

HARRY, REVISED

By Mark Sarvas

Reading Group Guide

About this Book:

Meet Harry Rent. Bumbling, lovable, good-hearted, misguided, foolish. No matter how hard he tries, Harry usually manages to make a mess of things, mostly because he can't quite get out of his head.

When his wife, Anna, dies unexpectedly, Harry's world is turned upside down. Numb to his own emotions, he sets out on a quest to reinvent himself, falling for Molly, an obsidian-haired, twenty-two-year-old waitress at a local diner. Instead of asking her out, however, he decides to transform the life of her beleaguered coworker Lucille, hoping that his escalating good deeds will win him Molly's heart. He soon devises increasingly elaborate schemes, most of which backfire in catastrophic—and often hysterical—fashion. But even these diversions can't entirely distract Harry from what he knows he must do—grapple with the troubling memories of his life with Anna, and his deep remorse for things both done and not done. Harry's emotional journey takes him from his own solipsistic and outrageously misdirected fantasies, to an understanding of his painful past and the tenuous beginnings of an actual, personal transformation.

At once deeply moving and darkly comedic, *Harry, Revised* is an extraordinary novel about the measure of a man's worth. Assured, nuanced, and written with elegance and consummate skill, it establishes Mark Sarvas as a major new voice in contemporary fiction.

Critical Praise:

BEST OF 2008 – Denver Post. “[Sarvas] promise[s] much for the future.”

FINALIST – Southern California Independent Booksellers Association 2008 Fiction Award.

“A remarkable debut.” John Banville, winner of the Man Booker Prize for *The Sea*.

“A marvelous, enviable debut.” Andrew Sean Greer, *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*.

“Mark Sarvas's debut novel is fun, fast and heartfelt.” Joshua Ferris, NBA finalist for *Then We Came to the End*.

“Harry, Revised is immensely readable, very funny and rich with earned emotion” David Leavitt, *The Indian Clerk*.

" As a comic novel, Harry, Revised ranks among the best of its kind. At the same time, its language elevates it to literary success." The Australian

"Sarvas has a sure hand for vivisectioning 21st-century absurdities" New York Magazine

"... a deeply felt and often hilarious book of mock heroics." Time Out, New York

"... poignant ... blisteringly funny ... " The Guardian

“Sarvas gives us beautiful bits of wisdom about marriage, which is really what this story is about. This is a book for grown-ups, for people who know how complex adult relationships are” Philadelphia Inquirer

"Sarvas is a wonderfully original writer ... " The Times (UK)

“Yes, Harry's a major league dolt, but, to Sarvas' credit, we end up pulling for him.” " Los Angeles Times

" ... the uninformed reader of this work might be forgiven for assuming he had stumbled upon some minor classic of the 1970s, whose author had won comparisons to John Updike and Philip Roth. ... Sarvas' compact, elegantly paced and pleasingly understated novel recalls a more literate and patient era ... At its best, Sarvas' prose seems effortless..." Chicago Tribune

“... deft one-liners, jokes and elegantly-turned insights ... " Boston Globe

" Harry is a genuinely likable character in spite of his shortcomings, and the reader roots for him in his quest for enlightenment and transformation." Bookforum

"Self-loathing was never so funny" Los Angeles Magazine

" A marvelous, often comic and moving tale." Harpers Bazaar (Australia)

"Harry, Revised is an entertaining read from the word go." Cosmopolitan (Australia)

" [Sarvas] delivers a first novel that – continually amusing us with the simple and fault-ridden Harry – never feels like one." New Zealand Listener

" ... endlessly inventive ... a cram of darkly hilarious scenes ... " New Zealand Herald

“*Harry* is a romantic comedy with dark undertones and an ending that is not quite Hollywood. This is brilliant entertainment with something more.” VG, Norway

Discussion Questions:

1. At his worst, Harry Rent does some pretty despicable things – consorts with prostitutes, forges diplomas – and even at his best, he is a bit of a bumbler. What were your initial impressions of Harry and, if they changed as the story progressed, what caused those changes? Do you think Harry is, at heart, well-meaning, and does it even matter?
2. How important do you think it is for a novel's protagonist to be "likeable"? What makes characters like Ebenezer Scrooge, Captain Ahab and Humbert Humbert so memorable in spite of their obvious character flaws? Did you find Harry likeable?
3. *Harry, Revised* draws liberally from Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a story of reinvention and revenge. Have you read *The Count of Monte Cristo*? If so, what parallels do you notice between Harry Rent and Edmond Dantes? If you haven't, does *Harry, Revised* make you curious to read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and if so, why?
4. Mark Sarvas has said in interviews that the central theme of *Harry, Revised* is that of change: How do we change? What does it really mean to change? Do you believe that meaningful change is possible and, if so, what does it mean to change? And how much do motives count? (After all, Harry often acts from selfish motives.)
5. *Harry, Revised* plays with narrative time, as flashbacks are told in reverse chronological order. What do you think the reason behind this choice is, and how effective is this kind of storytelling? How does your understanding of Harry's and Anna's marriage evolve as the flashbacks unfold?
6. *Harry, Revised* mixes the comic and poignant, often at unexpected moments. How effectively do you think Sarvas handles this balance? Which moments linger more in your memory, the comic or the sorrowful, and why? Can you think of other novels that employ the same combination of laughter and tears?
7. The Philadelphia Inquirer observed that *Harry, Revised* is "a marriage mystery, a whodunit of what-went-wrong. ... throughout the novel, Sarvas gives us beautiful bits of wisdom about marriage, which is really what this story is about." What do you think lies at the heart of the failure of the Rent marriage, and what greater truths about marriage – successful ones or unsuccessful – can be drawn from the story? What do you think was the basis for their love and marriage, given how unlikely a couple they were?
8. *Harry, Revised* is considered by many to be a "guy book," the action driven almost entirely by the central male character. But he is surrounded by strong women – Anna, Molly, Claire and Lucille – and most of the book is spent in interaction with one of them. How successful is Sarvas at creating female characters? What is most plausible about them? What is least convincing?
9. What do you make of Anna's struggles with her parents? Why is it that Claire doesn't seem to struggle in the same way or, more accurately, what is the nature of her struggles? Readers have alternately found Anna, in turn, sympathetic and controlling. What do you make of the choices she makes in her marriage?

10. How plausible do you find the burgeoning relationship between Molly and Harry? Why does such an educated woman put up with Bruce and his shenanigans? And why does she never catch on to the way Harry is pulling the strings behind the scenes? Is it possible that at some level she does know but decides not to acknowledge this? Why would she choose to do that?
11. Lucille undergoes a transformation from a fearsome, truculent presence to a genuinely sympathetic one, and unlikely friend. She's the one character who sees through Harry early on and yet she accepts him. What do you think drives the friendship between these two? On more than one occasion, Harry senses a strange link to Lucille – what do you think the basis of this link is? What common traits do they share? And was Harry wrong to try to foster a reconciliation with her son, given that it seems to have come from a (mostly) genuine desire to do something nice for her?
12. What do you make of Harry's unlikely friendship with the foul-mouthed Max, who is twenty years his senior? What does this friendship tell you about Harry? What do you make of Max's assessment of their friendship: "... what did our friendship really amount to?" (pg. 208)
13. Harry's signal trait is probably his rambling internal monologue, which leaps from one thought to another, endlessly drawing connections that often lead to nowhere. Did you find this trait annoying or endearing? How does this characteristic of Harry's evolve as the book progresses, and what do you think causes this evolution?
14. Mark Sarvas is a well-known critic and runs a popular litblog called "The Elegant Variation." Were you already familiar with Sarvas and, if so, is this the kind of book you were expecting from him? If not, how did it surprise you?

MARK SARVAS IS AVAILABLE FOR DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUR BOOK GROUP.

He can be reached via www.marksarvas.com.

Author Biography:

Mark Sarvas's debut novel, *HARRY, REVISED*, was published by Bloomsbury in May 2008, and will appear in more than a dozen countries around the world. A finalist for the Southern California Independent Booksellers Association the 2008 Fiction Award, and a Denver Post 2008 Good Reads selection, *HARRY, REVISED* has been called "A remarkable debut" by Booker Prize winner John Banville, and was compared to John Updike and Phillip Roth by the *Chicago Tribune*. He is best known as the host of the popular and controversial literary weblog "The Elegant Variation", a *Guardian* Top 10 Literary Blog, a *Forbes Magazine* Best of the Web pick, and a *Los Angeles Magazine* Top L.A. Blog. It has been covered by *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Scotsman*, *Salon*, *the Christian Science Monitor*, *Slate*, *The Village Voice*, *New York Newsday*, *The New York Sun*, *NPR's Day to Day* and *All Things Considered*, and numerous other fine publications. His book reviews and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Bookforum*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Barnes and Noble Review*, *Truthdig*, *The Modern Word*, *Boldtype* and the *Los Angeles Review*, and he is a member of the *National Book Critics Circle*. He has written episodic comedy for HBO and Showtime as well as screenplays for Warner Brothers, producer David Foster, and the World Entertainment and Business Network. His fiction has appeared in *Troika Magazine*, *The Wisconsin Review*, *Apostrophe*, *Thought Magazine*, *Pindeldyboz* and as part of the Spoken Interludes, *Vermin on the Mount* and *Swink* reading series in Los Angeles. He lives in Pacific Palisades with his wife.

EXCERPT:

ONE

In which our hero orders a sandwich and is late for an appointment

Harry Rent used to fiddle with his wedding ring, now he fiddles with the space it has left behind.

He fiddles by running the tip of his thumb along the underside of his fourth finger. He fiddles with it idling at a traffic light. He fiddles with it when addressing his attractive assistant over the intercom, asking her to send in his next patient. He fiddles with it waiting for change at the grocery store. He fiddles with it both absently and consciously. Consciously, to be certain it's gone. As for why he fiddles absently, he's not yet sure.

Presently, he's fiddling with it at a luncheon counter. He's surprised, but no more than vaguely, by how natural its absence already feels. The rest of his allotment of brainpower is split between despairing over how completely his new gray Italian suit fails to make him resemble the dashing model in the magazine ad—it hangs limply on his body, draped in woolen defeat—and trying to ignore how maddeningly nervous he feels sitting here on this stool, fiddling with In which our hero orders a sandwich and is late for an appointment a ring that's no longer there, waiting for his waitress to turn her attention to him.

There's an excellent chance that this unplanned lunch stop is going to make him late, and although he minds, he can't quite bring himself to forgo the stop. (Even as he recalls the sepulchral tones of the unctuous Tony Glide advising him that "things at Flavin and Makepeace run like clockwork," so punctuality is strongly advised.) He notes this, it registers that he ought to mind, and he wonders why he doesn't. He does this a lot, this strange circular thinking, Harry the Ouroboros, watching himself watching himself watching, often emerging many minutes later, foggy-headed and thick-tongued as if waking from a deep sleep. Wondering what the hell just happened, knowing only that another little piece of time is lost forever.

And now he's done it again, and all that alerts him to this fact, that brings him back to the moment, is the plume of perfume left behind by his departing waitress, and he realizes that he's once again missed his opening because he's been lost somewhere in Harry-land. He sighs with gathering desperation, the lateness of the hour beginning to weigh on him, and he glances down once more at the menu, on a futile hunt for something to eat. But Café Retro's forced good cheer and whitewashed surfaces meant to evoke the 1950s leave him cold, as do the Chuck Berry selections in the jukebox and the menu consisting largely of deep-fried this and sugarcoated that. Now, as he's debating the relative merits of the Kitchen Sink Chili over the Atomic Sloppy Burger, while carefully trying to negotiate the hot-fudge stains left on the menu by some less fastidious predecessor, some primeval instinct kicks him—nostrils flare slightly, adrenaline flows, hairs stir on the back of his neck, pupils dilate, and some infallible whisper in his ear advises him, Look up, Harry. Lift your head, my man. Your moment is nigh. And the head is lifted because who is Harry to countermand such fundamental, ageless commands?

"Have you decided yet? Or do you need a few minutes?"

This is Molly. Raven-haired and statuesque, she is twenty-two years old, and this gig at Café Retro is one of several ways she is paying her way through graduate school. She is working on her master's degree in postcolonial studies. The title of her thesis is "Patriarchal Modes in Contemporary Fiction: Just Who the Fuck Is the White Man to Decide What Passes as 'Literary'?" and by all accounts the early draft is a rollicking good read. She has a boyfriend, Bruce, who neglects her, and who she has begun to suspect has at least one other girlfriend. The truth is that she's growing tired of Bruce anyway—the working-class-bad-boy-tattoo thing was fun for a few months, but she's sat through enough French films alone now that reassessment is definitely in the cards. She has a strained relationship with her

mother, who lives in Seattle, and is only permitted to call her on Wednesday mornings, by design, as Molly has a class to teach at ten a.m. And she is also all too aware that the man sitting before her strangely fiddling with his left hand, this man who may well be old enough to be her father, has a crush on her, but he's not the first, and such crushes have been a tip boon in the past. Harry, of course, knows none of this. All Harry sees is Molly the waitress, standing before him, waiting for his order.

Nevertheless, it is his moment, the one opportunity he has to ask for something and actually have her do it. Power over women has always fascinated Harry, despite—or perhaps because of—its absence from his marriage. His wife, Anna, was much too successful, too poised, for him to have ever had any power over her. In fact, it was an extraordinarily strange turn of events, he often reflected, that led her to chose him out of the field of suitors blackening her front porch like a swarm of death and dung beetles. But, whoops, Harry feels it coming on, another circuitous detour away from the moment at hand, and so he forces himself back to the present, as he determines how to make the most of this moment, how to play it for maximum advantage, how to just this once have a lovely young woman do his bidding.

And, in true Harry-style, he muffs it, a world-class belly flop in front of the Olympic judging committee:

“Boy, it’s hard to decide. What do you recommend?”

And it’s done, power is ceded, Harry can’t grab this moment and run with it, no matter how loudly his desire screams at him. Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle. Patient smile, glancing at her, as though eye contact causes him physical pain.

Molly is both flattered and slightly weirded out to be asked—after all, Café Retro scarcely attracts the kind of clientele that thinks much about what’s put in front of them—Tell me, young lady, what brand of peanut butter does the chef use? I’m a Jif man myself or I hope it’s genuine Hershey’s syrup in the banana split, my dear. Still, unlike Harry, Molly has definite ideas and tastes and no discomfort expressing them, and thus she doesn’t hesitate to go directly to her favorite item on the menu.

“The Monte Cristo. Definitely go for the Monte Cristo.”

Disaster. Deep-fried and sweet. She couldn’t have picked a worse dish if she’d meant to, if she’d had a catalog of Harry’s loves and loathes and aimed with deadly, clinical precision at the heart of his culinary Achilles’ heel. (And now, for a moment, Harry teeters on the verge of exploring the whole “heart of the heel” construction, wondering if that’s actually allowed, but the snarling, threatening promise of the Monte Cristo is too strong to permit such reveries.) It’s inedible, revolting, vile.

“The Monte Cristo it is,” he says with what he hopes looks like a suave smile but fears can just as easily be read as murderous constipation.

“Great! If you don’t like it, just tell me and I’ll get you something else.”

“I’m sure it will be great,” he says, taking a hatchet to his lifeboat with grim abandon.

She nods, smiling, and is about to depart when she turns back.

“Have I seen you in here before?”

Well, no, not in here, not exactly. Harry has passed the front of the restaurant numerous times, paused before the window, gazed in hopelessly, and watched Molly making her rounds. Once he actually worked up the nerve to come in, but sitting in her section demanded more fortitude than the standard model Harry is equipped with, and so he sat in the section that was attended by Lucille, an overweight disciplinarian. Craning his neck helplessly, he withered slowly under Lucille’s long, gloomy shadow as he watched Molly gliding effervescently to and fro in her section.

Her question hangs in the air. Harry remembers a sage bit of advice once given to him by another resident during his intern days—if you have to lie, keep it as close to the truth as you can. It’s easier that way— less to remember. That said resident was convicted of malpractice and fraud some years later does little to dampen Harry’s enthusiasm for his counsel, and so Harry half-nods.

“Passed through once or twice. But I’m not a regular or anything.” Tolerable but just barely.

“Too bad,” Molly says with a glint of playfulness. Harry’s features adjust themselves to accommodate the rush of red that is flowing into his cheeks, and she calculates 15 percent has already leapt up to 18 and is bearing down relentlessly on 20. Harry focuses, returns the serve, and scores, in his eyes, a point:

“Well, if the Monte Cristo is everything you say, I may just become a regular.”

And the horrible tactical mistake is at once apparent to him—he has committed himself to a lifetime of Monte Cristos, of returning time and time again and being expected to order nothing else. After all, isn’t that one of the great advantages of being a regular—getting “the usual”? Ahh, here comes Charlie, get him his usual, Frida . . . Good to see you again, Alex. The usual? And so on. Sure, an occasional Not tonight, Eddie, I’m feeling footloose—get me a cheeseburger can be tolerated, but after a while, the universe reasserts itself, and Harry’s appearance in the doorway will set the bread in the batter and bring powdered sugar off the shelf. But Harry is careful not to let the shadow of defeat move across his face— it isn’t that he’s particularly philosophical about absorbing slings, arrows, and the rest. Rather, he’s too vain to puncture what he perceives to be his best moment thus far, his most suave line of the day, with the appearance of irresolution in any form. And so once again, he studiously ignores where the chips have fallen.

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Author Interview:

Q: What was the inspiration for *Harry, Revised*?

A: I got a phone call from a close friend who advised me that a mutual friend had died during plastic surgery. I didn't know this person terribly well – I had only met her about a dozen times or so – but I was struck by the fact that this person had no business going under the knife. She was an attractive woman, successful, vivacious and I couldn't make sense of why she'd done that, and – as I've been well trained by the women in my life – I decided it somehow had to be her husband's fault. I tried to imagine how he was feeling about himself, how he could possibly look into the mirror, and that's when the novel really began to take hold. From there, it traveled on to themes I'm personally concerned with – specifically, the question of change. How we change, what it means to change, whether change is even possible. This story seemed the perfect vehicle to explore those ideas.

Q: Are you Harry Rent?

A: Oh God, no. There's a tendency to read first novels as autobiography but that would be a mistake here. Harry and I couldn't be farther apart. Where he's uncertain, I am decisive. Where he's unsure, I'm probably overconfident. I certainly mined details from my own life to fill him out, but I did that (as all writers do) with all my characters. Harry's probably more my counterpart; my uncertain twin.

Q: How long did it take to write?

A: Three years, with a few interruptions. I saw the shape of the story fairly clearly from the outset, and the voice of the piece came quickly, too, although I had to smooth it out a bit – it was too wildly comic in the beginning, too jokey and wink-wink. Once I got the problems of shape and voice settled, though, it was mostly just a question of restraining my own natural tendency to procrastinate. I expect it took a bit longer than it should have.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your use of and devotion to *The Count of Monte Cristo*?

A: Well, it's one of the all-time greats, isn't it? Even in the unabridged form, it's a page turner right through to the end, filled with vivid characters and altercations. True, Dumas didn't go in much for psychological realism. But he knew how to tell a compelling story, and that's something that has become a bit devalued in the world of contemporary literary fiction. I wanted to suggest that it was possible to write a book that articulated some old-fashioned ideas about narrative, while absorbing the lessons of the last, let's say thirty years, and create an amalgam of strong narrative drive married to high literary purpose. I used to joke that the book would either be too literary for commercial tastes, and too commercial for literary tastes, thus disappearing altogether, or it would split the difference and score a bulls-eye. The jury is still out.

Q: You're known as a sharp-tongued blogger and a thoughtful but tough critic. Did you have any trepidation putting your own work out there to be judged? Has your background made it harder or easier?

A: Easier, which is not the answer most people expect. But as working critic, I know that whenever you read any review, no matter where it appears, it's merely one reader's opinion. It might fall under the banner of The New York Times, but it's not an institutional opinion – it's an individual. And each time out there's a 50/50 chance you will connect with a critic who appreciates and gets what you are trying to do. Of course, I knew there would be people waiting to take a piece out of me because they don't like me or my blog (which happened), but I'm a big boy and that's not a reason not to play.

Q: What authors inspired you? Who are your influences?

A: Well, subliminally, my work is probably the total of all the authors I have ever read and admired. I'm especially taken by John Banville, and his gorgeous lyricism, though in contrast, there's something about J.M. Coetzee's starkness that gets under my skin. But the most direct influence on *Harry, Revised* was Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, which I'd just finished as I was starting *Harry*. I was blown away by Smith's verve and fearlessness. She's not afraid to really step out there and risk looking foolish and more often than not, her risks pay off, and I felt liberated by her pell-mell narration. The first pass at Chapter One was little more than a Zadie Smith pastiche, of which little survives. But her energy infused everything that followed, though she is no way to blame for my book's flaws – those are all, sadly, my own.

Q: Publishing loves the first novel written by the twenty-something wunderkind. How is it different for you, with a first novel coming on your early 40s?

A: The primary difference (other than media attention) has to do, I think, with the accumulation of life wisdom. I read so many of these lauded debuts, and they are lauded for good reason – these writers are smart as hell and can write a beautiful sentence. But what they don't have yet is the ballast of a life lived, and so I'm often frustrated with that sort of writing, even as I see the promise of it, and look forward to what they can do when the shadow of experience begins to fall across the page. When I started *Harry, Revised*, I was 39 and had been through my share, and worn hats in life that had nothing to do with literature or academia, so I think that brought important perspective to the work. The other thing is that, at this age, you know who you are (or you should), so your world is not so easily shaken by a bad review (or pumped up by a good one).

Q: What makes *Harry, Revised* a good reading group book?

A: I think it deals with two sets of issues that are so fundamental to all of us, and it seems a natural for lively discussion. The first has to do with this previously noted question of change, and I think at some point, everyone has sort of wished they could be someone else. The second has to do with the timeless question of relationships, of why some marriages fail while others survive. And I also think it's a provocative window into the way a certain kind of male thinks and approaches life, and it seems there's much to be said about that.

Bonus Material:

- **The Original Ending**

In the original draft of *Harry, Revised*, Harry and Molly sleep together in the book's closing pages. Read this original version of the ending, as well as the author's explanation about the editorial discussions that went into making the change.

Mark Sarvas explains: When we sold *Harry*, the editing was very light but my agent warned me that the one thing my editor was ready to "go to the mat for" was that Harry and Molly should not sleep together. He felt that to undertake so long a journey with Harry and then have him do the wrong thing would shatter any sympathy for him. My original intention was that Harry should sleep with Molly, in essence, getting what he wanted but realizing how empty it really was, and how meaningless now that Anna was gone. (I'm drawn to stories in the "Be careful what you ask for" vein.) But I was willing to concede my editor's point and I felt that I could have Harry not sleep with Molly and still come to realize the things I wanted him to realize. But here, for posterity, is that original ending:

They stand in the kitchen, nursing warmed teacups.

"Harry, why didn't you just ask me?"

"Is there the remotest chance you would have said yes?"

She hesitates. Her "Yes" is unconvincing. Then she falters. "Probably not. Well, not at first. But ..." She sighs lost. "Well, it's kind of flattering, you know. Weirdly flattering. But flattering. I mean, no one's ever gone to that kind of trouble over me."

"Really?"

"I have to admit, when you punched out Bruce, I mean part of me was appalled by such retrograde macho posturing ... but part of me liked being defended that way. It was ... curiously romantic. Very Dumas," she adds. She smiles at Harry over the rising steam from her mug.

"Do you know how many times I've wanted to kiss you?" he asks. It's an honest question. The direct route, at last.

She nods. "Yeah. Do you know how many times I've wanted you to kiss me?"

Harry shakes his head. "No. I'm not very good at picking up on that stuff."

"Well, let me help you."

She places down her tea, pushes herself snugly against Harry's chest and offers up her lips.

"Now," she whispers.

*

They finish making love and invincible Harry holds Molly in his arms. What once seemed a remote fantasy, the puerile imaginings of his former self, now feels preordained, somehow inevitable. Harry examines the matter-of-fact emptiness he feels at his triumph, at the sight of Molly's naked limbs intertwined in his, her much-fantasized-about tattoo now warmly cupped beneath his palm, more or less precisely as he imagined it. The flat, muscled ridges of her young abdomen rising and falling gently in diminuendo as she recovers from her exertions. He can smell the pungently salty beads of sweat as they dry. He can still detect an echo of her taste on his lips. Yes, this is all definitely real. She is real. What just transpired, all of it, was real.

Why, then, this feeling of unreality?

In his own bed, his resting place for nearly a decade, he feels estranged, floating freely above the sheets as if somehow unanchored, cut loose from his pier, truly a permanent exile, a wanderer. Like his friend Edmond Dantes. And he remembers his closing lines from his farewell letter:

We must have felt what it is to die ... that we may appreciate the enjoyments of living.

Molly excuses herself to the bathroom, smiling luminously and Harry has no doubt, there's the beginnings of love in her eyes. With a warm kiss, she quits the bed, and Harry lets her go. And Harry realizes that Molly's urgent question oughtn't be what's going to become of Lucille when he's done with her. It's what's going to become of Molly now that he has her.

As she disappears into the bathroom, the phone rings. Harry looks to answering machine to screen the call, and then remembers pounding the device into oblivion. He picks up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Harry! It's Elliott. How are you doing?"

"Fine, Elliott."

"Really? You sound tired, Harry. Am I disturbing you?"

"No, Elliott, you're not disturbing me. What can I do for you?"

"Wow. You really do sound tired, Harry. Maybe I should call back."

"I'll probably be tired then, too, Elliott. What's up?"

"OK, I'll make it quick. I have someone I want you to say hello to. OK?"

The precedents for such randomness from Elliott are so well established that Harry can't find the grounds to say no.

"Sure."

"Say hello to Harry, honey."

A woman's voice fills Harry's ear. "Hi Harry. This is Katie."

Despite his exhaustion, Harry can't help but be surprised and interested. Her voice is a bit deeper and sturdier than he'd imagined. Not that he ever expected to hear it.

"Um. Hi Katie."

"Listen, I wanted to thank you. All that stuff you said to Elliott, well, he really seemed to get it."

Elliott interrupts, irrepressible. "We're getting back together, Harry! I did it, I found her, and she took me back."

"And we're getting married," Katie sighs contentedly. "I love this man so much."

"And I love you, too, baby. With all of my heart. Anyway, this is all thanks to you, Harry. You were right. Every word you said to me."

"Wonderful," Harry says, not remembering what he said, only remembering he said it to get rid of Elliott. Fortunately, Elliott obliges.

"You told me that things improve and you get through the dark times. Remember? And the best thing you said was about just going through the dark times to get through them. Well I did and you were right."

"Oh baby, I love you so much!"

"I love you, too, honey. Anyway, Harry doesn't need to hear us gush. We should go. Take care, Harry!"

"So long, Elliott. Nice to meet you, Katie."

"We'll send you an invitation!" Katie enthuses.

"You really do sound tired, Harry. Take care of yourself, ok?"

"OK."

Harry returns the receiver to the cradle. He can hear the squeaking of the shower knobs as the rush of water stops, and he can't help but compare the great love that the hapless Elliott has secured with this resonant emptiness that surrounds him. Heart racing, Harry reaches to the nightstand drawer and opens it. He withdraws the Swiss Army Knife. The tremor that shakes his body seems to originate somewhere below his groin and races upward like the expanding bubble of a massive underwater explosion. It breaks the surface and a tsunami of loss floods Harry with images – the x-ray, the restaurant, the morning after their wedding, the gift box, the white ribbon and now Anna's words echo:

For emergencies.

Emergencies. The rush is more than Harry can bear, holding this bit of red plastic that – along with a drawer full of whispering objects – is all that remains of his wife. He squeezes the knife tighter and tighter, hoping the effort will stanch his tears – his first real tears – that stream down his face in burning rivulets. Clutching the knife to his chest, he buries his face into his pillow to muffle the wails that shake his body. Which is how Molly finds him when she returns from the bathroom. Confused but compassionate, she puts her arms around his shoulders and presses her face into his back.

"It's okay, baby. It's all okay."

Bonus Material:

- **List of Alternate Titles**

During the writing, the manuscript was called “*Obiter Dicta*,” and it was submitted to agents as “The Count of Café Retro.” Check out a list of titles that were considered (and rejected) and find out how the final title of *Harry, Revised* came into being.

Mark Sarvas explains: I’m usually good with titles – they come early on, define the work, and I tend to stick with them. But no one but me ever liked *Obiter Dicta* – a title I still sort of love but which everyone thought sounded like a legal thriller – and so I submitted it to agents as *The Count of Café Retro*, which kinda sucked, and my agent Simon Lipskar looked me at kindly and said, “You know we’re going to be changing that.” So I came up with the list below, and when Simon saw *Harry, Abridged*, he suggested *Harry, Revised*, and we knew the search was over. But I still long for *Obiter Dicta* – the tangential nature of the term seems to perfectly describe Harry’s digressive consciousness to me.

Other literary sources – Poems, texts, etc.

Aubade

How Shall the Heart Be Reconciled

Feast of Losses

Exulting Somewhat

The Book of Transformation

We Are Many

A Thousand Reservations

His Proper Self

A Special Way of Being Afraid

A Rogue and Peasant Slave

All Our Yesterdays

A Place of Disaffection

The Unremembered Gate

Another Country

Decisions and Revisions

Each to Each

That Old Astonishment

Direct novel sources:

The Horizon

Harry, Abridged

No Man's Land

The Not Too Guy

Random:

Dreamwalking

Discontents

Reconciled

Reconciliation

Bonus Material:

- **The Original One-Page Outline**

All books begin with the spark of an idea. Mark Sarvas has shared with readers the very first page of jotted notes, in which he sketched out the idea that became *Harry, Revised*. Check out this fascinating glimpse of where ideas begin.

Mark Sarvas explains: My background was in screenwriting, so structure and outlines were pretty natural to me, and in the case of Harry, as you can see below, the structure of the story which first popped into my head served me well. What you have here is more or less a map of the book as it was written. Some things, like the idea of the stress test, didn't make the final book. And the reference to Consolation is another novel of mine that I've yet to write, but I love when minor characters from one novel become star players in other books. Here's my original, one-page document:

NOVEL IDEA – April 29, 2003

Man's wife dies during plastic surgery because he wanted it. Devotes his life to helping downtrodden women?? One of them falls for him.

Back story includes an affair. He doesn't tell her to do this, per se, but it's clear that this is why she is doing it.

He is a doctor? Didn't do stress test?

Themes – We can remake ourselves if we're willing to believe our own lies about ourselves? But is there a point where the lies become so much a part of our fabric that they become our new truth, or is it inevitable that the true self will out and the lie will eventually fall apart? Question – How is one remade – Can one be remade?

CHAPTER ONE

At a coffee shop. He chats up the waitress, is pleased that she regards him well. He feels that he looks sharp in his suit, is getting used to the wedding ring off his finger. More interaction with the waitress – he orders what she recommends even though he doesn't like it, is revolted in fact. He fantasizes an entire life for the two of them, and finally leaves, lest he be late.

Also – sees couple at a table arguing over an urn. (Foreshadows the funeral ahead AND will tie into Consolation.)

CHAPTER TWO: The funeral.

CHAPTER THREE: First flashback.

CHAPTER FOUR: Disintegration of his life, shunning by his friends.

CHAPTER FIVE: Failed attempts at redemption.

CHAPTER SIX: The idea and its attempt.

CHAPTER SEVEN: The idea's complications.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Climax and comeuppance.

MARK SARVAS IS AVAILABLE FOR DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUR BOOK GROUP.

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