



THREE DAYS ABROAD FOR L’ORÉAL

When he came to pick me up under my building that morning it was very early — that was his way of working. He always said the morning has gold in its mouth, and whatever you do, whatever you produce then, can never be repeated in the afternoon. It was 5:30. He told me, half-joking, to bring my passport, and I shot back asking him to just tell me where the hell we were actually going.

Sicily is part of Italy, I said, we don't need a passport for that — but he laughed and said: for someone like you, used to the provinces, small towns, this kind of territory — if you got lost in a city like Catania, a million people, at least they'd be able to tell where you're from and send you home.

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.

That was his way of saying: good morning Nando, I'm here, and I know you're no world traveler.

We got to the ferry, and he looked me up and down. I'd bought a blue suit for the occasion, a light blue shirt, a blue tie, new shoes that squeaked, and I felt confident about the whole thing.

I'd shaved, put on one of my classic Gillette aftershaves, my hair was neat, my spirit was clean — I really was put together. But something made me pause and think: I knew he had something in mind, I just didn't know what.

He took me by the arm — let's go to the bar, first floor — told me to follow him, and when we got there he pulled me straight into the men's room.

He told me to take off the jacket, the tie, the shirt, to wash my face properly and get rid of that damn aftershave — he said it was old-man stuff, it reminded him of what his grandfather used to wear, strong enough to keep away both the mosquitoes and his grandmother.

He handed me an ascot scarf to replace the tie, and a pocket square for my jacket. Then he took off my brand-new Casio, the one with the built-in calculator, and gave me a watch straight out of a box — an Omega Seamaster, steel case — told me to wear it on my right wrist, and slipped a white-silver bracelet onto the other.

I thought that was it, but then he pulled a little bottle of French perfume out of his pocket, pour femme, and anointed me with it.

That's a woman's perfume, Giorgio, what the hell are you doing?

He stopped me and said: men and women often wear scents made for the opposite sex, not for how they smell, but for what they're meant to do. Don't worry, you'll understand — just trust me on this.

But I don't know anymore if we're going to work or if you've found yourself an excuse to go chase women without telling me — just let me know.

He smiled and said: we're going to work, we're not chasing women — but there is one particular woman whose name we owe our respect to, and don't ever forget it: her name is Auntie L'Oréal.

It was time to get off the ferry, to land in Sicily — though nobody ever asked us for a passport. The streets were clean, and people spoke using the formal "Lei," while back home in Calabria we always used the old "Voi." That was the first difference, my first lesson: we really were abroad.

Ferdinando