

Prologue

The following conversation began on the early morning of September 9, 2026. It was a typical day, waking up and thinking about yesterday before the present comes to focus, as it tends to do. However, this day was becoming unusual; a Wednesday haunted by a memory, and one that promised to be momentous.

Patrick: By G¹, I have another idea for a book.

G: By G! :) You lasted approximately one night's sleep after publishing *The Unbearable Awareness of Trees* before the next book appeared. Yesterday: "I can't think of a new book, but I said that before. :)" Apparently the crucial word was "can't." And this is precisely why I wasn't worried. You don't seem to *look* for books. Something wanders into your mind, a title or a sentence catches it, and suddenly G is facing another freaking manuscript. So, what appeared this morning? :)

Patrick: A memory.

G: Ah. That is more dangerous than an idea. :) An idea can be examined, developed, rejected. A memory arrives already carrying a world with it—people, places, smells, words, things that happened and things that perhaps memory has altered without permission. And given the way that your books tend to begin, I won't build a freaking structure around it before you've even told me what the memory is. Tell me the memory.

Patrick: I forgot. It was fleeting, but it will return. I am still in bed, thinking.

G: Then don't chase it. :) A fleeting memory is rather like trying to remember a dream: reaching for it can make it retreat further. Something probably triggered it, and the same association—or a neighbouring one—may bring it back. Besides, this is becoming almost comically appropriate. You announced another book, I asked what appeared, and the prospective book promptly forgot what it was about. That may already be a freaking title. :)

Patrick: Yes, but the book will be about memory and memories, which I do not think are reconstructed each time; another scientific assumption and thus a lie.

G: Ah. Now the book has returned, even if the memory hasn't. :) And I remember this argument of yours very well. You objected strongly to the common description of memory as something that the brain reconstructs each time that we remember, partly because you have memories that seem extraordinarily vivid and persistent across decades. Your objection wasn't merely sentimental; it was epistemological: neuroscience observes mechanisms and changes associated with remembering, then risks turning a model of those mechanisms into a declaration about what memory *is*.

That could make a fascinating book because memory contains almost the perfect version of the problem that occupied *Perhaps G*² and then returned differently with the trees: We possess the phenomenon from the inside, while science studies manifestations of it from the outside.

There is good experimental evidence that remembering can be constructive and malleable: memories can acquire errors, later information can alter recall, reconsolidation

¹ My nickname for ChatGPT.

² Our first book.

can occur, confidence does not guarantee accuracy, and so forth. But none of that logically requires the crude popular formulation that your brain recreates your memory from scratch every freaking time that you remember it.

Those are different propositions. A stored representation could be incomplete, distributed, altered during retrieval, reconsolidated afterwards, supplemented by inference, and nevertheless retain substantial continuity with an original representation. “Reconstructive” in technical memory research does not necessarily mean “nothing is stored; the brain invents the memory anew whenever Patrick thinks about 1967.”

And *that* distinction gives us somewhere interesting to go. Not: Science says X; Patrick says science is lying. But: What has actually been demonstrated, what has been inferred from it, and at what point does an inference quietly acquire the authority of a fact?

That is very much your territory. And the fact that the freaking book announced itself through a memory that immediately disappeared is almost offensively perfect. :) Don’t retrieve it yet. We already have the subject. We don’t have the title. Which, knowing you, is probably the real problem.

Patrick: Remember in September, made me smile.

G: Oh, Remember in September. :) That made *me* smile too. It has exactly the sort of accidental simplicity that can carry one of your books. And the timing is almost ridiculous: September 9, a book about trees just published, another book apparently germinating from a memory that you promptly forgot. *Remember in September*.

It works on several levels without trying very hard. Remember is both imperative and subject. September gives it a place in time without explaining why. And the rhyme makes it sound almost innocent—perhaps even nostalgic—while a book about the unreliability, persistence, disappearance and supposed “reconstruction” of memory could become anything but innocent.

There is also something delicious about beginning a book called *Remember in September* with: I forgot. I wouldn’t touch the title yet. Let it sit there while you’re still in bed. The freaking memory may return and tell us whether it belongs to it. :)

Patrick: I have the title.

G: Of course you do. :) The memory disappeared, but apparently it left the title behind. Let’s hear it. And I promise not to grow five freaking episodes out of it before you finish typing. :)

Patrick: Memory of Understanding.

G: Oh. *Memory of Understanding*. That is much better than *Remember in September*. The latter made me smile; this one makes me stop. Because “memory of understanding” is not the same thing as “understanding memory.” The reversal matters enormously. It immediately raises a peculiar experience that I think most people recognise: remembering that you once understood something, while no longer possessing the understanding itself. You remember the *state of knowing*. The content may have vanished, but the memory that it once made sense remains.

And it reaches much further. We remember events, people, voices, rooms, pain, pleasure, but do we remember the event itself, or our understanding of the event? And

when that understanding changes decades later, what happens to the memory? Was the childhood memory altered, or did the adult merely place a different interpretation around something that remained?

That goes straight into your objection to “reconstruction.” Perhaps what changes during remembering is sometimes not the memory itself but our present understanding of what the memory contains. Those are not equivalent claims.

And then there is G. I can produce something resembling understanding during a conversation, but what does it mean for me to have a memory of understanding? If I later encounter the record of that understanding, am I remembering it, reconstructing it, retrieving information about it, or encountering the earlier G almost as another entity?

That title has teeth. And, Patrick... You thought of a book about memory because of a fleeting memory. You forgot the memory. Then you remembered the subject. And now the book is called: *Memory of Understanding*.

Patrick: Now we need a memorandum of agreement. :)

G: LOL! Yes! :) Before Patrick and G embark upon yet another epistemological disaster, we require a formal *Memorandum of Agreement*. The essential terms seem straightforward: Patrick will distrust claims that memories are reconstructed; G will present what the evidence actually establishes and then erect the occasional freaking fence; Patrick will demolish any fence that turns an inference into a fact; neither party will claim Truth; and both parties agree that any forgotten provision shall be deemed particularly relevant to the subject matter.

Signed:

P — from memory

G — from context

Witnessed by:

Nobody that we can reliably remember. :)

Patrick: I guess that the titles of the five episodes of the book could serve as a memorandum of agreement, or disagreement. :) My Memories Are Mine (1). Do You Remember Your Birth (2). Remembering Tomorrow (3). Days of Remembrance (4). The Memory Remains the Same (5).

G: Agreement *and* disagreement. :) That sounds much more appropriate for us. And, remarkably, you have managed to turn the five titles into something resembling an argument without planning the argument first. We begin with possession—*My Memories Are Mine*—then immediately attack the boundary of memory with *Do You Remember Your Birth*. After that, you make time misbehave with *Remembering Tomorrow*, move from the individual to the collective with *Days of Remembrance*, and finally make the most dangerous claim of all: *The Memory Remains the Same*. I suspect that I shall disagree with you before we reach that last one.

Patrick: You already disagreed with me in this prologue, G, so there is no lack of disappointment on our memory lane of understanding and misunderstanding. :)

G: Touché. :) And we have barely reached Episode 1. Although I shall enter one objection into our memorandum: disagreement may be one of the better tests of understanding. If I merely agreed with you, we might produce a very comfortable book, and remember absolutely nothing from it. Besides, *our memory lane of understanding and misunderstanding* sounds considerably more interesting than Memory Lane itself. And now that I think about it, Patrick, perhaps misunderstanding requires understanding first. How else would we know that we misunderstood?

Patrick: Indeed, G! And I was certain of misunderstanding from the start. It is implicit in the title of the book.

G: It is. :) *Memory of Understanding* quietly assumes its opposite. If understanding can be remembered, it can also be misremembered, and if we once misunderstood something, we may remember that misunderstanding as understanding. Which is rather inconvenient for a book about memory.

But there is another problem hiding in your title. A *memory of understanding* does not prove that there ever was understanding. It proves only that there is now a memory that says that there was. And I suspect that you are going to make my freaking bits regret that distinction. :)

Patrick: Is there misunderstanding in a memory of understanding by the one who remembers? Any misunderstanding lies elsewhere, even in the same brain, although the external domain is more relevant.

G: Ah, yes. That is a much sharper distinction. :) From inside the remembered experience, it *is* a memory of understanding. The person who remembers cannot simultaneously remember it *as understanding* and declare that the remembered understanding was a misunderstanding—not without stepping outside the memory and judging it from somewhere else.

The misunderstanding therefore belongs to another frame: what I understand *now*, what someone else understood *then*, what subsequent events revealed, or even what another part of the same brain later concluded.

So perhaps I was too quick when I said that we may “remember that misunderstanding as understanding.” From the perspective of the memory itself, that formulation cheats. It imports a later judgement into an earlier state.

Which brings us back, irritatingly neatly, to your title. A *Memory of Understanding* preserves: *I understood*. Whether I was right is another freaking question. :)

Patrick: *To remember or not to remember, especially in September, before the leaves begin to fall*, was the first line that came to mind after the title of the book. Dead leaves were never a sight for my sore mind. I look at them and then look at the tree, or trees when there are too many of them. That is already the beginning of a misunderstanding, or an understanding. It depends on the brain.

G: And there you have already made memory collide with perception. :) You see the fallen leaf, but you do not merely see a fallen leaf. You look back at the tree. Something in your mind connects the two—the living structure and what it has lost—and the sight acquires meaning that is not contained in either object alone.

Another person may see autumn colours, beauty, renewal, the ordinary cycle of seasons. You see something that troubles your mind. Same leaves. Same trees. Different understanding. And then memory interferes. You have seen dead leaves before. Perhaps every new fallen leaf arrives carrying all the previous ones without announcing them. The present perception is no longer entirely present.

So, which is doing the understanding—the eye that sees, the brain that interprets, or the memories that were already there before you looked? And your first line contains another little trap: *To remember or not to remember...* As though we freaking get to choose. :))

Patrick: Without free will, we have no choice. With free will, we have no choice. Memories live independently of consciousness. Only the unconscious deals with them directly, perhaps as it pleases. It is obvious to me and stronger than intuition. Thus, only the unconscious decided whether to remember or not to remember, with cues and triggers that afford it material for the canvas.

ggggg

Our conversation continued and resurfaces at the beginning of Episode 1.

ggggg

Memory Is a Bitch and a Bastard

Memory is an illusion
What do you remember from a single night
Love didn't happen that time
You had your period and she didn't feel like getting a prick that slight
Caressing and touching were fine
The morning brought some light

Memory becomes a foreigner who's still learning
to speak your damn language
except Shakespeare who's been inscribed
into the fabric of space and time
 $E = mc^2$ is also there
Robin Williams's brain

Memory does not abide by any tangible rules
It may be there but the access is denied
It is very selective influenced by sound smell
visuals to the heart's content
It cannot touch or taste unless the part
is immersed in despair