Some years after his death, my father appeared in my sleep. It was the night of his birthday, the twenty-fourth of March.

My mother was with me in the dream. As it began, she and I agreed the time had come to bury his ashes. We stood side by side in a small stone church. The organ was a few steps from the door. But soon we found ourselves outside the church, near a path that ran through a graveyard. It was evening. Light snow was falling.

My father’s ashes had been packed inside a long tube, the sort that tennis balls are sold in. After I dug a hole in the ground, my mother and I opened the tube and poured out the ashes. They lay there, a pale powder in the
dark soil. I felt obliged to speak, but uncertain whether to attempt a prayer or a eulogy. “Rest in peace” seemed the obvious phrase, and a wrong one. Eventually I found a few words to say.

When I had finished speaking, I didn’t want to leave the ashes exposed, and I began searching for the wooden fragments of a gravestone—within the contours of the dream, this made perfect sense. I walked back to the church and stood by its door. A choir was practising inside.

The choir emerged from the building in a procession, and one of the singers suggested I look for the fragments at the far end of the cemetery. I followed her advice but when I saw the pieces, they seemed to be just scrap wood. Even so, I picked them up and carried them back to the grave. I was surprised to find them fitting neatly in place, like the blocks of a jigsaw puzzle, above my father’s ashes.

Then I took up the spade again, and shovelled dirt on top. I was alone: the choir had vanished, and my mother was nowhere in view. Evening had dissolved into night.

I looked up and saw my father standing above me. Had time swept me back into childhood? Or was I now the one in the grave? He was wearing a black cassock and a white surplice, as though he had been playing the organ. It was very dark, yet light must have been coming from somewhere, for I could see him clearly.
I said nothing. My task was to listen.

At last he spoke. His tone was stern. Looking down at me, my father said, “Did you know I was more than you made of me?”
PART I

FANTASIA
A small hotel on the south coast of England, set back a few streets from the sea. My father had come to Bournemouth for sandcastle holidays as a boy, and now, at the end of an exhausting vacation with his wife and son, he may have wanted to recall or recreate some of the happier experiences of his early life. My mother didn’t care for the town. I was fifteen. It was the last time my parents would take me on holiday with them. In a few weeks, I would enter my last year of high school. I was slipping away from their grasp. Or should have been.

A small hotel, constructed in the Victorian era as a home for a man of means. The property had later been converted to serve tourists. Bournemouth lingers in my mind as a blur of rock candy, congested sand, and a long walk through a fern-strewn valley beyond the shops and the brick houses. Walks with my parents were always problematic. My father liked to stride ahead, stopping only to admire the most extravagant of views. But my mother
preferred to hang back, alert for any unusual tree or wildflower, keen to listen to birdsong in the wood. At such times they annoyed each other. I was an only child. I vacillated between the two of them.

The hotel was old and modest enough that it had no private bathrooms. A deep, chipped bathtub dominated a cream-painted room at one end of the hall. The toilet stood in a minuscule chamber beside. Every morning we would descend a wide flight of stairs to consume one of those “English breakfasts”—fried bacon, fried egg, fried tomato, fried potato, fried bread—that seem the quintessence of fat. My mother, who had not eaten red meat since childhood, would leave her bacon on the far side of the plate. We lubricated the toast with cups of steaming tea. It had been less than nine years since we settled in Canada, and my parents still needed tea in the morning. So did I. It would take another Saskatchewan winter before I acquired the taste for coffee.

This was our last breakfast of the trip. Where had we been in the previous few weeks? My memories are fragments, strands of displacement and desire: an evening listening to early Cat Stevens albums with a girl in Warwick; the stink of cheap cigarettes in a Woolworth’s café; the sight of lapwings and curlews high over the moors near my parents’ birthplace in the Welsh borderlands; the sexually provocative graffiti on a wall at Edinburgh Zoo. But
I thought of myself as a Canadian. I had a few friends at home. I wanted to go back—I even felt a tinge of excitement at the prospect of the long plane trip.

We would have to board a coach from Bournemouth to Heathrow Airport. My mother, efficient as always, had packed the suitcases and organized the hand luggage. Everything was ready for our departure.

But where had he gone?

My father was in the lavatory down the corridor from my parents’ room. I don’t know if he and my mother had traded harsh words. They sometimes did. But they stayed together regardless, bound by need and duty and drawing on some deep, secluded pool of love. We had to leave this seaside town in less than an hour. Why was he taking so long?

My mother went to ask, and obtained no answer. My father was not an inarticulate man—he could hold forth in long, bitter monologues if he chose. But he had what my mother called “an artistic temperament,” along with a talent for remaining silent. On that summer morning, silence was all that my mother received.

Her first reaction, I assume, was anger: “Don’t be ridiculous! We’ve got a plane to catch. It’s time to come out now.”

Silence. Immobility.

She knocked on the door of my bedroom. Was I reading the morning’s Guardian or The Lord of the Rings? My
mother’s skirt and blouse were as tidy as always, her lipstick applied with precision, yet she looked flustered, her manner strange, as though the fabric of her carefully woven life were at risk of unravelling. “You try. He just refuses to unlock the door. He’s being impossible.”

I walked down the corridor, my running shoes light against its dark red carpet, and tested the handle of the lavatory door.

“Dad, it’s me. It’s Mark. Please come out of there. We’ve got to get to the airport. We can’t stay in Bournemouth forever.”

Silence.

“We’ll be late for the bus! Come on, Dad. I want to go home.”

My first home had been a semi-detached house on a busy road in Coventry, an industrial city in the English Midlands. My second home was a bungalow in Sault Ste. Marie, a few blocks away from the river dividing northern Ontario and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Most emigrants leave their native country once and for all—but not my parents. My third home was the ground-floor flat of a big house back in Coventry, where I started school. But soon we set off again, this time to the town of Lethbridge, in southern Alberta. For several months my parents rented a small apartment above a Chinese-Canadian corner store. By the time I turned seven, I had lived in six buildings.
We moved on to Saskatoon a few years later. Saskatoon was where I belonged now; it had to be. In the throes of high school, I couldn’t allow myself the luxury of divided loyalties. My father’s concept of home was more nuanced, more complex.

Silence. My mother joined me. She spoke in her most gentle voice.

“Bunny, listen. Do listen to me. You know we have to be on our way. Bunny, the coach will be leaving soon.”

Years earlier, they had abandoned the use of each other’s given name in favour of private nicknames. My mother was never “Mary” on my father’s lips, but always “Woggo” or “Polly Wig” or simply “Mum.” Likewise, he had ceased to be “Harry” inside the family home. He called himself “Nubbo” or “Nub,” the reverse of “Bun,” short for “Bunny Hunch,” a play on “Honey Bunch”—a term that had, after the birth of his only child, been jettisoned.

“Are you all right in there, Bunny? Do unlock the door.”

Was he sitting on the toilet, was he standing up, were his trousers down, did he have a grip on the door, was his grey head in his hands? I didn’t have the least idea. The grandfather clock at the end of the hall was ticking remorselessly away.

My turn. “Dad, please! Come out! This isn’t funny anymore. I’m sorry if I upset you somehow, but we’ve got to leave!”
The world was spiralling into chaos again. This was always a danger of life in my home, life with my parents, but it was a special peril of holidays: they seemed to bring out all the latent tensions in the marriage. Driving east across the dry interior of Washington, three years earlier, my parents had argued so fiercely that they decided to seek a divorce. I slumped in the back seat of the blue Volkswagen Beetle, carsick, yearning for oblivion. By the time we made it back to Lethbridge, two motels later, some kind of reconciliation had occurred. I inferred this from the fact that my father failed to move out of our rented stucco bungalow, though nothing was said to me directly.

A summer before that, on the road from Salisbury to Winchester in southern England, my mother had so angered my father that he, the only driver in the family, stopped the rented car in what seemed, to an eleven-year-old boy, the sun-swept middle of nowhere. The battle lasted long enough for dozens of cars to speed by. It ended with my father spinning the vehicle around and driving back in the direction from which we’d come. We would not, after all, visit another of my mother’s uncles. The uncle would, after all, die a year or two later. She would not, after all, forget. It would take her years to forgive.

Holidays were dangerous: I knew that. But this latest one had passed without more than a couple of my father’s sudden, unpredictable blowups. Normally the mildest of
men, he could explode into an aggressive rant or a burst of self-pity and vicious self-hatred that had the power to darken my entire world. I was familiar with that. But I had never known him to lock a door, remain dead silent, and refuse all pleas to venture out.

My mother’s turn. “Bunny, don’t be so selfish. I’m ashamed of you. I’m ashamed and upset. This is absurd—you know we have to catch that plane. It’s not going to wait on the runway. We can’t stay in Bournemouth any longer.”

Silence. I remember an old man stepping down the hall, gazing curiously at a black-haired, middle-aged woman and a teenaged boy reasoning with a locked door. The old man’s head jerked back and forth. Humiliation: the wash of it across my face and ears. My hot, reddening ears. My heartbeat pounding against my temples like the English Channel’s onrushing tide.

“Look, Dad, this isn’t fair. I hate it when you act like this. What do you want us to do?”

Silence. Below my black-rimmed glasses, tears were trickling down my face. But I wasn’t going to let my father know. He was stubborn. He had his pride; I had my pride too.

“Bunny, how could you? How could you?”

At last my mother walked back along the corridor to their shared bedroom. Or she went down to the reception desk on the ground floor in search of help. However it
happened, I was left alone in front of a door. On the other side of it, I knew, I must have had a father.

I tried again.

“Dad, I just want you to know, your music means a lot to me.” I swallowed hard. “I’m proud of you. I’m really glad you’re an artist…”

At the time, I wasn’t proud of him; I was embarrassed and furious. But a brilliant inspiration isn’t always the whole truth.

*I’m really glad you’re an artist.* When he heard me say those words—words I had never spoken before—my father unlocked the lavatory door and stepped into the hall. His tie was neatly fastened; his parting looked immaculate as ever, the combed-over hair just about hiding his bald spot. He gave no sign of remorse or anxiety. I was a curly-haired wreck.

I don’t recall a hug, still less a kiss, but we made it onto the Heathrow coach and we caught the plane home.