

If Memory Serves – Stephen Gross

The jury's out on what actually caused it. Some claim it was the meteor that exploded over Russia. Some trace it back to the Higgs-Boson research CERN was doing. Some people won't give up on the whole Mayan calendar trash. Hell, I know a guy who swears it started because the Vatican elected a Jesuit pope. All I know is, in early 2013, people started being born with powers.

Now, these powers are a bit of a mixed bag. Some people lucked out, got flight, or telekinesis, maybe invisibility. Some people burst into flames when they got angry. If they were lucky, they were fireproof too. Turns out there's a lot of powers that aren't nearly what they're cracked up to be. I heard about a guy who could make himself magnetic. You're probably thinking that would be pretty cool. I'm guessing Magneto comes to mind. They must have forgotten to print the comic where Magneto gets startled making dinner and ends up with more silverware in him than a cutlery drawer.

I somehow managed to end up with one of the good powers. If this were a comic book, I'd probably be going around, calling myself Lapse or Memento, maybe wearing a stupid hood or something. If the writers really hated me, maybe I'd be Forget-me-not. Probably end up sporting just enough fabric to cover a small cat. Because when you've got the ability to make everyone forget what's happening when you're around, you're going to want to stand out in a crowd. That's for sure.

So yeah, I can control memory. Not really control, just make it fade away, really. But you'd be surprised how far that'll get you. People are happy to believe whatever you say just happened, if they haven't got a clue themselves. "When were you planning on giving me change for that \$20?", "I don't know what you're talking about, I was in class the whole time", and "What do you mean? I gave my presentation yesterday" have all served me well. Sure, you aren't exactly going to get an A+ on the presentation no-one remembers, but they can't fail you for it just because they forgot about it.

Not everyone ended up with superpowers, mind you. Only about one in a million actually got a power, so with one like mine nobody suspects a thing. You'd think they might get suspicious that their memory keeps failing around me, but it turns out it's hard to piece together a pattern from events you don't remember. Go figure.

Now, this whole forgetfulness power has its limits. If anyone's taking notes, making a recording or something, there's not much I can do. Of course, if I can get my hands on said notes, all bets are off. That's when things get fun. Unfortunately, sometimes that sort of thing just isn't possible. Sitting in the back of a limo, between two guys straight out of Men In Black, who've got "The girl has the power to make you forget. You are bringing her to the Institute" playing through their earbuds on repeat, that was one of those times. Not a whole lot I could have done, honestly.

Turns out I wasn't even on their radar for the longest time. Wouldn't have been noticed

at all if they hadn't been watching someone else with a power. This guy owned a convenience store, and the Institute guys suspected that he had some kind of power. He did, in fact, have one. Also more than a bit of a temper. I was pulling one of the usual tricks, and something must have tipped him off. The poor guy had to have been having a hell of a bad day, because he just exploded after that. I mean literally. One minute he's screaming at me, next minute there's bits of him splattered across the store. Like I said, these powers are kind of a mixed bag.

Once I got over the initial shock of being covered with exploding convenience store owner, I got out of dodge. I must have been quite a sight as I ran down the street. Hopefully didn't cause too many heart attacks. Invisibility probably would have come in handy at that point, but hey, I'll take what I can get.

Anyway, the Institute guys got suspicious once their field agents came back with no memory of the incident, despite the store's video footage of a guy exploding right in front of them. When they looked over the tapes, and saw that I was the only one in the store who seemed to know what was going on, they managed to put two and two together. Security cameras, always ruining my fun.

Took them a month or two to actually track me down once I was on their list. All they had was a face, and I left enough fake identities lying around that they had their work cut out for them. These guys were persistent though, and eventually they caught up with me. On the plus side, even once they found me they still didn't have the right name. Didn't stop the suits from dropping by my house and collecting "Meghan DeRosa", but I'll savour the small victories.

And so, on August 14th, 2038, I was brought into the Institute, a place I wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. I'm pretty sure they built the place from an old bunker or silo or something, though I'd guess they had to do some pretty significant modifications. I doubt any of the old bunkers came with retina scans and carbon fiber blast doors.

All the security must have really eaten into their budget, since they apparently couldn't afford to do anything to make the place look remotely liveable. Would it have killed them to throw up a picture or two, maybe lay down a nice rug here or there? If I was going to be stuck down here for the foreseeable future, it would have been nice if they'd made the place a little more friendly.

I wasn't the only lucky mutant stuck down here, though. No sense building a prison designed for superman if you've only got little ol' me to put in it. First one I met was a rather grumpy guy, name of Malcolm Wilson. He always talks like he's got something caught in his throat. Might have something to do with the fact that his saliva's acid. Nasty stuff, saw it eat right through a table. Didn't do much to the walls or doors or anything though, unfortunately. Probably put a damper on his romantic prospects. Not too many people lining up to kiss a guy who'll dissolve your face.

Then there was Travis Carter. He was an odd sort, jumpy, always seemed distracted. His

power was an interesting one, that's for sure. He'd make copies of himself, mirages, more like. He could send them off, have them do whatever, but they weren't really there. Couldn't pick things up, couldn't open a door, and they'd go poof with anything more than a light breeze. Except, of course, the one that was actually him. He could jump between them whenever he wanted, so it's not like you could just keep track of the real one.

Last but not least, we had Lilly Duncan. Neither of us exactly made a great first impression on the other. Institute guys walked me up, were all "Meghan, this is Lilly Duncan. Lilly, this is Meghan DeRosa." She got a sort of confused look at that, then smiled. "Nice to meet you, Andrea", she said as she offered me her hand. That's when I punched her. In retrospect, that might have been a bit of an overreaction, but she was kinda asking for it. Goddamn telepaths.

The Institute guys weren't entirely in favour of their lab rats slugging each other, so I was separated from the other "Gifted Individuals" for a while after that. I didn't mind, really. I appreciated the chance to plan my daring escape with some peace and quiet. Sure, said plan kinda hinged on one of the guards leaving the front door unlocked or something equally stupid, but hey, I'm not exactly Houdini.

While I was in solitary the friendly folks at the Institute filled me in on how they found me out and all. Must have figured I'd be more cooperative if I thought they were being honest with me. Didn't really work out for them, but I can't exactly blame them for trying.

They'd apparently long since given up on trying to figure out how these powers worked. Too much established science had to be thrown out the window, I guess. Doesn't mean they stopped trying to study us, of course. They just decided to take a different angle. Focus on how we controlled our abilities, and how they affected us, like psychologically or whatever. Exciting stuff.

Even then, we were still baffling them. They asked me how I controlled my ability, how I made people forget things. It's not really something that I can explain. It feels kinda like holding my breath, without the need to ever really start breathing again. Lilly said trying to explain her power was like telling a deaf person how hearing works. Mal, well, his seemed pretty straight forward.

Travis, though, he was a whole other situation. The labcoats were obviously stumped when it came to figuring out how he could create the duplicates in the first place, let alone control them all. Like the rest of us, he wasn't much help when it came to explaining it. I snuck a peek at some of their notes, and one of them mentioned how they "couldn't fathom how a mind could withstand keeping track of multiple bodies at once". Turns out it can't, exactly.

I'd like to say the bunker was kinda overkill, but to be honest there's no way I'd let them play shrink with me if I had a choice. Even trapped down here, I only co-operated once they threatened to sic Lilly on me. At least I could lie to the shrinks. Not that that accomplished much.

Apparently, it's hard to bluff your way out of a diagnosis as a compulsive liar with trust issues. A bit harsh, no?

I wasn't the only one. With a bit of snooping, I learned about Lilly's agoraphobia and various anxiety disorders, and Travis's laundry list of psychological "anomalies". Mal seemed to have dodged the crazy bullet, the labcoats seemed to think having a purely physical power wouldn't change your brain all that much. Lucky him.

The constant barrage of questioning from the shrinks got pretty boring after a few months. Things got a bit better once Lilly and I reached an arrangement, wherein she would stay out of my head, and I would try to be nice to her. And by be nice to her, I meant I wouldn't punch her any more, and she'd stop "mysteriously" losing hours.

You see, Lilly had this one look she'd get when she was poking around in someone's head, "listening in" as she called it. Girl had a terrible poker face, and I got real good at telling when she was in my brain. So every time she did, I made her forget everything that happened for the next few hours. Less she invaded my privacy, less gaps in her memory she'd get. Also had the nice side effect of making her forget whatever it was she'd learned from her intrusion.

Lilly was the only one I needed to worry about making this kind of arrangement with. Mal was a hermit in the making, and didn't like the idea of either of the ladies messing with his head. And Travis was kept under tighter security than the rest of us. The Institute guys had pretty solid ways of dealing with Mal, Lilly, and myself. They'd worked out suits that shrugged off Mal's spit like it was nothing special, and they kept using the earbud system to ruin my fun. And they weren't so reliant on passwords that Lilly could just mindread her way out.

But how do you control someone who can be not just anywhere at once, but everywhere? Even if the whole security team went after him, he'd still outnumber them. If they ever let him out of his cage, they'd never be able to get him back in. Hell, I've got no idea how they got him there in the first place. Must have drugged his food or something. But now that they had him, they weren't letting go.

Travis's room was made of the same carbon fiber and blast-proof glass as the rest of us, but his had a shiny hi-tech airlock. If they just opened the door when they left, he'd be able to mirage his way out. This way, they could make keep all the Travises in the main room before they left through the outer door. If he persisted in sticking around in the airlock, they had the room rigged to pump in some kind of knockout gas. Interesting what kind of important security info they just left lying around, huh? Anyway, long story short, they did their homework when it came to keeping Travis in his cage. Turns out, Travis wasn't exactly on board with the whole captivity gig.

When I woke up one morning to the sounds of alarms and screaming, it didn't take long to realize that everything was going to hell. Only once I'd fully regained consciousness did I notice the laughter. It wasn't as loud as the klaxons or the screams, but I could still hear it, echoing through the halls. I didn't have to be one of the shrinks to tell that it wasn't the laugh of

a sane man. No, I was pretty sure it was the laugh of one Travis Carter. Then, as suddenly as they had started, the alarms stopped. I heard the mechanical sound of my door unlocking.

After a few seconds of no-one bursting into my room and murdering me, the thought crossed my mind that Travis may have just found the big red “Unlock all doors” button or whatever. Psycho murderer or not, I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Chances were, everyone was busy dealing with Travis, and wouldn’t notice little ol’ me sneaking away to freedom.

I realized the problem pretty soon after I left my room. As I got closer to the compound’s exit, the screams were getting louder. Closer. I shouldn’t have been surprised, it was obvious Travis and I would be headed in the same direction. I probably should have waited. Waited for Travis to carve his way out and leave me a clear path. But I was sick of waiting. Sick of being trapped in a cage and studied. I had to get out of there just as much as Travis did. I just wasn’t quite so bloodthirsty.

There was only one way to the surface elevator, no chance of going around. I was hoping I could sneak around, that he’d be distracted with all the murdering and whatnot, but it turns out it’s a bit tricky to sneak past someone with a dozen pairs of eyes. I’d made it into the room, past one of the guards he’d killed, and almost to the other side before he spotted me. “Not so fast, Meg!” he cackled. “Can’t let anyone who knows us out! Don’t want anyone tattling on us, can’t have that!”

There were ten of him in the room. Each one held a knife, with unmistakable crimson on the blade. All the Travises were staring straight at me, grinning. He’d never had a particularly stable look to him before, but now it was clear he’d lost it. “Listen, Travis, I’m not goi-” “SHUT UP! SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP! We know what you’re trying, memory girl, trying to trick us, trying to distract us, want to make us forget!” All ten Travises pointed their knives at me. Then I saw two things: a drop of blood falling off one, and only one, of the knives; and Lilly standing in the doorway behind him.

I knew Travis’s copies also had copies of the clothes he was wearing, anything he was holding, that sort of thing. Otherwise it would be just one knife-wielding psycho staring me down, and nine naked ones. But I’d never seen anything he copied left behind. If the knife was dripping blood onto the floor, that was the real knife. Held by the real Travis. Unfortunately, I wasn’t really in a position to do anything about that.

But there was someone who was in a position to do something about that. Travis had apparently decided that if paid close enough attention to me, I wouldn’t be able to use my powers to their full effect on him. He was pretty much right on that count. But it did have the unintended side effect of making him completely oblivious to Lilly’s arrival. I was glad, then, that in my haste I’d neglected to grab the gun from the body of the guard by the door. I wasn’t

exactly sure why Travis had left it; perhaps he preferred to get up close and personal. Either way, it was conveniently located right next to Lilly, and I decided to think real, real hard about that particular fact.

“You were going to say you want to help, think we’re on the same side because we’re all freaks, but we know better! Mal’s a freak too, he wasn’t on our side, tried to spit on us, very rude, very rude. Had to teach him some manners, didn’t we...” They giggled. *Take the gun from the guard, as quietly as possible*, I thought, *Take the gun from the guard, as quietly as possible*. As Travis continued to rant, I saw Lilly carefully bending down to pick up the gun.

Travis started advancing on me, knife still dripping. “Couldn’t trust them, couldn’t trust him, can’t trust you, definitely can’t trust you.” *Third copy on the right*. Lilly stood, gun in hand. “Can only trust ourselves, we want what’s best for us, don’t we?” *Third copy on the right*. Lilly leveled the gun. *Third copy on MY right!*

There was a gunshot, and then there was only one Travis, crumpling to the floor. Lilly dropped the gun, hands shaking, staring at the body. Looking at her in that moment, I decided she didn’t deserve to be haunted by this. She’d remember what happened, but not the kick of the gun as she pulled the trigger, not the sound of the bullet screaming out of the barrel. She wouldn’t remember the splash of red, or the way his arms were splayed out after he fell to the floor. She’d remember killing him, I think she had to, but not well enough to have to relive it.

I grabbed her arm, and started pulling her towards the elevator. “C’mon Lil. We need to get out. There’s nothing for us here.” Travis had already disabled most of the security; all it took was a card from the dead guard and a passcode Lilly had “overheard” to get us out. Fresh air and sunlight had never in my life felt better. I hope it never does.

I came this close to leaving Lilly behind. I had plenty of opportunities to distract her, give her the slip, and make sure she didn’t remember where I went. But I never did. At first I told myself it was because she knew my name, knew my past, and I wanted to keep an eye on someone with that kind of info. We stayed on the move, not wanting to get picked up by whatever was left of the Institute. A month passed, and I was telling myself that I kept her around because she was helpful. A telepath can really come in handy, given my line of “work”.

But eventually I wasn’t able to deny it any longer. For the first time in my life, there was someone that I trusted, someone other than myself. I’d seen what had happened to Travis, alone except for his splintered mind, and I couldn’t let that be me. If it’s going to be me against the world, I’d like a little backup.