Frances Hider

Marchwell Cottage

Penicuik, Midlothian, United Kingdom

EH26 0PX

+44 7785510850

[hider.writer@gmail.com](mailto:hider.writer@gmail.com)

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A Frail Perishable Thing

**Before**

“I hope I’m not boring you,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Look, that’s what it says here.”

Balanced on the bottom step of a broad stairway within a detached, two-story house of generous proportions, my husband jogged his shoulders up and down in silent laughter as he studied a small, framed, wall-mounted cartoon of a line-drawn figure recumbent on an analyst’s couch. The figure had a bulbous, overlarge nose, which diminished his body. And with only a single currant-like eye visible, he gazed into the distance, and the past, while overhead the caption read, *I* *hope I’m not boring you*.

We were in Sigmund Freud’s northwest London residence, a red-brick building set back from the road, overhung by the leafless branches of the deciduous London Plane, *Platanus x hispanica,* which lined the street. The house, a museum of course, pays homage to Freud—his life, his work and his personality. From the outside, the house retained the guise of a family home. A wide wooden gate and a crazy-paved path bordered with straggling winter greenery led to a heavyset front door where, once inside, the business end of the museum—a ticket desk, a listing of openings and closings, a vending machine, an arrow pointing to a gift shop, discretely located at the back of the building, and another pointing to the body of the house, to toilets, to the library and an exhibition—belied the domestic. Yet, despite the paraphernalia of commerce, the portrayal of history, and the reverence paid to one man’s life, or perhaps because of these things, 20 Maresfield Gardens sustained a fragile air of home.

We were away from our own home. The trip from Scotland was a spur-of-the-moment event. London dinners and theatre tickets and meetings with friends were quickly arranged. But at the back of my mind was a niggle of doubt about the good sense of setting off on a weekend of activity sandwiched by a four-hundred-mile train journey there and back, when the February weather was dismal and Calvin’s health uncertain. Selfishly though, I wanted to be in London. I wanted to pursue my research of therapy dogs—Freud’s dog Jofi had come up in my reading, although as it turned out the museum held only photographic evidence of the analyst’s canine companions, not much else. But I also wanted to return to a city where, as I recalled, life had seemed simpler and the future more hopeful. I wanted to turn back time’s silent, ticking clock.

Freud’s study, preserved on the first floor, showcased his desk. The broad surface was decked with figurines grouped along its length, in the way he was known to favor when working. Oriental rugs adorned the couch and floor, and the bow windows were heavily draped. Calvin and I joined a group of hushed visitors, who, behind rope cordons, politely maneuvered around each other taking in the cornucopia of antiquities, books, and paintings of Freud’s mentors hanging on the walls, while on shelves and tables, silver framed photographs of family and friends, portraits and groups, in black and white and fading sepia marked the passing of time.

In a room with low wood benches, a video cycled images, in fleeting, crackling pixels across the screen, of Freud, his family, his dogs and his past.

Where Freud occupied a distant past, our lives—mine and Calvin’s—had become rooted in the present. The future was uncertain, and memories of the past were fractured by Calvin’s diagnosis six months earlier. Alzheimer’s. In the museum’s video room, we sat together, shoulder to shoulder, as moments in Freud’s life, held secure in home movies, spanned time. Calvin smiled at me and gave my hand a squeeze, and I wondered how soon our shared memories would be mine alone. How soon our mutual comprehension of a joke, an experience or a recollection, which for now hung on a word or a look, would be lost. When would the shorthand communication between us no longer be a valid currency? Would the invisible thread connecting us through half a life time of familiarity eventually unravel?

Freud died in September 1939. His death, from jaw cancer, was a protracted and painful affair. An émigré from Vienna to London in the wake of the Nazi invasion of Austria, Freud lived at Maresfield Gardens for just the last twelve months of his life, yet the house encapsulates the history of his eighty-three years and seems suffused with his spirit. The house—with neatly placed memorabilia and potted plants on window sills, polished dark wood tables and light parquet floors, eighteenth-century cupboards and chests, leather-bound books lodged from floor to ceiling, crowded collections of pots, bowls, amulets and figures in bronze, stone and terracotta from around the world, a tapestried footrest partially hidden under the desk, fireside armchairs in red, an extraordinary Felix Augenfeld, figure-shaped desk chair—almost as famous as the couch—padded in well-worn crimson-brown leather, and a cabinet display of his long single-breasted overcoat, his unfurled red umbrella, round-framed glasses, brown leather laced shoes and a notebook, laid open to reveal his forward sloping handwriting**—**gives the impression Freud never left.

When Calvin and I visited, the cartoons, a retrospective display of Mel Calman’s work, lined the walls of the downstairs hall and exhibition room. These cartoons—with their simplicity of line, the complexity of sentiment, and the inherent pithy truths of the professional cartoonist, which depicted the depressive and the emotional—seemed at ease in the former home of the renowned psychoanalyst. The crux of Freud’s intricate psychoanalytic theories––couched in the opulence of his living and working space, the desk teeming with figurines––were cracked open and laid bare in the cartoons’ brevity. The complex in brief.

I stood on the bottom step of the broad stairway to peer over Calvin’s shoulder, felt the metronomic rhythm of his laughter through the fabric of his green anorak, still damp from the February drizzle, and inhaled the warm scent of his hair, which smelt indefinably of him, of Old Spice aftershave and a lemony shampoo—a moment shared, a moment to remember.

Alzheimer’s doesn’t obliterate memories, it is not an either or, black or white, a with or without. It is a slow disintegration of the integrity of memory, characterized by gaps and fissures, spaces filled with fabrication or disjointed recollection—a landscape of dystopian proportions played out in a person’s head. And then perhaps a moment’s utter clarity.

“I’ve worked it out,” Calvin said to me one day, long after our encounter with Freud. “I’m going mad.”

Melancholy, like a slow exhaled breath, pervaded Freud’s museum, hovered over his professional books and papers. Melancholy—generated perhaps by the lingering nature of his death but more so in the exhibition of the personal—lent the house an air of sadness. In absence, Freud was present, trapped in the artifacts of his once everyday life, trapped in a never-ending repetition of opening and closing times, of stranger’s footsteps on the stairs, of milling bodies behind rope cordons, and eyes casually glancing at the famous couch and objets d’art, with which, according to the guidebook, Freud, with a glance to the past, surrounded himself for inspiration.

For Calvin, as time progressed, scenes from fifty forty thirty years ago replayed as if they occurred yesterday. But yesterday slipped away. Caught in a malign neuro fibrous web, words dodged recall, time skipped a beat, memories stalled. Yet held in some craggy corner, some memory outpost, lingered our shared laughter—our intrinsic understanding of each other remained intact.

Meanwhile, I, the keeper of our memories, sifted through old photos—to frame, to hang on walls, to remind him of who he was. I clung to the timbre of his voice, reminiscent of his dry slightly wacky humor, and took comfort in the familiar touch of his hand, the smell of Old Spice, of lemony shampoo. This moment in time, I told myself, was just a continuation of our relationship. A continuation, but with a variation in terms. Even so, there was a sadness in curating our memories alone.

The essence of Freud felt mummified in the carefully dusted and polished items, items which never moved but collectively gave the impression that he had popped out of the room for a moment or two to pass across the flickering film screen, to laugh with friends, to pet a favored dog, to sit in a garden chair on the veranda, a blanket across his knees, his wife tending to him, the neat parting of her short grey hair visible as she inclined her head and laid a gentle hand on his arm. And if the film should reverse, he’d reel back in comic motion, arms flailing, to a present past, to his study, to his desk, an A3 notepad and a succession of patients—his analysands—recumbent on the couch. *I hope I’m not boring you.* Here, Freud never rests, is never at peace, memories of him are in repeat, perpetual motion.

There was something exhausting in this constant repetition of memories. The past haunting the present. In a filmic version, the images never change. In a remembered version, the past is subject to the mind’s edit, versions rewritten and reimagined.

“Memory Wall,” a short story by Anthony Doerr, set in the near future, gives voice to the as yet unimaginable, to a time when memories can be captured and physically extracted through surgically placed cerebral pipes, to be stacked and stored on beige cartridges like musical tapes in a box and replayed through a vibrating helmet. The protagonist, a fifteen-year-old memory-tapper named Luvo, his own memories almost all erased, threads his way through the narrative. His outer world is the streets of Cape Town, his inner world the stolen memories of Alma, an ailing, part-demented seventy-four-year-old. *Remember a memory often enough*,Luvo thinks. *Maybe it takes over. Maybe, the memory becomes new again.*

In the coming years, I never ask Calvin, “Do you remember … ,” as I had no way of knowing if in fact rather than remembering he would adopt my version of events or insert something new of his own—perhaps, and I turn once more to Doerr and Luvo for inspiration … *the memory of remembering.*

I let Calvin’s memories surface willy-nilly, unchallenged but complimented by my own. Yet, in these shared recollections of ours, one—without the balance of the other—skewed our perspective on life and kept us living in the present from moment to moment, while the past sidled precariously alongside.

At the museum, after an hour or so, we made our way down the broad stairwell and out through the heavy front door, which clicked shut behind us as we left Freud to his daily meandering. In the taxi, on the way across London and back to our hotel, looking out through misted, rain-blotched windows, we passed Swiss Cottage, a four-minute drive from Maresfield Gardens down Fitzjohn Avenue to where it meets the Finchley Road and not far from where, in years past, I had lived. It was another life. A time before Calvin. In a tumble of memories, it was as if I crossed paths with my younger self, on foot then, not able to afford a taxi, crossing the road to the library, lugging a bagful of overdue books, as yet unaware of the accrued £6 fine.

Calvin and I sat side by side in the taxi, hand in hand, silenced by the noise of the engine, the slosh of rubber tyres on wet tarmac and the presence of the driver listening in. I inhaled the exquisite odor, unique to London cabs, a potpourri of past occupants who, clambering in and out, left behind traces of themselves to mingle with wafts of London air and the synthetic pine scent of a dangling air freshener, all combined with the resentment I still harbored against Swiss Cottage and the £6 fine.

A memory piled on a memory. Separated by time but colliding in my thoughts. What are memories but events and smells and images, encounters with people and places, stirred by emotion? Such memories, which psychologists term episodic, enable a flit to a previous time, confer a sort of time travel, a re-experiencing of past events. Such memories, fragmented and often out of sequence, embrace the fragility of dreams, and raise the question: was I really there and did it really happen? Memory … *how can it be such a frail perishable thing?*

But I remember the day of our 2014 visit to Maresfield Gardens with some clarity. Calvin’s diagnosis had set a limit—indefinite but certain—on our remaining time together. Each event and experience we shared carried the weight of possibly being the last. As there was a time before Calvin, there would be a time after.

**After**

Scotland. Eight years on. I wake in the early morning dark of a mid-November day, 2022. I am alone. It has been one year, seven months and twenty-four days since Calvin died. Last night I dreamt I forgot he was dead. In the dream, a black hole of infinite depth gaped in front of me. Teetering on the verge of panic, asleep yet awake to a conscious thought that this cannot be right, I floundered. Fought to open my eyes. Wrestled with disbelief. Fear gripped my throat and throttled common sense, grief flapped frantically, urging me towards the void.

I wonder if there is something wrong with me. Despite Calvin’s obvious absence—my knowledge of his death, the funeral, and the tumult of practicalities to sort out in the aftermath—my psyche lags behind, I am still attached to the idea of us.

I talk of *ours* and *we* and wear my wedding ring. Yet, the shape of my life has changed. It is thinner, lesser, incomplete. Together we were more than our individual selves. There was security in being us. And in contrast to the days when Calvin and I lived in the present with a nod to the past, now I find myself aware of the present—only aware of it—but otherwise lodged in memories of our prior life.

Memories pile on memories. In the garden, by the summer house, on rain-sodden grass and as if stepping in my own fossilized footsteps, I see the day Calvin brought home a black-and-white collie puppy twelve weeks old, one of a litter of eight. She’s rolling and play-fighting with our beloved but aged springer spaniel. An old life and a new life frolic. Then they stop for a second or two to sniff the damp ground. The puppy feels soft and fluid. A little mud cakes the short white hairs on her paws. It’s August 1993. I was tired that day. Calvin, though, was cheery. A new Canon camera hung on his chest—the strap, we’d notice later cut a red-raw mark on his neck—he was taking snaps, candid shots, fiddling with the lens, calling, *puppies! this way*. His jeans rankled at the top of his wellington boots and his blue-checked shirt was untucking at the waist**.**

“How did you choose her?” I said.

“She chose me,” he said, taking camera aim at the dogs. “What shall we call her?”

“Tress,” I said, stroking the collie’s smooth head.

As I stare at an otherwise empty patch of grass, my vision blurs. We are all there, he and I, old springer spaniel, new collie pup; then, oblivious to the passage of time, my living, breathing spaniel snuffles into view and joins the canine melee. It is as if two home movies slide one over the other and for a moment of a moment, the present merges with the grainy unsteady image of the past. A palimpsest. And I am there on the inside and on the outside looking in.

Am I going mad?

Am I going mad if Calvin is constantly in my thoughts, if his name is on the tip of my lips, if the chime of his voice rings in my ears? Am I going mad if I wonder, what would Calvin do in this or that situation, what tack would he take to cajole a workman or soothe a family squabble; what would he do to repair the car, the washing machine or a broken gate? Am I going mad if to get through the day I imagine him there just behind me bringing up the rear as I walk the dog, feed the pony, hoover the house, tidy away clothes, wash the dishes or speak to a friend on the phone? Going mad if I feel sure the chestnut-plumed, red-wattled, long-tailed male pheasant circling the house, tapping at the doors and windows, is an embodiment of his spirit trying to get in? Am I going mad if tears cloud my vision when alone—in the car, in a café, in a supermarket queue, in the middle of the night—when reality strikes, when it comes home to me, he’s not there? Grief is not an illness, notes Freud, but “a type of emotional fixation on a theory of the past.” A natural state, processed through memories. By placing the past against the present and the absence, suggests Freud, reality is eventually accepted. This is the German, *trauerarbeit*, this is grief work.

Calvin grins at me from photographs and from a never-ending reel of images, which unexpectedly revolve on the screen of my phone and computer with a message from Apple: *Hey F it’s your anniversary, hey here’s a photo memory of the two of you, together.* I recall Calvin’s hopes and worries whenI look around the house at remnants of our life—a print hanging on the hall wall of the old Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (the place where we first met); matching egg cups with our names indelibly burnt into the wood bowl (bought in France on a whim and never used); heavy binoculars in a hard-worn black case (from his navy days) still dangling from a hook by the patio door; a white globed paraffin lamp kept on the mantelpiece for when the power goes down; the complex system of color-coded pipework and back-up pipework in the hall cupboard, designed to ensure a water supply all year round, and the horde of books, books on everything, from medicine to language, anatomy, physiology, archeology, history, shooting, fishing, sailing, astronomy, photography, science fiction, gardening, travel, geography and animal care. In the inevitable clearing out, I discover in pockets and diaries and on scraps of paper tangible expressions of his thoughts. I find messages to me in …birthday cards, which I had long forgotten, his name written in fading biro, an almost illegible scrawl, trailed by a line of Xs. I grasp the edge of my chair. The void gapes. The cards slither from my lap to the floor. The mood of mourning, writes Freud, is “a ‘painful’ one.”

November has transitioned through the winter months to spring. Now, while sitting at my desk cluttered with papers and books, scribbled Post-It notes and a tea-stained cup, I watch as a single ant, a scout from the nest in a crevice by the fireplace, trundles amongst the desk paraphernalia. Out of place, he stop-starts, retraces his scurried steps as if encountering an invisible barrier. He circumnavigates pens and paper clips or just circles on the engraved wood surface, seeming to seek something as yet unfound.

On one side of my keyboard is my copy of Doerr’s *Memory Wall*, the book lying open to its titular story, corners turned down, passages underlined, and on the other, Freud’s classic paper “Mourning and Melancholia”—a past master’s philosophical treatise of the mind. My literary companions, my grief guides as I look back to the comfort of the past yet edge towards the future.

Many years ago, Calvin and I glimpsed the ghost of our beloved old spaniel slink from her favourite armchair and disappear behind the sofa in a slick of sunshine. No doubt a folie à deux, a trick of the light, a shared wish for what once was, but comforting all the same. In the months since Calvin’s death, I have acquired memories of which he is not a part. I have learnt things he will never know, had encounters with people and places he will never experience. The world has revolved on its axis every twenty-four hours. He stopped, but I moved on. Unlike the fictional Luvo, whose individual memories are overwritten with those of an old woman, my memories accumulate, overlap, influence my next step. Memories are what I have, memories are what I want hold on to. Yet I worry that in my future, new memories will overlay the old and lessen the importance of us. I worry I will forget.

However, restarting is thequintessential component of Freud’s philosophy; severing emotional links, replacing old ways with new ways, new people, new distractions and even new love. And Freud has a point. “Turning away” from the past offers freedom from longing, and from missing the unattainable.

The present has a strong pull; the cascade of memories, the “home movie” of our life together begins to rewind regardless. I slip into the toil of grief work. In the reeling, filmic backward roll of memories, which made up our life together, I laugh at the potential for comic effect. And I imagine Calvin’s laughter, *I hope I’m not boring you.*

In my waking hours, I yearn for a glimpse of Calvin going about his day. If, in a blink of light, he should pass by my desk—a shadow in transit, a glint in the corner of my eye, the complex in brief—perhaps then, I could free myself and, in part anyway, let him go, let him rest in peace. But never forgetting and always thankful, to have been, momentarily, *us.*

Notes

Memory … *how can it be such a frail perishable thing?*: See Anthony Doerr, “Memory Wall,” in *Memory Wall: Stories* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 70.

Sigmund Freud,“Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xiv (1914–1916), trans. James Strachey, (London: Vintage Books: 2001), 243–258.

“… a type of emotional fixation on a theory of the past,” in Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall,(Long Road Classics: 2022) Lecture Eighteen, 265.