ESSAYS | WEDNESDAY | APR 15, 2020 | 8:00 AM

I Called Off My Wedding. The Internet Will Never Forget

In 2019, I made a painful decision. But to the algorithms that drive Facebook, Pinterest, and a million other apps, I'm forever getting married.

PHOTO: ILLUSTRATION: ANA KIRILOVSKAY

I STILL HAVE a photograph of the breakfast I made the morning I ended an eight-year relationship. I don't know why I thought it was an appropriate breakfast—I drive egg-heart is now digitally knotted in a floral dish we moved with us when we left New York City for Los Angeles. I'm looking at it right now. It's a couple. And I, I feel hollow into the reflective bottom of my coffee mug.

Not long ago, the engaged pair is a "memory" in a photo app. The time-lapsed photo reel resurfaces. It was May 2019 when we ate breakfast, spent the day at a friend's weddings and called off relationship because of grief and fatiguing. Facebook, not a friend, pulled the photo from its algorithm and presented it to me as part of a wedding-night reel. Facebook's algorithm is a friend.

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I don't want to see the photo again? For really. But I want to see the wedding ash on Instagram, or a near daily collage of wedding paraphernalia on Pinterest, or the photo of the wedding cake I made with my mother, which for a long, long period every month on the day we were to be married (Nov 15) appears in my Facebook feed. I don't want to see it, but I don't want to forget it. Or, I don't want to forget it, but I don't want to see it. The photo nudges on my iPad cycles through pictures of wedding dresses.

Of the thousands of memories I have stored on my phone, the photo of the wedding cake is one of a dozen memories that I don't want to see but can't quite, and when significant, surface about-face images, my sense of time and place becomes warped. It leaves especially pronounced this year, when everyone is at home, and the world is so much more focused in a pandemic, more of us were supposed to go almost nowhere. Time became shapeless. And has turned on into sitting ducks for technology.

Our smartphones poke with mentions now. In normal times, we may scroll through photos, or Facebook memories, or Instagram posts, or Twitter feeds, and see two surprise associations between the present and the past, like when a relish of something reminds me of Sunday family dinners. Now that our memories are digital, though, they are incessant. Sophomoric intrusions.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when apps started co-opting memories, maybe deploying them as a marketing tool, but it's hard to think of a time when they weren't. Around the early 2010s, Gigi remarked to me one night over a pizza and a bottle of wine. I know, I have been a tech sniper ever since then. Yet we left pie in a technology-free zone, and I don't remember the conversation, but I remember the sensation of being overpowering with digital paternity, wearing multiple activity trackers, being empty "story" and applying every guess photo filter. Greetings!, I guess you're sharing a photo of your life in the relationship, one that I couldn't know when the connection proved fleeting.

If we already are part cyborg, or some technophobes believe, there is a cyborg version of me, a digital phase, that is still getting married. I'm sad no would really this is more or less.

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THE THING I'd forgotten was an act of refuge it was at the beginning, which is something that I didn't realize. It was a kind of hard-to-hold-on-to beacon. It was a kind of hard-to-hold-on-to thought I wouldn't with. I was interrupting for a job at a different company, which I told him one late night. He was kicks-confusing. Which after we started dating, he blamed digital text-message responses on a Blackberry mangle I force had to contend. I shelved it up to dating a New York.

We were catastrophically different, but connected in ways that seemed important at the time. We both grew up in suburbs, but I was a Jewish suburban girl who had a Jewish summer camp romance with the gawky, tech-phobic boy in the cottage in front a social group that would accept a new "walker" (gay) I was trying out. I was excited for him when he finally found a girlfriend who was a cute, cool, Jewish girl. We both had complicated scores about our middling athletic careers and expressed our bad-food-and-crazy-dad backstories for a couple of years. Each of us still had our bad knee. If we combined our bad knees, we could form a good one. Our parents were Democrats. We ate Cheerios for breakfast.

But I wanted to feel as though I was sharing in the dark, and I didn't quite know yet understand why. In 2010 he suggested we move to Silicon Valley. I said I didn't want to move to Silicon Valley. The following year we packed up and moved to Silicon Valley.

PHOTO: ILLUSTRATION: ANA KIRILOVSKAY

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg testifies before Congress.

Fitting simply the same period, in New York City, Facebook was expanding from Harvard and Boston Bring were holding on to Craigslist competitors called Friendster. The two companies were in a tight-fought competition for Harvard-and-Boston-Bring-and-Craigslist-competitors-LGPS to log-in-and-location and share-a-photo-and-post-a-status-and-write-on-a-wall-and-poke-and-tag-a-friend-and-like-a-page-and-join-a-group-and-play-Scrabble-and-Boggle-and-Boggle-and-Boggle

Taxonomy of Memory Themes that informs the algorithms that surface On This Day memories. Facebook memories that contain phrases like "miss your face" are more likely to be reshared, but food-related memories, like an old photo of tacos, are quite bland in retrospect. Facebook, Google, and Apple have also trained their systems to spot photos of accidents and ambulances and to not surface those in memories.

> I don't want to have to empty my photo albums just because tech companies decided to make them "smart" and create an infinite loop of grief.

"The machine will never have 100 percent precision," Yael Marzan, from the Google Photos team, told me. "So for sensitive topics, we're trying to do some of that. We know that hospital photos are sensitive, so when our machines detect that, we'll try not to show it to you." I couldn't help but think of Marzan's remark in the context of this pandemic year, and the trauma someone might feel if, a year from now, a photo from the hospital did flutter up on their phone screen.

But also, what if the photo from the hospital was of a birth, of uncomplicated relief? Would those photos also not appear? Shouldn't there be some way to identify when a blue hospital gown is actually a happy moment and a white wedding gown is not? Or are the two impossible to distinguish or predict, in technology and in life?

As time went on, I realized I didn't want to go nuclear on my photo apps. For most of 2020 I tried to identify why, then would back away from it. I'd pick up, then put down, Kate Eichhorn's book about the end of forgetting. I archived then unarchived Instagram photos. I called people smarter than me and asked them to help me understand complicated labyrinths of internet ad networks. I considered writing a how-to guide for canceling weddings (surely, someone would find it useful in 2020). I fixated on the spam that had turned me into a wedding cyborg, in order to avoid the sharp edges of my grief.

When I called up Jonathan Wegener during the final days of 2020 to talk about Timehop and the earliest forms of automated memories, something crystallized. I wanted to know if he had any regrets. Wegener still sees Timehop's core feature as a net positive—a kind of yardstick for personal progress, a welcome remembrance of the brunch he had with a fellow techie who later became his company's first investor. That's his experience with "memories."

But he is also aware that not everyone's memories are as carefree. His own sister declared the app unusable after going through a divorce years ago. And to help her, Wegener had asked his backend engineers to delete all of her memories from before 2013. This was so she didn't have to "relive that section of her life every day."

He also told me that they had deleted it all—check-ins from Mother's Day brunches, photos with family, and events that had absolutely nothing to do with her ex. It was, as Wegener called it, a sledgehammer solution, rather than chiseling away at the problem. "We weren't selective, you know? It wasn't *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," he said, the de facto film reference for post-breakup lobotomies.

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This, I suddenly realized, was the thing I had been trying to avoid this whole time: the total obliteration of my memories. Over the past year I have clung more than ever to digital facsimiles of family and friends, all of whom I now haven't seen since 2019. One of my favorite photos from the past two years is a snapshot of my mother hugging me. Her back is to the camera, my face hooked above her left shoulder, and I'm beaming. I'd like to hug my mom again, but I can't. For now, the photo and FaceTime calls will have to do.

Never mind that I'm wearing a white silk dress in the photo, that there's a ring on my finger and a hazy row of bridal gowns on racks behind us. I still won't delete it. I won't archive photos from the half-marathon I ran with my ex, the one finish line we crossed, because I ran 13.1 miles and I'd prefer to remember how that felt on days when I have nothing left in the tank. I won't delete the albums I have from half a dozen Christmases, because I need to believe holiday gatherings will happen again. I won't unfollow our wedding photographer on Instagram, because—even though she never shot our photos—I appreciate her work as a keeper of other people's memories.

It's obvious I need to be more selective about the apps I use. I'd like to live more offline too. But if we're all expected to be a lot smarter about how we use tech, the software that's now essential in our lives also needs to be much smarter. Memories in photo apps should be an option, not a requirement, and they shouldn't be activated by default. Apps should stop monetizing those memories, directly or otherwise. Algorithms should be more refined, so we're not trailed by events we'd rather leave behind or nudged into experiences that we don't really want. Timelines should actually consider the passage of time.

I want a chisel, not a sledgehammer, with which to delete what I no longer need. I don't want to have to empty my photo albums just because tech companies decided to make them "smart" and create an infinite loop of grief. That feels like a fast path to emotional bankruptcy, a way to "rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should," as the writer Andre Aciman put it. "To feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste." There it is: What a waste. Not wasted time, even if that is also true; that would be too cynical. A waste of potential joy.

Because buried within those 16,000 photos, there is an egg fossilized in a floral dish. In the taxonomy of memory themes, it is an unremarkable photo of food. In my actual memory, it's a photo from the morning I decided on a different path for the future. A different kind of joy. I just didn't know it at the time. The path won't be linear. It never was. But we as humans are remarkably good at hatching new worlds from the tiniest pixels. We have to be.

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