



Fundación **MAPFRE**

The Crooked Sign

Carlo Frabetti

The Crooked Sign

CARLO FRABETTI was born in Italy and lives in Spain. He has been writing in Spanish for many years. He is inquisitive, observant and incredibly skilled at merging seemingly unconnected worlds. He combines his mathematical background with his passion for classic stories, humor with narrative rigor, complex novels for adults with successful collections of children's books and scripts for well-known TV programs such as "*La bola de cristal*".

The Fundación MAPFRE Educational Project in Prevention and Road Safety is an initiative to prevent child accidents and to promote road safety in the educational environment.

First edition: October, 2011

First reprint: October, 2016

Coordination: Fundación MAPFRE

Educational design and publication: Mr. Garamond

Design and layout: David Sueiro and Elena Fernández

English translation: Carla Davidson

Text © Carlo Frabetti

Edition © Fundación MAPFRE

Paseo de Recoletos, 23

28004. Madrid

www.fundacionmapfre.org

All rights reserved. Any form of reproduction, distribution, public communication, or transformation of this work is only permitted with the authorization of its owners, save for exceptions provided by law.

ISBN: 978-84-9844-621-0

Legal deposit: M-39077-2016

THE CROOKED SIGN

Carlo Frabetti

Fundación **MAPFRE**

Zebras, cyclists and mopeds

Sonia's fifteenth birthday was just three months away and for the first time in her short yet intense life, she knew exactly and way in advance what she wanted for her birthday: a moped. But as they had warned her at least a dozen times, her parents were not going to give her one unless she passed what they called their "rigorous tests of skill and responsibility".

Sonia was not entirely sure what some of these tests consisted of, how many of them there were, or when her parents were "testing" her without her realizing it, which sometimes made her quite nervous. The promise of the moped (or rather, the threat of not giving her one) at times seemed to her like a kind of constant blackmail.

All she knew for sure was that it wasn't going to be easy to get what she wanted. Sonia's dad was a textile salesman so he had to do a lot of driving. And that's why he knew "the roads are worse than the jungle" — a phrase he liked to repeat over and over again. He wasn't going to let his daughter go out into the jungle alone if he didn't think she was perfectly ready to do so.

'Did you know that a cyclist has got more chances of being run over by a car than a zebra does of being devoured by a lion?' asked Sonia's dad the first time she told him what she wanted for her birthday.

'That's exactly why I want a moped, dad. Then I can go faster than the cyclist and the zebra,' she said.

'Bad start,' her father said. 'Zebras can gallop at around 40 miles per hour and a moped can't go over...'

'30 miles per hour, I know, dad. I didn't know that zebras were so fast though.'

'Ok, well I exaggerated a little. They actually

rarely go over 35...in fact, when can a moped go faster than that?’

‘On a highway. In that case it has to go 40 miles per hour, like your super-fast zebra, because that’s the minimum speed on highways and expressways.’

‘But mopeds can’t drive on highways or expressways...or can they?’

‘Never on expressways, but they can drive on the shoulder of a highway if there is no alternative route.’

‘And if her parents do not absolutely forbid her to do so.’

‘Fine, dad, I won’t ride on highways, not even if there is no alternative route and no other way to get to the concert of the year.’

‘Hold your horses...I mean moped. This is a purely hypothetical conversation. Don’t say “I won’t ride” as if it were already a done deal...I’m not sure fifteen years is old enough to drive a motor vehicle.’

‘But, dad, they used to give out licenses at fourteen...’

‘And that’s exactly why they had to change the law. They realized it was insane to put a potentially dangerous vehicle in the hands of some kids.’

‘Don’t be such an old fuddy-duddy, dad. A moped isn’t a “potentially dangerous vehicle”. It’s just a bicycle you don’t have to pedal...’

Many more “purely hypothetical conversations” ensued and in the end, her parents, albeit reluctantly, said that it wasn’t entirely impossible that Sonia’s birthday present might be a moped. And so she started to save up to buy herself one of those helmets that would protect her head a lot but allow her to show off even more.

Sonia’s best friend, Ana, who was seven months older than her, had recently tried out her brand-new, red, 50cc moped for the first time, and they were hoping to go everywhere together. Well, almost everywhere. At high school, during recess, they went over the theory questions. To get a license, you had to pass a 20-question test, and you could only get two

wrong. That morning, Sonia felt like talking about other things but her friend was a determined teacher.

‘When the road is wet, which part is particularly slippery?’ asked Ana, taking a big bite out of her sandwich.

‘Tell me the three choices, smarty-pants,’ protested Sonia.

‘OK, I’ll make it easy for you,’ said Ana with her mouth full, ‘uphill parts, recently asphalted parts, or the marks painted on the road.’

‘The marks painted on the road,’ said Sonia after hesitating for a moment, ‘because the paint makes the surface smoother. And you didn’t make it easy for me.’

‘You’re right. It’s one of the hardest ones. Most people say “the uphill parts” because it seems like you would slip more on the slope... Let’s see, what would you do if you had a traffic cop in front of you moving his hand up and down?’

‘Is he cute?’

‘Brad Pitt’s double.’

‘In that case, I would slam on the brakes and ask him to show me his badge and, while we’re at it, give me his telephone number, too. If it’s not Brad Pitt, though, I would slow down.’

‘Good. How much would you slow down?’

‘Don’t ask me any trick questions. That’s not mentioned in the handbook.’

‘OK, well, say you would slow down at your own discretion, in other words, whatever you feel like...Third question — you have your moped now, we’re riding together, and I fall...’

‘Hey, that one isn’t on the DMV test.’

‘Maybe not exactly that one, but a similar one. I fall off and I’m lying on the ground. Do you take my helmet off so I can breathe better, only take it off if I’m conscious, or not take it off at all?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you might have injured your back and moving your neck might damage your spine. And then who would I ride my moped with?’

The unnecessary sign

One of the “rigorous tests of skill and responsibility” that Sonia had to pass if she wanted to become the brand-new owner of a moped was to go with her father one afternoon a week on his frequent trips as a textiles salesman.

‘What nerve! And while I’m at it, I get to help you with your textiles samples that weigh a ton,’ protested Sonia as they finished loading up the trunk of the car.

‘What you mean to say is that while you’re at it you’ll get some exercise,’ responded her father with a grin. ‘It’s good for you to keep in shape so you will be able to handle your potentially dangerous vehicle.’

‘As if you were going to buy me a Tomahawk...’

‘That’s a missile, honey.’

‘You’re so behind the times, dad. The Dodge Tomahawk is a motorcycle that goes up to 400 miles per hour. But don’t worry, I won’t be asking you for that one until I’m eighteen...’

As they left the housing development, Sonia’s father stopped at an intersection where he had the right of way. Since he had told his daughter to mention anything on the road that caught her attention, she asked him, ‘Why did you stop, dad?’

‘Because I’m cautious,’ he said, as he set off again after ensuring that no-one was coming.

‘It’s one thing to be cautious. But being scared is something else altogether, dad. You’ve got the right of way.’

‘Yes, but I knew that intersection wasn’t safe.’

‘Did your sixth sense tell you that some drunk was about to go right past the “yield sign?”

‘Yesterday I saw with my own eyes that the “yield” sign on that street was partly covered by tree branches. Naturally, I informed the Council but I doubt they will have done anything about it yet, so a little extra caution is needed.’

‘I’ll make a note of the camouflaged “yield” sign since they probably still won’t have fixed the problem when I start driving, and I’ll also make a note of the wise fatherly advice.’

‘You can pick on your father, he’s used to it, but don’t push your luck with the driving instructor.’

Sonia’s father didn’t drive towards the highway as he normally did, heading instead to a secondary road that passed through several nearby villages. She deduced that he did it to have more chances to test her knowledge.

‘Taking a shortcut, dad?’ she asked with a smile.

‘Yes,’ he answered, mimicking her sarcastic tone, ‘an educational shortcut to your road safety training.’

Just as Sonia had expected, the class began a few moments later. As they crossed a small deserted village, her father said to her, 'look at the car behind us. What is the driver doing wrong?'

Sonia turned and stared at the bald, chubby man in the vehicle right behind them.

'He's not smoking, he's not talking on his cellphone, he's wearing his seat belt, he's got both hands on the steering wheel, he's facing forwards...I don't think he's doing anything wrong.'

'Are you sure he's not talking on his cellphone, not even with a hands-free device?'

'First of all, talking with a hands-free device, although some people think it's better not to, is not a violation. And secondly, no, he's not talking, not even with a hands-free device.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he's not moving his mouth and he's got a dumb look on his face.'

'There you have it, that's what he's doing wrong.'

‘Dad, you’re going too far today. If having a dumb look on your face were a violation, half of the male population would have already lost their license.’

‘The violation is that you can see it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That he’s close enough, in spite of the sun reflecting on the windshield, for you to see that he’s not moving his mouth and that he has an expressionless look on his face, which is the polite way to say that someone has a dumb look on their face. And that means he’s not keeping a safe distance.’

‘But, dad, we’re going 20 miles per hour!’

‘Meaning that the vehicle behind us would have to be...how many meters away?’

‘A number of meters equal to the square of the speed expressed in miriameters,’ said Sonia in a hurry. ‘So three times three, nine. And how far away is this dumb face?’

‘No more than five meters away. If a reckless child were to run across the street and make me slam on my brakes, dumb face would cer-

tainly hit the back of our car. At this speed and with our seat belts on, nothing would happen, but it's better to avoid it. Don't you think?'

'Good thing that there aren't many crazy children crossing the street with no warning because I'm afraid that hardly anyone keeps a safe distance.'

'Hardly anyone, it's true. But your mother and father do. And I hope you will too. To do that, the first thing you need is to learn to calculate distances at a glance. Let's practice a little...'

For the next few minutes, Sonia focused on calculating the distances between their car and the cars in front or behind it. At first, she tended to estimate a few meters too much but eventually she got closer to the real distance.

When in doubt, like with fire and bad friends, better to be too far than too close,' concluded her father as he rounded a curve.

On the right, close to the road in the inside of the curve, there was a small fenced-in

area that had to be a cemetery. An old man with a strange look about him, wearing a hat that looked like it had been chewed by a dog suddenly came out of it and started running at the car, making strange gestures and horrible faces. He didn't appear to be a homeless person because his clothing, although dirty and wrinkled, was elegant and well-made. Judging from his gestures and the agitated look on his face, he could have been a madman who had just escaped from some mental hospital...if it weren't for the fact that there weren't any of those for miles around.

'There aren't any crazy children on the road, but there are crazy old men,' said Sonia.

'And drunks, and people who are careless, sleepy, loutish, and reckless; cellphone addicts, compulsive chain smokers, people who are half-blind, lunatics... That's why you can never be too careful,' said her father.

A few seconds later, Sonia asked: 'Did you notice the sign before the curve, dad?'

'Yes. Are you testing me?'

‘That’s right. What was strange about it?’

‘Strange? Well, I thought it was unnecessary, really, because it wasn’t a dangerous curve. It was very open and there was good visibility.’

‘Correct. And why is that?’

‘A simple error of judgment, I suppose. In any case, it doesn’t matter. The contrary would be worrying — if they didn’t mark it as a dangerous curve and it was very tight...or maybe that crazy old man is always there and that makes it dangerous.’

A strange dream

That night, Sonia had a strange dream.

It was her birthday and there was a huge package with a red bow sitting on her front doorstep. And inside the package there was a lovely silver moped, which looked like a smaller version of the Dodge Tomahawk.

Sonia mounted her brand-new vehicle and rode around the housing development. All of the cars yielded and all of the traffic lights turned green as she approached; even the tree branches moved out of the way so that she could see the traffic signs clearly.

Then she left the development and took the same road she and her father had taken that afternoon.

As she reached the “dangerous curve” sign, it began to get bigger and fluctuate and ended up superimposing the road itself. It did so in such a way that Sonia had to turn abruptly to the right, following the arrow in the sign, which had now turned into the road. She ended up crashing into the cemetery wall although neither she nor her moped got hurt.

At the cemetery gate, the crazy old man who had run at their car beckoned for her to enter, gesticulating like a traffic cop directing vehicles. Sonia went in. She walked among the graves, coming to a stop in front of an open one. It looked like a bottomless pit.

The old man suddenly appeared right next to her and pushed her, making her fall very slowly, like Alice down the rabbit hole. Through the darkness she fell and fell and fell...until she landed on something soft.

It was her mattress. Sonia woke up with a start and turned on the light. She was covered in sweat and her heart was racing even though

the dream had not been especially terrifying or unpleasant.

It took her a long time to get back to sleep.

And suddenly, during the fitful sleep that comes before deep slumber, she understood why there was a “dangerous curve” sign at a wide curve with good visibility. But when she woke up the next morning, she had forgotten all about it.

The annoying grandfather

As usual with dreams and nocturnal thoughts, Sonia had not only forgotten what she had dreamt about and what she thought before falling back asleep, she had even forgotten that she had had a strange dream followed by a revelatory idea.

But she got up with a vague sense of unease that lasted all through breakfast and the whole way to school.

She couldn't get the old man from the cemetery out of her head and, without knowing why, she suddenly remembered her grandfather.

Her mother's father was laid-back and calm — the total opposite of that lunatic who had run at their car with an agitated look on his

face. Why did she connect the two? Maybe because of the supposedly dangerous curve...

A few years ago, when she was in the car with her grandfather, she didn't want to put her seat belt on. It was a very short ride and they were going very slowly. Sonia was playing Tetris on her video game machine and the seat belt restricted her right arm. But her grandfather insisted so much that she ended up doing as he said, not without first spewing at him, 'You're so annoying, grandpa. Now I know where mom gets it from.'

'Well you have no idea how happy that makes me,' he had said with a laugh. 'If your mom is as much of a pain as I am when it comes to safety, my favorite granddaughter might just reach adulthood.'

A few minutes later, at a curve which had good visibility, which didn't seem to be dangerous at all, a car coming at them crossed over the median into their lane and even though her grandfather maneuvered very quickly, he couldn't avoid hitting it.

It was a head-on impact at a low speed, and the only notable consequence was that the front left fender of her grandfather's car was totaled. But the inertia made the machine fly out of Sonia's hands and smash against the windshield, which shattered as if hit by a shower of stones.

'If you hadn't been wearing your seat belt,' said her grandfather, 'Your lovely little nose would have gone right through that windshield.'

At first it made Sonia furious that her grandfather was right, and she retorted, 'If I hadn't been wearing my seat belt, I would have been able to hold on to the device and it wouldn't have broken.'

Her grandfather didn't say a word and Sonia understood how silly and unfair she had been, but she was too proud to admit her mistake.

Fortunately, it was her grandfather's birthday the next month and Sonia had a chance to make up for it. Together with a gift, she gave

him a note that said, “To my favorite grandpa to whom I owe so much, among many other things, keeping my lovely little nose intact”.

An explanation...or two

During the “theory class” at recess, Sonia was distracted, as if she were elsewhere. Her sandwich sat on her knees, uneaten.

‘If your moped is equipped with high beam headlights, which roads must you use them on?’ asked Ana between bites.

‘The choices,’ asked Sonia.

‘Insufficiently lit inner-city roads, sufficiently or insufficiently lit inner-city roads, or any insufficiently lit roads.’

‘Any insufficiently lit roads.’

‘Wrong. The first choice is the right one — insufficiently lit inner-city roads.’

‘That’s absurd!’ protested Sonia. ‘If you were driving at night on a dark country road, wouldn’t you put your brights on?’

‘Of course I would. But the question isn’t about when it is convenient to do it; it’s about when you *must* do it. It’s not mandatory to put on your brights on a dark country road.’

‘You’re right, what a stupid mistake...I’m sorry, Ana, let’s leave it. I’m a little bit distracted.’

‘I can see that. Boy troubles?’

‘I should be so lucky...Yesterday when I was in the car with my dad, something very strange happened. You’ll think it’s stupid...’

‘Tell me what happened. If I think it’s stupid, I’ll laugh and that’s it.’

‘Well, when we were going around a curve that was marked as dangerous but actually wasn’t...’

‘How do you know?’

‘It was wide, with good visibility...’

‘Maybe it was really uneven.’

‘No.’

‘Or maybe the surface of the road was in poor condition.’

Just the opposite, that exact section was in better condition than the rest of the road.’

‘Well, maybe that’s why. The curve was dangerous because the surface was in poor condition. They fixed it recently and forgot to remove the sign.’

‘Maybe you’re right. In any case, the strange thing was that there was a little cemetery just off that curve and a bizarre old man who appeared to have come out of it, wearing a filthy hat pulled down over his head, ran at the car, gesticulating and making horrible faces as if he wanted to kick us out, threaten us, or warn us of some kind of imminent danger...’

‘The world is full of crazy people, didn’t you know? Like our math teacher, for example.’

‘Yeah. I know, but...’

‘Why the bewildered look?’

‘I have no idea why, but I just remembered that last night I dreamt that I went back there on my moped...well, on the one I assume I’ll have soon...and the old man signaled at me to come into the cemetery and then pushed me into a grave...’

Sonia stopped when she saw the horrified look on her friend's face.

'It's... it's... it's like...' stuttered Ana.

'Like what?' asked Sonia nervously.

'Like what happened with Freddy!' Ana finally exclaimed.

'Which Freddy? Freddy Mercury, the singer of Queen?'

'No. Freddy Krueger!'

'The one from *Nightmare on Elm Street*?'

Of course! Can't you see the similarities? Even the filthy hat!'

'Are you trying to tell me that the old man from the cemetery is a zombie or something?'

'Even worse! He's a ghost that can get into your dreams! Be very careful, Sonia. Try to have a light dinner and above all don't eat any cheese at night — it gives you nightmares.'

The crooked sign

Sonia didn't believe in all those supernatural things that Ana liked so much — and also terrified her — but that night she didn't have much for dinner, just in case. She didn't think anyone, alive or dead, could get into her dreams. But she absolutely did not want to have any nightmares.

And she didn't. She slept like a rock and woke up feeling very refreshed. A light dinner had been a good idea.

At school, she avoided the subject with Ana and even though she asked her some questions, she dodged them with the excuse that they had to focus on the “theory class”. She answered all of the questions correctly and identified all of

the road signs that Ana, who had a very practical “deck of signs”, showed her. Each card had a drawing of a sign on it, with a description of it on the back.

After lunch, however, when she opened her math book to study for the exam she had the next day, she remembered the old man from the cemetery again. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get him out of her head.

Suddenly, as if driven by an overwhelming urge, she put on her helmet, walked out of the house, grabbed her bicycle that was just next to the gate, leaning against the fence of her yard, and took off without saying a word. She didn't feel like doing any explaining.

The little cemetery was around twelve miles away and the road was flat, almost totally straight with hardly any curves, so Sonia got there in less than an hour.

The gate appeared to be locked but it gave way when she pushed it. And it didn't give a distressing screech as Ana would have liked. On top of that it was a really nice day. There

wasn't a cloud in the sky and the birds were chirping. The place wasn't sinister at all.

But it was strange. There were traffic signs on top of the graves instead of crosses. They weren't real signs that would have formed an inappropriate multi-colored mass for a cemetery. Instead they were copies in which the bright colors had been replaced by grey tones, giving Sonia the uneasy feeling that she was in a black and white film.

After reading some of the inscriptions, she came to the conclusion that all the people who were buried there had died in traffic accidents, and the signs on top of the graves had to do with the type of accident that had killed them. On one grave marked with a round sign with the number 70 in the middle, there was an epitaph that read,

“AFRAID OF ARRIVING
LATE TO MY DESTINATION,
I ARRIVED HERE TOO EARLY.”

And on another grave, that had a “No passing” sign on top of it, Sonia read with horror,

“I DIDN’T WANT TO GO
BEHIND ANYONE
AND NOW I’M UNDER EVERYONE.”

She was about to leave that unsettling place when a crooked sign caught her eye. It was a dangerous right curve sign but the arrow was pointing down as if it had been turned 120° clockwise. Sonia approached it and read the extremely short, disturbing epitaph engraved on the gravestone in big gold letters,

I’M NOT HERE

For a few moments she stood there, fascinated, contemplating the three words engraved on the white stone. She was about to turn around when she thought she heard a faint creaking noise coming from below.

The gravestone moved.

If Sonia hadn't been staring at it, she might have missed the movement, it was so slight. But she didn't take her eyes off the gravestone and she clearly saw the stone move a few centimeters to the right.

For a few neverending moments, she remained glued to the ground as if her feet had sprouted roots. But eventually she managed to react. She spun around, started running without looking back, left the cemetery, hopped on her bicycle and pedaled frantically all the way home.

That night, Sonia didn't have a light dinner. She went straight to bed without eating anything at all.

The gravedigger

At school the following morning, she rushed to tell Ana the whole story.

‘So what are you going to do?’ asked her friend, her eyes practically popping out of their sockets, not without first making half a dozen exclamations and just as many stifled moans.

‘I don’t know...what can be done about it?’ asked Sonia in turn.

‘Something will have to be done...Tell the cops, maybe...’

‘If I tell the cops that I had a nightmare and then I saw a gravestone in a cemetery move, all they will do is laugh in my face.’

‘Have you told your parents?’

‘Are you kidding? They’ll think I’m seeing things and the first step they’ll take is to not buy me a moped.’

‘Speaking of visions, you know I believe you but...couldn’t it have been an optical illusion or something?’

‘At the time I would have sworn it wasn’t. But this morning, when I woke up, after tossing and turning all night, I started to doubt myself. Sometimes your eyes play tricks on you.’

‘What if we go back there this afternoon to check? Four eyes are better than two.’

‘And six are better than four,’ added someone they hadn’t heard coming.

It was Pedro, one of the two officially cute guys in class. He liked Sonia and although he seemed nice enough, she found him a bit superficial and didn’t pay much attention to him.

‘Have you been eavesdropping on us behind our backs?’ said Ana.

‘No, not behind your backs,’ he said. ‘I’m not hiding behind some tree, eavesdropping

on you,' ... I came over to say hi and I couldn't help but hear something about a cemetery and how our eyes play tricks on us sometimes.'

'And why did you say that six eyes see better than four?' asked Sonia.

'Because if you're going to go to check something, I can go with you,' said Pedro with a charming smile. 'It's not a good idea for two girls to go there alone.'

The two friends looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

'Fine,' said Sonia eventually with a condescending tone. 'We'll let you come with us.'

'But you have to promise you won't tell anyone,' added Ana.

'Cross my heart and hope to die,' said Pedro, still smiling.

They agreed to meet at five in front of Sonia's house.

The two of them arrived on time, Pedro on his BMX and Ana on her brand-new moped.

'You could have come by bicycle, so we could all go at the same pace,' said Sonia to her friend.

‘I thought about it,’ she answered. ‘But it’s better to have at least one motor vehicle just in case there are any emergencies.’

‘So at least one of us can speed off?’ said Pedro in a mocking tone.

‘So that someone can speed off to go get help, smarty-pants,’ said Ana. ‘And anyway, I’ll go at the same speed as both of you the whole time. You’ll have to sing so I don’t fall asleep, though.’

They went off in single file, not just because it was a basic safety rule for bicycles and mopeds on the road but also because that way, Ana broke the wind, making and made it easier for Sonia and Pedro.

‘Easy when you’re in the slipstream, huh?’ said Ana over her shoulder.

‘Not as easy as not having to pedal,’ retorted Sonia, who was second in the line.

‘No complaining, this will get you your bikini body,’ laughed Ana.

‘Are you saying I need to lose weight?’ exclaimed Sonia furiously.

But Ana, speeding up a bit, had moved a few meters ahead so she couldn't hear her friend's response.

They reached the cemetery in under an hour. They parked the moped and the bicycles by the wall and walked to the gate that was still wide open, just as Sonia had left it the day before, and went into the cemetery.

If Sonia had intended to shock her friends, she had certainly achieved it. Ana and Pedro couldn't believe their eyes as they looked around at the grey traffic signs on the gravestones. Their brief yet emphatic epitaphs also served as warnings for people they knew and others they didn't. But it hadn't been her intention to shock anyone. Although she wasn't so sure what her intention really was.

Treading fearfully, Sonia led her friends to the grave with the crooked sign.

When he saw the white gravestone with the inscription, "I'm not here", Pedro said with a trembling voice,

'I owe you an apology, Sonia.'

‘Why?’ she asked, surprised.

‘Because I thought you had been shocked by some silly thing,’ he said, ‘and that we were going to come to a cemetery that would look just like any other...but this...this isn’t normal...’

‘So right,’ agreed Ana contemplating the gravestone from a safe distance. ‘At least it’s not moving today.’

‘Or it hasn’t moved yet,’ Pedro pointed out.

‘Well I’d rather it didn’t move,’ said Sonia, ‘even if it made me look like a liar.’

They stood there for several minutes that felt like hours, watching the gravestone in silence, almost not daring to breathe. Suddenly, Pedro whispered,

‘I’m going to see if it’s loose.’

‘Are you crazy?’ exclaimed Ana.

‘Don’t worry,’ he reassured her, ‘I don’t plan on lifting the gravestone; I don’t think I could even if I wanted to. I just want to see if it’s loose. I’ll try to move it just a bit...’

And doing as he said, he went up to the

grave, knelt down next to it and pushed the side of the gravestone.

‘It seems like...’ he began to say, but he couldn’t finish the sentence because he was interrupted by a threatening yell.

‘Wretched kids!’ roared a loud and booming man’s voice behind them. ‘What the heck are you doing?’

The three of them turned around at the same time and saw a big man in overalls standing about ten meters away. He was giving them a stern look and had a spade in his hand which made Sonia think he was the gravedigger. She took one step towards him to try to calm him down... and then, suddenly, the man’s expression went from one of fury to one of fear. With a moan, he let go of the spade that he was brandishing like a weapon, spun around and started running.

Ana was the first to react. She walked slowly at first, as if she didn’t want to draw attention to herself, and then gradually quickened her pace as she approached the exit. Her friends followed her in silence.

While a very nervous Ana was trying to start up her moped that didn't seem to want to move, Sonia said to Pedro, 'I owe you an apology too.'

'Why?' he asked.

'I thought you were one of those guys who preferred not to take risks,' answered Sonia. 'I never thought you would have been capable of moving the gravestone.'

'Well, you weren't wrong. I am one of those guys who prefer not to take risks. But sometimes my curiosity gets the better of me.'

'By the way, did it move?'

'It seemed to budge a little, yeah, but I didn't have enough time to see for sure. And I'll admit that I wouldn't go back in there for anything in the world. But...'

He wasn't able to finish his sentence.

'Let's get out of here!' said Ana, stepping on the gas, and Pedro and Sonia got on their bicycles.

The invisible sign

Sonia was in her room, typing away at her computer. She would have liked to have stayed longer to chat with Ana and Pedro, to exchange opinions about what had happened at the cemetery, but she wanted to get home as early as possible so her parents wouldn't ask any questions. When something smelled fishy, her mother could be very insistent with her questions and Sonia didn't feel like doing any explaining. Especially since her birthday — that is, her moped — was only three months away. Anything she said could be used against that.

After scouring the internet, she discovered that the strange place where she had just been was known as the Curve Cemetery because,

just like Ana had thought, there used to be a very dangerous curve there that caused many accidents. The fatal curve was eventually eliminated and at the most dangerous spot of the old route, a cemetery was built. Some of the people who lost their lives on that curve were buried there along with others who also died in traffic accidents nearby.

Jumping from one site to another, she managed to find the names and stories of some of the people buried at the Curve Cemetery, but nothing that could give her any clues about the identity or motives of the old gesticulating man from the first day.

She ate very little for dinner and went to bed with her head full of sinister images of accidents, family tragedies, graves and coffins, afraid that she was going to have horrible nightmares.

But she didn't have any because she didn't sleep a wink all night.

She got up at dawn, took a long hot shower, and a quick breakfast, and then left the house.

She was going to go for a walk to clear her head but she ended up getting on her bicycle and pedaling wearily towards the Curve Cemetery as if an overwhelming force was drawing her there. It was Saturday, she didn't have to go to school, and her parents would get up late. She could go there and be back before they realized she was gone.

When she arrived, the first surprise she got was on the road itself. The "dangerous curve" sign had disappeared. Fortunately, her father had seen it and they had talked about it. Ana and Pedro had seen it too and talked about it, otherwise Sonia would have started to doubt her memory.

The cemetery gate was closed again but this time it didn't open when she pushed it. Someone had locked it. It must have been the gravedigger who caught them beside the mysterious grave.

Sonia went all the way around the cemetery, looking for some kind of opening in the wall but didn't find any. After hesitating for a few

moments, she leaned her bicycle against the whitewashed wall, stood on its seat and jumped over the wall without any problems.

Everything seemed calm in the Curve Cemetery. Sonia combed every inch of it before stopping a safe distance from the grave with the crooked sign. And that was where she got her second surprise. The sign was in the correct position, as if someone had turned the triangle 120° counter-clockwise. Perhaps when the gravedigger saw them there, he noticed the grave and straightened the sign. Assuming that it was a mistake that the arrow was pointing down and not a deliberate sign with some sinister meaning...

And while Sonia was looking at that single grave without moving, she got a third surprise. Behind her, a shaky voice said, 'Please go away.'

When she turned around, she saw the big man from the day before who in all likelihood was the gravedigger of that strange cemetery. He wasn't wearing the blue coveralls or holding the spade but she recognized him immediately

by his bushy eyebrows and sturdy jaw. He was trembling.

‘Fine, I’ll leave if you want,’ said Sonia, trying to sound calm although she wasn’t in the slightest, ‘But if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions first.’

The man stared at her and an astonished look came across his face.

After a few moments, he said: ‘You’re not Amanda’.

‘No, I’m not Amanda,’ answered Sonia shrugging her shoulders. ‘I don’t even know who that is.’

And the fourth surprise was that the big man started cracking up. Once his fit of nervous laughter was over, he said, ‘Sorry, kid. I live very close by and my wife can make you a nice breakfast while I tell you the whole story. Well, at least, everything I know...’

They walked in silence until they came to a house that was half-hidden by the trees, about two hundred meters from the cemetery. It was a modest yet pleasant house with a front porch

that a couple of hens and quite a few chicks were running around on.

When she saw Sonia, the gravedigger's wife seemed to be frightened, but the man said to her, 'It's OK, Teresa. It's not Amanda.'

She nodded and smiled. And while the woman made some scrambled eggs, Sonia and the man sat across from each other at a wooden table in the corner of the cozy kitchen.

'It was seven years ago,' he said. 'There used to be a very dangerous curve where the cemetery is now. A lot of accidents happened there. In one of them, the car veered off the curve and caught fire. A man around sixty years old and his fifteen year-old granddaughter were inside it. They managed to get the man out but the girl was trapped inside. The car exploded and there was nothing left of the poor girl to bury.'

'Is that why it says "I'm not here" on the grave?' asked Sonia.

'That's right,' answered the man, nodding. 'The poor man went crazy. He said it was his

fault that Amanda died because he made her wear her seat belt.'

'But that's absurd!'

'Of course it is. They couldn't get her out because the car had been crushed and the poor girl was trapped inside. She was undoubtedly already dead before the car exploded. But her grandfather wouldn't see reason. He kept on repeating that it was his fault, that if Amanda hadn't been wearing the seat belt she would have been able to get out. A few years later, when they fixed the road and built the Curve Cemetery, he asked them to make a grave for his granddaughter although there was nothing to bury. And he told them to put that "I'm not here" message on the gravestone, which is pretty nasty, if you ask me, but he who pays the piper, calls the tune. He came to the cemetery often and showed me photos of Amanda. He used to say that she would come back one day. And you look so much like her. When I saw you next to her grave yesterday, I was scared to death.

‘You scared me to death too,’ said Teresa, setting a plate of scrambled eggs and a glass of orange juice down in front of Sonia. ‘Manuel came back all sweaty and worked up. He told me he had seen the dead girl with a couple of friends.’

‘Well, I am dead...starving to death, at least,’ joked Sonia picking up her fork. ‘Thank you so much...’

The whole story

When she got home, her parents were having breakfast. She told them she had gone for a ride on her bicycle, which, although not entirely true, wasn't a complete lie. Sonia didn't like telling lies but she didn't feel like she had to give the whole story either. Especially if what she said could be used against her.

Once she was in her room, she rushed to call Ana and told her everything that had happened. Her friend seemed relieved, of course, but also a little disappointed. She loved magic and everything that had to do with the supernatural and it bothered her a little that in the end this very exciting story had a very simple explanation, which wasn't mysterious at all.

Neither of them had Pedro's phone number so he would have to wait until Monday to hear the outcome of the story.

Ana had to go to her grandparent's house so Sonia, who was an only child and didn't have many friends, spent Sunday afternoon alone because she didn't feel like going to the movies with her parents. She wanted time to think, and to do an experiment.

Her mother had a book about optical illusions with all kinds of illustrations and tests you could do. It was very interesting and Sonia spent much of the afternoon reading it. She learned that it was true that certain combinations of colors or shapes could make the observer think they see movement, particularly if they stare at something for a few moments. Just like she had started at the blazing white gravestone in full sunlight.

The book also said that what we hear can also strengthen optical illusions, or even become visual sensations, through a phenomenon called synesthesia. And that had to be

what had happened to her at the Curve Cemetery. A faint creaking noise as if something was dragging along the ground together with the fact that she had been staring at the white, brightly lit surface had created the illusion of movement.

The last doubtful point of that gruesome story was clear, and Sonia felt a huge sense of relief. She read for a while, watched a movie on television and went to bed very early, right after dinner, because she was exhausted. For the first time in several days, she slept soundly and didn't wake up once.

A loose end

The next morning when she got to school, before her first class, Sonia told Pedro about her conversation with the gravedigger. He listened to her very carefully, nodding every now and then, but he didn't say a word. He didn't even seem relieved. And during recess, he didn't go over to talk to Ana and Sonia, as they expected.

'What's up with Pedro?' asked Sonia.

'I don't know,' replied Ana with a shrug. He likes you, so maybe he's trying to play hard to get.'

'I don't think so. He looks worried.'

'Well, you should ask him.'

'You're right. Should we go over there?'

‘You go. He’ll like it more if you ask him alone.’

‘Don’t push it.’

‘Plus, if we go over there together it will look like an interrogation.’

‘You might be right about that...OK, I’ll go.’

Sonia went over to Pedro, who was alone in a corner, looking pensive. He wasn’t even eating his usual whole wheat sandwich.

‘Is there anything bothering you, Pedro?’ asked Sonia, getting straight to the point.

‘Bothering me?’ he said, surprised. ‘No, of course not. Why would anything be bothering me?’

‘I don’t know...you don’t seem happy that everything is all cleared up.’

‘It’s just that...I’m not sure everything *is* all cleared up,’ said Pedro after a pause. ‘I think there is still a...loose end.’

He whispered, looking right and left as if he was scared someone else might hear him.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Sonia with a mixture of surprise and unease.

‘It’s not something I can tell you about here, and in a rush...can we meet up this afternoon?’

‘OK. Let’s ask Ana what time she can meet.’

‘It’s not that I want to exclude her, we’ll tell her later, too, of course but I wanted to speak with you first. You know Ana is a bit esoteric and she likes all that stuff about ghosts and things.’

‘OK...shall we meet at “The Roebuck”?’

‘That café with the tables outside, at the entrance to the housing development?’

‘Yeah, it’s a quiet place. Ana and I go there to study sometimes.’

‘OK. What time?’

‘Five?’

‘OK.’

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of recess.

On their way out to school, when Sonia told her friend that she had agreed to meet up with Pedro, Ana laughed.

‘It’s crystal clear,’ she said with a mischievous look. ‘What he wants is to hook up with you.’

‘No, seriously, he seemed pretty worried...’
replied Sonia.

‘Sure. He’s worried because you don’t pay him any attention. Now you pay attention to me, I’m older than you.’

‘By seven months.’

‘Seven months is a lot at our age. Just you wait and see all the things you do in the next seven months...especially if you hook up with Pedro.’

A lump in the throat

Sonia arrived at the café at five o'clock sharp, and Pedro was already there sitting at one of the tables outside; all the rest were empty. There was an A4-sized folder on it.

'Are we going to study?' joked Sonia, pointing at the folder.

'Yes, in a way,' he said with a slightly forced smile. 'Before we begin, we should swap cell numbers. I'm guessing you never called me yesterday because you don't have my number.'

'Yeah,' agreed Sonia, taking out her cell phone. 'We should have swapped them before we went to the cemetery.'

That's why I couldn't let you know yesterday that everything had been cleared up.'

‘Well, in a way, it was lucky that you couldn’t because if you had, I would have relaxed and I wouldn’t have spent the afternoon combing the internet.’

They exchanged telephone numbers and then Pedro opened up the folder and handed Sonia half a dozen sheets of paper he had printed out. She looked through them in silence. First she looked at them one by one to read the headlines and look at the images. Then she carefully read the parts highlighted in red.

‘That can’t be...’ said Sonia, her voice barely audible.

They were news articles and commentaries about the Curve Cemetery and the accident that had killed Amanda. There was a picture of the girl on one of the sheets and it was truly astonishing how much she looked like Sonia. But that was the least of it. One of the other sheets had a picture of the grandfather on it. It was a close-up where you could clearly see his face, distorted with pain, and

just as Sonia had imagined, it was the bizarre old man who had ran at the car, gesticulating as if possessed.

‘Is that the man you saw the other day?’ asked Pedro after a long pause.

Unable to speak, Sonia nodded.

‘Have you read what it says under the photo?’ Sonia nodded again. She had a lump in her throat that made it hard for her to speak. According to the caption beneath the photograph, that man had been dead for over two years.

Just then, a waitress walked over to them.

‘Do you want anything?’ Pedro asked Sonia.

She shook her head. The lump wasn’t going away. She couldn’t speak or swallow.

‘Two chamomile teas, please,’ said Pedro to the waitress.

When she had left, he added, ‘If you don’t want it, I’ll have both. I need them.’

Sonia also needed a chamomile tea...or two. When the waitress came back with the

tea, the lump in her throat was starting to go away.

‘Thanks,’ she said in a barely audible voice as she picked up the piping hot tea with trembling hands.

They sat there in silence for a few moments, avoiding each other’s gaze. Neither of them knew what to say. Finally, Sonia spoke: ‘Would you dare to go back there?’

This time it was Pedro who nodded.

‘Aren’t you scared?’ asked Sonia.

‘Very,’ he admitted, ‘but I’m even more curious, and it’s not just curiosity. If we don’t clear up this mystery, we’ll never be able to get it out of our heads.’

‘I agree...I see you came here by bike,’ said Sonia pointing at Pedro’s BMX, which was leaning against a lamppost with his striking red and black helmet hanging from the handlebars. ‘I walked here, my house is really close...I’ll go get my bicycle, it won’t take a second. And we have to let Ana know in case she wants to come too. We can’t leave her out of this.’

‘Won’t she get a bit carried away?’ asked Pedro. ‘You know how she’s into all that stuff about zombies and things.’

As things stand, I don’t think it matters whether we’re into it or not.’

‘You’re right. We’ll have to tell her anyway, at some point. Better sooner than later. And better if three of us go than two.’

‘Can I have this sheet?’ asked Sonia, holding up the page with the photograph of the grandfather. ‘So I can show to my dad.’

‘Yeah, of course. But he’ll flip out when he reads that he’s dead.’

‘I’ll cut it out and show him it without the text for now. It’s to see if he also saw the same man. Maybe they were just hallucinations.’

‘Not all, Sonia,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘The other day, I never told you, but when I bent down to try to move the gravestone, I heard something, a noise...as if something had moved inside the grave.’

The lump was back in her throat. Without saying a word, Sonia got up and went home.

When she got there she went up to her room, cut out the photo of the old man and went to her dad's office. He was there looking through some papers.

'Hi, dad.'

'Hi, Sonia. You don't look so good, aren't you feeling well?' asked her dad with a worried look on his face.

'No, I'm just a little tired,' she answered, forcing a smile.

'From so much studying, I suppose,' he said, teasing her.

'Of course... do you recognize this face?'

Her dad glanced at the photo with a frown and said, 'Yes, it looks really familiar. I know. It's the crazy old man we saw on the road, right?'

'Yeah, that's what I thought and I wanted to check with you.'

'Where did you find this photo?'

'On the internet. I was looking for information about the cemetery at that curve that shouldn't have a sign, remember?'

‘Yeah, of course.’

‘Well, there used to be a very dangerous curve there, where a lot of accidents happened and eventually they changed the road and built the cemetery at the most dangerous point along the old curve. That’s why it’s called Curve Cemetery.’

‘How interesting...I didn’t know that story. To be honest, I never take that road. I only did the other day so I could ask you questions about road safety.’

‘Well, the truth is that that crazy old man we saw the other day died at that curve...’

‘For a dead guy, he was running pretty fast.’

‘What I mean is,’ Sonia rushed to correct herself, blushing at her mistake, ‘that he had a fatal accident that his granddaughter died in...’

‘Are you sure he’s the one in the photo?’

‘I think it’s him, but you know I don’t have a very good memory for faces.’

‘Well I do have a good memory for faces,’ said her father, taking another look at the photograph, ‘because I have to pay a lot of atten-

tion to faces to remember my clients, and I can assure you that this man is the same one from the other day, unless it's his identical twin brother.'

His twin brother! The man they had seen at the Curve Cemetery was Amanda's grandfather's identical twin brother. Or simply a brother who looked a lot like him. That could and must be the explanation.

'Thanks, dad,' said Sonia and she ran back to her room to call Ana.

After filling her friend in on all the details, she gave her all the details about Amanda's grandfather and asked her to scour the internet to find out if he had any brothers.

'Then come and meet us at the cemetery,' said Sonia. 'Take your time, since you've got your moped you'll get there faster than we will and anyway, we're going to stop at the gravedigger's house first.'

She took some of the money she had saved up, put on her helmet, ran out of the house, hopped on her bicycle and went to meet Pedro.

‘My dad has confirmed that the man we saw is the one in the photo,’ she told him, going straight to the point, ‘but it could be a brother who looks a lot like him, maybe even an identical twin.’

That’s quite an unlikely explanation, don’t you think?’ he objected.

‘Yes, but it’s a lot likelier than the zombie explanation. Come on, let’s go...but first I want to buy some flowers.’

The half-hidden epitaph

They received a warm welcome at Manuel the gravedigger's house.

'These flowers are for you, Teresa,' said Sonia, offering the woman the bunch of flowers she was holding.

'Thank you very much, you shouldn't have bothered,' adding, 'they're lovely.'

'Not as lovely as your scrambled eggs,' joked Sonia.

'And those other ones?' asked Manuel, pointing at the bunch of flowers Pedro was holding.

'These are for Amanda,' the boy replied.

Manuel nodded without saying a word.

Sonia took the photograph out of her pocket and showed it to the gravedigger.

‘Is this Amanda’s grandfather?’ she asked him.

Manuel nodded again. There was a look of great sadness on his leathery face.

‘Yes, that’s him,’ said the gravedigger with a deep sigh. ‘That photo appeared in the paper after he...died.’

‘Do you know how he died?’ asked Sonia. ‘There’s no information on the internet.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Teresa as she put the flowers in a vase. ‘They never tend to mention it in those cases...Amanda’s grandfather couldn’t take so much grief and he committed suicide, the poor man.’

‘He threw himself into the sea,’ added Manuel. He left a letter saying that he didn’t want his body to be found, just as they hadn’t found his granddaughter’s body.’

‘And then did someone from his family come here?’ asked Sonia after a pause. ‘A brother maybe...?’

‘No, not that I know of,’ answered Manuel, shrugging his shoulders. Amanda was an or-

phan; that's why she lived with her grandfather. I don't think they had any other relatives.

After saying goodbye to the gravedigger and his wife, Pedro and Sonia went to the cemetery. They propped their bicycles against the wall and walked in through the gate that was open again, just as Manuel had said it would be.

'The identical twin theory is looking increasingly unlikely,' said Sonia while they walked towards Amanda's grave.

'We should have asked the gravedigger to come with us,' thought Pedro.

'I was too embarrassed to ask.'

'So was I.'

'But we don't have to go in. Nobody is making us do this.'

'Are you sure?'

Pedro's words, almost whispered, gave Sonia another lump in her throat.

And there they stood, in front of the white gravestone. In the afternoon sun, it seemed to shine with a light of its own.

And the sign was crooked again, with the arrow facing down at the ground as if someone had turned the triangle 120° clockwise again.

A leaf on the top part of the inscription, covering up “I’M NOT”, so all it said was:

“HERE”

‘Don’t panic,’ said Pedro, putting the bunch of flowers on the gravestone with trembling hands. ‘It’s a leaf that has coincidentally fallen from a tree and covered up part of the epitaph.’

‘I’d like to believe you,’ answered Sonia a few moments later, when she finally got her voice back. ‘But, it’s a leaf from a fig tree and the only trees here are cypress trees.’

They ran off like a bat out of hell but they were so stunned that instead of going towards the exit of the cemetery, they went in the opposite direction and came face to face with the wall.

Then Pedro did something that Sonia will never forget. Instead of jumping over the wall

as fast as he could, he cupped his hands together so that she, who wasn't as tall as he was, could step into them and easily reach the top of the wall.

Nocturnal clarity

A few moments later, they bumped into Ana on the road. As soon as they stopped, she said to them, ‘Judging from how fast you were going, my guess is that what you’re about to tell me isn’t going to be very reassuring.’

‘Nothing actually happened,’ Pedro said in a hurry.

‘But it doesn’t seem like the grandfather had an identical twin brother,’ added Sonia.

‘He didn’t have a twin brother or even a non-twin brother,’ said Ana. ‘He was an only child. Amanda was all the family he had, she was also an only child and an orphan to boot. I had some luck with my search and now I know everything about Heraclius — that was Amanda’s grandfather’s name.’

‘Do you know how he died?’ asked Sonia.

‘He committed suicide,’ her friend answered. ‘He threw himself into the sea and they never found his body. But going by the looks on your faces, maybe you just found him.’

‘No, but...’ Pedro began to say.

‘I don’t like that “but” one bit,’ Ana interrupted, even less so given that we’re just a mile away from the cemetery. Let’s get out of here right now, guys.’

Following Ana, who was in front breaking the wind for them, they got to the housing development in just over thirty minutes. But it was already getting dark and they had to get back home as soon as possible. If they didn’t, they would have a lot of explaining to do. And not one of the three of them felt like doing any explaining.

Sonia had very little for dinner and went to bed early. She wanted to fall into a deep sleep and forget about the whole wretched matter until the next day.

But she never managed to get to sleep.

A couple of hours later, Sonia got up, and went over to the window. It was a clear night and the moon, almost full, was shining high in the sky.

Suddenly, it was as if the clarity of the night, and the white clarity of the moon, soaked into her. It all made sense to her now.

She couldn't wait until the next afternoon. She got dressed, grabbed her reflective vest that she always wore when cycling at night and sneaked out of the house.

There wasn't a soul on the road. As if in a dream, she pedaled silently down the gleaming sidewalk that looked like a silver ribbon in the moonlight, and in just over an hour she was propping her bicycle against the wall of the Curve Cemetery.

The gate was wide open as if inviting her to come in. And Sonia accepted the invitation.

She walked slowly towards Amanda's grave. And suddenly, she saw him. The old man was sitting on the gravestone, engrossed in the bunch of flowers he was holding. The moon-

light accentuated his pallor and made him look like a ghost. Sonia felt a shiver down her spine but made herself keep going. When she was less than a meter away from the old man, she asked him, 'Do you like the flowers?'

'They are very beautiful,' he answered without lifting his gaze. 'Amanda likes flowers a lot.'

'Do I look like her?'

The old man looked up and gazed at her with infinite sorrow.

'A lot,' he answered, his voice faltering. 'The first time I saw you, I thought you were her.'

'I also have a grandpa who looks like you,' said Sonia as she sat down on the gravestone beside the old man. 'One day, a couple of years ago, I was in the car with him and I didn't want to wear my seat belt because I was playing with my video game machine and it was bothering me. In the end, my grandpa persuaded me, and I put my seat belt on. We had a little accident, nothing major, but my video game machine flew out of my hands and broke the windshield. If I hadn't been wearing my seat belt, it

would have been my face that had broken it... If your accident hadn't been so serious, the seat belt would have saved Amanda. You gave her the best advice you could give, and every time someone tells a child to do the best thing for their own safety, they are taking care of all of the children in the world. Just like my grandpa. Just like you. That's why I brought you those flowers, as a token of my gratitude.'

A tear that the moonlight turned into a sparkling gem ran down the old man's cheek.

The necessary sign

By the time she got back home, it was almost four o'clock. Fortunately, her parents hadn't noticed her little nighttime excursion. That night, Sonia slept very little but she slept soundly.

'It's very simple,' she told Ana and Pedro during recess. 'If a dead man is running around, he's not dead.'

'But he committed suicide!' exclaimed Ana. 'It was in the paper!'

'Do you still believe everything you read in the papers?' joked Sonia. 'He left a letter saying he was going to throw himself into the sea, so that they didn't find his body, just like what happened with his granddaughter, and

he retreated from the world. And every now and then he went inside Amanda's empty grave because he thought that he should have died instead of her.'

'But that makes no sense,' objected Ana.

'Of course it makes no sense,' intervened Pedro. The poor man was clearly traumatized.'

'It was just a coincidence that he was coming out of the cemetery right when my father and I were going past it,' continued Sonia, 'and when he saw me, he mistook me for his granddaughter. That's why he got so worked up; he thought the accident that happened that horrible day was going to repeat itself.'

'But he's been going to that cemetery for years, right?' commented Pedro.

'Five years,' said Sonia, 'and he has been officially dead for the last two.'

'And no one saw him in all that time?' asked Ana, taking a big bite out of her sandwich. Apparently, the excitement was making her hungry.

‘I guess not,’ answered Sonia shrugging her shoulders, ‘unless somebody caught him just as he was coming out of the grave. There’s nothing odd about an old man in a cemetery, even if he does have a bizarre look about him.’

‘And if anyone did see him coming out of the grave, they probably wouldn’t say anything and would never go back,’ thought Pedro.

‘But the gravedigger would have recognized him,’ insisted Ana, wolfing down her second-to-last bite.

‘I can think of two possible explanations,’ said Sonia. ‘Either Manuel knew and didn’t say anything out of respect for Heraclio, or Heraclio avoided bumping into him, which isn’t very difficult with his working hours.’

After a pause, Pedro said, ‘Yes, that’s the most plausible explanation. The only plausible explanation really, for those of us who don’t believe in ghosts,’ he added, giving Ana a meaningful look.

‘Hey, don’t look at me like that, I didn’t say anything,’ said Ana with her mouth full.

‘Yeah, right. All you said was that the old man from the cemetery looked like Freddy Krueger,’ Sonia reminded her.

‘OK, but I wasn’t being serious,’ said Ana. ‘I just wanted to give the whole thing a bit of morbid fascination.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Pedro after a few moments. ‘But there is one thing I don’t understand, that part about the leaf covering up “I’M NOT” on the epitaph.’

‘It was a sign,’ explained Sonia. ‘In his own way, in his mentally disturbed language, he wanted to tell us that he *was* there.’

‘Why?’ asked Ana with an uneasy voice.

‘To ask us for help,’ answered Sonia. ‘So that we could help him out of that grave where he’d buried himself alive.’

‘And how can we help him?’ asked Pedro.

‘He’ll let us know,’ answered Sonia with a smile. ‘Maybe not directly, but with some kind of a sign. We agreed to meet for an afternoon snack at the gravedigger’s house. I’ll wait for you at five at “The Roebuck” and we’ll

go from there. By the way, Teresa, Manuel's wife makes these scrambled eggs that are to die for.'

Table of Contents

Zebras, cyclists and mopeds	7
The unnecessary sign.....	13
A strange dream	21
The annoying grandfather	25
An explanation...or two	29
The crooked sign	33
The gravedigger	39
The invisible sign	47
The whole story	55
A loose end	59
A lump in the throat	63
The half-hidden epitaph	73
Nocturnal clarity	79
The necessary sign	85

Fundación **MAPFRE**

www.educatumundo.com

www.fundacionmapfre.com



“Sonia’s fifteenth birthday was just three months away and for the first time in her short yet intense life, she knew exactly, and way in advance, what she wanted for her birthday: a moped.”

But not only will Sonia have to pass the “rigorous tests of skill and responsibility” her parents have set for her before they will buy her a moped. She and her friends will also get caught up in a hair-raising adventure that will turn them into detectives.

ages 12 to 16



9 788498 443158