

The Photograph

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Abstract

This is a narrative inquiry that explores the significance of a photograph that has exerted a hold over me for several years. A single glance, like running a finger along the amassed spines of well-loved novels, tumbles me instantly into memory. Yet, over time I have realised there is more than nostalgia to this photograph's hold. Like those novels, this photograph holds its own fiction, yet through that fiction it also carries profound truths about how life might be lived. As I live alongside it, I find the photograph unfolding to another, deeper level of meaning that shifts and changes through time, representing a self in flux and guiding a journey through the themes of my life. In telling the story of another, I find that the photograph contains my own narrative too.



The Photograph

On my window ledge, for almost a decade now, has sat a photograph, black-and-white with a primrose-yellow mount, all framed in pine: a young couple in 1930s dress stand happy and ill at ease in equal measure, the stone buttress of a church and its high carved wooden door open behind them, newlyweds posing for their first photograph in marriage. She wears a calf-length dress, simple in design, a small hat with a lightly jewelled veil perched upon her head, a tumbling bouquet of ivy and lily-of-the-valley held tightly in her hands. Turned between husband and camera, she tilts her head back a little and smiles her joy. He stands facing front, tucked just a little behind his new wife, short hair neatly pressed, well-worn shoes shiny and a just-too-

big suit falling across the back of his hands where his fingers curl their nervousness. His smile is warm and wide and gauche, and they are both oh-so very young.

Occasionally, a visitor will glance at this photograph on the window ledge and ask whether they are my grandparents. I have always answered no – no, this is not family, this is not real. Only now, with the passing of time, I am not so sure.

The photograph in the frame shows the 1932 wedding of Walter and Gloria Kendall. Constructed to imitate an array of wedding photographs gone before – the clothing, the bouquet, the church as backdrop, the newlywed pose, that sense of ‘documentary truth’ (Berger & Mohr, 1982) – it leads the viewer (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001) to name it and date it, just as those who made the image intended. For, whilst the photograph shows the wedding, eight decades past, of Walter and Gloria, the bride and groom are played by Jacob Casselden and Poppy Roberts, the photograph taken in 2005 for a film I was then making about the life and dilemmas and decisions of the fictional character Walter (Crow, 2005).

One afternoon during the shoot, a single task on a vast list, a brief interlude away from the set, my art director Simon Hicks whisked away the two actors, to stand outside a nearby church, dressed in wedding clothes, and to ‘be’ Walter and Gloria, newly wed. The photograph appears in the film as a glimpse, blink-and-you-miss-it, years after the wedding day, when Walter, now aged 90, sits in his sitting room some months after the death of his beloved Gloria, sipping whisky and musing on the turns of life.

The camera bobs and weaves across Walter’s sitting room, alighting on the photograph upon the mantelpiece amidst a clutter of mementos of a life, well lived. The wedding itself never features in the film; only this photograph, a device to fill an ellipsis, to confirm for the audience what the story hints: that Walter and Gloria did (happily ever after) get married.

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Making this film was a joyous experience: from the two young actors with whom I worked closely and developed a deep fondness, to the crew who worked together with collaboration and commitment of a scale I’d never known before, to the

challenges of my most ambitious film to that point, and to the slow birth of the character and story that would be Walter.

His is a simple story about a young man's struggle to steer a course through life. It is a story of finding courage to turn from the expectations and grand designs of others towards a life more ordinary in which Walter can be more truthfully himself. Gloria's intervention will feed the courage he needs. Looking back from old age at the life he has lived, he can confirm that simplicity, for him, has made for the sweetest of lives.

With filming complete, I cast about for a few mementos of my own. This photograph seemed to encapsulate my experience of making the film, so I mounted it and framed it and set it down. On display in my workroom ever since, it sits amidst a clutter of memorabilia from this and other films, keeping me company and accompanying me in future imaginings. A single glance, like running a finger along the amassed spines of well-loved novels, tumbles me instantly into memory. Every time, it is a heartfelt smile.

Yet, still, over time I have realised there is more than nostalgia to this photograph's hold over me. Living alongside the still image, beyond the making of the film, it has unfolded to another, deeper level of meaning, impossible to discern by the outsider and gossamer thread to me.

In the making of a film, this photograph was a throwaway moment in the much bigger picture, helping to breathe life into the story I had set out to tell. It is an image whose original function has long since been served. Yet the simplicity of intent has inadvertently given rise to a larger and more lasting tale in which Walter's story continues to resonate for me. How is it that an image that appears as pure fiction has become, for me, so real?

I turn to the origins of Walter's story and its long unfolding. In the days after my beloved grandfather's death, almost a decade before, my family mused upon his nightly ritual, the carefully measured whisky, decanted into his glass, just so, and savoured. We contemplated the volume he must have consumed over decades: enough to fill a bath, a small car, a swimming pool? From that small beginning, Walter's story took hold. It incorporated that swimming pool, but became a tale of a champion swimmer who finds that competition takes him away from his love of the water. His love of the water is mine; I understand bodily the way that the flow of the

water lies deep in the truth of his self. In losing swimming from my own life through illness, Walter restores my memory of it. In working on a fruit and vegetable stall, Walter mimics the work of my grandfather's youth, but the largest imprint of all would be that of character: slow and steady, a family man steeped in gentleness who would always return to his core.

In the intimacy of the creative process, which is so much more than scripting, filming, or editing, characters are nurtured, *birthed* into existence. They draw from those who have influenced us and they draw from our selves, coming to exist through a process of our own getting to know them. If others look to photographs of their forebears for resemblances (Hirsch, 1997), in Walter I find a kind of fictional next of kin, a portrait I recognise. When I look to Walter, he carries traces of my grandfather and, from the years of nurturing his story into existence, he holds traces of me. At once old enough to be my grandfather and young enough to be my child, he evokes rootedness and maternal pride alike.

Despite the biographical gulf of age, gender, class and more, I find myself in Walter. Beyond the DNA of character traits and family history, with hindsight, I realise that his journey to be more truthfully himself, to forge a life that reflects that, echoes my own. Over time, it becomes harder to say whether Walter's search has emerged from mine, or mine from his, but the themes of his life are the themes of mine: we each find ourselves torn between making a public mark and finding a private peace.

What I have been trying to work out through Walter, alongside him, is not how to live the life he chooses but how to live my own. How do I make a mark yet remain myself? In a world that values the antithesis of Walter's choice, how do I negotiate the push-me-pull-you between a need to contribute and a duty to have impact? Is there a way I might find a voice less costly? Mine is a staccato dance between a public life of political action and the private life of a quieter self. My decision, in contrast to Walter's, is not so much a choice of opposites, but of how I bring together two oppositional ways of being, to meld them into something new that is at peace with who I am.

What I am seeking is perhaps more complicated than Walter, yet I too am in search of flow. To find it, I must, like him, silence the voices telling me their expectations, and listen instead to my inner voice. Our choices may differ, but Walter's 'truths' are mine and discovering this enables me to ask some of the same burning questions of

myself: who am I really and have I the courage to be myself? At once shaping Walter and being shaped in turn by him, I find both yearning and wisdom embedded in his portrait.

What matters to me about this photograph is not that it is fiction, but that it is truth. Even as it is not a precise mirror of the world (Jackson, 1998), by entwining real and imagined happenings, it conveys profound knowing (Banks, 2008). Rather than replicating real events, Walter's story contains a more introspective, moral knowing about how life might be lived. 'Documentary truth', here, is replaced by a deeper 'emotional truth'. In Walter, I find a character I believe; what he discovers through his story tells me something for my own. In his story, Walter realises the gulf between what he has become and who he is. His truth is the clarity and courage he brings to that, and they speak to me.

And yet still, even as I find I love Walter as a son, I wonder at the absurdity of loving someone who is not real, holding conversations with them, even mourning them when it is time to let go (Walker, 1982). I wonder at our capacity not only to invent stories but for those stories somehow to invent us back. It seems that fiction does something that exactitude often cannot. 'Stretch[ing] our world' (Sontag, 2007, p. 228), it offers ways to understand and interpret events, to imagine other ways of being and rehearse them into existence. Creating stories about the things that matter most to us, we can imagine a truth that does not (yet) exist and bring it closer to being. The intangible process of imagination can bring about concrete change.

In confronting the expectations of others, Walter re-learns what makes him happy, remembering the source of what matters most to him, what makes him most *Walter*. I look now to his swimming and I see not only the literal translation of my own love for the water, but that Walter's own rediscovery of this is a metaphor for my own search for self. With hindsight, I find that Walter's journey is mine.

I had thought that I brought Walter into being in order to bring to others insights gained in the course of my life; I suppose to offer not only moments of insight, but also shortcuts. I do not believe I set out consciously to learn about myself in the journeying alongside, but it seems the two sit comfortably together.

Perhaps, if this was a journey I needed to take, it was less intimidating to do so through a distanced persona and another era. It created a disguise even from myself

that Walter's journey might be my own. And perhaps another reason I cleave to the photograph is the completeness of Walter's story. In real life, where there is no ending until the life is over, fiction can give completion (Sontag, 2007). It can bring a solidity, a reliability, to the meanings that can be drawn from life. The photograph of Walter dates to the time of his taking courage, yet I view it through the eyes of his 90-year old self, knowing that the risk he took inspired a life well lived. Taking courage, for Walter, worked.

As I contemplate this photograph of Walter, there are no conclusions, only staging posts where ambivalence resides. It is that same ambivalence that earlier chased me from it, for this is not the first time I have tried to fathom its hold. Trying to write it once before, I found it too personal and self-absorbed, too quiet and un-*doing*. I turned away to write instead a very different work, a mark more public, a duty more clearly fulfilled. I see it now: my inability to approach the meaning in the image was the very reason I needed to do so. Here are the themes of my life.

And as I dance my halting, shambling, oh-so-real life of opposites, I begin to learn that the political and personal might be already entwined, deep within, each feeding the other's strength. It is the quiet voice that restores and brings me clarity, that might yet teach me how to make a mark and yet remain myself. Walter teaches me that there are other ways to swim. Now I must learn to listen so that the opposites within me may inhabit the same life. In the midst of that, where there can be no knowing how life might unfold, Walter's becomes an image of quiet and reassuring optimism, of trust in the long view.

I have come to know this photograph in that strange intersection of imagination and reality, where fiction can be truth. Beyond photograph and story, beyond tangible filmic intent and lingering nostalgia, I like the concealed influence of this image. Its backstory is one of manipulating image-meaning, but it has a 'forward-story' too, in which ever-shifting meanings bind Walter's life into the warp and weft of mine and continue to take me by surprise. This has been a process of reaching through the photograph and retrieving *my* narrative back out of Walter's – and, I realise, *this* is why the photograph holds me still.

In the end, a fictional image has become a kind of *allo* self-portrait (Hirsch, 1997): my ghost image shaping Walter who has shaped me back in turn. Or perhaps it is more an aspirational self-portrait, a familial touchstone for remembering my own priorities

and courage to act. In creating Walter's story, in setting out to give insight into another's life, I have been given insight into my own.

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