

The Winner Stands Alone



Eighth Chapter

She drinks her coffee and begins to understand her bad mood. She's surrounded by some of the most beautiful women on the planet! She certainly doesn't consider herself ugly, but there's no way she can compete with them. She needs to decide what to do. She had thought long and hard before making this trip, money is tight, and she doesn't have much time in which to land a contract. She went to various places during the first two days, giving people a copy of her CV and her photos, but all she achieved was an invitation to last night's party at a cheap restaurant, with the music at full blast, and where she met no one from the Superclass. In order to lose her inhibitions, she drank more than she should and ended up not knowing where she was or what she was doing there. Everything seemed strange to her – Europe, the way people dress, the different languages, the phoney jollity - when the truth was everyone was wishing they could have been invited to some more important event, instead of being in that utterly insignificant place, listening to the same old music, and having to hold shouted conversations about other people's lives and the injustices committed by the powerful on the powerless.

Gabriela is tired of talking about these so-called injustices. That's simply the way it is. They choose the people they want to choose and don't have to explain themselves to anyone, which is why she needs a plan. A lot of other young women with the same dream (but not, of course, with as much talent as her) will be doing the rounds with their CVs and their photos; the producers who come to the Festival must be inundated with portfolios, DVDs, business cards.

What would make her stand out?

She needs to think. She won't get another chance like this, largely because she's spent all her savings on this trip. And – horror of horrors – she's getting old. She's twenty-five. This is her last chance.

While she drinks her coffee, she looks through the small kitchen window at the dead-end street down below. All she can see is a tobacconist's and a little girl eating chocolate. Yes, this is her last chance. She hopes it will turn out quite differently from the first one.

She thinks back to when she was eleven years old and performing in her first school play at one of the most expensive schools in Chicago. Her subsequent desire to succeed was not born of the unanimous acclaim she received from the audience, composed of fathers, mothers, relatives and teachers. Far from it. She was playing the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland. She had got the part – one of the best roles in the play – after auditioning along with a lot of other girls and boys.

Her first line was: 'Your hair wants cutting.' Then Alice would reply: 'You should learn not to make personal remarks, it's very rude.'

When the long-awaited moment came, a moment she had rehearsed and rehearsed, she was so nervous that she got the line wrong and said instead: 'Your hair wants washing.' The girl playing Alice said her next line anyway, and the audience would never have noticed anything was wrong if Gabriela, who knew she had made a mistake,

hadn't promptly lost the power of speech. Since the Mad Hatter was an essential character if the scene was to continue, and since children are not good at improvising on stage (although they improvise happily enough in real life), no one knew what to do. Then, after several long minutes, during which the actors simply looked at each other, the teacher started applauding, announced it was time for an interval and ordered everyone off-stage.

Gabriela not only left the stage, she left the school in tears. The following day, she found out that the scene with the Mad Hatter had been cut, and the actors would instead move straight on to the game of croquet with the Queen. The teacher said this didn't matter in the least because the story of Alice in Wonderland is a lot of nonsense anyway, but during playtime, the other girls and boys ganged up on Gabriela and started beating her.

This wasn't so very unusual – it was a fairly regular occurrence - and she had learned to defend herself as energetically as when she, in turn, attacked the weaker children. On this occasion, however, she took the beating without uttering a word and without shedding a tear. Her reaction was so surprising that the fight lasted almost no time at all; her schoolmates expected her to scream and shout and, when she didn't, rapidly lost interest. For with each blow, Gabriela was thinking:

'I'll be a great actress one day and then you'll be sorry.'

Who says that children aren't capable of deciding what they want to do in life?

Adults do.

And when we grow to be adults ourselves, we believe that we really are wise beings who are always right. Many children had doubtless been through a similar experience, playing the role of the Mad Hatter or Sleeping Beauty or Aladdin or Alice, and decided there and then to abandon the spotlights and the applause. Gabriela, though, had never before lost a battle; she was the prettiest and most intelligent student in school and always got the best marks in class; and she knew intuitively that if she didn't fight back at once, she would be lost.

It was one thing to get a beating from her schoolmates – because she could give as good as she got – but it was quite another to carry a failure like that around with her for the rest of her life. As we all know, a fluffed line in a school play, an inability to dance as well as everyone else, or rude comments passed about skinny legs or a big head – which all children have to put up with – can have two radically different consequences.

Some people opt for revenge and try to be really good at whatever it is the others thought they couldn't do. 'One day, you'll envy me,' they think.

Most people, however, accept their limitations, and then things tend to go from bad to worse. They grow up insecure and obedient (although they dream of a day when they'll be free and able to do whatever they want), they get married to prove that they're not as ugly as other kids said they were (although deep down they still believe they are), they have children so that no one can say they're infertile (even though they wanted kids anyway), they dress well so that no one can say they dress badly (although they know people will say that anyway).

By the following week, the incident at the play had been forgotten by everyone at school, but Gabriela had decided that, one day, when she was a world-famous actress, accompanied by secretaries, bodyguards, photographers and legions of fans, she would go back to that school. She would put on a performance of Alice in Wonderland for needy children, she would make the news, and her childhood friends would say:

'I was on the same stage as her once!'

Her mother wanted her to study chemical engineering, and as soon as she finished high school, her parents sent

her to the Illinois Institute of Technology. During the day, she studied protein paths and the structure of benzene, but she spent her evenings with Ibsen, Coward and Shakespeare while attending a drama course paid for with money sent to her by her parents to buy clothes and course books. She trained with the best professionals and had excellent teachers. She received good reviews and letters of recommendation, she performed (without her parents' knowledge) as a backing singer for a rock group and as a belly dancer in a play about Lawrence of Arabia. It was always a good idea to accept any role that came along. There was always the chance that someone important might be in the audience, someone who would invite her to her first real audition, and then all those testing times and all her struggles to gain a place in the spotlight would be over.

The years passed. Gabriela made TV commercials, toothpaste ads, did some modelling work, and was even tempted to respond to an invitation from a group that specialised in providing escorts for businessmen because she desperately needed money to put together a proper portfolio to send to all the major modelling and acting agencies in the United States. Fortunately, God – in whom she never lost faith – saved her. That same day, she was offered a job as an extra in a video of a Japanese singer, which was going to be filmed beneath the viaduct of the Chicago 'L'. She was paid much more than she expected (apparently the producers had demanded a fortune in fees for the foreign cast) and with that extra money she managed to produce the vital book of photos (or 'book' as it's known in every language in the world), which also cost much more than she had imagined.

She was always telling herself that she was just at the beginning of her career, even though the days and months were beginning to fly by. She might have been picked to play Ophelia in Hamlet while she was on the drama course, but life mostly offered her only ads for deodorants and beauty creams. Whenever she went to an agency to show them her book and the letters of recommendation from teachers, friends and colleagues, she found the waiting-room full of girls who looked very like her, all of them smiling, all of them hating each other, and all doing whatever they could to get something, anything, that would give them 'visibility' as the professionals called it.

She would wait hours for her turn to come, and meanwhile read books on meditation and positive thinking. She would end up sitting opposite someone – male or female – who ignored the letters and went straight to the photos, not that they ever commented on those either. They would make a note of her name. Sometimes, she would be called in for an audition, about one in ten of which bore fruit. There she would be again, with all her talent (or so she thought), standing in front of a camera and a lot of ill-mannered people, who were always telling her: 'Relax, smile, turn to the right, drop your chin a little, lick your lips.' And the result: a photo of a new brand of coffee.

And what happened when she wasn't called? She felt rejected, but soon learned to live with that and come to see it as a necessary experience, a test of her perseverance and faith. She refused to accept the fact that the drama course, the letters of recommendation, the CV listing minor roles performed in minor theatres, were of no use at all...

Paulo Coelho

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