

Prologue

Tiago Díaz climbed through an open window of a recently vacated apartment and dropped to the floor. He peered back through the opening and, in pidgin Portuguese typical of the Brazilian underclass, gave the go-ahead to his cousin Abílio.

“Come on, nobody has moved in yet. Too much blood.”

“Hold on. I am not as tall as you.”

The boys silently scanned the abandoned space. Even though two of the four walls of the small apartment were spattered with blood, they dared not give too much significance to the grizzly scene. In order to cope with life in the *favela*, they had learned to hold the awareness of violence and injustice at arm’s length.

With a shrug, the cousins agreed there was nothing of value for them to claim, and they left the apartment to continue their rounds.

“Where are we meeting the others?” Abílio asked.

“Usual place – the cemetery,” said Tiago in a low voice as he led the way through an adjacent alley.

Their destination was a flat grassy area at the crest of a nearby hill, which is where they planned to meet the other three members of their little club. Paces away from this spot stood two poorly constructed crosses, suggesting that at least two graves lay nearby. Because nobody else ever seemed to go there, the boys would gather at this unofficial cemetery for the chance to show off their booty in private.

Moving away from the closely packed buildings as inconspicuously as they could, the boys made their way to a stand of trees where they would take the trail to their rendezvous. As they did so, their perspective gradually changed. With distance, the squalor of the favela was diminished, and this somehow gave it a reassuring wholeness. The colorful shanties seemed to have a symbiotic relationship with the subtropical hills on which they were so precariously placed. Several kilometers beyond these provisional homes, lower in altitude, sprawled the hub of the city.

Far below them, spread across 180 degrees of their panoramic view of Rio de Janeiro, lay Guanabara Bay, Jobim International Airport, Sugarloaf Mountain, and Copacabana Beach. It was an exotic view, but one which they had only experienced from a distance.

Tiago loved the weather in the late springtime. He especially liked the heady fragrances that wafted up the hillsides on the ocean breeze. He would soon turn ten, and he felt the promise of life floating to meet him, like the morning fog that transformed into the soft clouds that welcomed visitors to this stretch of the Brazilian coast in the summer months.

He felt a heightened sense of importance as Christmas approached, for that was his birthday. Sharing a birthday with the Christ was an important distinction, and Tiago seemed blessed by this influence. And, because he was both happy-go-lucky and focused, his friends granted him leadership in their little association.

Silvio and Ronaldo stood waiting as Tiago and Abílio raced the final fifty meters to the little plateau, huffing and puffing gleefully.

“Slow pokes ... Come on!” yelled Silvio, the tallest and hairiest of their little group. Ronaldo grinned and said nothing.

“What’s the hurry? We are not last!” called Abílio.

The four boys then directed their teasing at João, who dodged and darted from a slightly different direction, still half a kilometer down the mountain. The oldest at eleven and a half, he was the best collector among them.

“What do you bring, João?” asked Tiago as their friend stepped onto the grass from the last little rise.

“You will see,” said João. The others let him catch his breath while they repositioned themselves around an old wooden crate placed upside down in the middle of the little clearing. This was the table on which the boys would determine if anything of value could be sold, traded, or used to improve their sanctuary – a tree house with a retractable ladder.

“Look what I found,” said Ronaldo excitedly. He reached into his baggy cargo shorts and pulled out a slightly scuffed Motorola cell phone.

“Does it work?” asked Abílio.

“I haven’t tried it yet. A Vaquero left it on a table at Fat Man’s ... on the patio.”

“Shit, Ronaldo!” said Tiago.

“Don’t worry – nobody saw me. They had already left the bar. I was looking for my little sister.”

“How do you know it was a Vaquero?” João asked.

“It was on the table in the corner, the one with the marks carved in it. Nobody else will sit there.”

Tiago and Abílio exchanged a quick look and shuddered, for they had seen the Vaqueros' sign on the floor of the vacant apartment. It had been written in blood.

"Dios mio!" Silvio whispered, mirroring everybody's thoughts.

"That will be hard to beat," said Tiago, breaking the spell. He placed a small little cosmetic case, enclosed in faux leather, on the crate. Unzipping it, he showed off the shiny contents: tweezers, scissors, file, and a rectangular mirror held in place by Velcro.

"Not bad, Togo," Silvio said. "All I brought is a bottle of juice."

"Brilliant!" Ronaldo poked him. "After we drink it, you can pee in the bottle!"

The boys laughed.

"What I found is not much better," said Abílio as he emptied his pockets of an oddball collection of construction fasteners.

"Those might come in handy. We just need some tools," said Tiago.

"Okay, João, your turn," said Silvio. "Can you top mine?"

They all laughed again.

"I don't know," said João with a mock grimace. He opened a plastic grocery bag and withdrew a dark red mechanic's rag which he unrolled carefully. About a dozen AA batteries clattered onto the weathered crate, some of them falling to the ground.

Ronaldo picked them up and brushed them off. "These will fit in our radio!"

"Uh-huh," said João, beaming. He had come up with a portable radio months before, but the batteries had long since run down. It had been wrapped in plastic to protect it from the rain, then hidden with several other items under a nearby bush.

"What else?" Tiago pointed to the other pile of odds and ends that remained in the plastic bag.

“A coil of wire and some rope.”

“What did you do, rob a hardware store?” said Abílio.

João grinned. “My secret.”

After checking the perimeter for unwelcome visitors, including the occasional trespass by younger siblings or wannabes from the neighborhood, the boys moved the meeting to their treehouse, a hundred meters away. While Ronaldo grabbed the stowed cache of valuables, Tiago climbed the tree and lowered the ladder. After scrambling up like sailors ascending to the crow’s nest of a pirate ship, each boy settled into his own personalized niche.

João pried open the back of the radio and inserted four new batteries, and they all cheered when a familiar station came in loud and clear. The cheap transistor radio was their window to the larger world. Beyond their ramshackle village, beyond the city, beyond the people and goods that flowed through the airport and the shipyards, magical possibilities existed.

Tiago moved to his favorite perch, a gentle bend in one of the lower boughs of the tree. Through an opening in the lush canopy, he gazed out on the distant waves of the South Atlantic. His daydreams bypassed the city and the beaches below as he catapulted himself to invisible lands beyond the far horizon.

Chapter 1

Minerva Bennett doodled in the margin of the newspaper as she pondered the next definition. In her all-caps script, she inserted a long string of letters for 24 ACROSS and then two vertical words that became obvious as a result. While she considered the next word, she resumed the network of lines, curves, and shaded figures that gradually filled the space surrounding the crossword puzzle.

Glancing at the clock sitting on a nearby sideboard and noticing that the minute hand of the porcelain dial indicated it was a quarter past the hour, she reached for the intercom.

The 1970s device still functioned perfectly and had never lost its prominent position on her Louis XV writing desk. Her computer, meanwhile, was relegated to the corner of the work space, away from the stack of newspapers, magazines, the mechanical Rolodex, and an early push-button model telephone.

“Isabel, are my guests here yet?” she asked.

“Except for Mr. Proctor, yes. I’ll inform you the moment he arrives, Mrs. Bennett.”

“Thank you, Isabel.”

Her irritation quelled for the moment, Minerva searched her memory for a 9-letter word meaning “early form of communication.”

Ah-hah! SEMAPHORE, she thought. I yearn for those simpler days.

As she inserted the letters of the antiquated term, she smiled. She continued her internal monologue, thinking about the group she would meet with shortly. *These youngsters don't even know what that is. The world they've created for themselves runs on a different clock ... But there's still such a thing as being on time!*

Minerva rested her pale, slightly quivering hand, with its exquisite topography of veins, on the heel of her palm as she carefully thickened a line to give three-dimensionality to one of her shapes. *Not bad for an old gal like—*

“Mrs. Bennett,” interrupted Isabel softly from the door of the sitting room, “your guests are all here. They’re in the study.”

The housekeeper for Minerva Bennett for over twelve years, Isabel was fiftyish and slim. Trained to communicate concisely, she was fluent at reading her mistress’s thoughts and moods.

Minerva replaced the top of her pen with a satisfying click and set it on top of *The New York Times* puzzle. She stood up carefully, smoothed her skirt and blouse, and repositioned her shawl. As far as she was concerned, there was never a good reason not to look sharp and presentable. She walked the length of the main corridor of her penthouse, gathering her thoughts as she moved from her private rooms, past the dining room, living room, and library.

Her heart jumped a little as she considered her agenda. She wondered what they – her advisory staff – would say when she informed them of her vision. She imagined that she could already hear their protests.

Minerva entered through the heavy door of the study, and her five guests rose. Stewart Maxwell, principal legal counsel for the Koyne Foundation, bowed his head and smiled.

“Minerva, my dear, you look wonderful.” He was the only one of her many subordinates who had managed to attain a first-name relationship with her. She allowed it, perhaps because he was the nephew of one of her friends and only twenty years her junior.

“Thank you, Stewart. You’re looking sharp. I especially like your tie. It brings out the gray in your temples.” She spoke as she moved to her reserved chair by the fireplace, next to a side table with a water pitcher, reading glasses, tissue box, and intercom. She sat down, smoothed her skirt, and gestured to her guests to take their seats.

Next to her sat Catherine Myers, her executive assistant for five years. To her right was Brooks Mecom, the head fund manager and portfolio specialist.

Minerva turned and smiled at the youngest member of their team, Libby Armstrong. She had been lured to New York from San Francisco a year and a half earlier, initially to become Vice President of Development. After performing admirably, she was fast-tracked to replace the former president, who had, herself, been lured away by a marriage proposal. Libby brought a fresh west coast outlook and poise to the executive staff.

“I’m sorry I was late, Mrs. Bennett,” said Galen Proctor, fidgeting. “Cross-town traffic took me by surprise.”

“Well, none the worse for wear,” said Minerva with a hint of agitation.

Galen Proctor was her accountant. In his early fifties, he had never been comfortable in Minerva Bennett's presence.

Minerva had called this meeting in a more abrupt manner than usual, via a brief e-mail. The subject line had been vague: *Strategic Discussion*. No agenda had been included.

Since returning from almost two months of travels, including time in Italy and Greece, a week in Paris, and then a gala benefit and family reunion in Texas, she had been subtly different to those who knew her well – more impulsive, more imperious.

At eighty-seven, Minerva Bennett was in remarkable shape. But she had been on edge in recent weeks. This led some of her staff to accuse her, behind her back, of being unreasonable, even bitchy. Their simple diagnosis was that age was finally taking its toll.

Her closest friends, however, knew this was not the case. Beset by fears and doubts she had been grappling with for several years, Minerva was caught in a tempest of moodiness and introspection. For a woman who was at the peak of her reign, this was unsettling.

Two days earlier, just before 5:00 AM, her typical waking hour, Minerva had sat bolt upright. She had had a vivid dream and had remembered just enough of it to identify a connection to what had been haunting her. She had donned her housecoat and slippers and had padded into the library to search for a book – three books, it turned out. These had appeared in the cross-sensory strangeness typical to dreams, but there appeared to have been a common theme that tied into the fantasy. Chasing something, but not catching it, she was frustrated and maddened. The prey had then turned and chased her, the fright of which had awakened her.

The chasers had been an amalgam of beasts, dolls, and phantoms. But what kept them from rattling her too badly was the appearance of some story book characters that had profoundly affected her as a child. These characters had called out to her across time and space, and Minerva presumed there was some urgent message. If only she could piece it together.

After several minutes of scanning and poking about in her library, she spied a group of faintly familiar bindings on an upper shelf. These, she hoped, were the books that had been featured in her dream. They were among her oldest possessions.

Cover illustrations jumbled in her mind as several scenes echoed in her memory. Sitting in her favorite wingback chair, she recalled how her older sister Mary Catherine and she would sit up in bed and read stories aloud to one another. It was Mary Catherine who had taught her to read, even before she attended kindergarten in the neighborhood school.

As she sifted through the books, Minerva smiled at the happy little train on the cover of *The Little Engine That Could*. When she came across a vintage edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, she briefly considered canceling her appointments for the day to read it again. She set it aside, though, and kept searching for the ones that had called to her in her sleep.

When she picked up a first edition of *The Water-Babies*, by Charles Kingsley, she realized that it was one of the ones from her dream. She felt as if she were holding a sacred object; it had been in their family for almost one hundred years. Minerva couldn't recall the plot, but she somehow felt the magical spell it had cast eighty years before.

Then she came across *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and hugged it close to her breast. She opened it and smelled the pages, savoring the rich mixture of memories and emotions. Basically satisfied and prepared to give up her search for any more titles, Minerva noticed another stack of books on an even higher shelf. Though she was too old to go climbing up the rolling ladder, she decided to anyway. Half way up its fifteen-foot span, she grasped a book that looked familiar and carefully descended to the polished floor.

The moment she glimpsed the cover, she knew that it too had been featured in her dream. The reaction she experienced as she placed it on the table was out of all proportion. *A Little Princess*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, took her breath away. Her eyes stung with tears that gushed in from nowhere. She pursed her lips, ashamed at losing control.

In a flash of insight, the significance of her dream became clear – it was about the power of ideas. But it was more than that, she thought. It had to do with the portrayal of the undiluted optimism that she had acquired as a young child. This outlook, she suddenly realized, had been presented and reinforced by these books, forgotten for most of her adult life.

The distant irritation Minerva had been experiencing for months suddenly came into sharp relief in that moment of rediscovery. She felt as if the ground had fallen away and the sky had opened up.

What am I to do now? she asked herself as the weight of the books on her lap disappeared in a flash of excitement. She wanted to run through the park and scream like a child with delight.

The rapid replaying of that revelation two days prior now braced Minerva Bennett in the present of this meeting.

“I imagine you’re wondering why I summoned you this morning,” she said, but then immediately paused. She looked around, giving herself one final chance to back away from the precipice – to shift back into the usual, the comfortable ... the normal.

“For a number of years now, I’ve been wondering about things that we old people tend to wonder about. Specifically: what have *I* done to make the world a better place? This is a question that most of us think about at some point, since we all hope to leave the world better than we found it.

“This is the mission of the Koyne Foundation, of course, and I’m pleased with the help you have each contributed. For some time, though, I’ve wondered if we’re really doing all we can.

“I read the newspapers every day. I watch the news on TV ... and I wonder if *anything* is getting through.” Emotion swept across her face, and she halted momentarily.

“In short, I’ve been reflecting on our purpose. Yes, I know we give to worthy causes and worthy groups, all of which do good work. But ...” she paused again – not for effect, but out of fear – “I want to change our approach. I have a rough idea of what I want us to do, but I need your help in formulating it and making it work.”

As her senior advisor, Stewart Maxwell responded. “Minerva, I think I can speak for the others by saying how proud we are of the work we do, and ... there’s always room for improvement.”

Nodding, she continued. “Problems abound in the world, and they seem to be stacking up faster than ever. Solutions, however, seem to be lacking. We adults love to

bathe in our problems, and we love to imagine that we're open to solutions. It's only recently that I've begun to see through this delusion.

“During my recent travels, I had an opportunity to observe a certain segment of the population that doesn't hide behind this facade – namely *children*. Of course, children don't necessarily understand the full extent of our problems, but they naturally hold them to be temporary. They imagine and assume that solutions, even to the biggest problems, are high on everybody's list of priorities, and that we adults are actively involved in making things better.”

Sideways glances told Minerva that she was beating around the bush. She forged ahead.

“It occurs to me that all my money, my contributions, all the efforts of the Koyné Foundation, haven't really changed *anything*. I'm beginning to see my role as a philanthropist and patron of the arts as a subtle lie, as if—”

“Mrs. Bennett, I know I'm still pretty new to the organization,” interrupted Libby Armstrong, “but, from what I've experienced thus far, this foundation enjoys the highest reputation in the industry. I don't think I would have joi—”

“Yes, my dear. I know.” Minerva cut her off gently. “I have no doubt that our reputation is solid, but I can't ignore my recent revelation. Let me share some of the changes I'm considering.”

For the next several minutes, she painted a deliriously bright landscape of harmony, peace, prosperity, and hope. She became animated and enthusiastic, the bitter edginess that had colored her personality in recent months disappeared entirely.

Her guests sat there, frozen, captivated, even amused. As their chairman summarized her proposed objectives and the implied sweeping changes in the fundamental scope of the foundation, the mood in the room shifted awkwardly. Only her secretary maintained a neutral composure as she typed away at her notes. The others, perhaps because they were directly beholden to the Koyne Foundation in varying degrees, now looked at Minerva as if she had, in the space of half an hour, leapfrogged senility and lapsed directly into a sort of benign dementia.

Stewart Maxwell, who was originally hired to explicitly counterbalance all the “yes” men that would naturally surround the likes of Minerva Bennett, cleared his throat discreetly.

“I don’t know quite where to start, but I’ll begin by acknowledging that your vision is truly childlike in its purity and optimism. I guess my first question is: what specific changes are you imagining? I dare say that the Koyne Foundation is already doing a fine job of honoring the ideals of which you just spoke.”

“I was thinking the same thing, Mrs. Bennett,” added Brooks Mecom. “You talked about bringing the innocence of children into the process of problem solving, of giving young people a voice at the table ... fostering competition for solutions. What does that actually look like?”

“Regarding investment in education,” added Libby Armstrong, “especially elementary education, we could certainly adjust our annual giving to include more independent schools, charter schools, things of that sort.”

Then it was Galen Proctor’s turn. “Mrs. Bennett, you said you wanted to distribute a substantial portion of the principal in lump sums to ‘deserving leaders or

winners.’ For one thing, this would contradict our charter. Furthermore, I can only speculate as to the horrendous tax implications.”

Minerva nodded slightly, as if to say, *Yes – you heard me*, but she stayed silent for the moment.

Maxwell spoke again. “I’m not quite sure why, but you’re being very hard on yourself, Minerva. It’s as if you’re getting impatient to see the final outcome of your efforts, but that’s not realistic. And now you want to wave lots of money in the air for a bunch of strangers by holding a touchy-feely problem-solving competition.”

“Almost like a contest to *save the world!*” Brooks Mecom said sarcastically.

After several seconds of awkward silence, Minerva laughed. It was neither bitter nor resentful, but simple and melodious.

“I don’t blame any of you for being skeptical,” she responded. “Over the last couple of days, I’ve wondered myself if I’ve gone batty. I know that I’m talking about a bold break from our present course.” All eyes were on her to see if this were a softening of her stance.

Minerva continued, “But you heard me correctly. I *am* talking about giving away our money in a whole new way. I *do* want to somehow involve children. And, Brooks, I love your description of my idea: ‘a contest to save the world.’”

Relative to the accepted canon of mainstream charitable giving, the rest of the meeting was surreal. As Minerva affirmed that her idea was not a temporary flight of fancy, the looks of disbelief that flashed subtly back and forth among her staff hinted that they regarded her proposal to be nothing less than a fullscale repudiation of mainstream philanthropy.

She confirmed her intention to use the foundation's assets for some sort of global competition of ideals, and then she gave them a simple assignment. They were to identify any obstacles to such a shift, and then be prepared to offer counter measures. She finished with a warning.

“In light of the unusual nature of my proposal, and the changes under consideration, I want to remind each of you that, as a private foundation, our proceedings are secret and confidential. Not only would such changes affect each of us here in this room, they would have ramifications far and wide. If any of this gets out to the investment community, or to any of our annual recipients, there will be serious personal fallout.” She paused and looked each of them in the eye to insure that her meaning was clear.

“As you gather the facts and figures I've asked for, you'll need to show your hand to a degree. Nevertheless, I expect you to conceal your inquiries and cover your tracks in the vaguest speculations possible.”

As her guests gathered their belongings and made their way to the elevator, Minerva wondered darkly at the nature of this new course.

What have I done?

* * * * *

Minerva put on her overcoat and gloves so she could endure the crisp December air. Her Central Park penthouse offered one of the finer views in the hemisphere, and she liked to stand on the terrace and gaze upon the city.

She stepped carefully onto the tiled patio, slid the door shut, and weaved through the groupings of patio furniture and potted plants toward the open space. Some of the plants had been covered in plastic for the coming freezes; the more fragile ones had been moved indoors, to the alcove next to the sunroom.

Standing near the center of her terrace, she scanned the entire city. It was fantastic and beautiful. She could see a hundred buildings: the grand and gothic nestled with the simple and prismatic, all positioned in an elegantly simple grid. She liked them all. Their sky-scraping edges flaunted space itself, and their exhalations of vented exhaust, pure white against the deep blue of the sky, brought them to life as familiar giants.

Hearing the muffled traffic below, Minerva was comforted by the faint sounds of acceleration and the staccato punctuation of honking. As she looked skyward, the cacophony was softened by the silence of several airliners, miles above, tracing the sky with their contrails.

She fell into a brief rapture, inspired by the direct perception of a transcendent order and harmony, of which she felt an integral part. The doubt that had burrowed into her mind began to dissolve, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, Lord,” she whispered solemnly. She liked the numbing sensations of the cold wind on the tears in the corners of her eyes. Hands in her pockets, she made no attempt to wipe away her tears. They helped her feel alive.

As she liked to do in solitary moments such as this, especially when overcome with gratitude, Minerva took an inventory of the angels in her life: friends, loved ones, teachers ... some passed on, some still alive. Any lingering loneliness evaporated as she

recalled the tender smile of her sister Mary Catherine, the powerful gaze of her first husband Bill Fielding, and the friendly confiding embrace of her second husband JB.

Other faces flashed through her mind, mostly from her generation ... Gladys, Louisa, Father Ellison ... but suddenly a young man's face eclipsed the others, plunging her into a vivid reminiscence of the recent events that had precipitated her altered outlook.