

Henry, reach!

by Cary Briel

I've heard it said that nothing lasts forever. But when I heard this, no one could have made me believe that *nothing* referred to my Helen. For it was just this morning that I watched her step quite happily onto our porch, and blow me her goodbye kiss, as she did every other weekday morning.

Her goodbyes weren't always so impersonal. In the beginning, we'd embrace passionately before she left, and I'd try to convince her to stay another hour or two, arguing that her associates couldn't possibly know that her tardiness wasn't due to a flat tire, or a burst water pipe in the basement, and that it didn't matter that she'd need to shower again. Often my convincing her would go like this: Helen would stand on our porch, much like this morning, and I'd try to think up a new pretext, just to get her back inside. Since she insisted on bringing her lunch to work, I'd sometimes hide it, hoping she'd not notice it missing before walking out. But only to the porch. I'd wait until exactly the right moment and then tell her.

I'd say, "Helen? Haven't you forgotten something?"

Of course she'd glance quickly and impatiently at each hand and then realize, and come back inside, and this would lead to a game. She'd tell me how late she was, and how she didn't have time for this today, but she knew exactly what the game was. It had been played many times. I could always tell if she was in the mood to lose. How those playful mornings could easily be used as a metaphor for youth! These days, not so much. For the last five years or so, as Helen has blown me kisses from the porch, I've found that there are no words that will bring her back inside. No game excites her anymore.

But on this morning, little did I know that the blow of her goodbye kiss would mean goodbye forever. How could I have known? Today seemed just like any other day.

I should explain that I suffer from a phobia that leaves me housebound, and this is why I, personally, have not touched a toe to our porch in years. The last time I was outside, it was only because gas had been smelled in our home, and a fireman came and insisted that I leave my safe haven while its source was investigated. What happens if I do leave is panic, regardless of whether my leaving its voluntary or forced. The technical name of my condition is: Agoraphobia. It's a fear of public places. Whether our front porch would be considered public or not, is a matter for debate I suppose, but my problem goes much deeper.

Even while I'm inside the house, the curtains must be closed, blinding the outside world from the sight of me in any room that I happen to be in. Even a crack of a curtain, leaving the smallest opening, is a problem. In fact, the thought that someone might see me from outside is enough to bring on sweats and shaking, otherwise known as a panic attack. Did you catch that distinction? Not the thought that someone *has* seen me, but that someone *might* see me. This is an important distinction. Just the thought that I may be visible to an outside eye strikes terror into my heart.

What else? Phone calls. Even when a call is missed and the answering machine volume is up, and I hear a voice echoing through our house, I can be vexed for days! It's the intrusion, you see? It's the thought that anyone might gain access, or even worse, has gained access, to my world.

So this is why I practiced luring Helen back inside as she stood on the porch, during the years when passion was strong between us. As much as I wished that I could simply walk outside and take her in my arms, sweeping her off her feet as any normal man would, I

couldn't. I couldn't make myself do it, no matter how hard I tried. If I had, she'd be carrying me back inside in shambles, and needless to say, lovemaking would be off the table.

And so when the fireman insisted that I leave our home, being completely unaware of my problem, he managed to rush me out the door, pushing me as he went, and talking over me as I tried frantically to explain to him why the notion was implausible. He must have thought he was simply dealing with a typical homeowner, someone complaining about the need to grab the family jewelry, or important documents and photos before going. But did he get a surprise. The moment my foot touched the porch, panic overcame me, and when I say panic, I mean quite emphatically that I lost my mind! At least the rational part of it. The screaming wasn't the worst of it, but I do remember the look on the fireman's face when it began. It was the look of someone who'd encountered a madman, perhaps one whose madness should be named Legion, as the demons were that Jesus cast into swine. But the fireman wasn't Jesus, and there was nowhere for him to hide. With a single, lightning motion, I tossed him over the porch railing, and down he went. Down the rocks he slid toward the ocean, and it didn't seem he'd be able to stop himself, except for the fireman's axe he retrieved from his belt and used to catch the edge of a rock. That day, the gas leak was located and fixed while I remained inside the house, with every window open except the ones in the room in which I'd hidden, huddled beneath the covers on my bed.

But even as bad as those events were, what happened today was worse. Today, something new would enter my reality, a thing that most people should never need to know. It's something called, liquefaction, a term I was made aware of after the fiasco. As Helen stood on our porch this morning, and blew her goodbye kiss, rain poured down in buckets around her. In fact, it'd been raining like cats and dogs for two weeks. Our house, being one of those built on the coast, is partly set on a cement foundation, and partly stilted up

with long steel beams, with these connected to deep foundations at sea level. The builder was an expert in this type of home, and guaranteed us that ours was secure even up to category 4, hurricane winds. What was not ever discussed, or given great attention in our deliberations with this builder, was the drainage and retention of the soil around our home.

During the two weeks it'd rained leading up to this morning, the soil around our home became soaked. What wasn't known about this soaking was that it was actually a preparation. You may ask, *a preparation for what?* Nothing less than a textbook case of liquefaction! Though the installed drainage was carrying away excess water, some was retained in the soil itself. And it was this retained water that prepared the front yard, a yard that'd been heretofore as solid as any other, for what happened next.

What made matters worse was that it had been raining heavier all morning, intensifying to an even greater downpour while Helen stood on the porch and bid farewell. And when the rain picked up, what couldn't be known was that the drainage had failed. Though it carried what rainwater it could, what it couldn't carry to the sea thoroughly liquefied the soil around the house in an instant. It was as if the soil was itself water. Helen had no warning. As she walked from the porch to the driveway, the yard instantly disappeared. When I heard the sound of it, amounting to a rumbling, and witnessed her head plummet from sight, against everything my brain was telling me, I forced myself to the door and beheld the horror! Though the house remained on its foundation and stilts, these somehow remaining in place, the entire yard washed down the cliff and into the ocean! When I looked to the left and to the right, I found open air where once stood lawn!

And that's when I heard it. Helen's voice. Very small, as if it were distant. But also, in some sense, near! Panic set in. In order to see the place from which her voice came, I'd need to step onto the

porch, but stepping there was out of the question! My fingers locked to the doorframe when I tried. And try I did. After many attempts to overcome my fear, it was clear to me that stepping was impossible, and so I dropped to my hands and knees. Then to my belly. If I couldn't walk outside, perhaps I could crawl! It was then that I felt like a cat, one afraid of heights, one that clung to the tree waiting for someone to call the fire department to save it. And yet, I managed to crawl. I got past to door frame, and foot by foot, I crawled to the porch's front edge. Sweat poured from my face and my head throbbed with pain, but I made it.

With one more reach and pull, I managed to get my eyes out past the boards, and when I did, when I was able to look over its edge and see the extent of what had happened, I saw her! She was alive! She was dangling from our fifty foot, green garden hose, which was still attached to our spigot above. She clung to life as she hung there and was crying for me!

"Henry, help! Please, Henry! Pull me up!"

My God! This was out of the question! Not that I didn't love Helen, and wouldn't do just about anything to save her, but the spigot was at least four feet off the left side of the porch, bracketed to the house! That was four feet of open air that I'd need to span just to reach the hose! Didn't she realize how hard it was for me just to crawl with my belly against the surety of the wood? Shouldn't that be enough? Helen knows full well my condition! But this very obvious reasoning wasn't stopping her from crying all the more.

"Henry! Please! Grab the hose and pull!"

I was in a quagmire. What would I do? It's not that I didn't try to accommodate her. In the same way that I'd crawled to the front edge, I managed to crawl on my belly to the porch's left, but when I reached that edge and extended my hand toward the spigot, I could

see that my reach was a good two and a half feet short. I could tell that if I stood and stepped over the railing, and leaned out as far as I might, I could likely reach it, but these may as well have been instructions for scaling a skyscraper, the Empire State Building perhaps? It wasn't going to happen. I tried several times just to lift my belly from the boards, but couldn't. Not even that!

Moments later, it seemed I wouldn't need to. Looking down at Helen, I could tell she'd seen I was obviously quite incapable. So she reached. At first it was a single grasp with one hand over her other, but then another. My heart leapt with joy that she'd be saved, even if it would be by her own hand! Even if it would be through her own fortitude, her own iron will and strength. I remained exactly where I was, if not only to give her moral support.

"Come on, Helen. That's it! You can do it! CLIMB!"

She continued to climb. Hand over hand, foot-by-foot upward, and before she or I knew it, she'd climbed all the way up to the spigot. How amazed I was to see that the hose, piping, and its bracket held!

Now as you can probably imagine, Helen looked quite wasted. The stress of the event itself, combined with the exhaustion from climbing, had definitely taken its toll. Every ounce of strength seemed drained out of her. She hung, looking quite like a rag doll. And that's when she screamed it. She screamed words that'll haunt me for the rest of my days. In fact, these words were the next to the last words I'd ever hear from my Helen.

She screamed the words with every ounce of remaining strength that she could summon. "HENRY, REACH!!!!!"

Was she kidding? How was this any different from her requests a few moments before? I'd still need to climb the railing and reach out. I'd still need to lift myself up from the wood floor!

She cried again, louder, "HENRY, REACH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

I answered. "Helen, surely you jest? Look at the distance? Think what I'd need to do!!"

I could see her fingers were slipping. The hose was smooth, and the strength that remained was waning. But even with this stark reality directly before my eyes, even with the impending possibility of losing my Helen staring me in right the face, I couldn't. I could not force myself to stand.

It was just then, as Helen looked to be a goner, with her fingers weakened beyond the point of being able to hold the hose anymore, at the point when it'd be obvious to any onlooker she was definitely going down, she was saved! Not by my hand, but by the hand of a fireman. In fact, it was the same fireman who'd extricated me during the gas leak, the one I'd thrown from the porch. And did he ever give me a dirty look as he lifted and pulled my wife from danger.

I'd mentioned that Helen's words, while screaming to me from the spigot, were the next to the last words she'd ever say to me, and this was the truth. Though Helen survived today, by the grace of God, and certainly by the strong hands of the fireman, she didn't come back inside our home. In fact, as the fireman who'd saved her carried her along a rescue walkway he'd extended from the land that remained, Helen asked him to stop for a moment. This was when she turned and said the last words I believe I'll ever hear from the mouth of my sweet wife.

She turned and said, "Goodbye, Henry."

She said these words calmly, but resolutely enough that I know that she meant them. Because I know my Helen. So as I said at the beginning, I've heard it said that nothing lasts forever, but I never imagined that this *nothing* could refer to my Helen.

