KING, GILLETTE. THE NAME

The Conquest of Meaning

Ferdinando Frega



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Contents

Literary Manifesto

Dedication

Back-Cover Text

Preface

Premise

Synopsis

Editorial Note

Introduction

Prologue to the Stories

Chapter 1 — Before the Blade

Chapter 2 — The Man Who Wanted to Move America

Chapter 3 — The Prophet and the Salesman

Chapter 4 — When the Blade Was Born

Chapter 5 — The Blood of Companies

Chapter 6 — Eighteen Years Inside the Mother Company

Chapter 7 — The Exit Door

Chapter 8 — The Debt

Chapter 9 — Return to France

Chapter 10 — The Takeover Bid

Chapter 11 — The Grandfather and BIC

Chapter 12 — Objects Have a Homeland

Chapter 13 — A Hundred Useless Books

Chapter 14 — The One-Dollar Man

Chapter 15 — Calabria

Chapter 16 — My Mother

Chapter 17 — Ten Billion and a Pair of Clogs

Chapter 18 — Wall Street Was Not Prepared

Chapter 19 — I Am a Blade

Chapter 20 — The Name

Epilogue — Semantic Conquest

Postface — The Owner

The Name — Final Verse

LITERARY MANIFESTO

This book is not about razors.

It is not about steel.

It is not about market share.

It is about what happens when a name survives long enough to become more important than the products that made it famous.

Every great brand is born twice.

The first time in the marketplace.

The second time in the imagination.

The first creates customers.

The second creates meaning.

King saw a vision before he saw a blade.

Gillette built a company.

Generations built a memory.

This book tells the story of the moment when that memory becomes narrative.

Not to replace history.

To continue it.

DEDICATION

To my mother.

For all that can be given back.

And for all that never can.

To my father.

For the stretch of road he travelled before me.

To Grandfather King.

Who imagined a world before he imagined a blade.

And to all those who know that some names cannot be owned.

They can only be held in trust.

BACK-COVER TEXT

Before the blade, there was a vision.

Before the corporation, there was a man.

Before the brand, there was a name.

At the end of the nineteenth century, King Camp Gillette imagined an entirely new society. Years later, he built one of the most recognisable companies in the world.

More than a century later, a former Gillette executive chooses to travel in the opposite direction.

From the corporation to the founder.

From the product to memory.

From the brand to meaning.

Part industrial history, part autobiography, part narrative, part cultural reflection, this book explores one simple and radical question:

What happens when a name outlives its owners?

PREFACE

This book began with a surprise.

I thought I was studying the history of Gillette.

What I found was the history of an idea.

The further I went in my research and writing, the clearer it became that the product was not at the centre of the story.

It was meaning.

The blade was only the visible form.

Beneath it lay a vision, a culture, a memory, and a human chain stretching across generations.

From that moment on, the book ceased to be a reconstruction.

It became a journey.

PREMISE

I am not a historian.

I am not a biographer.

I am not even an industrial commentator.

I am a storyteller.

For this reason, the reader will find facts, memories, interpretations, and symbols in these pages.

This story is about more than the people who lived it.

It is about the destiny of names.

The way they travel through time.

The way they continue to generate meaning.

The way they outlive their own creators.

SYNOPSIS

King Camp Gillette imagined a city for sixty million people before inventing the blade that made him famous.

More than a century later, Ferdinando Frega retraces the adventure of the Gillette name through family memory, professional experience, cultural inheritance, and the creation of Gillettenarrative.

Through industrial utopias, a symbolic return to France, impossible acquisitions, books given away freely, and reflections on what brands mean, one question emerges:

Is the true legacy of a great company the product — or the meaning it leaves behind?

EDITORIAL NOTE

Gillettenarrative was not born as a commercial project.

It began as an infrastructure for stories.

The books that make up this ecosystem do not seek to occupy a space in the publishing market.

They seek to build relationships, memory, and meaning.

This volume is one of the central texts of the project because it explores the relationship between identity, inheritance, corporation, family, and narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Every story has a hidden centre.

For years, I believed the centre of this story was Gillette.

Then I believed it was King.

Then I believed it was my own experience.

I was wrong.

The centre was the Name.

The word that connects a nineteenth-century visionary, a twentieth-century multinational, and a twenty-first-century storyteller.

This book tells the journey of that name.

Not to prove something.

But to understand one simple thing.

How can a word travel through more than a hundred years of history without ever ceasing to produce meaning?

PROLOGUE TO THE STORIES

Every story begins twice.

The first time, when it happens.

The second, when someone decides to tell it.

This book was born from the second beginning.

For more than a century, the name Gillette has travelled through men, companies, products, markets, and generations. It has produced innovation, success, competition, and memory. It has moved through wars, industrial change, and cultural transformation. Yet none of these is the true subject of this book.

The true subject of this book is a question.

What happens when a name survives long enough to become more important than the people who created it?

This is not a biography of King Camp Gillette.

It is not a corporate history of Gillette.

It is not an essay on the shaving industry.

Nor is it an autobiography.

It is the story of a trajectory.

A journey that begins with a nineteenth-century visionary and crosses more than a century to reach a storyteller living in Calabria, still questioning the meaning of that name.

Many readers will enter these pages expecting to find a story about products.

They will find, instead, a story about meanings.

Because products have a beginning date and an end date.

Meanings do not.

Products are replaced.

Meanings are passed on.

Products belong to the market.

Meanings belong to time.

For this reason, the pages that follow do not seek to establish a final truth.

They seek something more useful.

An understanding.

An understanding of how a vision can become a company.

How a company can become a brand.

How a brand can become a memory.

How a memory can become narrative.

And how a narrative can continue to live long after its protagonists have disappeared.

At the centre of this book, you will not find a blade.

You will not find a corporation.

You will not find Wall Street.

You will not even find the author.

At the centre, you will find a name.

Because protagonists pass.

Generations pass.

Companies pass.

Owners pass.

Names, sometimes, remain.

And when they remain long enough, they become something greater than their origin.

They become memory.

They become inheritance.

They become meaning.

The stories that follow belong to that territory.

The territory where history meets narrative.

Where the market meets memory.

Where a founder meets time.

And where a name continues to speak when everyone believes it has already said all it had to say.

Welcome to the journey.

Welcome inside the Name.

CHAPTER 1

Before the Blade

Boston did not yet know who he was.

Nobody knew who he was.

There were no packages with his face printed on them. There were no disposable blades. There was no corporation that would cross the twentieth century.

There was only a man looking at the world and unable to accept it as it was.

This was King Gillette's first invention.

Not the blade.

Dissatisfaction.

Many men see an imperfect system and learn to live with it.

Some protest.

Others adapt.

He did not.

He observed the cities, the factories, the trade, the competition between enterprises, and always arrived at the same conclusion:

the world had been designed badly.

The extraordinary thing is that all this happened before Gillette.

Long before.

When his name did not yet mean anything.

When it was not yet a brand.

When he was simply a man with ideas too large for his social standing.

In 1894 he published The Human Drift.

It was not a book about shaving.

It was not a book about consumers.

It was not a book about blades.

It was something far more ambitious.

It was an attempt to redesign American society.

King imagined a gigantic city called Metropolis.

A place where millions of people would live together.

A single system.

A single organisation.

A single energy.

A single direction.

Many considered him an eccentric.

Some thought he was a visionary.

Others simply judged him mad.

History, almost always, confuses the two categories.

And it is here that this book begins.

Not with a blade.

Not with a product.

Not with a sale.

It begins with a question.

What comes first?

The object or the imagination?

The market or the dream?

King Gillette's answer was clear.

The vision always comes first.

Everything else arrives after.

Many years later, in a region far from Boston called Calabria, another man would discover something similar.

That products age.

Companies change hands.

Generations pass.

But names, sometimes, survive.

And when they survive long enough, they cease to belong to the market.

They begin to belong to memory.

This book is about that moment.

The moment when a name ceases to be a brand and becomes a story.

And to understand that story, one must return to the beginning.

Before the blade.

Before Gillette.

Before the myth.

One must return to Grandfather King.

CHAPTER 2

The Man Who Wanted to Move America

Before the blade existed, there was a city.

Not a real city.

An imagined city.

A city so vast it seemed absurd even to those who lived in the America of great railroads, steel mills, and factories that were transforming the continent.

King was not yet building a company.

He was building a world.

Many years later, when his face would appear on packages and his name would enter the homes of millions, almost no one would remember this phase.

History loves objects.

Much less, ideas.

It remembers the blade.

It forgets the dream.

And yet, the dream came first.

King observed late-nineteenth-century America and saw the same thing everywhere.

Duplication.

Competition.

Waste.

Thousands of men engaged in doing the same thing against thousands of other men.

Thousands of companies intent on fighting one another.

Thousands of energies dispersed.

To him it seemed like madness.

So he did what all visionaries do.

He began to simplify.

An ordinary man adds.

A visionary subtracts.

King subtracted.

He subtracted enterprises.

He subtracted competitors.

He subtracted fragmentation.

In the end, a single gigantic organisation remained.

He called it the United Company.

But even that was not enough.

Because if a single organisation exists, he thought, why should there be thousands of cities?

Why thousands of networks?

Why thousands of systems?

The conclusion came almost naturally.

A single nation.

A single city.

A single centre.

He called it Metropolis.

Sixty million inhabitants.

A number that today is staggering.

At the time it seemed simply impossible.

Niagara Falls would provide the energy.

Industry would work for everyone.

Distribution would be centralised.

The entire system would be designed to eliminate the waste he saw every day.

Many read those pages as fantasy.

Others as utopia.

Still others as proof of eccentricity.

Perhaps they were all right.

Great ideas are rarely born already dressed as truth.

They almost always appear disguised as madness.

And here appears the first lesson of this book.

King Gillette was not designing a city.

He was searching for order.

The city was only the container.

The true subject was the human desire to give shape to chaos.

It is an ancient temptation.

Every religion.

Every empire.

Every ideology.

Every corporation.

All promise the same thing.

Order.

King was no exception.

The difference is that he drew.

He wrote.

He imagined.

He put his obsession on paper.

This is why his story still interests me today.

Not because he was right.

Not because he was wrong.

But because he had the courage to think big before he became important.

Most men wait for power before they imagine.

He imagined first.

Power came after.

Many years later I would see the same mechanism again.

Not in Boston.

Not around Niagara Falls.

But in Calabria.

There too existed people convinced that a project had to prove its value before it could exist.

King had followed the opposite path.

First he built the vision.

Then he sought the way to make it possible.

Perhaps this is why I continue to call him Grandfather King.

Not for the blade.

Not for the brand.

Not for the success.

But because, before being an industrialist, he was a narrator of the future.

And every story that comes after, including my own, is born from that simple conviction:

first you imagine the world.

Then you try to build it.

CHAPTER 3

The Prophet and the Salesman

If history were simple, King Camp Gillette would be remembered as an inventor.

Historians like inventors.

They are easy to tell.

They have a date.

A patent.

An object.

A result.

King Camp Gillette's life was far less orderly.

Two men lived inside him.

The first looked at the present.

The second observed the future.

The first sold.

The second prophesied.

The first sought customers.

The second sought systems.

The first had to earn a living.

The second wanted to redesign society.

This tension runs through his entire existence.

And it is probably the reason he continues to interest me more than many other founders.

Great companies are full of managers.

Visionaries are far rarer.

Visionaries who also manage to build a company are exceedingly rare.

But there is a price.

To build something in the real world you must accept compromises.

Reality always demands payment.

There are no exceptions.

Not even for Grandfather King.

On one side was the author of The Human Drift.

The man who imagined a gigantic collective organisation.

The man who wanted to eliminate waste, duplication, and conflict.

The man who dreamed of a city capable of containing an entire nation.

On the other side was the salesman.

A man who walked the streets.

Who observed customers.

Who studied people’s habits.

Who looked for something to offer the market.

At first glance they seem incompatible figures.

And yet, they were the same person.

Perhaps that is precisely the secret.

Ideas need reality.

Reality needs ideas.

When one is missing, something breaks.

A visionary without contact with the world produces only fantasies.

A salesman without imagination produces only invoices.

King C. Gillette lived between these two extremes.

And one day the two extremes met in a tiny gesture.

He was shaving.

He looked at the razor.

An expensive object, one that had to be stropped, cared for, preserved. An object for the few.

And he understood.

The world did not need a better razor.

It needed a worse one, one you could throw away.

It was not a technical insight.

It was a theological one.

To finance Metropolis, he had to stop selling eternity.

He had to start selling the ephemeral.

The disposable blade was not a product.

It was a compromise.

The prophet had found a way to make the present pay for the future he dreamed of.

Five dollars for the handle. And then, for the rest of your life, you would come back to him.

Here is Grandfather King's theorem:

to build the city that lasts forever, you must sell something that does not last at all.

Many years later I would find myself facing the same question.

With different tools.

In another era.

In another geography.

Not in Boston.

In Calabria.

My father had understood the same thing, but in reverse.

King started from the future and looked for a product to reach it.

My father started from the product and built a future inside it.

King said: let us eliminate competition, let us make a single city.

My father said: if Frega can do it in Calabria, a disaster area, you can do it too.

The same obsession with order.

The same perfect geometry.

Itineraries fixed four weeks in advance. Hotels, restaurants, bars. No distractions.

It was not selling. It was urban planning applied to sales.

This is why the story of De Wakefield on a Friday at 8 p.m. is so important.

The Englishman wanted to see if the system held even without control.

He found a man coming out of the last tobacconist, according to itinerary, who told him:

This is my normal way of working. If you are not satisfied, I will sign my resignation immediately.

And then:

You must pay for your own drink. It is not included in the signed itinerary.

King would have understood perfectly.

Because he too, before the investors of Boston who thought him mad, said the same thing: either you believe in my city, or I continue anyway.

The prophet must become a salesman to survive.

The salesman must become a prophet to remain.

King became a salesman and bought the world with a cent of steel.

My father remained a salesman and became a prophet, because his itinerary is still there, after sixty years, telling people how work is done.

And in between, between the two, the Name remained.

Not the blade.

Not the quarter.

Not the 99.5% Nielsen share.

The Name.

The one that survives long enough to become more important than the products that made it famous.

The one we are still trying to hold in trust.

CHAPTER 4

When the Blade Was Born

Every legend has a decisive moment.

It is not always the most spectacular.

Often it is the quietest.

For Grandfather King, the decisive moment was not the publication of The Human Drift. Not Metropolis. Not the grand utopia.

It was a question.

A seemingly trivial question.

What can be sold a second time?

For years he had observed the world from above, trying to grasp its design.

Then, as often happens to visionaries, he was forced to look at it from below.

From the side of customers.

From the side of habits.

From the side of daily needs.

The paradox is extraordinary.

The man who had imagined a society for sixty million people found himself reflecting on a gesture a man performs in front of a mirror.

Shaving.

One of the simplest and most repetitive rituals of modern life.

And yet, that is precisely where the transformation occurred.

Not the birth of the vision.

The birth of the vehicle that would allow the vision to survive.

Because suddenly King understood something.

Ideas need a body.

A theory can excite.

A book can inspire.

But an object enters homes.

An object crosses generations.

An object builds habits.

An object creates memory.

The blade would become that body.

The insight was simple.

Even disarming.

A thin blade.

Replaceable.

Destined to be purchased again.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Many years later the world would call this mechanism a business model.

King probably saw it differently.

For him it was a form of continuity.

A constant link between company and user.

A relationship destined to repeat over time.

The real innovation was not shaving.

It was the relationship.

Naturally the idea alone was not enough.

Ideas are never enough.

Between vision and reality there is always a difficult land to cross.

It is called execution.

That is where William Emery Nickerson entered the scene, the engineer who helped solve the technical problem of industrial production.

This part of the story has always struck me.

Because it recalls a truth that authors tend to forget.

No great construction is born from a single man.

Even founders need allies.

Even visionaries need engineers.

Even prophets need people capable of turning words into matter.

And so the blade took shape.

First on paper.

Then in steel.

Then on the market.

Finally, in collective memory.

The world saw only the last step.

Most people always see only the last step.

They see the product.

They see the success.

They see the brand.

They do not see the long journey that preceded it.

They do not see the man who wanted to rebuild America.

They do not see the salesman who walked the streets.

They do not see the visionary who spent his nights imagining impossible cities.

And yet, everything was still there.

Hidden inside that thin strip of steel.

This is why I consider the blade a symbol.

It does not represent merely an invention.

It represents the compression of a vision.

Like a star that collapses until it becomes a blinding point.

Everything shrinks.

Everything concentrates.

Everything becomes an object.

And that object begins a life of its own.

From that moment the name Gillette gradually ceased to belong only to King.

It began to belong to the world.

It is the destiny of all names that survive their creators.

First they are people.

Then they become stories.

And once they become stories, no one can fully control them anymore.

The blade was born.

The myth, however, was just beginning.

CHAPTER 5

The Blood of Companies

Companies do not have blood.

They have balance sheets.

They have plants.

They have executives.

They have shareholders.

Blood belongs to families.

And perhaps this is why companies pass and families remain.

For a long time I believed my story with Gillette was a professional story.

Eighteen years.

A career.

A path.

A chapter of life.

Then I began to observe the matter from a greater distance.

And I discovered there was more to it.

Truly important stories do not begin when we sign a contract.

They begin much earlier.

They begin when we do not yet know we are involved.

In my case the line had already been drawn.

Not by me.

By others.

By people who had come before me.

By men who could not imagine where that road would lead.

This is why I keep using the expression Grandfather King.

It is not a genealogical definition.

It is narrative.

It is a way of describing a kinship built through a name, a corporate culture, and a chain of events that crosses time.

Companies often speak of legacy.

Almost always they mean market share.

Brands.

Intellectual property.

Factories.

I believe legacy is something else.

Legacy is what remains in people.

Habits.

Language.

Principles.

Convictions.

Obsessions.

Those truly pass from one generation to the next.

Everything else can be sold.

Even the greatest corporation in the world can change hands.

A culture, far less easily.

It was by observing this continuity that I began to see Gillette differently.

No longer merely as a blade manufacturer.

No longer merely as a global brand.

But as a long conversation.

A conversation that crossed decades.

King.

Kamp.

My father.

Me.

Four points on the same line.

Not necessarily in agreement.

Not necessarily the same.

But connected.

Because every generation receives something.

And every generation adds something.

Then passes the baton.

The interesting part is that often no one notices the handover.

It happens slowly.

Almost in silence.

A phrase.

An example.

A story.

A decision.

A behaviour copied without realising it.

This is how authentic legacies are built.

Not through documents.

Through daily life.

This is also the reason the name continues to interest me.

Not the brand.

The name.

The brand belongs to the market.

The name belongs to memory.

And while the market measures the next quarter, memory measures generations.

They are two completely different units of time.

Perhaps incompatible.

And yet, they coexist.

King would never have known me.

I never knew King.

And yet, a conversation exists.

Through books.

Through ideas.

Through a story that continues to produce meaning long after its protagonists have disappeared.

At this point in the narrative I begin to understand one thing.

Perhaps this book is not really about Gillette.

Perhaps it is about the way human beings transmit meaning through time.

Gillette is only the vehicle.

The visible structure.

The concrete example.

The true matter of the book is something else.

Continuity.

That thin thread that crosses different people and keeps moving even when everyone believes the story is over.

Because some stories end.

Others change author.

And when they change author they become something greater.

They become inheritance.

And it is precisely at that point that Grandfather King's story ceases to be only Grandfather King's story.

And slowly begins to become mine as well.

CHAPTER 6

Eighteen Years Inside the Mother Company

There are two ways to know a company.

The first is to read its history.

The second is to inhabit it.

They are completely different experiences.

Books tell what happened.

Corridors tell how it happens.

For eighteen years I lived inside Gillette.

Not alongside.

Not around.

Inside.

Long enough to see what consumers do not see.

Long enough to understand that behind every brand there exists an invisible universe.

When a person picks up a package they see a product.

When you work inside, you begin to see the people.

You see the discussions.

The decisions.

The mistakes.

The insights.

The daily work of keeping alive something much larger than any one person.

At that point the corporation ceases to be a word.

It becomes an organism.

It breathes.

It grows.

It defends itself.

It reacts.

Sometimes it errs.

Sometimes it surprises.

And above all, it leaves traces.

The best companies do not merely teach procedures.

They transmit a culture.

A way of looking at the world.

A way of confronting problems.

A way of behaving when no one is watching.

This is the true inheritance passed from one professional generation to the next.

Not the products.

Not the catalogues.

Not the revenues.

The culture.

When I arrived I was not thinking about all this.

I was thinking about the job.

Like everyone.

You enter to build a career.

Only much later do you realise that the career is only part of the story.

The invisible part is what stays inside us.

For this reason I consider those eighteen years a form of education.

One of many.

Not the only one.

But certainly one of the most important.

Because observing a multinational from the outside is one thing.

Knowing its language is another.

Understanding how it reasons.

Comprehending why some decisions are made and others are not.

Seeing the continuous relationship between vision and reality.

Sometimes I think of Grandfather King.

I think of the man who imagined Metropolis.

I think of the salesman looking for a simple solution.

I think of the founder who could never have predicted what his name would become a hundred years later.

Then I think of the offices.

The markets.

The commercial managers.

The people I met along the way.

And I realise the two stories are connected.

On one side is the idea.

On the other, the execution.

On one side, the founder.

On the other, thousands of people who, generation after generation, keep the result alive.

Neither can exist without the other.

It is a lesson the market often forgets.

We celebrate founders.

We forget those who build every day.

We celebrate inventors.

We forget interpreters.

And yet, every great enterprise needs both.

Perhaps this is also why I cannot look at Gillette merely as a brand.

I see it as a long relay.

King passes something to the next generation.

The next generation passes something to the next.

And so on.

Until it reaches me.

Not as an owner.

Not as a legal heir.

But as a temporary bearer of a portion of that memory.

Because this is the destiny of important stories.

No one truly owns them.

You hold them in trust for a stretch of road.

Then you deliver them to someone else.

During those eighteen years I had not yet understood this.

I thought I was working inside a company.

Much later I understood I was entering a story.

And once you enter a story, you never completely leave.

You can leave the office.

You can leave the role.

You can leave the desk.

But some narratives keep walking beside us.

Even long after.

This is why the next chapter is not about the entrance.

It is about the exit.

Because every true belonging is understood only in the moment you leave it.

CHAPTER 7

The Exit Door

There is a day no one tells.

Companies celebrate entrances.

They toast promotions.

They announce acquisitions.

They publish results.

Far more rarely do they speak of exits.

And yet, it is there that many stories become truly comprehensible.

For eighteen years I had lived inside the same architecture.

I had learned the language.

The rhythms.

The written rules.

And above all, the unwritten ones.

Then came the day of the door.

Not a physical door.

A narrative door.

The invisible boundary that separates belonging from memory.

When you leave a company, two things happen at once.

The first is immediate.

You lose the role.

You are no longer the person you were the day before.

People stop calling you for certain reasons.

Meetings continue without you.

Systems are updated.

Names change places on the org chart.

The machine keeps moving.

As it always has.

As it always will.

The second transformation is slower.

Much slower.

And far more important.

You begin to understand what you carried away with you.

Not the objects.

Not the documents.

Not the titles.

The ideas.

The habits.

The culture.

The invisible traces.

Those do not stay in the office.

They stay in the person.

For a long time I did not understand what was happening to me.

I thought I had concluded a professional chapter.

In reality I was entering a narrative chapter.

They are two different things.

When a career ends, the career is over.

When a belonging ends, memory begins.

It was in that period that I began to look back.

Not toward the results.

Toward the origins.

Toward what had produced everything else.

The more I observed the path, the more the figure of Grandfather King returned before me.

Not the inventor.

Not the founder.

The man.

The one who had imagined a world before imagining a product.

Suddenly the line appeared clear.

King had left his era.

The company had left King.

Later generations had left the company.

I had left my role.

And yet, something continued to exist.

The name.

Not the brand.

The name.

This distinction becomes fundamental.

The brand belongs to the owners.

The name belongs to history.

Owners change.

History continues.

Perhaps it is precisely here that the seed of what would become Gillettenarrative was born, without my noticing.

Not as a publishing project.

Not as a collection of books.

But as an attempt to answer a very simple question.

What happens to a name when the market ceases to be its only interpreter?

It is an unusual question.

Companies almost never ask it.

They are busy selling the present.

I was beginning to observe the past.

And above all, the future.

Because a name that has survived for over a century speaks not only of what has been.

It also speaks of what it could still become.

The exit door taught me this.

Not all separations are an ending.

Some are a transformation.

You leave a structure.

You enter a story.

You abandon a profession.

You encounter a mission.

You leave behind a position.

You inherit a question.

Mine was simple.

If the name Gillette had survived the man who created it, what would happen to it next?

The answer was no longer in the offices.

It was no longer in the balance sheets.

It was no longer in the markets.

To find it I would have to go back even further.

Much further back.

To the origins of the name itself.

To France.

To that forgotten place from which, long before corporations, long before blades, long before the myth, everything had begun.

CHAPTER 8

The Debt

There are debts that are paid.

And there are debts that you carry inside.

The first belong to the economy.

The second belong to life.

For many years I did not understand the difference.

Like almost everyone, I thought the concept of debt was tied to money.

A figure.

A bill.

A restitution.

A final settlement.

Then I began to observe my own story.

And I noticed that the truly important things shared a particular characteristic.

They could not be returned.

How do you return a teaching?

How do you return an example?

How do you return a trust?

How do you return a name?

There is no procedure.

There is no invoice.

There is no receipt.

There is only an attempt.

It was in that period that I began to better understand the meaning of certain obsessions that would later run through Gillettenarrative.

Memory.

Gratitude.

Continuity.

Restitution.

Different words to describe the same phenomenon.

The desire not to break a chain.

When I thought of Grandfather King, I no longer saw merely the founder.

I saw a man who had left something behind.

Not simply a corporation.

Not simply a product.

He had left a trace.

And traces have a curious quality.

They continue to influence people who never met their author.

My father too belonged to that chain.

So did I.

In different ways.

At different times.

With different responsibilities.

But always within the same narrative river.

It was then that I began to suspect something.

Perhaps gratitude does not consist in returning.

Perhaps it consists in continuing.

Continuing a conversation.

Continuing a memory.

Continuing a meaning.

Without pretending to own it.

Great companies often speak of succession.

Families speak of inheritance.

I prefer a different word.

Stewardship.

Because no one truly owns what they receive.

They hold it in trust for a stretch of road.

Then they deliver it.

This holds for names.

It holds for ideas.

It holds even for stories.

A book does not completely belong to the one who writes it.

Once published it begins an autonomous life.

Every reader modifies it.

Every generation interprets it.

Every era changes its meaning.

Names do the same thing.

The name Gillette no longer belonged only to King.

It had long since ceased to belong to him.

It had become something greater.

More complex.

More difficult to define.

And yet, it continued to generate questions.

Questions are often the sign that a story is still alive.

Dead ones produce only answers.

Living stories keep asking.

Where do we come from?

What have we received?

What must we preserve?

What must we transform?

What must we let go?

Little by little I understood that my task was not to answer.

It was to keep the conversation open.

It is an enormous difference.

Those who seek answers build closed systems.

Those who hold questions build narratives.

And it is exactly at this point that France reappears on the horizon.

Not as geography.

As symbol.

As origin.

As the place from which a name had departed before crossing oceans, generations, factories, markets, and human lives.

The question was no longer economic.

It was no longer professional.

It was no longer corporate.

It had become narrative.

Because when a debt cannot be paid, only one possibility remains.

To tell it.

And so, slowly, the idea of the return was born.

CHAPTER 9

Return to France

All great stories, sooner or later, return.

Not to the past.

To the origin.

They are two different things.

The past is what happened.

The origin is the place from which meaning continues to flow.

For years I had observed the name Gillette the way you observe a mountain.

From a distance.

I saw the brand.

The company.

The industrial history.

The products.

The acquisitions.

The markets.

Then, slowly, the perspective changed.

I began asking a different question.

Not:

What has Gillette become?

But:

Where does the name Gillette truly come from?

It was then that France returned to the map.

Not the France of governments.

Not the France of borders.

The France of origins.

That distant territory from which a family had departed long before the corporation existed.

Long before the product existed.

Long before the face of King C. Gillette appeared on packages.

At that point something curious happened.

The more I studied the founder, the less the inventor interested me.

The more the man interested me.

The man who had lived through a family history.

The man who had inherited a surname.

The man who, without knowing it, would transform that surname into a global symbol.

No company can do such a thing alone.

It takes time.

It takes generations.

It takes an enormous quantity of accumulated memory.

A brand can be built.

A name must be earned.

And it is here that the idea of the return was born.

Not a geographical return.

A narrative return.

When I mentally wrote the story of the BIC takeover bid, I was not thinking about financial markets.

I was not making an industrial plan.

I was not building a strategy.

I was telling a restitution.

An impossible gesture.

A dialogue with someone who could no longer answer.

In the end the whole affair could be reduced to a single sentence:

to give back to the grandfather a part of his France.

It is a sentence that makes no sense to a financial analyst.

It makes a great deal of sense to a storyteller.

Because that is how stories work.

They do not seek only results.

They seek meanings.

And meanings often live in places of origin.

People do the same thing.

As they age they begin to take an interest in their beginnings.

In photographs.

In grandparents.

In houses.

In family stories.

Corporations, normally, do not possess this capacity.

They are designed to look forward.

Never backward.

Perhaps this is why Gillettenarrative took a different road.

It was not looking for the next quarter.

It was looking for a memory.

An apparently small difference.

In reality, gigantic.

Because the moment you begin to pursue memory, the unit of measure changes completely.

Profits are no longer enough.

Market share is no longer enough.

Even success is no longer enough.

You begin to ask yourself:

What will remain?

It is a dangerous question.

Many people avoid it.

Many companies even more so.

I, instead, kept returning to it.

Perhaps because I had left the company.

Perhaps because time changes priorities.

Perhaps because some names keep asking questions long after they have stopped selling products.

France, at that point, had become a symbol.

The representation of something every human being knows well.

The desire to reconcile with one's origins.

Not to remain there.

To understand them.

Because only when you understand where a story comes from can you imagine where it might go.

And the story I was following had not yet reached its destination.

It had simply reached the point where past and future begin to look each other in the eye.

From that tension everything that followed would be born.

Including the most impossible operation of all.

CHAPTER 10

The Takeover Bid

The strangest ideas share a particular quality.

At first they seem absurd.

Later they seem inevitable.

The BIC takeover bid belonged to this category.

When the idea first appeared, it was not born in an investment bank.

It was not born in a boardroom.

It was not born from a financial model.

It was born from a narrative question.

What would happen if a story could give something back to its founder?

Finance observes the world through numbers.

Narrative observes the world through meanings.

The same operation can appear completely different depending on the point from which you look at it.

From Wall Street's point of view, an acquisition is a transaction.

From a storyteller's point of view, it can be a letter.

A letter written to someone who can no longer read it.

When I imagined the operation, the protagonist was not BIC.

Nor Gillette.

Nor myself.

The protagonist was the name.

Always the name.

That French surname that had crossed two centuries.

That had changed continents.

That had produced one of the most recognisable corporations on the planet.

That continued to generate stories long after the death of its creator.

At that point, I stopped thinking in industrial terms.

It became symbolic.

If I truly had the opportunity to intervene in the destiny of the Gillette name, what would be the first gesture?

The answer came almost on its own.

To bring it back toward France.

Not because France had to be owned.

Not because the past had to be reconstructed.

But because some stories need to close a circle.

King had never been able to go back.

His name could.

This is why the text of the BIC takeover bid is not really about acquisitions.

It speaks of reconciliation.

It speaks of the attempt to place in the same space:

the founder;

the origin;

the present;

the memory.

It is a literary construction disguised as an economic operation.

Many readers stop at the surface.

They see the companies.

They see the brands.

They see the implicit figures.

I see something else.

I see a question.

Is it possible to restore dignity to a story?

Not money.

Not assets.

Dignity.

Because there are stories that are celebrated.

And there are stories that are merely used.

The difference is enormous.

A celebrated story continues to produce meaning.

A used story ends up being consumed.

Like a product.

Like a package.

Like any ordinary object.

The paradox is that Grandfather King's entire life had been built to go in the opposite direction.

First he imagined a society.

Then he created a product.

Then the product created a corporation.

Then the corporation created a myth.

More than a century later I was attempting to travel the opposite path.

Starting from the myth.

Returning to the founder.

Returning to the man.

Returning to the origin.

Returning to the name.

In that moment I understood something.

The BIC takeover bid was not the story of an acquisition.

It was the story of a return.

And all returns share a common characteristic.

They do not seek the future.

They seek the exact point where a story began to breathe.

Because only there does it become possible to understand where that story might still go.

But the return, alone, is not enough.

Sooner or later every story must face a far more difficult question.

A question that does not concern origins.

It concerns value.

What is something worth that is given away?

It was the question waiting for me further along the road.

And it was far more dangerous than a takeover bid.

CHAPTER 11

The Grandfather and BIC

People kept seeing a pen.

I kept seeing a story.

That was the problem.

Or perhaps it was the advantage.

It depends on the point of view.

When we say the name BIC, almost everyone immediately thinks of an object.

A pen.

A lighter.

A razor.

Something you buy.

Use.

Replace.

End of story.

I suspected the story was much longer.

I had long since stopped observing brands as mere companies.

I had begun to consider them characters.

Some characters succeed.

Others disappear.

Others still cross entire generations and end up resembling family members.

Not because they are.

But because they live alongside us long enough to enter memory.

Gillette was one of these.

BIC was one of these.

At that point the mental project of the takeover bid had already taken a different shape.

It was no longer an economic operation.

It had become a conversation.

An impossible conversation between two industrial stories born on opposite shores of the same ocean.

On one side, the French name that had conquered America.

On the other, the French company that had conquered the world with everyday objects.

The more I observed this geometry, the more narrative it seemed.

Almost literary.

Like those tales in which two lines separated for a century suddenly meet.

Naturally none of this made sense from a traditional standpoint.

Finance seeks advantages.

Narrative seeks meanings.

I was seeking meanings.

For this reason the central figure of the story was not even BIC.

It was the grandfather.

Always the grandfather.

Grandfather King.

The man who had taken a surname and transformed it into a global presence.

Sometimes I imagined the scene.

Not as reality.

As allegory.

An old founder sitting somewhere beyond time.

Not interested in balance sheets.

Not interested in stock prices.

Not interested in press releases.

Interested only in one question.

What have you done with my name?

This, in the end, is the question every generation receives from the previous one.

Not only in families.

Also in companies.

Also in cultures.

Also in nations.

What have you done with what we handed to you?

There is no definitive answer.

There are only attempts.

The BIC takeover bid was one of these attempts.

An attempt to connect origins and present.

An attempt to hold France and America together.

An attempt to make the founder and the narrative heir speak to each other.

An attempt to transform an economic operation into a gesture of memory.

The most interesting part is that the market does not easily comprehend these movements.

And it is right.

They are not designed to be understood by the market.

They are designed to be understood by memory.

There is an enormous difference.

The market measures present value.

Memory measures accumulated value.

One lives in the quarter.

The other in the century.

I was observing a century.

And it is perhaps for this reason that the name kept returning to the centre.

Every time I tried to talk about companies I ended up talking about people.

Every time I tried to talk about products I ended up talking about stories.

Every time I tried to talk about acquisitions I ended up talking about inheritance.

As if an invisible force kept bringing everything back to the same point.

The name.

That name that one day had belonged to a man.

Then to a company.

Then to millions of consumers.

Then to an entire collective memory.

At that point I began to understand that the book itself was changing.

It was no longer recounting merely an industrial story.

It was becoming a reflection on continuity.

On the way certain symbols cross time without completely losing their meaning.

And just when I believed I had understood the value of memory, an even harder question appeared.

What happens when you decide to give away something that could be sold?

The answer would change the path of the narrative completely.

CHAPTER 12

Objects Have a Homeland

For a long time I believed objects were simply objects.

A pen.

A blade.

A razor.

A book.

A tool.

Nothing more.

Then I began to observe them carefully.

And I discovered that objects possess a biography.

They are born.

They travel.

They change hands.

They cross countries.

They cross generations.

And, sometimes, they even end up telling a story.

It was in that moment that I stopped seeing brands as companies.

I began to see them as territories.

Not geographical territories.

Narrative territories.

Every great brand carries within it an invisible homeland.

A place where its character was formed.

A place where it learned to speak.

A place it continues to inhabit even when the world considers it global.

The name Gillette had departed from France, crossed America, and then conquered the planet.

And yet, the origins had never disappeared.

They had simply become silent.

This happens to people too.

Years pass.

They grow.

They travel.

They change languages.

They change professions.

They change countries.

But something continues to connect them to the starting point.

A cadence.

A gesture.

A memory.

A photograph.

A mother’s phrase.

A family story.

Roots do not force.

They accompany.

The same holds for objects.

A BIC pen is not merely plastic and ink.

A Gillette blade is not merely steel.

Both carry within a long succession of human decisions.

Someone imagined them.

Someone designed them.

Someone produced them.

Someone used them.

Someone remembered them.

And in the end what survives is not the object.

It is the story.

This awareness changed the way I looked at the world.

The people around me kept dividing everything into categories.

Products.

Markets.

Industries.

Consumers.

I was beginning to see narrative lines.

Connections.

Invisible kinships.

A French name become American.

A corporation transformed into memory.

A founder transformed into a character.

A consumer transformed into a narrator.

Everything seemed connected.

Perhaps because time connects what the present separates.

The present loves compartments.

Memory loves connections.

For this reason Gillettenarrative was not born as an archive.

Nor as a collection of books.

It was born as a search.

An attempt to understand where a product ends and a story begins.

The further I went, the more difficult the answer became.

Perhaps there was no boundary line at all.

Perhaps some stories were simply born very long-lived.

And some products are stories that have learned to take material form.

When I observed a blade I saw steel.

When I observed the name I saw a century.

And the century was always more interesting than the steel.

Because steel wears out.

Names, sometimes, do not.

It was then that I understood a second thing.

If objects have a homeland, stories have one too.

And the homeland of stories is not a geographical place.

It is the memory of the people who keep telling them.

Up to that point I had followed the path of the name.

From origins to corporation.

From corporation to inheritance.

From inheritance to return.

Now a completely different question was emerging.

If a story possesses such great value, what happens when someone decides not to sell it?

What happens when they choose to give it away?

It was a question the market found incomprehensible.

And it was precisely for this reason that it interested me.

CHAPTER 13

A Hundred Useless Books

There are words the market loves.

Growth.

Conversion.

Profit.

Scalability.

Then there are words the market regards with suspicion.

Memory.

Relationship.

Gift.

Free.

Gillettenarrative was born in the territory of the latter.

When I said I was not selling books but giving them away, almost everyone reached the same conclusion.

That I had lost my mind.

It was not a surprising reaction.

It was even logical.

Because the market holds a very simple conviction.

If something has value, it must be sold.

If it is not sold, then it must have no value.

For years we lived inside this equation.

Value equals price.

Price equals value.

One of the greatest illusions of modernity.

I was not so sure it was true.

The more I observed Grandfather King's path, the more an interesting contradiction emerged.

The man had created a gigantic corporation.

And yet, everything had been born from a vision that had no price.

No one could have bought Metropolis.

No one could have bought the dream.

No one could have bought the obsession that had produced everything else.

Important ideas are almost always born outside the market.

The market arrives later.

Much later.

Sometimes it notices.

Sometimes it does not.

And so I began to reason differently.

Suppose we build a hundred books.

Suppose we write them in English.

Suppose we make them freely available.

Suppose we do not chase bestseller lists.

Suppose we do not chase publishers.

Suppose we do not chase reviews.

What remains?

Most people would answer:

nothing.

I reached the opposite conclusion.

Everything that truly matters remains.

The relationship with the reader.

Editorial freedom.

The possibility of following an idea to its extreme consequences.

The ability to write without asking permission.

This freedom is rare.

Very rare.

And it is often confused with irrelevance.

But the two are not the same.

Some people are invisible because no one reads them.

Others are invisible because they are building something the market has not yet learned to classify.

The difference is enormous.

It was in that period that I began to observe Gillettenarrative as an infrastructure.

Not a catalogue.

Not a library.

Not a collection of ebooks.

A narrative infrastructure.

A place where books were the vehicle, not the destination.

The real objective was to produce memory.

To produce relationships.

To produce meaning.

Words that rarely appear in financial reports.

But that occupy a central position in people's lives.

The further I went down this road, the more a second question emerged.

If value does not coincide with price, how is it measured?

The market had an answer.

Through sales.

I had another.

Through permanence.

What remains after a year?

What remains after ten?

What remains when the product disappears?

What remains when the marketing goes quiet?

What remains when the author is no more?

These are the questions that interested me.

Perhaps because I had spent too much time near brands to confuse fame with importance.

The two rarely coincide.

Fame is immediate.

Importance takes time.

Much time.

A century, sometimes.

As Grandfather King's path teaches.

And so the hundred books began to take a different shape.

They were no longer products.

They were messages left along a road.

Some would be ignored.

Others perhaps remembered.

Others still would find a reader many years later.

It did not matter.

The objective was not to sell.

The objective was to build.

To build a memory.

To build a relationship.

To build a place.

And it was then that one of the strangest ideas of the entire project appeared.

If everyone attributed enormous value to the things they sold, what value would something given away have?

The answer would lead me to the next chapter.

To the story of the one-dollar man.

CHAPTER 14

The One-Dollar Man

The value of a thing is discovered when you renounce selling it.

It is a sentence an economist would consider suspect.

Perhaps even irresponsible.

But my experience had led me precisely in that direction.

All my life I had worked inside systems built to measure.

Volumes.

Market share.

Margins.

Results.

Numbers.

Numbers everywhere.

And yet, the more I observed the world, the more I realised that the most important things escaped measurement.

Trust.

Friendship.

Memory.

Honour.

Influence.

Gratitude.

None of these appears correctly on a balance sheet.

And yet, it is precisely these that move people.

Not numbers.

People.

And so the idea of the one-dollar man was born.

Not because a dollar had economic value.

It does not.

Not in this context.

The dollar was a symbol.

A provocation.

A way of posing a question to the world.

If a project is worth hundreds of millions, billions, or even more in the theoretical valuations someone might construct, why ask for a single dollar?

The answer was simple.

Because the dollar did not represent a price.

It represented a relationship.

There is an enormous difference.

A price closes a transaction.

A relationship opens a conversation.

The market prefers the first.

I was interested in the second.

For this reason the principle of GILLETTEFRIENDS always seemed to me more important than the catalogue itself.

“We don’t sell books. We build relationships.”

It was not a slogan.

It was an operating model.

A philosophy.

A completely different way of interpreting value.

In a world that measures everything through sales, choosing relationship means accepting being judged incomprehensible.

I was prepared.

It had already happened to me.

It had happened to Grandfather King when he proposed Metropolis.

Ideas too large are almost always mistaken for madness.

Until the day someone understands them.

Or never understands them.

But this does not change their nature.

The more I reasoned about this theme, the more a contradiction became evident.

The world spoke constantly of value.

Almost never of meaning.

And yet, meaning generates value far more often than the reverse.

People do not remember a price.

They remember a gesture.

They do not remember an invoice.

They remember a story.

They do not remember a promotion.

They remember a relationship.

This is why the dollar continued to appeal to me.

It reduced money to its minimal function.

Almost symbolic.

And it freed space for something more interesting.

Conversation.

That same conversation that had begun with Grandfather King.

That had continued through my father.

That had passed through eighteen years of professional life.

That had become memory.

That had become narrative.

That had become Gillettenarrative.

At that point I began to see the project with greater clarity.

I was not building a publishing house.

I was not building a business.

I was not building an archive.

I was building a meeting place.

An infrastructure of relationships.

An environment where the book was the pretext, not the objective.

Books were important.

But they were not the centre.

The centre was people.

Always people.

It is a lesson corporations rarely understand.

For a simple reason.

Systems are designed to manage products.

Not relationships.

Relationships elude control.

They are unpredictable.

They arise where no one had planned them.

They follow their own paths.

And it is precisely this that makes them valuable.

And so the one-dollar man ended up becoming something different from what it appeared.

Not an author.

Not a seller.

Not an entrepreneur.

But a custodian of conversations.

And this awareness brought me back to the only place from which I could observe the entire journey simultaneously.

Calabria.

Because sometimes the periphery sees the centre far better than the centre itself.

CHAPTER 15

Calabria

Great maps have a flaw.

They are almost always drawn from the centre.

Those who live at the centre believe they see everything.

Those who live at the margins often see more.

Calabria entered my story in this way.

Not as a limitation.

As an observatory.

For years I had crossed nations, companies, continents, and systems.

Then I found myself in the place many consider peripheral.

And it was precisely there that I began to see certain things more clearly.

The centre possesses power.

The periphery possesses perspective.

They are different resources.

Not always compatible.

Almost never equivalent.

On one side of the world were the great platforms.

The great publishers.

The great numbers.

The great official narratives.

On the other side was a man sitting in Calabria, writing in English, and distributing freely what he produced.

At first glance it seemed a weak position.

Very weak.

Then I began to look at it more closely.

And I discovered something curious.

Size and influence do not always coincide.

A thing can be gigantic and devoid of meaning.

Another can be tiny and leave a lasting trace.

History is full of examples.

Many powers have disappeared.

Many books have survived.

Many corporations have changed their names.

Many ideas continue to circulate.

Time is an unpredictable judge.

This is why I kept returning to the same question.

What am I truly building?

Not a publishing house.

Not an archive.

Not a business.

A position of observation.

A place from which to observe the relationship between memory and market.

Between people and systems.

Between names and products.

Calabria became that place.

Not because it was isolated.

But because it was sufficiently distant from the noise.

Great cities produce speed.

Distance produces reflection.

Platforms think in days.

Stories think in generations.

I was interested in generations.

Perhaps this is why the name kept emerging above everything else.

Not the brand.

Not the product.

The name.

King had built an enterprise.

Later generations had built a corporation.

I was observing what remained after.

The most difficult part to measure.

Memory.

From here emerges one of the central intuitions of this book.

Places do not become important for their size.

They become important for the questions they allow you to formulate.

Calabria allowed me to formulate questions I might not have heard elsewhere.

What is success?

What is value?

What is an inheritance?

When does a story cease to be corporate and become human?

These are slow questions.

They require time.

They require silence.

They require distance.

For this reason I have never been interested in competing with the centre.

The centre is already occupied.

The periphery, instead, is a free space.

A space where it is still possible to observe.

To write.

To connect distant points.

To put in relation a nineteenth-century founder, a great twentieth-century corporation, and a twenty-first-century narrative project.

From afar it appears improbable.

Up close it appears inevitable.

Because there are stories that seem separate only until someone decides to put them on the same page.

Calabria had become that page.

And just when I thought I had understood the place from which to observe the world, the narrative brought me back to the figure who had made everything else possible.

Not a founder.

Not a corporation.

Not a brand.

My mother.

CHAPTER 16

My Mother

Every story seeks an origin.

Many look for it in founders.

Some in markets.

Others in ideas.

Mine, in the end, found it in a person.

My mother.

For a long time I did not realise the entire journey was converging toward this point.

I had followed the name.

I had followed Grandfather King's vision.

I had followed the corporation.

I had followed the inheritance.

I had followed memory.

I thought I was telling an industrial story.

In reality I was going home.

It happens often.

We spend half our lives departing.

The other half understanding where we departed from.

Great companies teach many things.

Discipline.

Organisation.

Ambition.

Competence.

But there is a teaching that does not belong to companies.

It belongs to families.

Loyalty.

A simple word.

Almost old-fashioned.

And yet, fundamental.

Because there are people to whom we cannot return what we received.

We can only acknowledge it.

We can only honour it.

We can only continue.

For many years I thought the most important debt of my life was professional.

Then I realised I was wrong.

Professional debts close.

Family ones do not.

They change form.

They accompany.

They remain.

Silently.

And so a conclusion arrived that surprised many people.

When someone asked:

What would you want in return?

My answer was increasingly less economic and increasingly personal.

Not because money does not matter.

It does.

It always matters.

But there are things that occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of meanings.

Honour.

Gratitude.

Continuity.

At that point I began to see the entire story from a different perspective.

King had received a name.

I had received a story.

Both of us had received something before building something.

This is the part the world often forgets.

We celebrate what people create.

Far less what they received.

And yet, every construction is born from a prior delivery.

No one starts from zero.

Never.

Even founders.

Even inventors.

Even storytellers.

Everyone receives something.

Then decides what to do with it.

And so the figure of my mother slowly began to occupy centre stage.

Not because she was the main character.

But because she represented the very principle of continuity.

The concrete proof that every important story is born inside another story.

Long before books.

Long before companies.

Long before ideas.

It is for this reason that the theme of the gift keeps returning.

A gift is not a present.

It is a transmission.

Something passes from one person to another without completely losing its meaning.

A name.

A habit.

A phrase.

An example.

A conviction.

Sometimes even a silence.

Families work this way.

Stories work this way.

Even brands work this way.

What survives is not the object.

It is the meaning that keeps travelling.

At this point in the narrative I finally understood one thing.

Gillettenarrative was not born to sell books.

It was not born to build a catalogue.

It was not born to occupy a space in the market.

It was born to hold a transmission in trust.

A continuity.

A passage of meanings between generations.

This is why the chapter dedicated to my mother is not an interruption of the book.

It is its hidden centre.

Because when you strip away everything else:

the companies,

the products,

the balance sheets,

the acquisitions,

the brands,

what remains is people.

And almost always, at the origin of a story long enough to survive, there is someone who gave without asking anything in return.

From that point on the narrative can finally enter the territory of myth.

Because only after understanding origins does it become possible to understand the impossible.

And in my case the impossible had the shape of ten billion dollars, a pair of wooden clogs, and an open door onto Wall Street.

CHAPTER 17

Ten Billion and a Pair of Clogs

Stories become myths when they cease to obey reality.

Not when they become false.

When they become larger than facts.

Up to this point I had followed a recognisable path.

A founder.

A name.

A corporation.

A family.

A memory.

Everything could still be explained.

Then the impossible arrived.

The impossible never announces itself.

It enters the scene as a simple question.

What if it had really happened?

What if one day the storyteller found himself on the other side of the table?

Not as an observer.

Not as a former executive.

Not as an author.

But as a protagonist.

And so The Impossible Deal was born.

Not as a forecast.

Not as a project.

As allegory.

As a narrative experiment.

As a response to a question the corporate world carefully avoids:

Who truly owns a brand?

The shareholders?

The executives?

The consumers?

The founders?

Or whoever keeps telling its story?

The scene was deliberately absurd.

Ten billion dollars.

Wall Street.

Cameras.

Bankers.

Analysts.

And at the centre, a man who presents himself wearing a pair of wooden clogs.

Not a tie.

Not a suit.

Not the costume the system requires.

The clogs.

Because the point was not the operation.

The point was the symbol.

Myths work this way.

They take a detail and transform it into language.

Achilles has his heel.

Ulysses has his journey.

King Arthur has his sword.

The man of The Impossible Deal has his clogs.

Every element of the tale keeps repeating the same idea.

Value is not in the money.

Value is in identity.

The ten billion is not the true protagonist of the scene.

The story is.

This is why the bankers in the tale observe the feet more than the documents.

The documents represent the system.

The clogs represent the person.

And in the end, people buy people far more often than they buy products.

Even when they believe otherwise.

This insight brought me back once more to Grandfather King.

He had started with a vision.

The vision had generated a product.

The product had generated a corporation.

The corporation had generated a myth.

I was travelling the opposite path.

Starting from the myth.

To return to the name.

To return to the man.

To return to the origin.

From that moment the book changes tone again.

It no longer recounts what happened.

It begins to tell what could happen when a name becomes stronger than the structures surrounding it.

Because there is an even more radical question.

A question waiting behind the door of Wall Street.

A question no balance sheet can contain.

What happens when a story becomes more important than the company that produced it?

It is the question that was waiting for me in the next chapter.

In the very heart of power.

CHAPTER 18

Wall Street Was Not Prepared

There are places that are not merely places.

They are symbols.

Wall Street is one of these.

Even those who have never been there know what it represents.

Money.

Power.

Markets.

Decisions.

The very idea that the world can be measured through a number.

For this reason the setting of The Impossible Deal could not be different.

The scene did not require a bank.

It required the temple.

And Wall Street is the modern temple of economic value.

But every temple possesses a weakness.

It knows perfectly what it worships.

Far less what it ignores.

Money understands money.

Markets understand markets.

Analysts understand numbers.

But there are forces that escape these categories.

Reputation.

Memory.

Myth.

Trust.

Stories.

This was precisely the centre of The Impossible Deal.

Not the money.

The inability of the system to comprehend a narrative when the narrative becomes more powerful than capital.

For years I had observed enormous companies.

Market leaders.

Global brands.

Organisations capable of influencing millions of consumers.

And every time the same question emerged.

What do people really buy?

The official answer is simple.

Products.

Services.

Performance.

The real answer is more complicated.

People buy meanings.

The product is only the container.

A blade does not sell merely steel.

It sells trust.

A pen does not sell merely ink.

It sells habit.

A book does not sell merely words.

It sells a relationship.

The more I observed the world, the more this truth became evident.

And precisely for this reason Wall Street was not prepared.

Because Wall Street had been trained to evaluate instruments.

Not symbols.

In the tale, the analysts keep asking the questions analysts always ask.

Who will be the CEO?

Where will the headquarters be?

What will the organisational structure be?

What will the operating model be?

They are correct questions.

Even inevitable.

But they are not the decisive questions.

The decisive question was another.

Why should people follow you?

This is the question that changes everything.

Because no org chart can answer it.

No balance sheet can answer it.

No acquisition can answer it.

Only a story can answer it.

And it is here that the narrative reaches its most interesting point.

The author does not really buy companies.

He buys a narrative.

He symbolically reassembles a system of meanings.

The difference is enormous.

Acquiring a business is an economic fact.

Acquiring a story is a cultural fact.

And cultural facts survive far longer.

King had understood this even before building Gillette.

He had imagined a vision.

The vision had generated an enterprise.

The enterprise had generated a name.

The name had generated a memory.

Now that memory was returning in a new form.

Narrative.

Almost mythological.

For this reason the scene of the clogs retains its meaning.

It does not represent nonconformity.

It represents independence.

The idea that a person can enter the heart of the system without completely adopting its language.

It is a concept I have always found fascinating.

Not becoming against the system.

Becoming independent of the system.

They are two very different things.

The first generates conflict.

The second generates freedom.

It was then that I began to understand the true theme of the book.

I was not writing about shaving.

I was not writing about corporations.

I was not writing about markets.

I was writing about narrative sovereignty.

The capacity of a human being to tell their own story without delegating it entirely to others.

King had done it.

In his own way.

I was trying to do the same.

In another century.

With other tools.

With other rules.

Wall Street was not prepared.

Because almost no one is prepared when a story stops asking permission to exist.

And it is from this point that the next chapter is born.

The simplest declaration.

The briefest.

And perhaps the most important of the entire book.

I am a blade.

CHAPTER 19

I Am a Blade

There are phrases that describe.

And there are phrases that define.

“I am a blade” belongs to the second category.

It is not an elegant metaphor.

It is not a slogan.

It is not a literary exercise.

It is a declaration of identity.

To arrive at understanding it, it was necessary to cross a long path.

Grandfather King.

The vision.

The corporation.

The inheritance.

The memory.

The mother.

The return.

Wall Street.

Everything leads here.

To a very short phrase.

Three words.

I.

Am.

A blade.

Most people build their identity through a profession.

I do this.

I sell that.

I manage this.

I own that.

These are fragile definitions.

They change easily.

Lose a role.

A desk.

A position.

A title.

And most of the identity collapses along with them.

A blade is different.

A blade is not a position.

It is a function.

It cuts.

It separates.

It distinguishes.

It makes visible what was previously confused.

For this reason the image of the blade keeps returning.

Not as a product.

As a principle.

A blade divides the superfluous from the essential.

The noise from the meaning.

The appearance from the substance.

It is exactly what I have tried to do throughout this book.

To cut.

Not to destroy.

To cut.

What remains of a corporation when you remove the marketing?

What remains of a brand when you remove the product?

What remains of a story when you remove the slogans?

What remains of a life when you remove the roles?

Page after page the answer always became the same.

The name remains.

Before being an object, the blade became a way of looking at the world.

Perhaps it had started with Grandfather King.

Perhaps it had passed through my father.

Perhaps through eighteen years lived inside Gillette.

Perhaps through Calabria.

Perhaps through Gillettenarrative.

It does not matter.

Origins matter.

But there always comes a moment when you must take responsibility for your own interpretation.

I arrived at this one.

I am a blade.

It means:

I do not belong completely to the market.

I do not belong completely to nostalgia.

I do not belong completely to the corporation.

I do not belong completely to the past.

I am a line of separation.

An interpreter.

A narrator.

Someone who keeps searching for the meaning hidden beneath the surfaces.

For this reason the phrase has a second reading.

A blade does not preserve.

A blade transforms.

Every generation receives something.

Every generation modifies something.

Every generation delivers something.

Transmission is never perfect.

It does not have to be.

If it were perfect there would be no history.

There would be only replication.

I did not want to replicate.

I wanted to continue.

To continue a conversation that began long before my birth.

Perhaps this is the true meaning of the phrase.

Not “I am a product.”

Not “I am a brand.”

Not “I am a role.”

But:

I am a continuity that has taken a different form.

And it is here that the book reaches its final threshold.

Because once identity is understood, only one question remains.

The last.

The greatest.

The question that was hidden from the first chapter.

What remains when everything else disappears?

The answer waits in the concluding chapter.

In the place where companies end.

Founders end.

Products end.

And something far more difficult to destroy begins.

The Name.

CHAPTER 20

The Name

All stories end.

At least in appearance.

Men end.

Companies end.

Products end.

Markets end.

Even empires end.

Time makes no exceptions.

And yet, there are things that resist longer than the structures that generated them.

Names.

This book began with a man who imagined the future.

A salesman.

A visionary.

An eccentric.

A man who designed cities before designing blades.

Then came the enterprise.

Then the product.

Then the brand.

Then the myth.

As almost always happens, the world remembered the last part of the story.

Far less the first.

But time possesses a particular talent.

It always returns to the origin.

And that is exactly what happened here.

Following the name Gillette I believed I was telling the story of a corporation.

Then I believed I was telling the story of a family.

Then the story of a memory.

Then the story of a narrative project.

In the end, I understood I was telling something even simpler.

The survival of meaning.

This is the true matter of the book.

Not steel.

Not shaving.

Not markets.

Not Wall Street.

Meaning.

That invisible substance that passes from one generation to the next without asking permission.

King received a name.

He transformed the name into a vision.

The vision became an enterprise.

The enterprise became a brand.

The brand became a memory.

The memory became narrative.

And the narrative continues the journey.

Perhaps this is the destiny of all names strong enough.

At a certain point they cease to belong to the owners.

They cease even to belong to the founders.

They begin to belong to the people who keep telling them.

For this reason I never thought of Gillettenarrative as a site.

Nor as a publishing series.

Nor as an archive.

I always imagined it as a bridge.

A bridge between what has been and what could still be.

A bridge between memory and the future.

A bridge between people and the names that helped build them.

Many years ago Grandfather King imagined Metropolis.

America did not follow that project.

The city was never built.

The utopia remained on paper.

And yet, it would be a mistake to consider it a defeat.

Because ideas do not always survive in the form they foresaw.

Sometimes they survive by transforming.

Metropolis did not become a city.

It became proof.

Proof that before the blade, a vision had existed.

And perhaps this is the final lesson.

Important things do not survive thanks to their perfection.

They survive thanks to their capacity to transform.

A founder becomes a character.

A corporation becomes a memory.

A brand becomes a story.

A story becomes a relationship.

A relationship becomes an inheritance.

The journey continues.

Always.

Even when we believe it is over.

And so the reader reaches the last page and discovers that King was not the central figure.

Not Gillette.

Not BIC.

Not Wall Street.

Not even the author.

The protagonist was the Name.

That invisible thread that crosses people, generations, places, enterprises, and tales without completely breaking.

Because products are consumed.

Companies are sold.

Markets change.

Eras pass.

Names, sometimes, remain.

And when they remain long enough they become something greater than the story that generated them.

They become memory.

They become inheritance.

They become meaning.

They become narrative.

And it is there that this book ends.

Or perhaps, more honestly, it is there that it begins again.

EPILOGUE

Semantic Conquest

For many years I believed brands lived in supermarkets.

Then I believed they lived in companies.

Later I thought they lived in people.

Today I am no longer sure.

Or perhaps I am too sure.

Brands live in meaning.

And meaning is the most difficult territory to conquer.

A factory can be purchased.

A patent can be transferred.

A market share can be taken.

A brand can even change hands.

Meaning cannot.

Meaning resists.

Meaning negotiates.

Meaning fights.

Meaning survives.

For this reason the true conquest is not industrial.

It is not financial.

It is not commercial.

It is semantic.

Semantic conquest begins when a word ceases to name an object and comes to represent an entire universe.

Gillette is no longer merely a blade.

Gillette is a story.

It is a memory.

It is a genealogy.

It is a conversation that crosses generations.

The question then becomes inevitable.

Does this conquest strengthen the brand or damage it?

The answer is surprisingly simple.

It depends on the owner.

An intelligent owner understands that every strong brand lives on two levels.

The first is commercial.

The second is cultural.

The commercial level produces revenue.

The cultural level produces permanence.

If you destroy the second to defend the first, in the long run you weaken both.

If you manage to nourish the second, the first receives additional energy.

Because people buy products.

But they remember meanings.

And meanings last longer than products.

Much longer than products.

King understood this without using this expression.

First he imagined a vision.

Then he built a product.

Most modern companies try to do the opposite.

First they build the product.

Then they desperately look for a story.

It is an enormous difference.

Semantic conquest does not mean taking possession of a brand.

It consists in expanding the territory of meanings that brand can inhabit.

If the owner understands this principle, narrative becomes an ally.

If they do not, they consider it a threat.

But narrative is neither an ally nor an enemy.

It is a force.

Like memory.

Like time.

Like culture.

It can be ignored.

It cannot be eliminated.

And so, at the end of the journey, I return to the same conclusion from which everything had started.

Grandfather King did not begin with a blade.

He began with a vision.

The blade came after.

This book grew from the same insight.

It is not about razors.

It is not about corporations.

It is not about impossible acquisitions.

It is about what happens when a name survives long enough to become something greater than the products that made it famous.

That is the true conquest.

Not of the market.

Not of distribution.

Not of advertising.

Semantic conquest.

And once meaning has been conquered, everything else depends only on who owns it.

POSTFACE

The Owner

Throughout the book I have spoken of founders.

Of companies.

Of brands.

Of memory.

Of names.

In the end, one question remains.

Who is the owner?

The simplest answer is also the least interesting.

The owner is the one who legally owns the brand.

It is true.

But it is only part of the truth.

There exists, in fact, a second ownership.

More difficult to register.

More difficult to defend.

More difficult to measure.

The ownership of meaning.

A brand can belong to a company.

But its meaning belongs to the relationship it manages to build with the world.

It is here that the responsibility of the owner is born.

Because meaning can be expanded.

It can be held in trust.

It can be enriched.

It can be transmitted.

Or it can be impoverished.

It can be reduced.

It can be consumed.

It can be forgotten.

The difference does not depend on the brand.

It depends on who governs it.

An intelligent owner does not fear memory.

Does not fear narrative.

Does not fear stories.

Understands that every authentic story adds depth to the name.

And that a deep name is always worth more than a merely known name.

A short-sighted owner does the opposite.

Protects the product.

Forgets the meaning.

Defends the present.

Consumes the future.

In the end, the choice is all here.

A brand can live as a product.

Or it can live as part of our cultural heritage.

It can limit itself to selling.

Or it can continue to mean something.

That is why semantic conquest is not a threat.

It is an opportunity.

It expands the territory of the name.

It makes it richer.

More complex.

More resistant to time.

More difficult to forget.

At the end of this journey, I do not know who will own Gillette a hundred years from now.

I do not know what products will exist.

I do not know what markets will survive.

I do know one thing, however.

The future of the name will depend far less on the factories its owners possess than on the meaning they can preserve.

Because products have a life cycle.

Corporations have a life cycle.

Even markets have a life cycle.

Meaning does not.

Meaning keeps walking.

And the true owner, in the end, is the one who understands that they are only the temporary custodian of its journey.

The Name

King Gillette built a blade.

Generations built a company.

Time built a myth.

I have only told the journey.

The rest belongs to the Name.

Ferdinando Frega