

The Winner Stands Alone



Second Chapter

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.’

Paulo Coelho

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