

Evil Glasses



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TRANSFORMATIONS

by Marshall Bowles

Sorry if there are typos. It's hard to use a laptop now that my hands aren't human anymore. I'm recounting my story for any of you out there who don't remember the previous timeline. Maybe one of you knows how to fix things.

Before I entered the time portal, the military scientists tried to explain the rules. I didn't get it. "You're sending me back to before I had my accident, and it will be like it never happened?"

"Correct," Walker said, pushing his glasses up higher on his nose. "And, of course, the assassin's tool you carry was manufactured prior to the target point. This ensures that it will not disassemble into its precursors when making the trip."

"What?" I looked down at the fake diamond ring on my hand, which Walker had given me a few minutes earlier.

"It doesn't matter," Faraday said. She was fiddling with the knobs on the time portal's control panel.

"It's really quite simple," Walker said in a lecturing tone. I could tell he wasn't intentionally trying to be obnoxious. He was just an obnoxious person. "Any energy-matter signature sent through the portal occupies its previous point in spacetime. However, these events have not yet been applied to your body's energy-matter signature at the target point in spacetime."

Faraday noticed the *WTF* look on my face, and she butted in. "It doesn't have to make sense. That's just how it is. Accept it and focus on killing Arkin."

But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. I need to go back further. Back to the day of the accident that took my legs and put me in a wheelchair. Back to the day I met Arkin.

The first class seat was worth the extra ninety dollars it cost me to upgrade. I hadn't slept well the previous week. Work sent me to Los Angeles for a conference, and I was never comfortable in hotel rooms. I hoped to sleep the whole flight back to New York.

A man was sitting in the window seat next to mine when I boarded. His greasy hair was matted down against his head. Clearly he wasn't a fan of hygiene. "Hi," he said when I sat down. He showed a set of crooked teeth when he smiled.

"Hi," I said. I avoided eye contact. No need to encourage an airplane talker.

"I'm going to turn everyone into airplanes," he said.

I sometimes wonder how things would have turned out if I had asked the flight attendant to move me to another seat. But I didn't. It was the weirdest thing I ever heard anyone say in my life, and I had to know more.

His name was Arkin, and he claimed to be a scientist of some kind. "What kind of scientist can turn people into airplanes?" I asked. "A geneticist? Nuclear physicist?"

"Something like that." I waited for more, but he didn't elaborate.

"Ok, sure," I said, trying to keep a straight face. He probably printed out and framed a "science" diploma from a website. "So how do you go about turning people into airplanes?"

"It's easier than you think." Arkin launched into a long explanation and said a lot of sciency stuff that I didn't understand. Retroviruses. Nanomachines. Reality distortion manifolds. "Right now I can only convert one person at a time. The hard part is figuring out how to do everyone at once."

"But why airplanes? Why not animals, or furniture?"

Arkin looked out the window at the clouds drifting by. He ran his finger down the inside of the plane, caressing the hard plastic. "Because planes are beautiful."

"What if I don't want to be turned into an airplane?" I said.

"Most people are like you," he said. "They only see how things are and not how things should be."

"So you know what's best for everyone?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't believe anything you're saying."

Arkin nodded. "Of course not. But you will." He looked out the window for the rest of the flight.

We landed and I decided to take a taxi instead of the train. While I waited in line for a cab, I wrote a Facebook post and recounted every detail of my conversation with Arkin. I even included a picture I surreptitiously took of him during the flight.

On the ride home a truck rear-ended the cab at a stoplight. One moment I was checking my phone to see if anyone had liked my post yet, and the next my legs were crushed in a tangle of metal. The cab driver didn't even get a bruise. There was nothing the doctors could do. They amputated both of my legs at the knee.

That was the end of my old life. I wish I could say I wasn't bitter. I wish I could say that I overcame the odds and went on to achieve great things in spite of my disability. I wish I hadn't lost my legs. But no matter how hard I wished, I knew that none of it would come true. So I stopped caring, got a job I hated that allowed me to work from home, and I checked out on life.

A few years went by. One morning I was sipping my coffee when I opened my laptop and read the news. There had been reports about a new flu-like virus spreading for the last week, but no one knew much about it. I wasn't concerned—there were a few benefits of being a recluse. But the virus had taken a new turn overnight. The first headline summed it up: *Virus Turns People Into Airplanes*.

My jaw hit the floor. It couldn't be. I opened the news website and watched a shaky handheld video of a middle-aged woman screaming and running into a field. She

stumbled and fell to her hands and knees, and her skin started swelling outward like a balloon.

What remained at the end of the transformation was an abomination. It was the size and shape of a passenger jet but composed of flesh. The fuselage was covered in skin, the ailerons were made of fingers, and the vertical tail was bone. The worst part were her eyes, stretched out in place of cockpit windows and leaking giant tears.

There was a knock at my door. I opened it to find two serious looking men in yellow hazmat suits. One of them held up his phone so that the screen faced me. "Ma'am, did you write this Facebook post?"

That's how I found myself in a giant military facility buried deep under a mountain in an undisclosed location. They stuck me in a bleak, gray interrogation room by myself. I could see my reflection in the one-way mirror, and I wondered if anyone watched me from the other side.

After hours of waiting, the door opened and a woman wearing a white lab coat walked in. The name patch sewn onto her lab coat read Faraday. "Sorry to keep you waiting," Faraday said.

"I don't know why you people hauled me off to this place, but I know you aren't stupid enough to believe that I had something to do with this virus because of a Facebook post—"

Faraday held up her hand and cut me off. "We have a lot to talk about," she said. "I'll answer your questions while we go." She nodded her head toward the hallway. "After you."

I thought about staying in place just to piss her off, but my curiosity was stronger than my anger. They didn't bring me here for fun. I had to know what the military wanted out of a disabled recluse. I wheeled myself out into the long, plain hallway. The walls were the same drab gray as everything else. "What am I doing here?" I said.

"Three years ago, you sat on a flight beside a man named Ulrich Arkin." Faraday led me deeper into the facility. We passed plain metal doors, identical except for the

room numbers on plates beside each one. "He told you he was going to turn people into airplanes."

"Yeah, I thought he was crazy," I said. "I guess he wasn't."

"Anyone who engineers a virus that turns people into airplanes is the definition of crazy," Faraday said. She stopped at room 834R and swiped her ID badge. The door slid opened on its own, and I rolled myself through into a large, cavernous room. In the center, a glowing bluish sphere floated in the air. Its surface shimmered like water rushing in a stream.

"What is that?" I stared at the glowing sphere, mesmerized. The pale light grew until it consumed my vision. My body became weightless and I floated away into space. I drifted past stars, black holes, entire galaxies, and ultimately into the pure void beyond existence itself. I was one with the infinite unknown.

"It's a time portal," Faraday said. I snapped back to reality. She grabbed the handles of my wheelchair and pushed me to the edge of the room, parking me by a table. Another scientist—Walker—was there, holding a metal briefcase. "But we'll get to that in a minute. First, we need to talk about how you're going to kill Arkin."

I'm not dense. I've seen plenty of science fiction movies. "No way. I'm not going back in time to be your assassin. Send somebody else."

"There is no one else," Walker said. "You are the only available vector pinpointing the target at any known point in spacetime."

"Huh?" I said.

"There are limitations," Faraday said. "It's only possible for a person to travel back to a time and place they previously experienced, and they only go back for a period of twenty-four hours."

"There must be a lot of other people who can do it. Someone else who knew Arkin," I said.

Walker put the briefcase down on the table and opened it. Inside was a small jewelry box packed in foam, the kind meant to hold an engagement ring. "All of our

other potentials have been infected or completed the transformation. You're the only one left."

Faraday leaned over and put her hands on my shoulders. She looked into my eyes. "You're our only chance. If you don't succeed, the human species is done."

I looked down at my lap. In that moment, I thought about how I had given up on life the day that I lost my legs. There was nothing I wanted, no goal to live for. I just existed. And now I finally had a chance to do something important. "Yes," I said.

Walker nodded. He opened the jewelry box, pulled out a simple diamond ring, and held it out for me. I reached for it, but Walker pulled it back a hair. "Careful. It's full of poison."

A half hour later, my wheelchair sat on the edge of the platform at the precipice of the portal. I wore the diamond ring on my finger, careful not to touch it and accidentally deploy the miniature needle on the bottom. Walker called the ring a "CIA Special."

Walker and Faraday stood to either side of me. I looked up at Faraday. "So I'm going to do this and everything will reset back to normal. Like nothing ever happened?"

Faraday put her hands on her hips. "I know you're thinking about changing your own past. You'll avoid the accident that took your legs and then you'll try to invest in stocks or something."

She must be able to read minds. "I wasn't—"

Faraday cut me off. "Go right ahead. We don't care, as long as you complete your mission first." I felt a surge of hope. If I did this right, would I be able to walk again? Before I could dwell on it, Faraday and Walker grabbed me under my shoulders and lifted me out of my wheelchair. "You ready?" Faraday said.

I wasn't. "Yeah," I said, taking a deep breath.

"We're counting on you," Faraday said. She and Walker tossed me forward into the abyss.

"I'm going to turn everyone into airplanes," Arkin said.

I was back on the same airplane. Back in the past. I couldn't believe it worked. I looked down, past my knees, at the old legs I used to have before they were amputated. I lifted up my right one, then my left, then I kicked them back and forth, laughing like a kid.

"They're back!" I yelled. I jumped up and danced in the aisle. I forgot how fantastic of a feeling it was to be on real legs. I started doing jumping jacks.

"Ma'am, please take your seat," the flight attendant said. She gave me the evil eye. "People are trying to board."

I plopped down in my seat, grinning ear to ear. "Hmm," Arkin said. He looked at me like I was the weirdo. What an unusual feeling, having a monster think you're strange.

I remembered why I was there. The diamond on top of the ring shifted when I pressed it, causing the tiny needle to extend out from the bottom part of the band. I leaned over, grabbed the back of Arkin's hand, and I whispered, "You aren't going to turn anybody into anything."

It bothered me that I didn't hesitate. Sure, Arkin was a maniac who tried to wipe out the human race for his own personal art project. But that was him. I always thought of myself as the type of person who would be incapable of taking the life of even the most despicable person.

Arkin pulled his hand away and rubbed it. He would have only felt a tiny pinprick, and he probably thought that my ring merely scratched him. "Most people are like you," he said. His eyelids drooped a little. "They only see how things are and not how things should be."

"I've seen a lot of things today," I said.

"I know you don't believe me," Arkin said. He swayed like he had too much to drink. "But you will."

"You feeling ok?" I said, pretending to be concerned.

Arkin rubbed his temple. "No. I'm suddenly very tired."

"Why don't you lie back?" I said.

Arkin sat back and leaned against the side of the plane. He closed his eyes. I watched him until his breathing stopped. He was dead by the time we were in the air. The flight attendant assumed that Arkin was sleeping, and when we landed, I got off the plane before anyone figured out he was dead.

Then I *walked* out of the terminal on my *legs*! Arkin was already out of my mind. I skipped the taxi this time around and opted for the train. I had a very safe and uneventful ride back to the city. I spent all afternoon in the park, walking every trail and going up and down every set of stairs I could find. When I finally made it home, I took a nice long bath, shaved my legs, and savored the feeling of the razor sliding over my skin. I drifted to sleep that night curled up in a ball so I could hug my shins.

This morning I woke up, back in the present. The good news is my legs are still attached to my body. The bad news is I'm a bear. Like the animal. Brown, furry, and I guess about five hundred pounds. My bed broke under my weight.

My best guess is that Arkin wasn't working alone. Whoever his partner or partners were, they continued his work and took it in a different direction. Like you, I've seen the news, and I know I'm not the only one who woke up as a bear today.

If you ever had a random conversation with a stranger who talked about turning people into bears, please write about it on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and every other social network you can think of. Pray that there is enough of a functioning government left to spy on our conversations and that they still developed time travel in this timeline. I don't want to live the rest of my life like this.

Moment in Time

By Sara Lufrano

Natalie had almost always despised her life. The normal joys like marriage, career, and children were not joys as much as a chore she willingly added to her life. She liked to travel but the sinking feeling of real life was never far away. She liked to cook but the reason she liked to cook was because she had a family that she had to take care of. Aside from that, she was resigned to her existence and did little to change it.

Once her son moved out she proclaimed all her actions to be for herself, this was her time to explore the possibilities. That selfishness didn't help either. Her husband ceaselessly annoyed her and she did nothing to hide it. Her son was floundering in the lackluster existence he chose and she didn't care to pry. She was in her last years before an early retirement from her tax firm.

She was resolved for it to go on like that until the end. Her attempts and failures caught up to her so now that retirement loomed closer she was panicked to be alone with herself. She thought to start traveling in earnest, the constant worry that brought would be keep her from really thinking about what her life had become, who she was going to be, and who she was going to be with through the rest of her life.

That all changed, though, when she realized she was in love with another man.

"Come in! Come in!" Natalie's friend Kate said as she moved aside and gestured to walk through. Natalie and her husband Dean walked in, smiles on their faces.

Natalie liked Kate a lot. Kate was outspoken and charming, sometimes aggressive but also happy, always honest and knew her own faults.

"Thank you, Kate!" Natalie said.

Dean handed Kate a covered pie pan. "Here's the dessert." Dean lightly clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

It was a habit of Dean's to click his tongue after he was done talking. Natalie had hoped one day she wouldn't hear it anymore, that it would fade into the background and would only come up when someone asked what that noise was without realizing it was coming from Dean. But it hadn't. She heard it every time. Every damn time.

Kate's husband, Warren, stepped out from the kitchen removing an apron from his waist. "Natalie, Dean," he said to them with a nod.

Natalie was in love with Warren.

He shook Dean's hand and then went in to hug her. She took his shoulders in her hands and kept him distant. She grew unable to be near him without loathing her feelings so it was best to always feign some sickness, some pain in her shoulder, to keep some obstacle in the way of his friendly greeting.

"Can I get you guys something to drink? Wine? Beer?" Warren said.

Kate linked arms with Natalie, "I just opened a bottle of wine."

Natalie smiled and went with her friend to the dining room just outside of the kitchen.

"I'll take a beer." Dean clicked his tongue and went with Warren outside to the barbeque.

Kate handed Natalie a glass of wine.

"So, how are you?" Natalie asked taking a sip.

"Oh, I'm good. Just always something with these young girls at the office," Kate started.

Natalie knew everything was perfect for Kate. She had Warren, the reason why Kate was also so happy, so cheerful, so positive.

Natalie and Kate met at a community get-together and hit it off. A dinner invitation was extended. They found out that the four of them had similar interests and enjoyed being around each other. Something Natalie was surprised to find in anyone.

When she thought about Warren, after first meeting him, there was no spark, no wild wonderment, no longing. He and Kate were happily married and she and Dean, in her opinion only, were not. That was all her life was going to be.

Warren was a quiet man but calculated, strong, and smart. Natalie found herself watching him and noticing his minute movements, listening to how he formed sentences, and noticed his smile at clever things she would say.

The day that did it was when Natalie watched Warren remove a peach pit from Kate's peach without Kate asking or even addressing that it had happened. Warren didn't pay any mind either. He just casually reached over, took the peach from Kate, pulled out the pit, and handed it back to her. He didn't even take a bite.

Natalie thought about that peach for days and snapped at Dean any slim chance that may have warranted a snapping at. Dean had never and would never do anything like that for her.

Warren made Natalie feel like she could be happy.

Natalie and Kate sat at the table with their wine glasses and small plates with cracker crumbs and streaks of dip left on them.

"It's like he never sees things that are right in front of him. I had to get up, walk over to him, grab it, which was right next to him, and hand it to him." Kate chuckled at the story she told of Warren.

Natalie smiled and chuckled too. Dean had been keeping to himself at home recently so Natalie didn't even have the opportunity to interact with him, even if the chances were high that it would be negative.

Avoiding having to insert an anecdote about their home life, Natalie asked, "Are Warren and Dean going to come in for appetizers?"

"Let me go see what they're doing." Kate got up and headed out to check on them.

Natalie looked at her plate with the crumbs.

Now she was aware that everything in the house was Warren's. He'd touched everything, held everything, remembered every story behind the house. And that the whole house and everything in it was also Kate's and would never be hers.

She ran her finger along the rim of her appetizer plate. A little chipped plate that didn't match the other little plates. Did he drop it in the sink while rinsing it off? Did he pick it up and examine the chip running his finger across it as she just had? Did he decide that even with its small imperfection that it was still a whole plate to be used?

Warren came through the back yard door and shut it behind himself.

"Warren." Natalie tried to hide the red heat that was crawling up her neck, feeling exposed to her thoughts of him.

He went to the kitchen and washed his hands. "Dinner's just about done," he said as he dried his hands and leaned against the countertop.

"Do you need any help?" She met him in the kitchen and leaned the side of her hip against the same countertop so she faced him.

"No, I think we have it handled."

He held the white thin towel he used.

"Where are Dean and Kate?"

"Dean took a call. Kate is walking the garden."

Here he was. With her. Alone. She looked at his big, weathered hands. She wanted to take his hands and hold them tight. She wanted to lean in and kiss him softly on his cheek. She wanted to say, I want us to be together, I love you.

"You can help yourself to more wine. We have plenty." This was a variation of Warren's canned lines. Multiple times a night he would offer more wine and food.

"I—I," her mind was foggy as she stepped out of her thoughts, "my glass is over there. Let me grab it."

She picked up her glass and went back to Warren settling herself closer to him in the kitchen. She put her glass on the counter and Warren left her side to fill it with more wine.

"Do you have a glass?" she asked. "How about a toast?"

Warren smiled and handed her back her glass. "I don't. My beer is outside."

"That's fine." The familiarity of disappointment dogged her.

He held the bottle and studied the label that was nondescript. "If I remember correctly we got this one last fall," he said idly.

Natalie went to him and took the bottle out of his hand. She put it on the counter. "Warren," she said.

He looked at her, his face plain. She grabbed at the hand that held the bottle but it was awkward, she only managed to capture his thumb and first two fingers.

"Warren," she said again. Her mind was racing as she looked in his eyes trying to show what she couldn't say with words. She squeezed his hand but what she actually wanted to do was to put herself against him and stay there curled in his arms.

"Let go of my hand," he said.

She quickly pulled her hand away, took up her glass, and stepped back to lean against the countertop.

Natalie felt no heat from him, no movement, he only let her touch his hand. Her heart hurt at the pass she just made.

"Dinner at our house next week, say Wednesday?" She said trying to save herself from Warren's cold reaction.

But without that reaction Natalie wouldn't love Warren so much. He was what she wanted him to be, completely immune to other women around him.

Kate came through the door carrying a small basket filled with cherry tomatoes. Natalie's face reddened when she saw Kate and noticed that Warren didn't move an inch.

"Dinner Wednesday at Natalie and Dean's," Warren said.

Kate nodded. "Perfect! Natalie, do you want some of these to take home tonight?"

Dean came through the door. "That guy can talk, I tell you. Sorry about that." He clicked his tongue.

"Not a problem," Warren said.

"Natalie, I'm going to put these in a plastic bag for you," Kate said as she crossed the kitchen.

Warren looked at Natalie. "You don't have to take them if you don't want them." She gave a small shake of her head. "No, I'd—I'd like to have them."