ONE, NO ONE, AND ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND

LUIGI PIRANDELLO
I. My wife and my nose

“What are you doing?” my wife asked, seeing me linger, unusually, in front of the mirror.

“Nothing,” I replied. “Just looking at myself, at my nose, here, inside this nostril. When I press it, I feel a little pain.”

My wife smiled and said: “I thought you were looking to see which way it tilts.”

I wheeled around like a dog whose tail has been stepped on.

“Tilts? My nose?”

And my wife said, serenely: “Of course, dear. Take a good look. It tilts to the right.”

I was twenty-eight years old, and until then I had always considered my nose – if not actually handsome – at least quite decent, like all the other parts of my person generally. So it was easy for me to accept and assert what is usually accepted and asserted by all those who haven’t had the misfortune of being given a deformed body: namely, that it is foolish to be vain about one’s own features. Hence the sudden and unexpected discovery of this flaw irritated me, like an undeserved punishment.
Perhaps my wife saw much deeper into that annoyance of mine and she added at once that, if I had the reassuring notion that I was without defects, I could dispel the thought because, not only did my nose tilt to the right, but also –

“What else?”

Oh, lots of other things! My eyebrows stood over my eyes like two circumflex accents, ^_^, my ears were badly placed, one protruded more; and there were other shortcomings . . .

“Other – ?”

Yes, other ones; my hands, the little finger; and my legs (no, not actually crooked, the right one a bit more curved than the left: just a little, at the knee). After a careful examination, I had to acknowledge the existence of all these defects. And finally my wife, surely mistaking for grief and dejection the wonder I felt, immediately after my irritation, sought to console me, telling me not to take it to heart since, even with these flaws, all things considered, I was still a good-looking man.

Who wouldn’t be irritated, on receiving as a generous concession what had previously been denied him as a right? I blurted out a venomous “thanks” and, sure of having no cause for grief or for dejection, I attached no importance to those slight defects, but a great, exceptional importance to the fact that I had lived all these years, without ever changing noses, always with that one, and those eyebrows, and those ears, those hands, and those legs; it wasn’t till I had taken a wife that I found out that these were all defective.

“Why so surprised?! We know all about wives! They were born to discover their husband’s defects.”
Mm, yes, wives: I agree. But I, too, if I may say so, was made to plunge, at every word addressed to me, at every gnat I saw flying, into abysses of reflection and consideration that burrowed deep inside me and hollowed my spirit up, down, and across, like the lair of a mole, with nothing evident on the surface.

“Obviously,” you say, “you had a great deal of spare time.”

Well, no. It was my nature. But for that matter, true, it was also my idleness, I admit. Rich, I had two faithful friends, Sebastiano Quantorzo and Stefano Firbo, to handle my affairs after the death of my father, who, though he tried in every way, had never succeeded in making me accomplish anything; except taking a wife, of course, when I was very young; perhaps in the hope that I might soon have a son who wouldn’t resemble me in the least; but, poor man, he wasn’t able to obtain even this from me.

Not, mind you, that I had any objection to following the path on which my father set my feet. I followed all paths. But when it came to advancing, I wouldn’t advance. I would pause at every step; I took care to circle every pebble I encountered, first distantly, then more closely; and I was quite amazed that others could pass ahead of me paying no heed to that pebble, which for me, meanwhile, had assumed the proportions of an insuperable mountain, or rather, a world where I could easily have settled.

I had remained arrested like that at the first steps of so many paths, my spirit filled with worlds – or pebbles: it’s the same thing. But I never felt that those who had gone past me and had covered the whole length of the path actually knew any more than I did. They had passed ahead of me, no doubt about that, and they were all foaming at the mouth like so many horses; but
then, at the end of the path, they had found a cart, their cart; they had hitched themselves to it with great patience, and now they were pulling it along. I wasn’t pulling any cart, no, not I; and so I had neither reins nor blinders; I saw certainly more than they; but as for moving ahead, I didn’t know where to go.

Now, to get back to the discovery of those slight defects, I plunged totally, immediately, into the reflection – was this possible? – that I didn’t know well even my own body, my most personal possessions: nose, ears, hands, legs. And I began looking at them again, to re-examine them.

This was the beginning of my sickness. The sickness that would quickly reduce me to conditions of spirit and body so wretched and desperate that I would surely have died of them or gone mad, if I had not found in the sickness itself (as I will tell) the remedy that was to cure me of it.

II. And your nose?

I imagined at once that, just as my wife had made the discovery, everyone must be aware of those bodily defects of mine, unable to see anything else about me.

“Are you looking at my nose?” I suddenly asked a friend, that same day, when he came over to speak to me about some matter that perhaps concerned him.

“No, why?” he asked.

Smiling, I said nervously: “It tilts to the right, can’t you see?”
And I forced him to observe it steadily and carefully, as if
that defect of my nose were an irreparable disaster befallen the mechanism of the universe.

My friend looked at me, a bit dazed at first; then, surely suspecting I had brought up my nose so suddenly and irrelevantly because I didn’t consider his concern worthy of attention or of a reply, he shrugged and started to leave me on the spot. I grasped his arm.

“No, really,” I said to him, “I’m quite willing to discuss this question with you. But at this moment, you must excuse me.”

“You’re thinking about your nose?”

“I had never noticed it tilted to the right. This was pointed out to me, this morning, by my wife.”

“Ah, really?” the friend asked; and his eyes laughed with a disbelief that was also mockery.

I stood and looked at him, as I had looked at my wife that morning: with a mixture of dejection, irritation, and wonder. Had he then also been aware of it for some time? God knows how many others had been as well! And I didn’t know, and, not knowing, I believed everyone saw me as a Moscarda with a straight nose, whereas everyone saw a Moscarda with a bent nose; and there was no telling how many times, unsuspecting, I had happened to talk about the flawed nose of X, Y, and Z, and how many times I had made others laugh at me, as they thought: Look at this poor man who talks about the defects of other people’s noses!

True, I could have consoled myself with the reflection that, in the final analysis, my nose was obvious and common, proving once again a well-known fact, namely, that we easily notice the
defects of others and are unaware of our own. But the first germ of the sickness had begun to take root in my spirit and I couldn’t console myself with this reflection.

On the contrary, I was obsessed by the thought that for others I was not what till now, privately, I had imagined myself to be.

For the moment I thought only of my body and, since my friend was still standing in front of me with that expression of mocking disbelief, to avenge myself I asked him if he knew that his chin had a dimple dividing it into halves that were not completely identical: more prominent on one side, more receding on the other.

“Me? What do you mean?” my friend cried. “I have a dimple; I know that; but it’s not the way you say.”

“Let’s go into that barber’s shop, and you’ll see,” I immediately suggested.

When my friend had gone into the barber’s, to his wonder, he became aware of his defect and admitted it was true; he displayed no irritation, and merely said that, after all, it was a trifle.

Ah, yes, no doubt, a trifle; however, following him at a distance, I saw him stop, first at one shop window, and then a second time, farther on, at another; and, still farther on, and for a longer period, a third time, at the mirror of a stall, to observe his chin; and I’m sure that, the moment he was home, he ran to the wardrobe to renew, with greater leisure, at that other mirror, his acquaintance with himself, with that defect. And I haven’t the slightest doubt that, to wreak his own revenge, or to continue a joke he felt deserved wider circulation in the town, after having asked some friend (as I had asked him) if he had ever noticed
that defect of the chin, he would then discover some other defect in that friend’s mouth or on his forehead, and that friend, in turn . . . – of course! of course! – I could swear that for several days in a row, in the noble city of Richieri, I saw (if it wasn’t really all my imagination) a considerable number of my fellow-citizens move from one shop window to another, stopping at each to study a cheekbone or the corner of an eye, the lobe of an ear, or the side of a nose. And even after a week, one man came up to me with a bewildered look to ask me if it was true that, every time he began speaking, he inadvertently contracted his left eyelid.

“Yes, my friend,” I hastily said to him. “And – you see? – my nose tilts to the right; but I know that myself; there’s no need for you to tell me; and my eyebrows? Like circumflex accents! My ears, see, one protrudes more than the other; and here, my hands, flat, aren’t they? And the joint of this little finger is twisted. And my legs? Here, this one! You think it looks just like the other, do you? Ah, no, it doesn’t! But I’m aware of this myself, and there’s no need for you to tell me. Good to see you.”

I left him there, and went off. After I had gone a few steps, I heard him call me.

“Pst!” Very calmly, with his finger, he was beckoning to me, to ask: “Excuse me, after your birth, did your mother bear other children?”

“No. Neither before nor after,” I replied. “I’m an only child. Why?”

“Because,” he said to me, “if your mother had given birth again, she would surely have had another male.”
LUIGI PIRANDELLO

One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand

I understand everything. But if I return to the condition of spirit I was in then, when seeing people’s eyes on me, I felt as if I were being subjected to a horrible oppression, thinking that all those eyes gave me an image that surely wasn’t the one I knew myself but another that I could neither know nor prevent; merely saying mad things was nothing: I felt like doing them, doing mad things: rolling over in the streets or flying along in dance-steps, winking here, sticking out my tongue and making faces there . . . And instead I walked down the street, serious, so serious. And now you, too, how marvelous! walking along so serious . . .

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