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opening extract from

Letters From Alain

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ONE

The postman came by today. He leaned his bicycle against the wall. He opened the gate. Filling his cheeks with air he gave a whistle and left an envelope in the garden mailbox.

Since I'm twelve years old now, and they know I can read perfectly well, they have given me permission to collect the post and then deliver it to everyone in the house.

We get a lot every day, because my Dad is a journalist and a writer and he's constantly sending messages to people all over the place, all over the world. He tends to exchange books, information, ideas.

My sister also receives many letters, all from her admirers who are "madly in love with her,

just about ready to kill themselves if she leaves them". At least that's what she says.

My grandparents get letters from their other children and relations, the ones who "crossed the pond" many years ago: or in other words, they headed North never to come back.

Mum, who comes from a different part of the country, gets letters from her childhood friends, who all get very excited about coming to visit her some day.

I sometimes think my mother doesn't live in the present, if anything the present bores and annoys her. But when she receives a letter, she becomes a different person, happier, more cheerful. She even seems younger, particularly when you see her hurrying to her favourite armchair where she spends hours on end reading and rereading those letters, which remind her of the good times with her friends when they were children.

My aunt, who never married, also receives lots of letters, from an old impossible love.

But that would mean telling a really long story, and that's not important right now.

My Casanova of an uncle keeps in touch with

his all too possible loves. That's another long and winding story, best to keep that one to myself.

The point is that I always have to deliver piles on piles of letters, and none of them are ever addressed to me.

And that's a great shame; I would really love to receive letters just for me:

Maybe from far away people who think like me.

From old friends.

From impossible loves.

In short, from anyone...

And today, for the first time

a letter arrived

for me.

It was from Alain, my best friend, and it said something that really surprised me. I couldn't say if it made me happy or sad to see who it was from. I was just stunned by that crumpled piece of paper that had once been blank.

It read as follows:

Arturo

We arrived safely. It's all very pretty and there's lots of stuff. The sea was very cold at first. Then we got used to it, well, it was a little scary. You should see how big the waves get when you sail in a little boat, little like a nutshell, in the middle of a deep, dark sea.

But my parents know how to swim and so do I. Nothing could go wrong.

Write to me please.

I'm still your friend.

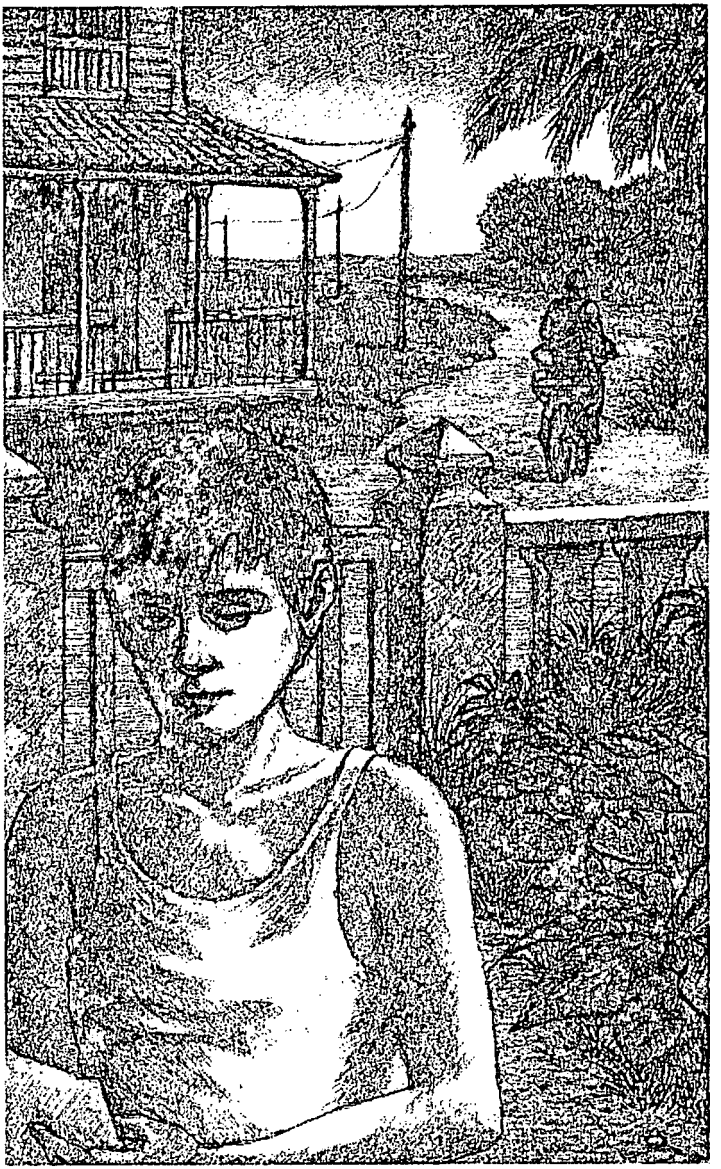
ALAIN

It was a brief letter, in a hurried scrawl, but very beautiful.

It makes me happy to know that Alain remembers me.

They left several days ago and every night when I go to bed, I look at the stars that come in through my window and think:

"Never, I will never hear from him again".



But today it happened - it really did.

That's why I feel so weird to be honest.

TWO

At first people said things I've never understood.

Grown up people I mean, the kind of people who, when they talk and you stop playing, suddenly go quiet, or change the subject because they don't want you to know their secrets.

Some people say that Alain's father was good and smart taking him far away, to a different country "where there are many beautiful things, luxurious and expensive and everyone has everything they could possibly want".

That's one thing that confuses me a bit.

Why would anyone need so many luxurious, pretty and expensive things? How can it be that everyone has everything they can possibly

want, just because they happen to live in one country or another?

On the other hand, some people say that it was a crime to take such a young child away and they talk about Alain's family in a way I don't understand, using words that I can't really remember.

My grandmother, for instance, is firmly of the opinion that "their little adventure" was a huge mistake:

"On his head be it if he wants to go off in a leaky boat, but to expose a child and his wife to that kind of danger... and leave behind that little girl, the poor little mite... it's an absolute disgrace to even take an innocent animal, the dog, who has nothing to do with anything. Sometimes those youngsters can be so irresponsible".

The poor little mite who is on her own is Anita. She was left behind with her grandmother and when they ask about her Mummy and Daddy or her brother, she just points towards the sea and says:

'Ally long, looong way away...'