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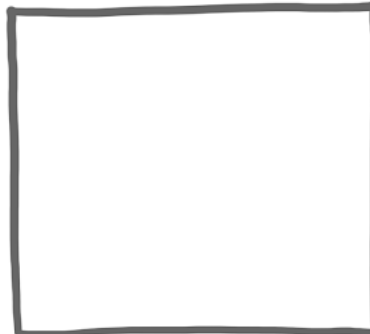
Life is a Picture, But You Live in a Pixel

📅 November 20, 2013 By Tim Urban

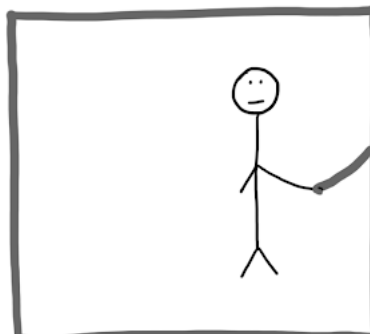
This is Jack:



And this is Today:



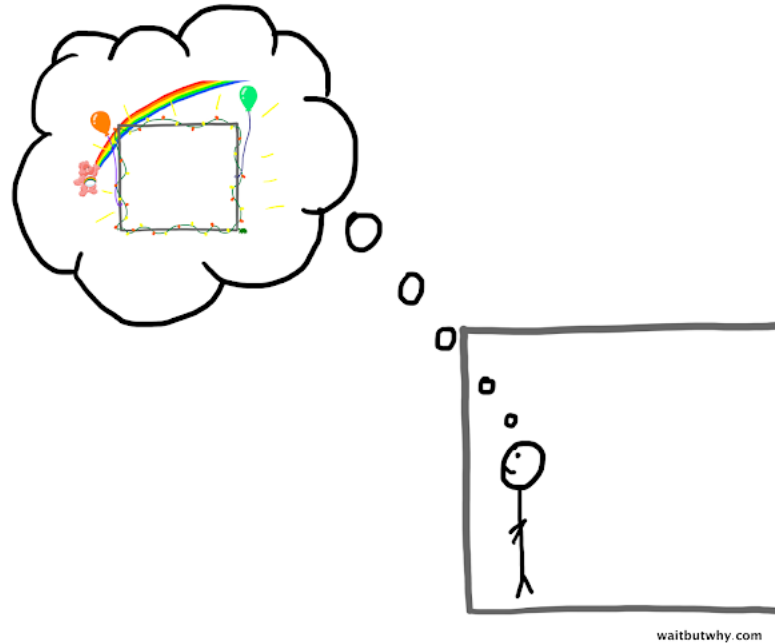
Jack and Today are dating.



The relationship is going all right and Jack's reasonably happy, but for a while now, Jack has known that the Today he's with is not *the one*. Sure, he and Today have fun sometimes, but all too often, Jack feels

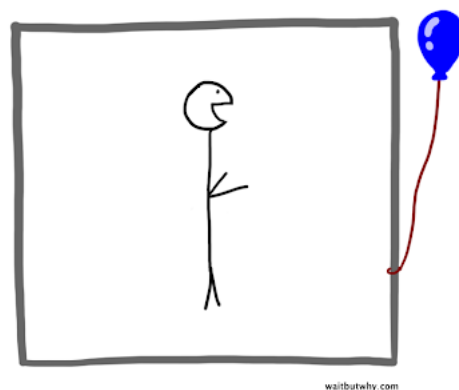
like he's dating a mundane Wednesday, and that's certainly not the kind of Today he plans to be with in the long run.

Because he knows the relationship is just temporary, Jack doesn't invest that much of himself in it, spending more of his energy thinking about someone else—Tomorrow. Now *Tomorrow* is the kind of day he'd love to date—fulfilling, passionate, meaningful and exhilarating. He knows it's only a matter of time before he finds a Today just like that, the kind of Today he'll be with when he's found love, when his career has taken off, and when he lives in his dream city. He can just picture her now:

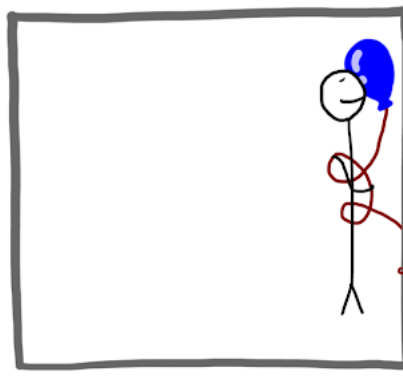


That time will come, but Jack has another plan in the meantime—he's getting a raise next week, and he's going to break up with his current Today as soon as that happens and start dating someone new—Today Once I Get My Raise. Of course, she's not the kind of Today worthy of marriage for a guy like Jack, but she's much more fun and exciting than his current very ordinary Today.

The morning after he gets his raise, Jack wakes up with an extra bounce in his step. He's a new man with a new Today, and he likes her already:

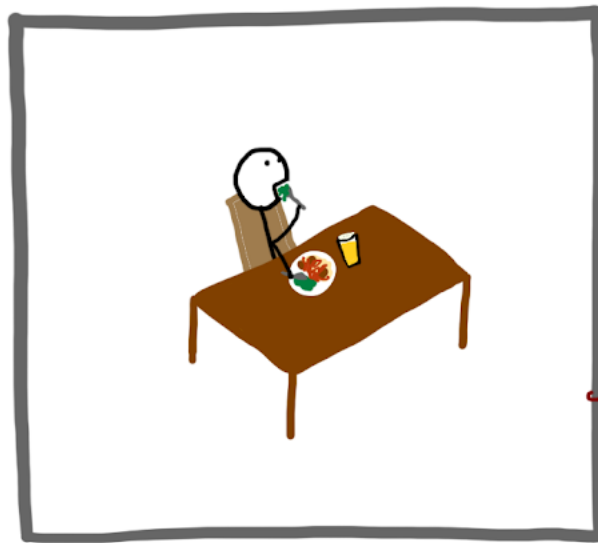


That night, he goes out to a restaurant he couldn't afford just a day earlier, and the second day, he buys a new set of golf clubs.



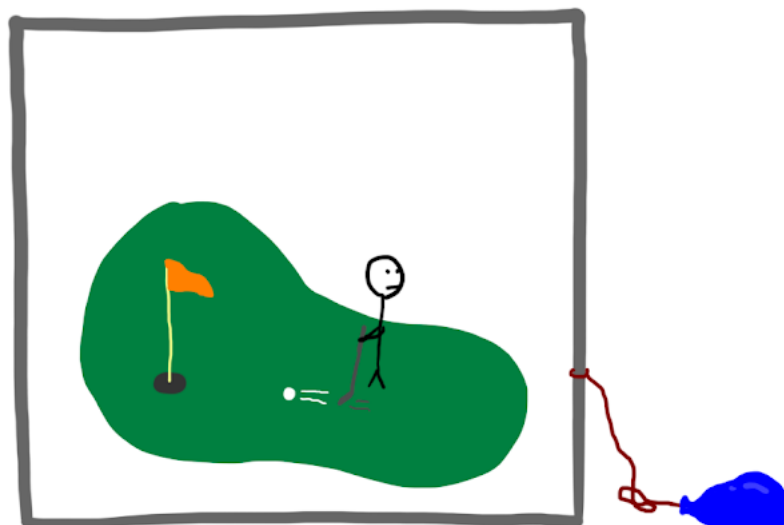
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Two weeks later, Jack goes back to that fancy restaurant, but something feels a little different. The food is still great, but it's just not quite as exciting this time.



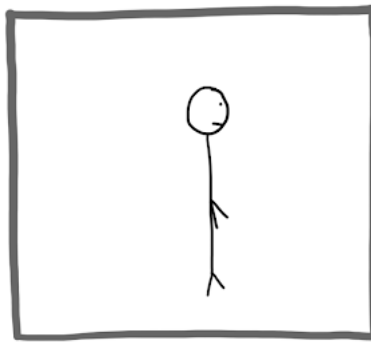
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And a month after that, when he heads out golfing for the fourth time with the new clubs, his mood isn't affected at all by them—it just kind of feels like a normal golf day again.



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Until one day, the walls look exactly how they did before his raise.



Jack is confused. He left his ex-Today in the dust, so why does it kind of seem like he's dating her again? He's supposed to be done with that part of his life.

It's disappointing, but Jack shrugs it off—this raise was small potatoes anyway, and the real future's all still to come, so it's not a big deal if he's not that happy.

A few years later, Jack has a big month. First, after years of being single, he meets this amazing girl and they hit it off right away. She's exactly who he's been waiting for, and after a few dates, she's his girlfriend. Right around the same time, the new restaurant-rating business Jack started a year earlier is written up in a big newspaper and suddenly, business starts raining in. He knew the business was a good idea, and now this is proof. For Jack, it's all finally happening.

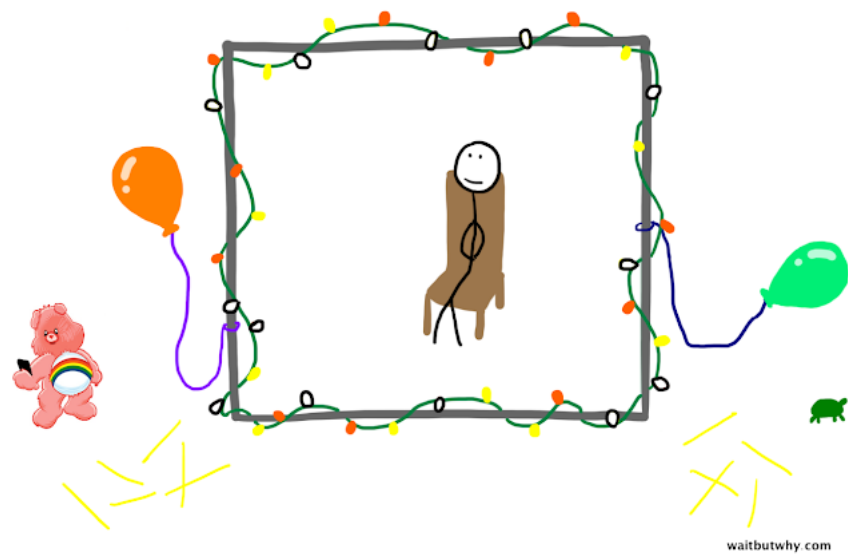
And his new Today, Today Once My Business Takes Off And I Find A Girlfriend, is everything he spent his last few years dreaming about.



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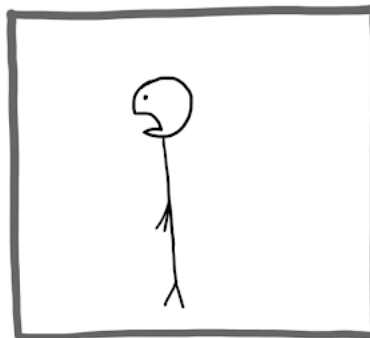
This is the life Jack always knew he'd be living soon enough—he's just that kind of guy. And his Wednesdays will never be mundane again.

But then something starts to happen. After a few months, even though things are going well with his girlfriend and his business's growth has only accelerated, Jack finds himself appreciating all of the excitement around his Today a bit less than he used to, which makes things feel a little less vibrant. He's busier than he's ever been before, working almost constantly, and while he's still pleased with his new Today, his general mood doesn't feel all that high anymore.



And a year after that, even though Jack's life is richer and more meaningful than it used to be, he's gotten completely used to the way things are. He also has watched a friend's career take off even more than his own and wonders what that must feel like, and his other friend seems to have a little more fun with his girlfriend than Jack has with his—must be nice, he thinks.

And one day, Jack wakes up to find himself here:



He can't believe it. What the *hell* is she doing here?

He considers placing a restraining order on this ex who won't leave him alone, but ultimately decides to let it go—after all, it's not like he was gonna marry Today Once My Business Takes Off And I Find A Girlfriend anyway. The real Today he's holding out for is Today Once I Sell My Business and Marry My Girlfriend, and that's the Today he'll truly be happy with.

* * *

Jack's struggle isn't unusual—it's something most of us are going through in one way or another. In [his amazing TED Talk](#), Harvard professor Dan Gilbert describes what he calls The Impact Bias—our “tendency to overestimate the hedonic impact of future events.” Humans have the ability to simulate future situations in our heads to predict what it'll be like to experience them, but that simulator doesn't always work so well and tends “to make you believe that different outcomes are more different than in fact they really are.”

Gilbert says that “from field studies to laboratory studies, we see that winning or losing an election, gaining or losing a romantic partner, getting or not getting a promotion, passing or not passing a college test, and on and on, have far less impact, less intensity, and much less duration than people expect them to have.” It even applies to terrible events in our lives. According to Gilbert, “a recent study showing how major life traumas affect people suggests that if it happened over three months ago, with only a few exceptions, it has no impact whatsoever on your happiness.” Jack is clearly a victim of The Impact Bias.

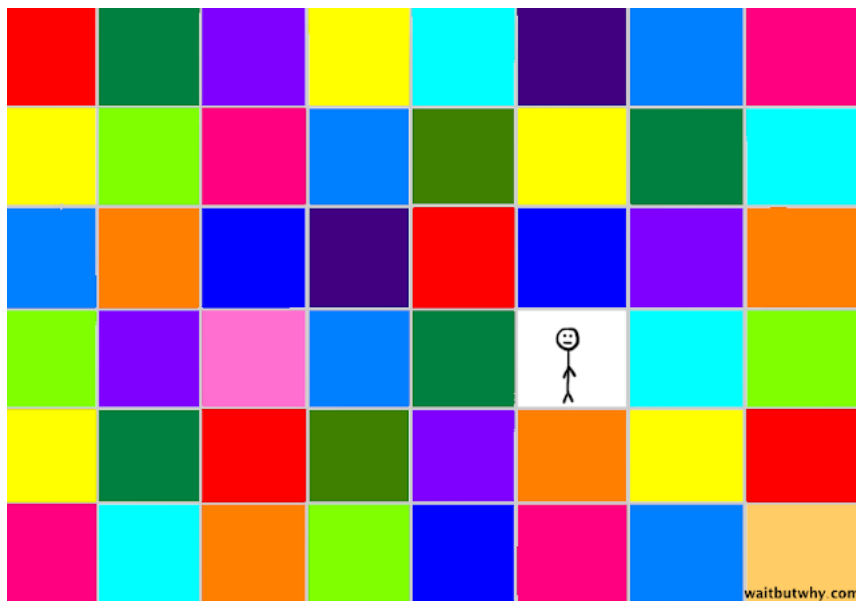
Jack's difficulties also relate to The Pixel Theory, a phrase coined by Tim Urban during his famous “alone in his apartment in front of the mirror” TED Talk.

Jack sees his life as a rich picture depicting an epic story and assumes that the key to his happiness lies in the broad components of the image.



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But this is a mistake, because Jack doesn't live in the picture's broad strokes, he lives at all times in a single pixel of the image—a single Today.



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le thousands of Jack's Todays will, to an outsider from far away, begin to look like a complete picture. Jack spends each moment of his actual reality in one unremarkable Today pixel or another. Jack's error is brushing off his mundane Wednesday and focusing entirely on the big picture, when in fact the mundane Wednesday *is the experience of his actual life*.

And his assumption that his future Todays would be as vibrant and rich as the broad picture of his life is misunderstanding the unremarkable nature of a pixel, no matter what one's life looks like in broad strokes. This assumption leads Jack to feel like his uneventful Today must be an unsatisfactory temporary relationship, when in reality it's an inevitable and permanent marriage that he must accept and embrace in order to be happy.

As far as what will *actually* make Jack happier as he lives in his mundane Wednesday, there are [a number of](#) scientifically proven things, including spending time with people you like, sleeping well and exercising, doing things you're good at, and doing kind things for others.

But perhaps the first thing Jack needs to do is learn to feel more gratitude, another [scientifically proven](#) route to happiness and the area in which he falls the most woefully short. Jack spends so much of his time looking up at the great things that will come his way and planning his future happiness and not nearly enough time looking *down* and thinking about how badly he used to want so many of the things he currently has.

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