



THE L’ORÉAL MAN

I waited a long time before writing this piece.

Not because I lacked the words, but because I was afraid of wasting them on a man who deserved more.

Giorgio was not a salesman.
He was a method disguised as a person.

He was Mr. Giorgio Priolo, Commercial Director for Southern Italy at L’Oréal.

He had started as a salesman in the mid-1970s, in the world of perfumeries—a market almost exclusively associated with women, the very world L’Oréal had always spoken to and remained deeply connected with. A world that eventually gave birth to the now universal slogan, “Because I’m Worth It,” as if it were the answer of a woman tired of having to prove her value, tired of seeking permission to feel worthy.

Global advertising agencies have earned billions of dollars developing concepts like this, with all their supposed creativity, when all they really needed was to send a salesman into Queens, listen to ordinary people for a few hours, and turn their words into two simple ideas for the price of a one-dollar coffee.

AHAHAHAHAHAH.

I met him in a hotel, sitting at a table with my father, on one of those evenings when work and family blend together without asking permission.

L’Oréal had sent him to organize its Large-Scale Distribution business, an emerging market that was rapidly concentrating consumers and consumption, while its historical kingdom—the perfumeries and the COROLLE counters—remained intact, strong, untouchable.

He had already met illness.
He was still young, but his body had already asked him to pay the bill once. He never spoke about it to earn sympathy. When he mentioned it at all, he spoke of it the way one speaks about the weather: a fact, not a tragedy.

He lent me two years of his company, one day a week every month, travelling among customers who were neither his nor mine.
For the duration of those journeys, they became ours.

He taught me that a Gillette man who knew how to listen to L’Oréal understood the market better than someone who sold only razor blades.

He took away my men’s aftershave and replaced it with a women’s fragrance, telling me that sometimes men must wear what they want to understand, not what they are.

He called me his sorcerer’s apprentice, and he never said it as a joke.
He said it because he believed it.

With customers, we became known simply as “What a Great Company.”
That was our slogan.
We always claimed that we were having fun, and that was why we were getting paid.

Meanwhile, the world outside was different: those who were always complaining, those who had always complained, and those who did absolutely nothing and still complained.
Salesmen from other companies.
No names required.

One day Milan called me, very politely, to ask me to stop travelling with him.
The Gillette Personal Care division in my territory was collapsing and, somehow, the blame seemed to be mine.
According to some people, I was selling L’Oréal without even realizing it.
Without commissions.
For free.
Just as I still do today.

We laughed about it for days.

Gillette had built an empire around a simple promise:
THE BEST A MAN CAN GET.

At the time, I thought it was advertising.
Years later, I realized it had been a description.
Because one day, a competitor gave me exactly that.
His name was Giorgio Priolo.

He died at fifty-two.
Far too early for a man who still had customers to introduce, jokes to tell, and a whole life of appointments that his health would never keep.

I gave her his name.
My daughter is called Giorgia, and every time I call her, I call him back too—for an instant, to my table.

He was not a colleague.
He was the man who taught me that a rival company, seen from up close, is simply another family you have not met yet.

Goodbye, Giorgio.
This saga is as much yours as it is mine.

Ferdinando Frega

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