THE EMPTY CHAIR



THRESHOLD 3

The Empty Chair

There are people who leave a room.

And there are people who leave a direction.

The first disappear.

The second remain.

For many years I believed that inheritance was a matter of goods, property, objects to keep or to pass on. In time I understood that true inheritance is much harder to see.

It is not found in the closets.

It is not found in the drawers.

It is not found in the documents.

It lives in behaviors.

My father did not leave me formulas.

He did not hand me a manual.

He did not prepare a detailed map of life for me.

He left me something much harder to explain.

A way of being in the world.

As a young man I did not see it.

Children rarely see their fathers clearly.

They take them for granted.

They consider them a permanent presence, almost a law of nature.

Like the sea.

Like the sky.

Like the passing of the seasons.

They watch them without studying them.

They listen to them without understanding them.

They imitate them without realizing it.

Then comes an age in which everything changes.

The words spoken many years before come back.

The gestures take on a different meaning.

Even the silences acquire a new voice.

It is then that we truly begin to know those who came before us.

My father did not explain to me the value of responsibility.

He practiced it.

And that difference is enormous.

People remember little of what is taught.

They remember a great deal of what is lived.

When a man keeps a difficult promise,

someone is watching.

When he faces a defeat without looking for someone to blame, someone is watching.

When he keeps doing his duty without receiving applause, someone is watching.

Often that someone is a son.

Even when he seems distracted.

Even when he seems far away.

Even when he seems not to understand.

He watches.

And he keeps.

Many of the decisions I made in my adult life have roots that reach into far more distant years.

They were not born in books.

They were not born in companies.

They were not born in training courses.

They were born in a home.

In a family.

In a set of behaviors that then seemed normal and that today I recognize as exceptional.

I remember one thing that time taught me.

Every son, sooner or later, discovers he

resembles his father in ways he had not foreseen.

It happens suddenly.

During a conversation.

While facing a problem.

While speaking a sentence.

While making a decision.

Suddenly he recognizes something.

An expression.

An attitude.

A reaction.

And he understands that certain presences never truly go away.

They change form.

That is all.

For years I crossed different countries.

Different cultures.

Different languages.

I worked with people from every part of the world.

And yet I discovered a surprising thing.

Everywhere there is the same longing.

Everywhere there is the same respect for

those who came before us.

Everywhere there is the desire to live up to someone who left us an example.

The words change.

The names change.

The geography changes.

But the feeling stays the same.

Because every human being comes into the world through someone else.

No one begins from zero.

We are all the continuation of something.

Of a story.

Of a family.

Of a choice made long before our birth.

In time I learned not to measure a person by what they possess.

I measure them by what they leave.

And what they leave almost never coincides with what they had planned to leave.

A father thinks he is building a career.

But perhaps he leaves a principle.

He thinks he is leaving security.

But perhaps he leaves courage.

He thinks he is leaving answers.

But perhaps he leaves a way of searching for them.

This is the invisible part of the inheritance.

The most important.

The most enduring.

The one that keeps living when all the rest has worn away.

Many people fear being forgotten.

It is an ancient fear.

Deeply human.

But I believe there is a different form of permanence.

Not that of statues.

Not that of photographs.

Not that of monuments.

Authentic permanence lives in the consequences.

In the good that continues.

In the dignity that is imitated.

In the responsibility that passes from hand to hand.

In the character that generates more character.

My father keeps living right there.

In the consequences.

Not as a memory.

As a presence.

Sometimes, on difficult days, I catch myself wondering which decision to make.

Which road to follow.

Which weight to accept.

Which responsibility to take on.

And almost always the answer comes from a very ancient place.

A place without an address.

A place without geography.

A place made of memory and gratitude.

I do not hear a voice.

I do not see a face.

But I recognize a direction.

And it is enough.

Because, in the end, it is not true that some people leave.

They simply stop walking in front of us.

They begin to walk inside us.

This is why I do not say that my father left.

I say that he continues the journey in a different way.

In my decisions.

In my words.

In my mistakes.

In my responsibilities.

In the way I treat others.

In the way I keep a promise.

In the way I face time.

And as long as something of all this remains alive, a part of him will keep walking beside me.

Silently.

As true fathers have always done.