

Livingness of a barber after death

There was a barber who had come to Piacenza to do his military service at a time when the city was full of barracks and, consequently, full of soldiers on the streets. And this is going back to the war when the barber got to know a girl from Piacenza and married her. After being taken prisoner by the Germans and sent to work in Germany, only some years later did the barber return to his wife's part of the world, where he opened a barber's shop. His wife set up a hair-dressing business above the barber's shop in the country.

Time passes and returning home one evening the barber believes he sees on the landing a friend who is not there - in fact, he died a good many years earlier in Albania. He confides what has happened to his wife and she suggests he goes to the hospital for treatment as she doesn't feel like being with someone who has hallucinations. The barber accepts and is admitted to an asylum.

He remains in the asylum for about a year and for another two years following that, and is then finally discharged and sent home.

In the meanwhile, his wife has both moved house and transferred the hairdressing business to the city where she's opened a shop. So, it's at this shop that the barber one fine day shows up.

His wife tells him that she doesn't feel like having him back in the house as he's only just left the asylum. The whole matter is too recent and she wants to be sure that the barber has truly recovered and no longer has hallucinations. The barber accepts and goes back to living in the house in the country above the old shop.

In the months that follow, the man shows no sign of imbalance and doesn't ever speak of hallucinations. From time to time, he takes his bicycle and goes to the city to see his wife, each time asking her if she's ready to have him back.

His wife shows that she has less and less time to spare on him since she is so busy with her work as a hairdresser. Until she asks him once and for all not to come and see her any more.

The barber accepts but after this begins to think that his wife is denying him his existence. And he tells the customers who come to have their hair cut by him in the old shop in the country, saying that his wife is denying him his existence and this he cannot accept.

What's more, he begins to think that everyone is denying him his existence, like his wife, and that they don't see him as being alive, whether in the street, the bar or the office. He feels this is due to an event that took place during the war when one night on the banks of the river Trebbia a German soldier shot at him without hitting. Evidently everyone thinks the German soldier did hit and kill him at the time, so he's not been alive for a good while.

After convincing himself of this, he begins going every Sunday to search the pebbly bed of the Trebbia with a fishing net. He searches the river bed under the bank where the German soldier shot at him that night, looking for the bullet which that night, missing him, must have finished up on the bed of the river.

He talks to the customers about the thing lost among the stones of the Trebbia on which his livingness depends - he never uses the word 'life' and talks always about his 'livingness'. Seeing him in the water every Sunday inspecting the river bed, the fishermen on the Trebbia sometimes, for a joke, ask him if he's looking for proof of God's existence. Each time, he replies: 'No, I'm looking for proof that I exist'.

Some months after the death of the barber, his wife discovered she was pregnant and put the word about that she was expecting the child of the dead barber. Subsequently, she put it about that the barber had spoken to her at night, saying he was happy she'd acknowledged the child as his as it meant she'd stopped denying him his existence.

According to the woman, the barber had spoken to her at night many times, always claiming that his livingness hadn't come to an end. Until she married again and moved to another city and from that day on the barber spoke no more.