THE GILLETTE MARRIAGE



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The Marriage

When he walked, despite being a man, you could still see the elegance and posture of the Army Officer he had once been, but also the education he had received in boarding school, where one rule prevailed: speak little and listen to everything.

He was twenty-seven during that October of 1962 when he saw her walk into the tobacco shop where he was working and was instantly captivated.

Tall, striking, unmistakably Southern in appearance, with that mischievous look that only women know how to give. But she was only sixteen years old. Her name was Giovanna, but to everyone in the family she was always Gianna.

He immediately asked the customer about her: who she was, her family, where she came from. He paid little attention to her age. In those years, this kind of marriage was blessed three times: by the families, by the Church, and by society. It was presented as a way to settle daughters, but in reality, it was only the sons who were being settled.

Her father worked for the railway. Her mother owned a respected tailoring business in town, employing seamstresses and producing garments for prominent families who demanded high-level craftsmanship and paid generously for it.

Gianna had another sister, Francesca, almost two years older. Balanced and calm, a quality she still possesses today.

Once the picture was complete, my father asked the customer to introduce him to that family. He wanted my mother as his

wife. He wanted to marry her. He wanted her.

And so, in April 1963, they were married.

Whenever he praised his wife's qualities to her mother, she would smile and say it was not true, because Gianna was a good actress who never asked for permission. She simply took whatever she wanted.

It took my father less than three months to understand that he would never be able to shape that girl or mold her into what he imagined. She was simply a woman with clear ideas, and she wasted no time making that clear to him as well.

One day he slapped her across the face. It was a behavior that the times recognized as a man's right within the family.

But she did not lose her composure.

She walked out and went to a cutlery store, where she bought a meat cleaver and a butcher's knife.

She returned home, looked at my father, and said:

"If you ever try it again, I'll come during the night and kill you."

There was no drama and no hesitation in her voice. Only certainty.

The certainty that she would do it.

For fifteen days he slept inside the house, locked in a separate room, and only came out when he was sure the danger had passed.

And it remained the only precedent.

They moved to Cosenza, three hundred kilometers from Reggio Calabria.

At that time there was no motorway, and the journey took almost six hours along provincial roads and through endless traffic in small towns.

Two looks.

Less than three minutes.

That was enough to decide a future, inside a love that would last physically for sixty-two years but would remain eternal in what they did and inside us, their children.

Cosenza - 1963

They rented a home on Corso Italia, a central area of the city, well served by shops and public transportation. But after the honeymoon ended, returning to ordinary life was a stage nobody knew.

Every Monday my father left home at two in the morning to reach his first customer at eight o'clock outside a store. He drove three hundred kilometers and then, during the week, day after day, worked closer and closer to home, until he reclaimed it again on Friday evening.

Meanwhile, my mother was fortunate enough to meet Nora Formisano, who lived directly across from her home, and the two became friends.

Nora was a woman the same age as her own mother and became like a mother to her.

She came from a noble Neapolitan family and was married to a senior official of the Ministry of the Interior serving in that area. She also had three children, only slightly younger than my mother.

It was to her that my mother confessed one morning that she had a strange delay in her menstrual cycle. She had always been regular.

After hearing her explain that she could not understand why she constantly felt the need to urinate, Nora embraced her and said:

"My daughter, you're pregnant."

When my father came home, she decided not to say anything.

She wanted to see his reaction, but she was waiting until Easter to tell him.

And so, she did.

She handed him his Easter egg and said:

"I'm pregnant. We have to move to Reggio Calabria. I do not want my child to be born here. I want my family beside me."

The transfer was not that simple.

It required company approval for work-related reasons and could only be carried out afterward.

My father thought he could buy some time.

But in December 1963 my mother boarded a bus and left on her own for her parents' home, where on January 11, 1964, she gave birth to Teresa.

When Teresa was born and the news spread through the family, relatives waited weeks before visiting her.

That wounded her pride as a woman and led her to make a decision about the future.

Her relationship with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law would never be the same again.

The anger remained, contained behind her eyes.

Meanwhile, the transfer request followed its own course, and in May 1964 my father received his second Easter gift.

My mother was expecting another child.

Reggio Calabria - 1964

In September 1964, the company transfer finally came through and they moved to Reggio Calabria.

But the idyllic relationship she expected to have with her mother never happened. Her mother was domineering and never gave up her power or authority to anyone. Her father was the only person who spoiled her and indulged her, and everything she did afterward depended on him.

It was February 21, 1965.

Soccer field.

Reggina versus Cosenza.

My father and my uncle were in the stands when the announcer declared that a certain Vincenzo Frega was requested at the entrance for an urgent message.

He thought it was a joke and stayed where he was.

Then came the second announcement:

"Vincenzo, we can't stop the match, and we can't stop your wife's labor either. Would you mind going home? Your son is being born."

Everybody laughed.

Embarrassed, he pretended not to be the man in question.

I came into the world with my father's blessing.

"You wanted a son and he has arrived. But this one will be the cross of your life."

Everyone was informed immediately, and they arrived as if they were the Three Wise Men.

The birth of a son was considered an event that guaranteed the continuation of the family name, but nobody ever stopped to think that a man without a woman is incomplete.

I would spend the next sixty-two years explaining that.

After all, better the Cross than the Hammer and Sickle.

It was all I needed to understand my colleague from two thousand years ago and know what things might be like up there.

Reggio Calabria - 1965

Gianna is only nineteen years old.

She has two children, a husband who works for Gillette, and absolutely no inclination to become a housewife.

The rules of the household are already established.

The salary and all the company benefits pass through her hands.

My father lives on Gillette expense reimbursements because he is always working and never sitting around scratching his balls.

She begins following the currency markets because every month my father wins a sales competition in Italy and the Milan headquarters sends gold sovereigns as prizes.

Then the Sales Director ships a complete bedroom set to the house.

Real beech wood.

Integrated beds.

Mattresses.

Pillows.

Blankets and duvets.

Summer sheets and winter sheets.

Everything is designed in a unique style that leaves people speechless whenever the story is told.

But she is afraid.

She does not see stability.

And who could blame her?

On Friday evening, as soon as my father walks through the door, she says:

"I have two children. I want a new car."

"But you don't have a driver's license. How are you going to drive it?"

"Tomorrow you are going to buy me a new car. I want a Simca 1000. Five Doors."

Nobody could contain her.

If anyone had tried, life would have become a living hell.

The best solution was to go to the dealership the next day, write a check for one million eight hundred thousand lire, buy the insurance, and hand over the keys.

It turned out to be the right decision.

Twelve days later she had her driver's license.

Nobody ever discovered how she managed it.

Meanwhile, her father owned all the properties occupied by her mother's tailoring business.

He had a weakness for his favorite daughter.

It only took a few minutes.

"Dad, make room for me in Mom's tailoring shop. Within six months I'm opening a yarn and haberdashery store."

The two reached an agreement.

With only a few moves, my grandfather relocated his wife into a separate space and granted his daughter two independent storefronts.

She went home and told my father she needed three million lire.

And that he should ask his parents for the money using the excuse that they wanted to buy a house.

My father played along.

The money arrived.

And so did the sign above the store:

LANA BBB DI GENNY

But she also needed a municipal business license, and she did not have one.

By the end of the 1960s, bureaucracy was not exactly efficient.

It was a tunnel that lived inside politics and traveled through politics.

That Monday morning, she asked my father to take a day off and stay home with us.

Then she left.

Like wind blowing across the desert.

You feel it moving, but you have no idea where the hell it came from.

She went to City Hall.

There she encountered a clerk who was almost ready to laugh at her when she requested the license.

The next thing anyone knew, she had grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, dragged him halfway out of the counter window, and five people were trying to pull her off him.

Meanwhile, the mayor happened to pass by.

His name was Pietro Battaglia.

He would later serve several terms in the Italian Parliament.

He watched the scene, took my mother by the arm, and invited her into his office.

Ten minutes later she walked out carrying a Table XV commercial license.

For clarity, it was the type of license required in Italy to open a hypermarket — the highest level, usually impossible to obtain without political connections.

The business took off.

Sales representatives lined up outside.

One colleague eventually told my father:

"You know, there is a shopkeeper in Reggio Calabria who gives every sales representative a hard time."

And my father replied:

"Yes, I know. A lot of people have told me about her."

But he never said she was his wife.

The store developed a life of its own.

People came from every part of the city to buy there.

The woman who grabbed men by the lapels and slammed them against the wall.

Whether they were civil servants or Mafia figures made little difference.

Her name echoed across the city.

The wife of THE GILLETTE MAN.

Control

One morning, a truck driver made a careless maneuver on a city boulevard.

The truck caught the door of my mother's car and ripped it off.

The sound of her horn made no difference.

The driver never realized what had happened and continued on his way while the car suffered considerable damage.

He finally stopped and climbed out into the street shouting that these damn women did not know how to drive.

He loudly declared that women would be better off staying home raising children.

Then, looking directly at my mother as she sat behind the wheel, he hurled insults and threats at her in the manner of a Mafioso.

In the back seat were my sister, four years old, and me, three years old.

She told us not to move.

That she would be right back.

We never learned exactly what happened outside.

The only thing we know is that the Mafioso ended up kneeling in front of my mother, kissing her hand and asking for forgiveness.

In the days that followed, the store experienced an extraordinary increase in customers.

So many people came through the door that my father eventually asked whether she was applying the correct markups or simply giving the merchandise away.

Before he could even sit down at home, she said:

"Tomorrow go to the Fiat dealership and buy me a white FIAT 124 Special, 1400 engine, four doors."

"But Gianna," my father replied, "do you know how much it costs?"

"Three million six hundred and fifty thousand lire. You pay now. When the insurance money arrives for the Simca, which cannot be repaired, I'll reimburse you."

That was enough.

Less than twelve hours later the brand-new car was sitting outside.

There was only one comment:

"They tell me this car is used in Calabria for robberies because it's fast and responsive. Why do you need it?"

She looked at him seriously and answered:

"You'll see."

And when he left for work in the morning, she would always ask:

"Where are you going today? Where are you having lunch?"

He would answer that he might be one hundred and twenty kilometers away.

And the three of us would show up there unexpectedly.

He thought it was love.

She was simply watching over her assets.

Then, not wanting to lose the habit, she tried to move that same system of control onto me.

Neither of us ever won.

Not her.

Not me.

She believed control was exercised through deprivation and through beatings.

The first had little effect on me because I immediately shifted my needs toward something else, and that drove her crazy.

The second I simply did not feel.

I did not react.

I did not cry.

I did not curse.

I had control over pain.

Years later, that same control would help me overcome other difficulties.

She always believed we were the same.

But she never accepted that part of me belonged to my father.

And he won with facts.

And in silence.

Field

A call from the District Manager on Friday evening, after the weekly sales figures had been submitted, gave him something to think about: His Majesty, Gillette Italy Sales Director Raffaele Di Tullio, would be spending three days in the field with him, and the meeting was scheduled for Monday morning at 7:30 a.m. at the Excelsior Hotel in Reggio Calabria.

The week's itinerary included sales calls throughout the city and a few visits in the surrounding suburbs. Since it was already mid-July and everyone knew how hot the area could become, my mother slipped a second shirt into his bag, telling him that before lunch it would be a good idea to freshen up and change.

He arrived at the appointment in full uniform: an impeccable blue suit, a light blue shirt, a tie, and all the respect that was owed to the man who had hired him.

It was an extremely hot day, and both men sweated through their clothes. Yet during the visits, the focus of every conversation was not sales numbers. The discussion revolved around whether he was happy, how he felt about his family life, and how he was adapting to the company.

The following day my father returned for the second day of the field visit. Whether because he failed to read the situation correctly or because he trusted his numbers too much, he made a mistake. He showed up wearing the same suit which, although dry, still carried visible traces of the previous day's

sweat.

Di Tullio looked at him for a long second, said nothing, and then invited him to sit in a bar for a coffee.

"Vincenzo," he said, "Gillette does not sell blades. Gillette sells trust. A man will put a blade to his own throat every morning only if he trusts the man who sold it to him. And trust begins with a clean shirt."

My father did not answer. He understood.

That night he came home and told my mother she had been right. Again.

He never made the same mistake twice.

The third day, Di Tullio shook his hand in front of the Excelsior and said: "You will go far. Because you listen."

That lesson became the family code.

My mother controlled everything that could be seen. The license, the stores, the cars, the money.

My father controlled everything that could not be seen. The example, the silence, the endurance, the dignity of showing up impeccable even when you have been sweating blood for two days.

It took me sixty years to understand that this is what a marriage is.

One person who grabs a clerk by the lapels to get a license.

And another person who changes his shirt in a public bathroom so his company won't be ashamed of him.

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A marriage is not a promise. It is a blade.

If you handle it with care, it gives you a clean shave every morning for sixty-two years.

If you handle it carelessly, it cuts your throat.

My father and my mother never cut each other.

They just learned, day after day, how to hold the blade together.