‘DURACELL, MRS. TANAKA SAID’

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The Japanese Death

That day I was at headquarters in Milan. I had to explain to the marketing people how a product could be sold just by letting people smell it, something nobody had ever thought of.

We sold grooming products and had never had any kind of connection with food. But what seemed logical met a different dimension in reality, where fantasy married noir and all of a sudden became truth.

The idea was that if we asked a customer to smell the tray of a product, they would tell us they smelled nothing but pressed cardboard. And I would be the one telling them that they couldn't smell the scent of success behind the brand alone.

Ahahahahahahahah.

But let's not get lost in the background. This is not what the story is about.

I had just come back from my hot dog when, right at the exit by the porter's lodge, I found my CEO about to leave. He called me over and said: "Frega, come with me. Stop playing with the marketing people, they will never understand, not until they see you at work in the field. Come along, we are going to the airport to meet a Gillette colleague, the new CEO of Japan, Mrs. TANAKA.

"You'll see, she is a pleasant woman, and she loves Calabrians. Long ago she had a boyfriend from your part of the world; she told me so at our last board meeting in Boston."

“But Dottore, I don’t speak Japanese, I have never had girlfriends in those places, I wouldn’t know how to behave or what to say. I have never been there.”

“Come on, get in the car, you drive. We are going to Milano Malpensa and I’ll explain on the way. I’ll have my secretary tell everyone who looks for you that you are on a mission with me.”

We had about fifty minutes of road ahead of us, and he started asking me personal questions: the family, the children, news of my father, whom he knew well. No work at all. Only in the last ten minutes before the airport did he give me a few technical details about who was arriving.

Mrs. Tanaka had recently suffered a loss, the death of her father, and this was a good occasion to offer our condolences. Between the lines it came out that she came from the global board of Duracell and had received this fresh appointment at Gillette only a few quarters earlier. But no suspicion of what lay behind it, at least not at my latitudes.

I saw her arrive: medium height, elegant, smiling. My CEO greeted her warmly with the ritual kiss on both cheeks. I had no such familiarity and limited myself to kissing her hand, and she smiled.

She asked to use the restroom first and then to stop at one of the little tables of the bar, to have a drink and exchange a few words.

She came back shortly after, fresh and even more fragrant than before, and my CEO turned to her to offer his condolences. She answered:

“Death is the same all over the world, but the philosophy of those who look at death and tell the story of life is, for an Eastern people, very far from the Western one.” What did she mean?

“You cry when you remember him. We smile when we tell his story, because he lives inside what he did, not only inside what he was.”

It was a new concept and a hard one at the same time. I didn’t lose my footing, but I struggled to digest it.

Then she turned to me and said, in perfect Calabrian dialect: “Capisci sti.”

Ahahahahahahahah.

The two of them stayed together about ten minutes, in a private conversation, and I kept thinking about her words. On her way back past me she said goodbye and walked off, and as she was leaving I called after her, shouting:

“Mrs. Tanaka, capiscia aaaa.”

She smiled and walked away.

Another fifty minutes in the car to get back to headquarters. The CEO stayed silent, said nothing, and I drove without asking questions, until at a certain point he said to me:

“The Japanese colleague told me you are a pleasant man, but to be careful with you.” Why?

“She said that people like you don’t work for companies, nor do they run them.” And what do they do?

He smiled and answered: “Capisci sti.”

Ferdinando