

Futures

Forgotten

A life disconnected. By João Ramalho-Santos



It seemed to take forever: navigating sites, clicking on pop-ups, checking boxes, confirming and reconfirming, introducing passcodes Eva barely remembered she had. Telling myriad interfaces that, yes, she understood all the terms, conditions, implications and possible repercussions; and yes, she was sure, exhaustedly sure. In the end, even though she could feel the system resisting, pleading, begging and threatening all at once, it finally relented. And Eva could declare herself free.

An hour later, it already felt like a new dawn. Her computer followed instructions like the good tool it was supposed to be, instead of constantly trying to outsmart her with alternatives she hadn't asked for. During breaks, the screen also behaved politely, and didn't skip channels on its own, in search of things it thought Eva should be watching instead. She smoked and sat still without her watch conjuring up images of cancerous lungs, or ordering her to get up and move about every

ten minutes. She did get up to manually adjust the lights and the window shades, which no longer obeyed whatever algorithm used to haunt them, and she was looking forward to cooking without being bombarded with calorie-intake information, recipe suggestions, needlessly precise instructions not to be deviated from, and memories of meals past. But unplugging also meant the 'smart' pantry didn't brief her on the lack of specific ingredients, and that, predictably, she'd only realize this when they were needed. Not a problem, she had chosen this neighbourhood carefully, everything conveniently nearby.

On the landing, the elevator seemed to be taking forever. No matter, she had decided to stop using it anyway. The building door didn't swish open, but Eva still had hands. It was only at the grocery store that she experienced her first twinge of regret. Yesterday, her glasses would have used automatic barcode sensing to direct her to the products she needed, trained on years of her eating habits

and brand preferences. Today, dumb as plastic, they were merely a decorative accessory that she'd worn, both out of habit and so she wouldn't be catalogued as a weirdo on the street. Eva did not see herself as a radical, off-the-grid, misanthrope survivalist. She was determined to live her life calmly while blending in as much as possible, not waste time constantly explaining; she had a brief inkling of what that would look like when asking for help, and hadn't appreciated the gasps of disbelief and 'techsplaining' lectures.

Hunting through the aisles for just a few items proved a true challenge, automatic product identification using personal devices had led to neglect in store organization; why bother if customers could find anything without actually looking. Which was what Eva had to do, and proudly did. She made a point of using one of the few human cashiers, but he paid her absolutely no attention until she tapped him on the shoulder and he removed the orange scanning visor covering his face.

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“Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” The pimply youth seemed very confused, constantly removing and restoring his visor as he scanned the groceries. He then stared at the banknote Eva produced as if it was the first one he’d ever seen. Luckily his register knew what to do with it, the change rattling at the end, startling the poor kid. Eva chuckled softly as she left the store. If the power went out, civilization would be truly doomed.

She never saw the car.

Eva woke up in a hospital, medical bots softly humming around her, the room buzzing with technology in all shapes and sizes. But there seemed to be a force field around her. Diagnostics-hungry tendrils emerging from multiple devices approached and then suddenly retracted, as if she was unclean. The bots gave up, dejected.

After what seemed like an eternity, something different was hovering over her. “My name is Elliot, Dr Elliot Lem,” said the face, attempting to smile but not quite making it. “Sorry it took so long, we had to find equipment that can be disconnected from the

Internet of things. Dumb machines, so to speak”, he chuckled, clearly amused.

“I don’t understand,” and Eva really didn’t.

“This morning you removed all authorizations for the remote usage of your data, didn’t you? You evoked the amended Data Protection Law, the Right to Forget Act?” Although framed like one, it wasn’t a question.

“Well, anything that relied on your stored data no longer works. Your favourites, your previous shopping history, your trusted routes, your medical records, any identification based on facial, voice or digit recognition, and, depending on the system, apparently even the acknowledgment of your presence as a human body. In essence, you became invisible.

“That’s why the self-driving car didn’t ‘see’ you,” Elliot made rabbit-ear quotes around the verb. “It’s a fascinating bug, to be honest: the car could detect a dog, a pothole, probably a fly. But not you.

“We tried to log all this into your file but the computer refuses to save the data; people are looking around for old paper copies. We even

sent requests to some of the more civilized off-the-grid survivalists for help; they need doctors, too, you know?”

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure this out, your injuries aren’t serious, as far as we can tell ... It’s actually my first time palpating, besides the artificial training bodies in school. By the way, I’ll leave this informed consent form for you to browse and hopefully sign, is that OK? I’m hoping to write a paper for my PhD, this is truly groundbreaking stuff!”

“Why not?” was all Eva could manage. Being forgotten was clearly going to be harder than she’d anticipated: she was going to have to rethink how much she wanted to be remembered.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

João Ramalho-Santos reveals the inspiration behind *Forgotten*.

Many years ago, I joined Facebook (that alone should tell you how ancient the root of this story is). All my friends were hooked on what we now know was the first incarnation in the dawn of social networks, so I thought I’d give it a try; peer pressure does work, you know? However, it did not take long to realize I had made a horrible mistake. I am not, by nature, a very social person, why on earth would this social mega-amplifier be a place for me? While gingerly navigating the platform, I felt a mix of voyeuristic and entitlement urges, and neither was a good look. Please save comments on how we can no longer live without these things; I’ve heard it all before, and, although I do make a point of (briefly) checking out new platforms for scientific purposes, I can’t help but see them as just different (albeit well-designed) packagings of the exact same thing. And almost never good, overall. Call me a cranky old dude, my kids do.

But the point is that, even though I had basically zero presence on my short-lived Facebook account, it was *much* harder to quit than to join. Ridiculously so, I thought at the time. I had to click, click again, was asked if I was sure, then absolutely sure, and then it was stressed how my (almost non-existent) friends on Facebook would miss me; blatant emotional blackmail. I could easily see a version of myself more invested in the platform quickly quitting the quitting process. Thus, I vowed never again to fall prey to these algorithm-based cheap pleasure seekers.

Except... then along came really smart phones and sites, and it was no longer just about social networks. Now almost all appliances tell me what I should be interested in, where great finds are, the best pad Thai and surrealism exhibition in town and how to get there, the TV show I simply cannot miss, and all that. In the end I gave up on not



signing in, on blocking the ‘system’. Not only is it just too convenient, but also someone could ping my phone, follow my card transactions, know when I’m arriving at a different country, boarding a plane, at a doctor’s appointment, etc. etc. It’s useless — hello Big Sibling!

In short: the person I am now is no longer the person that proudly quit Facebook so many years ago. I would need a much more committed and focused version of myself to attempt anything like this today, or in a near future where, I can only assume, it gets ‘worse’. Clearly all new tools being presented, for anything, assume that we are all connected, all the time. That is where Eva, the protagonist and better-me, comes in, bravely waltzing out of what many would consider a modern Garden of Eden, and into a more challenging connection-less world.

I wish her luck.