

Sample chapter

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My Father's Dreams

It isn't easy to talk of one's early life, even after so many years. However, allowing for lapses of memory, I intend to hold nothing back, otherwise telling the story would be a fruitless exercise. Much of it remains unclear, including why my father shortly after his fiftieth birthday went off his head. The whole thing was all the more surprising because he had never given any impression that he was anything other than the sanest person on earth. So, at least, he appeared to those who knew him. And he was known to a great many people: as a country doctor he covered twenty villages and was paid regular visits by patients ranging from pregnant girls to old men requiring colostomy. It is true that the doctor in the neighbouring district was of a friendlier disposition, but my father could boast a much higher rate of cure. That's why he felt that a guarded measure of disdain for one's patients was hardly a crime. Surprisingly, he was exceptionally pleasant to hypochondriacs, for whom he harboured a special feeling of closeness. In my mother's opinion he could have been a little less pleasant to young pregnant girls, who appeared to be his favourite patients. As far as I remember, that never caused any problems, except once, when a particularly attractive gypsy girl from a hamlet in the nearby woods came for an examination insufficiently clean. This upset my father so that he locked her into a bathing cabin, releasing her only after she had showered twice and once more for good measure. Although he later denied accusations that he had spent half an hour drying her with a miniscule towel, the gypsies threatened him with court action until he mollified them with a wad of cash.

My father was a quiet man, but occasionally he was struck by a fit of anger of such magnitude that he was more shocked by it than anyone else. Usually it was my mother who pushed him over the border of self-restraint, especially when she dared to criticize his "experiments" in the basement of the health center.

In her opinion he should have refrained from any work that was not part of his duties at the surgery, and devoted his free time, like most husbands, to his family.

"Family?" was his usual response. "One bastard and one feeble-minded woman are hardly a family."

Mother could bear his rudeness only by turning it into a joke. "Everybody's got what they deserve," she would observe with a bitter smile whenever she felt disinclined to argue. That was most of the time, so eventually they settled for aiming their words past each other, with Father exploding only when he was hit accidentally. But never, not even in the throes of his worst ill-temper, did he hit Mother, however much I felt that that was what she was trying to get him to do.

Whenever I summon my father to memory I see a tall, slightly stooping gentleman of middle age, with slow, careful movements, somewhat plumper round his waist than he would have wished, yet far from being fat, with a neatly trimmed reddish beard and gently graying hair parted on the side, which made him look younger than he was, always wearing a slightly anxious expression, which could, however, together with the softness of his eyes, unexpectedly leap into a warm, puzzling smile, sufficiently charming for him to be known, especially among the female patients, as the "handsome doctor".

It was probably his popularity that irked Mother most, for she desperately wanted his smile to be reserved for herself and me (although I was its happy recipient often enough, most likely because I never argued with Father). Another habit of his that Mother couldn't stand was his natural tendency to be eternally lost in thoughts. Indeed, very often he seemed to be most absent when he was at home, pontificating on God knows what problems or, with eyes closed, completely absorbed in classical music, hardly Mother's favourite.

At first Mother worked as a receptionist at the health center, but shortly after they married Father talked her into retraining for the position of an accounts clerk with the nearby brick factory. Otherwise, ran his argument, the health center would begin to resemble "a family practice". There was hardly any danger of that, for next to Father and his assistant, Nurse Mary, the health center also housed a dentist and his assistant, not to mention their shared receptionist. It was much more likely that Father began to be bothered by Mother's increasing curiosity about

his “experiments” in the basement of the health center, where he was spending much of his time. Once he even admitted as much. He said he had nothing to hide, but simply wanted to pursue his research in peace.

“You mustn’t think,” he would occasionally turn to Mother with a sarcastic smile, “that marrying a doctor automatically confers on you a degree in philosophy. What could a man of science and a housemaid possibly talk about? Wishes are one thing, but fortunately in this world it is through abilities that we realize our potential.” Mother tried her best not to show how lonely she felt. Any objections she found the courage to raise were promptly brushed aside by Father’s acid wit, in the face of which she felt transfixed like a small rodent confronted by a deadly snake. Gradually she came to realize that it was much safer to communicate with Father in monosyllables, and to entrust her grievances to me. There were days when she could not stop. With a cigarette perched on her lower lip, dishevelled, with one hand swinging this way and that, and the other firmly on a bottle of Valium in the pocket of her apron, she would cross and re-cross the living room and pile lamentation upon lamentation: that “this man” would send her to an early grave, that she had no one who would “at least try to understand her”, that one day she would simply walk out of the house and “drown in the nearby stream”, and that, obviously, I must hate her as well, otherwise I would not always “take Father’s side”. Or that I would, at the very least, grant her an occasional “loving smile”.

Evidently I was failing her as much as Father. I, too, was wrapped up in my own world, which was far removed from her notions of an idyllic family life. Whenever I wasn’t lost in one of the books I took from Father’s library I would wander through the surrounding woods or sit in my room, daydreaming about nothing in particular and everything at the same time. Sometimes I even locked the door, pretending to study for school, while in fact I would be staring out of the window, trying to imagine Father at work, examining patients, lancing boils, signing death certificates. And, above all, working on his experiments in the basement, to which he alone had the right of entry.

I loved Father very much. Without him, my growing years would have been lonely and without any mysteries. I had no friends at school. Father was the axis around which revolved all my joys and expectations. He seemed like a god to me, infallible. I was particularly excited

by the smells that hovered about him every time he returned from the surgery: of unusual potions and disinfectants, of unknown acids and bitter-sweet ointments, even – I felt – of blood and lymphatic fluid, not to mention the aromas of hundreds of illnesses, of which he was able, when we had guests, to talk so convincingly that most of those present instantly developed appropriate symptoms. Father laughed, comfortably at home in the midst of pain and suffering, never succumbing to as much as a cold, as if protected by the spell of a benevolent witch.

One day he invited me for a walk to the edge of the wood above our house, where he spent almost an hour of his precious time talking to me. It was spring and the meadows were overflowing with flowers. Sitting on the trunk of a fallen birch tree, we surveyed the village below us: the gray rectangular building which housed the health center, the shop, the inn, the houses, mostly farms, the school which perched like a speck of bad conscience among the trees on the opposite slope, and our home below us, half hidden in the luxuriance of the surrounding orchard.

“Look, son,” Father waved his hand. “Life is beautiful. But it is beauty that fills us with deepest anxieties.”

Then, using mostly learned expressions, yet visually enough for me to guess what he was talking about, he took the trouble to explain to me the mechanisms of reproduction of the human race and everything surrounding this incredible mystery. He devoted particular care to the ins-and-outs of what he chose to call coitus.

“Sooner or later,” he concluded, “the devil will start to tempt you toward the abyss. Don’t resist, it’s a waste of time. Only be careful not to fall all the way. It’s probably not very pleasant at the bottom.”

I said nothing. I was thirteen years old. And in any case he hadn’t told me anything new; I had already gleaned all the relevant information, laced with photos and diagrams, from some of the books in his library. But to tell him that would have deprived him of the joy of feeling a responsible Father.

Ever since I had learned to read, rummaging through Father’s extensive library was without any doubt the greatest joy of my life. The school had quickly become a bore and failed to provide the sort of excitement I craved. Everything was the same year after year, teachers were neither witty nor clever, and hours spent in the classroom seemed to be gliding past as in a dream.

Not surprisingly – to Mother’s great sorrow – I was not the star pupil. I just couldn’t be bothered.

I was average, quiet, invisible.

But all that changed on the fateful day when we were asked to write a free composition entitled “What I dreamt last night”. The theme was right up my street: I had been having unusual dreams for some time. I remembered almost all of them, certainly enough to choose from. So I chose the one I felt the teacher would find at least interesting, if not worthy of singling out for exceptional praise. I decided to record the dream as I remembered it, honestly, without frills. Allowing for a few memory holes (the events took place twenty years ago), my dream essay read roughly like this:

“I dreamt that Mother was returning home from the city by train. Father and I discussed whether the way someone died was predetermined by fate, or whether it was a matter of chance. Our reasoning went like this: if the train bringing Mother home gets derailed, she will survive, but only if fate had decreed that she should not die in a train accident; otherwise she will die. But if she does die, this might also be due to chance, simply because she had found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. So there was no way of telling. Except, suggested Father, if someone deliberately derailed the train. Then, if she remained alive, we could conclude that the time and manner of death are indeed determined by fate. If, on the other hand, she did not survive, death must be a matter of chance for the simple reason that fate would not have allowed her to die in a train accident if it had decided to dispose of her in a different way. But if fate *wanted* to kill Mother in a train accident, fate itself would cause the train to derail.

“The proposition seemed logical enough, so Father and I hurried along the track all the way to the point at which it passed a deep ravine. There, with a pickaxe, we removed a section of the rail, took shelter behind nearby trees and waited. It didn’t take long before the train’s whistle sounded just round the corner. Then it all happened much quicker than either of us had expected. One more whistle was heard, sounding almost like a cry for help. Then we heard a horrible squealing and crunching noise as the locomotive jumped the rail and tumbled into the precipice, with the carriages following and with deafening knocks and bangs piling on top of one another at the bottom of the ravine. Less than a minute later only steam could be heard escaping

from the pierced boiler of the squashed locomotive. A quick survey of the scene revealed a mountainous pile of twisted metal, resembling a huge, disordered scrap-metal yard, decorated with disembowelled, dismembered or beheaded corpses, amputated limbs, shattered skulls, splattered brains, a few toddlers and even two dogs and three cats.

“Father and I hurried home to await the results of our experiment in front of the TV. When the report finally came, it was worse than expected: one hundred and twenty-three dead, among them Mother, no survivors. That’s how Father and I obtained proof that Mother wasn’t destined to die in a different way. But neither was she destined to die in this way, for Father and I had derailed the train deliberately. So we succeeded in proving that fate doesn’t exist, and that everything, including death, is a matter of chance.”

I was very proud of my essay. But the teacher, who read it silently in front of the waiting class, grew increasingly red in the face, until, right at the end, he turned deathly pale. He quietly locked the hand-written sheet in his desk without saying a word. But already that same afternoon he turned up at our house and pressed the essay into Mother’s reluctant hand.

“Ask your husband to examine his head. I hope, for your sake, that he will find nothing worse than that your son is trying to make a fool of me.”

Mother was so shattered by the event, and especially by the contents of my literary endeavour, that she had to take three days off work. “God help us,” she said when she finished reading my essay to Father, who had asked her to do so on account of his alleged inability to decipher my scrawls. “And I had such hopes! This child will amount to nothing!”

“On the contrary,” Father immediately put a different view, as was his habit. “A dreamer often turns into a genius.” Winking at me, he added: “Right, Adam?”

I found consolation in Father’s protection. Yet more and more I began to fall prey to an alarming feeling that I was somehow hovering above my life, rather than living it. Almost invariably I was nudged into daydreaming by something I had read. The intensity of the events that would unfold in my turbulent mind caused a restlessness that would drive me on aimless wanderings across the village meadows and through the nearby woods. In silence and solitude I tried to sweep away the images, which multiplied in my head like a tumorous tissue, to make room for new ones, which

were already hurling themselves against the defences of my consciousness. But I could not sweep the old ones away fast enough. They were pushed by the new ones across the border of wakefulness into dreams. Very soon my nights, too, were swarming with grotesque pictures and curious happenings.

Inevitably it was Mother who first noticed that something wasn't quite right with me. She demanded that Father give me a thorough examination. But Father was full of ready-made, neatly phrased excuses. He said that for a boy of my age it was normal to live as if dreams were a reality. Wallowing in illusions was no less my right than a chronic feeling of dissatisfaction with the world, which in any case was one of the basic human rights. And so on. Mother took a gamble and accused him straight to his face of complete lack of interest in the fate of his son, and of selfishness that was a disgrace for a doctor.

This appeared to have worked. The next day Father decided to subject me to a little professional scrutiny, as he put it. First he wanted to know which books I had borrowed from his library, and from the school library, and from the village library. I mentioned Zane Gray, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, De Sade, Kafka, Goethe, Cervantes, Nabokov and a few others. He seemed astounded by the mixture. He suggested that, for a while at least, I should read books that are read by other boys of my age. But before I could tell him that other boys of my age read hardly any books at all, he had already changed his mind. He suggested that I should stop reading altogether, at least for six months. Then he came up with the final solution:

I should go on reading whatever I wanted, but should record all my dreams and fantasies in a diary, which he would examine once a week to make sure that I wasn't developing a mental disorder.

Without knowing why, I liked the idea of recording my dreams. I bought a yellow notebook and set about the new task without delay. By a strange coincidence, the first dream I recorded was more unusual than any I could remember having.

"In the beginning I found myself returning from school along the path I normally followed. It was early evening and the sky was unusually dark. I walked lost in thoughts, without paying much attention to my surroundings. So I barely noticed the silvery light gradually spreading over the meadows. I became aware of it only when a strange sound appeared in the air

above me. It was metallic, yet soft and rustling at the same time. Next I became aware of the presence of an invisible being. At first I tried to ignore the feeling, but suddenly it swept over me with such force that I had to turn. There was nothing. I felt a lump in my throat and my hands went damp with cold sweat.

I began to walk faster. But the nagging feeling that I wasn't alone would not leave me. Suddenly I felt a sharp, stabbing pain above my left ankle. Glancing at my feet, I noticed a gray hen whose long, sharp beak had just struck at my ankle for the second time. Then the hen flapped its wings and began to peck at me as if obsessed. I ran off across the meadows without any direction, just to get away from the unexpected attacker. But the hen wouldn't let go of me; it spread its wings and flapped after me, clawing at my feet, calves, and knees, at every exposed part of my legs. I could feel I was bleeding from many wounds. The hen's eyes were unusually bright, and every so often they began to burn with a piercing glow. Its wings were causing a pulsating, rustling murmur that followed me past the edge of the wood and into the valley. Soon the gray hen was joined by two more: one black, the other white. Now I could also determine the origin of the rustling noise: flying toward me from all directions were multitudes of hens, cackling, screeching, gurgling and producing a variety of other sounds, all of them orchestrated into a metallic murmur that seemed to be sweeping toward me like an approaching flood. From one direction were coming only gray hens, from another white ones, from the third black ones. And not a single rooster among them! Far in the horizon I could see groups of hens rise into the air and sail toward me like dark thunderclouds. The smell of so much poultry soon overpowered me and I sank to the ground, fainting; the last thing I heard was the rush of wings directly above me.

On regaining consciousness I found myself surrounded by endless numbers of quietly crouching hens with their heads drawn back and sunk in their necks. The three different colours had mixed, so the hens now resembled a thick carpet spreading in all directions as far as the eye could see. I rose onto my knees and looked around. Woven into the feathery carpet were myriads of gleaming, freshly laid eggs. I heard a strange crackling sound; little chicks were already pecking their way out of the nearest shells.

Then, right behind me, I heard a noise that was closer to breaking and shattering than gentle crackling. As

I turned I saw emerging from a huge egg, larger even than me, a grim-looking, uncommonly robust chick determined to leave its prison as soon as possible. Within moments it swelled right in front of my eyes into a giant hen that lowered its gaping beak toward me, picked me up and swallowed me. Pulsating muscular walls embraced me, pushing me deeper and deeper, until I slid into a moist cavern full of gurgling noises and a thick soup of acids, which began to turn my body into something horribly different. I could feel my limbs shrinking, my neck extending, my belly swelling, my nose elongating, and then there was a thump, as if the cavern in which all this was happening had fallen and landed on very hard ground.

By this time I was really frightened. I began to press and knock and push against the walls of the cavern to escape its suffocating closeness. There was a crunching noise, something hard suddenly gave way under pressure and my eyes were flooded with silvery light. I was able to take a deep breath – only to find that the overpowering smell of so many hens no longer made me faint, but instead filled me with great excitement. I discovered that I was standing on a pile of pieces of a large eggshell. Without a single thought, instinctively, I bent down, picked them up one by one with my large beak and ate them with a noisy crunching sound. I was so horrified by this act that I opened my mouth to call for help, but the sound I emitted resembled anything but my usual voice. What came from my throat was the crowing of a rooster!

From as far away as I could see my call was answered by a shrill greeting of myriads of hens, flapping their wings and awaiting my guidance. I shook my feathers, which appeared smooth and shiny, caused my crest to achieve full erection, flapped my awesome wings, took to the air and flew across the meadows. There was a stir among the hens, travelling in concentric waves all the way to the horizon. Beating my wings, I flew majestically in a straight line, followed by perfectly formed black, white and gray battalions of my devoted army of female admirers. This is the beginning of a new era, I thought. My era. I rose even higher, while the hordes of hens behind me converged into dark flying clouds. Raining down from these clouds like balls of hail were millions of eggs, which would cover the planet and enlarge my dominions to the ends of the galaxy. Just rising above the horizon in the east was the sun. My crest swelled even higher: the sun had the shape of an egg."

Of course it had to be Mother who first read the account of my dream. Although I had pushed the dream diary deep under the mattress, she obviously knew where to look. When I came home from school I found her on the sofa with my yellow notebook in her lap, and with tears in her eyes.

"Adam," she looked at me as if someone had just died. "What's happening to you?"

"Nothing," I shrugged and turned to go to my room.

"Wait! We have to talk."

I paused and waited, staring at the floor. I ignored her request to sit down.

"Adam," she began, making a long pause before finding the words to go on. "Adam, boys of your age are prone to doing something which is very bad for their health. But they find it hard to resist. How successful are *you* in resisting it, Adam?"

I tried to fake a yawn. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"You have, Adam," she said, "and a very good one, too, so don't pretend. I'm talking about what boys of your age do with their right hand. And about spots they leave everywhere, especially on the sheets that have to be washed by their mothers!"

"Peter does it with his left hand," I blurted out.

I could almost hear the sound of air being drawn into Mother's lungs. I saw her putting my notebook on the sideboard and rising to her feet. Afraid that she might hit me, I turned to run out of the house – and bumped into Father who had just returned from work.

"Father," I pointed an accusing finger at Mother, "she's read my dream diary."

"Here," she quickly reclaimed the initiative by passing him the notebook, "read for yourself the distortions of your son's lunatic mind. And don't reproach *me* for it, because *you* brought him up."

She pushed him aside so she could pass into the hall, where she clumsily stepped into her tennis shoes and walked out of the house, slamming the door. As Father and I looked out of the window we saw her crossing the courtyard to her bicycle, which was leaning against the door of the garage. She mounted it and furiously pedalled off down the gravel driveway to the road.

"You have no right to read his diary!" Father shouted after her, although she was already too far away to hear him. "Are you a doctor? How many times do I have

to tell you that you're not? Apart from that, the boy's at an age when privacy is essential to him!"

Before nightfall Mother quietly returned, as she always did when she stormed off in anger. Father had used her absence to read, and then carefully read once more, the account of my "rooster dream", frowning here and there, but also emitting a few spontaneous chuckles. After dinner, which mother prepared in silence, and which we ate in silence, Father cleared his throat and passed his opinion.

He said that this particular dream of mine, like all the others, was a consequence of my premature reading of books that my virgin intellect was unable even to comprehend, let alone absorb their contents in any meaningful way. So the contents had nowhere to go except sink into my subconscious mind, from where they erupted into my dreams in the form of surreal images. At the same time, he continued, my dreams were a classical symptom of sexual awakening. The metaphoric content of my last dream left no doubt

about that: I wanted to peck my way out of the shell, which was my childhood, because it had become too small for me. I wanted to grow a crest with which I could command the allegiance of hens, in other words of the female sex, which the rooster, or man, must fecundate according to a biological programme in his genes. The number of eggs in my dream showed very clearly that my urge had reached a critical stage, and that I could lessen the built-up tension only by more frequent and vigorous masturbation.

What followed was the worst quarrel I had ever witnessed between Father and Mother. Insults were flying about like shrapnel on a battlefield. Soon both of them completely forgot about me, so I slipped out, ran to my room and locked myself in. But even there I couldn't escape the sound of their bellowing voices. I could muffle them slightly, but not completely, by pulling the duvet over my head. Eventually the quarrel ended, like so many before, with Father unleashing the full fury of Wagner on Mother's ears.