million dollars that I kept in various banks.

This was the moment I was waiting for. The moment I had dreamed of. I bought my boat. A cabin cruiser. I named it, Henry's Boat.

The time for whimsy had passed.

The boat was real. Solid.

Mine.

I lived in the cabin and kept it monastic. I owned no material things other than some basic clothes, a guitar that I bought to replace the one that was stolen from my apartment, and a very extensive tool box.

I took Henry's Boat out to sea most every day. It was an expensive way to live, but I still had three point four million dollars left, sitting in various banks. I really wasn't thinking about the future anyway.

I was free of everything except an electrically charged pain which would only subside if I was writing or navigating Henry's Boat restlessly over the face of the ocean.

Chapter 15

I was wandering around a local market back on shore, gathering food supplies, when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

She was smiling at me.

She was dressed quite formally.

She carried a leather satchel that matched her skirt.

She wore a silver necklace that glistened. The ornament was hidden just beneath her yellow blouse. I was sure it was a beautiful simple design.

"Hi. I assumed I'd run into you eventually."

I tried to smile back.

"I'm a professor now, Henry."

"Same college as. . . ?"

"Yes, except. . ."

"No?"

"Yes, no."

"What happened?"

"I think nothing touches me. So it doesn't."

"I see."

"What touches you, Henry?"

"I finally bought my boat."

"Really? What did you name it?"

"Why would you ask me that?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I named it Henry's Boat."

"I see. Simple. Elegant. Minimalist."

"Full of imagination, isn't it?"

"You could have named it anything. It was your choice."

"I would have named it something different if life was different. . . ."

She cocked her head. "How could life ever be different?"

"Never mind."

"Can I come see it?"

"Do you still go barefoot most of the time?"

"Occasionally. But I don't have deck shoes if that's what you're asking."

"No. But I don't think coming to see the boat is a good idea."

"Why? Oh. Is it because I . . ."

"No. It's worse than that. It's because when you leave, the boat will be inhabited by you more than it already is, and I may have to sell it."

"I see."

She touched my hand. "Henry, come to lunch with me."

"No. Unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?"

Her eyes were upsettingly green. She had developed wizened creases under them since I last saw her.

She said, "Come to lunch with me, Henry, I have a story to tell you."

Chapter 16

The cafe was right on the wharf, filled with shops and harbors, jugglers and musicians. Across the street the skyline floated up endlessly into the air. It made me dizzy when I tried to see the tops of the buildings. The seagulls couldn't fly that high. Our seats had a view of the Bay, dazzling blue, as always.

There were competing smells. The water drifting into the docks, the bus exhaust, the food steaming in big pots as we were led to our table.

Val said, "Have you ever seen a Gary Cooper movie called Fountainhead?"

"No."

"Did you read the book, by chance?"

"Afraid not."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like Dominique."

"Okay. . ."

"Gary Cooper was very handsome. He was in the movie. Tall and a little gawky, like you."

"Are you trying to tell me you left the great professor for Gary Cooper?"

"I would have if he was still alive."

"How did it end with Mr. Comic?"

"You can probably guess. He became more of who he was that night. Unreachable. Narcissistic. We'd be looking at each other on a quiet street and he'd smile and whisper, 'How do I look?'"

"Seriously?" I laughed.

She laughed with me. "He's quite a mess. I can't really explain it. I wanted to find out what made him tick. I found the

electrical wires in him and cut them open to see what was inside, and there was nothing there."

"The electricity was gone."

"So to speak. Plus, there was another guy."

"For you or for him?"

"Me."

"Oh."

Our food came. My iced coffee was too strong. I searched for some cream and sugar while my mind collapsed like a dark star. I came back to the table and mumbled, "I actually hate coffee. I try to make it taste as much like a milkshake as possible."

"I remember," she smiled calmly.

The darkness intensified.

I was fumbling for something to say that would allow me to leave our lunch early.

"I hate coffee too," she said.

"I remember."

She took a sip of ice water.

"The other guy I told you about -- he hates coffee just like we do, Henry. And I also just found out that he named a fucking boat after himself."

"What?"

"Another narcissist. But I still love him. I never stopped loving him. In fact, whatever love is, he is that."

"*What?*"

"I made a big mistake. I did, I admit it. I'm still trying to figure things out, but that's nothing new for me, I guess."

She reached across the table and took my hand, "Take me back."

"Take you. . .?"

"Take me back and we can go out into the open sea, or sleep on the soccer field under the stars. Whatever you want. I'm ready now. All you'll have to do is trust me."

Chapter 17

She slept on the boat with me that night. She unbuttoned her yellow blouse. The ornament at the end of her silver necklace was as simple and beautiful as I imagined it would be. The rest of her clothes just disappeared. She slipped under the covers of my simple cabin bed. I touched her skin for the first time in so long. Electric-vanilla warm, oceanic connection. . . . The water rocked us asleep.

Chapter 18

"I like your poetry Henry," she said the next morning. She was sitting on the rock-hard cabin bed, cross-legged, sheets still on the floor, drinking tea.

"Short abstractions like these seem to be the only way to come close to the truth about anything." She was reading through random pages that were thrown about the cabin.

"I especially like the one about the Ferris wheel, and the one with the flower dialogue. And the daughter. Your daughter. Beautiful. Sad."

She read some others. "You write from a place of such pain, Henry. I'm sorry I was the cause of some of it. But at least you birthed *these*. You created something beautiful in return."

"Then everything changed. Here you are. Those poems mean something different to me now"

"Expect nothing less than change, always, or we're only going to suffer." She said this casually, as she leafed through more of my scribbles; poems either dying or not yet born.

"So then we suffer regardless. We suffer when there's change, and suffer if we don't expect change."

"Yes."

I laughed. "I'm glad we've had this little chat. But it's time to take Henry's Boat out for a spin. Actually, I'm planning on a long ride straight out to the edge of the world. I'm warning you, I may never come back. Are you coming?"

"Of course."

Chapter 19

Why did she come back to me after leaving Professor Hatcher?

She volunteered the answer one day as we walked along the wharf on a particularly warm windless day:

"He was more extroverted, more self-assured, more accomplished than you, Henry. That impressed me, sadly. I admit it. And to be honest, he got me my job as a professor at the college. I was not only thankful for that, but impressed he could make it happen.

"And I do truly enjoy the work, teaching students who question, and have a hunger to know. We exchange our philosophical views. I'm not responsible for telling them what's 'true.' It's all an exercise in not knowing. In fact, last week a student said to me, 'If we can't know anything, then we don't know nothing either.'"

Val laughed remembering that. "That's really profound. It's like we actually know less than nothing."

A boy rode by on a unicycle. He was wearing a multi-colored beanie with a little propeller on it. He had both hands in his pockets, and was whistling as he pedaled by us.

Val's eyes followed him as he passed by. "But something was still missing for me, Henry. Like. . . whimsy, a sense of wonder. . . and friendship. Ed was never a friend. Ed's humor was always so cynical and cocky. His love for me was like how a tree loves the sun. Need without care. I wanted the opposite -- care without need. And I know you need me too. . . *too much!* But I kept remembering our times on the boat, making our way through the wind and water, and watching you be so at ease away from land, and away from the typical lives people think they *have to* live. You were able to do that, *not* just because you have the money to

do it, but because you are *so* beautifully weird, you would have found a way to be you even if you were working in a fish store."

Some Giants fans rushed by on their way to a game at the ballpark two miles away.

She stopped walking and pulled me into an alcove. "And I also remembered how easy it is for you to listen and understand me, despite our differences. You don't try to change me. You accept me for who I am. I don't know anyone else like that. And I find it sexy."

She kissed me deeply. I was reeling with joy.

Chapter 20

This moment was followed by months of true love, and long talks, and sea visitations, sometimes in rough weather, sometimes with gentle waves rolling us to sleep. Then summer came. She had no classes to teach until fall.

We began spending less time together. She would fade back into her apartment for days at a time to read and think and write and read some more.

She could commit to sleeping with me under the stars on a high school soccer field, and she was a really good companion at sea, but she couldn't imagine herself fully committed, fully engaged. Or married ever; or having a child. With anyone. That never even occurred to her as a topic of conversation unless I brought it up. Which I occasionally felt compelled to do.

We did our best to forget the distances between us. We talked about everything except the future. But over time we became restless together, like true sailors.

The city where we lived, where we met, no longer held a strong attraction for either of us. We had no truly close friends. No important work to tie us down over the summer. So we decided to go on a long adventure, to try to reconnect. Or at least have fun *trying* to reconnect.

Val set the beginning of the school year as a return date. I was hoping she would come away far longer.

I sold Henry's Boat quickly and easily, without regrets, and said goodbye to San Francisco. Italy was our destination.

We settled on exploring the Cinque Terra. Five towns connected by pathways, set on the Ligurian Sea.

Chapter 21

We knew we had found our place the minute we got off the local train and saw the turquoise ocean spread out before us.

During the next few days we walked the high open paths from village to village, and ate some of the best food of our lives at the local bistros. We stayed at a small hotel right on the water in Monterosso.

In the distance we could see pastel towns sitting atop their own separate hillsides. Pulsing sunshine reflected off the water. We rented a medium-sized yacht and sailed from town to town, feeling like royalty.

After we made love one morning she fell back asleep, cozy and peaceful in our hotel room. I didn't want to wake her, so I left a note and went for a walk.

I found myself strolling through Old Town. I looked up to a first floor balcony overlooking the central plaza and noticed a round old man in a white sleeveless sweat-stained tee-shirt sitting beside his abiding wife in her well-worn flowered dress.

He was reading the newspaper. She was ignoring him, as if he didn't exist. They looked like they hadn't spoken or moved from that apartment balcony in months. And from the looks of things thousands of silent minutes would turn into thousands more, until death pushed them over like match sticks.

Meaning. Did they even bother thinking of such a thing?

I was thinking this when the church bells began to ring. They cut through the day with jubilant urgency. I was startled; they were beautiful. *Loud*. Multi-tonal. It was exactly noon. Sun sparkled on the rooftops. Yet the old couple seemed deaf. They were as still as mannequins. His eyes never left the paper.

It was at that moment that I first thought, we're not doing each other any favors staying together. Valerie's instincts about

not wanting to live together are probably right. All we'd be doing is killing each other by the day. Deadening our senses to everything around us, for what purpose? To keep loneliness in abeyance? This adventure too will become dead and we'll move on to the next sensual awakening until sensuality itself begins to die.

I was frightened to leave her. But I knew both of us would be better off if I did. I needed more than an act of courage. I needed a holy act of insanity. So I adopted insanity as my new religion.

At the end of summer I said goodbye to her, carried her bags to the train, kissed her, cried with her. Then she was gone.

I booked a permanent room at the Hotel La Spiaggia.

Chapter 22

Things are subtle here. Time goes by in various shades of blue -- an Egyptian-blue night sky is filled with star fragments, like a diamond necklace that is too beautiful for even God to wear. Then comes the morning, with the sea changing hue from cerulean to turquoise as the sun rises higher in the sky.

Most people who come here wish to wear only the finest clothes and jewelry on autumn evenings such as this one. That's the reason I was here, to connect to sensual timelessness. Senseless sensual love. The kind that warps space and memories.

The table umbrellas of the café below me are apricot colored. The roof of the café is blueberry blue. A soft yellow ladder rests against a vanilla wall. Everything in Cinque Terra looks edible.

The breeze off the water is clean and refreshing. I breathe in the cool salty wind, no longer wondering how far it may have traveled before reaching my balcony. I had thought of that image too many times already over the past month. It no longer held any magic for me. I demanded new thoughts from myself, new words. At all times.

It's an hour before midnight. Everyone is quite tipsy, raising their glasses, talking too loudly at their tiny round tables. They inevitably toast something too inadequate for the occasion. They are not poets. No one will remember their wine-inspired good wishes in the morning.

A half-moon blazes over the Cinque Terra hillside, throwing light above it like an enormous halo. But it no longer sparks the imagination, or gives me sustenance. That's the trouble with beauty in still-life; beauty that doesn't seem to change from day to day. Even the most wondrous things can be dulled by a wonderless mind.

Chapter 23

I began to write again. But this time pain was replaced by a gaudy sensuousness, reckless stories of one night love affairs. Food and wine and jewels, and poems about owning the stars above all the oceans.

I played my guitar in echoey alleyways. I read old novels like *East of Eden*. I read *Fountainhead*, then saw the movie starring Gary Cooper. He was tall and gawky, and graceful at the same time. Valerie's type. . . .

Then one night I dreamt about her. It was a long, torturous dream. I was pushing her further and further towards the edge of a cliff. Just as she began to fall I woke up.

All day I thought about her -- the innocent way we loved each other. No expectations about the future. What was wrong with having no expectations? What was right about demanding things like marriage and children before you both felt deeply that you wanted a life like that? I wasn't even sure I did! I just wanted to go to the next level. I was following some game board in my head. Val was right to hesitate. In fact, her relentless stubborn disobedience by refusing to want to follow a scripted life, refusing to believe what the world said was true, or how the world demanded we live, made so much sense to me now. She had found a way to be truly herself.

Suddenly a new thought surged through me. It was translucent yet clear, like looking through the stained glass of one of the old church windows here:

Maybe the old couple ignoring the church bells that day were simply too peaceful to be amazed.

Maybe they no longer needed amazement. Maybe they were too content, too conscious of their contentment, to need new adventures, or to lust after life, or to make plans.

Maybe they didn't need to sail the around the world in large meaningless circles.

Maybe even speaking peaceful words to each other were unnecessary.

Maybe they were *so* peaceful that the pounding bells, which shook me so profoundly, just sounded like distant wind chimes to them.

Maybe they were living a near perfect life. I mean, they somehow found themselves living in an apartment on the prettiest road in Old Town, in Monterosso, Italy. Was it that far-fetched to think they were saturated with satisfaction? Holidays filled with friends and family. Zero technology. Some of the best food in the world a walk away. Maybe they had a daughter that lived near-by? A daughter that loved them.

Maybe it was I who had been deaf to the bells.

Maybe I was far more heartless than adventurous.

Maybe I was undeserving of a life that beautiful.

Maybe these adventures had done more to cripple me than free me.

Maybe I was half asleep, half-dead, drowning slowly in an ocean of time while staring at myself in a mirror -- like the professor. Maybe I was him.

No. There was a vast difference between me and Professor Hatcher: I loved her. I knew how to love.

Suddenly I awoke! I was reborn.

Life became clear to me.

Chapter 24

I rushed back to San Francisco. My home. My city.

Valerie had no cell phone. She enjoyed living a simple quiet life and hated texting and emails.

I rented a car and drove to her apartment, but I was told she moved out. I drove to the college to find her. But I was told she quit her job.

I began to panic. Maybe she went somewhere new, a place where she could start over. For weeks I tried to find her. I tracked down an old friend of hers, but she had lost touch with her long ago. I began to lose hope.

If she was no longer living in the city did I actually want to be here? Where would I live if she was gone and no longer in my life? Who was I without her? Without my reckless desires, without my lifelong fears, without my constant need to escape? Who was I? What did I want?

I went down to the docks one day to see if I could find Henry's Boat. I thought I might want to try to buy it back. I would offer the new owner a good deal more than I sold it for if I had to. For some reason the boat felt like a missing part of me.

Or, maybe what I should do instead is gather the remaining three point two million dollars I had in various banks and throw it into the Bay. Maybe it was slowly killing me. Maybe from Day 1 it had changed my fate in all sorts of ways it shouldn't have. Maybe the real me was supposed to get a job in a cafe, or as a boat mechanic.

But sadly I was incapable of such a thing at this point. All my reckless desires and fears, and the need to escape everything

-- and having all this money as well -- were critical parts of the image of me I needed to hold onto, to hold the rest of me together. Henry's Boat was a reflection of all of that.

Chapter 25

At last I found it, docked in Sausalito. As I approached Henry's Boat there was a pretty girl sitting on the deck drinking a beer.

"Hey!"

"Hey there, stranger! Wait, do I know you?"

"No. I am literally a stranger. I just wanted to talk to the owner of the boat.

"That's my dad. Dear old daddy-poo."

She was obviously extremely drunk. Nothing like downing a six-pack before noon.

She stood up and held on to the rail to prevent herself from falling over, "My name is Anna." The sun turned streaks of her brown hair auburn. Her shorts were hardly longer than a bikini bottom. Her halter top was too small. Her lipstick was beginning to smear.

I leaned over and shook her hand. "I'm Henry."

She didn't make the connection.

"So where might I find daddy-poo?" I asked.

"IDK. Haven't seen him for weeks. Maybe Thailand?"

"Well, I was really hoping to. . . ."

"But. But but, *but*."

"Yes?"

She pointed her finger at me, "He is coming home for my *birthday*. Apparently. I mean Vegas would probably place the odds at 2:1. But at the moment I can't even count to two. 'Cause I'm just a tiny bit wasted."

"I think the empty beer cans gave it away."

"More than just beer, pal. Beer is a warm-up."

My eyes glanced down at the stern. "Henry's Boat" was still there, painted in big black lettering.

She noticed. "Yeah, my dad's not Henry. His name is Winston. I think they named him after a cigarette. Anyway, we're going to change the name next month as part of my birthday present."

"Change the name? *To what?*"

"The Piranha."

"The Piranha? That's a deadly fish!"

"Really? Oh, well I just like it because it has my name in it. Anna."

"Wow. Okay then. Listen, when you see your dad could you tell him to call my cell phone? It's a new number. I, uh. . . ." I had to look at the phone to find my number. I hadn't memorized it yet. "Okay, here, let me write it down."

I jumped aboard and went directly over to a waterproof box where I kept a note pad and pencil. Everything was still in its place. I wrote the number down and gave it to her.

"O--kay." She was confused by how I knew where things were.

I glanced down into the cabin. It was a complete disaster. Dishes unwashed, stains on the carpet, wine bottles, a broken glass.

"Maybe your dad could call me before you change the name of the boat?"

"Why?"

I shrugged.

"Oh, I get it. Your name is Henry too! How weird is that? No one your age is actually named Henry though. What's your real name?"

"Doris."

"Really? Oh, I get it. LOL. Wanna come join me for a beer?"

"Wish I could."

"Your wish is granted," she laughed.

"Listen, don't forget to give my number to your dad."

She gave me a soldier's salute. "Yes sir, Captain Doris."

I figured the odds of Winston getting the note were about the same odds as me seeing Valerie walk down the dock *right now*.

I looked down the pier towards the parking lot to see if I could somehow beat the odds.

But of course she wasn't there.

Chapter 26

I decided to see some music downtown that night to take my mind off of how badly things were going.

As I was entering the club, Professor Ed Hatcher was drinking a scotch about five feet away from me. He recognized me. He sauntered over with one hand in his pocket. "Hey, wild man! Valerie's other ex, right? How's life?"

"Interesting, as always." I didn't offer to shake hands, nor did he.

"You do recognize me, right?"

I looked him up and down. "Vaguely. I remember a very boring evening. . . ."

"The night I stole Val away from you."

"You mean the beginning of the end of your relationship."

"Good volley, mate. It wounds me deeply."

"I'm sure you still see her around from time to time," I said casually. The opening act was insanely loud. The bass buried the lead vocalist, although from what I could hear of the vocal, that was a good thing.

"Well, I bump into her in the cafe and I always leave a good tip. Poor kid. She got her degree, she becomes a professor, and then spends her life waiting tables.

"Better than working in a fish store."

"What? Say again?" The music was roaring. We'd have been better off talking on a runway.

"That cafe she works at, you mean the one on the wharf she used to go to?" I was hoping he'd either say yes, or correct me.

"No, The Apricot Cafe on 24th street."

"Oh yeah, that one."

"So. . ."

"This music sucks. I gotta go."

"The drinks are worse, mate," he said, frowning at his scotch.
But the women here. . . ."

"No thanks."

He squinted at me. "Sure. Okay then."

I ran to my car and drove straight away to 24th street. But
The Apricot Cafe was closed for the night. I wrote a note with my
new phone number and slipped it under the door.

Hey Val.

You are so much more beautiful than Italy.

Come to lunch with me? I have a story to tell you.

Love (will define later),

-- Henry, sans Boat.

Chapter 27

I was driving back into town. It was about 8:15. Night was descending but there was still a filtered light around me. It reminded me of a diffused halo. I looked at the time on my phone and figured I could still catch the headliner at the club. Hopefully Ed would have chosen his mate for the night and departed by the time I got there.

Suddenly, I saw her. Or, I thought I saw her.

From the back it looked like her walk, her hair. She was talking to a guy that actually looked a little like me! Was I too late?

I leaned over the steering wheel and squinted through the windshield to get a closer look. I didn't see the truck coming to a hard stop in front of me.

I slammed into the back of it at full speed, then skidded to the right into a lamppost. The light went on from the impact.

It felt as if the accident happened before I crashed. As soon as I realized it wasn't her it was like a gun went off and the bullet pierced through my temple. Then I felt the impact of the truck.

The girl and her friend came rushing over. They saw me pinned in the car bleeding and called an ambulance.

It wasn't her. And that wasn't me with her.

And it wasn't sunset anymore. It was completely dark now. It was fading darker still, into somewhere beyond night.

Chapter 28

When I opened my eyes the lights felt like flashlights pouring directly into me. Hot. Cold. Then I saw a shadow. It looked like her.

As I became more conscious the shadow leaned towards me. I thought I was hallucinating. I mind was reeling back into a blank past.

"What am I doing here?" I whispered. I meant to ask what are *you* doing here, but it came out wrong.

"You were in a really bad car accident, Henry. I got your note at work and called you and a nurse answered your cell phone. I told her I was your wife, so they let me in."

"So I finally got you to marry me?" I was half-joking. Although I wasn't sure.

But she smiled that smile of hers and I knew.

"So are you all right?" I asked. It sounded odd. I meant to ask if I was alright, but I was glad it came out wrong.

"Yes. I'm fine. Working. Making money. Writing a bit. You inspired me to write."

"The guy?" I whispered. Everything was achy.

"No. You. I'm not with anyone else. I'm here with you, Henry. I'm staying until you're better."

I crashed into a mind-truck and the lampposts dimmed. I don't remember how many hours or days passed, but when I awoke I was in another room. There were more doctors and nurses around than the last room I was in. I assumed my visit from Valerie was a dream. But then I saw her talking to a nurse in the hallway. When she noticed my eyes opening she ran to me.

"Henry! We almost lost you. Something happened." She began to cry. "Are you okay? Are you with us?"

". . . What?"

"Something. Henry. I want you to think things through with me. *Think things through*. I want you to tell me everything. Anything."

I found myself speaking far slower than I could think, because some of the images couldn't find words.

"Well, I don't know exactly." I was searching the images. "I came close to the ending to the story. It was like an edge. . . . the edge of the world, at the end of the sea."

"Oh dear. Listen, stay with me."

My consciousness was clearing a little. "Val, some people say life comes around again and again. And that we learn from one life, then regress in another, only to learn more in the next. And some people think that the past, present, and future might actually be simultaneous. And that we can be placed into any time, from any time. Same name. New name. We could be born into the same era as we live now and replay it differently. Or we could be born ten years ago, or born on the day of my own birth."

"Yes?"

"And I think some of that might be true."

"Maybe."

"Yeah, IDK."

"IDK?"

"Ask one of the young nurses. They'll know what it means."

She kissed my cheek. "We'll have plenty of time to talk about all that stuff."

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I'm sure. The doctors didn't think. . . but, you're back. You're so clearly back. Stay with me."

"Tell me the truth, Val. What do *you* think happens? After? I don't want to hear some re-creation a philosopher came up with a hundred years ago. What's your sense?"

“Well, I've actually been thinking about it a lot the last few days. All this time I've been in the hospital with you, I've been thinking all sorts of things. So, I have two answers.”

“Tell me.”

“One is, it's highly likely death is simply post-human -- post-consciousness. Maybe it's just that. Simply that. Beyond any kind of being-ness, or is-ness. And why would that be so bad? Whether consciousness survives or not, the natural course is the natural course. For everyone, in all time.”

My eyes fluttered. I was trying to think that through.

Val said, "Does that upset you?"

"A little. I mean it's not the happiest ending I can think of. But it's reasonable. Logical.

She put her hand in mine.

"So what's the second thing?"

She leaned over and whispered in my ear, “The second thing is, sometimes, even with all doubts accounted for, what should be impossible is simply true.”

Chapter 29

"I just thought of this amazing poem, Val," I whispered.

"Tell me," she said, breathlessly, hopefully. It had been two weeks now. I was given days to live. She didn't believe it.

I wet my lips. I began reciting unsteadily: "It. . . but. . . what. Sea boat night is not, but what is, but, the. . . ."

I finally gave up.

Valerie stared at me stone-cold still. Frightened. Her eyes moistened. Then she put her hand over her mouth.

I exhaled.

She looked as if she were in the past now. "I had it some words, I think. But there were others. . ." I mumbled.

She began to cry. Her body was shaking. The doctors rushed in.

It ends as it begins, with sporadic breathing and microscopic currents circulating through veins and synapses -- controlled.

Then uncontrolled. Stopped and started by unseen forces.

A lifetime of feelings and thoughts and distractions.

I may still have had things to say.

Chapter 30

The baby breathed quickly, still unsure whether the comfort of the breast was permanent, or just a lucky streak of liquid sunlight that needed to be consumed as quickly and greedily as possible.

The naming of the infant wasn't an easy process. Its mother contemplated her favorite male authors – John Steinbeck came to mind. She loved to read beautiful stories. But the name John wasn't unique enough. She eventually settled on her favorite movie star – a man who played cowboys, and Howard Roark, and Lou Gehrig, all with understated grace – Gary Cooper.

Gary. His name is Gary.

Finally named, I fell back asleep in my mother's arms. My breathing slowed again. Dreams came.