

WHAT GILLETTE LEAVES BEHIND

(seen by those who set off again)

“A clinic cures the patients. A caring community supports the people.”

I. What Remains

I was in the recreation room, the one open to patients for the afternoon rest, the cigarette, the conversation — and to us companions, waiting to take our sick ones back home.

I was not uneasy, but I was watchful: of how a person becomes fragile inside illness, often disabling and without escape, an illness that looks at no one’s age.

There were five men and one woman, all seated in wheelchairs. They turned to me and began to ask how old I was, what work I did, what I dealt with, what my vocation was; and finally they wanted to know what I thought about certain questions of politics and religion, and about a few public figures.

Their eyes were switched off, the eyes of someone who is only waiting to see the light go out. And instead I, that light, I lit again.

It is my way of being with people: to make them smile. I am not an actor, nor a jester of the clinic — only a man like many, but not as common as bread.

Then they asked me for a story. And here I must be honest with the reader: the one I told was not a polite joke, and I would not have told it in any other place. But there, in that room, the permission to laugh at what life had taken from them was theirs to give, to themselves. And they asked me for it. So I report it as it was, because to clean it up entirely would be to betray them.

Let me tell you — I said — about a man in a wheelchair, without arms and without legs, who one day answered an ad on a dating site.

And if someone doesn’t smile, I added, it isn’t my fault: it will only mean that today isn’t his day.

A very rich woman, well on in years — around eighty — helped by her forty-five-year-old niece, was looking for a husband. But after everything life had taught her, she had clear ideas about the kind of man she wanted: one who would never raise his hands, one who stayed at home, and — let us say — a man of generous proportions.

There was a knock at the door. She found before her this man in a wheelchair, without arms and without legs, but young and handsome, come to apply for the ad.

She interviewed him.

She wanted a man who would never raise his hands: and he had no arms. First point in his favor.

She wanted him home-loving, quiet: and he was without legs, in his chair. Second point in his favor.

And finally she told him she wanted him well endowed. And he, in all seriousness, replied: “Madam… and with what do you think I knocked at the door?”

At that point the five men burst out laughing, and could not stop. But the woman stayed serious, impassive. And all my attention went toward her.

For her I had no second version, I had prepared nothing. But I had a flash of inspiration: I told her that, if she wished, I would give her the phone number of that candidate. Her eyes lit up, she smiled, and she said: yes, yes.

I had won a smile from her. I had reached my goal. It was all that remained of that moment — and it was enough.

When I left the facility, everyone asked me when I would return, and whether I had other stories.

II. Epilogue

People believe that what remains is a medical file, an X-ray, a therapy to continue at home, or a phone number scribbled in haste on a piece of paper.

They are wrong.

When a person leaves a facility, they take away almost nothing of what was used to cure them.

They take away the people.

They take away the voices.

The habits.

The corridors.

The schedules.

The faces that for weeks, or for months, marked the time of their life.

Medicine stays in the archives.

Memory takes another road.

And it is of that memory that I want to speak.

III. Author Page

This work was not commissioned.

It was not sold.

It was not made for commercial purposes.

It was written to bear witness to the value of rehabilitation, of human dignity, and of the relationship between people.

The only fee requested is a symbolic dollar — not as payment for the work, but as a testament to a shared commitment to a culture of care, hope, and responsibility.

Ferdinando