



Ingrid Sagor

## What Lies Beneath Gold

Let me put it like this:

One of my first memories is of being two, perhaps three years old and purposefully falling asleep on the brown-carpeted stairs of the rented apartment where my mother and I lived.<sup>a</sup> I remember the intentionality of it: of thinking, in my young body, in my ever-developing mind, *wouldn't it be cute, wouldn't it be funny to fall asleep here?* I was so tired after all.

Or, let me say this:

I know there is a photograph of me in this moment.<sup>b</sup> I am a toddler, all saggy blue pants, and Osh-Kosh ruffled shirt, asleep, thumb-in-mouth on those brown stairs.<sup>c</sup> I know my mother laughs when she sees the image, thinks me entertaining and so sweet.

So, I distrust myself, my memory, my experience. I recognize what Tobias Wolff calls “the frailty of

<sup>a</sup> Developmental psychologists agree that memory can be formed as early as two to three years old, but it fades the older we get. Carole Peterson, PhD notes, “as young children get older their first memories tend to get later and later, but around age 10 their memories crystallize.” Memory, particularly childhood memory is all assemblage—a hint, a fragment, a color, a detail, all layering, a patchwork of references—cues to our past. Memory is postmodern in its nature—it is the collage of photographs, ripped newspapers and letters, taped and layered onto canvas, always ruffling in the wind. Psychologist Judith Hudson notes that the brain is always reassembling the fragments—that collage—and that because of this constant reassembling, memory is particularly vulnerable to distortion. Hudson notes, “it is possible to have a very detailed and vivid memory and be wrong about the details.” That, as we retell the distorted memory, it becomes more real to us in its falsehood, and I wonder if that is the point. If perhaps false memory gets to the heart of something unrelated to the narrative of our history, and closer to the heart of that moment’s sensation, the *feel* of memory’s reality.

<sup>b</sup> Photographs can inform memory. We live a singular moment, a singular experience, time threaded, looping and looping forward, but photographs fill in the snags, the moth-holed bits of the fabric. Photography works as the amber to encapsulate our experience, photography makes still what is always fleeting in our minds. However, photography can lie. Here I am thinking of those uncanny Victorian *memento mori*—death photographs whose subjects are propped up—life-like and lying—or the photography of young babies, held by their blanketed mothers hiding under the fabric of background.

memory”<sup>d</sup> and think that the reality of that moment might perhaps be something like this:

I am tired after a long Saturday of errands. I am babbling sleepily to my mom, she laughs. She goes to hang up her coat and purse as I go to sit on the stairs. I first lean back, then lie, then my eyes close. I slowly drift to sleep. I awake to my mom laughing under her breath, lifting me up, walking up those brown stairs, putting me to bed.

But this is definitely all wrong, all made up, a phony recollection that is somehow closer to the truth of the moment.<sup>e</sup> I tell my mother of this recollection and she corrects it, tells me:

“This is how I remember it: You were very young, maybe 18 to 24 months and we had just returned home after a very busy day. I was probably busy putting away groceries or my handbag after setting you down on the carpet. I think you started to crawl upstairs and just collapsed from exhaustion! You only made it up a few stairs and that is how I found you. I must have scooped you up and put you to bed,

<sup>c</sup> In his book, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about the magic of photography, “what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” (Barthes 4) That is to say, that through the photographic image, we are able to return again and again to a time that we are not from: in other words we are able to time travel. Barthes articulates a language system that we can utilize to interact with and describe how we relate to photography, and in turn, memory. Barthes describes the *studium* and *punctum* of image systems: wherein, simply put the *studium* is the ostensible subject and composition of the image we take in, and the *punctum* is the resonance that pricks us emotionally as we gaze upon the image. The *punctum* therefore becomes the lump in your throat, the squint of your eye as you interact with the photograph. It is the very essence of transportation, of transgression; of poignancy that one feels when they look at a particularly moving photograph, or of reliving a moment in memory.

<sup>d</sup> I remember Tobias Wolff, author of *This Boy's Life*, discussing what he called “the frailty of memory” at a lecture he was giving in Bellingham, Washington—where he grew up, and where I went to college. At the reading, Wolff detailed his concern in returning to that quiet college town, only to find that all the buildings had changed, all the referents of his memory—all of the images and maps that lay as the background of his memory—had changed. In fact, they had not changed—he had. The old hardware store on Holly Street, and the historical post office still stood, where they always had, but time was a distance Wolff’s memory could not accurately span, the photograph of his memory was no longer true, it was a falsehood, a frail thing he could no longer trust.

<sup>e</sup> It hurts me that my earliest memory is false, is frail. It makes me distrust my experience, my view of the world, makes me question my very sense of self in that moment.

but not before I took a picture of my tired baby girl!”

I begin to see that the truth lies somewhere in the middle of the photograph of my mind, and the physical photograph. It lies somewhere between the chemical residue of filmic process and the synapse flash of my mind’s capture.<sup>f</sup> It lies.

My great grandmother died in 1987. My earliest, and most vivid, memory is of attending her funeral. Let me say it this way:

I am small, looking up and out into a world of grownups. They are all clad in long black trench coats, with umbrellas overhead. The rain is darting fast and cold all around us. It is all wet and grey, and I can’t see my mother’s face, and I can’t see my grandmother’s face, but they are there and we are all mourning.

Even now, this memory is so vivid, but I distrust it, can see it shift, a pivot of unreality, let me say this:

After the funeral, it is suddenly sunny<sup>g</sup> and I am laughing running through the slightly damp grass with my grandmother.<sup>h</sup> She is

<sup>f</sup> Photographer and artist, A.R. Hopwood worked with British psychologist, Dr. Kimberly Wade on “The False Memory Archive” (an exhibit which has resided at The Freud Museum for the last year) in which the artist created doctored photographs which “proved” or illustrated a false memory. The photographs had a crystalizing effect on the memory of the subjects. The photographs made real what was not. When we evaluate the truth of our memory, it can seem innocuous—the intentionality of my falling asleep on the stairs, is after all, not important in the scheme of my life, and my formation of character, the flattening out of a disagreement with a friend, or the repression of a childhood disappointment may in fact have positive impact on our sense of self—we forget in order to protect. We lie in order to maintain our psyche, to maintain our ego. However, when one applies the flattening out, or falsification of memory within the context of recalling a crime in court, or holding accountable someone for abuse, memory’s frailty is fraught with consequence. In Melissa Hogenboom’s piece “Why Does the Brain Create False Memories?” for the BBC, she notes that “sometimes false memories can have more serious ramifications. For example, if an eyewitness testimony in court contributes to a false conviction—[the use of] forensic technology has now led to many such convictions being overturned.” And so there are consequences that we face in the recollection of false memory, slivers in our soles which make it hard to travel back to our past, back to what has been lost.

<sup>g</sup> I distrust my first memory of a sunny family funeral in Seattle, because when I dig into weather statistics, into objective scientific measurements of history (the only way to see the past without lying) I learn that Seattle averages only 58 days of sun a year, topping the list of ten-least-sunny places in the US. The memory I have of sun in itself signals to me a potential falsehood. Freud, in his essay “Screen Memories” from his book, *The Uncanny*, recalls a childhood memory of yellow flowers, and a girl he once loved—but upon closer inspection has “the impression that there’s something not quite right about this scene: the yellow of the flowers is far too prominent in the overall picture, and the delicious taste of bread seems exaggerated, as though it were part of a hallucination.” (Freud 11) The vividness of weather, or of the taste of bread, or of the overly glossy dew upon the grass of my memory set against a sunny sky—the exaggeration of it is what cues me of the falsehood. The vividness undermines the truth, and yet we know that the visceral sensations of scent, and taste, of warmth or cold are some of the most impressive catalysts of our memory, particularly of vague and repressed early memories.

throwing me a Frisbee that I never catch, and we are just moving and it is warm, we are immeasurably happy, and there are gravestones all around us.

The truth is, I never saw my grandmother run, not once. The truth is, this memory is as vivid and as real to me as the memory of breakfast this morning (eggs and coffee), and yet I know it is false, because my mother tells me I never attended the funeral, that I was too young (only two), and it was too sad, and that she left me in daycare that day.

I spoke to my grandmother and mother about that day some years ago and was shocked when they said I wasn't there. Even now, I feel a determinedness to validate this memory; there is something so real about it to me even now.<sup>i</sup> When I speak to my mother now about her grandmother's funeral, it is shadowed by the memory we share of my own grandmother's funeral, now seven years past. The sorrow is still close; it can be conjured up in an instant, tears come too quickly. But the problem still stands: I can remember that false memory as vividly and with as much emotion as I can recall the true memory of my own grandmother's

<sup>h</sup> My memory is so skewed and yet so logical, that I have implanted the wetness of the grass to "remember" the false memory of rain just moments earlier.

<sup>i</sup> In "Screen Memories" Freud notes that "the most frequent content of the earliest childhood memories [children] list on the one hand things that gave rise to fear, embarrassment, physical pain, and so on, and on the other, important events such as illnesses, deaths, fires, births of siblings, etc." (5) It is not the quotidian of our day to day that we remember from our early childhood, but often the more impactful memories—of birth, or death, of war, or abuse become encapsulated alongside scenic, details—the trench coat, or Frisbee, the rain, or yellow flowers—and speak to the way we assemble memory, utilizing images and symbols to stand in for more complex feelings and experiences in our lives. Freud in fact details his own guised memory—wherein he acutely remembers a bowl of ice on a set dining table—and only upon further probing at the memory, is he able to recognize that the bowl of ice was sitting out during his grandmother's wake. It was in fact not the bowl of ice that was the memory—but rather the intense loss he felt in his grandmother's death that he was actually remembering. The bowl of ice was a stand in, a screen for the loss of his grandmother, it was perhaps what he gazed upon, what the camera of his mind's eye settled on in the wake of the loss.

death and funeral.

The other day, I brought this up to my mother, and she thought that perhaps there was some psychic transference or projection going on, and that is why I hold the false memory of my great grandmother's funeral. She tells me that when her grandmother was sick and dying in the hospital, that she once took me to visit, and that I brought levity and joy to that moment.

I have no recollection of that visit, but can begin to posit the way I must have absorbed the emotion of the scene.<sup>j</sup> Let me say, I can imagine it went like this:

It is always raining, and grey, except those few days that it is sunny. That day it must have started grey and wet, but then shifted to sun breaks in the afternoon. My mother and grandmother are sad, losing the family matriarch, and they've brought me, the only granddaughter along to visit my great grandmother.

I have no true memory of this, and yet I accept that this is perhaps the closest to the truth of that moment

<sup>i</sup> Dr. Wade explains in her work with The False Memory Archive, that "our perceptual systems aren't built to notice absolutely everything in our environment. We take in information through all our senses but there are gaps. So when we remember an event, what our memory ultimately does is fills in those gaps by thinking about what we know about the world." This is where the intensity, the excess of those image systems, those symbols in our memory begin to feel more like hallucinations, than memory. Our psyches push the visual detail—the ice bucket, the yellow flowers—to the surface to protect us from the intensity of the pain, but also to cue us, to trigger us to remember so that we can reconnect with the experience long passed, or even repressed.

<sup>k</sup> Freud describes this correlation between symbol and memory: "one might say that, if a certain childhood experience asserts itself into the memory, this is not because it is golden, but because it has lain beside gold" (Freud 7).

that I will get. I begin to see the way my memory was formed because of its proximity to the emotion and reality of the world that my small self was experiencing.<sup>k</sup> The trench coat, the weather, the love and loss all reside next to some golden aspect of my memory's scaffolding. It becomes real through perception, through time's hindsight.

When I think of my first memories, the realization of my separation from my mother is vivid.<sup>l</sup> Let me put the realization this way:

I remember being a young girl—maybe only three or four—sitting on the dining room floor, watching my mom as she smoked a cigarette and talked to my grandmother on the phone.<sup>m</sup> I saw my mother inhale each puff deep, laughing, nodding her head, hearing my grandmother, connecting with her over the distance of some miles. I remember having the queerest feeling, realizing her embodiment as being totally separate from my own.<sup>n</sup>

At only four years old, I had a distinct existential

<sup>l</sup> Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD—not to be confused with Seasonal Affective Disorder—also SAD) occurs in children under the age of 18, who experience extreme emotional duress when separated from their home or family. My desire to be close to my mother and grandmother's loss, exists because of my need to feel psychologically close, and is the reason the memory of attending the funeral exists. I created the falsity to move through the SAD.

<sup>m</sup> My mother always smoked the gold packed Marlboro 100's—that detail always rises to the surface of my memory of realizing the separation from myself and my mother, it becomes a symbol of how I saw my mother when I was a child, it screens for the moment of existential awakening I had in realizing my separation from my mother.

<sup>n</sup> In his essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" presented in 1949, Jacques Lacan describes the period of development between the ages of 6-18 months wherein babies first regard their image in the mirror, and begin to understand their bodily separation from their mothers. To think back on the memory of my mother's separation from me, I recognize the feeling of the uncanny—or *unheimlich* as Freud explained—that familiar yet creepy feeling one has in moments like regarding their doppelganger, or perhaps in recognizing the ghost of what was that the photograph encapsulates.

realization. Let me put it simply:

I remember thinking *she is in her body, in her face, in her mind, peering out, and I am in mine.*

Even more so—my grandmother, who I could not see, was experiencing a similar thing—life—peering from her body out into the world.

This memory has always struck me, and I wonder if the isolation of embodiment that I realized as a very young child might be the reason for my need to construct memories? If in fact there may have been some deeply rooted fear of separation from my mother, and my grandmother and a desire to stay close to them that pushed me to psychologically reconstruct the trauma of loss that they experienced so distinctly apart from me.

When I think back on myself as a child, I do not remember myself being particularly sad, but I do remember often feeling lonely. I remember so many quiet weekends at home, my mother cleaning the house, or paying bills. I remember playing alone in my bedroom, or watching TV, and wishing for company. I was imaginative, and inquisitive, and very aware of my isolation as the only child of a single parent.<sup>o</sup>

<sup>o</sup> I would never describe myself gifted, but know the tense awareness asserted in James Webb's article, "Existential Depression in Gifted Children" in which he notes that "humans do not enter a world which is inherently structured. We must give the world a structure which we ourselves create. Isolation recognizes that no matter how close we become to another person, a gap always remains, and we are nonetheless alone." This speaks to why we reach for photos, reach for a camera in important moments. We anticipate forgetting, and we create photos to remind ourselves of our historical existence. As we create temporal distance from the moment encapsulated in the frame of both our mind, and the frame of the photograph, we realize the inevitability—the loss—the thing that we are constantly grappling to accept, that our past is always behind us, always slipping, escaping, always leaving, and dying, just like the family of our memory. Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* that he realizes why he is so drawn to a photograph of his mother as a child, "The Winter Garden Photograph" as he calls it—Barthes realizes that "in front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shutter, like Winnicott's psychotic patient *over a catastrophe that has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is that catastrophe." (96) We experience tragedy every time we gaze upon the memory of our past, a loss every time we regard a photograph.

<sup>p</sup> By loss, I mean death.

<sup>q</sup> This is SAD. This is isolation. This is memory. We hold the past uniquely within the frame of our mind. We exist psychologically totally absorbed in our experience, through this subjective and particular lens we construct artifice, we construct memory. It is all impression, all punctum and prick.

I have always been afraid of loss<sup>p</sup>—of the loss of my grandmother, and mother—afraid that without them I might cease to exist.<sup>q</sup> And so I imagine that is why I construct memory, desire to make connections to brown carpet, and black trench coats: because it frames the world for me, even now. It makes me feel a part of something, connected to something psychically as well as emotionally, historically. I need the frailty, the falsehood, because it helps me to create a memory of the person I am, when it has been very impossible to otherwise understand.

Children, like adults, construct narratives around the fracture of their memory in order to make solid, make gold of what is otherwise gravel. It helps us to make sense of our peculiar isolation, our embodiment, in relation to the people we love. When I boil it all down, I can say this:

I both distrust my first memories, and find them quite honest. They represent the general *feel* of the moment, are some kind of collage of experience and empathetic perception, an occasional layering on of photographic evidence, and peripheral knowledge.<sup>r</sup> The

<sup>r</sup> I know that my great grandmother died, and that I fell asleep on the stairs. I know it was always raining and grey, until it wasn't. I know that I was loved and that there was sorrow all mixed into one scene, and that the memories at a certain point became screens, once muddled and fragmented, were made linear and whole so that I could understand better, so that I could glimpse what was lost, so I could reach back to what is frail.

memories, like writing, are golden, amber encapsulations—constructed and false, aiming to contain experience in a solid way.

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