

“Would you be so kind as to tell me more about yourself, Gabby dear, so I can get to know you better? Where you grew up, where you went to university, and so on. I’m interested because I care about you. Walter hinted to me you have been on your own most of your life. And perhaps that’s the cause of your underlying sadness. Would you mind telling me? Maybe having a confidant would be of some help. Ease your burdens.”

Gabby hesitated. *Should she? Should she tell her sad secrets to this person she so admired? Would it put her off?* The Countess, using a soothing tone, encouraged Gabby to open up. “It’s alright,” she said. “Your feelings and secrets are safe with me.” This fabulous woman who Gabby had worshiped from afar was now insinuating herself into her life as if *she* were the important one. But a natural outcome of her obsession with the woman was that the Countess had become an authority figure. And as such, Gabby didn’t have the wherewithal to tell her she was not comfortable denying her request. She had never developed these skills as most teenagers do when disobeying and fighting with their mothers. Even thinking about her childhood was never anything Gabby cared to do much less speak of it out loud. Gabby became visibly agitated.

Then the Countess did something peculiar. She asked Gabby to hold hands with her, close her eyes, take deep breaths, and exhale slowly. The very first time the Countess had touched Gabby’s hand at the library, she was given flashes of Gabby’s troubled childhood. This intermittent gift (she wasn’t shown her last husband Don’s true self, unfortunately) was sometimes a curse. But today, she was grateful to have been alerted to Gabby’s pain. She knew if Gabby was finally able to unburden herself of her past heartaches, her life would be better. She might even blossom. The Countess murmured a chant while they both breathed slowly together. A sense of calm began to overtake Gabby and she started to relax.

“Now,” said the Countess, “Now, it will be okay.”

“Now,” Gabby whispered impulsively in response. And so, Gabby sat upright and slowly and uncomfortably revealed all the sadness and confusion of her childhood. The suffocating loneliness and constant fear. Being brought up with no parental nurturing as if an orphan but for the kindness of neighbors. She retold the painful discovery of her mother’s dead body sitting in her chair as if still alive. Calling 911 with shaky hands while gagging from the sorrow and sheer terror that engulfed her, a mere child still in her teens. She remembered all the emotions and all the minutia of that afternoon.

She relived waiting for the ambulance while feeling the anxiety of not knowing what her future would be. The overwhelming fear of being completely on her own even though she had basically been that way most of her young life. That shriveled woman in her chair had been a slim measure of comfort, and protection from foster homes. Now, this vestige of a mother would be utterly gone. Fatally gone. She would be forever alone. Really alone. The horrifying acceptance of that reality weighed heavily on her psyche, but it became a watershed moment, a defining moment for Gabby’s survival. For her future self. It was at that moment that Gabby decided she would not let her torturous childhood determine who she was.

The tragic death of this stranger known as “mother” would not damage her potential. She would make her life productive and happy despite the negativity that surrounded her and, in fact, surrounded us all. She had a breakthrough moment of strength, even at this terrible, awful change in her world. From somewhere in the recesses of her mind came these words, *it’s what we do that defines us. Not what is done to us.* And this thought immediately sustained her and made her stronger. It carried her into the current manifestation of the woman, Gabby, who managed to bring optimism into her life each and every day, *or did she?*

As she spoke, Gabby found herself choking back tears. She felt her heart begin to pound in her chest, a sense of panic clenching her stomach muscles. This immediate and visceral response belied all those years of control. Suddenly, she realized she was a fraud. Her optimism hollow and fake, evaporating in an instant as she told her woeful tale and succumbed to her overwhelming feverish and explosive heartache. Giving in to her mounting emotions, she finally let herself feel it all. Feel all the pain that had been subconsciously and consciously held in check. At last, giving in to feelings held tight for so many years, her suppressed feelings of sorrow and pain were given purchase. Her geyser of tears flowing wantonly was unstoppable in its force.

Right there, right then in that apartment with this new intimate friend, Gabby cried her heart out, wailing in a manner she had never done before. Floating out of the moment as a spectator, Gabby acknowledged that this display for her was extremely odd, embarrassing, and raw. Completely unexpected, she was powerless once it started to stop the outpouring of her repressed inner torment. As she wailed, she suddenly became aware she was in the perfumed and soft embrace of Countess Anastasia Ivanova, a tender moment of which she submitted gratefully. It was a surreal moment heretofore that she had never experienced. A simple thing woefully absent her entire life...a mother's hug. A consoling hug from this Russian lady of high status who had been her imaginary mother substitute now embodied the role with that much-needed hug. A physical expression of love to bring comfort and succor to dispel Gabby's misery.

As for the Countess, she herself had been overcome with such strong emotion that tears also flowed freely down her face as she listened to Gabby's anguish. It was brutal. Brutal but necessary, she told herself. When they both finally stopped crying, Gabby was exhausted but felt free, lighter. It was astonishing to feel so unburdened. Even her normal

frown face began to relax somewhat, although she had no idea of it. As for the Countess, her motherly instincts, her nurturing self, had kicked into high gear. In that loving tactile exchange, the Countess had indeed become Gabby's mother figure and it would change her's and Gabby's life's path from then on.

For Gabby, the shared tenderness of that moment brought with it the realization that this was the reason for her obsession. This was what had symbolized the Countess for her. For as the Countess had become Gabby's mother figure with that hug, so too, Gabby's longing for a mother or a least a mother figure was finally realized. A gift from the cosmos. She was no longer alone. For this, she was grateful and, being true to herself, was mindful of its significance to her.

They sat silently for some time recharging their spirits from the tearful ordeal while gazing at the tiny birds nesting in the few trees and the Countess lovingly stroking Gabby's arm.