

Helen Downs' Journal

A letter to my daughter:

I have only two days to live. Other people wouldn't be able to see that. The sun rises and sets, but I know that it all boils down to two days. You shouldn't know the day you die. I used to live my days, Now I live for only one. I call that day tomorrow. This forever day is all the gray time leading up until then. Today started the moment that Cabel left. I've watched my daughter grow up in this one day. And when tomorrow comes nothing that happened today will matter. Those moments decide my fate. According to Cabel, I can choose to change my fate right now, but my nature has chosen between the two paths so there's really no option at all.

Darling, keep an open mind, as you always have, and remember that you are as special as I have always tried to treat you. You remind me so much of your father. I try and picture you all grown up, but here you are next to me, and you look so small. Tonight as I got you ready for bed you pulled on your old red and flannel nightgown with the ribbon neck and plush heart on the front. And we knelt by your bed to say your prayers, just as we do every night. Do you still remember it, my princess?

Dear lord, I ask for little but hope for much. Smooth the paths we enter on, guide the ones we take. Love will ensure we find the future we shape. Let it be the peace we seek.

Your sweet voice says the words dutifully, but I wonder if you know how much faith I put into the prayer I designed after your father left.

I am a mouse in the maze of my mind. I know where I need to be, but the solution is hidden in the twists and turns. My want is so basic: I want to see my love again. And I've chosen to pay the price no matter how high. I am foreordained to die. It almost doesn't matter, because that prophesy is accompanied with the knowledge that he will be there. I chose this. Cabel wanted me to continue as if I didn't know my hypothesis was flawed. His insight cleared my vision, and there is no going back once you have knowledge.

In a world of possibilities surely there is a possibility where I live to be with my lover. He has seen me die. If it goes this way, then at least I will get to see him again. And when he sees me, it will be without censure. He won't know that I've disobeyed him.

Caught up in the serenity of my forest, and thinking about the fourth quantum equation I'd been working through for some time, I was slow to note a sudden anxious hush. My footsteps sounded loud, and my breath harsh, as I slowed to detect the problem. Nothing moved in the wood around me, and my breath made a frosty mist in front of me. I took a few steps toward the north, where people were most likely to have stumbled off of the road and gotten lost. I wanted to offer my help. I hadn't seen people for several months, ever since the pass froze over. There weren't even loggers in the area.

My breath caught as the sound of my own gentle footsteps was buried under the crashing of furious movement. I turned swiftly, running for the nearest tree and taking shelter behind it. A huge man came careening onto the path, his eyes wild. In front of him a wave of air smashed leaves free of the bushes. It rattled the stones in the ground, and whipped the grasses. I lifted my arm from the tree to cover my face. The wind stopped. I stared. His hair was short and the reddest red I had ever seen. He looked huge, and his legs were like the trunks of the trees around us. Both of his meaty hands were scratched, and the jumpsuit he was wearing was dirty and leafy, as though he had been rolling around in the loamy soil under the trees. He was huge and trollish. A hole in his garb implied a serious puncture wound. As the leaves finished floating back to the earth I finally stepped out.

The man ran one blunt hand through his outrageous hair. His intense blue eyes met mine, giving me a quick impression of uncertainty, before filling with recognition. Rumbling tones cried, "Oh Gods!" as though the woods around us moaned with the wind, before he sank to a sitting position. I moved to him. No sympathetic person could have resisted the absolute pain in his hollow expression.

I neared his crouched figure, unconcerned with the strangeness of the moment. I simply knew that it was right to comfort him. My hand reached out to his shoulder and he flinched away. I was no longer scared of him; I was intrigued. I needed to know how he'd gotten to your grandfather's cabin, and why he could barely bear to look at me. I didn't like the city, even then, and I didn't like crowds, but this one man attracted me to him effortlessly. I was usually too oblivious thinking or talking about my work to notice men.

I moved away and seated myself on the granite boulder at the bend of the road. I watched him with the patience an astronomer watches the stars, and remained seated, with a comfortable separation between our two forms until he had control of himself and stood. His body seemed inclined to leave, but he remained standing where he was. His resistance was palpable, but there was also a certain magnetism between the two of us that trapped him in my orbit, like a lonely comet. He was only gathering his strength and would shoot off again the moment my influence gave way.

I told him that there was nothing nearby, no other people or phones. I offered to mend the cuts in his hand, the puncture wound. He didn't acknowledge the pain by word or deed. He was

curious about me, I could tell, and followed me back without offering more words. I think he was as lonely and adrift as I was.

We arrived at the cabin. I led over the porch and opened the door. His first step on the wooden porch brought a horrendous crack! His foot, all the way to the calf, had driven through the board leaving a splintered mess. He backed off wordlessly, watching me. I held the door open, "It's a concrete foundation in here." I said shyly. I wondered how much he weighed, but I didn't ask. He looked big, but in fine physical condition. I wouldn't have guessed he weighed more than two hundred twenty-five pounds. He was only about five foot six, or maybe seven. I was much taller, but I was used to that. I theorized that he concealed a very heavy item or items on his person. As it turns out, he was of higher density than I allowed.

He watched me from where he stood. Finally I went in. I hung my coat on the hook behind the door and visually checked the lab. It was messier than I would have liked. I've never been good about that. A moment later he flew through the door and landed lightly on bent knees. I shut the door and started up the curved staircase. He watched me go up several steps. I stopped again.

"Is it safe?" he asked. His words shimmied out of deep places inside and filled the empty spaces in the house.

I turned to look down at him. "Oh yes," I patted the wall on the right, "The stairs are solid black marble. My grandfather collected minerals. He also sculpted. That used to be his studio." I pointed back toward my lab. He didn't even glance that way. I shut up. He followed me. I wondered how I had survived this long doing things this stupid. It hadn't occurred to me for several long minutes that I could be in danger from him. Never do something like this, Kay.

Of course Katherine, telling you about the romance of your father and me is the easy part. The rest of the story is rather more difficult. I had a number of weeks to come to believe your father's story, but I'm going to have to deliver it to you all at once. I hope that somehow I have prepared you sufficiently to understand what I am about to relate. If present indications are anything to go by, you may surpass the strengths of my studies and understand better than I do the rest of our tale.

Your father wasn't happy to be staying with me in the cabin. He shied away from contact with me, not even allowing me to help clean the scratches on his shoulders. He only insisted on a quiet place to sleep and heal. I didn't see him for days in the beginning, until he appeared at dinner one night and ate everything in the house. I chatted at him over dinner, filling the awkward empty spaces with information about myself, and my work, and any other thing I thought might interest such a man. At that point, I think he realized it was too late to leave. He'd already left his mark on my home and my life by being here.

He stayed, but remained removed from me. Even so, I felt his eyes seeking me whenever I wasn't looking. Despite my initial certainty that he was someone I wanted to get to know better, I could tell he was uncomfortable around me. Nothing I said put him at ease. I didn't know how to flirt. I reluctantly offered to take him into town, since we didn't even have a telephone then, but he disliked that idea slightly more than the idea of staying with me. I wasn't happy to be the lesser of two evils, and we spent several considerably miserable evening in the cabin together. He wouldn't answer any of my questions and seemed unable to think of what to ask me, just more of the same watching.

I kept up a light attitude, which wasn't very difficult since I was becoming content to have him around, but I still found his constant close attention unnerving. I disgusted myself by running off at the mouth, both about my work and myself. He found it piquing, and eventually let his guard down enough to ask me questions. I was amazed at his knowledge of quantum physics, among other things. In fact, I often got the impression he knew more than I did, and I got the faintest taste of promise on my tongue. I finally lured him into looking at my work of that time, by leaving it out for him to peruse while I left the room. I waited on the stairs, and you can imagine my contrition when I heard him burst out-- laughing at me! I rocketed into the room, since he was laughing at something I held almost as dear as I hold you.

"What do you think you're laughing at?" I yelled at him, and I snatched my papers away from him.

"This can never work," he said with a smile and a shrug, and the feelings his voice gave me this time was not as sweet.

I shuddered, my voice tiny, "My life's work?"

He could see on my face how much he had hurt me. I am unable to hide the slightest emotion. Where he had only found interest and loyalty before, he saw ramparts of distrust rising between us. I was shocked to see how he callously smashed years of research. If he had not already proven himself my equal at discussing the most abstract of theories I would have scoffed at his curt dismissal of my best work ever. Work I had been planning to make my life achievement.

My shocked expression was mirrored by his own as growing horror widened lapis eyes. "Good God," he murmured at soul level, "Helen, don't listen to me." His arm snatched at mine, but I cradled my paper closer to my bosom and only looked at his face. I still saw no cruelty there. I saw only an intellect that I respected, eyes I could drown in, and a sorrow that ran so very deep every time he looked at me.

I couldn't stand to see the look of regretful pity he gave me, where I had only wanted to see admiration. I might have been found lacking in personal appeal to him, but my work was my

bastion of safety, the arena where I was uncontested champion. I was a genius, why wasn't that enough?

"My work." I felt my skin crawl. I looked down at my arms where it rested against me. This was all I had. I had poured everything into it. It nestled against my breast like a babe in arms and I felt such a wave of revulsion rush over me. I saw clearly for a moment how poor an excuse for a life it was. How long I had gone without anything more was suddenly unfathomable. I looked into his eyes and saw that the one thing I had been relying on to make me worthy wasn't enough. If it was all I was then I wasn't enough. It was everything I'd feared. Maybe it was the reason I was there working by myself. Maybe I had always known that if other people saw the thing I considered my one reason for living they'd mock me.

"Helen please," he chased me down the stairs, and I pinballed out into the snow. He was right behind me. He merely kept pace, knowing he could catch me at his leisure. I was infuriated at his arrogance. I wasn't going to run from him, though. I turned in a tight circle, my more slender body torquing infinitely quicker than his, and raced to the back of the house. I slammed open our sliding back door and he followed closely on my heels.

"Here!" I shouted, bringing more and more papers out of the drawers and files in my workroom. "All nonsense? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Gods Helen, please." He was pleading with me, but I didn't know why. I probably never would have given his words the credence I did if I hadn't seen how sincerely he regretted having said them, yet still didn't take them back. I had been with him for days neglecting my life's work and yet willing to because a part of me recognized that I wanted more than it had to offer. Looking at the piles of figures, and then at him, I saw that neither one was the answer. I was angry with him, and with it. I hated them both with a passion. I was more than these two things. My work would never draw me in again.

"Why should I listen to you? Why should anything you say mean a word to me?" I poked at his chest.

"It shouldn't."

"Don't patronize me! Say what you need to say!"

"I'm not. Helen—," he kept using my name, that soft tone of voice I had dreamt about. It wasn't fair that now he use it. I had wanted this work to have meaning for him. It hadn't, it no longer even had meaning for me.

I was raging beyond reason. "I'll burn it."

Again, surprise was on my side. Moving like a hummingbird, I kept all my papers in a wad against me, and raced to the front of the house, and the turret staircase. I kept crying the

same words over and over. I tried to get up the stairs, but the turns were too tight, and his long arms found me before I had gotten a full turn. We both fell in a heap. My papers flew around us as I threw out my hands protectively, stopping my fall at the last second so my hip cracked painfully but my head didn't strike. The stone steps were cold and hard. He too had trouble catching himself, and both knees struck at the same time. There was a sharp crunch.

His arms were still around me, and he pulled me to him so strongly that there would have been no resistance possible. "Please don't listen to me. Please, oh please." He was rocking us back and forth. Pleasure coursed through me as I really felt his words, rumbling and shimmying their way out of his chest like sound through a series of mellow caverns. I wanted to be held forever, but couldn't forget his hurtful words.

"Tell me why." Tears were streaming down my face, making me taste salty sadness in my shaking mouth.

"Why?" His breathy whisper moved my hair. "Why what?" He pulled me away from him, holding me up at the shoulders to stare for the first time into my face and eyes. They streaked over my face, taking in the tears and the flushed redness of my emotions. They traced my trembling mouth and fluttering eyelashes. I remained silent under his gaze, reading every nuance of his coiled body. "Why am I so sad when I look into your eyes? Why do you look at me like I'm your salvation and yet I know I'm utterly powerless?" A shudder traveled from me to him, his husky words echoing eerily in the small space, "Why, oh why, does the answer have to be that I have watched you die."

I licked my parted lips, speechless. He pulled me to him again, in a violent and welcomed kiss. His arms were tender, and his kiss strong enough to reassure him that I wasn't dead, I was very much alive. I reveled in the kiss, not knowing whether I believed him or not. I only knew that I had wanted him to do this since I had first met him. The kiss traveled along my full lip and traced its way along my wet cheek to my ear. I could feel soft lips and sandpaper stubble. I welcomed the burn.

I was melting like heated wax, feeling myself limp and content in his arms. His lips brushed my cheek as he spoke, "You mustn't let anything I do or say affect you."

I laughed aloud. Everything about him demanded a reaction from me. I could never be immune.

He didn't laugh with me. His face angled downward, so that his eyes appeared huge and appealing. "Please Helen, I lost my head up there, I shouldn't have said anything about your work." He swallowed, "It's very revolutionary."

I watched his face closely, and added slowly to his words, "But on the wrong track."

He flinched, and averted his face once more. I knew that if I didn't talk to him now he would never give me another chance like this again.

"You care about me."

"No." I thrilled at his word, recognizing that it was not the truth, but only what he wanted to be true.

"I care about you," I continued along the same track.

"Ah Helen, what have I done to you?" He brushed a lock of brown hair off my cheek.

I was young and impulsive then. "You've made me love you." He hugged me again, beyond words. And I allowed myself to be swept away in the feelings that would end all too soon.

"I'll have to leave you," he was looking at me with a new fire in his eyes, "Do you understand that? I won't be able to stay, no matter how I might want to."

I was drowning in the depths of his deep eyes, and engulfed in the tide of his voice, "I'll go with you."

He shook his head sadly, not denying my words himself, but reflecting impossibility so vast it dwarfed us both. "Can't." The word was dragged out of his body.

"But you'll come back." I sought desperately in his face for reassurance, and found blanching horror. "You will be back, I can see you will."

He realized I was reading him too closely, and his averted face kept no secrets. He rose to his feet, "Helen, I'm not from here, from Earth, and I'm not from here, the twentieth century." He offered me his hand to help me rise, and I took it without hesitation. Whatever, whoever he was, and whatever he believed he was, he was what I loved. I saw the new rips in the knees of his pants, and glanced down at the step where he had fallen. As he led me down the steps my foot crunched on the bits of broken stone his impact had left. His knees were not even scratched. He moved with uninhibited ease.

"I wouldn't tell you this," he held me close to him, as if now that he had me near he didn't want to let me go, "but my presence alone upsets things. I accidentally traveled from the future to this time, without precautions." He held an arm out in apology, "I'm just not trained for this."

"And you have seen me die." I whispered. My hand clutched in his shirt.

He enveloped me once more in his wayward arm, "Yes. That's why I told you who I am." He looked at me with feverish intensity, "I had to come through that trip, there was a unique weakness in time and place where time was distorted. Two of us traveled back. David and I

watched you die." His voice deepened until it was hardly audible, but came back with new strength, "but maybe this was the problem, maybe it was because I influenced you to change your research on time theories. If you simply stick to what you have been working on, then the portal will be self healing."

"Won't that cause a paradox, if you were already there?" I didn't want to interrupt his flow of words, but the analytical part of me was always engaged.

"Of course, of course," he responded impatiently, "unless I misunderstood what I saw. I don't have to have really seen you die, I didn't have the opportunity to check for your pulse." He nodded his head absently, "David and I were just there to make sure that events happened without interruption from outside influences. Time is self-healing, and there are very few points where a time traveler can have an impact. Your death," he stumbled on his words, "your accident, was one of those points. It's not that we were there to make sure you died, just see that no one from the future took advantage of this anomaly. Unfortunately, it's still close enough to that point that what I might be influencing history right now. There's a period of about two decades where we sense a problem." His eyes slid from mine, "I can't bear to think I've caused this."

"Do you have the math for this anomaly?" I asked eagerly. I fumbled for a paper on the steps and my eyes sought a pen.

"No!" He wanted to shake me, "Are you hearing me?"

"No!" He wanted to shake me, "Are you hearing me?"

The papers still lay discarded on the steps. He'd laughed at my proudest accomplishment. I'd thought I'd die when he'd scorned me: my work had been me. I thought it was all I had to offer the world, but everything I had and was I wanted to offer to him. He was the only one who mattered. It didn't hurt now. I had him. I didn't look at the papers again.

"Not pointless, and for your life Helen," He snatched at my hands to make me understand, "for your life isn't it worth every precaution?"

Not if you're leaving me, I wanted to shout, but I didn't. He was carrying enough of a burden as it was. I nodded silently, not yet thinking about all my options.

"How long are you here?"

He smiled, as if slightly flattered, "There's no real telling—hopefully months."

"Is your friend, David, also going to appear?"

He shook his head, "No, We jumped through together but were separated when he got hit. We were under attack, and had to jump back through the portal after we saw you die. I imagine

that he went one direction and I went the other. He probably appeared six years afterward." His smile faded, "I hope he's all right. He was injured. I didn't hold on tightly enough to save him."

* * *

He left me, of course. There was no hope that it could have been otherwise, although I would have fought it with my very soul if there had been any hope. I would gladly have abandoned everything I ever knew for him, and he knew that. He didn't know about you, my sweet. I never had the chance to tell him. He left suddenly, except of course for the mark I have shown you. I had lost your father and it nearly destroyed me.

He faded before my eyes, an image of a man appearing in a strobe of time, flickering away from me across the ages until he disappeared. At the end he was with his friend David, as they escaped back to their own time. As David said, "When it's right, nothing can stop it. Nothing can part love." Maybe he'll help me, when the time comes. Cabel only apologized. He said many times that he was sorry, but I cannot be.

I've changed my research. It serves only to bring us together. I realize that he would call it suicidal, but I have to try and meet up with him again. I am willing to take this chance for both of us.

I have a plan. Very soon now I will go out to the place where we first met. I live my life for that moment. Love has the ability to give an empty existence meaning, and if possibly ending that life gives me the chance to be complete, well, others have certainly risked more. If it doesn't work, I don't want to continue anyway.

But you're still little. We have time.

This accompanies the full length novel *Fractured Horizon* by H.E. Roulo

For more information and extras go to www.fracturedhorizonnovel.com