

THE WOMAN OF THE YEAR, by Elena Shalneva (excerpt)

Dawn broke suddenly and spread rapidly; merry lights of Cascais faded and quelled; the sky in the east turned amber, then coral, then peach, then – at once, without a warning – burst into a violent conflagration.

A southern dawn. We don't have dawns like this in France.

By the time I left the hotel, placing the butterscotch Max Mara and five €100 notes – (for the trouble of dealing with the aftermath) – in the middle of the bed, the morning was still and bright. As I hobbled down the rotting wooden steps that connected the back of the kitchen with Guincho Beach, it struck me that the pungent red hue of Leonora's dress might attract attention. But my alarm dissipated as soon as I rounded a block of pop-up shops and saw that the beach was even starker and barer than yesterday. There wasn't a human in sight, or an animal, or a bird.

Here, allow me to pause for a moment, reader, as I have a confession to make. In relating the chronicle of the last three days, I omitted an important detail. On Thursday, 27 February 2020, the night before my flight to Cascais, after I had said good-bye to Maya Tango and went back to my flat, I returned to Dorset Park one more time – this time, carrying a plastic bag under my arm. Inside the bag, carefully folded, its long ruffled tail rolled in a tube, was the Galliano: my staunch companion, the glamorous symbol of my promising beginning in life. I left the house shortly after eleven and, in the wealthy silence of Portsmouth Road, turned right and started towards Linden Square. But then I stopped, made a full pivot, strode twenty meters to number thirty-three, pushed the front gate, sidled through the back garden, pushed another gate and stepped straight into Dorset Road. Trespassing, I know. But the Sotomayors should change the entry code from time to time.

This shortcut saved me a good four minutes, and, in no time at all, I was standing before the magnificent wrought iron gates – twice the human height, spikes shaped like cork screws, Buxus planted along the railings, CCTV flickering from every pillar – of Dorset Park Hall. Here, I pitched myself opposite the main camera, took off the hood, raised my head high and waved. Then I slung the plastic bag over the spikes and was gone.

Enjoy the dress, Marie-Christine Catineau! It is a Galliano, and it belongs to Margot, the prom queen, the ruler of the world. It no longer belongs to me. When your cancellation is over, wear it to pick up your BAFTA, or your Oscar, or your Palme d'Or. The beige will go well with your skin, and I'm guessing you're also a size 8. And sorry about the stain. I cut my palm on a nail when we were chatting, and a droplet of blood trickled on the bodice as I was wrapping the dress up.

I stride along the water rim, up to my ankles in foam: warm, very warm, warmer than the air. Morning fog slowly dissolves, uncovering the boarded lifeguard's booth, the rambling line of evergreens, the sand, smooth and virginal, untouched since it was raked last night, and the barren cliff that severs Guincho Beach from the rest of the world. After the inferno of last night, when waves lashed and tumbled and beat at the land in fierce rage, the ocean lies placid like a lake, glinting and gleaming and luring me in.

Treacherous creature! Just like us humans, you know how to hide savagery behind a benevolent façade.

Here's the rock. *My* rock. My benchmark, my destination, my terminus. In low tide, it stands in high relief, tall and austere, rising in sinister prominence against the sky.

I check the clock. 8:39 a.m. I have twenty-six minutes. 9:05 a.m., the Coastguard's bulletin said.