**Archive for the 'The Winner Stands Alone' Category**

[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter XII by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/03/06/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-xii-by-paulo-coelho/)

[The Winner Stands Alone](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/category/the-winner-stands-alone/). Javits glances around. There’s a man in dark glasses drinking a fruit juice. He seems oblivious to his surroundings and is staring out to sea as if he were somewhere far from there. He’s smartly dressed and good-looking, with greying hair. He was one of the first to arrive and must know who Javits is, and yet he’s made no effort to come and introduce himself. It was brave of him to sit there alone like that. Being alone in Cannes is anathema; it means that no one is interested in you, that you’re unimportant or don’t know anyone.

He envies that man, who probably doesn’t fit the list of ‘normal’ behaviour he always keeps in his pocket. He seems so independent and free; if Javits weren’t feeling so tired, he would really like to talk to him.

He turns to one of his ‘friends’.

‘What does being normal mean?’

‘Is your conscience troubling you? Have you done something you shouldn’t have?’

Javits has clearly asked the wrong question of the wrong man. His companion will perhaps assume that he’s regretting what he’s made of his life and that he wants to start anew, but that isn’t it at all. And if he does have regrets, it’s too late to begin again; he knows the rules of the game.

‘I asked you what being normal means?’

One of the ‘friends’ looks bewildered. The other keeps surveying the tent, watching people come and go.

‘Living like someone who lacks all ambition,’ the first ‘friend’ says at last.

The ‘friend’ laughs.

‘You should make a film on the subject,’ he says.

‘Not again,’ Javits thinks. ‘They have no idea. They’re with me all the time, but they still don’t understand what I do. I don’t make films.’

All films start out in the mind of a so-called producer. He’s read a book, say, or had a brilliant idea while driving along the freeways of Los Angeles (which is really a large suburb in search of a city). Unfortunately, he’s alone, both in the car and in his desire to transform that brilliant idea into something that can be seen on the screen.

He finds out if the film rights to the book are still available. If the response is negative, he goes in search of another product – after all, more than 60,000 books are published each year in the United States alone. If the response is positive, he phones the author and makes the lowest possible offer, which is usually accepted because it’s not only actors and actresses who like to be associated with the dream machine. Every author feels more important when his or her words are transformed into images.

They arrange to have lunch. The producer says that the book is ‘a work of art and highly cinematographic’ and that the writer is ‘a genius deserving of recognition’. The writer explains that he spent five years working on the book and asks to be allowed to help in the writing of the script. ‘No, really, you shouldn’t do that, it’s an entirely different medium,’ comes the reply, ‘but I know you’ll love the result.’ Then he adds: ‘The film will be totally true to the book,’ which, as both of them know, is a complete and utter lie.

The writer decides that he should agree to the conditions, promising himself that next time will be different. He accepts. The producer now says that they have to interest one of the big studios because they need financial backing for the project. He names a few stars he claims to have lined up for the lead roles – which is another complete and utter lie, but one that is always wheeled out and always works as a seduction technique. He buys what is known as an ‘option’, that is, he pays around $10,000 dollars to retain the rights for three years. And then what happens? ‘Then we’ll pay ten times that amount and you’ll have a right to 2% of the net profits.’ That’s the financial part of the conversation over with, because the writer is convinced he’ll earn a fortune from his slice of the profits.

If he were to ask around, he’d soon find out that the Hollywood accountants somehow manage it so that no film ever makes a profit.

Lunch ends with the producer handing the writer a huge contract and asking if he could possibly sign it now, so that the studio will know that the product is definitely theirs. With his eyes fixed on that (non-existent) percentage and on the possibility of seeing his name in lights (which won’t happen either, at most there’ll be a line in the credits, saying: ‘based on the book by…’), the writer signs the contract without giving the matter much thought.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, and there is nothing new under the sun, as Solomon said more than three thousand years ago.

The producer starts knocking on the doors of various studios. He’s known in the industry already, and so some of those doors open, but his proposal is not always accepted. In that case, he doesn’t even bother to ring up the author and invite him to lunch again, he just writes him a letter saying that, despite his enthusiasm for the project, the movie industry isn’t yet ready for that kind of story and he’s returning the contract (which he, of course, did not sign).

If the proposal is accepted, the producer then goes to the lowest and least well-paid person in the hierarchy: the screen writer, the person who will spend days, weeks and months writing and re-writing the original idea or the screen adaptation. The scripts are sent to the producer (but never to the author), who, out of habit, automatically rejects the first draft, knowing that the screen writer can always do better. More weeks and months of coffee and insomnia for the bright young talent (or old hack – there are no halfway houses) who rewrites each scene, which are then rejected or reshaped by the producer (and the screen writer thinks: ‘If he can write so damn well, why doesn’t he write the whole thing?’ Then he remembers his salary and goes quietly back to his computer.)

Finally, the script is almost ready. At this point, the producer draws up a list of demands: the removal of any political references that might upset a more conservative audience; more kissing, because women like that kind of thing; a story with a beginning, middle and an end, and a hero who moves everyone to tears with his self-sacrifice and devotion; and one character who loses a loved one at the start of the film and finds him or her again at the end. In fact, most film scripts can be summed up very briefly as: Man loves woman. Man loses woman. Man gets woman back. Ninety per cent of all films are variations on that same theme.

Films that break this rule have to be very violent to make up for it, or have loads of crowd-pleasing special effects. And since this tried and tested formula is a sure-fire winner, why take any unnecessary risks?

Armed with what he considers to be a well-written story, who does the producer seek out next? The studio who financed the project. The studio, however, has a long line of films to place in the ever-diminishing number of cinemas around the world. They ask him to wait a little or to find an independent distributor, first making sure that the producer signs another gigantic contract (which even takes into account exclusive rights ‘outside of Planet Earth’), taking full responsibility for all money spent.

‘And that’s where people like me come in!’ The independent distributor can walk down the street without being recognised, although at media-fests like this everyone knows who he is. He’s the person who didn’t come up with the idea, didn’t work on the script and didn’t invest a cent.

Javits is the intermediary – the distributor!

He receives the producer in a tiny office (the big plane, the house with the swimming pool, the invitations to parties all over the world are purely for his enjoyment – the producer doesn’t even merit a mineral water). He takes the DVD home with him. He watches the first five minutes. If he likes it, he watches to the end, but this only happens with one out of every hundred new films he’s given. Then he spends ten cents on a phone call and tells the producer to come back on a certain date and at a certain time.

‘We’ll sign,’ he says, as if he were doing the producer a big favour. ‘I’ll distribute the film.’

The producer tries to negotiate. He wants to know how many cinemas in how many countries and under what conditions. These, however, are pointless questions because he knows what the distributor will say: ‘That depends on the reactions we get at the pre-launch screenings.’ The product is shown to selected audiences from all social classes, people specially chosen by market research companies. The results are analysed by professionals. If the results are positive, another ten cents gets spent on a phone call, and, the following day, Javits hands the producer three copies of yet another vast contract. The producer asks to be given time for his lawyer to read it. Javits says he has nothing against him doing that, but he needs to finalise that season’s programme now and can’t guarantee that by the time the producer gets back to him he won’t have selected another film.

The producer reads only the clause that tells him how much he’s going to earn. He’s pleased with what he sees and so he signs. He doesn’t want to miss this opportunity.

Years have passed since he sat down with the writer to discuss making a film of his book and he’s quite forgotten that he is now in exactly the same situation.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, and there is nothing new under the sun, as Solomon said more than three thousand years ago.

Welcome to Share with Friends – Free Texts for a Free Internet

*Now you had a chance to read the first 1/11 of “The Winner stands alone” and we stop here the publication of the first pages. The book, already released in Brazil and Portugal, will start being published on March 19, in UK, followed by US, France, Greece, Bulgaria, Australia, Holland. In nearly all the other countries, it will be published from June to December 2009.*

[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter XI by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/03/03/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-xi-by-paulo-coelho/)

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He realises he should not have asked that question. Firstly, because he doesn’t need anyone’s support to justify what he’s doing; he’s convinced that since everyone will die one day, some must do so in the name of something greater. That’s how it’s been since the beginning of time, when men sacrificed themselves in order to feed their tribe, when virgins were handed over to the priests to placate the wrath of dragons and gods. The second reason is because he has now drawn attention to himself and indicated an interest in the man on the next table.

The waiter’s sure to forget, but there’s no need to take unnecessary risks. He tells himself that at a Festival such as this, it’s only normal that people should want to know about other people, and even more normal that such information should be rewarded. He himself has done the same thing hundreds of times in restaurants all over the world, and others had doubtless done the same with him. Waiters aren’t just accustomed to being given money to supply a name or a better table or to send a discreet message, they almost expect it.

No, the waiter wouldn’t remember anything. Igor knows that his next victim is there before him. If he succeeds, and if the waiter is questioned, he’ll say that the only odd thing to happen that day was a man asking him if he thought it was acceptable to destroy a universe in the name of a greater love. He might not even remember that much. The police will ask: ‘What did he look like?’ and the waiter will reply: ‘I didn’t pay much attention, to be honest, but I know he said he wasn’t gay.’ The police – accustomed to the kind of French intellectual who sits in bars and comes up with weird theories and complicated analyses of, for example, the sociology of film festivals – would quietly let the matter drop.

Something else was bothering Igor though.

The name or names.

He had killed before – with weapons and the blessing of his country. He didn’t know how many people he had killed, but he had rarely seen their faces and certainly never asked their names. Knowing someone’s name meant knowing that the other person was a human being and not ‘the enemy’. Knowing someone’s name transformed them into a unique and special individual, with a past and a future, with ancestors and possibly descendants, a person who has known triumphs and failures. People are their names; they’re proud of them; they repeat them thousands of times in their lifetime and identify with them. It’s the first word they learn after ‘Daddy’ and ‘Mummy’.

Olivia. Javits. Igor. Ewa.

Someone’s spirit, however, has no name, it is pure truth and inhabits a particular body for a certain period of time, and will, one day, leave it, and God won’t bother asking ‘What’s your name?’ when the soul arrives at the final judgement. God will ask only: ‘Did you love while you were alive?’ For that is the essence of life: the ability to love, not the name we carry around on our passport, business card and identity card. The great mystics changed their names, and sometimes abandoned them altogether. When John the Baptist was asked who he was, he said only: ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.’ When Jesus found the man on whom he would build his church, he ignored the fact that the man in question had spent his entire life answering to the name of Simon and called him Peter. When Moses asked God his name, back came the reply: ‘I am who I am.’

Perhaps he should look for another victim, one named victim was enough: Olivia. At this precise moment, however, he feels that he cannot turn back, but he decides that he will not ask the name of the next world he destroys. He can’t turn back because he wants to do justice to the poor, vulnerable girl on the bench by the beach – such a sweet, easy victim. This new challenge – this sweaty, pseudo-athletic, henna-haired man with the bored expression and who is clearly someone very powerful – is much more difficult. The two men in suits are not just assistants; he notices that every now and then, they look around the tent, watching everything that’s going on nearby. If he is to be worthy of Ewa and fair to Olivia, he must be brave.

He leaves the straw in the pineapple juice. People are beginning to arrive. He has to wait for the place to fill up, but not too long. He hadn’t planned to destroy a world in broad daylight, in the middle of the Boulevard in Cannes, and he doesn’t know exactly how to carry out this next project. Something tells him, though, that he has chosen the perfect place.

His thoughts are no longer with the poor young woman at the beach; adrenaline is filling his blood, his heart is beating faster, he’s excited and happy.

Javits Wild wouldn’t be wasting his time here just to get a free meal at one of the thousands of parties to which he must be invited every year. He must be here for some specific reason or to meet a particular person. That reason or person would doubtless be Igor’s best alibi.

12.26 p.m.

Javits watches the other guests arriving. The place is getting crowded, and he thinks what he always thinks:

‘What am I doing here? I don’t need this. In fact, I need very little from anyone – I have all I want. I’m a big name in the movie world, I can have any woman I desire, even though I dress badly. In fact, I make a point of being badly dressed. Long gone are the days when I had only one suit, and, on the rare occasions when I received an invitation from the Superclass (after much crawling, begging and making promises), I would prepare myself for a lunch like this as if it were the most important occasion of my life. Now I know that the only thing that changes are the cities these lunches are held in; otherwise, it’s all utterly boring and predictable.

‘People will come up to me and tell me they adore my work. Others will call me a hero and thank me for giving movie mavericks a chance. Pretty, intelligent women, who are not taken in by appearances, will notice the people gathering round my table and ask the waiter who I am and immediately find some way of approaching me, certain that the only thing I’m interested in is sex. Every single one of them has some favour to ask of me. That’s why they praise and flatter me and offer me what they think I need. But all I want is to be left alone.

‘I’ve been to thousands of parties like this, and I’m not here in this marquee for any particular reason, except that I can’t sleep, even though I flew to France in my private jet, a technological marvel capable of flying at an altitude of over 36,000 feet from California all the way to Cannes without having to make a refuelling stop. I changed the original configuration of the cabin. It can comfortably carry eighteen passengers, but I reduced the number of seats to six and kept the cabin separate for the four crew members. Someone’s always sure to ask: “May I come with you?” And now I have the perfect excuse: “Sorry, there’s no room.”’

Javits had equipped his new toy, which cost around 40 million dollars, with two beds, a conference table, a shower, a Miranda sound system (Bang & Olufsen had an excellent design and a good PR campaign, but they were now a thing of the past), two coffee machines, a microwave oven for the crew and an electric oven for him (because he’s hates re-heated food). Javits only drinks champagne, and whoever wishes to was more than welcome to share a bottle of Moët & Chandon 1961 with him. However, the ‘cellar’ on the plane had every drink any guest might conceivably want. And then there were the two 21-inch LCD screens ready to show the most recent films, even those that hadn’t yet made it into the cinemas.

The jet was one of the most advanced in the world (although the French insisted that the Dassault Falcon was even better), but regardless of how much money he had, he couldn’t change the clocks in Europe. It was now 3:43 a.m. in Los Angeles, and he was just beginning to feel really tired. He had been awake all night, going from one party to the next, answering the same two idiotic questions that began every conversation:

‘How was your flight?’

To which Javits always responded with a question:

‘Why?’

People didn’t know quite what to say and so they smiled awkwardly and moved on to the next question on the list:

‘Are you staying here long?’

And Javits would again ask: ‘Why?’ Then he would pretend he had to answer his mobile phone, make his excuses and move on with his two inseparable besuited friends in tow.

He met no one interesting. But then who would a man who has almost everything money can buy find interesting? He had tried to change his friends and meet people who had nothing to do with the world of cinema: philosophers, writers, jugglers, executives of food-manufacturing companies. At first, it all went swimmingly, until the inevitable question: ‘Would you like to read a script I’ve written?’ Or the second most inevitable question: ‘I have a friend who has always wanted to be an actor/actress. Would you mind meeting him/her?’

Yes, he would. He had other things to do in life apart from work. He used to fly once a month to Alaska, go into the first bar, get drunk, eat pizza, wander about in the wild, and talk to the people who lived in the small towns up there. He worked out for two hours a day at his private gym, but the doctors had warned him he could still end up with heart problems. He didn’t care that much about being physically fit, what he really wanted was to off-load a little of the constant tension that seemed to weigh on him every second of the day, to do some meditation and heal the wounds to his soul. When he was in the country, he always asked the people he chanced to meet what ‘normal life’ was like, because he had forgotten. The answers varied, and he gradually came to realise that, even when he was surrounded by other people, he was absolutely alone in the world.

[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter X by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/02/27/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-x-by-paulo-coelho/)

Even if he’d had his swimming things with him, he would have found it difficult to get anywhere near the sea shore. The big hotels had, it seems, acquired the rights to great swathes of beach which they had filled with their chairs, logos, waiters and bodyguards, who, at every entry point, demanded the guest’s room key or some other form of identification. Other areas were occupied by huge white marquees, where some production company, brewery or cosmetics firm was launching its latest product at a so-called ‘lunch’. People here were dressed normally, if by ‘normal’ you mean a baseball cap, bright shirt and light-coloured trousers for men, and jewellery, loose top, bermudas and low-heeled shoes for women.

Dark glasses were de rigueur for both sexes, and there was little bare flesh on show because members of the Superclass were too old for that now, and any such display would be considered ridiculous or, rather, pathetic.

Igor noticed one other thing: the mobile phone. The most important item of clothing.

It was essential to be receiving a constant stream of messages or calls, to be prepared to interrupt any conversation in order to answer a call that was not in the least urgent, to stand keying in endless texts via an SMS. They had all forgotten that these initials mean Short Message Service and instead used the key pad as if it were a typewriter. It was slow, awkward and could cause serious damage to the thumb, but what did it matter? At that very moment, not only in Cannes, but in the whole world, the ether was being filled with messages like ‘Good morning, my love, I woke up thinking about you and I’m so glad to have you in my life’, ‘I’ll be home in ten minutes, please have my lunch ready and check that my clothes were sent to the laundry’, or ‘The party here is a real drag, but I haven’t got anywhere else to go, where are you?’ Things that take five minutes to be written down and only ten seconds to be spoken, but that’s the way the world is. Igor knows all about this because he has earned hundreds of millions of dollars thanks to the fact that the phone is no longer simply a method of communicating with others, but a thread of hope, a way of believing that you’re not alone, a way of showing others how important you are.

And it was leading the world into a state of utter madness. For a mere 5 euros a month, via an ingenious system created in London, a call centre would send you a standard message every three minutes. When you know you’re going to be talking to someone you want to impress, you just have to dial a particular number to activate the system. The phone rings, you pick it up, open the message, read it quickly and say ‘Oh, that can wait’ (of course it can: it was written to order). This way, the person you’re talking to feels important, and things move along more quickly because he realises he’s in the presence of a very busy person. Three minutes later, the conversation is interrupted by another message, the pressure mounts, and the user of the service can decide whether it’s worth turning off his phone for a quarter of an hour or lying and saying that he really must take this call, and so rid himself of a disagreeable companion.

There is only one situation in which all mobile phones must be turned off. Not at formal suppers, in the middle of a play, during the key moment in a film or while an opera singer is attempting the most difficult of arias; we’ve all heard someone’s mobile phone go off in such circumstances. No, the only time when people are genuinely concerned that their phone might prove dangerous is when they get on a plane and hear the usual lie: ‘All mobile phones must be switched off during the flight because they might interfere with the on-board systems.’ We all believe this and do as the flight attendants ask.

Igor knew when this myth had been created: for years now, airlines had been doing their best to convince passengers to use the phones attached to their seat. These cost ten dollars a minute and use the same transmission system as mobile phones. The strategy didn’t work, but the myth lingered on; they had simply forgotten to remove the warning from the list of dos and don’ts that the flight attendant has to read out before take-off. What no one knew was that on every flight, there were always at least two or three passengers who forgot to turn their phones off, and besides, laptops access the Internet using exactly the same system as mobiles. And no plane anywhere in the world has yet fallen out of the sky because of that.

Now they were trying to modify the warning without alarming the passengers too much and without dropping the price. You could use your mobile phone as long as it was one you could put into flight mode. Such phones cost four times as much. No one has ever explained what ‘flight mode’ is, but if people choose to be taken in like this, that’s their problem.

He keeps walking. He’s troubled by the last look the girl had given him before she died, but prefers not to think about it.

More bodyguards, more dark glasses, more bikinis on the beach, more light-coloured clothes and jewellery attending ‘lunches’, more people hurrying along as if they had something very important to do that morning, more photographers on every corner attempting the impossible task of snapping something unusual, more magazines and free newspapers about what’s happening at the Festival, more people handing out flyers to the poor mortals who haven’t been invited to lunch in one of the white marquees, flyers advertising restaurants on the top of the hill, far from everything, where little is heard of what goes on in Boulevard de la Croisette, up there where models rent apartments for the duration of the Festival, hoping they’ll be summoned to an audition that will change their lives for ever.

All so unsurprising. All so predictable. If he were to go into one of those marquees now, no one would dare ask for his identification because it’s still early and the promoters will be afraid that no one will come. In half an hour’s time, though, depending on how things go, the security guards will be given express orders to let in only pretty, unaccompanied girls.

Why not try it out?

He follows his impulse; after all, he’s on a mission. He goes down some steps, which lead not to the beach, but to a large white marquee with plastic windows, air-conditioning and white chairs and tables, largely empty. One of the security guards asks if he has an invitation, and he says that he does. He pretends to search his pockets. A receptionist dressed in red asks if she can help.

He offers her his business card, bearing the logo of his phone company and his name, Igor Vassilovich, President. He’s sure his name is on the list, he says, but he must have left his invitation at the hotel; he’s been at a series of meetings and forgot to bring it with him. The receptionist welcomes him and invites him in; she has learned to judge men and women by the way they dress, and ‘President’ means the same thing worldwide. Besides, he’s the President of a Russian company! And everyone knows how rich Russians like to show off their wealth. There was no need to check the list.

Igor enters, heads straight for the bar – it’s a very well equipped marquee; there’s even a dance floor – and orders a pineapple juice because it suits the atmosphere and, more importantly, because the drink, decorated with a tiny, blue Japanese umbrella, comes complete with a black straw.

He sits down at one of the many empty tables. Among the few people present is a man in his fifties, with hennaed mahogany brown hair, fake tan and a body honed in one of those gyms that promise eternal youth. He’s wearing a torn T-shirt and is sitting with two other men, who are both dressed in impeccable designer suits. The two men turn to face Igor, and he immediately turns his head slightly, but continues to study them from behind his dark glasses. The men in suits try to work out who this new arrival is, then lose interest.

Igor’s interest, however, increases.

The man does not even have a mobile phone on the table, although his two assistants are constantly fielding calls.

Given that this badly dressed, arrogant fellow has been let into the marquee; given that he has his mobile phone turned off; given that the waiter keeps coming up to him and asking if he wants anything; given that he doesn’t even deign to respond, but merely waves him away, he is obviously someone very important.

Igor takes a fifty-euro note out of his pocket and gives it to the waiter who has just started laying the table.

‘Who’s the gentleman in the faded blue T-shirt?’ he asks, glancing in the direction of the other table.

‘Javits Wild. He’s a very important man.’

Excellent. After someone as insignificant as the girl at the beach, a figure like Javits Wild would be ideal – not famous, but important. One of the people who decides who should be in the spotlight and who feels no need to take much care over his own appearance because he knows exactly who he is. He’s in charge of pulling the strings, and the puppets feel themselves to be the most privileged and envied people on the planet, until one day, for whatever reason, the puppeteer decides to cut the strings, and the puppets fall down, lifeless and powerless.

He’s clearly a member of the Superclass, which means that he has false friends and many enemies.

‘One other question. Would it be acceptable to destroy a universe in the name of a greater love?’

The waiter laughs.

‘Are you God or just gay?’

‘Neither, but thank you for your answer.’

[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter IX by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/02/24/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-ix-by-paulo-coelho/)

sHer mobile phone rang.

…none at all.

It continued to ring.

She was still travelling back in time as she gazed out at the tobacconist’s and at the little girl eating chocolate, then she finally emerged from her reverie, realised what was happening and answered the phone.

A voice at the other end was saying that she had an audition in two hours’ time.

She had an audition!

In Cannes!

So it had been worth crossing the ocean, arriving in a city where all the hotels were full, meeting up at the airport with other young women in exactly the same position as her (a Pole, two Russians and a Brazilian), and going round knocking on doors until they found that shared, exorbitantly priced apartment. After all those years of trying her luck in Chicago and travelling now and then to Los Angeles in search of more agents, more adverts, more rejections, it turned out that her future lies in Europe!

In two hours’ time?

She couldn’t catch a bus because she didn’t know the routes. She was staying high up on a steep hill and had only been down it twice so far – to distribute copies of her book and to go to that stupid party last night. On both occasions, when she reached the bottom of hill, she had hitched a lift from complete strangers, usually single men in magnificent convertibles. Everyone knew Cannes to be a safe place, and all women know that good looks help when trying to get a ride, but she couldn’t leave anything to chance this time, she would have to resolve the problem herself. Auditions follow a rigorous timetable, that was one of the first things you learn at any acting agency. She had noticed on her first day in Cannes that the traffic was almost permanently gridlocked, and so all she could do was get dressed and leave at once. She would be there in an hour and a half; she remembered the hotel where the producer was staying because it was on the ‘pilgrimage route’ she had followed yesterday, in search of some opportunity, some opening.

Now the problem was what to wear.

She fell upon the suitcase she had brought with her, chose some Armani jeans made in China and bought on the black market in Chicago for a fifth of the real price. No one could say they were fake because they weren’t: everyone knew that the Chinese manufacturers sent 80 per cent of what they produced to the original stores, with the remaining 20 per cent being sold off by employees on the side. It was, shall we say, excess stock, surplus to requirements.

She was wearing a white DKNY T-shirt, which had cost more than the jeans. Faithful to her principles, she knew that the more discreet the clothes, the better. No short skirts, no plunging necklines, because if other women had been invited to the audition, that is what they would be wearing.

She wasn’t sure about her make-up. In the end, she opted for a very light foundation and an even lighter application of lip liner. She had already lost a precious fifteen minutes.  
11.45 a.m.

People are never satisfied. If they have a little, they want more. If they have a lot, they want still more. Once they have more, they wish they could be happy with little, but are incapable of making the slightest effort in that direction.

Is it just that they don’t understand how simple happiness is? What can she want, that girl in the jeans and white T-shirt who just came running past? What could be so urgent that it stopped her taking time to contemplate the lovely sunny day, the blue sea, the babies in their prams, the palms fringing the beach?

‘Don’t run, child! You’ll never escape the two most important presences in the life of any human being: God and death. God accompanies your every step and will be annoyed because he can see that you’re not paying attention to the miracle of life. Or indeed death. You just ran past a corpse and didn’t even notice.’

Igor has walked past the scene of the crime several times now. At one point, he realised that his comings and goings might arouse suspicion and so decided to remain a prudent two hundred yards from the scene, leaning on the balustrade that looked out over the beach. He’s wearing dark glasses, but there’s nothing suspicious about that, not only because it’s a sunny day, but because in a celebrity town like Cannes, dark glasses are synonymous with status.

He’s surprised to see that it’s almost midday, and yet no one has realised that there’s a person lying dead on the main street of a city which, at this time of year, is the focus of the world’s attention.

A couple are approaching the bench now, visibly irritated. They start shouting at the Sleeping Beauty; they’re the girl’s parents, angry because she isn’t working. The man shakes her almost violently. Then the woman bends over, obscuring Igor’s field of vision.

Igor knows what will happen next.

The mother screams. The father takes his mobile phone from his pocket and moves away, clearly agitated. The mother is shaking her daughter’s unresponsive body. Passers-by stop, and now he can remove his dark glasses and join them as one more curious on-looker.

The mother is crying, clinging to her daughter. A young man gently pushes her away and attempts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but soon gives up; Olivia’s face already has a slight purple tinge to it.

‘Someone call an ambulance!’

Several people dial the same number, all of them feeling useful, important, caring. He can already hear the sound of the siren in the distance. The mother’s screams are growing louder. A young woman tries to put a comforting arm around her, but the mother pushes her away. Someone attempts to sit the body up, and someone else tells them to lay her down again because it’s too late to do anything.

‘It’s probably a drug overdose,’ the person next to him says. ‘Young people today are a lost cause.’

Those who hear the comment nod sagely. Igor remains impassive while he watches the paramedics unload their equipment from the ambulance, apply electric shocks to Olivia’s heart, while a more experienced doctor stands by, not saying a word, because although he knows there’s nothing to be done, he doesn’t want his colleagues to be accused of negligence. They place Olivia’s body on the stretcher and put it in the ambulance, the mother still clinging to her daughter. After a brief discussion, they allow the mother to get in too, and the ambulance speeds away.

No more than five minutes have passed between the couple discovering the body and the ambulance leaving. The father is still standing there, stunned, not knowing where to go or what to do. Forgetting who he’s speaking to, the same person who made the comment about a drug overdose, goes over to the father and gives him his version of the facts:

‘Don’t worry sir. This kind of thing happens every day around here.’

The father does not respond. He’s stilling holding his mobile phone and staring into space. He either doesn’t understand the remark or has no idea what it is that happens every day, or else he’s in a state of shock that has sent him immediately into some unknown dimension where pain does not exist.

The crowd disperses as quickly as it appeared. Only two people remain: the father still clutching his phone and the man who has now taken off his dark glasses and is holding them in his hand.

‘Did you know the girl?’ Igor asks.

There is no reply.

It’s best to do as everyone else has done, keep walking along the Boulevard de la Croisette and see what else is happening on this sunny morning in Cannes. Like the girl’s father, he doesn’t know quite what he is feeling: he has destroyed a world he will never be able to rebuild, even if he had all the power in the world. Did Ewa deserve that? From the womb of that young woman, Olivia – the fact that he knows her name troubles him greatly because that means she’s no longer just a face in the crowd – might have sprung a genius who would have gone on to discover a cure for cancer or drafted an agreement that would ensure that the world could finally live in peace. He has destroyed not just one person, but all the future generations that might have sprung from her. What has he done? Was love, however great and however intense, sufficient justification for that?

He had chosen the wrong person as his first victim. Her death will never make the news and Ewa won’t understand the message.

Don’t think about it, it’s done now. You have prepared yourself to go much further than this, so carry on. The girl will understand that her death was not in vain, but was a sacrifice in the name of a greater love. Look around you, see what’s happening in the city, behave like a normal citizen. You’ve already had your fair share of suffering in this life; now you deserve a little peace and comfort.

Enjoy the Festival. This is what you have been preparing yourself for.

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[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter VIII by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/02/20/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-viii-by-paulo-coelho/)

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She drinks her coffee and begins to understand her bad mood. She’s surrounded by some of the most beautiful women on the planet! She certainly doesn’t consider herself ugly, but there’s no way she can compete with them. She needs to decide what to do. She had thought long and hard before making this trip, money is tight, and she doesn’t have much time in which to land a contract. She went to various places during the first two days, giving people a copy of her CV and her photos, but all she achieved was an invitation to last night’s party at a cheap restaurant, with the music at full blast, and where she met no one from the Superclass. In order to lose her inhibitions, she drank more than she should and ended up not knowing where she was or what she was doing there. Everything seemed strange to her – Europe, the way people dress, the different languages, the phoney jollity – when the truth was everyone was wishing they could have been invited to some more important event, instead of being in that utterly insignificant place, listening to the same old music, and having to hold shouted conversations about other people’s lives and the injustices committed by the powerful on the powerless.

Gabriela is tired of talking about these so-called injustices. That’s simply the way it is. They choose the people they want to choose and don’t have to explain themselves to anyone, which is why she needs a plan. A lot of other young women with the same dream (but not, of course, with as much talent as her) will be doing the rounds with their CVs and their photos; the producers who come to the Festival must be inundated with portfolios, DVDs, business cards.

What would make her stand out?

She needs to think. She won’t get another chance like this, largely because she’s spent all her savings on this trip. And – horror of horrors – she’s getting old. She’s twenty-five. This is her last chance.

While she drinks her coffee, she looks through the small kitchen window at the dead-end street down below. All she can see is a tobacconist’s and a little girl eating chocolate. Yes, this is her last chance. She hopes it will turn out quite differently from the first one.

She thinks back to when she was eleven years old and performing in her first school play at one of the most expensive schools in Chicago. Her subsequent desire to succeed was not born of the unanimous acclaim she received from the audience, composed of fathers, mothers, relatives and teachers. Far from it. She was playing the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland. She had got the part – one of the best roles in the play – after auditioning along with a lot of other girls and boys.

Her first line was: ‘Your hair wants cutting.’ Then Alice would reply: ‘You should learn not to make personal remarks, it’s very rude.’

When the long-awaited moment came, a moment she had rehearsed and rehearsed, she was so nervous that she got the line wrong and said instead: ‘Your hair wants washing.’ The girl playing Alice said her next line anyway, and the audience would never have noticed anything was wrong if Gabriela, who knew she had made a mistake, hadn’t promptly lost the power of speech. Since the Mad Hatter was an essential character if the scene was to continue, and since children are not good at improvising on stage (although they improvise happily enough in real life), no one knew what to do. Then, after several long minutes, during which the actors simply looked at each other, the teacher started applauding, announced it was time for an interval and ordered everyone off-stage.

Gabriela not only left the stage, she left the school in tears. The following day, she found out that the scene with the Mad Hatter had been cut, and the actors would instead move straight on to the game of croquet with the Queen. The teacher said this didn’t matter in the least because the story of Alice in Wonderland is a lot of nonsense anyway, but during playtime, the other girls and boys ganged up on Gabriela and started beating her.

This wasn’t so very unusual – it was a fairly regular occurrence – and she had learned to defend herself as energetically as when she, in turn, attacked the weaker children. On this occasion, however, she took the beating without uttering a word and without shedding a tear. Her reaction was so surprising that the fight lasted almost no time at all; her schoolmates expected her to scream and shout and, when she didn’t, rapidly lost interest. For with each blow, Gabriela was thinking:

‘I’ll be a great actress one day and then you’ll be sorry.’

Who says that children aren’t capable of deciding what they want to do in life?

Adults do.

And when we grow to be adults ourselves, we believe that we really are wise beings who are always right. Many children had doubtless been through a similar experience, playing the role of the Mad Hatter or Sleeping Beauty or Aladdin or Alice, and decided there and then to abandon the spotlights and the applause. Gabriela, though, had never before lost a battle; she was the prettiest and most intelligent student in school and always got the best marks in class; and she knew intuitively that if she didn’t fight back at once, she would be lost.

It was one thing to get a beating from her schoolmates – because she could give as good as she got – but it was quite another to carry a failure like that around with her for the rest of her life. As we all know, a fluffed line in a school play, an inability to dance as well as everyone else, or rude comments passed about skinny legs or a big head – which all children have to put up with – can have two radically different consequences.

Some people opt for revenge and try to be really good at whatever it is the others thought they couldn’t do. ‘One day, you’ll envy me,’ they think.

Most people, however, accept their limitations, and then things tend to go from bad to worse. They grow up insecure and obedient (although they dream of a day when they’ll be free and able to do whatever they want), they get married to prove that they’re not as ugly as other kids said they were (although deep down they still believe they are), they have children so that no one can say they’re infertile (even though they wanted kids anyway), they dress well so that no one can say they dress badly (although they know people will say that anyway).

By the following week, the incident at the play had been forgotten by everyone at school, but Gabriela had decided that, one day, when she was a world-famous actress, accompanied by secretaries, bodyguards, photographers and legions of fans, she would go back to that school. She would put on a performance of Alice in Wonderland for needy children, she would make the news, and her childhood friends would say:

‘I was on the same stage as her once!’

Her mother wanted her to study chemical engineering, and as soon as she finished high school, her parents sent her to the Illinois Institute of Technology. During the day, she studied protein paths and the structure of benzene, but she spent her evenings with Ibsen, Coward and Shakespeare while attending a drama course paid for with money sent to her by her parents to buy clothes and course books. She trained with the best professionals and had excellent teachers. She received good reviews and letters of recommendation, she performed (without her parents’ knowledge) as a backing singer for a rock group and as a belly dancer in a play about Lawrence of Arabia. It was always a good idea to accept any role that came along. There was always the chance that someone important might be in the audience, someone who would invite her to her first real audition, and then all those testing times and all her struggles to gain a place in the spotlight would be over.

The years passed. Gabriela made TV commercials, toothpaste ads, did some modelling work, and was even tempted to respond to an invitation from a group that specialised in providing escorts for businessmen because she desperately needed money to put together a proper portfolio to send to all the major modelling and acting agencies in the United States. Fortunately, God – in whom she never lost faith – saved her. That same day, she was offered a job as an extra in a video of a Japanese singer, which was going to be filmed beneath the viaduct of the Chicago ‘L’. She was paid much more than she expected (apparently the producers had demanded a fortune in fees for the foreign cast) and with that extra money she managed to produce the vital book of photos (or ‘book’ as it’s known in every language in the world), which also cost much more than she had imagined.

She was always telling herself that she was just at the beginning of her career, even though the days and months were beginning to fly by. She might have been picked to play Ophelia in Hamlet while she was on the drama course, but life mostly offered her only ads for deodorants and beauty creams. Whenever she went to an agency to show them her book and the letters of recommendation from teachers, friends and colleagues, she found the waiting-room full of girls who looked very like her, all of them smiling, all of them hating each other, and all doing whatever they could to get something, anything, that would give them ‘visibility’ as the professionals called it.

She would wait hours for her turn to come, and meanwhile read books on meditation and positive thinking. She would end up sitting opposite someone – male or female – who ignored the letters and went straight to the photos, not that they ever commented on those either. They would make a note of her name. Sometimes, she would be called in for an audition, about one in ten of which bore fruit. There she would be again, with all her talent (or so she thought), standing in front of a camera and a lot of ill-mannered people, who were always telling her: ‘Relax, smile, turn to the right, drop your chin a little, lick your lips.’ And the result: a photo of a new brand of coffee.

And what happened when she wasn’t called? She felt rejected, but soon learned to live with that and come to see it as a necessary experience, a test of her perseverance and faith. She refused to accept the fact that the drama course, the letters of recommendation, the CV listing minor roles performed in minor theatres, were of no use at all…

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[**The Winner Stands Alone : Chapter VII by Paulo Coelho**](http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2009/02/17/the-winner-stands-alone-chapter-vii-by-paulo-coelho/)

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He takes a few steps and his head begins to ache terribly. This is perfectly normal: the blood is flooding the brain, an understandable reaction in someone who has just been under extreme tension.

Despite the headache, he feels happy. Yes, he has done what he set out to do.  
He can do it. And he’s happier still because he has freed the soul from that fragile body, freed a spirit incapable of defending herself against a bullying coward. If her relationship with her boyfriend had continued, the girl would have ended up depressed and anxious and devoid of all self-respect, and would have been even more under her boyfriend’s thumb.

This had never been the case with Ewa. She had always been capable of making her own decisions. He had given her both moral and financial support when she decided to open her haute-couture boutique; and she had been free to travel as much as she wanted. He had been an exemplary man and husband. And yet, she had made a mistake: she had been unable to understand his love or his forgiveness. He hoped, however, that she would receive these messages; after all, he had told her on the day she left that he would destroy whole worlds to get her back.

He picks up the throwaway mobile phone he has just bought and on which he has entered the smallest possible amount of credit. He sends a text message.

11.00 a.m.

It all began, they say, with an unknown 19-year-old posing in a bikini for photographers who had nothing better to do during the 1953 Cannes Festival. She immediately shot to stardom, and her name became legendary: Brigitte Bardot. And now everyone thinks they can do the same. No one understands the importance of being an actress; beauty is the only thing that counts.

That’s why women with long legs and dyed hair, the bottle blondes of this world, travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to be in Cannes, even if only to spend the whole day on the beach, hoping to be seen, photographed, discovered. They want to escape from the trap that awaits all women: becoming a housewife, who makes supper for her husband every evening, takes the children to school every day, and tries to dig up some dirt on her neighbours’ monotonous lives so as to have something to gossip about with her friends. What these women want is fame, glory and glamour, to be the envy of the other people who live in their town and of the boys and girls who always thought of them as ugly ducklings, unaware that they would one day grow up to be a swan or blossom into a flower coveted by everyone. They want a career in the world of dreams even if they have to borrow money to get silicone breast implants or to buy some newer, sexier outfits. Drama school? Forget it, good looks and the right contacts are all you need. The cinema can work miracles, always assuming, of course, you can ever break into that world. Anything to escape from the prison of the provincial city and the long, dreary, repetitive days. There are millions of people who don’t mind that kind of life, and they should be left to live their lives as they see fit. However, if you come to the Festival you must leave fear at home and be prepared for anything: making spur-of-the-moment decisions, telling lies if necessary, pretending to be younger than you are, smiling at people you loathe, feigning an interest in people who bore you, saying ‘I love you’ without a thought for the consequences, or stabbing in the back the friend who once helped you out, but who has now become an undesirable rival. Don’t let feelings of remorse or shame get in your way. The reward is worth any amount of sacrifice.

Fame. Glory. Glamour.

Gabriela finds these thoughts irritating. It’s definitely not the best way to start a new day. Worse, she has a hangover.

At least there’s one consolation. She hasn’t woken up in a five-star hotel next to a man telling her to put her clothes on and leave because he has important business to deal with, like buying or selling films.

She gets up and looks around to see if any of her friends are still in the apartment. Needless to say they’re not. They’ve long since left for the Boulevard de la Croisette, for the swimming pools, hotel bars, yachts, possible lunch dates and chance meetings on the beach. There are five fold-out mattresses on the floor of the small shared apartment, hired for the duration at an exorbitant rent. The mattresses are surrounded by a tangle of clothes, discarded shoes, and hangers that no one has taken the trouble to put back in the wardrobe.

‘The clothes take up more room here than the people,’ she thinks.

Not that any of them could even dream of wearing clothes designed by Elie Saab, Karl Lagerfeld, Versace or Galliano, but what they have nevertheless takes up most of apartment: bikins, miniskirts, T-shirts, platform shoes, and a vast amount of make-up.

‘One day I’ll wear what I like, but right now, I just need to be given a chance,’ she thinks.

And why does she want that chance?

Quite simple. Because she knows she’s the best, despite her experience at school – when she so disappointed her parents – and despite the challenges she’s faced since in order to prove to herself that she can overcome difficulties, frustrations and defeats. She was born to win and to shine, of that she has no doubt.

‘And when I get what I always wanted, I know I’ll have to ask myself: Do they love and admire me because I’m me or because I’m famous.’

She knows people who have achieved stardom on the stage and, contrary to her expectations, they’re not at peace with themselves; they’re insecure, full of doubts, unhappy as soon as they come off stage. They want to be actors so as not to have to be themselves, and they live in fear of making the one false step that could end their career.

‘I’m different, though. I’ve always been me.’

Is that true? Or does everyone in her position think the same?

She gets up and makes herself some coffee. The kitchen is a mess, and none of her friends has bothered to wash the dishes. She doesn’t know why she’s woken up in such a bad mood and with so many doubts. She knows her job, she’s devoted herself to it heart and soul, and yet it’s as if people refuse to recognise her talent. She knows what human beings are like too, especially men – future allies in a battle she needs to win soon, because she’s 25 already and nearly too old for the dream factory. She knows three things:

(a) that men are less treacherous than women;

(b) that they never notice what a woman is wearing because they’re always mentally undressing her;

(c) that as long as you’ve got breasts, thighs, buttocks and belly in good trim, you can conquer the world.

Because of those three things, and because she knows that all the other women she’s competing with try to emphasise their attributes, she pays attention only to item (c) on her list. She exercises and tries to keep fit, avoids diets and, illogical though it may seem, dresses very discreetly. This has worked well so far, and she can usually pass for younger than her age. She’s hoping that it’ll do the trick in Cannes too.

Breasts, buttocks, thighs. They can focus on those things now if they want to, but the day will come when they’ll see what she can really do.

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‘I promised I wouldn’t if you behaved in a more adult fashion and with due respect for my intelligence.’

He’s right. The adult thing to do would be to talk a little about herself. She might arouse the compassion that is always there in the mind of a madman by explaining that she’s in a similar situation, even though it isn’t true.

A boy runs past, an iPod in his ears. He doesn’t even turn to look at them.

‘I live with a man who makes my life hell, and yet I can’t leave him.’

The look in Igor’s eyes changes.

Olivia thinks she’s found a way of escaping from the trap. ‘Be intelligent. Don’t just give up; think of the woman who’s married to the man sitting next to you. Be honest.’

‘He’s cut me off from my friends. He’s always jealous even though he can get all the women he wants. He criticises everything I do and says I have no ambition. He even takes the little money I earn as commission.’

The man says nothing but stares at the sea. The pavement is filling up with people; what would happen if she just got to her feet and ran? Would he shoot her? Is it a real gun?

She senses that she has touched on a topic of possible interest to him. It would be best not to do anything foolish, she thinks, remembering the way he spoke and looked at her minutes before.

‘And yet, you see, I can’t bring myself to leave him. Even if I were to meet the kindest, richest, most generous man in the world, I wouldn’t give my boyfriend up for anything. I’m not a masochist, I take no pleasure in these constant humiliations, I just happen to love him.’

She feels the barrel of the gun pressing into her ribs again. She has said the wrong thing.

‘I’m not like that scoundrel of a boyfriend of yours,’ he says, his voice full of loathing now. ‘I worked hard to build up what I have. I worked long and hard, and survived many a setback. I was always honest in my dealings, although there were, of course, times when I had to be hard and implacable. I was always a good Christian. I have influential friends, and I’ve always been grateful to them. In short, I did everything right.

‘I never harmed anyone who got in my way. Whenever possible, I encouraged my wife to do what she wanted to do, and the result: here I am, alone. Yes, I killed people during the idiotic war I was sent to fight, but I never lost my sense of reality. I’m not one of those traumatised war veterans who goes into a restaurant and machine-guns people. I’m not a terrorist. Of course, I could say that life has treated me unfairly and taken from me the most important thing there is: love. But there are other women, and the pain of love always passes. I need to act, I’m tired of being a frog slowly boiling to death.’

‘If you know there are other women and you know that the pain of love will pass, why are you so upset?’

Yes, she’s behaving like an adult now, surprised at the calm way in which she’s trying to deal with the madman by her side.

He seems to waver.

‘I don’t really know. Perhaps because I’ve been abandoned once too often. Perhaps because I need to prove to myself just what I’m capable of. Perhaps because I lied, and there is only one woman for me. I have a plan.’

‘What plan?’

‘I told you before. I’m going to keep destroying worlds until she realises how important she is to me and that I’m prepared to run any risk in order to get her back.’

The police!

They both notice the police car approaching.

‘I’m sorry,’ says the man. ‘I intended to talk a little more. Life hasn’t treated you very fairly either.’

Olivia realises this is the end. And since she now has nothing to lose, she again tries to get up. Then she feels the hand of that stranger on her right shoulder, as if he were fondly embracing her.

Samozashchita Bez Orujiya, or Sambo, as it is better known among Russians, is the art of killing swiftly with one’s bare hands, without the victim realising what is happening. It was developed over the centuries, when peoples or tribes had to confront invaders unarmed. It was widely used by the Soviet state apparatus to eliminate people without leaving any trace. They tried to introduce it as a martial art in the 1980 Moscow Olympics, but it was rejected as being too dangerous, despite all the efforts of the Communists of the day to include in the Games a sport which they alone practised.

Perfect. That way, only a few people know the moves.

Igor’s right thumb is pressing down on Olivia’s jugular vein, and the blood stops flowing to her brain. Meanwhile, his other hand is pressing on a particular point near her armpit, causing the muscles to seize up. There are no contractions, it’s merely a question of waiting two minutes.

Olivia appears to have gone to sleep in his arms. The police car drives by behind them, using the lane that is closed to other traffic. They don’t even notice the embracing couple; they have other things to worry about this morning, like doing their best to keep the traffic moving – an impossible task if carried out to the letter. The latest call over the radio tells them that some drunken millionaire has just crashed his car a mile or so away.

Still supporting the girl, Igor bends down and uses his other hand to pick up the cloth spread out in front of the bench and on which all those tasteless objects were to be displayed. He adroitly folds the cloth up to form an improvised pillow.

When he sees that no one else is around, he tenderly lays her inert body on the bench. She looks as if she were asleep; and in her dreams she must be remembering some particularly lovely day or else having nightmares about her violent boyfriend.

Only the elderly couple had noticed them sitting together. And if the crime were discovered – which Igor doubted, since there were no visible marks – they would describe him to the police as fairer or darker or older or younger than he really was; there wasn’t the slightest reason to be worried; people never pay much attention to what’s going on around them.

Before leaving, he plants a kiss on the brow of the sleeping beauty and murmurs:

‘As you see, I kept my promise. I didn’t shoot.’

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Igor points to the one free lane on the Boulevard de la Croisette.

‘Let’s say that I don’t want you to go to a party, but I daren’t say so openly. If I wait for the rush hour to begin and stop my car in the middle of the road, within ten minutes, the whole of the boulevard opposite the beach will have come to a standstill. Drivers will think: “There must have been an accident” and will wait patiently. In fifteen minutes, the police will arrive with a truck to tow the car away.’

‘That kind of thing is always happening.’

‘Ah, yes, but I – very carefully and without anyone noticing – will have got out of my car and scattered nails and other sharp objects on the road in front of it. And I will have carefully painted all of these objects black, so that they blend in with the asphalt. As the tow-truck approaches, its tyres will be punctured. Now we have two problems, and the tailback of traffic will have reached the suburbs of this small city, the very suburbs where you perhaps live.’

‘You clearly have a very vivid imagination, but you would still only have managed to delay me by about an hour.’

It was Igor’s turn to smile.

‘Oh, I could come up with all kinds of ways of making the situation worse. When people started gathering round to help, for example, I would throw something like a small smoke-bomb under the truck. This would frighten everyone. I would get into my car, feigning despair, and start the engine. At the same time, though, I would empty a bit of lighter fluid on the floor of the car and it would ignite. I would then jump out of the car in time to observe the scene: the car gradually going up in flames, the flames reaching the fuel tank, the explosion that would affect the car behind as well, and so on in a chain reaction. And I could achieve all that with a car, a few nails, a smoke-bomb that you can buy in a shop, and a small amount of lighter fluid…’

Igor takes from his pocket a small flask containing some kind of liquid.

‘…about this much. I should have done that when I realised Ewa was about to leave me, to make her postpone her decision and reflect a little and consider the consequences. When people start to reflect on decisions they’re trying to make, they usually change their mind – it requires a lot of courage to take certain steps.  
‘But I was too proud. I thought it was just a temporary move and that she would soon realise her mistake. I’m sure she regrets leaving me and, as I said, wants to come back. But for that to happen I need to destroy a few worlds.’

The expression on his face has changed, and Olivia is no longer amused by the story. She gets up.

‘Well, I need to do some work.’

‘But I paid you to listen to me. I paid enough to cover your whole working day.’  
She puts her hand in her pocket to give him back the money, but at that moment, she sees the pistol pointing at her face.

‘Sit down.’

Her first impulse is to run. The elderly couple are still slowly approaching.  
‘Don’t run away,’ he says, as if he could read her thoughts. ‘I haven’t the slightest intention of firing the gun if you’ll just sit down again and hear me out. If you don’t try anything and do as I say, then I swear I won’t shoot.’

A series of options pass rapidly through Olivia’s head, the first being to run, zigzagging her way across the street, but she realises that her legs have gone weak.

‘Sit down,’ the man says again. ‘I won’t shoot if you do as you’re told. I promise.’  
Yes, it would be madness on his part to fire that gun on a sunny morning, with cars driving past outside, people going to the beach, the traffic getting heavier by the minute, and more pedestrians walking along the pavement. Best to do as the man says, even if only because she’s in no state to do anything else; she’s almost fainting.

She obeys. Now she just has to convince him that she’s not a threat, to listen to his deserted husband’s lament, to promise him that she has seen nothing, and then, as soon as a policeman appears, doing his usual round, throw herself to the ground and scream for help.

‘I know exactly what you’re feeling,’ the man says, trying to calm her. ‘The symptoms of fear have been the same since the dawn of time. They were the same when men had to face wild beasts and they continue to be so right up to the present day: blood drains away from the face and the epidermis, protecting the body and avoiding blood loss, that’s why people turn pale. The intestines relax and release everything, so that there will be no toxic matter left contaminating the organism. The body initially refuses to move, so as not to provoke the beast in question by making any sudden movement.’  
‘This is all a dream,’ thinks Olivia. She remembers her parents, who should have been here with her this morning, but who had been up all night making jewellery because the day looked likely to be a busy one. A few hours ago, she had been making love with her boyfriend, whom she believed to be the man of her life, even though he sometimes hit her; they reached orgasm simultaneously, something that hadn’t happened for a long time. After breakfast, she decided not to take her usual shower because she felt free and full of energy and pleased with life.

No, this can’t be happening. She must try to appear calm.

‘Let’s talk. The reason you bought all my stuff was so that we could talk. Besides, I wasn’t getting up in order to run away.’

He presses the barrel of the gun gently against the girl’s ribs. The elderly couple pass by, glance at them and notice nothing odd. There’s that Portuguese girl, they think, trying, as usual, to impress some man with her dark eyebrows and child-like smile. It’s not the first time they’ve seen her with a strange man, and this one, to judge by his clothes, has plenty of money.

Olivia fixes them with her eyes, as if trying to tell them what’s going on just by looking. The man beside her says brightly:

‘Good morning.’

The couple move off without uttering a word. They’re not in the habit of talking to strangers or of exchanging greetings with street vendors.

‘Yes, let’s talk,’ says the Russian, breaking the silence. ‘I’m not really going to try and disrupt the traffic. I was just giving that as an example. My wife will realise I’m here when she starts to receive the messages. I’m not going to take the obvious route, which would be to go and meet her. I need her to come to me.’

This was a possible way out.

‘I can deliver the messages, if you like. Just tell me which hotel she’s staying at.’  
The man laughs.

‘You suffer from the youthful vice of thinking you’re cleverer than everyone else. The moment you left here, you’d go straight to the police.’

Her blood freezes. Are they going to sit on this bench all day? Is he going to shoot her after all, now that she knows his face?

‘You said you weren’t going to shoot.’

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He sees a young woman setting out her wares on the pavement – various bits of craftwork and jewellery of rather dubious taste.

Yes, she will be the sacrifice. She is the message he must send, a message that will be understood as soon as it reaches its destination. Before going over to her, he observes her tenderly; she doesn’t know that in a little while, if all goes well, her soul will be wandering the clouds, free for ever from an idiotic job that will never take her where her dreams would like her to go.

‘How much?’ he asks in perfect French.

‘Which piece do you want, sir?’

‘All of them.’

The young woman – who must be twenty at most – smiles.

‘This isn’t the first time someone has asked to buy everything. The next step is usually: “Would you like to go for a walk? You’re far too pretty to be here selling these things. I’m…”’

‘No, I’m not. I don’t work in the movies, nor am I going to make you an actress and change your life. I’m not interested in the things you’re selling either. I just need to talk, and we can do that right here.’

The young woman averts her gaze.

‘My parents make these things, and I’m proud of what I do. One day, someone will come along who’ll recognise their value. Please, go away. I’m sure you can find someone else to listen to what you have to say.’

Igor takes a bundle of notes out of his pocket and puts them gently down beside her.  
‘Forgive my rudeness. I only said I wasn’t interested in buying anything to see if you would lower the price. Anyway, my name is Igor Malev. I flew in from Moscow yesterday, and I’m still a little jet-lagged.’

‘My name’s Olivia,’ says the young woman, pretending to believe his lie.

Without asking her permission, he sits down on the bench beside her. She shifts up an inch or so.

‘What do you want to talk about?’

‘First, take the money.’

Olivia hesitates, then, looking around, realises that she has no reason to be afraid. Cars are now driving down the one available lane, young people are heading for the beach, and an elderly couple are coming towards them down the pavement. She puts the money in her pocket, not even bothering to count it; she has enough experience of life to know that it’s more than enough.

‘Thank you for accepting my offer,’ says the Russian. ‘You asked me what I want to talk about? Well, nothing very important.’

‘You must be here for a reason. You need a reason to visit Cannes at this time of year when the city is as unbearable for the people who live here as it is for the tourists.’  
Igor is looking at the sea. He lights a cigarette.

‘Smoking’s bad for your health,’ she says.

He ignores this remark.

‘What, for you, is the meaning of life?’ he asks.

‘Love.’

Olivia smiles. This really is an excellent way to start the day, talking about deeper things than the price of each piece of handiwork or the clothes people are wearing.  
‘And for you?’

‘Yes, love too. But for me it was also important to earn enough money to show my parents that I was capable of succeeding. I did that, and now they’re proud of me. I met the perfect woman, we married, and I would like to have had children, to honour and fear God. The children, alas, never came.’

Olivia doesn’t like to ask why. The man, in his forties continues in his perfect French:  
‘We thought of adopting a child. Indeed, we spent two or three years thinking about it, but then life began to get too busy what with business trips and parties, meetings and deals.’

‘When you sat down here to talk, I thought you were just another eccentric millionaire in search of an adventure, but I’m enjoying talking about these things.’

‘Do you think about the future?’

‘Yes, I do, and I think my dreams are much the same as yours. Obviously, I’d like to have children as well…’

She pauses. She doesn’t want to hurt the feelings of this unexpected new companion.  
‘…if, of course, I can. Sometimes, God has other plans.’

He appears not to have heard her answer.

‘Do only millionaires come to the Festival?’

‘Millionaires and people who think they’re millionaires or want to become millionaires. While the Festival is on, this part of the city is like a madhouse. Everyone behaves as if they were terribly important, apart from the people who really are important; they’re much politer; they don’t need to prove anything to anyone. They don’t always buy what I have to sell, but at least they smile, make some pleasant remark and treat me with respect. What are you doing here?’

‘God made the world in six days, but what is the world? It’s what you or I see. Whenever someone dies, a part of the universe dies too. Everything a person felt, experienced and saw dies with them, like tears in the rain.’

‘“Like tears in the rain”… I saw a film once that used that phrase. I can’t remember now what it was.’

‘I didn’t come here to cry. I came to send messages to the woman I love, and in order to do that, I need to destroy a few universes or worlds.’

Instead of feeling alarmed by this last statement, Olivia laughs. This handsome, well-dressed man, speaking fluent French, doesn’t seem like a madman at all. She was fed up with always hearing the same things: you’re very pretty, you could be doing better for yourself, how much is this, how much is that, it’s awfully expensive, I’ll go away and think about and come back later (which they never do, of course), etc. At least this Russian has a sense of humour.

‘Why do you need to destroy the world?’

‘So that I can rebuild my own world.’

Olivia would like to try and console him, but she’s afraid of hearing the famous words: ‘I think you could give meaning to my life,’ at which point the conversation would come to an abrupt halt because she has other plans for her future. Besides, it would be absurd on her part to try and teach someone older and more successful how to overcome his difficulties.

One way out would be to learn more about his life. After all, he’s paid her – and paid her well – for her time.

‘How do you intend to do that?’

‘Do you know anything about frogs?’

‘Frogs?’

‘Yes, various biological studies have shown that if a frog is placed in a container along with water from its own pond, it will remain there, utterly still, while the water is slowly heated up. The frog doesn’t react to the gradual increase in temperature, to the changes in its environment, and when the water reaches boiling point, the frog dies, fat and happy.

‘On the other hand, if a frog is thrown into a container full of already boiling water, it will jump straight out again, scalded, but alive!’

Olivia doesn’t quite see what this has to do with the destruction of the world. Igor goes on:

‘I was like that boiled frog. I didn’t notice the changes. I thought everything was fine, that the bad things would just go away, that it was just a matter of time. I was ready to die because I lost the most important thing in my life but, instead of reacting, I sat there bobbing apathetically about in water that was getting hotter by the minute.’  
Olivia plucks up the courage to ask:

‘What did you lose?’

‘The truth is I didn’t lose anything. Life sometimes separates people so that they can realise how much they mean to each other. For example, last night, I saw my wife with another man. I know she wants to come back to me, that she still loves me, but she’s not brave enough to take the first step. Some boiled frogs still think it’s obedience that counts, not ability: those who can, lead, and those with any sense, obey. So where’s the truth in all this? It’s better to emerge from a situation slightly scalded, but alive and ready to act. And I think you can help me in that task.’

Olivia tries to imagine what is going through the mind of the man beside her. How could anyone leave such an interesting person, someone who can talk about things she has never even thought about? Then again, there’s no logic to love. Despite her youth, she knows that. Her boyfriend, for example, can be quite brutal and sometimes hits her for no reason, and yet she can’t bear to be apart from him even for a day.

What exactly were they talking about? About frogs and about how she could help him. She can’t help him, of course, so she’d better change the subject.

‘And how do you intend to set about destroying the world?’

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Fashion. Whatever can people be thinking? Do they think fashion is something that changes according to the season of the year? Did they really come from all corners of the world to show off their dresses, their jewellery and their collection of shoes? They don’t understand. ‘Fashion’ is merely a way of saying: ‘I belong to your world. I’m wearing the same uniform as your army, so don’t shoot.’

Ever since groups of men and women first started living together in caves, fashion has been the only language everyone can understand, even complete strangers. ‘We dress in the same way. I belong to your tribe. Let’s gang up on the weaklings as a way of surviving.’

But some people believe that ‘fashion’ is everything. Every six months, they spend a fortune changing some tiny detail in order to keep up their membership of the very exclusive tribe of the rich. If they were to visit Silicon Valley, where the billionaires of the IT industry wear plastic watches and beat-up jeans, they would understand that the world has changed; everyone now seems to belong to the same social class; no one cares any more about the size of a diamond or the make of a tie or a leather briefcase. In fact, ties and leather briefcases don’t even exist in that part of the world; nearby, however, is Hollywood, a relatively more powerful machine – albeit in decline – which still manages to convince the innocent to believe in haute-couture dresses, emerald necklaces and stretch limos. And since this is what still appears in all the magazines, who would dare destroy a billion-dollar industry involving advertisements, the sale of useless objects, the invention of entirely unnecessary new trends, and the creation of identical face creams all bearing different labels?

How ridiculous! Igor cannot conceal his loathing for those whose decisions affect the lives of millions of honest, hard-working men and women leading dignified lives and glad to have their health, a home and the love of their family.  
How perverse! Just when everything seems to be in order and as families gather round the table to have supper, the phantom of the Superclass appears, selling impossible dreams: luxury, beauty, power. And the family falls apart.  
The father works overtime to be able to buy his son the latest trainers because if his son doesn’t have a pair, he’ll be ostracised at school. The wife weeps in silence because her friends have designer clothes and she has no money. Their adolescent children, instead of learning the real values of faith and hope, dream only of becoming singers or movie stars. Girls in provincial towns lose any real sense of themselves and start to think of going to the big city, prepared to do anything, absolutely anything, to get a particular piece of jewellery. A world that should be directed towards justice begins instead to focus on material things, which, in six months’ time, will be worthless and have to be replaced, and that is how the whole circus ensures that the despicable creatures gathered together in Cannes remain at the top of the heap.

Igor is untouched by this destructive power, for he has one of the most enviable jobs in the world. He continues to earn more money in a day than he could spend in a year, even if he were to indulge in all possible pleasures, legal and illegal. He has no difficulty in finding women, regardless of whether they know how much money he has – he’s tested it out on more than one occasion and never failed yet. He has just turned 40, is in good physical shape and, according to his annual checkup, has no health problems. He has no debts either. He doesn’t have to wear a particular designer label, go to a particular restaurant, spend his holidays at a beach where ‘everyone’ goes or buy a watch just because some successful sportsman is promoting it. He can sign major contracts with a cheap ballpoint pen, wear comfortable, elegant jackets, hand-made by a tailor who has a small shop next to his office, and which carry no label at all. He can do as he likes and doesn’t have to prove to anyone that he’s rich; he has an interesting job and loves what he does.

Perhaps that’s the problem: he still loves what he does. He’s sure that this is why the woman who came into the bar some hours earlier is not sitting at his table with him.  
He tries to keep thinking, to pass the time. He asks Kristelle for another drink – he knows the waitress’s name because an hour ago, when the bar was emptier (people were having supper), he asked for a glass of whisky, and she said that he looked sad and should eat something to cheer himself up. He thanked her for her concern, and was glad that someone should care about his state of mind.

He is perhaps the only one who knows the name of the waitress serving him, the others only want to know the names – and, if possible, the job title – of the people sitting at the tables and in the armchairs.

He tries to keep thinking, but it’s gone three o’clock in the morning, and the beautiful woman and her courteous companion – who, by the way, looks remarkably like him – have not reappeared. Maybe they went straight up to their room where they are now making love, or perhaps they’re still drinking champagne on one of the yachts where the parties only begin when the other parties are all coming to an end. Perhaps they’re lying in bed, reading magazines, ignoring each other.

Not that it matters. Igor is alone and tired and needs to sleep.

7.22 a.m.

He wakes up at 7:22 .am., much earlier than his body would like, but he hasn’t yet adapted to the time difference between Moscow and Paris. If he was at work, he would already have held two or three meetings with his subordinates and be preparing to have lunch with some new client.

He has another task to fulfil here: he must find someone he can sacrifice in the name of love. He needs a victim, so that Ewa will get his message that very morning.

He has a bath, goes downstairs to have a coffee in an almost deserted restaurant, then sets off along the Boulevard de la Croisette on which nearly all the major luxury hotels are located. There is no traffic because one lane is blocked off and only cars with official permission are being allowed through. The other lane is empty because even the people who live in the city are still only just getting ready to go to work.

He feels no resentment. He has passed the really difficult phase, when he couldn’t sleep because he was so filled with pain and hatred. Now he can understand Ewa’s feelings: after all, monogamy is a myth that has been rammed down people’s throats for far too long. He has read a lot on the subject. It isn’t just a matter of excess hormones or vanity, but, as all the research indicates, a genetic configuration found in almost all animals.

Paternity tests given to birds, monkeys and foxes revealed that simply because these species had developed a social relationship very similar to marriage did not necessarily mean that they had been faithful to each other. In 70 per cent of cases, their offspring turn out to have been fathered by males other than their partners. Igor remembered something written by David Barash, Professor of Psychology at University of Washington in Seattle, in which he said that the only species in nature that doesn’t commit adultery and in which there seems to be 100 per cent monogamy is a flatworm, Diplozoon paradoxum. The male and female worms meet as adolescents, and their bodies literally fuse together.

This is why he cannot accuse Ewa of anything; she was merely following her human instincts. However, she had been brought up to believe in those unnatural social conventions and must be feeling guilty, thinking that he doesn’t love her any more and will never forgive her.  
He is, in fact, prepared to do anything, even to send messages that will mean he has destroyed someone’s world, just so that she’ll know that not only is he willing to welcome her back, he will gladly bury the past and ask no questions.

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However, everyone knows that the bar in the Hotel Martinez is where the powerful people hang out, which means there’s always a chance of meeting them.

It doesn’t even occur to the hopefuls that the Powerful only talk to the Powerful, that they need to get together now and then for lunches and suppers, to lend allure to the big festivals, to feed the fantasy that the world of luxury and glamour is accessible to all those with the courage to pursue an idea, to avoid any non-lucrative wars and to promote aggression between countries or companies where they feel this might bring them more power and more money, to pretend that they’re happy, even though they’re now hostage to their own success, to continue struggling to increase their wealth and influence, even when both those things are already vast, because the vanity of the Superclass consists in competing with itself to see who is the top of the tops.

In an ideal world, the Powerful would talk to the actors, directors, designers and writers who are now bleary-eyed with tiredness and thinking about going back to their rented rooms in distant towns, so that tomorrow they can begin again the marathon of making requests, fixing possible meetings, and being endlessly ready and available.

In the real world, the Powerful are, at this moment, locked in their rooms, checking their e-mails, complaining that these Festival parties are always the same, that their friend was wearing a bigger jewel than they were, and asking how come the yacht a competitor has just bought has a totally unique décor?

Igor has no one to talk to, nor does he want to talk. The winner stands alone.

Igor is the successful owner and president of a telephone company in Russia. A year ago, he reserved the best suite in the Martinez (which makes everyone pay up-front for at least twelve nights, regardless of how long they’ll be staying); he arrived this afternoon in his private jet, was driven to the hotel, where he took a bath and then went downstairs in the hope of witnessing one particular scene.

At first, he was pestered by actresses, actors and directors, until he came up with the perfect response for them all:

‘Don’t speak English, sorry. Polish.’

Or:

‘Don’t speak French, sorry. Mexican.’

When someone ventured a few words in Spanish, Igor tried another ploy. He started writing down numbers in a notebook so as to look neither like a journalist (because everyone wants to meet journalists) nor a movie mogul. Beside him lay a Russian economics magazine (most people can’t tell Russian from Polish or Spanish) with the photo of some boring executive on the cover.

The denizens of the bar, who pride themselves on their keen understanding of the human race, leave Igor in peace, thinking that he must be one of those millionaires who comes to Cannes in search of a new girlfriend. That, at least, is the rumour doing the rounds by the time the fifth person has sat down at his table and ordered a mineral water, alleging that there are no other free seats. Igor is duly relegated to the category of ‘perfume’.

‘Perfume’ is the slang term used by actresses (or ‘starlets’ as they’re called at the Festival) because, as with perfumes, it’s easy enough to change brands, but one of them might just turn out to be a real find. ‘Perfumes’ are sought out during the last two days of the Festival, if the actresses in question haven’t managed to pick up anything or anyone of interest in the movie industry. For the moment, then, this strange, apparently wealthy man can wait. Actresses know that it’s always best to leave the Festival with a new boyfriend (whom they might, later on, be able to transform into a film producer) than to move on to the next event and go through the same old ritual – drinking, smiling (must keep smiling), and pretending that you’re not looking at anyone, while your heart beats furiously, time ticks rapidly on, and there are still gala nights to which you haven’t yet been invited, but to which the ‘perfumes’ have.

They know what the ‘perfumes’ are going to say because they always say the same thing, but they pretend to believe them anyway.

(a) ‘I could change your life.’

(b) ‘A lot of women would like to be in your shoes.’

(c) ‘You’re young now, but what will become of you in a few years’ time. You need to think about making a longer-term investment.’

(d) ‘I’m married, but my wife…’ (this opening line can have various endings: ‘…is ill’, ‘…has threatened to commit suicide if I leave her’, etc.)

(e) ‘You’re a princess and deserve to be treated like one. I didn’t know it until now, but I’ve been waiting for you. I don’t believe in coincidences and I really think we ought to give this relationship a chance.’

It’s always the same old spiel. The only variable is how many presents you get (preferably jewellery, which can be sold), how many invites to yacht parties, how many visiting cards you collect, how many times you have to listen to the same chat-up lines, and whether you can wangle a ticket to the Formula 1 races where you’ll get to mingle with the same class of people and where your ‘big chance’ might be there waiting for you.

‘Perfume’ is also the word used by young actors to refer to elderly millionairesses, all plastic and botox, but who are, at least, more intelligent than their male counterparts. They never waste any time: they, too, arrive in the final days of the Festival, knowing that money provides their only pulling power.

The male ‘perfumes’ deceive themselves: they think that the long legs and youthful faces have genuinely fallen for them and can now be manipulated at will. The female ‘perfumes’ put all their trust in the power of their diamonds.

Igor knows nothing of all this. This is his first time at the Festival. And he has just realised that, much to his surprise, no one here seems very interested in films, except the people in that bar. He has leafed through a few magazines, opened the envelope in which his company has placed the invitations to the most prestigious parties, but not one of them is for a film première. Before travelling to France, he tried to find out which films were in the running, but had great difficulty in obtaining this information. Then a friend said:

‘Forget about films. Cannes is just a fashion show.’

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3.17 a.m.

The Beretta Px4 compact pistol is slightly larger than a mobile phone, weighs around 700 grams and can fire ten shots. Small, light, invisible when carried in a pocket, its small calibre has one enormous advantage: instead of passing through the victim’s body, the bullet hits bones and smashes everything in its path.

Obviously the chances of surviving a shot of that calibre are fairly high; there are thousands of cases in which no vital artery was severed and the victim had time to react and disarm his attacker. However, if the person firing the pistol is experienced enough, he can opt either for a quick death – by aiming at the point between the eyes or at the heart – or a slower one – by placing the barrel at a certain angle close to the ribs and squeezing the trigger. The person shot takes a while to realise that he has been mortally wounded and tries to fight back, run away or call for help. The great advantage of this is that the victim has time to see his killer’s face, while his strength ebbs slowly away and he falls to the ground, with little external loss of blood, still not fully understanding why this is happening to him.

It is far from being the ideal weapon for experts. ‘Nice and light – in a lady’s handbag. No stopping power though,’ someone in the British Secret Service tells James Bond in the first film in the series, meanwhile confiscating Bond’s old pistol and handing him a new model. However, that advice applied only to professionals, and for what he now had in mind it was perfect.

He had bought the Beretta on the black market so that it would be impossible to trace. There are five bullets in the magazine, although he intends to use only one, the tip of which he has marked with an ‘X’, using a nail file. That way, when it’s fired and hits something solid, it will break into four pieces.

He will only use the Beretta as a last resort. There are other ways of extinguishing a world, of destroying a universe, and she will probably understand the message as soon as the first victim is found. She will know that he did it in the name of love, and that he feels no resentment, but will take her back and ask no questions about her life during these past two years.

He hopes that six months of careful planning will produce results, but he will only know for sure tomorrow morning. His plan is to allow the Furies, those ancient figures from Greek mythology, to descend on their black wings to that blue-and-white landscape full of diamonds, botox and high-speed cars of no use to anyone because they carry only two passengers. With the little artifacts he has brought with him, all those dreams of power, success, fame and money could be punctured in an instant.

He could have gone up to his room because the scene he had been waiting to witness occurred at 11.11 p.m., although he would have been prepared to wait for even longer. The man and his beautiful companion arrived – both of them in full evening dress – for yet another of those gala events that take place each night after every important supper, and which attracted more people than any film première at the Festival.

Igor ignored the woman. He shielded his face behind a French newspaper (a Russian newspaper would have aroused suspicions) so that she wouldn’t see him. An unnecessary precaution: like all women who feel themselves to be queen of the world, she never looked at anyone else. Such women are there in order to shine and always avoid looking at what other people are wearing because, even if their own clothes and accessories have cost them a fortune, the number of diamonds or a particularly exclusive outfit worn by someone else might make them feel depressed or bad-tempered or inferior.

Her elegant, silver-haired companion went over to the bar and ordered champagne, a necessary aperitif for a night that promised new contacts, good music and a fine view of the beach and the yachts moored in the harbour.

He noticed how extremely polite the man was, thanking the waitress when she brought their drinks and giving her a large tip.

The three of them knew each other. Igor felt a great wave of happiness as the adrenaline began to mingle with his blood. The following day he would make her fully aware of his presence there and, at some point, they would meet.

God alone knew what would come of that meeting. Igor, an orthodox Catholic, had made a promise and sworn an oath in a church in Moscow before the relics of St Mary Magdalene (which were in the Russian capital for a week, so that the faithful could worship them). He had queued for nearly five hours and, when he finally saw them, had felt sure that the whole thing was something dreamed up by the priests. He did not, however, want to run the risk of breaking his word, and so he had asked for her protection and help in achieving his goal without too much sacrifice. And he had promised, too, that when it was all over and he could at last return to his native land, he would commission a golden icon from a well-known artist who lived in a monastery in Novosibirsk.

At three in the morning, the bar of the Hotel Martinez smells of cigarettes and sweat. By then, Jimmy (who always wears different coloured shoes) has stopped playing the piano, and the waitress is exhausted, but the people who are still there refuse to leave. They want to stay in that lobby for at least another hour or even all night until something happens!

They’re already four days into the Cannes Film Festival and still nothing has happened. Every guest at every table is interested in but one thing: meeting the people with Power. Pretty women are waiting for a producer to fall in love with them and give them a major role in their next movie. A few actors are talking amongst themselves, laughing and pretending that the whole business is a matter of complete indifference to them – but they always keep one eye on the door.

Someone is about to arrive. Someone must arrive. Young directors, full of ideas and with CVs listing the videos they made at university, and who have read everything ever written about photography and scriptwriting, are hoping for a stroke of luck; perhaps meeting someone just back from a party who is looking for an empty table where he’ll order a coffee and light a cigarette, someone who’s tired of going to the same old places all the time and feels ready for a new adventure.

How naïve!

If that did happen, the last thing such a person would want to hear about is some ‘really fresh angle’ on a hackneyed subject; but despair can deceive the desperate. The people with power who do occasionally enter merely glance around, then go up to their rooms. They’re not worried. They have nothing to fear. The Superclass does not forgive betrayals and they know their limitations – whatever the legend may say, they didn’t get where they are by trampling on others. On the other hand, if there is some important new discovery to be made – be it in the world of cinema, music or fashion – it will emerge only after much research and not in some hotel bar.

The Superclass are now making love to the girl who managed to gatecrash the party and who is game for anything. They’re taking off their make-up, studying the lines on their faces and thinking that it’s time for more plastic surgery. They’re looking at the on-line news to see if the announcement they made earlier that day has been picked up by the media. They’re taking the inevitable sleeping pill and drinking the tea that promises easy weight-loss. They’re ticking the boxes on the menu for their room service breakfast and hanging it on the door handle along with the sign saying ‘Do not disturb’. The Superclass are closing their eyes and thinking: ‘I hope I get to sleep quickly. I’ve got a meeting tomorrow at ten.’

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FOLLOW MY DREAM – BUT WHICH ONE?

One of the recurrent themes of my books is the importance of paying the price of your dreams. But to what extent can our dreams be manipulated? For the past decades, we lived in a culture that privileged fame, money, power – and most of the people were led to believe that these were the real values that we should pursue.

We all should be a “winner”. Not in the sense of someone who finally wins what is important to his/her life. Not in the sense that happiness is the most valuable gift on Earth – and it can be attained here and now, when your work fulfills your heart. We should be a winner in the sense that the system portraits a successful person: celebrity, influence, photos in glossy magazines, behaving like the masters of the universe.

Yes, you may reach the goal society has fed you – but will you be satisfied? Will you be whole? Will you be in peace? This cycle of possession never ends – because the moment that you think that you have reached your goal another desire creeps in. And how can you find rest when it is the hunt that moves you?

While people are connected – omniscient thanks to their mobile phones and GPS – they all speak the same words, fight for the same goals, and crave the same things. How could it be otherwise? If fashion exists it is precisely because you can mold the desire of the masses – or how else could a bag, a dress impose itself as necessary?

In a world of invisible yet unsurpassable “diktats”, where a few puppeteers pull the strings of the many, instill in other people’s dreams the pursue of superficial things, there seems to be a rising feeling, a silent despair that creeps in.

Greed to have, greed to be seen, greed to prevail, even greed to kill, if you think it is for a good cause – like love, for example.

What we don’t know is that, behind the scenes, the real manipulators remain anonymous. They understand that the most effective power is the one that nobody can notice – until it is too late, and you a trapped. This book is about this trap.

Soon after I finished writing “The winner stands alone”, the financial market collapsed. Will this lead us again to the real values? I really don’t know. What I do know is that we cannot continue to allow our dreams to be manipulated like they are as for three of the four main characters in the book:

Igor, a Russian millionaire, who believes that you can kill if you have a good reason for that – like avoiding human suffering, or bringing back the attention the woman he loves.

Hamid, a fashion magnate, who started with good intentions, till he got caught by the very system he was trying to use.

Gabriela, who – like most of the people today – is convinced that fame is an end by itself, the supreme reward in a world that praises ccelebrity as the supreme achievement in life.

As I finish writing these pages, there are currently several dictators in power. One country in the Middle East has been invaded by the world’s only superpower. Support for terrorist groups is growing. Fundamentalist Christians have the ability to elect presidents. The spiritual search is manipulated by various sects each claiming to possess ‘absolute knowledge’. Whole cities are wiped from the map by Nature’s fury. According to research carried out by a reputable American intellectual, all the world’s power rests in the hands of six thousand people.

There are thousands of prisoners of conscience on every continent. Torture is once again deemed acceptable as an interrogation method. The wealthier nations are closing their borders. The poorer nations are witnessing an unprecedented exodus as their inhabitants leave in search of El Dorado. Genocide continues to be committed in at least two African countries. The economic system is showing signs of break-down, and great fortunes are beginning to collapse. Child slavery has become a constant. Hundreds of millions of people live below the poverty line. Nuclear proliferation is accepted as irreversible. New diseases emerge. The old diseases have not yet been brought under control.

But is this a portrait of the world I live in?

Of course not. When I decided to take a snapshot of my own times, I wrote this book.

So please join me in this journey into a world that is coming to an end. You will see glittery, glamour, and blood – but don’t see this book as a thriller: it is a crude portrait of where we are now. We are part of the solution, if we go back to the real values of life, being “follow your dream” the most important of all. Not the dreams of the Superclass. Not the dreams of our parents, or our partners. We should be what we always wanted to be.