

RESTLESS NIGHTS



Selected Stories of Dino Buzzati

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The Seven Messengers

Having set out to explore my father's kingdom, I go on day after day, drawing away from my city, and the news that reaches me becomes increasingly more infrequent.

I began the journey when I was little more than thirty years old, and more than eight years have passed, exactly eight years, six months, and fifteen days of uninterrupted travel. I believed, at my departure, that I would have easily reached the borders of the kingdom in a few weeks, but I have continued to encounter always new people and regions; and everywhere I have met men who spoke my language, who said they were my subjects.

I sometimes suspect my geographer's compass has run wild, and thinking we continually proceed toward the south, we have in fact been describing circles without ever increasing the distance that separates us from the capital; this could explain why we have not yet reached the outermost frontier.

But what more often torments me is the suspicion that this border does not exist, that this kingdom stretches limitlessly, and that despite the extent of my advances, I shall never be able to reach the end.

I began the journey when I was already more than thirty years old, too late perhaps. My friends, even the members of my family, derided my project as a useless expense of the best years of my life. Few of my loyal retainers, in reality, consented to leave.

Although carefree—much more than I am now!—I was preoccupied with the possibility of communicating with my family during the journey, and from the knights of my guard I selected the seven best to serve as my messengers.

Ignorant of my real situation, I supposed having seven of them was an utter extravagance. As time passed I perceived that on the contrary they were ridiculously few; and yet none of them has ever fallen ill, or run into brigands, or ridden his horse to death. All seven have served me with perseverance and devotion that I shall probably never be able to reward.

To distinguish them easily, I gave them names with alphabetical initials: Alessandro, Bartolomeo, Caio, Domenico, Ettore, Federico, and Gregorio.

Unaccustomed to being away from my home, I dispatched the first, Alessandro, as early as the second night of the journey, when we had covered eighty leagues. The night after, to assure the continuity of the communications, I sent the second one, then the third, then the fourth, consecutively, until the eighth night of the journey, on which Gregorio departed. The first had not yet returned.

He arrived on the tenth night while we were pitching camp in an uninhabited valley. I learned from Alessandro that his speed had been inferior to my expectations: I had thought that proceeding alone, he could cover a distance twice ours in the same time; instead he made only one and a half. In one day, while we advanced forty leagues, he devoured sixty, but no more.

The others had similar results. Bartolomeo, having departed for the city on the third night of the journey, reached us on the fifteenth; Caio, having departed on the fourth, was back only on the twentieth. I very quickly noted that it was sufficient to multiply by five the days elapsed thus far to know when the messenger would catch up with us.

As we were always moving farther away from the capital, the messengers' routes became longer for each trip. After fifty days of travel, the interval between their arrivals began to increase appreciably. While at first I saw one come before me every five days, this interval became twenty-five. In this way, the voice of my city was always growing fainter; whole weeks passed without my hearing any news from it.

Six months having elapsed—we had already crossed the Fasani Mountains—the interval between the messengers' arrivals increased to at least four months. They now brought me outdated news; the envelopes reached me wrinkled, sometimes spotted with the dampness of nights spent in the open by whoever carried them to me.

We still proceeded. In vain I sought to persuade myself that the clouds passing above me were identical to those of my childhood, that the sky of my distant city was not different from the azure vault that now loomed over me, that the air was the same, the wind's breath identical, identical the birds' voices. The clouds, sky, air, winds, birds

appeared to me, in truth, new and different things; and I myself felt a stranger.

On, on! Vagabonds encountered on the open plain told me the boundaries were not far. I urged my men not to rest, I silenced the disheartened words that came to their lips. Four years had already passed since my departure—what long drudgery! The capital, my home, my father had become strangely remote, I almost did not believe in them. At least twenty months of silence and solitude now intervened between the messengers' successive appearances. They carried me peculiar letters yellowed by time, and in them I found forgotten names, strange modes of speech, sentiments I could not understand. The following morning, after a single night's rest, while we were resuming our journey, the messenger set out in the opposite direction, bringing to the city the letters I had prepared for some time.

But eight and a half years have passed. Tonight I was having supper alone in my tent when Domenico entered, still able to smile though overcome with fatigue. For almost seven years I had not seen him. Throughout this very long period, he had done nothing but hurry, across grasslands, woods, and deserts, changing his mount who knows how many times, to bring me that bundle of envelopes which so far I have had no desire to open. He has already gone to sleep and will leave again on his own tomorrow at dawn.

He will leave again for the last time. In my diary I have calculated that if all goes well, if I continue my journey as I have done till now and he continues his, I will again see Domenico only when thirty-four years have passed. I will then be seventy-two years old. Yet I begin to feel weary, and it is probable that death will seize me before that time. So I shall never see him again.

In thirty-four years (sooner in fact, much sooner), Domenico will unexpectedly perceive the fires of my camp and ask why I have made so little progress in the meantime. As tonight, the good messenger will enter my tent with letters yellowed by years, laden with absurd news of an already forgotten time; but he will halt at the entrance, seeing me motionless, laid out on the pallet, dead, two soldiers at my sides with torches.

But go, all the same, Domenico, and do not tell me how cruel I am! Carry my last greeting to the city where I was born. You are the

last surviving link with the world that at one time was still my own. The most recent messages have informed me that many things have changed: my father has died; the crown has passed to my older brother; they consider me lost; they have constructed lofty palaces of stone where before there were oaks under which I went alone to play. Yet it is still my ancient native land.

You are the last link with them, Domenico. The fifth messenger, Ettore, who will reach me, God willing, in a year and eight months, will not be able to leave again because he would never have enough time to return. After you, silence, O Domenico, unless I finally find the longed-for boundaries. But the more I proceed, the more I become convinced that the frontier does not exist.

It does not exist, I suspect, at least in the sense we are accustomed to think. There are no separating walls, nor dividing valleys, nor mountains obstructing passage. I shall probably cross the frontier without ever noticing it and continue to move on, unaware.

Because of my suspicion, I want Ettore and his successors, when they will have just reached me, never to resume the path to the capital, but to set out ahead and go before me. Thus I can know in advance what lies in wait.

For some time a strange longing has nightly burned in me, and it is no longer regret for abandoned joys as it was at the beginning of the journey; it is rather the impatience to know the unknown lands toward which I move.

I have been noting—and until now I have confided it to no one—how day after day, as I advance toward my improbable goal, an unusual light that has never appeared to me, not even in dreams, illumines the sky, how the plants, mountains, rivers we come across seem made of an essence different from that of our country, and how the air brings omens I do not know how to read.

A new hope will draw me still farther ahead tomorrow morning, toward those unexplored mountains the nocturnal shadows are hiding. Once again I shall break camp, while Domenico disappears on the opposite horizon, carrying to the very distant city my futile message.

(1942)

The End of the World

One morning about ten o'clock an immense fist appeared in the sky above the city. Then it slowly unclenched and remained this way, immobile, like an enormous canopy of ruin. It looked like rock, but it was not rock; it looked like flesh but it wasn't; it even seemed made of cloud, but cloud it was not. It was God, and the end of the world. A murmuring, which here became a moan, there a shout, spread through the districts of the city, until it grew into a single voice, united and terrible, rising shrilly like a trumpet.

Luisa and Pietro were in a small square, warmed by the early sun, enclosed by strange palaces and partly by gardens. But in the sky, at an immeasurable height, hung the hand. Windows were thrown open amid fearful cries, while the initial shout of the city gradually subsided, and half-dressed young women looked out to watch the apocalypse. People left their houses, many of them breaking into a run. They felt the need to move, to do something, anything, but they didn't know where to turn. Luisa burst into uncontrollable tears: "I knew it," she stammered between sobs, "I knew it had to end this way . . . never when you were in church, never when you were praying . . . I didn't give a damn, didn't care at all, and now . . . I felt it had to happen this way! . . ." What could Pietro do to console her? Even he began to cry like a baby. Most of the people were in tears too, especially the women. Only two friars, spry little old men, went along as happily as if they were on their way to a party. "Now it's all over for the smart ones!" they joyfully exclaimed, proceeding at a brisk pace, turning toward the most notable passersby. "You're not so smart anymore, eh? We're the smart ones now!" they sneered. "Always mocked, always considered dunces—now we'll see who the smart ones are!" Cheerful as schoolboys, they passed through the middle of the growing crowd, which glared at them without daring to make any resistance. Minutes after they had disappeared down an alley, a man instinctively rushed in pursuit of them, as if a precious opportunity had been allowed to slip away. "By God!" he shouted, beating his

forehead, "and to think they could have confessed us." "Damn it!" someone else quickly added, "What idiots we've been! They turn up right under our noses and we let them get away!" But who could ever catch up with the sprightly friars?

In the meantime women and evil men who had previously been arrogant were returning from churches, cursing, disappointed, and discouraged. The more clever confessors had vanished—it was reported—probably bought up by the most influential people and the powerful industrialists. It was very strange, but money amazingly preserved its certain prestige even though it was the end of the world; it was estimated that maybe a few minutes, or hours, or even several days were still left, but who knew. As for the rest of the available confessors, such a frightening throng formed in the churches that they were not even considered. It was said that serious incidents occurred precisely because of the extreme overcrowding, and that swindlers dressed as priests were even offering to make house calls to hear confessions for exorbitant prices. On the other hand, young couples hurriedly withdrew to make love one last time, stretching out on the grass in gardens without the slightest pretense of restraint. The hand, meanwhile, had turned an ashen color, even though the sun was shining, and as a result it was more frightening. The rumor that the catastrophe was imminent began to circulate; a few people were certain they would not see noon.

Just then a young priest was seen on the small, elegant balcony of a palace, a little higher than street level (it was reached by two fan-shaped flights of stairs). With his head sunk between his shoulders, he seemed as if he were afraid to leave. It was strange to see a priest at that hour, in that sumptuous house peopled by courtesans. "A priest! A priest!" was being shouted somewhere. With lightning speed the people succeeded in stopping him before he could get away. "Confess us, confess us!" they cried at him. He paled, was dragged to a rather pretty niche which jutted out from the balcony like a covered pulpit; it seemed especially made for this purpose. Dozens of men and women immediately bunched together, creating an uproar, surging from below, clambering up the ornamental projections, clinging to the columns and the edge of the bannister; after all, it wasn't very high.

The priest began to hear confessions. Very quickly he listened to

breathless secrets from unknown people (who at this point were not concerned with whether the others could hear them). Before they finished, he traced a small sign of the cross with his right hand, absolved them, and immediately turned toward the next sinner. But there were so many of them. The priest looked around in a daze, measuring the rising sea of sins that were to be erased. With great effort Luisa and Pietro also came beneath him, got their turns, managed to be heard. "I never go to Mass, I tell lies," the young girl shouted hurriedly in a frenzy of humiliation, afraid that she wouldn't make it in time, "and then any sin you want . . . add all of them, really . . . and I don't say this because I'm frightened that all these people are here, believe me, it's only that I desire to be near God, I swear to you, . . ." and the priest was convinced of her sincerity. "*Ego te absolvo*, . . ." he murmured and turned to listen to Pietro.

Now an inexpressible longing arose among men. One asked: "How much time until the universal judgment?" Another, a well-informed man, looked at his watch. "Ten minutes," he said authoritatively. The priest heard the man and suddenly tried to leave. But, insatiable, the people held him. He looked feverish. It was clear that the wave of confessions came to him as no more than a confused murmur devoid of sense; he made signs of the cross one after another, repeated *Ego te absolvo* mechanically.

"Eight minutes!" warned a man's voice from the crowd. The priest literally trembled, he stamped his feet on the marble like a child throwing a tantrum. "And me? What about me?" he began to implore, desperate. They cheated him of his soul's salvation, those cursed people; the Devil take them, however many there were. But how would he deliver himself? How provide for himself? He was on the brink of tears. "And me? Me?" he asked of a thousand postulants, voracious of Paradise. Yet no one paid any attention to him.

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