

Luigi Pirandello

A DAY GOES BY

Rudely awakened from sleep—perhaps by mistake—I find myself thrown out of the train at a station along the line. It's night time. I've got nothing with me.

I can't get over my bewilderment. But what strikes me most forcibly is that nowhere on myself can I find any sign of the violence I've suffered. Not only this. I have no picture in my mind of its happening, not even the shadow of a memory.

I find myself on the ground, alone, in the shadowy darkness of a deserted station, and I don't know who it is I ought to ask, if I'm to find out where I am and what's happened to me.

I only got a quick glimpse of a small bull's-eye lantern which rushed forward to close the carriage-door through which I'd been ejected. The train had left immediately. And that lamp had immediately disappeared again into the inside of the station, its wobbling, flickering light struggling fruitlessly with the blackness. I was so utterly astounded by everything that it hadn't so much as passed through my mind that I might rush after it to demand an explanation and lodge my formal complaint.

But, formal complaint about *what*?

With boundless dismay I perceive that I no longer have the faintest memory of having started off on a journey by train. I haven't the slightest memory of where I started from, or where I was going to. Or if, on leaving, I really had anything with me. I had nothing, I think.

In the emptiness of this horrible uncertainty, I'm suddenly seized with terror at that spectral lantern which had immediately retreated from the scene, without paying the slightest attention to my being ejected from the train. Am I to deduce that it's the most

Translated by Frederick May. From *Luigi Pirandello: Short Stories*, translated and edited by Frederick May, © 1965, by permission of The Pirandello Estate.

natural thing in the world for people to get out at this station in that particular way?

In the darkness I have no luck with my attempts to decipher the name of the station. The town, however, is quite definitely one I don't know. In the first grey, feeble rays of the rising sun it looks deserted. In the vast pale square in front of the station there's a street lamp still alight. I move over to it. I stop and, not daring to raise my eyes—so terrified am I by the echo roused by my footsteps in the silence—I look at my hands, I look at the fronts, I look at the backs. I clench them, I open them again. I tap and prod myself with them, I feel myself all over. I even work out how I'm made, because I can't even be certain of this any longer—that I really exist and that all this is true.

Shortly afterwards, as I penetrate farther and farther into the city centre, at every step I see things that would bring me to a standstill with utter amazement, if an even greater amazement didn't overcome me. I observe that all the other people—they all look like me, too—are moving along, weaving in and out past one another, without paying one another the slightest attention; as if, so far as they're concerned, this is the most natural and usual thing in the world for them to do. I feel as if I were being drawn along—but, here again, without getting the sensation that anyone's using violence on me. It's just that I, within myself, ignorant of everything as I am—well, it's as if I were being held somehow on every side. But I consider that, even if I don't even know how, or whence, or why I've come there, I must be in the wrong, and the others must quite assuredly be in the right. Not only do they seem to know this, but they also know everything that makes them sure that they never make a mistake. They're without the slightest hesitancy, so naturally convinced are they that they must do what they're doing. So I'd certainly attract their wonder, their apprehension, perhaps even their indignation if, either because of the way they look or because of some action or expression of theirs, I started laughing or showed how utterly astounded I was. In my acute desire to find out something, without making myself look conspicuous, I have continually to obliterate from my eyes that something akin to irritability which you quite often see fleetingly in dogs' eyes. I'm in the wrong—I'm the one who's in the wrong, if I don't understand a thing, if I still can't succeed in pulling myself together again. I must make an effort and pretend that I too am quite convinced. I must contrive to act like the others, however much I'm lacking in all criteria by which to appraise, and any practical notion even of those things which seem most commonplace and easy.

I don't know in which role to re-establish myself, which path to take, or what to start doing.

Is it possible, however, that I've grown as big as I have, yet remained all the time like a child, without ever having done anything? Perhaps it's only been in a dream that I've worked. I don't know how. But I certainly *have* worked. I've always worked, worked very hard, very hard indeed. It looks as if everyone knows it, moreover, because lots and lots of people turn round and look at me, and more than one of them even goes so far as to wave to me. I don't know them, though. At first I just stand there, looking perplexed, wondering if that wave was really meant for me. I look to either side of me. I look behind me. Were they, possibly, waving to me by mistake? No, no, they really were waving to me. I struggle (in some embarrassment) with a certain vanity, which would dearly like me to deceive myself. It doesn't succeed, though. I move on as if I were suspended in mid-air, without being able to free myself from a strange sense of oppression which derives from something that is—and I recognize it as such—really quite wretched. I'm not at all sure about the suit I've got on. It seems odd that it should be mine. And now I've got a suspicion that it's this suit they're waving at and not me. And, just to make things really troublesome, I haven't got anything else with me except this suit!

I start feeling about myself again. I get a surprise. I can feel something like a small leather wallet tucked away in the breast pocket of the jacket. I fish it out, practically certain in my own mind that it doesn't belong to me but to this suit that isn't mine. It really is a small leather wallet, a faded yellow in colour—with a washed-out look about it, as if it had fallen into a stream or down a well and then been fished out of the water again. I open it—or rather, I unstick two bits of it that have got stuck together—and look inside. Buried among few folded sheets of paper, which the water has rendered illegible by staining them and making the ink run, I find a small holy picture—the sort they give children in church. It's all yellowed with age, and attached to it there's a photograph, almost of the same format and just as faded as it is. I detach it and study it. Oh! It's the photograph of a beautiful young woman in a bathing costume. She's almost naked. The wind is blowing strongly through her hair, and her arms are raised in a vivacious gesture of greeting. As I gaze at her—admiringly, yet with a certain feeling of pain (I don't know quite how to describe it, it's as if it came from far, far away)—I sense, coming from her, the impression, if not exactly the certainty, that the greeting waved by those arms is directed at me. But, no matter how hard I try, I can't recognize her. Is it even remotely possible that so lovely a woman as she can have slipped my memory? Perhaps she's been carried away by all that wind which is ruffling her hair. One thing's quite definite: in that leather wallet, which at some

time in the past fell into the water, this picture, side by side with the holy picture, is in the place where you put your fiancée's photograph.

I resume my rummaging through the envelope and, more disconcerted than pleased—because I'm very doubtful about whether it belongs to me—I find a huge banknote tucked away in a secret hiding-place. Heaven only knows how long ago it was put there and forgotten. It's folded in four, all worn with use and here and there on the back it's so cracked by folds that it's positively threadbare.

Unprovided as I am with anything, can I provide myself with a little help by using it? I don't know with quite what strength of conviction, but the woman portrayed in that little photograph assures me that the banknote's mine. But can you really trust a charming little head like that, so ruffled by the wind? It's already past midday. I'm dropping with weariness. I must have something to eat. I go into a restaurant.

To my amazement I find myself greeted like an honoured guest. I'm obviously most welcome. I'm shown to a table that's already laid, a chair is drawn aside and I'm invited to take a seat. A scruple holds me back, however. I signal to the proprietor and, drawing him to one side, I show him the huge threadbare banknote. He gazes at it in utter astonishment. He examines it, filled with compassion for the condition to which it's been reduced. Then he tells me that it's undoubtedly of great value, but that it's one of a series which was withdrawn from circulation some time ago. I'm not to worry, however. If it's presented at the bank by someone as important and respectable as myself, it will certainly be accepted and changed into notes of smaller denomination which are currently legal tender.

Saying this, the proprietor of the restaurant accompanies me to the door and out on to the pavement, where he points out the nearby building that houses the bank.

I go in, and everyone in the bank is just as happy to do me this favour. That banknote of mine, they tell me, is one of the very few of that series not yet returned to the bank. For some time now, in this part of the country, they've no longer been putting into circulation notes other than those of minute size. They give me masses and masses of them, so that I feel embarrassed, even oppressed by them. I've only got that shipwrecked leather wallet with me. But they urge me not to let myself get worried. There's a remedy for everything. I can leave that money of mine in the bank, in a current account. I pretend I've understood. I put some of the notes in my pocket, together with the passbook which they give me in return for all the rest that I'm leaving behind, and go back to the restaurant. I can't find any food there to my taste.

I'm afraid of not being able to digest it. But already the rumour must have got about that, if I'm not exactly rich, I'm certainly not poor any longer. And, in fact, as I come out of the restaurant, I find a car waiting for me, accompanied, by a chauffeur who raises his cap to me with one hand, while with the other he holds the door open for me to get in. I don't know where he takes me. But since I've got a motorcar, it's obvious that, without knowing it, I must have a house. Why yes, a very lovely house. It's an old house, where quite obviously lots of people have lived before me, and lots more will live after me. Is this furniture really mine? I somehow feel myself to be a stranger here, a kind of intruder. Just as this morning at dawn the city seemed deserted, now this house of mine seems deserted. I again feel frightened at hearing the echo of my footsteps, as I move through that immense silence. In winter, evening's soon upon you. I'm cold and I feel tired. I buck up my ideas, however, and start moving about. I open one of the doors, quite at random, and stand there in utter amazement, when I see that the room's ablaze with light. It's the bedroom, and there on the bed . . . There she is! The young woman in the photograph, alive, and with her two bare arms still raised in the air, but this time they're inviting me to hasten over to her so that she may welcome me and joyously clasp me in them.

Is it a dream?

Well, this much is quite certain: just as would happen in a dream, when the night has passed and dawn has ushered in the morning, she's no longer there in that bed. There's no trace of her. And the bed which was so warm during the night, is now, when you touch it, freezing cold, just like a tomb. And the whole house is filled with that smell which lurks in places where dust has settled, where life has been withered away by time. And there's that sensation of irritated tiredness which needs well-regulated and useful habits, simply in order to maintain itself in being. I've always had a horror of them. I want to run away. It's quite impossible that this is my house. This is a nightmare. It's quite obvious that I've dreamt one of the most absurd dreams ever dreamt. And as if seeking proof of this, I go and look at myself in a mirror that's hanging on the wall opposite, and instantly I get the terrible feeling that I'm drowning. I'm terrified, lost in a world of never-ending dismay. From what remote distance are my eyes—those eyes which, so it seems to me, I've had since I was a child—now looking wide-eyed with terror at this old man's face, without being able to convince myself of the truth of what I'm seeing? What, am I old already? So suddenly! Just like that! How is it possible?

I hear a knock at the door. My heart turns over. They tell me my children have arrived.

My children?

It seems utterly frightful to me that children should have been born to me. But when? I must have had them yesterday. Yesterday I was still young. It's only right and proper that I should know them, now that I'm old.

They come in, leading several small children by the hand—their children. They immediately rush over and tell me to lean on them. Lovingly they reprove me for having got up out of bed. Very solicitously they make me sit down, so that I shan't feel so weary. Me, weary? Why yes, they know perfectly well that I can't stand on my feet any longer and that I'm in a really bad way.

Seated there, I look at them, I listen to them. And I get the feeling that they're playing a joke on me in a dream.

Has my life already come to an end?

And while I sit there looking at them, all bent so solicitously over me, I mischievously observe—almost as if I really ought not to be noticing it—right under my very eyes, I can see, sprouting there on their heads . . . Yes, there's a considerable number of white hairs growing there. Yes, white hair's growing there on their heads.

"There, that proves it's all a joke. You've got white hair too."

And look, look at those young people who came through that door just now as tiny children. Look? All they had to do was to come up to my armchair. They've grown up. One of them—yes, that one—is already a charming young lady. She wants the rest of them to make way for her so that she can come and be admired. If her father hadn't grabbed hold of her she'd have thrown herself at me, climbed up on to my knees, put her arm round my neck, and rested her little head on my breast.

I feel the urge to leap to my feet. But I have to admit that I really can't manage it any more. And with the same childlike eyes that a little while before those children had—oh, how grown-up they are now!—I sit there, looking at my old children, standing behind these new ones, and there is great compassion in my gaze.