

Persistence of Memory  
LJ Cohen

*My handwriting is starting to go. That seems to be a consistent sign of the disease progression. It was much faster this cycle. Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll be like a leaky jar and the memories will just spill out of my head as fast as the doctors can pour them back in. At this point, that would be a blessing.*

The irony is not lost on me. Until my medical leave, I was the head researcher at MIT's virtual memory project. I invented the algorithms and storage protocols that led to this cutting edge treatment. The doctors warned me it was experimental, that it might not be a cure, but I didn't care.

My work has guaranteed there is no 'forget it' anymore. No 'never mind', no 'it doesn't matter.' Everything matters. And if everything matters equally, does anything really matter anymore? I'm sure given what I know now, I could tweak the search algorithms, I could assign a weight and relative relevancy to each specific moment and event that makes up my life, but that's not the same as knowing what matters. I could swear I told Pendergast that at our last section head meeting, but I can't find a memory of that conversation anywhere, either on the server or in my personal chip. Well, she wouldn't understand anyway.

I used to know what mattered. I used to be able to remember phone numbers and birthdays. Hell, I could tell you the date, what day of the week it was, and even give you the most direct route to the interstate all on my own, without consulting a smart phone. How many people can say that now?

Something fundamental in the science of information technology changed when we broke the terabyte barrier for flash memory. Suddenly anyone could carry around the whole yellow pages on the head of a pin. Along with the contents of every dictionary in every language. And with wifi being broadcast from every storefront and even the cheapest cellphones data enabled, we were finally freed from having to remember anything.

When my lab came up with the v-mem app and the cyber-architecture to support it, it seemed like the next logical step in personal computing technology. Just brain-dump all the things you didn't need to keep in mind and store it at your fingertips instead. For most of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we were doing that anyway. Need a phone number? Fire up your browser. Directions? Email them right to your GPS. Social networking took care of personal reminders--you could even set it up so the computer would automatically choose and send your friends their birthday cards.

Long before my memory had started to hiccup, I had been testing and relying on v-mem. And it was so damned convenient. Seductive, even. The next true revolution in leisure time. Without the tyranny of having to use up precious personal bandwidth remembering what groceries you needed, why not let your phone query your pantry and have the food delivered instead? Then think of how much free time and space you would have to think.

Only it didn't work out that way.

I was in charge of theoreticals. Pendergast headed the implementation and marketing team. When she first suggested that split, I was grateful. She knew how much I would rather bury myself in the lab anyway. And she was much better at managing the grants and interfacing with industry.

Her team was so very clever in the way v-mem was released. The school age kids were easy enough to hook. It wasn't a big step for them anyway, so much of their lives were already in the cloud. To most of them, v-mem was shiny, sexy, the next meme. It was free and the company released a hacker's toolkit. That's all it took for the college kids. Some smart grad-student figured out a way for the big job search engines to directly query the virtual memory database. V-mem could nab you the perfect job--the ideal mesh with your skill set, but only if you were hooked in. Otherwise, someone else got the job. Then it was keyed into universal medical records and spun into a matter of preventing malpractice and tracking drug interactions. From there, it was only a small push to adopt virtual memory markers as unique biometric measures.

The V-mem homepage became the most used web portal, blowing Google and Facebook out of the running by a factor of a hundred. And initially, it looked as if we had been right--virtual memory storage solutions seemed to eliminate information anxiety nearly overnight. If you woke up at 3 am with the nagging feeling that you'd forgotten something, all you had to do was playback the last day's memories and find it again. Arguments were settled, accidents reconstructed. The ultimate in 'instant replay' with the ability to search and sort too. Archivists

hailed a new era of research. Who needed trails of correspondence when you could have the actual memories of soon to be important historical figures? And virtual memory seemed to hold the key to solving the problem of memory-killing diseases like Alzheimer's.

*At first I didn't notice. Or maybe I did and refused to see it. The names on the tip of my tongue, getting lost on the way to the cafeteria. It was easy to laugh it all off. Just the stereotypical absent minded professor.*

And thanks to virtual memory, I have at least a few hours left to question everything I thought I believed in before it all begins to unravel again.

It was hard to see anything wrong with the treatments. After all, how different is it in philosophy from autologous blood or bone marrow donation? Theoretically, someone with Alzheimer's could have their stored memories re-implanted as they slept and wake up with those memories fresh and accessible, at least until they began to fade and needed to be refreshed.

And it worked. Not just theoretically, but actually.

I should know--for the past eight months, I've undergone 12 such treatments.

*The nurses are upset at me for refusing to let Laura visit this afternoon. I let them think it's because I want to spare her the pain, but the truth is, we are becoming strangers to one another. Maybe memory isn't the glue we thought it was. The last time she came to see me, she left in tears. Hell of a disease that makes you forget your own wife.*

According to the CDC, there is no epidemic of early onset dementia, only that surveillance techniques and better detection have allowed for more accurate diagnosis. They report it as if it's a great gift: early detection increases the chances of early treatment and even the holy grail of remission or cure. There is more money being poured into memory research than all the cancers and AIDS combined. Surely someone else has made the correlation between dementia rates and the rise in the use of virtual memory. I can't be the only one.

*I'm sure that just looking at the latest data has alerted the medical staff to my 'escalating fixation' as they like to say it in my medical record. Note to self: remember they are monitoring my memory retention and rate of progression. It's part of what I agreed to when I entered the study.*

I understand it so much better now. The problem is memory isn't like a film of your life events, narrated by an impartial observer. Memory is fluid. And it's unreliable. We remember best when emotion is involved and emotionally laden memories are likely to be the most volatile. We remember peak experiences, for good or for ill, and events without any limbic overlay are likely to be forgotten. The virtual memory programs didn't account for our messy, unstructured human brains. They documented everything without any filtering--the sensory bombardment and minutiae of day to day living, placing every word and deed under its merciless lens. How can we not suffocate under the weight of that much remembering?

*If I focus on one thing over and over, I can keep it from the end of one cycle to the start of another. One of the last things I remind myself is where I hide this journal. It's the only part of me that isn't susceptible to change. Or maybe it's just the paranoia that seems to be the hallmark of whatever stage I'm in.*

*Laura can't be in on it. Whatever it is. She loves me.*

*Twelve times, I've accused her in my own handwriting and twelve times I've struggled to come to terms with it. Something made me suspicious. Only I can't remember what. That's part of what's so suspicious.*

Recruitment ads looking for the memory-challenged run on every major channel and through every ISP. Memory loss has replaced erectile dysfunction and herpes as the problem du jour in all the commercials even as faster and more complete virtual memory systems are hyped and released. The very definition of knowing has changed from understanding something to having its storage location and access. I did that. I'm not proud of it.

*I know time is running short. The cycles of integration and disintegration are so fast now that I only have a few lucid days where several months ago, I had weeks. There may come a time when the doctors become discouraged and advise us to end the treatments. I wonder what Laura will make of this journal. I wonder what will become of me.*

Some clever hacker even figured out how to tap into and broadcast stored memories. It was only a matter of time before he struck a deal with the Reality Channel. Now you get to choose between the already famous and the soon to be famous. See through their eyes. It should have been the ultimate in empathy--the walking a mile in someone's shoes made literal. Instead, what it did was make us all voyeurs of minutia. It's now possible to know more about some perfect stranger than yourself. Be a baseball player for an hour. Or try on the opposite sex. Cheat on your wife, but it's not you so it doesn't count. There are even pay-per-murder channels. They get even higher ratings than the immersion porn. And it's all been brought to you courtesy of yours, truly.

When the memory lapses and the episodes of anxiety pushed me out of the lab, I felt like I was drowning. Laura made me an appointment with her shrink and I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't the large flat screen and memory chip access port. The doctor never even made eye contact. He downloaded my medical history and started pawing through my data. I never went back. That's when Laura found out about this study.

*My hands are shaking too much to keep writing. I still feel like me, but I know the signs. The doctors believe that waiting until everything fades completely makes the procedure less likely to work, so tomorrow morning, they'll try to deepen the grooves of my memories. I want to tell them no, that I think my mind has been worn too smooth. I want to tell Laura that forgetting would be the greatest gift she could give me.*

According to the informed consent form, the procedure involves no remembered pain. Is that the same thing as no pain at all?

Even after the horror show of the Cassidy trial, the law still relied on virtual memory evidence almost exclusively in criminal proceedings. All the police procedural and forensics shows that had topped the ratings for so long became quaint, dated reruns on late night TV. It didn't kill all the lawyers, but virtual memory did kill the whole concept of trial by jury. Cassidy was one sick fuck and he made a fortune on the movie rights. To this day, the court refuses to recognize the possibility of deliberately altered memory, even after Cassidy released both versions of events.

*If it weren't for a few entries in this journal that don't make any sense, I wouldn't give Carl Cassidy a second thought. He was an aberration. The original unreliable narrator. See, we all needed to believe in the sanctity of memory, divorced from our emotions and interpretations. Hell, virtual memory's main selling point was that it was objective. Not like our mutable, fallible human memory. But here's the thing. I flip through the pages of this little book and I recognize my own handwriting. I just have no memory of placing my hand to the paper and forming the loops and lines of these particular words. And I have written the same sentence twelve times already.*

*I'm sure I've never been married, so who the hell is Laura?*



*Persistence of Memory* by [Lisa Janice Cohen \(LJCohen\)](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

You are free to distribute the work with attribution/link back to LJCohen at <http://www.ljcohen.net>. Or contact Lisa at [lisa@ljcohen.net](mailto:lisa@ljcohen.net). Please do not make any changes to this work. If you like what you have read, please sign up for Lisa's newsletter, BlueMusings. On a regular basis, you will receive additional stories and writing updates.

This story was released September, 2011