On January 9th, shortly after eleven on a dark sleety morning, I saw my dead father on a train pulling out of Clapham Junction, bound for Waterloo.

I glanced away, not recognizing him at once. We were on parallel tracks. When I looked back, the train had picked up speed, and carried him away.

My mind at once moved ahead, to the concourse at Waterloo Station, and the meeting which I felt sure must occur. The train on which he was traveling was one of the old six-seater carriage-and-corridor type, its windows near-opaque with the winter's accumulation, and a decade
of grime plastered to its metal. I wondered where he'd come from: Windsor? Ascot? You'll understand that I travel in the region a good deal, and one gets to know the rolling stock.

There were no lights in the carriage he had chosen. (The bulbs are often stolen or vandalized.) His face had an unpleasant tinge; his eyes were deeply shadowed, and his expression was thoughtful, almost morose.

At last released by the green signal, my own train began to draw forward. Its pace was stately and I thought that he must have a good seven minutes on me, certainly more than five.

As soon as I saw him, sitting sad but upright in that opposite carriage, my mind went back to the occasion when... to the occasion when... But no. It did not go back. I tried, but I could not find an occasion. Even when I scrubbed the recesses of my brain, I could not scour one out. I should like to be rich in anecdote. Fertile to invent. But there's no occasion, only the knowledge that a certain number of years have passed.

When we disembarked the platform was slick with cold, sliding underfoot. The bomb warnings were pasted up everywhere, also the beggar warnings, and posters saying take care not to slip or trip, which are insulting to the public, as few people would do it if they could help it: only some perhaps, a few attention seekers. An arbitrary decision had placed a man to take tickets, so that was fumbling, and further delay. I was irritated by this; I wanted to get on with the whole business, whatever the business was going to be.

It came to me that he had looked younger, as though death had moved him back a stage. There had been in his expression, melancholy though it was, something purposeful; and I was sure of this, that his journey was not random. And so it was this perception, rather than any past experience—is experience always past?—that made me think he might linger for a rendezvous, that moving toward me and then away, on his Basingstoke train or perhaps from as far as Southampton, he might make time for a meeting with me.

I tell you this: if you are minded to unite at Waterloo Station, lay your plans well and in advance. Formalize in
writing, for extra caution. I stood still, a stone in the rude
stream, as the travelers crashed and surged around me.
Where might he go? What might he want? (I had not
known, God help me, that the dead were loose.) A cup of
coffee? A glance at the rack of best-selling paperbacks?
An item from Boots the Chemist, a cold cure, a bottle of
some aromatic oil?

Something small and hard, that was inside my chest,
that was my heart, drew smaller then. I had no idea what
he would want. The limitless possibilities that London
affords... if he should bypass me and find his way into
the city... but even then, among the limitless possibili-
ties, I could not think of a single thing that he might want.

So I hunted for him, peeping into W. H. Smith and
the Costa Coffee boutique. My mind tried to provide
occasions to which it could go back, but none occurred. I
covered something sweet, a glass of hot chocolate to warm
my hands, an Italian wafer dusted with cocoa powder.
But my mind was cold and my intention urgent.

It struck me that he might be leaving for the Conti-

nent. He could take the train from here to Europe, and
how would I follow? I wondered what documents he
would be likely to need, and whether he bore currency.
Are dispensations different? As ghosts, can they pass the
ports? I thought of a court of shadow ambassadors, with
shadow portfolios tucked within their silks.

There is a rhythm—and you know this—to which
people move in any great public space. There is a certain
speed that is no one's decision, but is set going every day,
soon after dawn. Break the rhythm and you'll rue it, for
you'll be kicked and elbows will collide. Brutal British
mutter of sorry, oh sorry—except often travelers are too
angry I find for common politeness, hesitate too long or
limp and you will be knocked out of the way. It occurred
to me for the first time that this rhythm is a mystery
indeed, controlled not by the railways or the citizens but
by a higher power: that it is an aid to dissimulation, a
guide to those who would otherwise not know how to act.

For how many of all these surging thousands are solid,
and how many of these assumptions are tricks of the light?
How many, I ask you, are connected at all points, how many
are utterly and convincingly in the state they purport to be:
which is, alive? That lost, objectless, sallow man, a foreigner with his bag on his back; that woman whose starved face recalls a plague-pit victim? Those dwellers in the brown houses of Wandsworth, those denizens of balcony flats and walkways; those grumbling commuters gathered for Virginia Water, those whose homes perch on embankments, or whose roofs glossy with rain fly away from the traveler's window? How many?

For distinguish me, will you? Distinguish me "the distinguished thing." Render me the texture of flesh. Pick me what it is, in the timbre of the voice, that marks out the living from the dead. Show me a bone that you know to be a living bone. Flourish it, will you? Find one, and show me.

MOVING ON, I stared over the chill cabinet with its embalmed meals for travelers. I caught a glimpse of a sleeve, of an overcoat which I thought might be familiar, and my narrow heart skipped sideways. But then the man turned, and his face was sodden with stupidity, and he was someone else, and less than I required him to be.

Not many places were left. I looked at the pizza stand, but I did not think he would eat in a public place, and not anything foreign. (Again my mind darted forward to the Gare du Nord and the chances of catching up.) The bureau de change I'd already checked, and had scooped aside the curtain of the photograph booth, which seemed empty at the time but I had thought it might be a trick or a test.

So nowhere then. Dwelling again on his expression—and you will remember I saw it only for a moment, and in shadows—I discerned something that I did not see at first. It seemed, almost, that his look was turning inward. There was a remoteness, a wish for privacy: as if he were the warden of his own identity.

Suddenly—the thought born in a second—I understood: he is traveling incognito. Shame and rage then made me lean back against plate glass, against the front window of a bookshop; aware that my own image swims behind me, and that my ghost, in its winter cloak, is forced into the glass, forced there and fixed for any passer to stare at, living or dead, as long as I have not strength or power to
move. My morning's experience, till then unprocessed and scantily observed, now arrived inside me. I had raised my eyes, I had lifted my gaze, I had with naked curiosity looked into the carriage on the parallel track, and by indecent coincidence I had happened to see a thing I should never have seen.

It seemed urgent now to go into the city and to my meeting. I gathered my cloak about me, my customary suit of solemn black. I looked in my bag to pat that all my papers were in order. I went to a stall and handed over a pound coin, for which I was given a pack of paper handkerchiefs in a plastic sheath as thin as skin, and using my nails I tore it till the membrane parted, and the paper itself was under my hand: it was a provision, in case of unseemly tears. Though paper reassures me, its touch. It's what you respect.

This is a bleak winter. Even old people admit it is more frigid than the usual, and it is known that as you stand in the taxi queue the four winds sting your eyes. I am on my way to a chilly room, where men who might have been my father but more fond will resolve some resolutions, transact some transactions, agree on the minutes: I notice how easily, in most cases, committees agree the minutes, but when we are singular and living our separate lives we disperse—don't we?—each second we believe we own. It's not generally agreed, it's not much appreciated, that people are divided by all sorts of things, and that, frankly, death is the least of them. When lights are blossoming out across the boulevards and parks, and the town assumes its Victorian saggery, I shall be moving on again. I see that both the living and the dead commute, riding their familiar trains. I am not, as you will have gathered, a person who needs false excitement, or simulated innovation. I am willing, though, to tear up the timetable and take some new routes; and I know I shall find, at some unlikely terminus, a hand that is meant to rest in mine.