

Beyond Henry

~ Gary Marks

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Part 1

Valerie

Chapter 1

I always wanted to name a boat.

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

Two of the names I have picked are, I Myth the Future, and, The Reincarnation of Neptune. I realize both are a bit long. But I have shorter ones.

When telling a woman who I like about the boat I'm going to buy someday, I always imagine that she asks me what I would name it. The problem is, why would she ask me something like that? It's not a fair expectation. I decided to settle for a woman who, when I tell her about the boat, gets excited about it and doesn't say she gets seasick. That's all I'm asking. I think that's fair.

Living in the city without a boat is hard. Plus, I don't like the way cities smell. Cities smell like a place where no one cares about people. I especially blame the mayor. As soon as you walk outside city hall you can smell that something is just not right. Why doesn't someone go back inside and tell the city council -- you know what, something smells here. We need to do something about it.

But mayors and city council members are mostly useless. They have no taste, and no sense of smell, figuratively.

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

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

But luckily, now I can afford to sail forever. After I quit my job as a carpenter last month I was looking for a new line of work when suddenly this lawyer called me and told me my Uncle Riverton -- the last of the Vandecclare 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, staying out until past sunset. Everyone else in the family either hated being out on the water, or just wanted to go out on his million-dollar yacht and drink champagne and brag to someone about what they were doing, Face Timing people on their cell phones. But I loved his small sailboat. I loved the water spraying up into my face, and the effort it took to fight through the waves and the 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 their soul 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 woman I met, despite not having a boat yet, was Valerie. She worked in a pet-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. I found out later she hated wearing shoes. And they were really nice feet, so I looked up to see the feet's owner. 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. The words glided their way towards me instead of echoing loudly.

I said, no. Because I didn't need any help. I only came to look around, 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 fit pretty tightly. I could never wear jeans that tight. No guys can, or should.

She eventually climbed down from the ladder and came over to me. No one else was in the store. I mean, pet-fish stores aren't like a Starbucks, or a Jewish deli, where there are just tons of people hanging around all the time. A pet-fish store is the kind of store where you either buy some pet 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 freshwater fish. They only live in streams or fish tanks."

"I'm planning on buying a boat."

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

At that very moment we heard a loud crash.

The glass tank that was part of the display fell from a height of about seven and a half feet and smashed onto the floor into thousands of clear sharp 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? A broom?"

At that moment a fat man whose face actually reminded me of a fish came in and demanded to know what happened. 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 any fish, I was just looking, he became livid, his face turned red and he started to grit his teeth. He said, "I'm sorry but you're fired."

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 with her.

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 actually I don't want to go home right now. So if you want to walk 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. Beyond the truck exhaust and construction dust 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, scrawled in crooked thick black paint 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, especially if he or she really believed there was no point. If there was no point, then why bother with grammar? Especially from that height. And two question marks? Why would someone who really thought there might be no point at the same time be passionate enough to add an extra question mark? There was something disingenuous about the whole thing. But this mirrored the conversation Valerie and I were engaged in moments before, regarding why people even tried anymore. Work, relationships, life extension supplements, living in a city that made you feel like an ant. And then we saw the graffiti. It was an odd coincidence.

A few blocks further down the road we saw a lipstick red graffiti written on the walled entrance of a huge fancy white hotel that said, "MONEY TALKS." Amazingly, Valerie and I had just been talking about why someone like her with a PhD in philosophy would be working as a pet-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 sensed that what she was saying was true. Sometimes words that express the truth just sound true.

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 and pranked by her two brothers growing up. She had observed her girlfriends getting 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 occasionally 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 true, even on the first day. There was no room for me to build a more likable identity by talking about past events in a certain way. She would just look at me sideways.

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

She said, "Are you always scared of something when you're not on a boat?"

I nodded. "Good guess."

She smiled and said, "No. Deductive reasoning."

Chapter 4

Valerie's blonde hair had a thin blue streak on one side. The blue streak did not coordinate well with the color of her green eyes in my humble opinion. Her green eyes were the color of jade. I am using the word jade not to be cliché, but to say that the color was something you would find on a very expensive necklace -- sparkly, and almost impossible to look all the way into without feeling like you'd looked farther than you perhaps should have.

Whereas the blue streak just looked like someone spilled cobalt-colored paint down the side of her hair, in the shape of a braid. It was alluring in some undefinable way. That's true. It just didn't match the color and expensiveness of jade.

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

I, on the other hand, tended to wear sports jackets and collared shirts even when going to a pet fish store -- especially lately, because I now had the money to do so.

We had a lot of things in common. We were both officially 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 pet-fish store. I dropped out at the end of my freshman year, which freed me to do just about anything except teach what I knew in college, or try to put people in jail, which took a law degree, or accidentally kill people by legally drugging them with good intentions.

Also, I had inherited three point six two million dollars. She inherited jade-colored eyes.

You can always find connections if you search hard enough.

I found a reason to call her every day after The Walk.

We would sometimes play tennis in the morning fog. Or we'd go to the 24-hour gym at three in the morning and work out. 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."

I was considering what words I could improvisationally string together to fit the feeling 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 sure were real, 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 when in reality you're actually just repeating thoughts you all too recently forgot.

It can take years before you come to the realization that the make-believe games the professors decided to call reality is -- even from the agreed upon fictional reality of math and science -- entirely debatable.

Valerie's constantly-questioning way of seeing the world naturally guided her to become a philosophy major. It was quite a brilliant way out because questions became as important as answers. Which makes tests a lot easier, in my opinion.

Her philosophical mind became very frustrating for me to argue with. She was a dimension 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 infinite possibilities and therefore basically become meaningless.

Hence, Valerie's arguments and opinions were, by definition, always as valid as my arguments and opinions. Case closed. Because there was no case.

And I loved that! Because I believed with all my heart in giving meaninglessness equal weight and power as meaning.

When seeing things through her eyes, the pressure to have to know anything was vastly diminished. All you had to do was feel and be.

I was 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 try.

Chapter 6

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

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 marriage

I asked her to live with me, but she said she couldn't live her life 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 together someday.

She said she didn't feel the same way.

A few days passed before we spoke to each other 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," she whispered.

* * *

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 experience a moment in time where you let go in the present tense. It's merely a working concept.

Valerie taught me a lot of things like that. Some of the concepts were emotionally very frustrating.

Part II

My First Three Poems, and Julie Elk

Chapter 8

The Ferris wheel, seen from a distance tonight
looks like a blurry white candle.
It revolves endlessly
until the switch is pulled
and the mechanism shuts down with a whirr.

I turn away from the window,
turn down the bed, silently thinking, I am a Ferris wheel.
I stop spinning without touching her.

I hear machine-gun trucks
rattling by on the street below -- crashing through pot holes,
screaming across the wet-streaked streets just before sunrise.

At dawn dark skeleton dreams will have to do.
They have replaced all other realities.
They are the only thing that survived the night.

Chapter 9

My daughter is in the next room playing piano
while I write these words as darkness falls.

The sun is almost fully down, inhaling the remaining light;
I had no time to turn the lamp on. I was barely breathing...
busy typing away.

The sound of her music soothes me,
and her voice, some say it's like an angel whispering.
The darkness seems to amplify all that.

I keep writing, writing, writing,
as the final light dims into pure night,
and I fall all the way down here, to this lonely space
where I dreamed you up -
a daughter playing a piano that never was.

Goodbye. Farewell dream.
The music stops.
Farewell sound.

The sun rises -- cherry-colored in a whipped cream sky.
I awaken in a curled ball, cold beneath blankets
that had mostly fallen away.
My pillow is asleep on the floor.

I walk out the front door in my bathrobe.
The avenue seems food-like;
a cooked-marshmallow-gray, topped with cars.

At noon I sit in a café eating a bowl of peaches,
typing away as always on my black-checkered keyboard,

fighting logic. Avoiding the present beyond words.

I once learned to love meaninglessness.

Now I'm living it. It's a hard thing to swallow.

Digesting reality is never easy.

Onward.

Bon Appetit.

Chapter 10

I traveled far inland, all the way to where winter was.
I hiked the hills, first snowfall, and came
to where the river was, ending my journey.
I bent my knees at the shoreline.

A blue sky appeared where taffy clouds had been.
A distant white sun began to warm my shoulders.
A single rose had grown somehow through the frozen soil
and suddenly interrupts me,
"Did I mention my sun?" it said. "It returns to me each dawn."
"My sun isn't coming anymore," I said. "It Westerned."
"Why?"
"I guess the energy burned itself out."
"How will you survive then? And how did you get here,
did the wind bring you?"
"No. I have leg-wheels. I move at will, in any direction, but not
through water."
"But why did you move here?"
"I moved because she did."
"Who?"
"Valerie"
"As in Valerian, the flower?"
"No."
"Valerian comes around every summer. She smells beautiful,
I love her."
"Define love."
"Why would I do that?"

I nodded. "And how have you survived this winter?"
"What's winter? This is simply my time. I don't ask

questions like that.”

I laid down next to the rose for the night,
there at the river’s edge.
My first unfaithful night
in my endless future life of wandering.

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 blue eyes shined smearily 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 other wrist. But she kept moving her hands too fast for me to ever read it.

When we first met, she was wearing a rose-colored blouse and white shorts that looked like the color of a distant sun. It reminded me of a dream I'd had.

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 in the morning.

I told her about my boat. She asked me where it was. I said I hadn't birthed it yet, but it was coming. She said, "Cool."

She didn't ask much about my past. I wouldn't have known what to say if she had. The level we existed in seemed like a non-sequitur.

Her father made crystals and pyramids to sleep under. Julie Elk tied one onto the top crossbeam of her teepee. I never felt much difference in energy one way or the other.

She didn't have much money. But each afternoon she'd buy a rose. It was odd. Alluring in some way.

I left a week later, when winter started making the teepee too damp and uncomfortable to sleep in, 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 had nothing, and had nothing to live for.

I bought my boat. A cabin cruiser.

I named it, Henry's Boat.

The time for whimsy had passed; I named it after myself.

The boat was real. Solid. Mine. Me. More me than me in some ways.

I lived in the cabin, and chose a rather monastic life. I owned no material things other than some basic clothes and a very extensive toolbox.

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 for the boat with cash -- actually a bank check -- and living on it for a number of months.

I didn't really care that much about the money. Because I had it. It was simply there.

And I really wasn't thinking about the future. Because it wasn't there. In reality, that was philosophically true, and somewhat comforting.

I was free of everything -- except some vague overwhelming *emotional seasickness*, which would only subside when I was navigating Henry's Boat recklessly, restlessly, over the face of the wide wild 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. A small piece of jade, octagonal in shape, shined just above her yellow blouse and matched her eyes.

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

I was too stunned to speak. I felt a crushing weight, gravity too intense to bear.

"I'm a professor now, Henry."

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

"Nothing touches me. So technically, no."

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..."

"I named it Henry's Boat."

"I see," she laughed.

"Full of imagination, eh?"

"To the contrary -- simple, elegant, minimalist," she nodded.

"That's polite."

"You could have named it anything you wanted to. 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, you know. I was being figurative. Poetic, I guess. I write poems now."

"Can I come see?"

"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."

There was a long silence. It was becoming eerie.

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

"No. Unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?"

Her eyes were upsettingly green. The jade necklace amplified everything emotionally. She had also developed a few creases under her eyes since I last saw her that made her look even wiser than before. I guess that's what happens to philosophy professors.

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

Chapter 14

The café she chose was right on the wharf. The wharf was filled with yachts and sailboats, and colorful shops and tourists, and jugglers and musicians. The musicians played odd loud homemade instruments that The Beatles could never have imagined. They created an odd skyline of sound.

Across the street, skyscrapers floated upwards endlessly. It made me dizzy when I tried to see the tops of those buildings. The seagulls couldn't fly that high so they surrendered themselves to the wooden benches in front of bus stops. Each bench was dedicated to someone long gone who somehow felt the need to name a bench after themselves. Or maybe the grieving family saw fit to do such a thing as a way to honor the deceased. This way seagulls, and strangers, and homeless people would forever sit on a bench dedicated to their loved one's memory, until the silver plaque either rusted off, fell off, or got stolen by wayward teens with a sadistic streak.

The table we chose in the café had a view of the bay -- it shimmered, a dark dazzling blue, as always. It had become my only true home.

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

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

"No."

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

"Afraid not."

"Okay."

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I feel like Dominique."

"I don't understand."

"Well, this very famous actor, Gary Cooper, was very handsome, like you. He had a rugged attractive face like you, 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 when we...?"

"No. But I was in love with an ideal. I was in love with the thought that philosophy should be beautiful and perfect on its own. Like a Rodin statue. And that it should stand above the human heart. It was simply, coldly true. Like carved marble. So not only *wasn't* I in love with someone else, Henry. I wasn't in love with anything. I didn't want to be."

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 pushed the sugar bowl closer to me.

"Something has changed, Henry. I think I do love someone now. It's quite remarkable, this feeling."

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 he's so self-absorbed and quirky he named a boat after himself. And apparently he writes poems now."

"What?"

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

"Val, I... "

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

She reached across the table and took my hand, "I want you back."

I was speechless. A poem failed to materialize.

"Take me back, Henry -- we can go out into the open sea on your boat, or sleep on the soccer field under the stars like we did that night. Whatever you want. Life can turn out the way you wanted it to all along. All you'll have to do is trust me."

Chapter 15

Valerie slept on the boat with me that night.

I remember how she unbuttoned her yellow blouse, and unlocked the jade necklace from the back and laid it on my wooden nightstand.

The rest of her clothes disappeared under the covers of my simple cabin bed. I touched her skin for the first time in so long, felt the windswept vanilla waves of her, with our eyes meeting blue and green -- two oceans... until in the morning hours the water rocked us asleep.

Chapter 16

"I like your three poems, Henry," she said the next morning. She was sitting on my rock-hard cabin bed, cross-legged, a white sheet covering her legs, drinking a cup of tea. She closed my notebook.

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

She looked at me quizzically but said nothing.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

"Yes. Of course."

Part IV

Rebirths

Chapter 17

The city where we lived, and where we met, no longer held a strong attraction for either of us. We had no truly close friends. And there was no work to tie Val down over the summer since philosophy professors don't have to force anyone to think when the weather gets warm. Something was pulling me away. Something was telling me I shouldn't be here. 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 wherever we went. We were both restless. We wanted to see the world.

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

I sold Henry's Boat. I wanted to leave all the memories before reuniting with Val behind me. Too much bad energy. Val was my transducer. I didn't need to be alone at sea anymore.

Chapter 18

We knew we had found our place the minute we got off the local train and saw the turquoise ocean overwhelming everything. After we unpacked at our hotel in Monterosso we decided to explore. We walked north, up a winding hill, and began to find an open path high above the sea. In the distance we could see pastel towns sitting atop their own separate little hillsides. They looked like Monet paintings.

The next day we rented a medium-sized yacht and sailed from town to town, feeling like royalty.

Early one morning I opened up all the windows in our modest-sized room. It was cool. The wind was up. I could hear the waves falling onto the shore across the footpath.

"Val."

She opened her eyes from a deep sleep.

"Let's pretend we're back on the soccer field."

She blinked and looked around the room, breathed in the salty air, smiled, 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," I said.

"Like your poem."

"Yes. Maybe I saw the future. Our future.

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

"Of course it is."

But that was a lie.

My mind tumbled into the odd land of genetic paranoia.

"What if I die without ever having a child?" I was shocked and embarrassed that I'd said this out loud.

"Sometimes I think we never actually die. Maybe 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 just in time 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 in timelessness, with the same consciousness playing things out in another dream."

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

"I don't know," she laughed, rubbing her eyes. "Sorry, I just woke up! But you're right to feel hurt, Henry. Maybe I just wanted to put that idea out there for you to consider.... to distract you."

I said, "Maybe you'd want to have a child in one of those reality shifts!"

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

She got up to wash her face and brush her teeth. When she returned she got back in bed and began reading a book she'd brought from home -- *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck. After a few minutes she finished the chapter, turned away from me, and fell back asleep.

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

Chapter 19

After walking thousands of feet above the sea I descended back into the central plaza. A church loomed above the central square. Small apartments looked over the plaza, each with a porch and a bright blue or green awning.

I looked up to a first-floor balcony and noticed a round old man in a white sleeveless ribbed t-shirt sitting beside his abiding wife in her well-worn flowered dress.

He was reading the newspaper. She was ignoring him, looking in the opposite direction, as if he didn't exist. They looked like they hadn't spoken or moved from that apartment balcony in months, or years. And from the looks of things thousands of silent minutes would turn into thousands more, until death pushed them over like matchsticks. I imagined generations of this same family meeting the same fate long ago, in this same town.

I was thinking about them when the church bells began to ring. They cut through the day with jubilant urgency. It was exactly noon. Sun sparkled on the rooftops. The world was awash in bells. 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 in a sisterly way. Then she was gone.

I booked a room at the Hotel La Spiaggia. I hadn't decided how long I would be there.

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 a god to wear.

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

Most people who come here wish to wear only their finest clothes and jewelry on early autumn evenings. 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 were apricot colored. The roof of the café was blueberry blue.

A soft yellow ladder rested against a vanilla wall.

Everything in Cinque Terra looked edible.

The breeze off the water was clean and refreshing. I breathed in the cool salty wind, wondering how far it had traveled before reaching me. But I'd thought of that image too many times already. It crossed my mind just yesterday, in fact. I demanded new thoughts, new images from myself, new words, at all times.

An hour before midnight everyone on the promenade was quite tipsy, raising their glasses, talking too loudly. The sound of their voices came swirling onto my balcony. My perch. They inevitably made a toast to something too inadequate for the occasion. They are not poets. No one would remember their conversation in the morning.

I was also no poet. Three poems don't make you a poet.

A half-moon blazed over the hillside, throwing light above everything like an enormous halo. But it no longer sparked my imagination or gave me sustenance.

Then a life-changing revelation came to me -- that even the most wondrous things can be dulled by a wonderless mind.
I was back to living in a world without wonder.

Chapter 21

Maybe the old couple ignoring the church bells that day were too peaceful to be amazed. Maybe they weren't bored or dissatisfied at all.

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 now blissfully unnecessary.

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

Somehow they had found themselves living in an apartment on the prettiest street 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 could be found by walking in any direction. Gelato. Glasses of house wine. Maybe they had a grown daughter that lived near-by. A daughter that loved them. Perhaps she even played piano at family gatherings and had children of her own.

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 The 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 from the airport and drove straight away to her apartment. But I was told she'd moved out a number of weeks ago.

I drove to the college hoping to find her there. But I was told she quit her job. I began to panic.

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

Maybe she went somewhere new, to 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. That sisterly kiss at the train station -- could she feel my emptiness? Did she feel like I was saying goodbye for the last time?

For weeks I tried to find her. I tracked down an old friend of hers, but she had lost touch with her months 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 by myself? Something powerful had called me away from here in the first place. She was the only reason I returned.

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? What did I actually have, aside from two point eight 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 necessary. For some reason the boat suddenly felt like a missing part of me. The only missing part I could get back. And it was my transport away from here if I never found her again.

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 to halt much. 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? Or maybe thigh land. He's a real player since the divorce."

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

"But. *But*," she raised her finger in the air.

"Yes?"

"He is coming home for my *birthday*. I mean Vegas would probably place the odds at about 2:1. But at the moment, I can't count to two, 'cause I'm just a tiny bit... wasted."

"I think the empty beer cans on the aft deck gave that away."

"The what?"

"The back of the boat."

"Oh."

"Do you know the name of your dad's boat?"

"I can't remember. But, caring about boat names is kinda lame. I mean, they're not people. They're not even dogs. But I think it's like Henry something."

"It's Henry's Boat," I said.

"Yeah, well, my dad's not Henry. His first 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?"

"Okay. Well, listen, when you see your dad could you please tell him to call my cell phone right away?"

I'd turned my old phone in before we left for Italy. My current phone was a rental with a new number. I hadn't memorized it yet.

"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--okay." 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, empty 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?"

"Gary Cooper."

"Oh. Want a drink, Gary Cooper?"

"No thanks. Listen, don't forget to give my number to your dad."

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

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. I looked down the pier towards the parking lot to see if I could somehow beat infinite 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 Café on 24th street. I go there sometimes."

"Bless you! You're an angel!" I ran to my rental car.

By the time I arrived, Allison's Café 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 far more beautiful than Italy could ever be.

We speak the same language. We always have.

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 kind of light in the air. It reminded me of a diffused halo. I looked at the time. It was 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 out the passenger window to get a closer look. I didn't see the truck in front of me coming to a hard stop.

Once I turned my eyes back to the road I slammed on the breaks and heard metal against rubber. My car hit into the back of the truck at nearly full speed, then skidded off to the right, smashing into a thick silver lamppost.

The front of my car collapsed inward; the lamppost bent. The lamppost light went off from the impact.

It felt as if the accident happened before I crashed. As soon as I thought it might be her it was like a gun went off and the bullet pierced right 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 in my world. Blackness and nothingness merging somewhere beyond night.

Chapter 26

When I opened my eyes the lights felt white hot. As if a thousand flashlights were pouring directly into me from above. Hot-cold. Sweat-chills. Sick-frozen. Nauseated. Then I saw a shadow. It looked like her. But I assumed I was still caught up in the continuous thoughtless dream I'd been in.

As I became more conscious, the shadow leaned towards me. My mind was reeling backwards, hallucinating 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. Then suddenly I wasn't quite sure we hadn't been. But then she smiled that smile of hers and I knew.

"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. Writing a bit. You inspired me to write poetry. But there's a lot more to the story than that."

"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. You have to get better, Henry. Because..." she came closer and touched my hand, "I think I might be pregnant. I mean *we*. You and me... together."

The words fell backwards in time. I couldn't remember the rest of what she said. Or if she'd actually said it. I tried to remind myself to ask about it, next time. But I never did.

I don't remember how many hours or days passed, but when I awoke again I was in another room.

There were more doctors and nurses around than the last room I was in. And less color. Less noise.

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. Just talk to me."

I found myself speaking far slower than I could think, because some of the images couldn't find words. I was searching the images. "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 there, in that reality for me."

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

She kissed my cheek. "We'll have plenty of time to talk about all those abstractions when you're safe at home with me."

"Not so sure."

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

"Truth, Val. What do you really think happens?"

She knew what I was referring to. She hesitated before speaking. "I really don't know, Henry. I've been thinking about it all this time I've been in the hospital with you. I've been thinking about all sorts of things. I guess I have two thoughts. But they're not important right now. You're going to make it. You have to. We can talk about it another time."

"Tell me. Please."

"Okay. Alright... Well, one thought is, it's highly possible that afterlife is simply post-human -- post-consciousness. And why would that be so bad? Whether consciousness survives or not, the natural course, after life is over, is the natural course for everyone, and everything, for all time. What *is* is, and has been, and will always be. So destiny takes care of everything. You see?"

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. 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, things that should be impossible, and seem impossible, are true."

Chapter 27

I fell asleep.

When I awoke she was still there next to me. It had been two weeks since I'd arrived here. I was given just days to live. She didn't believe it.

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

"Tell me," she said breathlessly.

"Remember I used to write poems?"

"Yes, Henry."

"Three poems?"

"Three beautiful poems."

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

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

I stopped and waited to see what she thought.

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

"I finally finished it."

She looked to me as if she were in the past now.

I exhaled, "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.

Chapter 28

It ends as it begins, with sporadic breathing. Controlled.
Uncontrolled. Controlled. Uncontrolled.
Stopped and started by unseen forces.

Wordless feelings, diffused images, come and go, each with
a flash of light sparkling, then diming, in front of closed eyes.

I may have still had things to say.

Chapter 29

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 old-time 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. Dreams came.

The End

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