

The Winner Stands Alone



Third Chapter

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 .a.m., 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.

Paulo Coelho

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