

The Virus Strikes Again

Thursday morning, 13 June: Africa sketches

For every famous Italian fashion designer there are a thousand lowly assistants, unknown yet hungry, toiling in their cubicles, churning out the umpteenth collection of that year. Two days before I travelled to Russia I was still one of them, and sat beside my desk perfecting the previous evening's sketches when Ben Blumenthal entered my office, opening the door at the same time as knocking on it, so that he might as well have come in without knocking at all.

He remained standing in front of a window, his corpulent physique occupying the entire room, face turned towards me. Daylight was shining behind him, like a divine spirit in old religious paintings, and framing his round shoulders and red curly hair.

He looked at me, books stuffed under his arm, his stomach bulging over his jeans. He was a stylist at Marisa Marchetti, and Sarah Beck's right-hand-man, and one of life's little ironies was that *he* was my friend, my *only* friend, and *she* was my former girlfriend, my *only* girlfriend, and the three of us had worked in the same fashion house twelve years ago, even though she had already left when Ben arrived. And now we were back working under the same roof.

'Why didn't you come to the meeting yesterday?' Ben asked.

I didn't say anything.

'Answer me, Federico!' he said impatiently.

That's my real name. Federico. (It should have been Federica: Mother dreamed of having a girl.) The sobriquet comes from my former mentor Marisa Marchetti who had a house full of fox terriers that were all called Oscar. When I got my first job in the fashion industry I told them that my name was Oscar, and the name stuck. Ben was one of the few people who still called me Federico, and he usually did it when he was exasperated with me.

'I did come –' I started.

'Yes, when it was halfway through.'

'I went for a walk. I get my best ideas that way. You know that.'

'You can't go for a walk in the middle of a workday!' he cried. 'Christ!'

I didn't say anything. We were silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, he forced himself to be calm.

'I know it's not easy for you to be back at work, and especially here, at Marisa Marchetti. I've talked with Sarah and she understands your situation. But her lenience is not unlimited, and so you've got to pull yourself together. You understand that? You've got to sit here eight hours a day and come to each and every bloody meeting and do whatever is asked of you. After all, *you* wanted this. *You* asked me to get you this job. *You* told me that you wanted to have a one last try, to see if you could work in this business. Didn't you?'

I stared at my hands. He sighed.

'Anyway,' he said, his voice resigned. 'You should have a look at these.'

He put the books on my desk. There was a volume on trendy images, commissioned from a London-based trend forecaster, a book on safaris, another on black-and-white photographs, and so on.

'Sarah has been reconsidering the Africa theme, and needs new sketches,' he said. 'Forget about Zanzibar glamour – now she's thinking about adventurous women in colonial Africa. Sort of *Out of Africa*, but with an attitude. Ever heard about Beryl Markham? She lived in British East Africa and flew alone across the Atlantic. Concentrate on her – she's our muse. And remember that this new theme is all about women testing their limits, women designing for women, which wraps up everything nicely, because Marisa Marchetti was a woman too.'

I moved the books closer to me. It occurred to me that Marisa Marchetti hadn't even liked women: her biggest regret had been to be born one.

He was already on the door when he turned to look at me.

'She wants to have your sketches on her desk by Thursday,' he said. 'You've got to try your best. I know how exceptional you can be, if you just put your mind to it. And you know Marisa Marchetti better than the rest of us.'

He closed the door and left. I flicked through the books he'd given me.

I thought.

Could it work, adventuresses and Africa? True, the wildlife of the savannahs had been the inspiration for Marisa's summer collection in 1964.

I stared out of the window. For once the sky was just a sky and buildings were just buildings, and not a riot of colours and shapes.

Relax! I told myself. Let your mind roam around freely!

Yet the next thing I knew my concentration was gone, and it didn't help that my dear colleagues were talking in the corridor and their voices carried into my office. In recent days, the office atmosphere had been frenzied: the fashion week in Milan was just around the corner, and everyone else was wrapped up in the upcoming menswear collection – that is, everyone expect me, who had just started working there. As a newcomer I had been exempted from the last-minute preparations.

Listening to those voices I became nervous, as if there was an invisible eye on the wall observing me all the time. And in all likelihood there was, some digital device, monitoring my efficiency. Once more I realised that I didn't feel comfortable here, that offices were hell on earth for me, always had been.

I put the books aside and started to sketch, because that's my way of thinking, through my hands. Soon my hand was dancing on the paper, drawing forms and figures, never stopping, not even when my mind was elsewhere, when I was thinking about Sarah, our last meeting in her office, the sunlight on her desk, on her arms, on her shoulders, the sunlight playing on her arms and shoulders, her arms pale and smooth in the sunlight – no, my hand kept moving, roughing out images and dreams, and the act in itself was so soothing that little by little I forgot the world around me.

It was already lunchtime when I put the pencil aside and checked my watch. I rubbed my eyes, cracked my knuckles. Then I took a painkiller and washed it down with cold black coffee. I drink coffee in gallons and it is just as indispensable for my work as paper and pencils. It's the excessive caffeine intake that makes you design well.

I looked around my desk, holding my breath. Dozens of drawings covered it, like leaves on an autumn lawn. There were colonial style linen trouser suits, gauzy dresses with tribal prints, and oversized beach bags and flat sandals and huge shawls with a touch of Masai. Or silk pyjamas and ankle-length skirts, all of them in colours of dusty earth and earthenware vases and the African night sky.

I studied each sketch singly. These aren't bad at all, I thought in surprise. Relief swept over my body, sapping me of my last drop of energy. For a moment I sat staring at nothing, savouring the microscopic victory of having worked well. Finally I organised the drawings into a neat pile and went to the toilet.

The corridor was in chaos, just as I had expected. Models were waiting for the last fittings and assistants rushing back and forth, their faces the very picture of panic. *The shoes are missing! Call XXX and ask about the shoes!*

Thankfully everyone was too busy to notice me. I have been a loner in all of the places I've worked, but believe me, here I was virtually an outcast, an old drifter among freshly graduated rookies. And most of my teammates were eagerly spreading Did-You-Know-This-About-Oscar stories behind my back.

I walked towards the toilet, opened the door and locked it quickly.

It was silent again.

Thursday afternoon, 13 June: Everything collapses

It has always puzzled me how designs that seem all right at one time, appear average and even second-rate the next time you look at them. It takes so little for your self-reliance to go to pieces: sometimes it's only a look on a person's face, or light coming from the wrong angle. It's like the butterfly effect, at least in my unscientific eyes: an old fisherman sneezes in Alaska, and suddenly you realise that your work is no good. No, even more: you realise that you simply don't have it. You have no talent.

So this is what happened when I returned to my desk: it hit me in a moment of ruthless clarity that my sketches were rubbish. I don't know why it happened. For sure I hadn't had any brainwaves in the men's toilet. I had just been peeing.

But still, there was a faint voice in my head. *Listen to me*, it said. *These are no good. I told you.*

I knew that voice. We had spent a great deal of time together in the past when I had been designing full-time. I had named it Federica after the flawless daughter Mother had never had.

I told you, Federica continued. *You can't design any more!*

I sat down and started drawing again. But now I was too desperate to work well. I was trying too hard, and it made my work forced.

After hours of work there was a multitude of crumpled papers around me, yet not even one single finished design that looked good in my eyes. I studied them with a sort of frenzied determination. Something was missing, and it was almost on the tip of my tongue what that something was.

In a flash I remembered a picture in my art book. I had to see it, right away. I took the sketches and left the office. Walking back to my apartment I brooded over my situation and why it was so vital not to fail this time.

I had worked for the fashion business for twelve years now, even though after a sensational debut collection my star had waned quickly and it had proved impossible for me to hold on to a job for more than a year or two. One of my bosses, who in my mind went by the name of Sallow Pale, had fired me because I had vanished from the office just before a crucial deadline. Another – Brilliant Pink – had found me drinking in the office, and Mossy Green had believed that I had insulted an important client, and Ash Grey had got fed up with my creative crises, and Steel Blue had argued that I was yesterday's promise, a human wreck, unable to maintain even the simplest promise, and...

It was two years since I had been fired for the last time, this time from a sportswear company. Ever since then I had been packing bread and washing dishes and borrowing money, and getting by as best I could. Many people in the business had claimed that my career was over, for nobody in his or her right mind was going to hire a fashion designer whose unreliability had broken all records.

But now I was back in the race. For three weeks I had been living in Florence and working at Marisa Marchetti, a one-time darling of Italian high fashion that ever since the triumph of Milanese ready-to-wear has languished in respectable oblivion. Its namesake founder was a lamented Florentine couturier who once had a) dressed the likes of Ava Gardner and Claudia Cardinale, b) employed my mother as her housemaid, and c) coached the shy, adolescent me. So working there was like returning to my past.

I had never really planned to return to Marisa Marchetti, but after hearing that the company had recruited Sarah, I had called Ben and asked if he could help me to work there. Luckily the in-house bigwigs had agreed to take me on – yet not without misgivings, and only because the next women's collection was expected to revive the Marisa Marchetti brand and thrust its classic look into the third millennium. Given my background, their thinking had gone, there was no other designer more apt for preparing it.

And now yet another crisis had hit me, and I wasn't able to draw even the simplest design.

Thursday evening, 13 June: Darkness and despair

When I saw the art picture in my flat some twenty minutes later, nothing happened. I stared, but my mind remained blank. Whatever intuition I'd had was now forever gone.

That's when my self-confidence collapsed. Once more I began to draw, even if I knew that it would only make things worse.

I sketched the entire evening, starting one design after another, only to scrunch it up a minute later and throw it on to the floor. A tiny voice kept anxiously reassuring me that this was no big deal – it had been a bad workday, yet so what? I should stop designing, take a painkiller and go to bed. But I didn't.

Memories went through my mind, memories of wasted workdays and crumpled designs, of booze and loneliness. Right then I understood how desperately I wanted to get my talent back, and design the way I had once done. Once I had believed that I was destined to do great things: I wanted to be that man again. I did not want to fail, and I did not want to lose this job.

Then it occurred to me that maybe I should have another look at the morning sketches, because maybe they were not rubbish after all. So I began to search for them desperately, yet they were nowhere to be found, because the floor was covered with crumpled or torn-apart sketches. Finally I remained seated on the floor, exhausted.

That's when the ghosts came. Suddenly the room was full of accusing faces, like every other time I couldn't design. There were most of my former bosses and colleagues, and perhaps even Mother, and many were talking angrily, and a few were smirking at me, an I-told-you-so look on their faces, and though I tried not to listen to them I did it anyway, because by now I knew their arguments by heart.

While they went on and on I stared obstinately at the floor, like a little boy hell-bent on disobeying grown-ups. It struck me that this wasn't simply a bad workday. I rarely had bad workdays: in my case they immediately ballooned into bad workweeks and at times even into full-scale depressions, and *that* was why I had been fired from the sportswear company and a succession of others, and why I had never got anywhere in my life.

Just because of the fear of the blank paper.

Friday morning, 14 June: Incapacitated

The next day at work was even worse. I didn't even pretend that I was going to design but instead sat at my desk, and it didn't help that one of Sarah's assistants (Burqa Black for me, thanks to her

dark, minimalist clothing) dropped by my cubicle just to remind me that Sarah wanted the sketches by Thursday.

That was just twenty-four hours away... Yet there I sat, paralysed, unable to draw. I couldn't tell Sarah the truth either, because though she might've tolerated my artistic whims she wasn't going to accept anyone's unproductiveness, that's just the way she was, how this business was, and besides, it was a question of pride too. I could never admit that I wasn't able to sketch. Not to her, anyway.

And so the morning passed: unprofitably. Occasionally I got up and opened or closed the window. Or closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. Or took a painkiller with a gulp of coffee. Or organised the things on my desk. Or switched my iPod on and off.

I was no longer frantic, just benumbed, and there was not even half an idea inside my head.

Finally I couldn't take it any more, and rushed out of my cubicle.

Away! Away!

Away from this office!

I ran downstairs, exhausted but not really shocked, because there was no mystery as to what was happening to me. I was having a creative block, the occupational disease of artists and poets and songwriters and other lucky people. If you have never had it, think of it as a kind of virus: it is infectious and invisible, and it attacks you no matter what you do.

If you're lucky, it will be short and harmless – like flu – and you'll get over it with a little bit of a headache and some soul-searching.

In more unfortunate cases it marks you for life. It turns into a chronic infection, and hits you year after year.

That's what happened to me.

There is no vaccination against creative blocks. And nowhere else are they as devastating as in fashion which, unlike art or literature, dies the moment it is born.

Friday afternoon, 14 June: Sarah

I had just stepped on to the street when a shiny caviar-black BMW, huge like a cruise ship, stopped in front of the entrance door. The driver's door opened: first slightly ajar, the movement making the door close again; and then fully open, with a single commanding push. A pair of slim legs came out of the car, moving gracefully sideways and downwards at the same time.

A second later my boss-cum-former-girlfriend Sarah Beck was on the street, talking animatedly on her cell phone, her huge sunglasses glossy in the sunlight. The driver's door was still wide open. A couple of cars had already gathered behind hers, but nobody dared to honk at her, for she looked like a film star with her marble white mini-length dress and nut-brown hair tied in a simple bow.

Sarah was the most recent of Marisa Marchetti's creative directors, and the first one who hadn't been fired once the honeymoon was over. Now the company's hopes of a comeback were pinned on her. And why not – she was as close as a girl could get to being Stella McCartney without having a member of the Beatles for a father, for ever since designing ocean-inspired dresses for Blumarine her career had followed a rapid upward trajectory, and now everything in her life seemed proper, including photogenic looks, the right career moves, the right contacts, the right awards (RTF Best Young Designer 2009, Eco Fashion 2010), the right fundraising projects (rain forests in Papua New Guinea, orphan children in Malawi, illiterate girls in Pakistan), the right kind of fiancé (high-flying and handsome), the right upmarket home, the right business-like attitude, the right interviews in the right magazines: everything flawless, frighteningly flawless.

A rear door opened and Burqa Black stepped off the car. She took the wheel and began to park the BMW, yet so clumsily that the drivers behind her finally woke up and started a furious honking concert. All this time Sarah was talking on the phone, unaffected by the chaos she had created.

She began to walk towards the entrance door. I stared at her, rooted to the spot, my heart beating a little faster. And of course right at that moment my unborn sister materialised from nowhere and started to bad-mouth me.

That is just so sad, Federica said, shaking her head. You still fancy her!

I tried to ignore her. I had a childish urge to cover my ears with my hands and shout *AAAAAAAH!* so that I wouldn't hear her malicious voice.

Tell her about the Africa sketches, she insisted. Tell her! Tell her! Tell her!

Maybe I should tell her, I thought suddenly. Not the truth, of course – but some pretext believable enough that would buy me more time. But for some reason I couldn't get a word out of my mouth. At the same time she passed by, throwing a glance at me, smiling a little, as if to make up for the fact that she couldn't greet me. She was plainly enjoying the scene she had created, and the fact that I was witnessing it.

Burqa Black was rushing in her heels. Carrying a mountain of folders, her cheeks were bright red from the effort to park the car. Close to me she slowed down.

‘Don’t forget,’ she said. ‘Sarah wants the sketches before tomorrow lunch.’

I nodded, without moving. Even after the entrance door had shut behind them I remained standing there. Abruptly I remembered how twelve years earlier Macho Bronze, my employer of the time, had been standing at my office door with a young girl beside him.

‘Can you spare a minute, Oscar?’ he had asked. ‘I want to introduce you to someone. This is Sarah, our new assistant from Britain, fresh from Central Saint Martin’s.’

She was clad in badly cut jeans, with her abundant hair twisted into a bun, and clasping a notepad to her breast, as if she were afraid of losing something precious. Her posture was bad and her eyes scared, but she was unmistakably pretty, and so my heart had given a little flip when I saw her.

My reaction had surprised me. I didn’t usually notice people, let alone remember their names – which is why I rename them after colours, the shades of which I know in hundreds, and love like nothing in this world. But she was one of the very few people whose name was carved in my mind immediately, just like it had always been there.

I had put my pencil down and watched her with the gawking curiosity of a lab worker who has found a new species among his insects.

She had mumbled a hello, stubbornly in Italian, which she had pronounced so badly that she had to repeat the phrase a few times before getting it right. She had been so mortified that her cheeks had flushed. For some reason I had blushed too, but Macho Bronze had just smiled benignly.

Then he had begun to praise me, what a prodigy I was and how she should learn from me. She was staring at me, and I doubt she had understood a word he said.

We had talked for a few minutes, but I don’t remember much about it. The only thing I remember is the image of her, and my surprise that she had made such an impression on me.

Friday afternoon, 14 June: Last-minute offers

My trip down memory lane might have been considerably longer had I not remembered that there was alcohol in my flat. I walked back home and found a few drops of liqueur. While I was opening the bottle alarm bells started to ring in my head. Suddenly I was aware that emptying its contents

would increase my problems tenfold because once I had started drinking I wouldn't stop, and after a brief sense of relief I would feel like shit, and that would make me drink even more, by which point I could kiss goodbye to sketching that week.

I put the bottle away and remained standing in the middle of the room, irresolute. All I could think of was how badly I needed to drink. It was hammering my head, that thought, need to drink, need to drink, need to drink. In the end it won, as it always did, and I rushed back to the wardrobe and fished out the bottle and finished its contents so hastily that I didn't even feel pleasure in what I was doing.

Since all this made me loathe myself – just as was expected – I got out of my apartment, to find more alcohol. I crossed the street, but then remained standing on the pavement, once more hesitant. It had struck me that I should try, one last time, to see if I could sketch or not. Because soon it would be too late to finish the sketches, even if I worked well. The clock was ticking; the deadline approaching.

What now? I thought.

I had no time to answer that question, because just then I realised that I was standing in front of a travel agency. Its window was full of last-minute offers. Maldives, New York, Amsterdam, you name it.

In the top corner stood a picture of an Orthodox dome, silhouetted against a cloudless sky. Beneath it was a photo of a blonde peasant girl who was staring solemnly at the camera, without striking a pose.

Return flight to St Petersburg: 510 euro.

I stared spellbound at the poster. Instantly my mind was alive with shades of blue and grey, which presented themselves in the soft pastel tones of Monet's water-lilies: there was azure and baby blue and pearl-grey and faint Delft blue, and the dreamy grey of faraway mountains. And then, just as unexpectedly, these colours faded away and I saw an image of Mother, a uniformed maid standing to attention in Marisa Marchetti's palatial apartment, her hands crossed and bluish-grey eyes dreamy, in a land of no disappointments. It was a wonderful image, rich and sugar-coated, as if in Cinemascope, and in it Mother had the same sincere look on her face as the peasant girl in the poster.

A parenthesis on Mother: it just so happened that she was a foreigner here in Italy, and came from the North, from that land of magic, that place between the two seas, where the sun never set in the summer and woods concealed the greatest treasure imaginable. Her roots were of course no

mere accident, and it makes me wonder whether everything hadn't started earlier than a month ago – much earlier, decades ago, when Mother was a little girl in her native country and lived close to my miracle machine.

So here are the facts. She was born in Vyborg, a medieval city some eighty miles from St Petersburg – and what a dollhouse-pretty town it used to be, one of the jewels of the Baltic sea, competing in cosmopolitanism with the great metropolises of the North, before Stalin snatched it as war booty in 1944. That's when Mother, still just a girl, was sent to Finland. She was safe but had no home country, and often when people asked where she came from, she replied that she was from nowhere.

While I was thinking back to Mother, superstitious thoughts caught me unawares. Since my modest pedigree comes from almost as far away as St Petersburg, I thought, the region must have a special meaning for me. Who knows, seeing it might even help me to overcome my crisis? And here I stood, in front of a travel agency.

If that wasn't a sign, then what was?

On impulse I walked in.

'Hello,' I said to a middle-aged woman reading a gossip magazine behind a sleek chrome desk. She wore heavy make-up and jewellery, and a daffodil yellow jacket with padded shoulders, and for a moment I simply watched her, soaking in her bad taste. Padded shoulders have that effect on me – just like leg warmers and sweatbands, and money belts and Birkenstocks with white tennis socks, and overweight women wearing low-waist jeans, and shorts-clad tourists roaming the streets of Florence. They make me lose my balance momentarily.

She finished the celebrity interview before raising her head reluctantly.

'What can I do for you?' she asked, examining her Spider-Man red fingernails.

'I'm interested in the last-minute offers,' I said, pointing at the window.

'Where would you like to go? We've got Sicily and Sardinia –'

'I was actually thinking about St Petersburg.'

'What about Veneto? There's a coach tour leaving tomorrow. You'll get to see all Palladio's villas, and it's only a hundred and fifty euro.'

'I'm interested in St Petersburg,' I insisted.

She touched her hair, coiffed like a crown. Then she ran her eyes over my barfly face with stubble, pallid skin, and messy hair. Once upon a time I had been a real poster boy, a dandy of the finest stock, but years of failing had worn down all the pomp and circumstance.

'That's more expensive,' she finally said, coolly, crossing her hands.

'I don't mind,' I said, smiling for the first time that day.

And so twenty minutes later I left the travel agency with a plane ticket, and the next day I was sitting on a plane to the Great Tsarist Empire of Russia, formerly known as the Evil Empire, the promised land of the Brothers Karamazov, Kremlin politics and Kalashnikovs. I had left my flat and work, without telling anyone where I was going, and right to the very end I was debating with myself whether to take that flight or not.

In the end I got on the plane, and the strangest thing is that I did it because I knew that it was the last thing to do.

Call it an act of desperation: a Loser's Last Hope to Find His Lost Imagination.

Horosho!

Kremlin Convicts

Saturday morning, 15 June: Who I was, and why I was this way

My thoughts were confused as I perched on my seat and looked out of the airplane window.

I thought about Florence.

Florence was the city from where I had embarked on my desperate trip, just as it was the city where I had been born. Not to mention that it was the city of Fra Angelico, who never touched his brushes without first praying for inspiration, and Leonardo da Vinci who made his boss Verrocchio give up painting, ashamed as he was that a teenage novice could do it so much better than he could, and the young boy Michelangelo who got beaten by his father because he spent all his time sketching obsessively.

As for me, I began to draw before I learned to walk or speak, and right from the beginning it was the thing I most loved to do. Anyone who saw my drawings was stunned because a child of my age couldn't be that good, and so grown-ups kept debating what it was in my drawings that made them so exceptional: whether it was a question of superior technique or imagination or a combination of both. Though none of them ever managed to explain what my secret was, afterwards they treated me with a sort of confused awe, as though I wasn't flesh and blood like them.

What they did not know – and how could they have known? – was that I spent my days in my own world – that is, not in the world of what-is, the world we can touch and see, but in a secret and more splendid one, hidden behind the real one. This was the world of imagination, of angels and demons, of haunting, wild beauty: in it a table was never just a table, but immediately took two, four, five forms, depending from what angle my eyes spotted it, what time of the day it was, or what kind of light fell on it. It wasn't a world of dull everyday objects, but of lines and configurations, circles and squares and oblongs and semicircles and triangles and many other shapes the name of which I didn't know, but were rich and clear in my mind.

And the colours! Oh, the colours of that world! I don't even know where to begin... There were the different hues of red, like strawberry and old rose and carmine and burgundy and cerise and crimson and Venetian red, and of blue, like ultramarine and cobalt and sapphire and Prussian

blue and lapis lazuli, and of brown, like ecru and cinnamon and mustard and hazelnut and burnt sienna – this is just to name a few – and then there were the colours that had never been identified, like the foamy white of a breaking wave, or the shiny black of a dead fish’s eyes, or the intense red of a sun-drenched tomato; and the most wonderful thing was that these thousands, and yet again thousands, of shades were constantly changing because of the light, so that what was soft and lyrical in the mornings, or sombre in the evenings, could be of unparalleled sharpness in broad daylight. The colours I saw were alive, you see, they were breathing and vibrating, they were talking to me, for it seemed that these colours had a music of their own, music that no one else could hear or understand; and I knew that they had their moods, just like you and I have, so that a colour could be passionate, or cheerless, or vigorous, or glacial, or playful... or... or it could be *shining* – But now I’m getting ahead of myself.

Let me get this right, you say. Yours was the quintessential whizz-kid childhood? A young genius in the making, complete with the proverbial pathos and determination to conquer the world?

Not quite, is my answer: life wasn’t as simple as that. It never is. Because though inside me there was a fire burning, pushing me to draw and create things, I was also exceedingly insecure, so that even the faintest criticism or disapproving look made me hate my drawings and myself. I often destroyed what I’d drawn, even if a moment earlier I had found nothing wrong with my sketches. I was a perfectionist – and ruthless with myself, right from the beginning.

You can picture the juvenile me easily. A plain kid, that’s how I was, all skin and bones with a big nerd’s head, big protruding ears, as shy as a wood mouse, and lonely, terribly lonely, not the least because Mother didn’t want me to go and play with other children. This she was doing for my own good, she told me, because the world was full of nasty people who would do anything to take advantage of a person like me, and if I instead did as she told me and worked hard and used my extraordinary talent to good advantage, one day I would make her the proudest mother in the entire world.

Since she had come to Italy without much of an education and spent her life toiling as a maidservant, she was hell-bent on making sure that I would fare better. It was she who urged me to draw for hours on end, to persevere until you’ve found that one perfect line. And it was she who checked my sketches every evening after she came home from work and threw away those she didn’t like, just as it was she who taught me my first Rule, which was that you should never eat and rest before your drawings are flawless, and for this reason I have often worked non-stop till evening and

only then gobbled up lunch and dinner at one go. (Later on I invented dozens of other Rules, so that for most of my adult life work has been a jungle of guidelines. So much for wild creativity.)

We lived in the suburbs in the north of Florence, in a fifties tower block next to the railway line, and its indistinct yellowish shade was one of the saddest I have ever seen; it was the dirty yellow of bargain stores and nervous despair and hamburger restaurants. From our bedsit you could see nothing but the tiled wall edging the railway line, and higher above, a crisscross of electric wires, thick black cables silhouetted against the sky. That was the view I had day after day, year after year, while sketching by the window.

Every morning Mother bicycled in her maid's uniform across town to the famous and photographed parts of the city, where Marisa Marchetti lived in a sumptuous sixteenth century *palazzo*, and every evening, after the day's work, she sat down behind her sewing machine and started to repair clothes people had sent to her. It was the best time of the day – evening – when we worked together in pleasant silence, and she let me help her. Eventually I grew to love clothes just as much as I loved drawing.

There wasn't a thing she wouldn't have done for me, but at times I felt, because I read it on her face, that she couldn't bring herself to love me – not because of meanness or callousness, but because she had wanted another kind of life and another kind of child, and that was why she fussed over me: because she couldn't forgive herself. I still remember how much I yearned to conquer her heart, and impress the world with my talent so that one day she might love me the way she loved what she could never have.

Our way of living was quiet: we had no relatives, no grandparents to visit, no family memories to cherish, no photos or knick-knacks in our bare apartment, and no friends who came over, except for two garrulous women who lived in the same tower block as us and occasionally had a cup of coffee with Mother. Nor did we have any father in our little family, not a single trace of this mysterious and somehow accursed man whose surname I had inherited and who had once known Mother in the biblical sense, and it took years before she admitted that he had so much as existed.

Since there was so little in our lives and days elapsed one identical to another, it seemed as if time had stopped altogether and all that remained was a foggy here and now. It's only now, looking back, that I can see the invisible thread of destiny in my past and realise that something *was* happening in it, something infinitesimal and mysterious, and it kept pushing me towards the day I ran away from the office and travelled to Russia.

Saturday afternoon, 15 June: Russia

It was pouring when I arrived in St Petersburg, and bitterly cold, even if it was summer. This wasn't what I had expected. I had hoped that Russia would reveal its mysteries to me: that the pale silhouette of the Hermitage, the drunken torpor of old factory workers, the morning mist of a lakeside view or the icy blue eyes of another peasant girl would lead me to the heart of that nation, and the discovery would make me design again.

After collecting my bag I walked to the taxi queue, and stood there, staring at the rain. I didn't have an umbrella and my jeans and shoddy tee shirt were already damp.

That's when the situation got the better of me, and all my mad defiance disappeared in a matter of nanoseconds. Suddenly I knew that travelling to Russia had been an error, a terrible self-deception, one of my many, because there was nothing miraculous in this country that would help me to overcome my crisis.

As I was slouching on the backseat of the taxi my thoughts raced ahead, as they always did. I began to wonder whether returning to Marisa Marchetti had been such a great idea – or rather, whether that had been just another self-deception, because it was so evident that my halcyon days had finished a long time ago. The next I knew I was doubting anything and everything and above all myself, and asking whether my life wasn't just one huge shebang of self-deceptions, starting from that stubborn conviction that had haunted me since childhood: namely, that one day I would design something great.

This was the first time I had allowed myself to think about Sarah, and in so doing my heart grew cold. I didn't even want to guess what her reaction had been when she had been told about my vanishing act. I racked my brains as to whether I should return to Florence immediately, before it was too late to sort things out with her; and it was this thought that accompanied me to my matchbox of a hotel room overlooking a shabby courtyard, and made me drink the contents of the minibar, even if I had promised myself that from now on I would be sober.

The rest of the day I lay in bed, watching cartoons in Russian and CNN via satellite, my entire being disconsolate. A couple in the adjoining room was arguing round the clock in a language that sounded like machine gun fire, and when I wasn't listening to their incomprehensible insults I was reassuring myself that the next day I was going to be travelling back to Italy, oh yes I was, no matter what it took, so that everything would be fine again.

When evening came the hotel room was blanketed in shadow, and in that fuscous half-light it looked even bleaker than during the day. For some reason it made me think of Mother, of how in the evenings she used to sit in front of the television, her head covered in hair rollers, and a cup of coffee in her hand. (Every time a train passed beneath our windows, her coffee cup trembled.) I tossed and turned for hours, and Mother sat there, with me, watching television, and her image was the last I saw before I finally fell asleep in the small hours.

Monday evening, 17 June: The black dress

On Monday evening the rain stopped and I went out. I was walking on Nevsky Prospekt, which was cold and shiny with wet, an air of melancholy hovering over it. But I hardly noticed it because my mind was torn between A and B, the responsible and irresponsible me, both debating what I should do, whether I should or should not buy a ticket back to Italy. I kept listening to them, apathetically all of a sudden, like it was no concern of mine which side was going to win, and what I was going to do.

After some five, ten minutes of walking I spotted a commotion ahead of me. A patch of the pavement was security-cordoned and the local nouveau riche was turning up in their dark-windowed SUVs and walking into a prestigious-looking building. There were long-legged babes in high heels, and bejewelled, puffy-lipped socialites air-kissing each other, and potbellied wild boars of men sporting costly loafers and glittering wristwatches. Something in the way they moved and behaved was so typical of their social standing that the scene could have taken place in any major city of the world.

Oh, I thought, stopping in front of the security cordon. It's a boutique opening party.

I'd stood there no more than a few seconds when a showily dressed elderly woman sprang up from nowhere, and spoke to me in Russian. Hollow-cheeked and powdered with big bulging eyes, she looked like a dragonfly, and was holding a Jack Russell terrier in her gold-bracelet-accessorised arms.

She must have thought that we knew each other. I don't know what came over me, but I replied in Italian, smiling eagerly, pretending that we were acquainted with each other. This pidgin conversation went on for a few minutes, after which the old woman kissed me on both cheeks, and led me by the arm to the party.

I am not often talkative with people, but that time it was worth the trouble.

As soon as we were inside I got rid of her (which wasn't difficult, as she was greeting just about everyone) and took a drink. Then I positioned myself in a corner and looked around me.

Inside, the boutique resembled an art gallery. Huge paintings were hung on the walls and the place was full of people. Holding on to their drinks, greeting friends and strangers, the guests were talking in small groups, posing and laughing, and furtively checking each other out. There were some aggressive social vibes bouncing in the air, and observing them, I started to feel awkward and regret that I had ever come inside. For a moment I was painfully aware of how rumpled my jeans and shirt must have looked.

Luckily just then a blonde hostess clinked her champagne glass. She started to speak in Russian and American-accented English.

'Ladies and gentleman,' she said at the end of her speech. 'Let me introduce to you a comedy troupe of the finest calibre... Kremlin Convicts!'

A few minutes later the lights were dimmed and a half a dozen dwarfs clad like clowns occupied the centre of the boutique, dancing, jesting, turning somersaults, conjuring flowers out of hats, making faces, and pushing each other. It seemed like just plenty of merry chaos, and though there was something charmingly Fellini-like in the clowns' hopping and frolicking, something that made me dream of prancing horses, tigers, fire-eaters, carousels and acrobats, it still wasn't the kind of show you expected to see in a luxury boutique.

I glanced at the people around me, to see if anyone else was confused, only to notice that the other guests weren't even paying attention to the clowns, but instead continued chatting like there never had been any entertainment to begin with.

And that's when it all happened, you remember, that incident one month ago, when my story began...

A woman in a black cocktail dress entered the shop premises, and I had the shock of my life.

It was a life-changing moment to be sure, the kind that usually happens only in operas and badly written Baroque plays: the point in which the heavens open and powdered, wigged actors cry out in wonder, and your fate changes in a split second.

What's more, I had dreamed of it all my life. Really, I had. Ever since I was a ten and started to yearn for genius (instead of playing football and Nintendo, like other boys of my age did), this moment had been my biggest hope; this very opportunity, of making my dreams come true in a single second. It is what defines me most – without it, I would be someone else altogether.

But even if it was just an instant, nothing about it was simple and clear. It wasn't like Saul of Tarsus being transformed into Paul the very moment a light from heaven dazzled him on the road to Damascus, or Romeo falling in love with Juliet the first time he laid eyes on her, and the fact that I have rewound this scene tens, perhaps hundreds, of times in my mind, makes it even more difficult for me to remember what really happened, and in which order.

But I'm certain that I felt rather than saw the woman at first, because all of a sudden the room fell silent and I turned my head to see what had been the cause. That's when I saw it, the black dress she was wearing, and it was a dress and it wasn't a dress, because rather than an outfit it seemed like a prayer, or a whisper, or a melody, or your very deepest desire, and as such it was not of this world, for no woman had ever worn anything like it – no starlet, no celebrity, no red-hot pop diva, no supermodel, no *paparazzo*-pursued princess. The amazement of spotting it was so great that I felt as though someone had punched my stomach, and my head was bursting with half thoughts, one more frenzied than the other, whizzing around like particles inside an accelerator, bumping into each other, and into the invisible walls of my mind. Yet I couldn't put those thoughts into words. I couldn't – and still can't – explain what I had just seen, except that I *had* seen it before, in my dreams and visions. But I hadn't been able to commit it to paper.

During these seconds she had come in from a side door and walked barefoot to the centre of the room. Even if 'walking' is a prosaic word to describe the way she was moving, catlike and confident, a teasing smile on her face, fully aware that she could steal the show with nothing more than an entry, a pursing of lips, or a seductive swaying of hips. One of the clowns offered her a chair and she sat on it, taking a microphone, and started to sing a song in Russian, in a voice that was husky and melodious, yet not particularly carrying.

But there was no need for her to be more audible, because by the time she had sat down the entire room was watching her in stupefied silence. Stupefied, because though in that crowd of rich and beautiful people there was no shortage of high cheekbones and swollen breasts, somehow this angel in black was special. And it wasn't just because she too was a good looker with her voluptuous red hair and scarlet red lips forming a perfect cupid's bow. No, she was special because she was shining, for there really is no other way of putting it: her translucent skin radiated as if there was a soft light burning inside her.

The silence lasted for no more than a few minutes, and during it the atmosphere was thick with a strange kind of longing for this Black Angel, hunger almost, to touch her. And so it was perhaps no surprise that a man shouted something to her in Russian, and you didn't have to

understand the language to know that his comment had been of the bawdy kind, and immediately someone else whistled and a few others laughed, clapping, and then the man who'd made the bawdy remark walked over to her and tried to grab her breasts.

A few seconds of confusion ensued, after which two security guards in suave dark suits and listening devices tucked into their ears went to talk with the man. He threw his hands up in the air, as if to say, *OK, OK, I was just joking anyway.*

Yet now he looked offended and even angry. Maybe that was why the security guards left him alone, and instead conducted the clowns and the woman out of the building.

Monday evening, 17 June: Driving with the dwarfs

It took me a few minutes to grasp what had happened.

I stared at the guests, who were filling up the empty space left by the dwarfs and chatting once more like nothing at all had ever happened. All I could think of was the dress.

Had I seen it... had it really happened? And how had it looked? Jesus, it had been masterfully cut, that was for sure... But what kind of cut? And – what kind of black? Coal black? Lamp black? No, that wasn't it... Ebony black? Or Payne's grey? Or even a very dark shade of burnt umber?

But only tastes came to my mind, not colours. It had been the savoury blackness of beef gravy, I thought, and the syrupy blackness of *marrons glacés*, and the cold blackness of Beluga caviar on blinis. And as soon as I had tasted these flavours in my mouth, the funny longing verging on hunger overtook me once more, and so I scurried for the door and out into the fresh summer evening. I knew that I *had* to see that dress, and touch it, unravel its mystery.

I found the dwarfs perching in sulky disorder on Nevsky Prospekt, still offended that their gig hadn't been rightfully appreciated, and spitting globs of mucus on to the puddles. Yet to my great consternation Black Angel was nowhere to be seen. I ran across the street, and then back again, my eyes darting everywhere, up and down, but she had disappeared. It was as if she had grown herself wings and flown away. That is when I returned to the clowns and loitered behind them, flushed and panting.

Let's state it for the record, though there might not be any need to do it, that my social skills are somewhere between those of a computer nerd and Tarzan, which is why I'm no more capable of

initiating a conversation with a group of strangers than a toddler is of piloting a bulldozer. So I simply stood there, helpless and embarrassed, and the dwarfs for their part acted as if they hadn't even noticed me.

Only now I saw that their clown clothes were patched and faces smudged because of excessive rouge and powder and sweating. They looked like poorly dressed gnomes in a budget Christmas movie, and in any other circumstances seeing them would have sparked off in my mind the most lavish display of colours and forms.

Finally, as I didn't know what else to do, I pulled a bottle of vodka out of my rucksack and passed it to them. It was one of the miniature bottles from the hotel room minibar, but it did the trick. All you needed was a dash of spirits to warm your mouth, and in no time at all it seemed as if we had been friends forever, especially as they fished out a bottle of their own and offered it to me.

As the bottles were passing from one clown to another we started to talk – or rather, I was repeating in all the two-and-a-half-languages-I-speak that I needed to see the woman in black, and they kept insisting in pidgin French that I had to explain what I was doing in their town. Finally I gave up, and told them about Mother, and how my modest pedigree came nearly as far as St Petersburg. I have no idea why I didn't mention my creative crisis, which of course was the real reason I was there, and you could ask whether my story might have had another ending had I not given them the answer they wanted to hear.

When I had finished speaking, an ominous silence followed, after which the deeply moved troupe members embraced me like a brother. They even – miraculously! – remembered that there indeed was a female member in their company. It would be no problem at all to drive me to see her, they assured me, and so a moment later we were walking towards their car. It was agreed that they would first show me St Petersburg, and then take me to meet Black Angel.

At first we drove past cathedrals, palaces and Soviet-era housing estates, all shrouded in dreamlike mist, the kind that veils fairy tale kingdoms and lands of make-believe. The car reeked of petrol and vodka, and was so packed with clowns that one of them was sitting on my lap. All of us were irrevocably and irrefutably befuddled, and the atmosphere was cheerful. The troupe members were singing folk songs in resonant voices you would never expect to come out of such little people, and I was socialising like I was another human being altogether, and didn't have my history of being the strangest kid in the school, or the maverick of the workplace. It was the power of that black dress, the electrifying sensation that something extraordinary had just taken place, which enabled me to behave that way.

But then something went wrong. We were already deep in the dullness of the countryside when I suddenly woke up from my drunken stupor. All I could see from the window was forest, and that never-ending haze. It hit me that we were a long way from St Petersburg, and I had no idea where we were driving.

Chuckling at my suspicion, the dwarfs explained that they were simply taking me back to Karelia, Mother's native soil. That's where I would meet Black Angel, someone said in harsh-sounding French, giving me a wink. I stared at my hijackers. It was here, I think, that my earlier thrill vanished, and I became afraid for the first time.

The clown beside me patted me on the shoulder. His grin was so broad that it bared his gums and yellowed teeth. He had lost his wig and there was lipstick all over his face.

When he offered me a half empty bottle, I didn't refuse it – after all, what else could I do? No, I took it, and in a few frenzied gulps emptied its contents so that soon I was coughing and tears were running down my face. Afterwards everything became foggy, and I no longer registered what was happening around me.

Monday night, 17 June: In a forest barn

Much of that night is a mystery to me, but I remember waking at some point. What entered my otherwise dark mind were excited shouts and laughter and a peculiar mouldy smell, that of hay and soil and something else I couldn't pin down.

I opened my eyes, only to discover that I was still sprawled on the back seat. But now the car was standing inside of what looked like a huge, candlelit barn filled with every imaginable kind of clutter, from rusty cookers to a lawn swing. Something told me that we were in the middle of nowhere: nobody would hear if I cried for help.

A big crowd was gathered in the centre of the barn. There were the clowns, but also faces I had never seen before. The rise and fall of cries and occasional applause gave me to understand that they were playing, even if I couldn't make out what. It seemed as if everyone had forgotten about my presence.

Despite the excess booze packed in my veins I still remembered the black dress. It was the first thought that came into my head. But now its memory was muddled, and I couldn't say whether I had actually seen it, or just dreamed it up.

With difficulty I raised my upper body and leaned on my elbows, nausea billowing in my stomach. There's no use denying it. I *was* afraid. I recall staring at the back seat and thinking that I should get up and get the hell out of there while no one was looking in my direction.

I sat up, determined to sneak away. But just then I saw Black Angel. It was her, even if she was no longer wearing the black dress. She was seated on the elbow rest of a burgundy red sofa, leaning one hand on the back of the sofa and holding a cigarette in the other. Thanks to this position her hips formed a wonderful, sharp curve à la Betty Boop, and her reddish long hair shone above the other heads. She was laughing, and just as she was doing so she turned to look in my direction. Her eyes were dark and impenetrable as she looked right through me, and I felt all cold, like death had just visited me.

I leaned forward to open the door, yet whether I did so to escape or to finally meet my enchantress I can't say. And maybe it didn't make any difference, because at that very moment a fit of nausea swept over me and I lay down again.

So I closed my eyes, there on the back seat, amidst the shouts and the laughter. And little by little the voices became more distant – now they were coming from another world – till the moment came when I heard nothing at all.

Monday night, 17 June: Dreams or reality?

After that, I don't remember much, and the little I remember doesn't make sense.

There is an image in my mind, of lying on the back seat and trying to vomit (which seems obvious, considering the circumstances) – but there's also another one, of standing unsteadily among the players, and clasping a bottle in my hand. Everything else is shadowy, except the bottle (I am certain that I'm holding it) and the excited cries around me, *ab! ob! ab!* Another voice comes to my mind as well, it is low and authoritative and belongs to an old woman, and every time she speaks there's a respectful silence. Once or twice she bursts into a rumbling ha ha ha laughter that resonates all around the barn and sends a cold shiver down my back.

Other memories are more fantastic, and possibly products of my imagination. I recall, for example, a fully clothed bear gnawing compulsively at its shackles, its listless eyes bespeaking lifelong suffering and sorrow; and a gilded trapeze hanging above our heads, glowing in the candlelight. And the barn is no longer just a barn, but a mythical attic of children's adventure stories where rainy afternoons turn into battles between good and evil.

I also dreamed of Sarah. She was walking towards me barefoot and in a white dress, a pale light behind her, her face sincere, softened by affection.

Tuesday morning, 18 June: The Sampo

When I finally woke up it was already day. I opened my eyes, only to realise that broad daylight hurt them. I shaded my eyes with my hand, waiting for the soreness to pass. Around me wafted an odious smell of booze, but whether it emanated from my clothes or from the half-drunk bottle next to my feet, I couldn't tell. The sight of it made me want to vomit.

The candles had been blown out and the huge double doors were half open, revealing unspoiled glade shrouded in rain. I heard the pit-a-pat of raindrops on the roof and then, angry voices. Together they composed a crazy symphony in my head, playing at full volume.

Next I tried to lift my head without feeling nauseous. After having succeeded I looked around me. A group of people was arguing in the centre of the barn, next to a mahogany roulette table. Others were lying here and there, sleeping away their drunkenness. The excitement of the previous evening was gone, and the atmosphere was unmistakably one of irritation. Somehow I managed to stand up. Then I staggered towards the people, my head aching non-stop.

The old woman with the low voice was speaking. I watched her as if seeing her for the first time. She had a puffy face and watery eyes, and her lips were moving frenziedly in all imaginable directions as she, time and again, stated that she was not going to change the rules: whoever had won the roulette game had won it, and that was that. Her declaration created an avalanche of protests among the clowns, protests which darted before my eyes, back and forth, and such was their speed that I understood nothing of what was being said, and instead felt dizzy due to the effort of following the conversation.

Finally I gave up and contented myself with staring at the old woman's restless mouth. Only now I realised how thirsty I was. My tongue felt stiff, like an overcooked roast.

At that instant the old lady walked toward me. Before I had any time to escape she had poked me in the ribs, probably to wake me up, brushed hay and dust from my jacket with a few angry strokes, and proclaimed me the winner of a roulette game. A few mouths opened to protest, but she stared them into subdued silence.

'Congratulations,' she said to me. 'You've beaten us all! And now you've got to name your prize.'

I gaped at her in astonishment. I had no idea what she was saying, nor any recollection of playing anything at all, but judged it better to keep it to myself.

‘Your prize,’ she repeated.

I don’t know what it was in her voice – authority, or perhaps even a hidden threat – but I nevertheless straightened myself, and mustered all my energy to glance around me. And of course I immediately spotted Black Angel, sleeping on her side on the burgundy red sofa, her upper knee bent, hands cupped under her head, and long curls falling over her face. The position had lifted the hem of her polka-dotted dress high, unveiling her bare thighs. Her skin was pale, and glowing in that same unnatural way that naked flesh shines in old master paintings.

I stared at her thighs. At once my headache and queasiness were gone. I was acutely aware of her presence and myself standing next to her. Now I remembered everything: her black dress, singing in Russian, that strange collective longing for her body. She still had the same unearthly allure, even though it was more muted now, quieter and sleepier, as if it had decreased the moment she fell asleep.

Watching her I also realised that hers was a peculiar kind of seductiveness, because my appetite for her arose not only from my private parts but also from my empty, aching stomach. That’s right: I had a childish urge to touch her *panna cotta* skin, just where the silky dress finished – no, correct that, I had an urge to *bite* it, and to find out what kind of sugary taste her thighs would leave in my mouth... Would she be a baba or a *bavarois*? Or a delicious *tiramisu*, made in flesh?

I took a step closer towards her.

‘Don’t touch my wife!’ someone yelled. ‘Don’t you dare touch her!’

I turned around. The movement made my head ache: someone was hammering it so hard that it was going to burst at any moment.

In front of me a beer-bellied dwarf jumped to his feet with such force that the folding chair on which he had been sitting keeled over. He had a clown’s ruddy and jolly face, and a convalescent’s tired eyes. I named him Rubicund Resignation.

For a second we just stared at each other, he furious, I too stupefied to move. He was about to walk toward me when two other Kremlin Convicts grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop. All three were speaking heatedly in Russian. Finally they led him outside, where I heard him shouting and weeping. I gulped, tried to stand straight. Now the nausea was back as well.

Silence fell upon the barn, and for a while nobody moved. Some were looking at the door, others were exchanging glances, and an old bespectacled man shook his head disapprovingly.

After clearing his throat and spitting out the residue, the old man turned to me, his face sincere and serious.

‘You have to understand him’, he said, nodding towards the door. ‘He’s a good man – even the fact that he married that little flirt testifies to that, because a few years ago she was just a slow-witted village girl and not even much to look at. But then she got that damned machine and started putting clothes into it, and next thing everyone knew she looked like a goddess, an angel made of flesh and blood. Soon her beauty was so legendary that people travelled from afar just to catch a glimpse of her. And now he’s losing his mind, because he’s sick and tired of warding off admirers –’

He kept talking. Finally he realised that instead of listening to him I was about to vomit. The barn became quiet once more.

A juggler broke the silence. ‘All the fault of that Sampo,’ he said bitterly.

While others nodded in agreement, I grabbed my stomach with both hands, the taste of sick already in my mouth. And then, after slowly straightening my back, I put a question I have never stopped asking.

‘What Sampo?’

‘It’s a machine,’ the juggler replied. ‘A dressmaking machine. Sort of.’

His comment prompted an animated argument, because nobody seemed to agree what the Sampo really was. Some kept repeating that he was right, whereas others insisted that it was more than a machine. The old man began to explain how the Sampo was the materialisation of a magic mill that had existed in some long-ago folk epic, but soon he was interrupted because one of the clowns said something in Russian and everyone laughed, and then the conversation became chaotic. It was, if you will, like an Italian television show – not that I watch them – everyone was talking and no one was listening to what anyone else was saying.

At this point many people (especially those who had most fiercely opposed my being the winner) began to smirk and snigger and exchange knowing looks, and the otherwise cheerful atmosphere acquired a hint of hostility, the way it does when a group of children is making fun of one of its members. I knew that they were laughing at my expense, and that their joke had something to do with the dressmaking machine. I also knew that I should have kept my ears open and asked questions. But I was terribly crapulent, you see, and there was nothing else left in my head but thick fog, and nothing travelled through it, not even the simplest thought. And it might’ve irritated me, too, the fact that these bumpkins were talking about *my* profession. That’s why I gave

up, closed my eyes, and stopped listening to what was being said. Of course there's irony in all this, in not paying attention to what was probably the single most important conversation of my life.

Finally the juggler spoke to me.

'That's what it is,' he concluded. 'It makes you look young and sexy. And isn't that what we all want?'

I opened my eyes to watch him. He was wearing a fulgent blue gym suit and high-heeled boots: a stunted Russian Super-Man, only the cape was missing. I was itching to tell him that he would look, if not necessarily young and sexy, at least better after he had changed his clothes. You needed no magic to do that.

At times it gives me nearly physical pain to see how badly people dress, especially outside Italy. (And the worse my own dress code has got, the less I tolerate bad taste.)

Without waiting for my answer the juggler walked to a steel fridge standing next to the roulette table. It was the first time I had noticed it, so full of odds and ends the barn was. He gestured to me to come closer.

I obeyed him, even if each unsteady step made my stomach churn. Everyone stared at me as I studied the fridge, my movements clumsy and slow. I was concentrating hard to come up with at least one lucid comment about their machine. Finally I turned to look at the clowns.

'It's a fridge,' I pointed out.

My question provoked benevolent laughter, and the atmosphere relaxed. The juggler motioned me to look inside.

'Believe it or not, but it's easy to use,' he said. 'You just put a dress inside and when you take it out, it has changed...'

He hesitated, trying to find the right words.

'The new dress is hypnotic,' he continued. 'You can't take your eyes off it. It's seductive, you see, a Sampo dress is...'

He paused again, spreading his arms helplessly. There was a silence.

'Shining,' someone finally said. 'It is shining.'

Tuesday morning, 18 June: Naming my prize

Finally the three clowns returned inside. Rubicund was walking in the middle, meek and speechless, his eyes downcast. He sat down on his folding chair and buried his face in his hands. For a split second he was the centre of attention, a target of compassionate and curious glances.

Then the juggler pulled out a dress from a wicker basket, and handed it to me.

‘That’s why she bewitched you,’ he told me sotto voce, glancing at Black Angel. ‘She keeps her clothes inside the Sampo for hours. This one here is one of her favourites.’

It was a Burberry beige baby-doll dress with beaded straps. I stared at it in disbelief, and a wave of disappointment washed over me. For a while I had almost – but no, I won’t say anything more, especially as the dress showed how foolish my expectations had been. That’s it, then, I thought, the black dress never happened. It was just a drunken dream.

In reality the baby-doll dress wasn’t so terrible, all of which explained why the Convicts had considered it a work of art. But it was simply an outfit, just like a Ford is simply a car and *The Terminator* is nothing more than a film. And for sure it wasn’t shining; on the contrary, it was sagging on my arms, slack and sad, as if it had just become aware of its mediocrity.

I also felt pity for my captors. Those unsophisticated souls, so proud of their miracle machine! If only I could say something nice about the dress!

‘It *is* lovely,’ I began. ‘And shining... just like you said...’

My voice trailed away.

After that things happened quickly. The old woman, who had been listening to our conversation impatiently, stood up from her armchair and took control again with nothing more than a cough. Again she insisted that I had to name my prize, and again the tone of her voice suggested that a refusal to do so would be considered an insult. So my eyes darted desperately about the barn – past tins of paint, rusty cookers, discoloured icons and leather suitcases – until I spotted the fridge standing next to the roulette table, and a wave of relief passed over me. That is how I chose the Sampo: not because I truly wanted it.

But because I didn’t know what else to take.

‘I’d like to have that machine,’ I said. Now my head was surprisingly clear. I was sick and tired of Russia, and we had to be close to the border. ‘And I want you to drive me to Finland.’

An indignant murmur went up from the Kremlin Convicts.

‘You’ve got some nerve, stranger,’ someone yelled. ‘The Sampo is worth *billions!*’

‘Billions?’ repeated another voice, full of sarcasm. ‘Billions? Come on, that fucking apparatus has –’

Immediately many people started to talk all at once, but the old woman silenced the crowd with a raised hand. She went over to Rubicund Resignation and the two of them spoke in muted tones. At some point he said something with vehemence, yet then his shoulders hunched up and he nodded a few times, looking more resigned than ever. So she returned to me, and though she was lamenting volubly at how I was conning a poor, hardworking theatre ensemble out of their one and only prized possession (ha!), I sensed that in reality she was pleased, and not at all unhappy about giving away the fridge.

At long last she nodded, and handed me a new bottle.

‘We’ve got to celebrate this’, she said.

Tuesday evening, 18 June: Finland

A dog barking in the distance: a howling ballad of canine misery. The evening sun caressing my cheeks, like Mother used to do, when she came to put me to bed. A smell of gasoline, grass and cow dung – my nostrils confirmed that I was still alive.

I opened my eyes. Questions hung in my benumbed mind, incomplete, incomprehensible. Where was –? Who was –? What had –?

I was cast off in a birch wood that resembled a scene from *Doctor Zhivago*. The birches towered above me, the sunlight filtered through the foliage, reproducing green in its endless hues: in emerald, viridian, yellow-green, turquoise, mint, cucumber, nettle, rosemary, fern, even indigo. I stared at the trees, trying to concentrate. How to copy these colours, the gentle *chiaroscuro* flicking on the leaves, and transform them into an outfit? I thought hard, doing my best to invoke my secret world of dreams and images. But the moment was already gone, and I rubbed my eyes, disappointed that nature had outshone me.

All I could see was asphalt road and forest. Further away stood a blue direction sign with white borders, and its letters were no longer in the Cyrillic. *LAPPEENRANTA 15*. I was in Finland.

With difficulty I looked around and noticed a steely container basking in the sunlight. My rucksack was nowhere to be seen, which meant that I had lost my money, credit cards and passport. But I was free. The fridge was with me. Kremlin Convicts had kept their promise. They had driven us across the border, just as I had asked.

Those were my last thoughts before a divine hand turned the lights off, the scarlet curtain fell, and the world grew dim.