

MY LADY WILKINSON

I sent her a text message that very same evening, telling her that I would stay for five days and asking how she wished to spend that time.
I barely had enough time to put my phone down.
Less than two minutes later, her reply arrived.

“Tomorrow morning at eleven.
Here at my villa in Eaton.
We shall have an English tea.
Tell me where you are staying.
I will give the address to my driver and he will come to pick you up.”

I smiled.
The organization was military.
The elegance was British.
The invitation was impossible to refuse.

I replied immediately.

“At 10:30 I will be standing in front of the Four Seasons Hotel.
I am staying nearby.
I will walk.”

Then I remained for a few moments looking at the message before sending another one.
I was genuinely involved in our meeting.
Perhaps more than I was willing to admit.
I had the feeling that I was preparing myself for a ceremony without a Master.

The following day we both arrived exactly on time.
The driver was called Dominique.
He was of French origin.

Courteous.
Discreet.
Perfectly educated.

As we drove through those streets, a strange feeling came over me.
It was as if I had already been there.
My memory suddenly travelled back to 1993.
The same place.
With a former Gillette colleague.
I thought it was merely a coincidence.
One of those gifts that life sometimes offers without being asked.

I entered the castle.
She continued to call it a villa, out of her natural sense of modesty.
For me, it was a castle.
The second one I had visited in my life.
The first had been Bran Castle in Transylvania.
I had gone there to meet an extraordinary director, a magnificent woman who hosted Count Vlad, better known as Dracula the Impaler.

I found Maggy seated in an armchair beside the sofa.
She greeted me warmly.
Instinctively, I reached for her hand to kiss it.
Instead, she adopted the French protocol.
Three kisses.
We were simply two people separated by generations and united by a story that neither of us had yet finished telling.
And for the first time since my arrival, London no longer felt like a city.
It felt like a destination.

I told her that, as far as I knew, the English tea ritual belonged to five o’clock in the afternoon.
At least that was what I had been taught at school.
At eleven in the morning, however, I could not understand what had changed.

She smiled.
Then she replied with the confidence that belongs only to those who have lived long enough to no longer need to convince anyone.

“The English drink tea whenever they appear to be resting.
In reality, it is the moment when they think.
It is the moment when they make decisions.
There is no fixed hour.
Five o’clock tea is merely a format that someone institutionalized to justify a break from work.”

I listened without interrupting her.
She was a strong woman.
Assertive.
Determined.
Elegant.
Tireless.
Unyielding.
She was made of steel.
Like her swords.
She was Maggy.
She was my Lady Wilkinson.

Ferdinando Frega