

A History of the Glasses

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March 15, 2015: They'd been talking about the glasses for years, but nothing had been possible until now. It had been a fever dream, a science-fiction fetish that couldn't be satisfied. It was beyond imagining, something out of a movie or a comic book— glasses that could see for you, learn for you, speak for you. A point of access to the entire universe, right in front of your eyes. The idea tempted them: every new development flirted with them, swinging their dreams like too-wide hips behind a computer screen. Frustrated, nearly in heat, they'd tried to swallow the sting of disappointment with every failed prototype. But the temptress wouldn't be beaten.

The initial meetings had been disastrous at best. The idea had been proposed, rejected, proposed, rejected; they'd sat like fiancés jilted at the altar, miserable and confused. Long nights turned into weekends turned into months away from home as they struggled; reaching for the reality they so desperately wanted to create. As skeptics and scientists speared the underbelly of their obsession, they sank towards despair, brutally yanked back to the surface by the hook they couldn't dislodge. There had to be a way. Magazine subscriptions expired, leaves and snow and rain piled up in gutters, car engines failed, but still they fought. They manipulated and teased and swayed, knowing one day, finally, finally.

The night before the glasses were released to the general market, none of them slept. There had been hundreds of tests. They'd worked out bugs and adjusted the style and (at the suggestion of a younger colleague) created models in different colors. The design was clean and polished, stainless steel frames with a single brow band and a small glass piece in the right eye.

Everything worked. Everything fit. The culmination of years of missed birthdays, stomach ulcers and Chinese takeout at 11:30pm, they had emerged from the dust as creators. They had become gods, and this was their miracle—the glasses were the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge the way it always should have been. One voice command and you could access the entire world, you could know everything, know everyone, be anything.

This was information at its freest and its most available, without the interruption of a fall. They were drunk on their success, and actually just drunk at 4am in a hotel in California.

“This is the day,” they told each other, smiling and sloppy and sated. “Welcome. This is the day.”

April 5th, 2015: He bought his own pair the day they arrived on the market. He’d been part of a beta-test group last fall, and he’d fallen in love. Light as air, almost imperceptible, the glasses had become an extension of his body. He was a sophomore at UC Berkley, a music major with a flair for techno, and he’d won a slot in the beta-test in an online competition. He was positive it had changed his life.

The first few weeks of the beta test had been odd as he’d adjusted to the addition. For a while he hadn’t even known what to do with them, and would frequently reject them in favor of his two-year-old cell phone. Not many others on campus wore the glasses, but he didn’t mind standing out. He was too busy to pay much attention anyways, mid-way through his first album and hell-bent on finishing it before the end of the semester. The glasses sat on his nose, awkward and bright and sad-looking in their disuse.

They would have stayed that way if it hadn’t been for Chelsea.

Chelsea was a senior, a dance major, and the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. She had hair the color of molasses—slow waves punctuated by thin, turquoise-blue feathers, she walked past the window of his practice room every Monday and Thursday afternoon at 3:04 pm. She was the biggest distraction he’d ever encountered, and he thought she was glorious. Even his songs had absorbed her; bright and distinct, veined with dark tones but predominantly blue and dotted with loose, lazy beats.

One Tuesday in October he’d been in the lab working on a mix and she’d walked in on accident. He froze in his seat, paralyzed while she looked him slowly up and down, then shifted her eyes to the rest of the empty lab.

“Sorry, I must be in the wrong place. My class moved into a lab for the day.” She tossed her hair over one strong, sculpted shoulder.

“No problem,” he said, choked and high. He coughed.

“You don’t happen to know where it is, do you? Professor Bernstien’s Music Tech class? I think he put a message on his website, but I can’t remember.”

Mouth dry, fingers stalled on the sliders of a soundboard he suddenly didn't remember how to use, her voice registered only as music. All he could see were blue feathers and brown molasses, flashes of her body skittering through his sight in staccato.

Transfixed, he might have stayed frozen forever, or at least until she walked out of the room. But the blinking light in the top corner of his right eye was—mercifully—turquoise.

It was like rescue, like redemption. The glasses, jumping at the new voice, had been his eyes and ears. Swallowing his shock and awkward silence, he let the home page of Bernstein's website flash into his vision.

"Right down the hall, I think. Room 312."

"Perfect! Thanks." A smile, slow and easy, smoldering under side-swept bangs. "You know, I think I've seen you practicing. Are you education or performance?"

"Composition," he said, stuttering to life, confident behind the miracle glasses.

"Oh, really? Are you working on one of your songs?"

"Mixing it up, yeah."

"What's it called?"

He'd never take them off again. He'd wear them on dates, searching for new music to show her, dance companies to mention, concerts and recitals and ballets to attend. He'd wear them on the beach one night and teach her the names of the constellations, singing their stories to her as they swayed under the stars. And what did it matter, really, if he was faking it a little? He could pull it off. He could do this, and have her. He saw their future flash in the bright blue of the alert in the top right lens.

"Chelsea," he said. "It's called Chelsea."

January 5th, 2020: For the 25th anniversary of their news broadcast Daybreak, the company had bought the glasses for the anchors and producers of every show. They thought it would speed things up; producers could keep track of all incoming media while watching the broadcast, anchors could follow internet trends and communications while presenting a story, and everyone could generally keep in touch more quickly.

She thought it might have been the best idea she'd ever heard.

She'd been working as an anchor on Daybreak for six years. Truthfully she preferred reporting, but the salary bump was too much to refuse, and she liked the location. Minneapolis was beautiful, even in the winter. It could stand to be a bit warmer, but she liked to bundle up.

The gloves were the only exception.

She'd had her Blackberry for about a year, and had become increasingly attached to it during that time.

Everything—all her emails and call logs, her favorite social networking and news sites, even her calendar existed solely on her cell phone, and it was hard enough to type on the tiny keys without several layers of insulation in the way. She wanted to be the fastest, the most connected, the most able—it was why she preferred reporting. She liked the speed. She needed the adrenaline to replace the coffee her doctor no longer let her drink, and the padding between her fingers and the keys felt like cotton gauze, clogging her senses and slowing her down.

When they gave her the glasses for the first time, her first thought had been I don't have to use my hands anymore! That concept alone was enough to make the glasses appealing.

But "appealing" didn't even come close to covering the ecstasy she felt the first time she put them on.

Everyone talked about how much the glasses were going to further the news process; internet access in real time, live feeds from Twitter and Facebook, audience interaction via comment chains and blog posts. And they were right. But it wasn't just the news process they sped up. She could look at a stranger on the street and see their name and background. She could search a topic and have enough information to fill a memo in under sixty seconds. She was more than powerful, she was unlimited. It felt like flying.

The first time they used the glasses in a broadcast, her co-anchor had turned his off in the first few minutes. She'd nearly attacked him afterwards: "You have to learn how to use them," she yelled, eyes too wide behind her own pair. "What's the point of having them on otherwise? You have no idea what they can do, every station is going to start using these. Keep up."

She began to rely on her glasses during the broadcasts, spitting out information so fast she surprised even herself. She was on fire, fast and fierce and aggressive, blazing with potential. She was the most successful she'd been in the entirety of her career.

And then it happened.

7:00am and they're supposed to be on air in thirty minutes.

"THERE'S BEEN A SHOOTING IN AUSTIN AND A SENATOR HAS BEEN SHOT IN THE HEAD." Shouts echo through the station office, ricochet off the walls and drum into her head. The alert tone in the glasses is vibrating through her skull and it feels like the room is shaking apart.

"I NEED A CORRESPONDENT IN AUSTIN. SOMEBODY GET ON THE PHONE."

A blur of red faces and the blue alert light blinding her right eye, a swirl of red and blue like an ambulance. The noise is unbearable. The glasses are attacking her, she can't see:

"OMG not another shooting #austin #guncontrol"

"AP: Austin, Texas gunman open-fires at press conference, 4 killed, 24 injured"

"DOES ANYONE KNOW IF THE SENATOR'S BEEN KILLED?"

"Why should a criminal be able to use a gun that I can't legally own? Sorry, keeping my guns. #NRA" "It WAS in Texas, you can buy a gun at a convenience store over there."

"Wasn't the Senator a democrat?"

There's red on blue and red on the pavement and now there are pictures, flashing fast and too bright and bloody, and she can feel the blood on her hands and in her eyes. She can hear the sirens like a symphony but she's hundreds of miles away. The voices in the office have become unintelligible and they sound like seagulls, sharp and pitchy and raw like weeping. There's a video now, streaming through her mind and inches in front of her face and the gun glitters blue-white in the early sun, red and blue everywhere and so much noise.

She doesn't realize she's screaming until her throat starts to burn.

When she finally pulls the glasses off she shatters them against a wall and nobody sees her, nobody even stops. She's shaking when she leaves the station, hands too unsteady to call a cab on the phone she's almost forgotten how to use.

Three weeks later, she moves to northern Maine and buys a new Blackberry and a pair of gloves.

July 21st, 2030: They sat on a pier in northern Wisconsin, drinking beer and smoking cheap cigars. Late summer looked good on the Wisconsin lake; the trees were thick and dark, shading the pier from the weak sun that permeated the heavy humidity and impending clouds. The smoke from their cigars curved into a dark stain against the trees as the sunlight struggled to hold onto the day.

They'd graduated from the University of Ohio in the spring, and all of them were headed to graduate school in the fall. Most were political science or business majors, though one studied philosophy, a fact for which he took no small amount of grief from the others. They all wore the glasses, each pair a different color: except for the Philosophy Major, who wore thick bifocals at just 22 years old.

They'd come to Wisconsin on holiday, a sort of last hurrah before resigning themselves to graduate school and their inevitable entrance into the "Real World." It had been a relatively quiet summer up until two weeks ago when the United States declared war on a small Middle Eastern country and released a not-so-small fleet of drones to the region.

"They sent over a hundred of the drones," said Green Glasses.

"The vice-president advised against it," said Orange Glasses.

"Over 300 killed already," said Grey Glasses.

"They say we'll send 8000 troops in August," said Blue Glasses.

"Why would we need to send troops if we're already sending drones?" asked the Philosophy Major. "What's the point of robotic weapons systems if we're still going to be sending people?"

The water beat against the legs of the pier, shushing and hissing with the tide. The sky darkened slightly, slipping from a weak blue to a pale grey. Small ripples formed in the water where the Philosophy Major wiggled his toes. His feet were light, weightless in the water—they made his legs feel strange, almost separate from the rest of his body. None of the others seemed to be moving at all.

“They say their army has started summarily executing civilians.”

“France hasn’t offered aid yet. Neither has Spain.”

“The EU hasn’t declared genocide.”

“The rebels have broken into over a dozen factions.”

“They can call it whatever they like, but it’s genocide,” said the Philosophy Major.

“Europe isn’t going to offer aid until our President and VP can get together, but until then we have to figure out who we’re arming. If the rebels can’t find some way to act cohesively, it’ll be Iraq all over again. We can’t see the enemy.”

It started to rain gently, pattering on the pier and on the water, and the sky edged towards a deeper grey. The first raindrop landed on the Philosophy Major’s bifocals with a sound like wineglasses touching. He took them off and began to clean them on the sleeve of his jacket. Vision blurring without correction, the world floated in a helix of blues and greys. The raindrops touched his face gently, a suggestion or a guide. He scrubbed a hand over his bushy hair. “Why don’t we go inside?” he suggested, and pulled his knees to his chest. Silence. Then:

“Israel’s Prime Minister is angry.”

“There are over 100,000 refugees already.”

“There are camps in Jordan and in Turkey.”

“The Red Cross can’t get access to the area at all.”

The rain grows steadily stronger. Curls of cigar smoke slowly flattened out, beaten down by the weight of the water. The philosophy major stood, awkwardly pushing upwards from the pier, elbows and knees sharp against the grey of the lake.

“It’s raining,” he said, and his voice sounded thin. Nothing moved but the rain. His hair dripped onto the pier, and everything was grey; the sky and the water melted together in monotony and he started to feel the color in his clothes and his skin. For a moment he thought it might be beautiful—peaceful and quiet, colors gentle instead of bleak. But the others were still, and as he watched them he imagined that from a distance the hum of the President’s drones sounded the same as the rain.

Eventually he folded his arms across his chest and walked towards the house, leaving the pier behind. From the back, it was unclear whether he hugged or defended himself.

August 27th, 2050: It would have been the first day of school at Lincoln Elementary in southern Illinois. She had dreams about it last night; waking up slowly in the guest bedroom of her daughter's house, the smell of new crayons and nylon backpacks and dry-erase markers had lingered, twisting their way into her stomach.

She made her way down the stairs, creaking and clicking, her age offering insult with every measured step. Her daughter sat at the breakfast table with her own daughter, crusts of toast and orange peels left on the plates in front of them. They faced each other, but did not really see; eyes obscured by the glasses the grandmother refused to wear, the daughter and granddaughter watched cartoons or checked e-mails or read the morning news. The grandmother was the only member of the family who didn't own a pair of the glasses; she may well have been the only person in the town who didn't.

She made herself a cup of tea and sat down next to the granddaughter. She was seven years old, and would begin second grade that morning- the same grade the grandmother taught for thirty years.

"Are you excited for school?" asked the grandmother.

The granddaughter blinked, and her slightly-too-big, neon-green glasses slipped down her nose. She shook her head. "No."

"Why not?"

"It's the same as being here, Grandma."

The grandmother sipped her tea. She missed teaching more than anything else she'd lost; more even than her husband, sometimes. She wondered if God still made teachers, or if someone had the sense to tell Him they didn't need them anymore.

Her daughter finally looked at her, a strange look from behind glasses whose angles seemed sharp and abnormal on her face. "Morning, Mom."

"Good morning," said the grandmother.

The granddaughter stood up and put her jacket on. "Time for school," she said. She sounded bored.

"I'll walk her there," offered the grandmother.

The daughter hesitated. "What about your hip?"

“I’m fine,” said the grandmother. “I want to walk her to school. Please.”

The daughter shrugged.

The school at which the grandmother had taught didn’t exist anymore. The replacement was only two blocks further down the same street, but to the grandmother it could have been a different planet. A single building, one story, all glass walls and rows of desks. There was no library. No playground. Not even separate classrooms.

They were two blocks from home before the grandmother realized the child wasn’t carrying anything. “Don’t you have a backpack?” she asked.

“Why would I need a backpack?” came the reply. When she turns her small face upwards, the grandmother sees the glasses and remembers.

“Never mind,” she said.

The grandmother had been released from her position at the same time thousands of other teachers had been released from theirs. All the public schools in the United States had been closed ten years ago by virtue of the Accessible Education Act. The act replaced teachers with moderators who oversaw groups of children as they completed online curriculums using the glasses; students now dictated answers to questions, took photos of themselves completing different tasks, and watched videos created by a national board of educators specific to their grade level. By government standards, the act was ideal. It eliminated the need for textbooks, or school supplies, or teacher salaries. It removed the risk of bad teachers and the aggravation of teachers unions. Affordable. Accessible. Standardized.

The only problem seemed to be the writing. Children’s writing abilities nationally seemed to have decreased, at least in the first ten years of the program. It was a point of confusion for many of the legislators, who couldn’t understand why, with so much information available, students couldn’t put together a decent paper.

As they crossed the street in front of the school, the grandmother reached for the granddaughter’s hand. For a moment, she felt like a teacher again, guiding her students across the street for recess. But after a few steps the grandmother was shaken off, and the child deliberately placed her hands in the pockets of her jacket.

The grandmother's stomach turned as she left the granddaughter at the door and shuffled slowly back home. Her daughter barely noticed her coming inside, and appeared not to hear when the jagged syncopation of a person crying echoed through the still house.

Alone in the guest room, the grandmother tried to fall back asleep, hoping for another dream.

March 15th, 2065: It has been fifty years since the glasses went on the market for the first time, and they are much older now than they had been. Several of them have lost significant portions of their hearing or vision—none of them have escaped the thralls of arthritis. They are not together in a hotel room tonight. Instead they are spread across the whole of creation, some with families, others alone.

Two of them are celebrating over drinks at a bar in San Francisco. One of them, the younger colleague who had originally suggested multiple colors, flashes bright purple glasses above a Sapphire and tonic. It is her third. In an effort to break up the stilted awkwardness of their conversation, the other has tried to keep up, but it is his first taste of alcohol in three years. He will regret having gone in the morning, when the aftermath of his nightmares will make it even harder to stop himself from opening the mini-bar in his hotel room.

One is on a business trip in Tokyo, alone in an office although it is day, not night, where she is. Her glasses are folded on her desk. She used to wear them constantly, but since the passage of the AEA has seemed to only carry them around. When she leaves the office tonight, she will forget to bring the glasses with her.

One stopped wearing the glasses over a decade ago, at which point the others ceased to be able to pinpoint his exact location. Once or twice they'd attempted to contact him, but were unsuccessful each time, and eventually stopped trying altogether. It was clear his absence had been intentional. After several years without mention, they discovered his location when online newspapers in northern Washington reported his death.

Things are much different now. Books are infrequently written, and even less frequently printed. Technology expands only horizontally: a new app here or there, nothing impressive, nothing particularly useful. Even medicine seems to have stagnated. They are

too old to feel pride, but not too old to feel guilt, and several of them wonder if the changes have been their fault. It's not that people don't know things anymore—it's more that they just don't think about them.

They'd wanted to free humanity from ignorance. All information accessible, all information free.

But information doesn't equate to intelligence, and they know there's something they must have missed. Something connective, something integral. The difference between reading and writing, between reading and thinking, between recitation and discussion.

The fruit of their Tree of Knowledge has grown misshapen and undersized, ugly even to their eyes. And they're old now, too old. It's only a matter of time before they all fall.

Abby creates a lot of free time that she doesn't have in order to see as many movies as she can in as many different movie theaters as she can get to. She particularly likes the old ones that are mostly falling down and smell like the ghost of popcorn past on account of them having "character." She loves large bodies of water, trying different kinds of food, and a ridiculous range of music. She watches nature documentaries to relax and consequently has National Geographic's *Ice Planet* memorized. Also, she writes a lot, but rarely submits anything for publication due to being buried in twenty-something insecurity. She is thoroughly pleased to have had her work accepted to *A Common Thread* anyway.