

THE DAY AFTER WITH WILKINSON

The text message was clear.

“Be in front of the hotel at 12:00.
I will come by with my daughter and my granddaughters.
We will take you to lunch.
Then we shall spend the afternoon together and hope not to bore you.”

I smiled.
After what I had experienced the previous day, boredom was the last thing I feared.

They were punctual.
Absolutely punctual.
But this time something was different.
There was no driver.
The driver had been given the day off.
Maggy was behind the wheel.

I confess that I offered a brief prayer to God.
Not for spiritual reasons.
For automotive reasons.
I hoped everything would go well.
Without surprises.
At least not that kind of surprise.

She, however, seemed perfectly at ease.
She held the steering wheel with the same confidence with which she conducted a conversation.
Or made a decision.
Or chaired a meeting.

Something came to mind.
Not everyone grows old in the same way.
Some people stop driving.
Others stop travelling.
Others stop making decisions.
Not Maggy.
She had simply continued.
As if time itself had decided to step aside out of respect.

We continued across London.
They had reserved the front seat for me.
The seat normally assigned to a guest.
Maggy was driving.
Her daughter and granddaughters sat in the back.
It looked like an ordinary family.
But it was not.

After a few minutes they asked me what I would like to eat.
Whether I had any preferences.
I answered without hesitation.

“Definitely English cuisine.”

They all burst into laughter.
Not the polite kind.
The genuine kind.
Spontaneous.

Maggy turned toward her daughter.
She had the expression of someone who had just proven a theory.

“Do you understand now why I told you those things?”

Her daughter smiled without adding a word.
As if my answer had confirmed something they had already discussed long before.

I did not ask for an explanation.
Sometimes questions arrive too early.
Answers, on the other hand, need their own time.

I simply observed that strange English family.
And I had the feeling that, somewhere, long before we had ever met, Maggy had already decided who I was.
I was merely catching up.

We arrived at a restaurant.
Not one of those places belonging to the great luxury of the English aristocracy.
No uniformed doorman.
No display of status.
No artificial sophistication.

At that moment I became certain that we were going to eat well.
Cuisine is like the art of things.
The simplest things are almost always the best.

And Maggy was exactly like that.
She could live in a castle and call it a villa.
She could speak like a queen and drive like a London taxi driver.
She could take you to the ruins of her own history without losing the dignity of an English lady.
But when it was time to eat, she chose substance.
Not representation.

Perhaps that was the reason I kept listening to her.
Behind the steel of her swords, I had not found an institution.
I had found a woman.

Ferdinando Frega