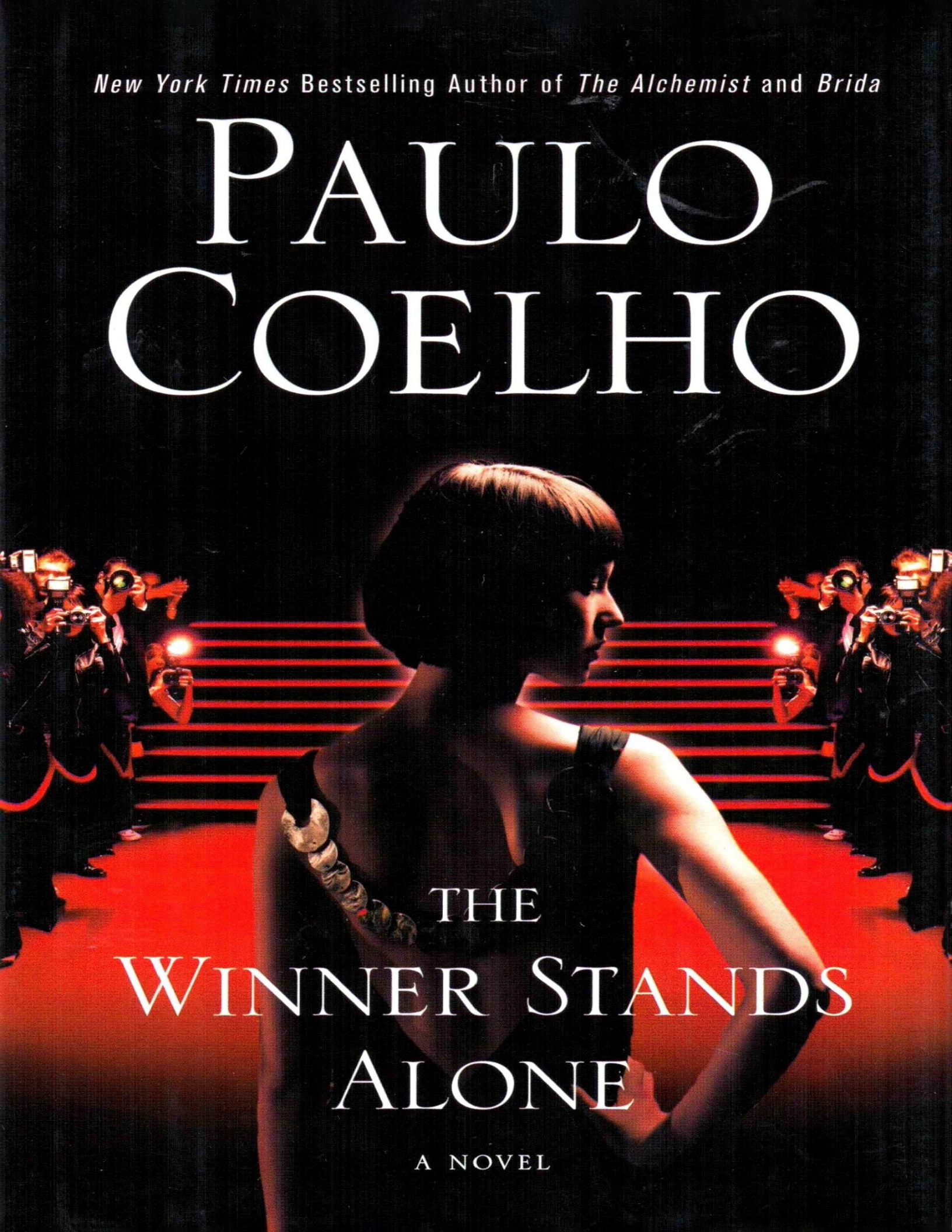


New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Alchemist* and *Brida*

PAULO COELHO

A woman with a tattoo on her back is walking a red carpet. She is seen from the back, looking over her shoulder. The carpet is red and leads up a set of stairs. Photographers with cameras and flashes are lined up on both sides of the carpet, capturing the moment. The scene is lit with dramatic, low-key lighting, emphasizing the woman's silhouette and the vibrant red of the carpet.

THE
WINNER STANDS
ALONE

A NOVEL

The Winner Stands Alone

Paulo Coelho

Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa

 HarperCollins e-books

*O Mary conceived without sin,
pray for us who have recourse to thee. Amen.*

*For N.D.P.,
who came down to Earth in order to show us
the path of the Good Fight*

And he said unto his disciples, Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on. The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment.

Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls? And which of you with taking thought can add to his stature one cubit? If ye then be not able to do that thing which is least, why take ye thought for the rest?

Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

LUKE 12: 22–27

*Whoever you are holding me now in hand, Without one thing
all will be useless, I give you fair warning before you
attempt me further, I am not what you supposed, but far
different.*

*Who is he that would become my follower? Who would sign
himself a candidate for my affections? The way is
suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,*

*You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to
be your sole and exclusive standard, Your novitiate would
even then be long and exhausting, The whole past theory of
your life and all conformity to the lives around you would
have to be abandon'd, Therefore release me now before
troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my
shoulders, Put me down and depart on your way.*

WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

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FOREWORD

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

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 are trapped. *The Winner Stands Alone* is about this trap.

In this book, three of the four main characters face this ordeal:

Igor, a Russian millionaire, who believes that he can kill if he has a good reason for it—such as avoiding human suffering, or bringing back the attention of the woman he loves.

Hamid, a fashion magnate, who starts with good intentions, until he gets caught up by the very system he was trying to use.

Gabriela, who—like most people today—is convinced that fame is an end in and of itself, the supreme reward in a world that praises celebrity as the highest achievement in life.

With these characters in mind, I wrote *The Winner Stands Alone*—not a thriller, but a crude portrait of where we are now.

PAULO COELHO

3:17 A.M.

The Beretta Px4 compact pistol is slightly larger than a mobile phone, weighs around seven hundred grams, and can fire ten shots. It is small, light, invisible when carried in a pocket, and its small caliber 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 caliber 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 for 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 realize 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 harbor.

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 colored 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 among 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 makeup, studying the lines on their faces, and thinking that it's time for more plastic surgery. They're looking at the online 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."

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 nonlucrative 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 like 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 rumor 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 jewelry, 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 realized 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 traveling 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.”

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 jewelry, 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 in 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 anymore 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, hardworking 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 sneakers because if his son doesn't have a pair, he'll be ostracized 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 jewelry. A world that should be directed toward 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 forty, 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, handmade 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 titles—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.