

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?

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 by the very thing that allows them the freest 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 up at her and said, "May I help you?" I loved her voice right away. It was soft and feathery; an "I would never hurt you" kind of tonal resonance.

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 let her go on the spot.

We left the store together after she collected her final pay minus the price of the fish tank which was incredibly expensive. 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 do that."

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 sour 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 after WHAT if he or she really believed there was no point. That wasn't realistic. Meanwhile, this mirrored the conversation Valerie and I were engaged in moments beforehand 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 huge fancy white hotel with a large gate made of gold that said, "MONEY SUCKS." Amazingly, Valerie and I had just been talking about why someone like her 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 gentle instead of full-voiced and confident. Her thoughts were so complicated at times I couldn't keep up with them. Even when I knew that 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 growing up.

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 that she wasn't positive happened. She would just look at me sideways. The truth is, 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, "Does that mean you're always scared when you're not on a boat?"

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-like 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 all the way into without feeling like you'd looked farther than 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 had things in common. 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, which freed me to try to do just about anything.

I inherited three point six two million dollars. She inherited the thoughts of 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. It was a good beginning.

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 string together 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 distorting the known world. If you stay in college long enough it starts to look like this:

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

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 look twice as hard to understand.

It can take years before you have the realization that the make-believe games 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. It was quite a brilliant way out.

Her philosophical mind became very frustrating to argue with. 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 have to know anything was vastly diminished. 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 having a lot of alone time, and that she would not want to give up her apartment.

I asked her to reconsider.

Then she miscarried.

She curled up in a ball in her apartment and I fed her tea and we both cried.

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 before you can actually hope to let go.

So you almost never really do.

Part II

My First Three Poems, and Julie Elk

Chapter 8

The Ferris wheel from a distance
looks 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.

Chapter 9

I traveled far inland,
all the way to where winter was.
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. It westerned."
"Why?"
"I guess the energy burned out."
"How will you survive? And how did you get here?
Did the wind bring you?"
"No. I have leg-wheels. I move at will, in any direction.
But this time I moved only because she did."
"Who?"
"Valerie"
"As in Valerian, the flower?"
"I don't know."
"Valerian comes around every summer. She smells good.
I love her."
"Define the word love."
"Why would I need to do that?"
I nodded gratefully. "How have you survived the winter?"
"What's winter? This is simply my time. I don't ask
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 now 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.

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

The street-sky melted, pre-dawn,
into 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 blue 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 ever 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, bathed in her, 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; I named it after me.

The boat was real. Solid. So was the name.

I lived in the cabin and kept a rather 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 overwhelming emotional sea-sickness, 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 jade ornament it held shined just above her yellow blouse.

"I assumed I'd run into you eventually," she said.

I was too stunned to speak.

"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 nodded.

"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, eh?"

"Simple. Elegant. Minimalist."

"How polite."

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

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

She cocked her head. "How could life ever be different than what actually happens?"

"Never mind. It wasn't the kind of statement that required a burden of proof."

"Can I come see it?"

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

"Why? Oh, is it because you found someone. . . ?"

"No. 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 also developed a few wizened creases since I last saw her. That's what happens when you become a philosophy professor.

"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. The musicians played odd loud homemade instruments The Beatles could never have imagined. Their imaginations created a skyline of sound.

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 so they surrendered themselves onto the benches in front of bus stops.

The table we sat at had a view of the Bay, a dark dazzling blue, as always. It had become 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 the old Gary Cooper movie called Fountainhead?"

"No."

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

"Afraid not."

"Oh."

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I feel like Dominique."

"I don't understand."

"Well, this very famous actor, Gary Cooper, was very handsome. He had a rugged attractive face, and he was a bit too 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 thought that philosophy should be beautiful and perfect on its own. That it should stand above the human heart. It was simply coldly true. 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 admitted. "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, Henry. 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. And I also just found out that he's so self-absorbed he named a boat after himself."

"What?"

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

"Who are you. . ? "

"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 you back."

"*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. Life can turn out the way you wanted it to. All you'll have to do is trust me."

Chapter 15

Valerie slept on the boat with me that night.

She unbuttoned her yellow blouse and unlocked the jade necklace and laid it on my wooden nightstand.

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 warm waves, with our eyes meeting blue -- two oceans. . . . until the water rocked us asleep.

Chapter 16

"I like your poems, Henry," she said the next morning. She was sitting on my rock-hard cabin bed, cross-legged, sheet covering her, drinking tea.

I had given her my notebook of poems to read.

"I especially like the ones about the Ferris wheel, and the winter rose. And the daughter. Our daughter we lost. I'm sorry. But at least you birthed *these*. You created something beautiful on your own."

"I was planning on taking a long ride straight out to the edge of the world today. Wanna come? I'm warning you, I may never come back."

She looked at me quizzically.

"Are you coming?"

"Yes, of course."

Part IV

Senseless

Chapter 17

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 since philosophy professors don't have to force anyone to think when the weather gets warm.

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 thought I might stay a bit longer. We were both restless. We wanted to see more of the world. But this time not by sea.

We were searching for beauty, for hills to walk in, for warm nights and a joyous atmosphere. We decided on exploring the Cinque Terra in Italy -- five towns connected by pathways high above the Ligurian Sea.

I sold Henry's Boat and left all of its memories behind.

We packed for our long trip, eager to reinvent ourselves in a new land.

Chapter 18

We knew we had found our place the minute we got off the local train and saw the turquoise ocean overwhelming everything.

We walked the high open paths from village to village, and ate 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.

We rented a medium-sized yacht and sailed from town to town, feeling like royalty.

Early one morning I opened up all the windows. It was cool and the wind was up. I could hear the waves falling onto the shore across the footpath.

"Val."

She opened her eyes. "Let's pretend we're back on the soccer field."

She blinked and looked around the room with sleepy eyes, breathed in the salty air, and pulled me towards her.

After the electricity passed through us and left our minds open and light, we laid back on our separate pillows.

"Maybe we'll have a piano playing daughter someday after all," I said.

It was my way of telling Val how deeply committed I was to her.

But she shook her head. "I don't ever want children, Henry. My body gave me that message loud and clear last time. I haven't the heart for it. And no time for it. I just want you, here. Is that enough?"

"Of course it is."

But that was a lie. My mind tumbled into the dark land of genetic paranoia. "What if I die without ever having a child?"

"I don't know Henry. But I'm not sure any of that will matter in the long run. I mean sometimes I think maybe we never actually die. And that every time we're about to die we do die in that reality, but our consciousness simply shifts into a reality where we don't die. We move out of the way of the car in the new reality, or we get cured from the illness we died from in the old reality. And this happens forever. It's not like reincarnation, it's just endless reality shifts with the same consciousness."

"Wow. That's your answer to me wanting children?"

"I don't know," she laughed, rubbing her eyes. "Sorry."

I said, "Well, maybe you'd want to have a child in one of those reality shifts!" I considered myself very good at interfering with someone else's random internal musings and trying to turn them to my advantage.

"Yes, but we're in this reality, where I don't," she said darkly.

She got up to wash off in the bathroom. But when she returned she got back in bed, turned away from me and fell back asleep.

I left a her a note and went for a walk in the hills alone.

Chapter 19

After walking thousands of feet above our town and the sea I descended back into the central plaza. I looked up to a first floor balcony and noticed a round old man in a white sleeveless ribbed 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.

I was thinking about this when the church bells began to ring. They cut through the day with jubilant urgency. It was exactly noon. Sun sparkled on the rooftops. Yet the old couple seemed deaf to it. They were as still as mannequins. His eyes never left his paper. Her eyes never glanced at him.

It was at that moment that I first thought Valerie's instincts about not wanting to live together or have children were probably right. I wouldn't want us to become like that couple.

At the end of the summer we said our goodbyes. I carried her bags to the train station and kissed her. 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 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 even too beautiful for God to wear.

Then comes morning, with the sea changing hue from cobalt to turquoise as the sun rises higher in the sky.

Most people who come here wish to wear only their finest clothes and jewelry on early autumn evenings such as this one. I enjoyed watching them walking down the promenade. I wanted to connect to a sensual timelessness. The kind that warps space and memories.

The table umbrellas at 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, new images, 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 make a toast to something that's 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 hillside, throwing light above it like an enormous halo. But it no longer sparks my imagination, or gives me sustenance.

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

Chapter 21

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, just sounded like distant wind chimes to them.

They had somehow found themselves living in an apartment on the prettiest road 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, in any direction. Maybe they had a daughter that lived near-by. A daughter that loved them. Perhaps she even played piano at family gatherings?

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

Maybe I was undeserving of a life as beautiful as theirs.

Maybe these adventures I insisted on 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. Our home. Our city.

Valerie had no cell phone. She enjoyed living a simple quiet life and hated texting and emails. So I rented a car and drove straight away 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 we had gone 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 actually want aside from the three million dollars sitting in various banks?

What had I done to my life?

Chapter 23

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. It was a curse I found to be a comfort. Like enjoying the presence of a witch.

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 there!" I tried to sound chippy.

"Hi babe. 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. My 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."

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 all over the deck gave that away."

"More than just beer, pal. Beer's my warm-up."

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

She noticed. "Yeah, my dad's not Henry. His name is Winston. I think they named him after a fucking cigarette. It used to be a thing. Anyway, we're going to change the name of the boat next month as a 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. It's like Pier Anna, but it's a fish. Get it?"

"Wow. Okay. Well, listen, when you see your dad could you please tell him to call my cell right away? It's a new number. Here, uh. . . ." I hadn't memorized it yet. "Okay, here, let me write it down for you."

I climbed aboard and went 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 mug.

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

"Why?"

"IDK," I said.

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

"Doris, actually."

"Really? Oh. . . I get it. Hey, you wanna come join me for a beer, Doris?"

"Wish I could."

"Your wish is granted," she laughed.

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

She gave me a sloppy 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 long wooden 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 was. 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 and ran to my car.

But by the time I arrived 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 could ever be.

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 me. 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. Like black and nothingness merging. 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. Sick. Then I saw a shadow. It looked like her. But I assumed I was still 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 edge of the sea. It was sunset."

"Oh dear. Henry, stay with me."

My consciousness was clearing a little. I had so much to say. "Val, remember what you said once about you never really die, you just go into another reality where you don't die?"

"Yes."

"Please be in that reality."

"You're not going to die, Henry."

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

"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 really think happens? I don't want to hear you reciting something another philosopher came up with. What's *your* sense?"

"I've been thinking about it all this time I've been in the hospital with you. I've been thinking all sorts of things. So, I guess I have two answers."

"Tell me."

"One is, it's highly possible that afterlife is simply post-human -- post-consciousness. Maybe it's just that. Beyond 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, 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 I suppose."

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, things that should be impossible are simply true."

Chapter 27

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

"Tell me," she said, breathlessly, hopefully.

"Remember I used to write poems?"

"Yes, Henry."

It had been two weeks I'd been in intensive care. 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. Then she screamed. 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 like his. 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.