

## A Letter

The assistant manager, a tired-looking little man with a narrow, greying moustache, had invited him to sit down in a tiny windowless office brightened only by its canary-yellow door. When Alain saw the carefully framed notice, he felt nervous laughter return – but more hysterical this time, and accompanied by the disagreeable feeling that if God existed, he had a very dubious sense of humour. The notice showed a joyful team of postmen and -women all giving the thumbs up. Running across the top in yellow letters were the words ‘The future: brought to you by the Post Office.’ Alain chuckled mirthlessly. ‘Great slogan.’

‘No need to be sarcastic, Monsieur,’ replied the civil servant calmly.

‘Don’t you think I’m entitled to a little sarcasm?’ demanded Alain, pointing to his letter. ‘Thirty-three years late. How do you explain that?’

‘Your tone is not helpful, Monsieur,’ replied the man drily.

Alain glared at him. The assistant manager held his gaze for a moment, then slowly extended his arm towards a blue folder which he opened with some ceremony. Then he licked his finger and started turning the pages, rather slowly. ‘And your name is?’ he murmured, not looking at Alain.

‘Massoulier,’ replied Alain.

‘Ah, yes, Dr Alain Massoulier, 38 Rue de Moscou, Paris

8°,' the civil servant read aloud. 'You're aware that we're modernising?'

'The results are impressive.'

The man with the moustache looked at Alain again in silence and seemed about to say something sharp, but apparently thought better of it.

'As I was saying, the building is being modernised, so all the wooden shelves, dating back to its construction in 1954, were taken down last week. The workmen found four letters which had fallen down the back and were trapped between the floor and the shelves. The oldest dated back to ... 1963,' he confirmed, reading from the file. 'Then there was a postcard from 1978, a letter from 1983 – that's yours – and lastly, a letter from 2002. We took the decision that, where possible, we would deliver them to their recipients if they were still alive and easily identifiable from their addresses. That's the explanation,' he said, closing the blue file.

'But no apology?'

said Alain.

Eventually the assistant manager said, 'If you wish, we can send you our apology form letter. Would that be of use?'

Alain looked down at the desk where his eye fell on a heavy cast-iron paperweight, embellished with the insignia of the postal service. He briefly saw himself picking it up and hitting the little moustachioed man with it repeatedly.

'For whatever purpose it may serve,' droned the man, 'does this letter have a legal significance (with regard to an inheritance or transfer of shares or similar) such that the delay in delivery would activate legal proceedings against the postal service—'

'No, it does not,' Alain cut him off brusquely.

The man asked him for his signature at the bottom of a form that Alain did not even bother to read. Alain left and stopped

outside in front of a skip. Workmen were throwing solid oak planks and metal structures into it, shouting at each other in what Alain believed was Serbian.

Passing a mirror in a chemist's window, Alain caught sight of his reflection. He saw grey hair and the rimless glasses that his optician claimed were as good as a facelift. An ageing doctor, that's what the mirror reflected back at him, an ageing doctor like so many thousands of others across the country. A doctor, just like his father before him.

Written on a typewriter and signed in turquoise ink, the letter had arrived in the morning post. In the top left-hand corner was the logo of the famous record label: a semicircle above the name, featuring a vinyl record in the form of a setting sun – or maybe a rising sun. The paper had yellowed at the edges. Alain had reread the letter three times before putting it back in the envelope. His name was correct, his address was correct. Everything was in order except for the date, 12 September 1983. That date was also printed over the stamp – a Marianne that had been out of circulation for a long time. The postmark was only half printed but you could clearly read: Paris – 12/9/83. Alain had suppressed a fleeting guffaw like an unwelcome tic. Then he had shaken his head, smiling incredulously. Thirty-three years. That letter had taken thirty-three years to travel across three *arrondissements* of the capital.

The day's post – an electricity bill, *Le Figaro*, *L'Obs*, three publicity flyers (one for a mobile phone, one for a travel agent and the third for an insurance company) – had just been brought up by Madame Da Silva, the concierge. Alain had considered getting up, opening the door and catching Madame Da Silva on the stairs to ask her where the letter had come from. But

she would already be back downstairs in her apartment, and anyway, she wouldn't be able to help him. She had merely brought up what the postman had delivered to the building.



Paris, 12 September 1983

Dear Holograms

We listened with great interest to the five-track demo tape you sent us at the beginning of the summer. Your work is precise and very professional, and although it needs quite a bit of work, you already have a sound that is distinctive. The track we were most impressed by was 'Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On'. You have managed to blend new wave and cold wave whilst adding your own rock sound.

Please get in touch with us so that we can organise a meeting.

Best wishes

Claude Kalan  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The tone was polite but friendly. Alain focused on the words ‘precise’ and ‘very professional’ whilst noting the slightly derogatory repetition of the word ‘work’. And the letter ended on an encouraging note, an affirmation in fact. Yes, thought Alain, ‘Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On’ was the best, a jewel, a hit, whispered in Bérengère’s voice. Alain closed his eyes and recalled her face with almost surreal precision: her big eyes, always vaguely worried, her short haircut with the fringe sweeping over her forehead, the way she had of going up to the mic and holding it with both hands and not letting go for the whole song. She would close her eyes and the soft voice with its touch of huskiness was always a surprise coming from a girl of nineteen. Alain opened his eyes again: ‘a meeting’ – how many times had the five of them uttered that word. How many times had they hoped for a meeting with a record label: a meeting at eleven on Monday at our offices. We have a meeting at Polydor. That ‘meeting’ had never been forthcoming. The Holograms had split up. Although that was not exactly the right term. It would be more accurate to say that life had simply moved on, causing the group to disperse. In the absence of a response from any record label, they had each gone their own way, disappointed and tired of waiting.

Still half asleep in her blue silk dressing gown, Véronique had just pushed open the kitchen door. Alain looked up at her and handed her the letter. She read it through, yawning.

‘It’s a mistake,’ she said.

‘It certainly is not,’ retorted Alain, holding out the envelope. ‘Alain Massoulier, that’s me.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Véronique shook her head, indicating that untangling an enigma so soon after waking up was beyond her.

‘The date, look at the date.’

She read out, ‘1983.’

‘The Holograms, that was my group, my rock group. Well, it wasn’t rock, it was new wave; cold wave to be exact, as it says here.’ Alain pointed to the relevant line in the letter.

Véronique looked at her husband in astonishment.

‘The letter took thirty-three years to travel across three *arrondissements*.’

‘Are you sure?’ she murmured, turning the letter over.

‘Have you got another explanation?’

‘You’ll have to ask at the post office,’ concluded Véronique, sitting down.

‘I’m going to! I wouldn’t miss that for the world,’ replied Alain.

Then he got up and started the Nespresso machine.

‘Make me one,’ said Véronique, yawning again.

Alain thought it was time his wife cut down on the sleeping tablets. It was distressing to see her every morning appearing like a rumpled shrew. It would take her at least two hours in the bathroom before she emerged dressed and made up. So all in all it took nearly three hours for Véronique to get herself properly together. Since the children had left home, Alain and Véronique found themselves living on their own as at the beginning of their marriage. But twenty-five years had passed and what had seemed charming at the beginning was becoming a little wearing, and now long silences stretched out over dinner. In order to fill them Véronique talked about her clients and her latest decorative finds, while Alain would mention patients or colleagues, and then they would fall to discussing their holiday plans although they could never agree where to go.