

# The Floating Harbour

By William Altoft

## Chapter 9

*A Path More Covered, And A Darker Night*

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## Chapter 9

"The fountain-pool's been covered since this morning."

"This morning? That was years ago."

Her silent laugh, her soundless smile: they bring her head and body 'round to sit back in her chair. While my legs do reach the ground, hers settle for the sky before it, though it won't be long 'til she hops back up and off and off she'll go.

As she was standing with a foot on either side of the gap between the quadrilaterals – slabs (varying size) to pave the waterfront – she had gazed across, beyond the rail, to where the wooden boards (more uniform) make a space to further set back Neptune, as I ate and ate (and still eat now) a bowl of food – vegan, spiritual.

Swinging as her legs are, she knocks the metal frame that holds up the table-top, with the transfer of the impact manifesting in the movement of the liquid (of the pale ale) in my glass.

"Oop! Sorry..."

I say it's alright with a look instead of words. "You didn't spill any, anyway."

She says she's glad, not with words but with a look, as I pick it up to drink some more.

Out of somewhere, I feel my heart is broken.

Out of somewhere, I have to start again.

Out of somewhere, a passage takes new context.

Out of somewhere, I lose someone to somewhen.

"And what" (says she) "ll you do now?" Our blue eyes hold the river that no longer holds the sun. Through tears and sighs, I give her a reply that only she and I can hear.

The night's now nearer; evening will evanesce.

Across the water, across the roads, a cross-section beckons – a time-scar, manifesting mist.

There's a point to reach, and only one way to truly reach it.

"It's almost time."

"It's always time, really. It's just that I've decided when to stop putting it off."

I don't finish my drink. From her standing stance by the table's edge, she goes to run her finger through the candle-flame but finds she can't: I blow it out before her finger gets there.

An insincere seriousness tries to convince in her look of disappointment. Her hands play the drums and the white 'n black keys upon the table: percussion ever-present, here and there in spirit to engage your energy.

"I'm sure that sounds lovely in your head..."

And now I hear what it accompanies.

"I'm sure it sounds lovely in your head, too."

With a flourish, even fidgeting through music has its end-point and she's calmly standing, watching wax change state, as I finish off my drink and draw a breath.

"Shall" (I say) "we wander more?"

"Let's" (she says) "meander."

"You" (I say) "meander, then."

"I'll, as" (she says) "you wander."

Is one way really rushing to be done with it?

Is the other way avoidance and delay?

If I walk over the water and across the road, I'll be merged with the final paragraphs.

"What will you call it all?" She speaks into my thoughts, as I noisily put chair back under table.

"Um... 'One Summer's Day'?"

"I like it."

"No promises."

"None taken."

We pass on through arch-topped space between a pillar and the wall it branches from, joined about the pale-stone arch in red-brick strips, based by black-bricked hooves that fall behind us.

Crêpe-catered open space: here are further seats and tables. The tuneful rhythms of a solitary bass are amplified around the centre, here in town, here where the world takes increasing notice.

I won't become the breeze or wind, but the scent of food floods, carried by the bassline. As we take small steps on broad steps we find ourselves looking at a market on the new and wooden boards that cover up the first/last fountain pool.

As much as the mix within the market up on Corn Street, around the crowded seats there's food from 'round the world. Canvassing the canvass-covered caterer's collected wares – their individual tentish-huts of colours – of all, of none – – the crowd sits, stands, moves, and stays, its components boasting lives their own, a miracle of indifference to strangers.

Falling water water-falling to the river as it goes beneath the city; I feel a pull upon my back that takes me half a step through space as she stops me standing where I'd stop a cyclist.

"What would – or will (or did) – I do without you?"

"Talk to yourself?"

"Let's" (I say, after smiling, after laughter) "not stop here."

"No?"

"No. I don't wanna lose momentum. I'm afraid I'll never make it if I don't go now."

"Then let's go now. If you're certain?"

"I'm not certain. But if I wait for that I'll be here, still, through sunrise."

"Then let's slip beyond the cycle path, the bus stops, and the road, and let's stand before the time-scarred mist at King Street."

A Georgian house, already blitzed in twain,  
is cut across and split again.  
Pennant stone and sloping roofs:  
part pink-paint-covered, rooms clean and couth;  
part exposed brick, sailors – convalescent,  
fevered, blind: all evanescent –  
housed within, til putting out to sea  
on vessels, unequivocal, of entropy:  
an ultimate voyage back to eternity.

The Merchant's Almshouse is wisped by mist and held in two moments passed: the now that's then, that no longer present moment, and, through the window of the time-scar that rends the air like heat, the 1800s, with its raucous gabled houses.

"Imagine seeing the world this way. A picture of the world in your mind generated by two eyes that perceive two different moments."

The mist is coalescing as I speak, and soon we are enveloped once again. I don't feel that ancient light burst on, that command to flee or freeze or fight, or perish.

She is standing to my right, holding my hand.

"There's little left, but it could take minutes, months, or years. I have to write it. I have to live it, too."

“Don’t run from it. If you run it will take the space you were standing in and, though you’ll return, you’ll return to a shorter road, a path more covered, and a darker night. You’re not a wall for it to die against and it’s not a danger you can flee. Know it, and let it know you back.”

“Is it safe?”

“No.”

“Is it necessary?”

“Yes.”

“Will I make it?”

“I’ll find you at the end,” (she says, softly, as she ebbs away) “where we circled the beginning.”

I feel the looming desperation of a lonely child becoming frantic at the edge of the unknown. An edge that, like a shadow, can’t be run from. An unknown that’s spilling out, reclaiming ground.

She and the mist are gone.

I have circled ‘round and inward and backed away, I’ve even written out the end, but all that’s left, as I am left here on my own in my own head, is to confront the only chapter that remains, to cede control and meet with what it has to say.