Winter Song

Jean Claude Mourlevat

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Extract

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THE RULES

At a sign from the supervisor, a girl in the front row rose to her feet and went over to press the metal switch. Three unshaded electric bulbs flooded the study room with white light. It was so dark that reading had been almost impossible for some time, but the rules were strict: in October the lights came on at six-thirty in the evening and not a moment sooner. Helen waited ten more minutes before making up her mind. She'd been counting on the light to dissolve the pain she'd been feeling in her chest since the morning, but now it was rising like a oppressive lump in her throat. She recognized it for exactly what it was: sadness. She'd felt it before, she knew she couldn't fight it off, and waiting would only make it worse.

So yes, she'd go and see her consoler. Too bad if it was only October, very early in the school year. She tore half a page out of her rough book and

wrote on it: I want to go and see my consoler. Will you come with me? There didn't seem any point in signing it. The girl who read it would know her handwriting anywhere. She folded the piece of paper into eight and wrote the recipient's name: Milena. Third table by the windows.

She slipped the paper in front of her neighbour Vera Plasil, who was dozing open-eyed over her biology textbook. The little note passed discreetly from hand to hand down the line of tables next to the aisle where Helen sat, reached the fourth table, then sped on invisibly down the middle line, moved to the line beside the windows, and so on to the far end of the classroom and Milena in the row second from the front. The whole thing only took a minute. It was an accepted rule among the girls: messages must circulate fast and freely and must always reach their destination. You passed them on as a matter of course, even if you hated the girl sending the message or the girl she was writing to. The boarding school demanded absolute silence, so these little forbidden notes were the only way of communicating during study periods and lessons. In over three years at the school Helen had never seen a message go astray or come back, let alone be read by someone it wasn't meant for. Any girl who did that would have paid heavily for it.

Milena skimmed the message. Her masses of blonde hair cascaded down her back like a lion's mane. Helen would have given a lot for hair like that, but her own was short and straight like a boy's

and she couldn't do a thing with it. Milena turned and frowned, as if in disapproval. Helen knew exactly what that meant. You're crazy! This is only October! Last year you held out until February!

Helen gave an angry little shake of her head and narrowed her eyes. Maybe – but I want to go now. So are you coming or not?

Milena sighed. So that was all right, then.

Helen carefully tidied her things away, rose to her feet and crossed the room under the curious gaze of a dozen girls. When she reached the supervisor's desk she noticed that Miss Zesch, in charge during the study period, had a sour smell of sweat about her. In spite of the cold, her forearms and upper lip shone with unhealthy-looking perspiration.

"I want to go and see my consoler," Helen whispered.

The supervisor showed no surprise, just opened the large black register in front of her.

"Name?"

"Dormann. Helen Dormann," said Helen. She was sure the woman knew her name perfectly well and just didn't want to show it.

The supervisor ran a greasy finger down the list of names and stopped on the letter D. She checked that Helen Dormann hadn't used up all her outings yet.

"Very well. Companion?"

"Bach," said Helen. "Milena Bach."

The supervisor ran her finger up the list again to the letter B. Milena Bach hadn't gone out as an-

other girl's companion more than three times since term began in September. Miss Zesch raised her head and shouted in such a loud voice that half the girls jumped. "BACH, MILENA!"

Milena rose and went to stand in front of the desk.

"Are you willing to be Helen Dormann's companion going to see her consoler?"

"Yes," said Milena, without looking at her friend.

The supervisor glanced at her watch, noted down the time on a piece of paper and then said expressionlessly, as if reciting something learned by heart, "It is now eleven minutes past six p.m. You must be back in three hours' time, at eleven minutes past nine p.m. If either of you is not back, another girl will be put in the Sky and will stay there until you return. Any particular girl you'd like to name?"

"No," said Milena and Helen at the same time.

"In that case," said Miss Zesch, running her finger down the list, "in that case it will be Pancek."

Helen felt a pang. It was awful to think of little Catharina Pancek in the Sky. But another of the unwritten rules was that you never picked the girl who would be punished instead of you. The choice was left to the supervisor. Of course if she liked she could choose the same person ten times running, but at least that way solidarity among the girls was maintained. No one could be accused of deliberately causing someone else to suffer.

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high in the air above, the detention cell was underneath the cellars. You reached it from the refectory, down a long spiral staircase with cold water dripping from the steps. The cell measured about two by three metres. The walls and floor smelled musty, earthy. When the door closed behind you, all you could do was grope your way over to the wooden bed, sit or lie on it, and wait. You were alone in the darkness and silence for hours. People said that when you went in it you had to take a quick look at the top of the wall opposite the door, where someone had painted the sky on the beam – a patch of blue sky with white clouds. Catch a glimpse of it before the door closed, if only for a split second, and you could find the strength to bear the darkness better without despairing. That was why the place was called the Sky, and why everyone was so afraid of being sent there, or even unintentionally getting someone else sent there.

"And you'll miss supper," Miss Zesch went on. "Did you think of that?"

"Yes," Helen replied for both of them.

"Off you go, then," said the supervisor.

She wrote the date and time of the girls' outing on their cards, stamped them, and took no more interest in the matter.

Milena went to put her things away under her desk and then joined Helen, who was waiting for her in the corridor, already muffled up in her hooded coat. Milena took her own coat off its hook, put it on, and they both walked along the corridor,

which was lit on both sides by the lights from the study rooms. They went down the worn steps of the wide staircase to the ground floor. Then they followed another corridor, a dark one this time because the classrooms were empty after six in the evening. It was cold. The enormous cast iron radiators were all turned off — had they ever worked at all? In silence, the girls crossed the school yard, Helen in front, walking quickly, Milena following with a gloomy look on her face.

When they reached the barred gate they went into the Skeleton's lodge, as the rules required. The old crow, alarmingly skinny and always surrounded by a cloud of acrid smoke, ground her cigarette out in a brimming ashtray and looked at the two girls.

"Names."

You could see the bones beneath her skin, almost piercing her cheeks and fingers, where the blue veins traced intricate patterns.

"Dormann," said Helen, showing her card. "Helen Dormann."

The Skeleton studied the card, coughed over it, and handed it back to her.

"What about you?"

"Bach. Milena Bach," said Milena, placing her own card on the desk.

The Skeleton looked up with sudden interest. "You're the one with the good singing voice?"

"I sing a bit," said Milena cautiously.

"Well?" the Skeleton persisted.

It was hard to make out what she was getting at

was it jealousy or admiration? Or a mixture of both? When Milena didn't reply she went on, "So do you sing – better than me, for instance?"

This time it was obvious that the Skeleton was determined to pick an argument. "I don't know. Possibly," said Milena.

Three years in the boarding school had taught her how to answer the supervisors and teachers: stay neutral, make no positive statements, always agree with them. Then you had a quiet life.

"So you don't sing better than me? Come on, let's have an answer!"

The old bag of bones was clearly out for a bit of fun. She lit another cigarette. The forefinger and middle finger of her right hand were stained yellow by nicotine. Helen glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. They were wasting so much time!

"I don't know," said Milena calmly. "I've never heard you sing."

"And I expect you'd like to?" the Skeleton simpered. "You'd like to hear me sing a little tune but you don't dare ask, is that it?"

Helen had no idea how her friend was going to wriggle out of this, but the Skeleton broke into hoarse laughter which quickly turned into an uncontrollable coughing fit. Unable to say another word, she put a bunched-up handkerchief in front of her mouth and, still coughing, signed to the girls to hurry up and get out.

It was almost half past six when the two friends were finally through the barred gate and out on the

road.

"Totally off her rocker!" said Milena.

To their right lay the small town with dimly lit streets, to their left the old bridge, its street lamps and the four stone statues of armed horsemen. They made for the bridge.

"Are you mad at me?" asked Helen. "For missing supper? I'm sure my consoler will give me something for you. She cooks really delicious things."

"I couldn't care less about supper," said Milena. "It's not worth eating. It'll just be burnt soup this evening. I'm mad at you for wasting a visit to your consoler in October. You know we need at least two to get us through winter. We'll want them as soon as it gets darker and the nights are longer. How are you going to manage when you don't have any left?"

Helen knew her friend was right. All she said was, "I don't know. I just needed one today."

An icy drizzle made them screw up their eyes. They wrapped their coats around them and instinctively moved closer together. The uneven pavement shone below their feet, and the black, sluggish water of the river ran under the bridge. Milena took Helen's arm and heaved a deep sigh of exasperation. They looked at one another and smiled. Their arguments never lasted very long.

"How does the Skeleton know I sing?" asked Milena.

"Everyone in the school knows," said Helen. "There aren't many good things about the place.

Something like that gets noticed. People talk about it."

Her mind went back to the unforgettable afternoon three years earlier when she had first heard Milena sing. Four of them, all new girls, were sitting on the steps near the refectory, bored to tears. There was Doris Lemstadt, who only stayed six months before she fell so sick that she left again; Milena and Helen, still at the start of their friendship; and a fourth girl — had it been Vera Plasil with her gentle blue eyes? Probably. Doris Lemstadt had suggested passing the time by taking turns to sing songs. She started with a song from her own part of the country down in the plains. The song was about a soldier's wife waiting faithfully for her husband, but it was clear that he was never coming back. Doris didn't sing badly at all, and the other three clapped, quietly not to attract attention. It is forbidden to sing or listen to any song not on the syllabus, said Rule 42 in the school rules. Helen had followed with a comic song from the old days, about the troubles of an old bachelor who didn't know how to get on with girls. She couldn't remember all the words, but it was funny enough to make her three friends laugh, especially the bit about a poor man whispering sweet nothings to a nanny-goat, thinking it was his fiancée. Vera didn't know any songs, so missed her turn. Then Milena sat up a little straighter to expand her chest fully, closed her eyes, and a pure sound like the notes of a flute rose from her throat.

Blow the wind southerly, southerly, southerly
Blow the wind south o'er the bonny blue sea…

The other three girls were astonished. They hadn't known anyone could play with her voice like that, modulating it, making it vibrate, lingering on a note that swelled and then faded.

But sweeter and dearer by far 'tis when bringing
The barque of my true love in safety to me.

In the stupefied silence that followed the last notes, all Doris could whisper was, "What was that?"

"A traditional folk song."

"It was lovely," said Doris.

"Thank you." Helen had faltered.

That was three years ago, and Milena hadn't sung more than half a dozen times since. When she did sing, it was a rare and precious gift, made when she chose to whoever she chose. For instance one evening in the dormitory at Christmas time, for a group of ten girls; or in a corner of the yard just for Helen on 14 June, as a birthday present; or last time on a summer afternoon during a long walk beside the river. As soon as she opened her mouth you felt a tingle down your spine. Her singing, even if they didn't understand the words, somehow spoke straight to all the girls. It brought back old faces, and you could almost feel a hug you thought you'd forgotten. And above all, even if you were sad when you heard it, it gave you strength and

courage. The rumours had spread very fast: Milena did indeed "sing well", but she revealed none of her gift in Old Crackpot's music lessons and choir practice. Her voice was like anyone else's then, ordinary, with no special charm. Old Ma Crackpot taught nothing but theory in music lessons, and she made the girls sing the three authorized songs until they were completely sick of them, particularly the dreadful school song:

Happy of heart and pure of soul
In unison we sing...

Now the two girls were in the middle of the bridge, at its highest point. Ahead of them in the distance was the hill where the consolers lived.

"Think we'll meet any of the boys?" asked Helen.

"That really would surprise me!" laughed Milena. "They don't come here as often we do, everyone knows that. And no one but Helen Dormann would think of visiting their consoler at this time of the evening in October!"

"We might meet some coming back down, all the same."

"Dream on! They hide in the undergrowth when we come along! You'd have to shake the branches and shout, 'Hey! Anyone there?'"

Helen burst out laughing. She was relieved to see her friend back in a good mood.

"Do you think the consolers hug the boys too?"

"I'm sure they do!" said Milena. "But the boys wouldn't admit it even under torture."

They started down Donkey Road, which was steep and poorly lit. You could imagine families sitting over supper in yellow lamplight behind the narrow windows and drawn curtains. Another world. Sometimes you caught the sound of laughter or a raised voice. They passed the cobbler's. He was just closing his shop for the night and gave them a vague nod without really looking at them. Boarding school girls, that's what they were to everyone, and people avoided speaking to them. At the end of the road you came to the countryside, no more houses except where the consolers lived at the very top of the hill. They stopped for a moment to get their breath back and look at the town below on the far side of the river. Now they could see the glistening slate rooftops, the church towers, the roads shining in the light of the street lamps. A few cars were driving around, silent at this distance and looking like big, pot-bellied beetles.

"It's lovely," sighed Helen. "I would like the town if it wasn't for..." She stopped, jerking her head at the huge building they had just left: the girls' boarding school on the other side of the bridge.

"And if we could go there now and then." Milena finished her sentence, pointing to the other building, the boys' boarding school a couple of hundred metres from the girls' school.

They had just set out again along the trodden earth road when a couple of figures came round a

bend higher up. The two boys were striding downhill fast. They disappeared from view for a moment and then came into sight again, closer now, where the road began to run straight. The first boy was tall and thin. Helen noticed the way he looked straight ahead in a challenging way, his firm chin jutting. The second, who was rounder in the face and shorter, followed close behind him. She saw the curly hair under his cap, and his laughing eyes.

"Hi!" said all four of them at almost the same time, and they stopped face to face in the road.

"You're going up?" asked the boy with the cap, rather stupidly.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Helen. Then she was cross with herself for sounding sarcastic, and to apologise added, "And you're going down again."

"That's right," said the boy.

"Who was whose companion?" Helen ventured. "If it's OK to ask."

The boy said nothing for a couple of seconds, looking undecided, and finally made up his mind and pointed to his taller friend. "He's my companion."

Helen got the impression that he was blushing as he made this confession. She liked that. Not wanting to embarrass him, she pointed to Milena and said, "And she's mine." Which meant: I'm going to see my consoler too; it's nothing to be ashamed of.

The boy was obviously grateful. He smiled, and said, "What are your names?"

"I'm Helen," said Helen, "and this is Milena."

"I'm Milos," said the boy. "He's Bartolomeo. We're in the fourth year. What about you — which year are you in?"

"We're both in the fourth year too," said Helen.

The little coincidence amused them. Then they didn't know what to say next, so they said nothing, feeling rather awkward. The two boys couldn't bring themselves to go on down the hill or the girls to go on up it. There were very few opportunities for the students in the two schools to meet like this: it would have been stupid to part so quickly. Helen noticed that Milena and Bartolomeo couldn't take their eyes off each other, and thought her friend seemed unafraid. Looking from one to the other, she wondered desperately what to say next. But it was Milena who spoke first.

"We could exchange messages through the Skunk, couldn't we?"

Helen felt the blood rise to her face. She had always thought that messages delivered by the Skunk were only for the fifth and sixth-year students. Milena's suggestion seemed incredibly daring. It was as if she had suddenly crossed a forbidden frontier without warning.

The Skunk was a wizened little old man who hobbled across the school yard twice a week late in the morning on Fridays, laboriously hauling his handcart after him. It contained a pile of dirty sheets which he was taking to the laundry in town. As the only person who could pass freely between both schools, he was someone of considerable im-

portance' he could deliver messages and bring the replies back next week or the week after. All you had to do was leave your letter among the laundry along with payment — a banknote in an envelope, or even better, a bottle of spirits if possible. The Skunk suffered from some kind of gastric disorder which gave him appallingly bad breath. A disgusting smell of rotten cabbage hit you five metres away from him even if he'd hardly opened his mouth. The poor man tried to keep this misfortune at bay by drinking cheap gut-rot which could be bought for him in the town.

"We've never tried it before," said the taller boy, the one his friend had called Bartolomeo. "But the older guys say it works."

His voice was both deep and soft, almost a man's voice.

"Let's write our names down," said Milena. She was already tearing a piece of paper into four.

They all searched their pockets for a pencil or a pen, and then each of the four carefully wrote his or her name. Standing close together in their long overcoats, they formed a little island of warmth in the cold. The boys had their collars turned up, the girls had pulled their hoods over their heads, and there was almost nothing of them to be seen except their hands and faces. As she finished writing Helen Dormann, the girls' school, 4th year, Helen handed it to Milos without hesitating. He handed his note to her at the same time, and their fingers touched. They smiled, and put the two scraps of paper in

their pockets unread. Milena and Bartolomeo had already exchanged theirs.

"We don't want to cross in the post," said Milena, always practical. "Helen and I will write first."

"Fine," said the two boys.

"Right." Helen shook herself and took Milena's arm. "We're going on up. I don't have much time left."

"We'd better get a move on too," said Milos. "Or we're going to be late. I don't fancy sending a friend to the detention cell."

And they rushed on downhill.

"You'll write first, then?" the taller boy confirmed, turning back for a moment.

"Is that a promise?" asked Milos, forefinger raised as if to threaten them.

"It's a promise!" said the two girls at the same time, laughing.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously.

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"Everyone in the school knows," said Helen. "There aren't many good things about the place.

Something like that gets noticed. People talk about it."

Her mind went back to the unforgettable afternoon three years earlier when she had first heard Milena sing. Four of them, all new girls, were sitting on the steps near the refectory, bored to tears. There was Doris Lemstadt, who only stayed six months before she fell so sick that she left again; Milena and Helen, still at the start of their friendship; and a fourth girl – had it been Vera Plasil with her gentle blue eyes? Probably. Doris Lemstadt had suggested passing the time by taking turns to sing songs. She started with a song from her own part of the country down in the plains. The song was about a soldier's wife waiting faithfully for her husband, but it was clear that he was never coming back. Doris didn't sing badly at all, and the other three clapped, quietly not to attract attention. It is forbidden to sing or listen to any song not on the syllabus, said Rule 42 in the school rules. Helen had followed with a comic song from the old days, about the troubles of an old bachelor who didn't know how to get on with girls. She couldn't remember all the words, but it was funny enough to make her three friends laugh, especially the bit about a poor man whispering sweet nothings to a nanny-goat, thinking it was his fiancée. Vera didn't know any songs, so missed her turn. Then Milena sat up a little straighter to expand her chest fully, closed her eyes, and a pure sound like the notes of a flute rose from her throat.

Blow the wind southerly, southerly, southerly
Blow the wind south o'er the bonny blue sea...

The other three girls were astonished. They hadn't known anyone could play with her voice like that, modulating it, making it vibrate, lingering on a note that swelled and then faded.

But sweeter and dearer by far 'tis when bringing
The barque of my true love in safety to me.

In the stupefied silence that followed the last notes, all Doris could whisper was, "What was that?"

"A traditional folk song."

"It was lovely," said Doris.

"Thank you," Helen had faltered.

That was three years ago, and Milena hadn't sung more than half a dozen times since. When she did sing, it was a rare and precious gift, made when she chose to whoever she chose. For instance one evening in the dormitory at Christmas time, for a group of ten girls; or in a corner of the yard just for Helen on 14 June, as a birthday present; or last time on a summer afternoon during a long walk beside the river. As soon as she opened her mouth you felt a tingle down your spine. Her singing, even if they didn't understand the words, somehow spoke straight to all the girls. It brought back old faces, and you could almost feel a hug you thought you'd forgotten. And above all, even if you were sad when you heard it, it gave you strength and

courage. The rumours had spread very fast: Milena did indeed "sing well", but she revealed none of her gift in Old Crackpot's music lessons and choir practice. Her voice was like anyone else's then, ordinary, with no special charm. Old Ma Crackpot taught nothing but theory in music lessons, and she made the girls sing the three authorized songs until they were completely sick of them, particularly the dreadful school song:

Happy of heart and pure of soul
In unison we sing...

Now the two girls were in the middle of the bridge, at its highest point. Ahead of them in the distance was the hill where the consolers lived.

"Think we'll meet any of the boys?" asked Helen.

"That really would surprise me!" laughed Milena. "They don't come here as often we do, everyone knows that. And no one but Helen Dormann would think of visiting their consoler at this time of the evening in October!"

"We might meet some coming back down, all the same."

"Dream on! They hide in the undergrowth when we come along! You'd have to shake the branches and shout, 'Hey! Anyone there?'"

Helen burst out laughing. She was relieved to see her friend back in a good mood.

"Do you think the consolers hug the boys too?"

"I'm sure they do!" said Milena. "But the boys wouldn't admit it even under torture."

They started down Donkey Road, which was steep and poorly lit. You could imagine families sitting over supper in yellow lamplight behind the narrow windows and drawn curtains. Another world. Sometimes you caught the sound of laughter or a raised voice. They passed the cobbler's. He was just closing his shop for the night and gave them a vague nod without really looking at them. Boarding school girls, that's what they were to everyone, and people avoided speaking to them. At the end of the road you came to the countryside, no more houses except where the consolers lived at the very top of the hill. They stopped for a moment to get their breath back and look at the town below on the far side of the river. Now they could see the glistening slate rooftops, the church towers, the roads shining in the light of the street lamps. A few cars were driving around, silent at this distance and looking like big, pot-bellied beetles.

"It's lovely," sighed Helen. "I would like the town if it wasn't for..." She stopped, jerking her head at the huge building they had just left: the girls' boarding school on the other side of the bridge.

"And if we could go there now and then." Milena finished her sentence, pointing to the other building, the boys' boarding school a couple of hundred metres from the girls' school.

They had just set out again along the trodden earth road when a couple of figures came round a

bend higher up. The two boys were striding downhill fast. They disappeared from view for a moment and then came into sight again, closer now, where the road began to run straight. The first boy was tall and thin. Helen noticed the way he looked straight ahead in a challenging way, his firm chin jutting. The second, who was rounder in the face and shorter, followed close behind him. She saw the curly hair under his cap, and his laughing eyes.

"Hi!" said all four of them at almost the same time, and they stopped face to face in the road.

"You're going up?" asked the boy with the cap, rather stupidly.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Helen. Then she was cross with herself for sounding sarcastic, and to apologise added, "And you're going down again."

"That's right," said the boy.

"Who was whose companion?" Helen ventured. "If it's OK to ask?"

The boy said nothing for a couple of seconds, looking undecided, and finally made up his mind and pointed to his taller friend, "He's my companion."

Helen got the impression that he was blushing as he made this confession. She liked that. Not wanting to embarrass him, she pointed to Milena and said, "And she's mine." Which meant: I'm going to see my consoler too, it's nothing to be ashamed of.

The boy was obviously grateful. He smiled, and said, "What are your names?"

"I'm Helen," said Helen, "and this is Milena."

"I'm Milos," said the boy. "He's Bartolomeo. We're in the fourth year. What about you – which year are you in?"

"We're both in the fourth year too," said Helen.

The little coincidence amused them. Then they didn't know what to say next, so they said nothing, feeling rather awkward. The two boys couldn't bring themselves to go on down the hill or the girls to go on up it. There were very few opportunities for the students in the two schools to meet like this; it would have been stupid to part so quickly. Helen noticed that Milena and Bartolomeo couldn't take their eyes off each other, and thought her friend seemed unafraid. Looking from one to the other, she wondered desperately what to say next. But it was Milena who spoke first.

"We could exchange messages through the Skunk, couldn't we?"

Helen felt the blood rise to her face. She had always thought that messages delivered by the Skunk were only for the fifth and sixth-year students. Milena's suggestion seemed incredibly daring. It was as if she had suddenly crossed a forbidden frontier without warning.

The Skunk was a wizened little old man who hobbled across the school yard twice a week late in the morning on Fridays, laboriously hauling his handcart after him. It contained a pile of dirty sheets which he was taking to the laundry in town. As the only person who could pass freely between both schools, he was someone of considerable im-

portance: he could deliver messages and bring the replies back next week or the week after. All you had to do was leave your letter among the laundry along with payment – a banknote in an envelope, or even better a bottle of spirits if possible. The Skunk suffered from some kind of gastric disorder which gave him appallingly bad breath. A disgusting smell of rotten cabbage hit you five metres away from him even if he'd hardly opened his mouth. The poor man tried to keep this misfortune at bay by drinking cheap gut-rot which could be bought for him in the town.

"We've never tried it before," said the taller boy, the one his friend had called Bartolomeo. "But the older guys say it works."

His voice was both deep and soft, almost a man's voice.

"Let's write our names down," said Milena. She was already tearing a piece of paper into four.

They all searched their pockets for a pencil or a pen, and then each of the four carefully wrote his or her name. Standing close together in their long overcoats, they formed a little island of warmth in the cold. The boys had their collars turned up, the girls had pulled their hoods over their heads, and there was almost nothing of them to be seen except their hands and faces. As she finished writing Helen Dormann, the girls' school, 4th year, Helen handed it to Milos without hesitating. He handed his note to her at the same time, and their fingers touched. They smiled, and put the two scraps of paper in

their pockets unread. Milena and Bartolomeo had already exchanged theirs.

"We don't want to cross in the post," said Milena, always practical. "Helen and I will write first."

"Fine," said the two boys.

"Right." Helen shook herself and took Milena's arm. "We're going on up. I don't have much time left."

"We'd better get a move on too," said Milos. "Or we're going to be late. I don't fancy sending a friend to the detention cell."

And they rushed on downhill.

"You'll write first, then?" the taller boy confirmed, turning back for a moment.

"Is that a promise?" asked Milos, forefinger raised as if to threaten them.

"It's a promise!" said the two girls at the same time, laughing.