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O.K., Glass

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26-33 minutes



I hear that in San Francisco the term “Glassholes” is already current, but in New York I am a conquering hero. Photograph by Emiliano Granado

On a weekday afternoon in late June, a nondescript forty-year-old man in beige shorts, a blue Penguin sports shirt, and what appears to be a pair of shale-colored architect’s glasses with parts of the frame missing gets on an uptown No. 6 train at Union Square to go see his psychoanalyst, on East Eighty-eighth Street. As the man walks into the frigid subway car, he unexpectedly jerks his head up and down. A pink light comes on above the right lens. He slides his index finger against the right temple of the glasses as if flicking away a fly. The man’s right eyebrow rises and his right eye squints. He appears to be mouthing some words. A lip-reader would come away with the following message: “Forever 21 world traveler denim shorts, \$22.80. Horoscope: Cooler heads prevail today, helping you strike a compromise in a matter you refused to budge on last week.”

There is a tap on his shoulder. He turns around. An older man, dressed for the office in a blue blazer, says, “Are those them?”

“Yes.”

“My kid wants one.”

“If you give them to your kid, you’ll be able to see everything he sees from your computer. You could follow him around all day.”

The businessman considers this. “Are they foldable?”

The man with the glasses shakes his head. A young college student in a hoodie and Adidas track pants, carrying a Pace University folder, takes out one of his earbuds. “What does it do?”

Everyone on the train is now staring at the man with the glasses.

The man with the glasses jerks his head up and down. The soft pink light is on above his right eye. “O.K., Glass,” the man says. “Take a picture.” The pink light is replaced by a shot of the subway car, the college student with the earbuds, the older man, now immortalized. If they are paying close attention,

they can see a microscopic version of themselves and the world around them displayed on the screen above the man's right eye. "I can also take a video of you," the man says. "O.K., Glass. Record a video."

"That is *so* dope," the college student says. It appears to the man that the student is thinking over the situation. There's something else he wants to say. It's as if the man with the glasses has some form of mastery of the world around him, and maybe even within himself. The man with the glasses remembers the first time he saw something he loved that wasn't alive. An airplane on a Soviet tarmac, a Tupolev plane. With its sharply angled beak, it so resembled a bird that the child who would become the glasses-wearing man couldn't believe it existed in the world alongside him.

The college student keeps looking at him.

"You're lucky," he finally says.

Outside, the summer is coming together at last and Manhattan is just on the right side of sweltering. The man jerks his head, and slides his finger against the right temple of the glasses, across the so-called touch pad. A pink rectangle above his field of vision, which looks like a twenty-five-inch television screen floating some eight feet away from him, is replaced by another message: "SVO Hav Su flight 150 225pm delayed." The man has been Googling the N.S.A. leaker Edward Snowden on his computer, and now his glasses, which are synched to his Google Plus account, are informing him of a delay on the next Aeroflot (Su) flight to Havana out of SVO (Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport). Another flick of the index finger, and a different screen clicks into place. Now it would appear that someone named Chris Brown is defending himself on Twitter and that a water bed for cows has been developed. The man has subscribed to all the news sources currently available for his spectacles: the *New York Times*, CNN, and *Elle* (hence news of the Forever 21 world traveler denim shorts, available at the flick of a finger). The man feels a tingle at the back of his ear, and a voice tells him his friend Christine Lee is ready to do a video call, also called a "hangout." The image of Christine at her desk beams above the man's right eye. He can see her and she, in turn, can see everything he sees through his glasses, the quiet green streetscape of East Eighty-eighth Street streaming on her computer screen. He's going to go to the Guggenheim later and promises her that she will be able to watch the new James Turrell exhibition through his eyes.

"I see that on TV!" A Park Avenue doorman runs after the man. "What it do?"

"I'm taking a picture of you," the man says.

"Oh, shit!"

"And now I'm recording a video of you."

"Oh, shit!"

"Technology."

"Yeah."

The man with the glasses is lying on the couch at his psychoanalyst's office. The pink rectangle floats before his eye. The man begins complaining about his glasses. In the first week, he's supposed to wear them only one hour a day, but he can't help himself. He's been wearing them non-stop and now it feels like his right eye is bulging out, and also he feels nauseous and has a throbbing headache somewhere to the right of the bridge of his nose.

"It sounds like you're suffering from motion sickness," the psychoanalyst says.

The man discusses a dream he's had in which his Manhattan neighborhood has been reduced to a series of canals, and he's been given a kind of flotation device armed with Jet Skis that can skim the top of the water while everyone around him drowns.

The man stops talking about his dream. Psychoanalytic silence ensues. Boredom. The man flicks his finger against the touch pad of his glasses. The Aeroflot flight to Havana is still delayed. There are three places to eat in this neighborhood. The Viennese Café Sabarsky, perfect for a post-analytic snack of *Apfelstrudel mit Schlag*, is open until 9 P.M. and has a Zagat score of 22. There is too much traffic on Park Avenue and Second Avenue to take a taxi downtown to the Momofuku Ssäm Bar. The man does not remember telling his glasses about enjoying that restaurant, but somehow they know.

"What else can you remember about that dream?" the analyst says. But it's too late. The man with the glasses is gone.

On February 23, 2013, I entered a Twitter contest run by Google to pick the first batch of Glass Explorers with the following tweet: “#ifihadglass I could dream up new ideas for the TV adaptation of my novel Super Sad True Love Story.” This was not quite as technically precise and inventive as some geek named Noah Zerkin’s entry: “#ifihadglass I’d pair it with biofeedback sensors for self monitoring and uploading telemetry with pictures triggered by spikes in the data.” But, about a month later, @googleglass responded: “@Shteyngart You’re invited to join our #glassexplorers program. Woohoo!” The privilege would cost fifteen hundred dollars plus New York State tax. (The film and television studio that had bought the rights to my novel had agreed to pay for my Glass.)

“Super Sad True Love Story” was mostly written between 2006 and 2008 and was published in the summer of 2010. The novel was set in an unspecified near future, because setting a novel in the present in a time of unprecedented technological and social dislocation seemed to me shortsighted. For example, the word “phone” has meant almost entirely one thing for close to a century, but by 2007 it meant a device that was also a personal stereo, a stockbroker, a weather prognosticator, and a flashlight. By 2013, my glasses serve not only as a phone but also as a *video* phone. To write a book set in the present, circa 2013, is to write about the distant past.

My novel—a love story between Lenny, an aging son of a Russian immigrant and the last book reader on earth, and Eunice, a younger, fully digital Korean-American woman—proved prescient all too quickly. New York City parks occupied by protesting ninety-nine-per-centers, transparent women’s clothing, and a general giddy sense that privacy is kind of stupid—all became reality right after “Super Sad”’s publication, making me feel like a very limited Nostradamus, the Nostradamus of two weeks from now.

I had become an avid iPhone user while researching “Super Sad.” The device became a frightening appendage to a life of already sizable anxiety. My phone became a reprobating parent that constantly bade me to work harder, a needy lover that beeped and clanged and marimba’d her demands through the left-hand pocket of my jeans, a sadistic life coach constantly reminding me that, whatever I was doing, there were more fascinating things to be done. Returning to the novel five years after its completion, I had the general sense that I had allowed technology to run me over. Now I was more Eunice than Lenny, an occasional rather than a voracious reader, a curator of my life rather than a participant, a man who could walk through a stunning national park while looking up stunning national parks.

I had a general idea of how Lenny and Eunice could romance each other on the screen, but I was unsure of how to televise one detail: the all-powerful device used by my denizens of the future called an äppärät. This umlaut-ridden contraption, which looks like a smooth white pebble worn around the neck, constantly beams holographic data and streaming video at eye level. The äppärät’s most useful function is RateMe Plus, an endless series of rankings its wearers undergo in categories such as Fuckability and Male Hotness. Lenny naturally had a lot of problems with his Fuckability—entering a bar in newly chic Staten Island (one prediction that has not yet come true), he is immediately and publicly ranked as the fortieth-ugliest man out of the forty men present.

The first drafts of “Super Sad” had a technology called The Eye, which was basically an äppärät inside a contact lens. My editor suggested that it was a little much, and it certainly was in 2008, at a time when even the first iterations of the iPhone seemed like they were beamed back to our world from some glorious future civilization in Cupertino. By 2013, having a miniature screen above my right eye tell me all about “Ashton Kutcher’s new job” feels about right.

My first encounter with Google Glass came on a Saturday in June, when I showed up at the Glass Explorers’ “Basecamp,” a sunny spread atop the Chelsea Market. My tech sherpa, a bright-eyed young woman, set me up with a mimosa as we perused the various shades of Glass frames, each named for a color that occurs in nature: cotton, shale, charcoal, sky, and tangerine. I went for shale, which happens to be the preference of Glass Explorers in San Francisco. (New Yorkers, naturally, go for bleak charcoal.) I was told that I was one of the first few hundred Explorers in the city, which made me feel like some third-rate Shackleton embarked on my own Nimrod Expedition into the neon ice. The lightweight titanium frames were fitted over my nose, a button was pressed near my right ear, and the small screen, or Optical Head Mounted Display, flickered to pink-ish life. I was told how to talk to my new friend, each command initiated with the somewhat resigned “O.K., Glass.” In deference to Eunice and Lenny, I started off with two simple instructions, picked up by a microphone that sits just above my right eye, at the tip of my eyebrow.

“O.K., Glass. Google translate ‘hamburger’ into Korean.”

“Haembeogeo,” a gentle, vowel-rich voice announced after a few seconds of searching, as both English and Hangul script appeared on the display above my right eye. Since there are no earbuds to plug into Glass, audio is conveyed through a “bone conduction transducer.” In effect, this means that a tiny

speaker vibrates against the bone behind my right ear, replicating sound. The result is eerie, as if someone is whispering directly into a hole bored into your cranium, but also deeply futuristic. You can imagine a time when different parts of our bodies are adapted for different needs. If a bone can hear sound, why can't my fingertips smell the bacon strips they're about to grab?

Glass responds to a combination of voice and touch-pad commands. After the initial "O.K., Glass," you can tap and slide your way through the touch pad, but since there is no keyboard or touch screen, Googling and Gmailing will probably always involve voice recognition.

"O.K., Glass. Google translate 'hamburger' into Russian."

"*Gamburrrger*," a voice purred, not so gently, like my grandmother at the end of a long hot day.

And, all of a sudden, I felt something for this technology.

So far, Glass's most interesting and controversial feature is video recording, which can be activated with a slide-and-tap of the touch pad or the usual "O.K., Glass, record a video" rigmarole. Casinos in Las Vegas have banned Glass, for obvious reasons; bars and other public establishments may follow suit. The actress Liv Tyler was reportedly incensed when she thought a Glass wearer was filming her at a fashion show. On the other hand, the day I arrived at Basecamp the staff was abuzz about the TV actress Alyssa Milano stopping by for her Glass. But when I tried to get my friend Christine to see the James Turrell exhibit from her desktop, a tech-savvy Guggenheim guard on the museum's first ramp shouted, "No recording!"

There is also a handy maps feature, with the map floating above your eye and directions thrumming against your ear bone, although an attempt to get to my favorite Kerala fish restaurant, on East Sixth Street ("O.K., Glass, get directions to Malai Marke"), resulted in directions to a career coach named Mark Strong, on West Twenty-fifth. Which is to say that Google's voice recognition, just like Apple's Siri, still has a way to go.

The main problem with Glass in its infancy is the lack of apps for the lay user. Since I don't know how to pair my Glass "with biofeedback sensors for self monitoring and uploading telemetry with pictures triggered by spikes in the data," the best part of wearing my Glass has been recording the response it elicits in others.

"The perp walks are killing us."

As I leave Basecamp, I cross a bike lane where, a week earlier, I'd nearly been run over, an irate cyclist telling me exactly where I should wedge the iPhone I was distractedly tapping at the time. A similar near-miss now brings out a shout of "O.K., Glass!" from a cyclist clearly in the know. As I walk down lower Lexington's curry row, a group of Indian men start chanting, "Google Glass! Google Glass!" Freshmen from Xavier High School follow me for an entire city block the way kids in the world's poorest countries follow you if you have, say, a pen. I hear that in San Francisco, where these devices are far more in evidence, the term "Glassholes" is already current, but in New York I am a conquering hero. I pass by fascinated faces looking intently into my own unremarkable *punim*, as I update Walt Whitman's poem—"Are You the New Dork Drawn Toward Me?"

My friend Doug and I hit Bushwick and Williamsburg. Everyone at the bar at Roberta's restaurant wants a piece of me. "Ah, future!" a German man cries. "We saw you have the Google," a girl from a group of visiting Atlantans drawls. "Can we try it awn?" And then, without warning, I'm talking to young people. We're all squealing, full of childish zeal. We are rubbing up to the future, hearing the first gramophone playing scratchily in the distance. Doug knows a movie producer who recently got Glass and said, "This is as close as I'll ever get to being a rock star." When the velvet-rope hostess at the of-the-moment Wythe Hotel bar in Williamsburg stops to take a photo of me with her iPhone, I know exactly what the producer meant. This is the most I will ever be loved by strangers. If poor Lenny had had a pair, he need not have worried about his Fuckability.

Wearing Glass takes its toll. "You look like you have a lazy eye," I'm told at a barbecue, my right eye instinctively scanning upward for more info. "You look like you have a nervous tic," when I tap at the touch pad. "You have that faraway look again," whenever there's something more interesting happening on my screen. To awaken Glass, one must tap at the touch pad or jerk one's head; otherwise the device remains inactive, conserving its limited battery supply and allowing the user to remain perfectly human. At breakfast, I jerk my head up theatrically, and then use a new function which allows me to move around Web sites by holding two fingers to the touch pad and moving my head about, in effect turning my skull into a cursor. "*Domo arigato*, Mr. Roboto," my wife says.

After a full day of Glassing, of constantly moving my eye up and down as if in preparation for the bifocals I will need when I'm older, I fall into bed exhausted. I want to take my Glass off, but there's a tweet from Joyce Carol Oates in response to a tweet I posted of myself wearing Glass. Oates is more concerned about my choice of shirts in the photo I tweeted. "Did Rasputin wear a button-down collar?" she asks, questioning my identity. "Not the actual G.S., possibly."

Thus far, the nascent Glass technology is being deployed for useful, cuddly purposes that rely mostly on the camera function: a surgeon live-streaming an operation, a tennis player preparing for Wimbledon. Not much room for dystopia there. One Glass Explorer catches my attention, a young arts administrator in the Albany region who tells a local news channel, "I am going to wear the Glass on my wedding day! And anyone who wants to see our wedding will be able to see it." I get on an Amtrak train northbound to Schenectady.

Aray Montalvan is a lovely and lively twenty-seven-year-old woman with a charming, light Cuban accent who fits into her snappy tangerine Glass with Millennial ease. She meets me on the station platform, recording me as I record her. (As soon as I plug my Glass into a wall socket back home, all the videos and photographs I've taken will be downloaded onto my laptop.) Seeing someone with Glass is like running into an old countryman on the docks of Manhattan in 1905. Few others can understand the mediated life we live. "Landsman!" I want to cry.

Aray's entry for the Glass Explorers contest read: "#ifihadglass I would show the behind-the-scenes world of our organization working on bettering our region through the arts." Aray works for Proctors Theatre, an elegant, marble-clad former vaudeville house built in the nineteen-twenties. As we walk through the theatre's swank, modernized lobby, recording our journey, we run into one of Aray's co-workers. "I was quite reluctant at first," she says of Aray's venture into Google Glass. "But she explained it to me a little more. What it records, and where it goes. And I actually think it's kind of cool now." Before Aray brought the device to work, there was a conversation with the theatre's staff and an e-mail was sent letting people know they could opt out of being recorded. None did. In New York City, during some of my nights out with Glass, I would approach bar-goers and tell them I was from the N.S.A. and that I was pilfering their data with my spectacles. Perhaps I do not much resemble an N.S.A. employee, but the replies were quite jovial. "You can read all my e-mails," one young man said. "No one ever reads my e-mails."

Aray was born and raised in Cuba, and came to the United States at eleven. I mention that both of us spent our childhood in totalitarian countries. "It's no different from being in that type of environment," she says of wearing Glass. "I grew up accustomed to knowing that the government knew more than I probably knew about myself and about my family. And I think here it's our choice as to how much we want to share." Does this mean she has any qualms about the technology? "I don't," she says. Aray was an early adopter of Twitter and Foursquare; as a young immigrant, she learned to read English through a computer program. "It's who I am," she says.

She has an iPhone, but finds she is using it a lot less. "This allows for more personal interaction," she says of the device perched on the bridge of her nose. Which is true. In contrast to looking down at a smartphone's screen, one can be more continuously present and engaged during a live conversation with carbon-based creatures, even if the urge to tap and slide at one's touch pad and make circular motions with one's head can be overwhelming.

Unlike Aray, I have not decreased the use of my smartphone. "Doesn't it defeat the purpose of your iPhone to be looking at Google Glass?" a woman on the street asks me as I tap the screen of one while barking voice commands to the other. But it doesn't. In fact, because Apple and Google don't play nicely together, I've had to get an Android phone to tether to my Glass via Bluetooth (even as I type this sentence, I'm not sure exactly what it means). As a result, I now walk around New York with three mobile devices, all yapping and pinging and boinging at one another.

"I want to be at a sound check," Aray says, when I ask her how she will use Glass to further the arts in the Capital Region. "I want to be in the studio with a painter when he's working on a piece and later show the gallery opening. I want to be in the kitchen with our chef for our wedding, who's making Cuban food." Her September wedding, to an industrial designer named Ian, has been eight years in the making. It turns out that she's decided not to pair her tangerine Glass with her wedding dress, but her officiant, who is also her boss, will wear the device, as will her bridesmaid, and I'll be able to watch the big day streaming in real time on my laptop. "I'll tell you right now, when it's time to have kids I will not have Glass in the room," she adds.

Before I leave, Aray and I have a Google "hangout." We essentially swap identities. I see what she sees through her Glass, which is me. She sees what I see through my Glass, which is her. We bring our faces

closer, as if approaching a mirror, but the feeling is more akin to being trapped in an early Spike Jonze movie or thrust into an unholy Vulcan mind meld.

For the first time, Aray is not seamlessly woven into her technology. “I’m not going to lie,” she says. “It’s a little freaky.” We give each other a hug as we part.

On the way to Schenectady on an Amtrak train, I overhear a conversation between a man and a woman that a writer can’t help but jot down. “There be jobs in the casino, but he still in jail. He rob some old men.” Who is saying this? Which faces go with this conversation? As I get up to go to the dining car, I can’t help but mutter, “O.K., Glass, take a picture.” Did the man in the sunglasses and the sweatshirt talking to an older woman, who, I presume, is his mother, even notice the tiny burst of light above my right eye, the picture of himself, soon to be on the hard drive of my laptop, reflected back at him?

A few days later, I Glass out. I film a line of tourists waiting for Shake Shack burgers in Madison Square Park. I record an inane Fox Sports reporter on a nearby bench trying to guess the favorite sports team of an office worker: “You’re a vegetarian with yellow toenails and no tattoos and you drink whiskey and you like Jay-Z. Are you a Yankees fan?” As she ends the interview and gets up to leave, the Fox reporter’s mic wire gets caught in the bench and I record her toppling over. At Chelsea Market, I snap a photo of a man shorter than me. Then a gent carrying an oversized steamed lobster. I duck into the Biergarten at the Standard Hotel and take a picture of a plate of currywurst for a German-food-loving friend. “Mmm, currywurst,” I say, adding those words as a caption to the photo I’m about to send. “Mmm, curry vs.” is how Glass interprets my caption.

After the disappointment at the Guggenheim, I do a hangout with my friend Christine at *MOMA PS1*, in Long Island City. I want to see an exhibit called ProBio, which, according to the museum brochure, “explores the theme of ‘dark optimism.’”

“Some scientists and thinkers have speculated that, with the advancement of applied biological science, humankind may no longer be subject to Darwinian natural selection,” the text reads. I rush through the exhibit, my Glass darting around the sociopolitical extravaganza, but I’m so busy making sure Christine gets a good look that I barely comprehend any of it. There’s a video that seems to be composed entirely of very athletic women holding on to their pregnant bellies. I snap a picture of it with my iPhone (you can’t do a video call and a recording at the same time) and dash off toward the next thing. I suppose that I, too, want to escape the bounds of natural selection. Also, I’m worried that the security guards will confront me for having a recording device on my face, and one of them eventually does (“We don’t own the rights to these works,” he explains). Christine complains about the quality of the video and audio, which she says “is like seeing things through the point of view of an elderly person with sight and hearing problems.”

In the evening, I do a hangout with Aray, who is some hundred and fifty miles to the north. She tells me to go to one of her favorite restaurants, a place called Cuba, on Thompson Street, where I should get the *manitas de puerco*. I see what she sees at an elegant fund-raiser upstate: a plate of rabbit and sweetbread sausage, a co-worker in a black dress waving at me through the camera of Aray’s Glass. A bartender Aray knows waves at her through my Glass. So far, this technology has enabled a lot of waving, but it is impossible to hear a word Aray says above the modest din of the restaurant, and we quickly end our hangout.

By Union Square, a homeless veteran in an “I ❤ NY” T-shirt is writing a fresh plea on a piece of cardboard. “O.K., Glass,” I say. There’s a moment of indecision. What am I doing here, exactly? But then I succumb to the fear of not capturing the right pixels, of not documenting something that might someday prove useful. “Take a picture.”

The next day, I head to my country place, upstate, and I have another hangout with Christine. I show her the residents of the sheep farm next door. Taking photos and videos of unsuspecting country animals is one of the great benefits of Glass (groundhogs and sheep alike freak out when you point an iPhone at them). Then I lie down on my lawn, sweating in the hundred-degree heat. “Cool,” Christine says, as she sees the sky above me and some of the trees, their leaves burnt orange from the horde of cicadas that had just made a feast of them. “It kinda looks like an aurora,” she says of the sky. “The limited bandwidth makes for all these gradations.” I record a bit of the sun peeking out from behind a maple, or what I think is a maple. In fact, it may be high time to Google maples, but a light, welcome breeze wends its way in from the direction of the sheep farm, and, suddenly exhausted, I close my eyes.

When I was a geeky child, the highlight of each month was the arrival of Isaac Asimov’s *Science Fiction* magazine, with its lurid interstellar and darkly apocalyptic covers. In 1984, William Gibson’s “*Neuromancer*” came out, a cyberpunk novel that proved to be incredibly predictive of what life would be like when we committed ourselves to the virtual world. But the narrative that really caught my

imagination was a short story called "Bloodchild," by Octavia Butler. The story takes place on a faraway planet dominated by a large insect-like species called the Tlic. The humans who have fled oppression on their own planet live on a so-called Preserve, where their bodies are used as hosts for the Tlic's eggs, culminating in a horrifyingly graphic hatching procedure often resulting in the death of the human host.

Many reviewers thought of the story as an allegory of slavery (perhaps influenced by the fact that Butler was African-American), but the author denied the claim. Butler wrote that she thought of "Bloodchild" as "a love story between two very different beings." Although their relationship is unequal and often gruesome, Tlic and humans need each other to survive. Today, when I think of our relationship with technology, I cannot help but think of human and Tlic, the latter's insect limbs wrapped around the former's warm-blooded trunk, about to hatch something new. ♦