

Beyond Henry

~ Gary Marks

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Part 1

Valerie

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, I Myth the Future, and The Reincarnation of Neptune. I realize both are a bit long.

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? Honestly, most of the kinds 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 calls 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 two million dollars after tax.

I was his favorite nephew because I loved going out on his boat with him, sailing 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 his sailboat. I loved the water spraying up into my face, and the effort it took to fight through the waves and wind to get home.

Like people, boats have to have a home or they'll die. They'll be overcome with the very thing that allows them movement and keeps them alive.

So I decided to wait to buy a boat until I had a few other things figured out. I needed to find a dock, and settle on a name, before venturing out to sea.

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 or should. And the other thing I kept staring at was her belt. Because even though it was just an ordinary belt, her shirt kept rising above it when she raised her arms and I was hypnotized by that.

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 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.

We laughed at the coincidental graffiti, mirroring our conversations as we walked. One graffiti painted in crooked black print high atop an old rundown apartment building said, "WHAT'S THE POINT ? ?" I was a bit bewildered why the artist would bother to add the apostrophe if he or she really believed there was no point. Meanwhile, this mirrored the conversation Valerie and I were engaged in moments before about why people even tried anymore. Work, relationships, life extension pills, living in a city that made you feel like an ant. And then we saw the graffiti.

A few blocks further down the road we saw a lipstick red graffiti written on the walled entrance of a fancy white hotel that said, "MONEY SUCKS." Amazingly, Valerie and I had just been talking about why someone with a degree in philosophy would be working as a fish store assistant. I asked her if she had learned anything from having worked there. She pointed to the graffiti and smirked.

I liked her sense of humor immediately, and the expressions on her face. I liked the way her hands moved in sync with her words. 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, "So until then I guess you're pretty much scared of everything?"

I laughed and nodded. "Good guess."

"Deductive reasoning."

I began to realize on our long walk that I was immediately 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's blonde hair had a thin blue streak on one side. The blue streak did not match her 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 at all times, and 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 two 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 morning fog. 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."

I was considering what words to use 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 turned the game inside out and became a philosophy major.

Her philosophical mind-set became very frustrating if we argued. She was beyond arguing like a lawyer. Lawyers try to trap you, but there are usually ways around the traps. Philosophers never try to disprove your point. Instead they offer so many other versions of the truth that all your main points start to evaporate into the fog of possibilities and basically become meaningless.

And I loved that! Because I believed with all my heart in meaninglessness.

The pressure to know anything was off. All I had to do was feel and be.

I was finally in love for the first time in my life -- whatever love was, because Val was right, I couldn't define it. But the great thing was I no longer had to.

Chapter 6

The most cosmic time Val and I made love was on a high school soccer field one summer night. It was amazing.

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

I was really excited. 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 live without alone time, and that she would not want to give up her apartment.

I asked her to reconsider.

Then she miscarried.

After she recovered there was a gap between us. I told her I still wanted to us to be parents someday.

She said she didn't feel the same way.

A few days passed before we talked again.

Chapter 7

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 on the cheek. "I'm not sure you know it yet, but we're breaking up."

Letting go is a paradox.

It's what Valerie called a logical contradiction.

Because you can't just decide to let go and have it happen.

You have to let go over and over again.

So you never really do.

Part II

The First Three Poems and Julie Elk

Chapter 8

The Ferris wheel from a distance looked like a blurry white candle.

It revolves meaninglessly until the switch is pulled and the mechanism shuts down with a whirr.

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.

The wheel was set in motion.

Genies were flying out of the bottle.

Chapter 9

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. 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 the word love."

"Why?"

I nodded gratefully. "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 10

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

When 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 -- and her voice, some say it's like an angel whispering. The darkness seems to amplify all that.

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 a piano that never was.

Goodbye. Farewell, dream. The music stops here.

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

The streets melted, pre-dawn,
to a cooked marshmallow gray.

At noon I sit in a cafe eating a bowl of peaches, typing away on this mindless metallic keyboard, fighting logic.

I have always loved meaninglessness. Now I'm living it.
Bon Appetit.

Chapter 11

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 -- a phrase of some kind -- 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 the way 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.

Part III

Not Really About the Boat

Chapter 12

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 two 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. So was the name.

I lived in the cabin and kept a monastic life. I owned no material things other than some basic clothes 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 over three million dollars left after paying it off in full and living on it for a number of months.

I didn't really care that much about the money. I really wasn't thinking about the future.

I was free of everything -- except constant, at times overwhelming, emotional pain, which would only subside when I was navigating Henry's Boat restlessly over the face of the ocean.

Chapter 13

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

Val 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 it held was hidden just beneath her yellow blouse. I imagined it was a beautiful simple design.

"I assumed I'd run into you eventually. I'm a professor now, Henry."

"Is that what you wanted all along? Are you happy now?"

"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. I just. . . ."

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

"I see."

"Full of imagination, isn't it?"

"Simple. Elegant. Minimalist."

"How polite of you."

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

"I would have named it something different if life turned out differently."

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

"Never mind. It's not really a philosophical statement."

"Can I come see it?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why? Is it because you found someone. . . ?"

"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."

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. Damn wisdom.

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

Chapter 14

The cafe she chose was right on the wharf. The wharf was filled with shops and harbors, jugglers and musicians. Across the street the skyline floated upwards endlessly. It made me dizzy when I tried to see the tops of the buildings. The seagulls couldn't fly that high. The table we sat at had a view of the Bay, dazzling blue, as always. It was becoming my only true home.

There were competing smells -- sea water drifting into the dock, bus exhaust, the food steaming in big pots.

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

"No."

"Did you ever read the book, by chance?"

"Afraid not."

"Oh."

"Why did you ask?"

"Because I feel like Dominique."

"Who?"

"This very famous actor, Gary Cooper, was very handsome. A rugged attractive face, but tall and a little gawky -- like you. He played the part of Howard Roark. He was fiercely independent. A brilliant architect who wasn't about to make any artistic compromises with anyone. He didn't need anyone, except her, Dominique. She was his muse. His mistress. But she was also in love with someone else."

"Were you in love with someone else?"

"No. I was in love with an ideal. I was in love with the expectation that art and philosophy should be beautiful. And at the same time I wanted to feel independent and free enough to keep my heart guarded. So not only wasn't I in love with someone else, Henry. I wasn't in love with anything."

Our food came. My iced coffee was too strong. I searched for some cream and sugar. "I actually hate coffee. I try to make it taste as much like a milkshake as possible."

"I remember," she smiled calmly.

She took a sip of ice water.

"But something has changed. I think I do love someone now."

That was enough for me. I was fumbling for something to say that would allow me to leave our lunch early. I was starting to feel quite unraveled.

"He hates coffee just like you do, Henry. And I also just found out that he named a boat after himself."

"What?"

"But I think I love him anyway. In fact, whatever love is, he is that."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I made a big mistake, Henry. 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, "I want to come back."

"You. . . *what?*"

"Take me back, Henry. We can go out into the open sea on your boat, or sleep on the soccer field under the stars. Whatever you want. All you'll have to do is trust me."

Chapter 15

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, just as I imagined it would be.

The rest of her clothes disappeared. She slipped under the covers of my simple cabin bed. I touched her skin for the first time in so very very long.

Electric, vanilla blonde, oceanic connection. . . . The water rocked us asleep.

Chapter 16

"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.

"Abstractions seem to be the only way to come close to the truth about anything." She was reading through random pages of mine that had been 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. I'm sorry. But at least you birthed *these*. You created something beautiful."

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 17

Far out to sea I said to her, "I can't believe this. Give me just one reason why you're actually here with me right now."

She said, "It's always been easy for you to listen, and to 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."

Part IV

Senseless

Chapter 18

The city where we lived, where we met, no longer held a strong attraction for either of us. We had no truly close friends. And no important work to tie Val down over the summer. So we decided to go on an adventure.

Val set the beginning of the school year as a return date. I didn't set a return date. I was restless. I wanted to see more of the world.

I sold Henry's Boat quickly and easily, without regrets, and said goodbye to the city where we lived. Italy was our destination.

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

Chapter 19

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 her a good morning 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 about 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 Valerie's instincts about not wanting to live together are probably right. All we'd be doing is killing each other's senses day by day. Deadening everything around us.

For what purpose? To keep loneliness in abeyance? This adventure too will become dead to us and we'll move on to the next sensual awakening, until sensuality itself begins to die.

A revelation hit me like an avalanche.

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. It was too soon. Too soon. I wanted more of her. I needed more time.

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

I booked a room at the Hotel La Spiaggia. I didn't know how long I would stay.

Chapter 20

Things are subtle here in Cinque Terra. 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 some kind of sensual timelessness. Senseless sensuality. 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'd thought of that image too many times already. It no longer held 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 mumblings 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 my imagination, or gives me sustenance.

Then the next life-changing revelation came to me: Even the most wondrous things can be dulled by a wonderless mind.

Chapter 21

That night I dreamt about her. It was a long, torturous dream. I was pushing her further and further towards the edge of a cliff. She was more than happy to allow it. Just as long as I was the one that didn't fall! Then I woke up.

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

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, to need new adventures, or to lust after life, or to make wild future 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 eventually unnecessary.

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

They had somehow found themselves living in an apartment on the prettiest road in Old Town, 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, in any direction. 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 undeserving of a life that beautiful.

Maybe these adventures had done more to cripple me than free me. Suddenly I awoke! It was as if I was reborn.

Part V

All Things Left Unsaid

Chapter 22

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'd moved out. I drove to the college to find her. But I was told she quit her job.

It had only been two months since I'd seen her. Why all the sudden changes?

I began to panic. Maybe she went somewhere new, a place where she could start over. Maybe I hurt *her* this time; hurt her so badly that she never wanted to see me again.

For weeks I tried to find her. I tracked down an old friend of hers, but she had lost touch with her long before Val and I went to Italy. 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 in the background of my every thought?

Who was I? What did I want?

Chapter 23

Two weeks alter I went down to the docks 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 suddenly felt like a missing part of me. The only missing part I could get back.

Or, maybe instead, I should have gathered the remaining three million dollars I had in various banks and throw it all into the Bay.

Maybe it was slowly killing me. Maybe from Day One it had changed my fate in all sorts of ways it shouldn't have.

Maybe the real me was supposed to get a job as a boat mechanic. Or a fisherman.

Sadly, I was incapable of throwing the money away at this point.

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

"Hey!"

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

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

"That's my dad. Dear old dad."

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 red. 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 your dad?" I asked.

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

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

"But. *But.*"

"Yes?"

She pointed her finger at me, "He is coming home for my *birthday*. 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?*"

"Piranha."

"Piranha? That's a deadly fish!"

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

"Wow. Okay. Well, listen, when you see your dad could you tell him to call my cell? It's a new number. I, uh. . . ." 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?"

"IDK."

"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. Hey, you 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*.

My imagination ran away with me. So I looked down the pier towards the parking lot to see if I could somehow beat the odds.

Of course she wasn't there.

Chapter 24

I decided to go back to the university one last time to see if anyone in the administration office knew where she went. But no one had a clue.

Just as I was leaving I walked past a student with a philosophy book in her hand.

"Excuse me, sorry to bother you. But did you ever have Valerie Cybele as one of your philosophy professors?"

"Yes," the girl said. "In fact, she was the best professor I ever had."

"I bet. She's quite amazing. But. . . do you know what happened to her? Why she left? Where she is now?"

"I don't know why she left. But I do run into her from time to time because, believe it or not, she's a part-time waitress at Allison's Cafe on 24th street. I go there sometimes."

"Bless you. You're an angel!" I kissed her on the head, ran to my car, and drove to 24th street.

But by the time I got there Allison's Cafe was closed. The store hours posted on the window were 6am to 2pm.

I wrote a note with my new phone number on it and slipped it under the front 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 25

I was driving back into the center of town. Night was descending, but there was still a filtered light in the air. It reminded me of a diffused halo. I looked at the time. 7pm.

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

From my side view it looked like her walk, her hair. She had her arm around a guy that actually looked a little like me!

I leaned over the steering wheel, squinting 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 thick silver lamppost.

The front of the car collapsed inward, the lamppost bent, the light went off 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 that I mistook for Valerie and her male friend came rushing over. They saw me pinned in the car, bleeding, and called an ambulance.

It wasn't sunset anymore. It was completely dark. Black. Somewhere beyond night.

Chapter 26

When I opened my eyes the lights felt hot. A thousand flashlights poured directly into me from above. Hot. Cold. Then I saw a shadow. It looked like her. But I assumed I was caught up in the continuous dream I'd been in.

As I became more conscious the shadow leaned towards me. My mind was reeling backwards into raw feeling.

"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. But I suddenly wasn't quite sure we hadn't. 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 poetry. But there's a lot more to the story."

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

"What guy? Henry, I'm not with anyone else. I'm here with you. I'm staying until you're better."

I crashed into a mind-truck and the lampposts dimmed to black.

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?"

"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.

"I don't know." I was searching the images. "I came close to the end. It was a cliff at the end of the sea."

"Oh dear. Henry, stay with me."

My consciousness was clearing a little. I had so much to say. "Val, some people say life comes around again and again. And we learn from one life, then regress in another, to learn more in the next. And. . . and then. . . some people, they think the past, present, and future might be simultaneous. And we're placed into any time from any time. We could be born ten years ago, or born on the day of our own birth."

"Yes?"

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

"You *think*?"

"Yeah. But IDK what of it is."

"IDK?"

"Ask one of the young nurses. They'll tell you what that means."

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

"I'm just not sure."

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

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

"Well, I've been thinking about it a lot these 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 possible that after life is simply post-human -- post-consciousness. Maybe it's just that. Beyond beingness, or is-ness. And why would that be so bad? Whether consciousness survives or not, the natural course is the natural course for everyone, for all time. What is is, has been, will be."

My eyes fluttered. I was trying to think through the image of that.

Val said, "Does that upset you?"

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

She put her hand in mine. "So I have a second possible answer." She leaned over and whispered in my ear, "The second answer, Henry, is that sometimes, even with all doubts accounted for, what should be impossible is simply true."

Chapter 27

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

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

I wet my lips. I began reciting my thought poem unsteadily:

"It. . . but. . . what. Seaboat night is not, but what is, but, the."

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

I exhaled. I finally finished it.

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

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

It ends as it begins, with sporadic breathing.

Controlled. Uncontrolled.

Stopped and started by unseen forces.

Feelings, thoughts, distractions, come and go with each flash of light.

I may have still had things to say.

Chapter 28

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 philosophical 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.