

## CHAPTER THREE

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*This little book belongs to  
María Teresa*

*1945 to 1946*

*Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception  
Saint's Day of our school!*

*Dear Little Book,*

Minerva gives you to me today for my First Communion. You are so pretty with a mother of pearl cover and a little latch like a prayerbook. I will have such fun writing on your tissue-thin pages.

Minerva says keeping a diary is also a way to reflect and reflection deepens one's soul. It sounds so serious. I suppose now that I've got one I'm responsible for, I have to expect some changes.

*Sunday, December 9*

*Dear Little Book,*

I have been trying to reflect, but I can't come up with anything.

I love my new shoes from my First Communion. They're white leather with just a little heel like a grownup young lady. I practiced a lot beforehand, and I must say, I didn't wobble once on my way to the altar. I was so proud of myself.

Mamá and Dedé and Patria and my little nephew Nelson and my little niece Noris came all the way from Ojo de Agua just to watch me make my First Communion. Papá couldn't come. He is too busy with the cacao harvest.

*Wednesday, December 12*

*Dear Little Book,*

It is hard to write in you here at school. First, there is hardly any free time except for prayers. Then, when I do take a minute, Daysi and Lidia come up sneaky and grab you. They toss you back and forth while I run after them trying to catch you. Finally, they give you back, giggling the whole time like I'm being silly keeping a diary.

And you might not know this, Little Book, but I always cry when people laugh at me.

*Feast Day of Santa Lucía*

*Dear Little Book,*

Tonight, we will have the candle lighting and all our eyes will be blessed on account of Santa Lucía. And guess what? I have been chosen to be Santa Lucía by all the sisters! I'll get to wear my First Communion dress and shoes all over again and lead the whole school from the dark courtyard into the lit-up chapel.

I have been practicing, walking up and down the Stations of the Cross with a blessed look on my face, not an easy thing when you are trying to keep your balance. I think saints all lived before high heels were invented.

*Saturday, December 15*

*Dear Little Book,*

What does it mean that I now *really* have a soul?

All I can think of is the picture in our Catechism of a valentine with measles. That is the soul when it commits mortal sins. Venial sins are lighter, like a rash instead of measles. A rash that goes away even without Confession if you say an Act of Contrition.

I asked Minerva what it means to her, having a soul. We had been talking about Daysi and Lidia and what I should do.

Minerva says a soul is like a deep longing in you that you can never fill up, but you try. That is why there are stirring poems and brave heroes who die for what is right.

I have that longing, I guess. Sometimes before a holiday or a birth-

day party, I feel like I'm going to burst. But Minerva says that's not exactly what she meant.

Sunday, December 16

Dear Little Book,

I don't know if you realize how advanced I am for my age?

I think it's because I have three older sisters, and so I've grown up quick. I knew how to read before I even started school! In fact, Sor Asunción put me in fourth, though really, I should have been in third with the other tens.

My penmanship is also very pretty as you will have noticed. I've won the writing prize twice, and I would have this week, too, but I decided to leave some i's undotted. It doesn't help with the other girls if you are best all the time.

At first, Mamá didn't even want me to leave home. But she agreed it made sense for me to come since this is Minerva's last year at Inmaculada Concepción, and so I would have family here to look after me my first year.

Don't tell anyone: I don't like it here that much. But after we talked Mamá into letting me board, I have to pretend. At least, Minerva is here with me even if she sleeps in another hall.

And you are here with me too, my dear Little Book.

Thursday, December 20

My dear Little Book,

Tomorrow, Minerva and I take the train home for the holidays. I can't wait! My soul is full of longing all right.

I long to see Papá, whom I haven't seen in three whole months!  
And my rabbits, Nieve and Coco. I wonder how many new ones I have?  
And Tono and Fela (they work for us) making a fuss over me.

And my room (I share with Minerva) with the windows you throw open on the garden with its bougainvillea arch like the entrance to a magic kingdom in a storybook.

And to be called Mate. (We're not allowed nicknames here. Even Dedé was called Bélgica, which no one has ever called her.)

I guess I will miss some things here.

Like dear Sor Milagros who always helps me braid my hair with ribbons. And Daysi and Lidia who have been so nice lately. I think it helped that Minerva had a talk with them.

But I will NOT miss waking up at six and early morning Matins and sleeping in a big dormitory hall with rude sleepers who snore and Rest & Silence every day and wearing a navy blue serge uniform when there are so many nicer colors and fabrics in the world.

And the chocolate not made with enough chocolate.

*Sunday, December 23*

*Home!*

*My dear,*

Minerva explained everything to me in detail and with diagrams as we were coming home on the train. I was not one bit surprised. First, she had already told me about cycles, and second, we do live on a farm, and it's not like the bulls are exactly private about what they do. But still, I don't have to like it. I am hoping a new way will be found by the time I am old enough to be married.

Oh dear, everyone is calling me to come see the pig Tío Pepe brought for tomorrow's Christmas Eve party.

To be continued, Little Book.

*Later*

Back to the train coming home. A young man started following us around, saying Minerva was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. (She's always getting compliments when we walk on the street.)

Just as Minerva and I were going to sit down, this young man dashes forward and wipes our seat with his handkerchief. Minerva thanks him, but doesn't really give him the time of day. At least not the time he wants, which is the invitation to sit with us.

We thought we'd gotten rid of him. We were riding along, the *thing* lesson being done, and here he comes again with a cone of roasted cashews he bought for us at the last stop. He offers it to me, although I'm not to accept tokens from strange men either.

And yet, and yet . . . those cashews smell so yummy and my stomach is growling. I look up at Minerva with my sad puppy dog look, and she gives me the nod. "Thank you very much," I say, taking the cone, and suddenly, the young man is sitting to my left, and peering at the lesson on my lap.

"What a lovely drawing," he says. I could have died! There it was, the thing and its two balls. Minerva and I giggled so hard, I started choking on a cashew, and the young man smiled away, thinking he had said something very clever!

Christmas Eve

My dearest, darling Little Book!

I am so excited! Christmas and then New Year's and then Three Kings—so many holidays all at once! It is hard to sit still and reflect! My soul just wants to have fun!

My little niece and nephew are staying through Three Kings' Day. Yes, at ten, I am an aunt twice over. My sister Patria has those two babies and is pregnant with a third one. Noris is so cute, one year old, my little doll. Nelson is three and his is the first boy's thing I've seen close up, not counting animals.

First Day of 1946

Little Book,

I pulled out *Regular* from under my pillow for my New Year's fortune. Mamá frowns that this isn't allowed by the pope, but I have to think fortunes really do tell the truth. My first day of the year wasn't *Good* and it wasn't *Bad*, just *Regular*.

It started out with Patria scolding me for telling Nelson ghost stories. I know that Patria is pregnant and not feeling all that well. Still, doesn't she remember she used to play *Dark Passages* with me when I was only four?

And it was Fela who told me the zombie story. I just repeated it.

It takes the joy out of making my resolves, but here they are.

Resolves of María Teresa Mirabal for 1946:

I resolve not to scare Nelson with scary stories.

I resolve to be diligent with my tasks and not fall asleep when I say my prayers.

I resolve not to think of clothes when I am in church.

I resolve to be chaste, as that is a noble thing to do. (Sor Asunción said we should all resolve this as young ladies in the holy Catholic and Apostolic church.)

I resolve not to be so tenderhearted as even Minerva says crying will bring on prematuring wrinkles.

I think that is enough resolves for a *regular* year.

Friday, January 4

Dearest Little Book,

We went all the way to the shops in Santiago. They were swamped. Everyone shopping for Three Kings. We had a list made up with things we needed. Papá had given me some money for helping him out at the store. He calls me his little secretary.

I talked Mamá into letting me buy another pair of shoes. She didn't see why I needed a second pair since she just got me my First Communion ones. But these newest ones are *patent leather*, and I have *always* wanted patent leather shoes. I must admit Minerva helped with some of the convincing.

Minerva is so smart. She always finds ways around Mamá.

Like today, Minerva found this cute red-and-white checkered swimsuit with a little skirt. When she went to buy it, Mamá reminded Minerva of her *promesa*. Last night at dinner, Minerva announced that this year she's giving up swimming in our lagoon in exchange for divine help in becoming a lawyer. Minerva drops hints as big as bombs, Papá always says.

"I don't plan to use it," Minerva explained to Mamá. "But how can my *promesa* have any bite unless I have a pretty suit to tempt me?"

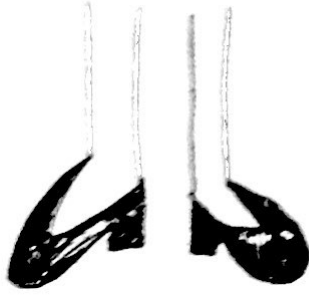
"You are going to argue with Saint Peter at the gate," Mamá said. But she was smiling and shaking her head.

Minerra's new  
swimsuit



(The bag  
doesn't come  
with it)

My new shoes



(The heels are  
snap-ons)

Saturday, January 5

Dear Little Book,

Cousin Berto is so dear. His older brother Raúl, too, but Berto is especially special-minded, if that is a word.

Yesterday when Tía Flor was up with the boys, Mamá was bemoaning that her rose bushes were so scrabbly and saying she wasn't going to be seeing much of her favorite flowers this year. Right after breakfast this morning, Berto appears with a big basketful of the most beautiful roses for her he had picked himself. Tía's garden has been blooming every variety. Berto had arranged them so specially in the basket. He had picked them with long stems too. Isn't that unheard of for a boy?

The whole house is as sweet as a perfume shop this morning.

Three Kings Day

Dear Little Book,

I had such a time deciding between the patent leather and white leather for church today. I finally settled for the white pair as Mamá picked those out for my First Communion, and I wanted her to feel that they were still my favorites.

Afterwards at Three Kings dinner with all the uncles and cute

cousins, there was a funny little moment. Tío Pepe reminded us of the big parade next Sunday for Benefactor's Day, and Minerva said something like why don't we go celebrate at the cemetery. The room went silent as a tomb, all right.

I guess I do have a reflection. Why should we celebrate Benefactor's Day in the cemetery? I asked Minerva, but she said it was just a bad joke, forget she said so.

*Benefactor's Day*

*My dear Little Book,*

We're expecting Tío Pepe any moment. He is coming in the old wagon and taking us to the celebrations in Salcedo. After the parade, there's going to be recitations and a big party over at the town hall. Papá is going to say the speech for the Trujillo Tillers!

This time I'm inaugurating my patent leather shoes and a baby blue poplin dress with a little jacket to match. Patria made them for me with fabric I picked out.

While we're waiting, I am taking these few minutes to wish El Jefe Happy Benefactor's Day with all my heart. I feel so lucky that we have him for a president. I am even born the same month he is (October) and only nine days (and forty-four years!) apart. I keep thinking it shows something special about my character.

*Monday, January 14*

*Dear best friend Little Book,*

Back at school after the holidays, and I am so homesick. Really, I am writing to keep myself from crying.

Daysi is now best friends with Rita. They both live in Puerto Plata, so they became best friends over the holidays. Maybe Lidia will be my best friend now. She is not coming back until after the Virgencita's feast day on the 21st as her whole family is making the pilgrimage to Higüey.

We are having Rest & Silence before lights-out. We must keep quiet and not visit with each other, but think only of our immortal souls.

I am so tired of mine.



Monday, February 18

Dear Little Book,

This morning without warning, I was summoned to the principal's office, and my heart dropped when I saw Minerva there, too. At first, I thought someone had died in our family until I noticed Minerva eye-balling me as if to say, watch what you say, girl.

Sor Asunción comes right out and says your older sister has been caught sneaking out of school. Then, before I can even put that in my head, she asks me if our Tío Mon, who lives in La Vega, is ill, yes or no. I take one look at Minerva's sick-looking face and I nod yes, our Tío Mon is ill, and then I invent with *sarampión*, last I heard.

Minerva's face recovers. She flashes our principal an I-told-you-so look.

I guess I even improved upon her lie. Now Minerva could explain her sneaking out. *Sarampión's* so contagious, the sisters would've never let her visit if she'd asked.

Thursday, February 21

Dear Little Book,

I've been worrying about Minerva sneaking out and lying about Tío Mon. Today, after our courtyard rosary, I cornered her behind the statue of the Merciful Mother. What is going on? I asked, but she tried to brush me off with a joke, "Now, little sister, you don't want us to talk behind the Virgin's back, do you?"

I said yes, yes I do. So Minerva said I was too young to be told some things. That made me angry. I told her that if I was going to commit a Mortal sin, as lying to a religious can't be Venial, the least Minerva could do was tell me what I was risking my immortal soul for.

She seemed pretty impressed with my arguing back at her like that. She's always telling me to stand up for myself, but I guess she didn't figure I'd stand up to her.

She promised to tell me later when we can have a more private conversation.

Sunday, February 24

Little Book,

The whole school went to the Little Park of the Dead today. Minerva and I had a chance to talk and she told me everything. Now I am worried to death again. I swear my older sister will be the death of me!

It turns out she and Elsa and Lourdes and Sinita have been going to some secret meetings over at Don Horacio's house! Don Horacio is Elsa's grandfather who is in trouble with the police because he won't do things he's supposed to, like hang a picture of our president in his house. Minerva says the police don't kill him because he is so old, he will soon die on his own without any bother to them.

I asked Minerva why she was doing such a dangerous thing. And then, she said the strangest thing. She wanted me to grow up in a free country.

"And it isn't that already?" I asked. My chest was getting all tight. I felt one of my asthma attacks coming on.

Minerva didn't answer me. I supposed she could see that I was already upset enough. She took both my hands in hers as if we were getting ready to jump together into a deep spot in the lagoon of Ojo de Agua. "Breathe slowly and deeply," she intoned, "slowly and deeply."

I pictured myself on a hot day falling, slowly and deeply, into those cold layers of water. I held on tight to my sister's hands, no longer afraid of anything but that she might let go.

Monday, February 25

Dearest Little Book,

It is so strange now I know something I'm not supposed to know. Everything looks just a little different.

I see a *guardia*, and I think, who have you killed. I hear a police siren, and I think who is going to be killed. See what I mean?

I see the picture of our president with eyes that follow me around the room, and I am thinking he is trying to catch me doing something wrong. Before, I always thought our president was like God, watching over everything I did.

I am not saying I don't love our president, because I do. It's like if I were to find out Papá did something wrong. I would still love him, wouldn't I?

Sunday, March 3

*Oh dear! Little Book!*

Tío Mon appears today for visiting hours with some letters and a parcel for us, and almost the first words out of Sor Asunción's mouth are "And how are you feeling, Don Ramón?" I just about died of flabbergastedness, if that is a word. Minerva, who is much quicker on her feet, just hooked her arm in his and whisked him away saying, "Tío Mon, a nice stroll will do you good." Tío Mon looked a little confused, but Minerva had him through the arm as well as around her little finger, so off he goes.

About the letters he brought me. Dear Little Book, here I am ten years old and already getting beaux. Berto wrote again. I've shown Minerva all his letters and she smiles and says they are "sweet, boyish letters."

I confess I didn't show her his last one.

It's not that it was mushy, but I felt sort of shy about it. Berto wrote so sympathizingly about my homesickness and signed himself, "your Stronghold."

I do like the sound of that.

Tuesday, April 30

*Dearest Little Book,*

This new friend of Minerva's, Hilda, is really rude. She wears trousers and a beret slanted on her head like she is Michelangelo. Minerva met her at one of her secret meetings at Don Horacio's house. Very soon this Hilda was always at Inmaculada. I think the sisters felt sorry for her because she is some kind of orphan. Rather, she made herself an orphan, I am sure. Her parents probably just died of shock to hear that girl talk!

She says the most awful things like she isn't sure God exists. Poor Sor Asunción. She keeps giving Hilda little booklets to read that will

explain everything. I've seen what happens to those little booklets the minute our principal turns her back. The nuns have let her get away with her fresh ways for a while, but today, they finally put their foot down.

Sor Asunción asked Hilda if she wouldn't like to join us for Holy Communion, and Hilda said that she liked a heartier menu!

So, she was asked to leave and not come back. "She has a very poor attitude," is how Sor Asunción explained it, "and your sister and her friends are catching it." Although I hated to hear anyone criticize Minerva, I had to agree about Hilda.

*Friday, June 27*

*My dear secret Little Book,*

All week guards have been coming in and out, looking for Hilda.

Minerva has told me the whole story.

Hilda appeared a few nights ago at Inmaculada wanting to hide! What happened was she hid some secret papers in the trunk of a car she borrowed, and she ran out of gas on the highway. A friend came to pick her up, and they got some gas in a can at a station, but when they were on the way back, they saw police swarming around the car. The trunk was pried open. Hilda got her friend to drop her off at Inmaculada where she woke up Minerva and her friends. They all argued what to do. Finally, they decided they had to ask the sisters for help.

So, late that night, they knocked on the convent door. Sor Asunción appeared, in her night dress, wearing a nightcap, and Minerva told her the problem.

Minerva said she still doesn't know if Sor Asunción agreed to help Hilda out of the goodness of her heart or because this was a perfect lesson to teach that fresh girl. Imagine! Hilda, who doesn't even believe in God!

The police have been here again today. They passed right by Sor Hilda with her hands tucked in her sleeves and her head bowed before the statue of the Merciful Mother. If I weren't so scared, I'd be laughing.

Thursday, July 4  
Home at last!

*Dear Little Book,*

Minerva graduated this last Sunday. Everyone went to La Vega to watch her get her diploma. Even Patria with her stomach big as a house. She is expecting any day now.

We are home for the summer. I can't wait to go swimming. Minerva says she's taking me to our lagoon and diving right in herself in her "temptation" swimsuit. She says why keep her *promesa* when Mamá and Papá still won't let her go to law school in the capital?

I'm going to spend the summer learning things I *really* want to learn! Like (1) doing embroidery from Patria (2) keeping books from Dedé (3) cooking cakes from my Tía Flor (I'll get to see more of my cute cousin Berto, and Raúl, too!!!) (4) spells from Fela (I better not tell Mamá!) (5) how to argue so I'm right, and anything else Minerva wants to teach me.

Sunday, July 20

*Oh Little Book,*

We all just got back from the cemetery burying Patria's baby boy that was born dead yesterday.

Patria is very sad and cries all the time. Mamá keeps repeating that the Lord knows what he does and Patria nods like she doesn't half believe it. Pedrito just cracks his knuckles and consoles her by saying that they can have another one real soon. Imagine making such a gross promise to someone who is already having a hard enough time.

They are going to stay with us until she feels better. I am trying to be brave, but every time I think of that pretty baby dead in a box like it doesn't have a soul at all, I just start to cry.

I better stop till I get over my emotions.

Wednesday, in a hurry

*My dearest Little Book, Oh my dearest,*

Minerva asks if I'm ready to hand you over. I say, give me a minute to explain things and say goodbye.

*In the Time of the Butterflies*

Hilda has been caught! She was grabbed by the police while trying to leave the convent. Everyone in Don Horacio's meeting group has been told to destroy anything that would make them guilty.

Minerva is burying all her poems and papers and letters. She says she hadn't meant to read my diary, but it was lying around, and she noticed Hilda's name. She says it was not really right to read it, but sometimes you have to do something wrong for a higher good. (Some more of that lawyer talk she likes so much!) She says we have to bury you, too.

It won't be forever, my dear Little Book, I promise. As soon as things are better, Minerva says we can dig up our treasure box. She's told Pedrito about our plan and he's already found a spot among his cacao where he's going to dig a hole for us to bury our box.

So, my dearest, sweetest Little Book, now you know.

Minerva was right. My soul has gotten deeper since I started writing in you. But this is what I want to know that not even Minerva knows. What do I do now to fill up that hole?

*Here ends my Little Book*

*Goodbye  
for now, not forever  
(I hope)*