

## PLEASE REPORT YOUR BUG HERE

My former employer made me sign an NDA. An NDA is a nondisclosure agreement, and once you sign one it's good for life. Meaning, I'm still under NDA right now, meaning legally I shouldn't tell you this story. But I feel like I have to, because I know the bug I discovered and never told anyone about is still reproducible, and I want you to see what I mean when I say I know how to disappear.

Let me back up.

I was hired at DateDate in the fall of 2010. This was the early days, the first year DateDate existed, when it was still a startup, not the omnipresent social app we know today. There were four of us: the two co-founders, an engineer, and me. Our office was in a windowless room that we sublet from a solar-panel company. Aside from the weekly delivery of Red Bull and Nature Valley granola bars, no one visited. That was okay, because we were busy. We were experiencing rocketship growth. Investors salivated over our app downloads. We'd eat lunch hunched over our keyboards, in a constant state of trying-not-to-fuck-things-up.

I handled all of our support. A big part of support is debugging. The most common bugs had hundreds of user reports associated with them. Fixing these bugs was key to our success early on. If we didn't fix them ASAP, our rating in the App Store would tank, and people would

not download DateDate. We labeled these bugs *hi-pri*.

The bug I discovered and never told anyone about until it was too late was not hi-pri, at the time. In fact, only a handful of people ever reported it. A fraction of a fraction of a percent of our total users. Therefore, I felt somewhat justified in saying nothing about it, just based on the numbers. Besides, because I hadn't yet reproduced the bug myself, I couldn't even verify it.

I found out about the bug from a user named Lukas. Lukas was a graduate student of art history based in Berlin. He wrote an email to DateDate support with the subject line: *Nonexistent Bug*.

*Dear DateDate, I have experienced a rather unusual bug in your software. Simply through a series of taps, I am able to make myself temporarily not exist in this world.*

I had probably read a couple hundred support emails that day before I came across Lukas's. When you read and respond to so many emails, you get into a groove. You're not necessarily thinking critically about every one — rather, you're deciding quickly what additional information you need from the user. Upon reading Lukas's email, I assumed when he claimed DateDate could make him *not exist* that he meant the app crashed on him, or even that somehow his profile

had disappeared. “Can you please clarify what you mean by ‘not exist?’” I asked. “A screenshot would help.”

The next morning, Lukas had replied to my email: *It is impossible to take a screenshot of this state of nonexistence*, he claimed. Nevertheless, he attached a photo of a black rectangle.

At this point I was genuinely confused, but I really didn’t have the time to get involved in a long back-and-forth. Each day, there were at least another thousand new emails to answer. I decided to not reply to Lukas’s email. I filed his messages away in a folder marked *low-pri*. Days went by, and Lukas found my personal DateDate profile and started to comment on my photos. “Ethan, did you get my last email?” he would ask, or, “Ethan, why are you ignoring me?” In the comments, my friends would sometimes follow up with remarks mocking him, or at least I assumed they were mocking him, but in hindsight I didn’t really spend a lot of time with my friends that year, so maybe they were not mocking Lukas but echoing his frustrations.

. . .

My partner Isabel worked at an art gallery. The month I found out about the bug was the same month the F.D. Thomas show opened. “Someone bid \$40,000 above asking on the capsule,” she said, browsing the gallery’s website on her laptop, perched on the kitchen counter.

I snapped the bottoms off the ends of

asparagus. “You mean the dark room one?” I asked.

Before the show had opened, Isabel invited me and our friend Noma to the gallery to check out the work. It was her way of finding small mistakes she could fix last-minute, like how Noma noticed the text cards for two pieces had been swapped. We drank Tecates and commented in our amateur way about the work. Abstract paintings inspired by tides and murky water. Of all the work, the piece that stood out was the small capsule. One person at a time could crawl into the capsule, shut the door, and wait in complete darkness for the piece to respond. I heard a distant *lub-lub* and saw swirling twists of purple, while Noma said horses thundered towards her. Isabel wouldn’t tell us what she saw.

“I don’t get art,” Isabel said, in that frustrated way people with art history degrees sometimes talk about art. She closed her laptop and placed the asparagus onto a baking sheet. She drizzled on olive oil, salt-and-peppered them, then tossed the spears with her hands.

I never talked with Isabel about my work because it was the same thing over and over again, but I’d been thinking about Lukas’s email for a few weeks now, and I wanted to tell someone. “A user wrote in the other week and told me DateDate makes him not exist,” I said.

“Like, metaphorically?” she asked. “I can see that.”

“I don’t think he meant it that way.”

“Then what? He thinks DateDate makes him

disappear?”

“I don’t know. That’s what it sounded like.”

Isabel knew enough about my work to joke about it. “Have you tried to reproduce the bug?” she said, touching her olive-oiled hand to my face in pretend-concern. “Ethan, are you still there?”

I don’t know why I hadn’t tried to reproduce the bug before Isabel asked me. While I liked to think of myself as someone who believed in the impossible, my instincts indicated otherwise. “Of course,” I said. I washed the cutting board then left the kitchen for the bathroom.

In the bathroom, I pulled up Lukas’s original email, where he had documented the six steps he took in the app to achieve a state of nonexistence. *Take a photo, choose the Milky Way filter, upload the photo, comment on three photos, like seven photos, then comment on another photo with an exclamation mark.* I followed the first five steps and then, with my comment typed out, I added an exclamation mark and hit Send.

Nothing happened.

“Ethan?” Isabel shouted from the kitchen.

I flushed the toilet and washed my hands.

The next day, I heard from Carmen, a photographer in Brooklyn who also claimed to have experienced the nonexistent bug. She documented in her email the same six steps Lukas had. The difference is, I sort of knew Carmen. We had been following each other on DateDate for the last few months, and we had some mutual friends. “What do you mean when you say ‘not exist?’” I asked her, and she said that by “not

exist” she does not mean invisible or dead. “What I mean,” she said, “is that I enter into another plane. I don’t know, it’s strange. It feels like if you could walk out of yourself, the way you walk out of your apartment. You know it will still be there when you get back, but at the same time you’re not in it. I don’t know if I’m explaining this right. Do you understand?”

Kohji, a user in Tokyo who had voluntarily translated DateDate into Japanese, wrote directly to my work email address.

*Ethan, I hope you are well. Here, in Japan, I am experiencing unusual activity with the app. I go to a place where I do not exist. It is rather inconvenient. I believe I have figured out the steps to replicate this bug, but I would like to understand why this is happening. Is this something you believe your team can fix?*

No matter how many times I tried to reproduce the bug, I couldn’t. All three users had reported the exact same steps, but each time I tried them nothing happened. I was still me, still in San Francisco, still existing in the same plane of reality where I had always existed.

Kohji was an excellent debugger—he too worked as a support rep for an app—and so finally I decided to ask for his help. “I can’t get it to work on my end,” I admitted. We video-chatted and he tried to help me perform the steps accurately, but it still wouldn’t work for me. “There must be

another factor,” Kohji said.

I had trouble sleeping for a few weeks, still not able to understand what was happening. Isabel wanted to distract me—she’d encourage me to join on her evening runs through the city, to bicycle with her and her friends across the Golden Gate Bridge, into Marin—but all I wanted to do was solve the mystery. She watched me try the series of steps again and again, hoping to not exist, and then finally, a few months in, she said, “You can’t possibly believe they’re telling the truth. What does it even mean to not exist?”

What she was saying made rational sense, but I couldn’t accept it. “Even if they don’t technically cease to exist,” I said, “something’s going on here, you can’t deny that.”

Four more reports came in. One from South Korea, two from France, and one from Australia.

Meanwhile, at DateDate, the four of us were working sixteen-hour days, Red Bull coursing through our veins. During our weekly meetings, the four of us would go around in a circle and give brief updates on our respective projects. When my turn came, I’d run through a list of whatever-bugs—login issues, crashes on image uploads—but I never could figure out how to tell them about the nonexistent bug.

Finally, I couldn’t stand not knowing how to reproduce it. I texted Carmen to see whether she was free and in Brooklyn that week (she was), then booked a red-eye for that night and a return red-eye for the next day. When I told Isabel about the trip, she didn’t ask for a reason. She’d become

more reserved. She wasn’t hanging out with her friends as much either. Her bike had been locked up on the stairway railing for weeks. I assumed it had something to do with work, but we’d made an agreement to try to not talk about work too much, and so I just let it go.

In Brooklyn, Carmen agreed to meet at a cafe in Greenpoint that sold several varieties of coffee brewed in several different ways, all roasted by an award-winning barista in Copenhagen and overnighted to Brooklyn in vacuum-sealed bags. Exhausted from my flight, I didn’t feel like thinking critically about whether I preferred a washed or unwashed coffee, whether it was from Guatemala or Ethiopia, whether it was brewed in a see-through plastic cone or in a Chemex. The barista, however, did care that I cared. “Farm to cup,” he said, invoking the mantra I’d repeated myself throughout college, offsetting student loans as a barista in Portland. I nodded, asked whether there was a natural processed coffee, and the barista delightedly brought over a tall glass jar filled with lightly roasted coffee beans. He ground a small sample and asked me to smell them, then explained the variety of flavors—Fruit Loops! lemon lime!—which he had identified in this particular Rwandan coffee at the cafe’s last cupping event. The coffee was \$5.50 plus a \$1 tip plus a \$0.50 fee for using a credit card when the total is below \$7.

As I waited for Carmen, I wandered around in the back of the cafe, where a small pop-up store had been set up. The store sold woven goods from

Scandinavia: a lambswool sweater, a lambswool hat, lambswool mittens. While browsing the items I learned from a small sign on the tabletop that the pop-up's main location is also in Copenhagen, next door to the coffee roaster that roasts all the coffee served in this Greenpoint café. I had been excited to leave San Francisco for Brooklyn, if only for a day, and so it was slightly disorienting to find myself inside a café that insisted I be somewhere else entirely.

"We have the Rwandan V-60 up on the bar," the barista said.

Careful to not spill my coffee, I found a seat at a small teak table near the window and browsed DateDate as I waited for Carmen. By habit, I almost tried the six steps that could make me not exist, but thought better of it, just in case it actually worked this time. I didn't want to not exist when Carmen showed up.

Carmen arrived wrapped in scarves. I could barely see her face, only her eyes. Green, maybe blue, or a combination of both. I stood up. We hugged, which didn't feel forced because we had been following each other on DateDate for at least three months now. She always commented on my photos of the sea, and I always liked her minimalist photos of New York, how she made the city seem not so busy.

For the first half hour, we talked about everything but the nonexistent bug. Finally, after I had finished my coffee, there was a pause in the conversation. "So, do you want to see?" she asked.

I nodded.

She set her phone in the middle of the table, between us. I watched as she went through the steps, the same as I had so many times before. "Ready?" she said, after typing in a comment with an exclamation mark, her finger hovering over the Send button.

"Ready," I said.

She tapped Send.

"You're still here," I said, but she didn't respond. She looked at me and smiled. "Does it not always work?" I asked.

She rested her head in her hands and leaned against the wall. She was there and she was not.

I looked around the coffee shop. The barista was explaining to a customer why they don't serve French roast coffees. A young boy had tied the lambswool sweater around his neck and was running through the café with his arms extended in front of him like Superman. A baby cried. Someone behind me used the word *somniferous*. I started to feel uncertain. I took out my phone, dialed 911, but waited to make the call. If I did call, what would I tell them? If this was in fact connected to the app I helped make, would I be under investigation? Perhaps our entire company would be shuttered. Should I have said something sooner?

Several minutes passed like this, Carmen in a state of not-existing while I tried to keep from panicking.

At last, life entered her again. "Did you see?" she asked.

"What the fuck," I said. "Has anyone seen you

do this?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, “but then again I go there all the time.”

“How often?”

“Just whenever I’m bored. Usually at home, sometimes on the subway or out in the park. I’m sure people just assume I’m napping.”

“Do you remember where you go?”

“All I know is other people are there, in the same woozy state, and it feels good to be there.”

“Do you see a Japanese man there?”

“You’ll have to be more descriptive,” she said.

I tried to remember what Kohji looked like, but I had a tough time recalling specific details. “Short black hair, mid-thirties.” I pulled up his profile on my phone. “Here, this is him.”

“Oh yes, I’ve seen him,” she said. “He usually sits on a bench and sketches. Do you know him?”

“Sort of.” I pulled up Lukas’s profile. “How about him? Is he there too?”

“I don’t recognize him,” she said, “but it’s been busier lately.” Carmen leaned in, closer. “Do you know what’s causing this?” she asked. “Because the thing is, as much as I like taking a break from myself every now and then, I’m concerned it’s becoming a strange kind of addiction.”

I wasn’t really sure what to tell her. Back then, I had a tendency to fall into a certain mode of speaking that mimicked the support emails I sent all day. “While we don’t have a fix for this issue just yet, we’re actively working on a solution,” I told her. Which of course was a lie, because nobody at DateDate but me knew about the bug.

On the flight back to San Francisco, I thought about how all breakthroughs take some getting used to. What would be the problem if DateDate allowed users to disappear for a few minutes, in the safety and privacy of their own homes? I was already writing the draft of the press release in my head, I’m not proud to admit. I imagined a big bonus, an increased equity stake.

Home, I told Isabel what happened, and my plan to pitch the bug to the founders as a potential new feature. I told her about how I thought the idea might lead to big things for me professionally. Maybe we could buy an art capsule of our own, or at least rent a bigger apartment. To which she responded, “What about Carmen, you want her to keep doing this, and what about everyone else who suddenly would have access?” I said, “You make it sound worse than it is,” and she said, “Really?” and picked up her phone, performed the six steps like she’d done them a hundred times before, and slumped over on the couch.

I waited, waited.

She stayed in that other place for much longer than Carmen had, like she had some kind of mastery over it. I reached for my phone to call someone, just as I had with Carmen, but this time I didn’t worry about whether I’d be in trouble for not disclosing the nonexistent bug sooner—all I thought was, What would I do if Isabel disappeared forever? But out of habit, instead of calling anyone, I tried the six steps myself, one last time. And, finally, there I was, in the hazy plane. Like all I needed to do to reproduce the bug was

actually want it to happen. What did that mean? That everyone—Carmen, Lukas, Kohji, even Isabel—wanted to disappear?

I was in a field of tall, wet grass. Across the field, I saw Isabel, and ran to her. She said, “Now what do you think?” And it felt like she was really asking me something essential, like if I answered dishonestly I’d lose everything. “It feels amazing,” I said. And Isabel, who seemed more like Isabel than real-world Isabel, said, “Right?”

“Which is why,” she said, now back in our apartment, “you have to tell them to fix it. Every time I go it’s harder to return, and I worry one day...” She cut herself off here, honoring her own kind of nondisclosure agreement.

That morning, I arrived at the office an hour late. “Where have you been?” the founders asked, and right then I tried to tell them about the nonexistent bug, stammering about woozy worlds, but they wouldn’t listen. “We get it—we’re all exhausted,” they said, “but listen.” They proceeded to tell me that our main competitor was about to release their app on Android, and so we had to push up our own Android release date. “We’re launching in an hour,” they told me.

The new influx of users was an avalanche that buried me for days.

Then more chaos: a week later, still spinning from all the new Android downloads, we were acquired by the Corporation. People with MBAs and JDs and their own books on boardroom success shook our hands and told us they would help us become what they thought we always

wanted to be. Within all this my voice shrank, and I knew it was too late. I could yell out into the cubicle-less office space and no one would hear me, not that I bothered, for the only place that mattered to me by then was the world of the nonexistent bug.

This led, a few months into my stint at the Corporation, to my being let go. A senior manager who had once shared with me his body language tips for important meetings told me, in a somber tone, that I had two weeks to wrap things up. “Why?” I asked, and he responded, “Because frankly, Ethan, you’ve disappeared.” And I said, “Of course I have, what else did you expect me to do? Nobody would listen. You have to know: there’s a bug that takes you away from here. What I mean is, you can use the app to disappear. Or, not really disappear, but leave your body, like you’re walking out of your apartment. Or like—” As I continued, not sure how to say it, the senior manager stood up, crossed his arms very deliberately, and left the room.

The reason this has been so difficult for me to disclose these past years is because I want to get every detail right, and every time I reread this account, I remember something I left out, and then when I go back to add it, the story feels more and more fabricated, like the addition of new facts steers the story closer to fiction.

Isabel moved to New York for work a couple years ago. I stayed in San Francisco. It was one of those breakups that has more to do with figuring out your mid-twenties than with each other.

We still text, though. The other night, totally unprompted, she told me what she saw in that capsule in the art gallery. She said she hadn't wanted to say then because she didn't want to seem like a downer, which made me a little sad, knowing there were these parts of her I never knew, as a direct result of my own obliviousness. She wasn't sure exactly how to describe what she saw. *Like fog, I guess, or the inside of a raincloud.* I pictured the fog or the inside of a raincloud, knowing that whatever I imagined was not what she saw, though as she kept texting, not so much refining her description as adding to it—the cloud emoji, words like *amorphous* and *drifting*—I could feel myself moving closer to her, or to a version of her I'd previously been unable to see.