

1



Two are one...

Only one. Yes, of course! Of course, there is only one bottle.

No, that's not true... I see two bottles.

But maybe, maybe I'm seeing double, maybe there's still a chance there's only one bottle...

No, I can't be that drunk, I can't be seeing double. There must really be two bottles.

Yes, okay, there are two bottles. But why are there two? Why two?

Oh, god, they look exactly the same. Their size, shape, color are exactly the same, even their goddamned production date is the same! Yes, they are... They are twin bottles!

But how? How could one bottle suddenly be two bottles? How could this happen?

And why?

It's not fair...

In one of Rio de Janeiro's most voluminous and beautiful homes, set on a hill overlooking the bay, the same scene that had been played almost every night for the last month was now being played over again. Buried among the cushions of the black sofa in the narrowest corner of the huge living room, Diana, with her wine-bottles, lay trying to understand how her life had so suddenly turned upside down.

Tonight, like every other night, the things she'd suppressed during the day now weighed on her like a ton of bricks. Her body was as numb as it had been every other night; her chestnut hair was as tousled and her green eyes were as bloodshot. Those blood-shot eyes looked from the two bottles on the coffee-table to her mother's photograph on the mantelpiece and then back again.

The only apparent difference from the other nights was the fire she'd lit especially to burn the two letters. The shadows of the flames flickering on Diana's face on this warm May night fanned the fire within her.

She drank down the last sip from the wine-glass in her hand and dropped it on the floor. Before gathering her strength to reach for the second bottle, for a moment, she turned her eyes towards the bottle she'd just finished.

"You know," she said to the bottle, "you're just like me; even though you're finished, you're still standing up shamelessly." She smiled wryly. "After all, we're goddesses, aren't we? What can knock us down?"

Then she turned to the second bottle. "As for you, you mother-thief!" she said. "Mom says that you and I are twins. But for me, you're nothing, nothing but an illusion."

Diana raised herself up from the cushions of the sofa and leaned towards the coffee table, but instead of reaching for the

bottle, she picked up her mother's letter which lay next to it. That letter which, in a matter of minutes, had made one bottle become two bottles.

Her mother had given this letter to her a month ago, the day before she passed away. She'd told Diana to read it only after she died, saying, "This is my last wish, darling. I want you to promise me you'll carry it out."

Diana had asked what it was her mother wanted her to do, but her mother had not answered her question. Instead, she'd fixed her deep blue eyes on Diana, patiently waiting for her daughter's promise. It had been as if those eyes would never yield; so in the end, no longer able to withstand her mother's pleading gaze, Diana had given her word.

On hearing her promise, her mother's eyes had regained their old sparkle, and her pale face had come alive for a moment. She'd placed Diana's hand within her own and said, "I knew I could depend on you, darling. Please look after her, look after her very well. She is unique."

Bending towards her mother, Diana had asked, "She? Who is she? Who are you talking about, Mom?" But her question had remained unanswered until after her mother's final departure from her the following day.

When Diana had opened and read the letter, she felt as if the ground had slipped from beneath her feet. Sinking slowly to her knees, she'd read the letter over and over again, feeling all her remaining strength drain out of her.

Since then, little had changed.

Before placing her mother's letter into the fire, Diana read it one last time:

April 1

My Dearest Diana,

I hope you're well, my darling. You must keep well. You mustn't ever believe you've lost me. I know it's not easy. But I beg you to try...

Please don't forget to let me know how you're doing once in a while. Scribble something to me in your diary, talk to my photograph, write stories to me...

As soon as the time of your graduation is fixed, let me know. And please don't give up your evening walks. You're going to your classes, aren't you? Any news of your job applications? Above all, please tell me as soon as you start writing beautiful stories again like you used to. Who knows, perhaps very soon you'll give me the joyful news that you've finally decided to become a writer. What is it really, darling, that's preventing you from pursuing your greatest dream? But, as always, it's for you to choose. All I want is your happiness.

I say 'your happiness,' Diana, but what I have to tell you in this letter may cause you some despair. Please know that this isn't my intention. But I'm afraid I have no other choice. Forgive me...

I really wish I could discuss with you face-to-face what I'm about to tell you. But, as you can see from my scrawled handwriting, I no longer have the strength to confront you with this news nor to give you all the details. My only hope now is that God will help me get to the end of this letter.

I don't quite know where to begin...

And even if I did, I couldn't. Because in order to begin, I have to go back twenty-four years, to the day when you were one year old, the day on which you last saw your father.

Diana, my darling... The truth is, your father never died. But he left us. And he left us taking your twin sister Maria with him...

So that you wouldn't feel the pain I felt and wouldn't grow up feeling like a child abandoned by her father; for all these years I've let you believe that he was dead. I even put up that gravestone which, while we were living in Sao Paulo, you visited every month thinking it was your father's. But, in any case, he was as good as dead to both of us.

When we moved to Rio de Janeiro, it was as if we'd left the past behind us. I never told anyone here that your father was alive nor mentioned anything about Maria. I knew that your father who'd separated us from Maria would never let us see her again. He must have told her a story similar to the one I told you.

You must be asking, quite rightly, why I'm telling you all this now. Let me explain...

About a month and a half ago, your father was informed of my illness by a mutual friend and must have wanted to clear himself of blame by giving Maria my address. But I know he didn't tell her about you or about my illness.

From then on, I received a letter from Maria once a week—four letters in all. But never with any return address. She wrote that she was looking forward to coming to see me soon. A week ago, however, I got this note from her:

"Mom, I can't bear being without you any longer. If I can't be reunited with you, there's no point in living. Oh, Mom... I want to kill myself... Maria, March 23."

As far as I could tell from her letters, your sister seemed so full of life that I still can't believe she'd write such a thing. And since she has my address, I can't understand why she didn't come to see me.

As if that note weren't enough, yesterday your father phoned. It was the first time he'd called in twenty-four years. As soon as I heard his voice, I knew he was calling about Maria. Indeed his first words were, "Do you know where Maria is?" He went on to say that about two weeks earlier, Maria had gone missing, leaving a farewell letter behind—you'll find it attached to this letter; your father faxed it after our conversation. He told me they'd searched everywhere for Maria and consulted all her friends, but had found no clue as to where she might be.

Oh Diana, in the little time I have left, there's nothing I can do now. I'm so afraid... You are my only hope. So I have no choice but to ask you to please find your twin and take care of her.

I am so sorry to be adding more pain to your grief and burdening you with such a responsibility. But I feel even more sorry to be leaving behind another daughter who spent her whole life hoping to meet her mother.

Knowing how much you love me, I have no doubt that you'll do everything you can to fulfill this last wish of mine. But I know finding Maria won't be easy. There's absolutely no clue as to where she may be. Our only hope is the fact that in her letters she has left a door half-open for me into the extraordinary world she's created for herself. Hers is a deep, secret world, one to be found in fairytales; yet at the same time, it is so real. I'm sure she hasn't shared it even with her father or her closest friends; that's why I think we have a better chance of finding her than anyone else has.

What I'd like you to do is to step into Maria's world and follow the footprints she's left behind. After all, who could do this better than her identical twin?

The Missing Rose

All the information we have are the three names Maria wrote in her letters, "Zeynep", "Socrates" and the name of a palace. These names alone may not be enough to trace her. But unfortunately, that's all we have.

Maria's letters are in the antique chest. You'll find the key to it in my jewelry box.

Diana, I hope you and Maria will soon be united, just like you once were within me.

And when that happens, please write to me...

Diana, my darling, this is not a time to say goodbye. No time is. Please never forget, I am always with you. And I love you very much.

Your mother

2



Diana unfolded the farewell letter Maria had written to her father. It was now time for it to turn to smoke.

March 17

Dear Dad,

I have to leave home today.

You must be wondering why.

Yesterday, after so many years, I read St. Exupéry's Little Prince again. The book seems to have changed completely! The only thing that hasn't changed is that the rose is still my favorite character. And the fox, of course; because it is he who teaches the little prince how to become responsible for his rose.

I think at last I'm also beginning to understand what "being responsible for a rose" means. And that's the reason why I'm leaving.

At the end of the book, St. Exupéry urges us to ask ourselves, "Has the sheep eaten the rose, yes or no?" He says the answer to this question changes everything.

So I'm asking myself a similar question:

"Have Others stolen my rose, yes or no?"

St. Exupéry was right; the answer to this does change everything. But I know that no grownup will ever understand why.

I'm leaving because my answer to this question is "yes."

I'm leaving to reclaim my rose...

Maria

Diana turned to the bottles once again. "Tell me, bottles!" she said. "Tell me what on earth all this means... Doesn't it all seem quite mad? To take off after reading a book... To go missing on account of a rose? What's all this about? Reclaiming one's rose, being responsible for a rose...

"No, no, I'm not interested in knowing what the rose in *The Little Prince* stands for, nor in what it means to that girl. I really couldn't care less! All I want to know is, why it's *me* who has to pay because some girl I've never even seen left home and then wanted to kill herself?"

She fell silent, angry with herself for appealing for help to the bottles she'd despised such a short while before. But who else was there? Who else except these bottles would listen to her?

“How true Mom’s words are,” Diana murmured. “She said Maria was unique... Of course, of course she is unique. The way she stole my mother from me is truly unique.”

After a moment of silence, Diana crumpled Maria’s letter in her hand and threw it into the fire. “Forgive me, Mom,” she whispered, watching with an expressionless face as the ball of paper slowly turned to ashes.

3



Startled, Diana awoke to the sound of the doorbell which, despite its melodious chime, cut like a knife through her aching head.

“Senhora Lopez! Senhora Lopez! Please answer the door!”

Receiving no reply, she remembered that it was Senhora Lopez’s day off. Holding onto the sofa, she dragged herself up. Hardly able to stand, she made her way to the door.

On looking at the security camera, she could see that the unwelcome caller was Gabriel, the courier who regularly delivered flowers or all kinds of beribboned packages to her.

When she opened the door, she found Gabriel standing with yet another beribboned package, its top reaching almost to his chin. His brown face, brown overalls and brown hat were a perfect match for the color of the package.

“Good day, Miss,” Gabriel said. “I have yet another gift addressed to Rio’s most beautiful girl. Would you know if she happens to live here or not?”

“Isn’t it a bit early to be delivering parcels, Gabriel?”

“Well, this must be the right address then. But maybe the wrong time?”

“What time is it?”

“It’s already noon.”

“Is it really that late?”

Diana took the package and signed her name in the delivery book in a scrawl that resembled any signature but her own. And before Gabriel could say his usual, “Take care till the next time your admirers bring us together,” Diana shut the door.

Receiving prettily gift-wrapped packages always used to make her day. This time, however, she wasn’t the least bit interested in knowing what was inside the package, nor who’d sent it. She left it there on the floor and headed back to the sofa.

As she walked past the mirror in the hall, she noticed wine stains on her shirt. She suddenly remembered her mother; a happening which she’d become accustomed to these days. Somehow, a small or seemingly unrelated thing was enough to take Diana back to her life with her mother. A color, a smell, a word, and now this stained shirt... The memory of the day she’d bought this shirt and the conversation she’d had with her mother afterwards came to life as if it were only yesterday...

For Diana, it had been just one of those shopping days. At the boutique, she’d first debated whether she needed a new shirt or not, telling herself she’d done enough shopping that day already, but finally she’d ended up buying yet another yellow shirt.

When she showed it to her mother, Diana didn’t bother to conceal from her the R\$ 2200 price tag.

After glancing at the price, her mother asked, “Darling, did you read about the Paris auction in yesterday’s paper?”

“No, Mom, why?”

“A vest belonging to Descartes was auctioned for R\$ 250,000.”

“Oh, really? I’m glad we weren’t there. You wouldn’t have bought it and it would have stuck in my mind. Anyway, look, my shirt is much smarter than Descartes’ vest, don’t you think?”

“All of R\$ 250,000, Diana!”

“Oh, all right, I see what you’re getting at. You’re trying to tell me that R\$ 2200 isn’t really too much to pay for a shirt like this, aren’t you, Momma dear?”

Diana knew perfectly well that wasn’t what her mother had in mind, but she wanted to use her charm to pass it off lightly, so she could go and happily hang up her new shirt along with all the others.

“Well, you’re right on one point, darling. Your shirt is certainly smarter than Descartes’ vest. His vest wasn’t made of silk or cashmere, nor was it from Donna Karan or Armani. In fact, it wouldn’t cost more than R\$ 30 at the mall.”

“Still, the auction price makes sense, Mom. I mean, the vest was worn by Descartes!”

“True. Being worn by a person like Descartes certainly increases the worth of a piece of clothing. But can you imagine the reverse?”

“What do you mean?”

“A piece of clothing increasing the worth of a person...”

Diana hung her head for a moment. She’d realized what her mother, in her own inimitable way, was once again trying to say: “The only thing you need in order to feel special is yourself.”

"I know what you mean, Mom, but people always want to see me wearing the best. As soon as they see me, they look me up and down from my shoes to my hair and only then do they say, 'Hi.' If I wear the same clothes two days running, they look at me in horror.

"Do I like being judged by my appearance? Or seeing the insincere respect in people's eyes? Their whispers about my couture collection, my Cartier, my Maserati, my this, my that ... No, Mom, I really don't like it. But you know that it's because of who we are, that everyone, at every moment, expects the best of everything from me."

"And you believe it's your duty to live up to their expectations, darling, is that it?"

"What can I do? We're not living in the jungle."

Smiling playfully, she added, "Admit it, Mom. Diana Oliveira has become a trademark. How can I disappoint my public, those fans of mine who shower me with endless adulation?"

Five months ago, however, from the moment the doctor had uttered those few words, many things in Diana's life had changed.

"We're going to lose your mother," the doctor had said.

4



The kitchen with its medicine cupboard seemed so far away. Everyday the house was becoming larger and larger for Diana; the distance from the living room to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the bedroom and from the bedroom to the bathroom were all getting longer. For a month now, she hadn't gone down to the basement where the swimming pool was located, or climbed to the upper floor with its terrace and art studio, so she had no idea whether the way there had become longer, too. Nor did she have any desire to find out.

When she finally reached the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of water and drank it in one gulp. Then another. And a third, this time with two aspirins dissolved in it.

She journeyed back to the living room. As she headed for the sofa once again, her cell phone rang. It rang a second time, a third, a fourth... After the seventh ring, she decided to answer it.

"Happy birthday! Happy birthday! Happy—" howled a young man's voice.

Diana immediately cut the connection, and threw the phone onto the table.

Was it true?! Was it really her birthday? Did someone have to remind her of that?

In the past, however, she would always count the days till her birthday and make plans for it in advance, preparing a list of people afterwards in the order they'd celebrated her.

The first name on this list had always been her mother's.

This would be the first birthday she would spend without her. The first of all the rest of her birthdays...

Her eyes filled with tears.

She went to the cabinet and searched through several drawers before she finally found her diary. Sitting on the floor, she opened it and began to write.

My Beloved Mother,

You said you were always with me... If you are, then why do I miss you so terribly?

I just learned that today is my birthday...

Oh, Mom... Where are you?

Forgive me, Mom, for not having replied to you sooner. It's just that this is the first time I've opened my diary since you went away...

No, I'm not mad at you because of your confession. Maybe in the beginning, I was a little angry, perhaps a little heart-broken, too, but it didn't last long. I'm sure you had good reasons for keeping the truth from me.

But I'm sorry, Mom; I never searched for Maria. I'll never forgive her for causing you to live your last days in worry and fear. I didn't even read her letters, can you believe it? Maybe she's already been dead a long time... Forgive me...

You know what hurts the most, Mom? Just because I broke my promise to you, I feel like I can't even keep you alive in my heart. Everything always reminds me of you, but this only makes things worse... I feel like I can't remember you in peace... If only she hadn't showed up, things wouldn't be like this.

And I'm not interested in knowing about that man, either. I'm sure you had enough reason to believe that he was as good as dead to both of us.

Anyway... Let me answer your questions, Mom...

Today is the last day of school. I'll still be graduating among the top three of my class. The ceremony is on May 19th at 5 o'clock. You can't imagine how much I wish you could be there...

To be honest, I haven't been taking my evening walks. But don't worry, I'll start again as soon as I feel less tired.

As far as my job applications are concerned... Last week, two of the best law firms in the city both offered me a job. They want an answer by the end of the month, but I haven't decided yet which to accept.

I know, you'd tell me to turn them all down and become a writer; instead. I really wish I could do that, Mom. But you know as well as I do that you're the only one who likes my stories. Others think they are no good.

Anyway, I only dreamed of being a writer because of those wonderful stories you used to tell me. It was your stories that added meaning to my life. But now you're gone. And so are your stories. You can never

tell me another story and if I did write a book, you could never read it. You could never say, "Oh, that was splendid, Diana."

That's all my news for now, Mom. I hope, somehow or other, you'll know that I'm doing okay.

Diana's eyes stayed fixed on her diary for a while. She'd written this page feeling for a moment that her mother was expecting some news from her. But that was ridiculous! The dead couldn't read the letters written to them nor could they receive news that their daughters were okay.

She closed her diary and walked to the silver frame her mother had had made specially for her as a birthday present. A month before she'd died, she'd held out this frame which had a black rose motif handcrafted on each of the four sides. "Happy birthday, my darling," she'd said. Diana had immediately realized what her mother hadn't put into words and had refrained from mentioning that there were still two months till her birthday.

She caressed the four black roses ornamenting this most precious remembrance of her mother. Then she read aloud her mother's poem written inside the frame:

*No, it's not what you think.
You have not lost me;
I speak to you through everything,
From behind the remembrances...*

A tear ran down her cheek. "No, Mom, it's not what *you* think," she whispered. "I have lost you. And you don't speak to me."

5



Diana sat down by the package to open it with the hope that perhaps it had been sent by her mother. She was amazed that not even this gift-wrapped package had reminded her of her birthday.

Inside it were a bottle of champagne, a heart-shaped crystal, a birthday card and a love letter with no name on it. Before she had the chance to get up and throw them into the garbage, the doorbell rang again. It seemed there was to be no peace for her today.

On the viewing-screen, she could see the uninvited guests were her close friends, Isabel and Andrea. Those “close” friends who were only interested in how she did her hair, what she wore, how entertaining or how popular she was.

But Diana also knew that it was through friends like Isabel and Andrea that she felt admired, through them she felt special, and through them she’d become *the* “Diana.”

In the face of what she owed them, now that they'd come, she couldn't refrain from opening the door or tell them to come later or shout from behind the door, "I don't want to see anyone!"

So she opened the door.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear goddess, happy birthday to youuu!"

Their display of joy ceased when they took in her disheveled appearance.

"What happened to you, Di?!" Isabel asked.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mix your drinks, Di?" Andrea said. Then, perhaps thinking that the view from the living room wasn't good enough for her, she caught Isabel's hand and drew her quickly toward the steps up to the terrace, as she started firing questions:

"Aren't we having a birthday party tonight, Di? Why weren't you at school? So what's the plan?"

As soon as they stepped out onto the terrace, Isabel ran her finger along the edge of the teak furniture. "There, Senhora Oliveira! This dust is sufficient proof that although the whole city lies at your feet, you've given up enjoying the view. Isn't that right, Andrea?"

"Indeed!" Andrea said.

"Well, Di," Isabel continued, "you haven't answered Andrea's question. What's the plan for tonight?"

"I don't think I'm going to do anything."

"What?!"

"I never like to disappoint you, you know that, but I went to bed really late last night and my head's splitting, so—"

"But today's your *birthday*, Di!"

"I really don't feel like—"

“What’s going on with you, Diana?” Isabel said looking at her sternly. “It was you who used to bring everyone together, now we hardly ever see you. We know, you’re going through a tough time, we all understand that. But do you think shutting yourself up in the house will help you get over it? Do you think that’s what your mother would have wanted? Pull yourself together. You’re a strong girl.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“I’m weak.”

“No, you’re not. You can’t be. You have a long way to go, goals to achieve, dreams... But if you keep behaving like this, you’ll never—”

“What dreams?”

“Well, didn’t you dream of becoming a successful lawyer?”

Heaving a sigh, Diana first looked at Isabel and then Andrea. They really had no idea, did they?

“I never dreamed of becoming a lawyer, Isabel.”

“What do you mean?”

“I only ever dreamed of being a writer.”

“Oh, right, that dream!” Isabel said.

“Oh, come on, Di,” Andrea said. “We’re not kids anymore. When I was little, I wanted to be a singer. But when I grew up, guess what, I realized I have the voice of a crow!”

Neither the friendly expression on Andrea’s face nor her appearance of laughing at herself was enough to mask what she was really trying to say.

“Don’t worry, Andrea,” Diana said. “I already know that I write like a crow.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, Di, I just—”

“Well girls, we have no time to argue now,” Isabel said. “What about tonight?”

Neither Diana nor Andrea replied.

“Di, we should really get going now, we have to go try on our graduation outfits. But we’ll come by this evening to pick you up, let’s say at around eight. Be dressed and ready so we don’t lose time. We’ll take you to Olympia or what about Da Mario? And if you like, to Pulana, okay? A few calls and the old gang will get together. How’s that for a plan?”

“I’m in!” cried Andrea.

“Well,” Diana said. “Thanks a lot, both of you, for coming... But today, I want to be alone.”

6



When Isabel and Andrea had gone, Diana stayed on the terrace for a while longer, thinking how little they knew her. For years they'd been friends, they'd laughed and had fun together, sharing so many good times... So how was it that these two girls didn't know her and what she dreamed of? But then, what did it matter if no one understood a dream she'd decided to let go of?

She thought of the question her mother had asked in her letter. "What is it really, darling, that's preventing you from pursuing your greatest dream?"

Diana knew that if she had a thousand lives to live, in each single one of them she'd still want to be a writer. The only reason she'd chosen law was because of the dreaded scenario she envisaged for herself if she were to become just a mediocre writer...

To begin with, those around her would think she'd wasted her qualifications. In spite of this, however, they'd politely conceal their actual thoughts and tell her what an interesting and excit-

ing profession she'd chosen. But there would always be a hidden disapproval and disdain behind their words and soon she would become the subject of gossip. People would whisper the news about the heiress to an international hotel group and one of the most prestigious hotels in Rio de Janeiro, "the unfortunate Diana Oliveira" who had once been the envy of all the young people in the city, admired by everyone, but who eventually ended up being a writer whose books nobody read. Those who would once have given everything to be in her place would pity her thinking that she'd wasted her life.

Diana had never told anyone that it was only because she didn't want to live this scenario that she'd chosen a career which people around her would approve of. So maybe it was her own fault that her friends didn't know how she really felt. But hadn't she tried to tell them about her dreams and hopes? Of course, she had.

But whenever she'd tried, they'd judged her. It was as if they knew what was best for her and always swamped her with advice on what she should do, how she should think and even how she should feel. They never tried to understand.

How was she to face being left all alone in this world, with no one to understand her?

To still her tired mind, Diana eventually decided to take an evening walk down in the park as she'd always done with her mother.

7



The park wasn't too crowded. Getting as close to the sea as possible, Diana walked along the shore.

How many times in the past had she and her mother walked here together, how many times? What would she not give to be able to have one more stroll here with her mother? Just one more...

Lost in her memories she walked for about a quarter of an hour more. When she reached the marina with its sailing ships, she turned for home.

She usually chose to return home by way of the short cut across the park, mainly because she enjoyed seeing the unusual people along the way. People with hair dyed every color of the rainbow, pierced on the least expected parts of their bodies; people who looked for but couldn't find an empty space to be ornamented with yet another tattoo...

As usual, the pathway was crowded with vendors of knick-knacks and kitsch, with tattoo artists, strolling musicians and beggars.

As Diana went past the beggars, she heard a deep voice:

“Hey there, little lady!”

Not sure if she was the one being addressed, she glanced around, but couldn't see anyone else who might answer to this description. Then, she caught sight of an old beggar staring at her. Once more he called, “Hey there, little lady!”

She had often seen this man with curly gray hair at this corner, sitting cross-legged on a piece of straw matting. What made him different from his fellow beggars was that, although his small black eyes were constantly searching the crowd for something, he never harassed the passersby. Another difference was that on the corner of his ragged mat was written: “Fortunes Told- R\$ 9.”

Diana was surprised; she'd passed by this fortunetelling-beggar perhaps a hundred times before, but never once had he called out to her.

“Were you talking to me?” she asked the beggar pointing to herself.

“You're searching for her?”

“What do you mean?”

“Her!”

“Who's her?”

“If you don't know, how come I should?”

“What?!”

“Her, I'm saying!”

She shook her head. There was no need to go on with this strange and pointless conversation. Perhaps he had been waiting for someone to play a joke on, or perhaps he was simply testing a new way of attracting the attention of a possible customer. Whatever the reason, it was enough to make Diana decide to walk away as quickly as possible.

She wanted to continue on her way as though no words had passed between them, but she paused when the beggar called out to her once again:

“See here, little lady, I’m ready to tell your fortune for nothing. Come, maybe your luck will tell you where she is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and I don’t want to know, either.”

At that moment, quick as a wink, the beggar tipped something resembling ashes into the glass of water in front of him and began to peer at it intently as the water turned grayish. Then, “Oh, my!” he said. “What do I see, what do I see? She’s looking like you. Just like you!”

Diana froze where she stood.

“Who looks like me?” she asked swallowing hard.

“That’s better, little lady, come sit now.”

Diana did as she was told.

The beggar swirled the water with his forefinger before brushing the tip of it on Diana’s face. Without waiting for her reaction, he said, “Whether you are searching for her or no, she’s looking like you. Just like you! Same age, same height, same eyebrows, same eyes...”

Diana felt a cold shiver run down her spine. She hardly knew what to do or what to say. But there had to be an explanation to this. There was no such thing as fortunetelling, no such thing as mind-reading. There was no chance that this man could be talking about Maria!

To prove he was just a charlatan, she asked, “So, where is she?”

“Not far away.”

“Where exactly?” she asked, raising her voice.

The beggar took her hand and poured a little of the dirty water into her palm. After examining it attentively for a minute, he said, "She comes from far away to near. Soon she goes far away, but she comes back again."

Then, he lifted his head and fixed his gaze on something at the other side of the pathway. Diana turned to see what he was looking at.

About twenty yards ahead, a street artist was watching them. When the artist realized they were looking at him, he quickly turned back to his easel. Diana gestured questioningly at the beggar.

"That girl who's just like you," the beggar said, "she gets to meet that artist some day."

Diana sprang to her feet. It'd been a mistake to sit down there in the first place. It was obvious he was just having a joke at her expense. She should have realized it long ago; there had been a sly expression of amusement on his wrinkled face from the very beginning.

As Diana hurried away, the beggar called after her, "Read. Open what's written and read."

Open and read! These words sped like a treacherous arrow into Diana's retreating back.

Was this also a coincidence? Could these words be related to Maria's letters which she'd never opened, let alone read? Her head was in a whirl, but this time she went on without a backward glance.

Even though she wanted to get home quickly and leave all this behind her, her steps involuntarily slowed as she was passing the young street artist. As he stood facing his painting, she took a quick look at this unkempt youth, to see if she could make any sense of what the beggar had said.

Probably a few years older than her, the artist was tall, well-built, with tanned skin and untidy brown hair. He was wearing an old maroon T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, worn into holes at the knees. His sandals were too dusty to guess their color.

Propped against the iron railing that surrounded a nearby palm tree stood his paintings for sale. They were all much the same in theme—sky, sea and a seagull in each. Each had a price tag of R\$ 150 hanging on it. Although the quality of paint looked poor, the paintings themselves were inviting.

The artist became aware of Diana's gaze as her eyes wandered from himself to his paintings and back again. He turned his big hazel eyes on her. "How can I help you?"

"Oh, just looking."

"But could you see?"

"Excuse me?"

"Well, did you like the paintings?"

"I like your choice of color tone."

The artist remained silent.

Diana, who'd expected at least a "thank you" for her compliment, said, "So... Bye then."

The artist merely waved and without waiting for Diana to leave, became engrossed in his painting once again.

Diana wasn't going to mind the manners of a street artist. At least not today. But as she walked away with steady steps, she couldn't help thinking how uncouth his behavior had been and how unlikable he was.

8



All that was left of the moth which had been flying around the room was a slight haze of smoke around the lamp and a faint smell of burning. Looking at the wisp of smoke, Diana wondered what had driven the moth to throw herself into the light.

She must have followed an instinctive call to fly away from the dark, Diana thought. The urgency with which she flew must have been a rebellion against the gloom that enveloped her. A rebellion against uncertainty. She'd chosen to melt away in the fire instead of flying a lifetime in perpetual darkness.

Wouldn't opening and reading Maria's letters be the same as the moth throwing herself into the fire? Would it be an escape from the darkness she'd fallen into by ignoring her mother's last wish? And if so, to escape from such darkness, uncertainty and disloyalty, should she face the risk of being extinguished like the moth?

Diana didn't know what to think anymore. She didn't know why she was in the dark, how she'd ended up there, or whose fault

it was ... Was it her fault for not acting upon her mother's wish? Or her mother's for placing such a heavy burden on her shoulders? Her father's for splitting the family in two? Maybe the blame should be put on Maria since she was the one who'd sent that selfish note to her mother. Or maybe on God who had taken her mother from her. Perhaps everyone was to blame, perhaps no one ...

She didn't know the answer, yet she could feel that the reins of her life had long since slipped from her grasp. It was as if events beyond her control were determining her thoughts, feelings and actions; as if decisions about her life were being made somewhere, at some unknown place, and put into effect without her knowledge or consent.

Was it fate?

If it were, were those strange words of the beggar who'd never spoken to her before, also a part of that fate? If she got up now, opened Maria's letters and read them, would it be of her own free will? Or would she simply be obeying another command of fate which was dragging her toward the unknown? Perhaps the two were the same thing. She didn't know.

However, there was one thing she did know: She respected that moth.

Diana suddenly got to her feet. She walked straight to her mother's jewelry box, took out the key to the antique chest and went to the room where it stood. She opened the chest and found Maria's letters wrapped in a piece of cloth. With the bundle in her hands, she returned to the living room.

Sitting on the floor, her back against an armchair, she unwrapped the cloth. Inside it, she found four large and one smaller envelope, all of different colors. In the smaller envelope was Maria's last note to her mother. The larger envelopes had all been

numbered in her mother's handwriting in the order she'd received them.

The colors of the envelopes were, in sequence, red, green, white, silver. She noticed that the first three had been posted in Sao Paulo, while the fourth as well as the one in the smaller envelope were postmarked Rio de Janeiro.

So Maria must have come to Rio, thought Diana. She suddenly remembered the old beggar's words. "She comes from far away," he'd said. "She's not far away."

If Maria had come to Rio, then why hadn't she come to see her mother? Could she still be here? Did she live in Sao Paulo?

As Diana battled with such questions, she noticed that the silver envelope—the fourth one—was empty. The question of where the letter it had contained might be just added to her confusion.

In the hope of finding some answers, she read through the letters. Then, she picked up the first one again and began to read it carefully a second time.

Letter No: I

"Objecting to Others"

February 14

My Beloved Mother,

Outside, lightning is flashing and thunder rolling. I'm reminded of the nights when I would curl up in my bed shaking with fear, longing for the refuge of a mother's chest.

Just when I'm about to be overcome by your absence once again, my father comes into my room to confess that you are alive! Holding out your address to me, he says that I can write to you.

The storm outside suddenly becomes my friend. The lightning bolts become camera flashes photographing my joy. "At last," I say to myself, "At last, I'll be reunited with my mother!"

Yes, Mom, it's unbelievable but true. My quest for you, which began such a long time ago, is about to come to a joyful end. In exactly one month's time, I'll be coming to see you!

The thought of meeting you after so many years fills me with such indescribable happiness. Yet, I feel my happiness is incomplete because you don't really know me.

I have recently begun writing a novel to help me introduce myself to you. The story is based on the things I experienced in my search for you. Oh, Mom, if you only knew what I've lived through in this endless search. I've objected to the Others, crossed an ocean and even spoken with a rose!

I wish I could send you a copy of my novel right away, but it isn't finished yet. However, I'd still like to share my story with you. To give you the feel of it, I've decided to send you a letter once a week, telling you about the different phases of my search.

I call these phases: "Objection", "Path", and "Annihilation". The last phase, "Rebirth," will start as soon as we are reunited.

Let me begin telling my story with the phase of Objection...

I was quite young when I asked myself this question: "Why don't I have a mother?"

But no matter how hard I tried, I could never find the answer.

However, if there was a question, there had to be an answer: Of course, I wasn't old enough then to reason like this; but at the time, I could still hear the voice of my heart.

"Don't ask, 'Why don't I have a mother?'" my heart said. "Ask the right question, ask 'Where is my mother?' Ask this to Someone-who-knows."

Someone-who-knows... Someone who knows... Someone with knowledge... My father!

"Dad, where is my mother?" I asked.

After hesitating for a moment, my father said, "Your mother is with God, my child."

Surely, that had to be the truth. Because God would live in the best place and my mother, too, would be worthy of the best place.

And so, "Where is God?" became my next question. My father looked at me as though I'd asked the oddest question in the world. Then, he answered: "I don't know."

Hoping maybe Others would know where you were, I asked them, "Do you know where my mother is?"

"Your mother doesn't exist," they said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, she died, she's not here anymore."

How was this possible? This thing, your dying, your being "not here." How could they suggest your absence when I felt your presence so strongly? Once again my heart spoke to me, "You feel your mother's presence, so she must exist."

I went up to Others and said, "My mother is alive!"

They gave me a different answer: "Your mother is some place far away."

I wasn't convinced by that, either, because I felt that you were very close.

They came up with yet a different answer: "You can only see your mother in the next world."

No! There had to be another answer.

"I'll go and search for God, then," I said to myself and asked Others if they knew where He was. If I could find that out, I'd also find out where you were. But soon, I realized that people's views on God were very confused. Some said, "God doesn't exist"; some, "God is some place far away"; and some, "You can only see God in the next world."

Again, there had to be another answer! But at least these answers showed I was on the right track. The clear similarity between Others' answers to the questions, "Where is God?" and "Where is my mother?" proved that you really were with God. Actually, I've recently come to realize that the phases of my search for you weren't too different from the ones in my search for God. In fact, they were the same.

So Mom... As time went by, seeing that my whole being was preoccupied with you, Others tried to distract me from you. They gave me many toys and playthings. These kept me entertained for a while, but soon I grew tired of them. They offered me new ones; more attractive, more expensive, more exciting toys...

Maybe, I thought, if my toys are constantly renewed, and if I am always given better toys, then I can keep myself entertained for the rest of my life. But, no, that's not what I really want. What I want is my mother!

What toy could make me happy if you were absent? But if you were with me, the lack of what toy could cloud my happiness?

So I was able to escape from the toy-trap, but before long, my search for you was interrupted again. Let me explain, Mom...