WHEN I WAS VERY LITTLE, MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO NOW, I USED TO HAVE NIGHTMARES. You don’t forget nightmares. This one was always the same. It began with a face, a twisted, tortured face that screamed silently, a face without hair or eyebrows, a skull more than a face, a skull which was covered in puckered, scarred skin stretched over the cheekbones. It was Grandpa’s face and he was staring at me out of his scream. And always the face was on fire, flames licking out of his ears and mouth.

I remember I always tried to force myself to wake
up, so that I wouldn’t have to endure the rest of it. But I knew every time that the rest would follow however hard I tried to escape – that my nightmare would not release me, would not allow me to wake until the whole horrible tale had played itself out.

I saw a great ship ablaze on the ocean. There were men on fire jumping overboard as she went down, then swimming in a sea where the water burned and boiled around them. I saw Grandpa swimming towards a lifeboat, but it was packed with sailors and there was no room for Grandpa. He begged them to let him on, but they wouldn’t. Behind him, the ship’s bow lifted out of the sea, and the whole ship groaned like a wounded beast in her death throes. Then she went down, slipping slowly under the waves, gasping great gouts of steam in the last of her agony. A silence came over the burning sea. Grandpa was clinging to the lifeboat now, his elbows
hooked over the side. That was when I realized that I was in the lifeboat with the other sailors. He saw me looking down at him and reached out his hand for help. It was a hand with no fingers.

I would wake up then, shaking in my terror and knowing even now that my nightmare was not over. For my nightmare would always seem to happen just a day or two before Grandpa came to stay. It was a visit I always dreaded. He didn’t come to see us in London very often, every couple of years at most, and usually at Christmas. Thinking about it now, I suppose this was part of the problem. There were perfectly good reasons why we
didn’t and couldn’t see more of him. He lived far away, on the Isles of Scilly, so it was a long way for him to come, and expensive too. Besides which, he hated big cities like London. I’m sure if I’d seen him more often, I’d have got used to him – used to his face and his hands and his silent, uncommunicative ways.

I don’t blame my mother and father. I can see now why they were so tense before each visit. Being as taciturn and unsmiling as he was, Grandpa can’t have been an easy guest. But, even so, they did make it a lot worse for me than they needed to. Just before Grandpa came there were always endless warnings, from Mother in particular (he was my grandpa on my mother’s side), about how I mustn’t upset him, how I mustn’t leave my toys lying about on the sitting-room floor because
he didn’t see very well and might trip over them, how I mustn’t have the television on too much because Grandpa didn’t like noise. But most of all they drummed into me again and again that whatever I did, I must not under any circumstances stare at him – that it was rude, that he hated people staring at him, particularly children.

I tried not to; I tried very hard. When he first arrived I would always try to force myself to look at something else. Once I remember it was a Christmas decoration, a red paper bell hanging just above his head in the front hall. Sometimes I would make myself look very deliberately at his waistcoat perhaps, or the gold watch chain he always wore. I’d fix my gaze on anything just as long as it was nowhere near the forbidden places, because I knew that once I started looking at his forbidden face or his forbidden hands I wouldn’t be able to stop myself.