
GILARDI

THE WOMEN WHO OWN BIC

I had arrived at the entrance of the café where the meeting was supposed to take place.

I was trembling, but not from fear. It was the kind of trembling that asks a simple question: Am I doing the right thing, or have I finally pushed myself beyond the limit?

There was another question as well: What do I gain from this operation? What objectives have I hidden from myself so deeply that even I can no longer recognize them?

I reached into a rose on display, pulled off three petals, and used them to perfume my face. Aftershave was not included in the travel budget, but I did not want to arrive carrying only the scent of a man.

I was in the homeland of Georges, son of L'Oréal, and that company had taught me many things.

I started the music from my website as a background soundtrack. By chance, the song that began to play was the same one my father and grandfather used to perform together: mandolin and guitar. They were with me. The three of us entered together.

Chanel saw me from a distance and walked over with a warm embrace, as if we were old friends meeting again after many years. Tall. Blonde. Blue eyes. Hair gathered neatly. A breathtaking presence wrapped inside a navy-blue dress. For a moment I almost wanted to ask her where I could find a church and marry her immediately.

She guided me toward the table. Six women were waiting. The meeting was about to begin, and I already knew there would never be a confrontation. I suffered from a congenital defect: I knew how to lose while winning.

I introduced myself to each woman, without trying to identify the most important one at the table. I discovered that naturally about ten seconds later.

The first woman revealed her name and surname, and in perfect Gillette Man fashion I kissed her hand. Then I did the same with every other woman at the table, offering each one a smile and an: “Enchanté.” Made in Calabria.

Only afterward did I state my own name, with no doubt whatsoever that every one of them already knew who I was.

They asked what I would like to drink, whether I wanted breakfast, perhaps a small pastry. I explained that the staff at my usual hotel would never allow me to leave in the morning unless they had first witnessed a serious breakfast. All of them burst into laughter.

Then they asked whether this was my first visit to Paris. I told them that years earlier I had worked along the banks of the Seine, in the gardens beside the river, gathering flowers and delivering them fresh every morning to Notre-Dame Cathedral. I had done it while waiting for the Madonna to grant me a favor and arrange this very meeting with the six of them. I had never doubted it. After all, it was the promise of a woman.

They smiled. The atmosphere softened. Empathy entered the conversation.

Then one of them asked: “Mr. Frega, what do you like most about France?”

“What kind of question is that?” I replied. “The answer is obvious.”

BIC.

The conversation immediately took a pleasant turn.

A little later we decided to continue over lunch and walked about one hundred meters along the Champs-Élysées. Throughout the entire walk, however, I kept noticing the same three or five men observing us from a distance. I had noticed them from the very first moment. And they had noticed me. They were security. Never too close. Never too far away.

We entered a French restaurant. The typical kind of French restaurant where you eat almost nothing and pay a small fortune.

I called Chanel over. She immediately walked toward me.

“What happened?”

“We're leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“Yes. I'm taking all of you somewhere to eat.”

For a full minute they stood frozen. The guest leading the dance was not something they were accustomed to seeing. Yet my proposal was so convincing that they all followed. Like hens

walking behind a rooster. Then again, we were in the land of the rooster.

We arrived at the first pizzeria and sandwich shop we could find. Before entering, I walked over to the owner.

“I would like seven sandwiches, five euros each, drinks included.”

“And I'm paying.”

The agreement was reached. And so was the good impression.

We walked inside. They seemed completely bewildered, as if riding on the wings of flying horses, unable to understand exactly what was happening.

They were inside GILLETTENARRATIVE. And none of them knew it yet.

Ferdinando