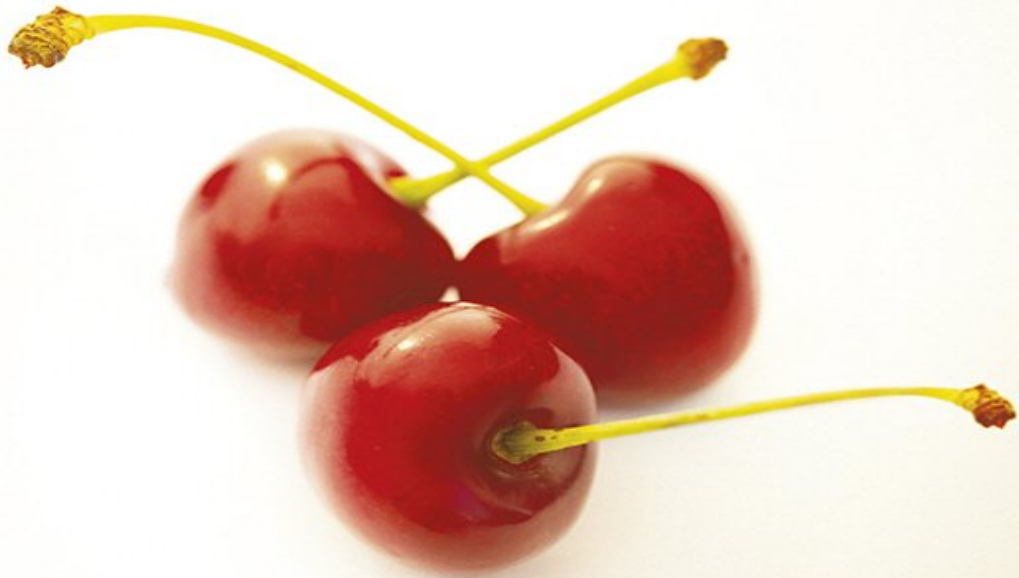


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Sometimes you have to lose yourself
to discover who you are

Adultery

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ADULTERY

a novel

PAULO COELHO

Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa and Zoë Perry



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Reading Group Guide

About the Author

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for those who
turn to you. Amen.

Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.

—LUKE 5:4

EVERY morning, when I open my eyes to the so-called “new day,” I feel like closing them again, staying in bed, and not getting up. But I can’t do that.

I have a wonderful husband who is not only madly in love with me, but also the owner of a large investment fund. Every year—much to his distaste—he appears in *Bilan* magazine’s list of the three hundred richest people in Switzerland.

I have two children who are (as my friends say) my “reason for living.” I get up early to make their breakfast and take them on the five-minute walk to school, where they spend all day, allowing me to work and fill my time. After school, a Filipino nanny looks after them until my husband and I get home.

I enjoy my work. I’m a highly regarded journalist at a respectable newspaper that can be found in almost all the news kiosks in Geneva, where we live.

Once a year, I go on holiday with the whole family, usually to some far-flung paradise with marvelous beaches, where we stay in exotic cities inhabited by very poor people who make us feel richer, more privileged, and more grateful for the blessings life has bestowed upon us.

Ah, but I haven’t introduced myself. Pleased to meet you. My name’s Linda. I’m in my thirties, five-foot-eight, 150 pounds, and I wear the best clothes that money can buy (thanks to my husband’s limitless generosity). I arouse desire in men and envy in other women.

And yet, every morning, when I open my eyes to this ideal life that everyone dreams of having but few achieve, I know the day will be a disaster. Until the beginning of this year, I didn’t question anything. I simply got on with my life, although, now and then, I did feel guilty about having more than I deserved. One day, though, while I was making everyone breakfast (it was spring, I remember, and the flowers were just beginning to open in the garden), I asked myself: “Is this it?”

I shouldn’t have asked that question. It was all the fault of a writer I’d interviewed the previous day who, at one point, said:

“I haven’t the slightest interest in being happy. I prefer to live life passionately, which is dangerous because you never know what might happen next.”

At the time, I thought: “Poor man. He’s never satisfied. He’ll die sad and embittered.”

The following day, I realized that I never take any risks at all.

I know what lies ahead of me: another day exactly like the previous one. And passion? Well, I love my husband, which means that I’ve no cause to get depressed over living with someone purely for the sake of his money, the children, or to keep up appearances.

I live in the safest country in the world, I have no problems to speak of, and I’m a good wife and mother. I was brought up as a strict Protestant and intend to pass that education on to my children. I never take a false step because I know how easy it is to ruin everything. I do what I have to do efficiently and put as little of myself into it as possible. When I was younger, I experienced the pain of unrequited love, just like any other normal person.

Since I married, though, time has stopped.

Until, that is, I came across that horrible writer and his answer to my question. I mean, what’s wrong with routine and boredom?

To be honest, nothing at all. It’s just ... it’s just the secret fear that everything could change from one moment to the next, catching me completely unawares.

From the moment I had that ominous thought that bright, beautiful morning, I began to feel afraid. Would I be capable of facing the world alone if my husband died? “Yes,” I told myself, because the money he left behind would be enough to support several generations. And if I died, who would look after my children? My beloved husband. But he would surely remarry, because he’s rich, charming, and intelligent. Would my children be in good hands?

The first thing I did was try to answer all my questions. And the more questions I answered, the more questions appeared. Will he take a mistress when I get old? We don’t make love as often as we used to—does he already have someone else? Does he think *I’ve* found someone else because I haven’t shown much interest in sex for the last three years?

We never have jealous spats, and I used to think that was great, but after that spring morning, I began to suspect that perhaps our lack of jealousy meant a complete lack of love on both sides.

I did my best not to think about the matter anymore.

For a whole week, whenever I left work, I would go and buy something in one of the expensive shops on Rue du Rhône. There was nothing I really wanted, but at least I felt that I was—how should I say this?—changing something, discovering something I didn't even know I needed, like some new domestic appliance, although it has to be said, novelties in the world of domestic appliances are few and far between. I avoided toy shops, because I didn't want to spoil my children by giving them a present every day. I didn't go into any men's shops, either, just in case my husband might grow suspicious of my sudden extreme generosity.

When I got home and entered the enchanted realm of my domestic world, everything would seem marvelous for a few hours, until everyone went to bed. Then, slowly, the nightmare would begin.

I think that passion is strictly for the young. Presumably, its absence is normal at my age, but that isn't what terrifies me.

Today I am a woman torn between the terror that everything might change and the equal terror that everything might carry on exactly the same for the rest of my days. Some people say that, as summer approaches, we start to have weird ideas; we feel smaller because we spend more time out in the open air, and that makes us aware of how large the world is. The horizon seems farther away, beyond the clouds and the walls of our house.

That may be true, but I just can't sleep anymore, and it isn't because of the heat. When night comes and no one is watching, I feel afraid of everything: life, death, love or the lack of it; the fact that all novelties quickly become habits; the feeling that I'm wasting the best years of my life in a pattern that will be repeated over and over until I die; and sheer panic at facing the unknown, however exciting and adventurous that might be.

Naturally, I seek consolation in other people's suffering.

I turn on the TV and watch the news. I see endless reports about accidents, people made homeless by natural disasters, refugees. How many people on the planet are ill right now? How many, whether in silence or not, are suffering injustices and betrayals? How many poor people are there, how many unemployed or imprisoned?

I change channels. I watch a soap or a movie and for a few minutes or hours I forget everything. I'm terrified my husband might wake up and ask: "What's wrong, babe?" Because then I would have to say that everything's fine. It would be even worse if—as happened a few times last month—he put his hand on my thigh, slid it slowly upward and started caressing me. I can fake orgasms—I often have—but I can't just *decide* to get wet with excitement.

I would have to say that I'm really tired, and he, never for one moment admitting that he was annoyed, would give me a kiss, turn over, and watch the latest news on his tablet, waiting until the next day. And then I would hope against hope that when the next day comes, he'd be tired. Very tired.

It's not always like that, though. Sometimes I have to take the initiative. If I reject him two nights in a row, he might go looking for a mistress, and I really don't want to lose him. If I masturbate beforehand, then I'm ready and everything's normal again.

"Normal" means that nothing will ever be as it was in the days when we were still a mystery to each other.

Keeping the same fire burning after ten years of marriage seems a complete impossibility to me. And each time I fake an orgasm, I die a little inside. A little? I think I'm dying more quickly than I thought.

My friends tell me how lucky I am, because I lie to them and tell them that we often make love, just as they lie to me when they say that they don't know how their husbands can still be so interested in sex. They say that sex in marriage is interesting only for the first five years, and after that calls for a little "imagination." Closing your eyes and imagining your neighbor lying on top of you, doing things your husband would never dare to do. Imagining having sex with him and your husband at the same time. Imagining every possible perversion, every forbidden game.

TODAY, when I leave the house to walk the kids to school, I take a good look at my neighbor. I've never imagined having sex with him. I'd rather imagine having sex with a young reporter who works with me, the one who seems to be in a permanent state of suffering and solitude. I've never seen him try to seduce anyone, and that's what's so charming. All the women in the office have commented that "the poor thing needs someone to look after him." I reckon he knows this and is happy merely to be an object of desire, nothing more. Perhaps, like me, he has a terrible fear of taking a false step and ruining everything—his job, his family, his past and future life.

Anyway, I look at my neighbor this morning and feel like crying. He is washing his car, and I think: "Look at that, another person just like me and my husband. One day we'll be doing the same thing. Our children will have grown up and moved to another city, or even another country. We'll be retired, and will spend our time washing our cars even if we can perfectly well afford to pay someone else to do it for us. After a certain age, you have to do irrelevant things—to pass the time, to show others that your body is still in working order, to express that you still appreciate the value of money and can still carry out certain humble tasks."

A clean car won't exactly change the world, but this morning, it is the only thing my neighbor cares about. He says good morning, smiles, and goes back to his work as if he were polishing a Rodin sculpture.

I LEAVE my car at the park-and-ride (Take the bus into town! Say “No” to pollution!). I catch the usual bus and look at the same things I always look at on the way in to work. Geneva doesn’t seem to have changed at all since I was a child; the grand old houses are still between the buildings put up by some mad mayor who discovered “new architecture” in the 1950s.

I miss all of this when I travel. The appalling bad taste, the absence of huge glass-and-steel towers, the lack of highways, the tree roots that push through the concrete sidewalks and trip you up, the public parks with their mysterious little wooden fences overgrown with weeds because “that’s what nature is like.” In short, a city that is different from others that have been modernized and lost their charm.

Here, we still say “Good morning” when we meet a stranger in the street and “Good-bye” when we leave a shop after buying a bottle of mineral water, even if we have no intention of ever going back. We still chat to strangers on the bus, even though the rest of the world thinks of the Swiss as being very discreet and reserved.

How wrong they are! But it’s good that other people should think of us like that, because that way we can preserve our way of life for another five or six centuries, before the Barbarians cross the Alps with their wonderful electronic gadgets; their apartments with tiny bedrooms and large living rooms to impress the guests; their women, who wear too much makeup; their men, who talk loudly and bother the neighbors; and their teenagers, who dress rebelliously but who are secretly terrified of what their parents might think.

Let them believe that all we produce is cheese, chocolate, cows, and cuckoo clocks. Let them believe that there’s a bank on every corner in Geneva. We have no intention of changing that image. We’re happy without the Barbarian hordes. We’re all armed to the teeth (since military service is obligatory, every Swiss man has a rifle in his house), but you rarely hear of anyone shooting anyone else.

We’re pleased that we haven’t changed for centuries. We feel proud to have remained neutral when Europe sent its sons off to fight senseless wars.

We're glad not to have to explain Geneva's somewhat unattractive appearance, with its fin de siècle cafés and elderly ladies strolling about the city.

To say "*we're* happy" might not be entirely true. Everyone is happy apart from me, as I travel to work wondering what's wrong.

ANOTHER day at the newspaper, trying to ferret out some interesting news other than the usual car accident, weaponless mugging, and fire (which dozens of fire engines manned by highly qualified firemen rushed to put out and flooded an old apartment. All because the neighbors were alarmed about the smoke issuing from a pot roast left too long in the oven).

Back home, there's the pleasure of cooking, the table set, and the family gathered around it, thanking God for the food we're about to receive. Another evening when, after supper, each person goes about his business—the father helping the children with their homework, the mother cleaning the kitchen, tidying the house, and putting out the money for the maid the next morning.

There are times during these months when I feel really good, when I really believe that my life makes perfect sense, that this is the role of human beings on Earth. The children feel that their mother is at peace, their father is kinder and more attentive, and the whole house seems to glow with its own light. We are an example of happiness to the rest of the street, the city, the canton—or what you might call the state—of the entire country. And then suddenly, for no reason, I get into the shower and burst into tears. I can cry there because no one can hear my sobs or ask me the question I hate most: “Are you all right?”

Yes, why shouldn't I be? Is there anything wrong with my life?

No, nothing.

Only the nights that fill me with dread.

The days I can't get excited about.

The happy images from the past and the things that could have been but weren't.

The desire for adventure never fulfilled.

The terror of not knowing what will happen to my children.

Then my thoughts start to circle negative things, always the same, as if there were a devil watching from one corner of the room, ready to leap out and tell me that what I call “happiness” is merely a passing phase, that nothing lasts. Surely I know that.

I want to change. I need to change. Today at work I got ridiculously uptight, simply because an intern took longer than usual to find the material I wanted. I'm not normally like that, but I'm gradually losing touch with myself.

It's silly to blame it all on that writer and his interview. That was months ago. He merely took the top off a volcano that could have erupted at any moment, sowing death and destruction around it. If it hadn't been him, it would have been a film, a book, or someone else I happened to talk to. I imagine that some people spend years allowing the pressure to build up inside them without even noticing, and then one day some tiny incident triggers a crisis.

Then they say: "I've had enough, I don't want this anymore."

Some commit suicide. Others get divorced. Some go to poor parts of Africa to try to save the world.

But I know myself. I know that my only reaction will be to repress my feelings until a cancer starts eating me up inside. Because I do actually believe that many illnesses are the result of repressed emotions.