

Letter from the Understudy
by Kathryn Simmonds

Dear Malcolm,

The first thing to say is, I'm sorry. I know it won't be easy for you to believe after recent events, but I deeply regret the mess I've made and the embarrassment I've caused you. I've had time to turn it all over since I've been here – to be honest, there's not much else to do but ruminate once you've wandered around the market and visited the Orang-utan sanctuary - so I'm writing to try and explain.

It's true, Alex and I didn't have the best relationship, but I wasn't the only one in the cast who found him difficult. He's a fine actor, of course, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say he also has an ego the size of a small planet. As a director, you wouldn't know what it was like to be around that all the time. The way he strutted around back stage in those tights. We used to say the only reason he'd climb a balcony in real life was if he knew there'd be a reflective surface at the top. You don't know what it was like to come in and see him every evening, warming his voice, poring over his notices, practising his Jude Law smile. I knew he'd never give me a chance. Apart from anything else, he seemed to have the constitution of a Shire horse – not so much as a runny nose, a headache

Actually, my own head is pounding rather. It must be the heat. Apparently it's so hot because the rains are due, that's what one of the local children told me anyway. There are a little gang of them who like to practise their English on me. They're a welcome diversion from my thoughts. They were asking me questions this morning.

'What is your name?'

'Gavin.'

'Where do you come from?'

'London.'

Then one of them, a little girl of about seven, asked me, 'What are you doing here?' I didn't have the phrase in my book for 'I've committed actual bodily harm against one of the rising stars of British theatre,' so I said I was having a holiday. 'Where is your wife?' she asked. There was a blinding shaft of sunlight between us, and the ground was wobbling with the heat. All of a sudden I felt so terribly wretched. The theatre is my wife, I thought, And now I've lost her. And I began to sob. Right there in front of them. Well, they all ran away of course in hysterics and who could blame them.

But this is what I want to explain. The theatre is the only thing I've ever wanted, since I was a child myself - almost before I knew what it meant to be an actor. I don't come from a theatrical family. Mum and Dad didn't take us for a quick burst of Chekhov and a Zeffirelli double-bill; it was Bob's Full House and The Daily Mirror, so they had no idea where I got the notion from. Actually, it started with The Wizard of Oz at primary school, I was a nine year-old Tin Man and I had a costume made out of foil-covered boxes. I can still remember the song:

Just to register emotion
Jealousy – devotion
And really feel the part.
I could stay young and chipper
And I'd lock it with a zipper
If I only had a heart.

Later on I used to sing that song to myself at castings, except it became 'If I only had a part.'

So Mum and Dad helped me through drama school, even though they wanted me to get a nice safe job, something with a pension plan. My younger sister, Dianne, works in risk management and drives a convertible Golf GTI. Mum's always impressed because Dianne buys bottles of balsamic vinegar which are tied with raffia around the neck. Mum had never eaten an olive until Di introduced her to one. All I've managed to introduce her to is a feeling of vague

anxiety. As I said, my parents aren't middle-class, they don't understand what we affectionately call 'The Arts'. So my motivation wasn't all self-interest, you see. I owed them. You can't have your parents carrying on the same awkward conversations for years. 'Oh yes, Gavin's still acting...Hm? No, he's done a bit of radio work though. Yes, The Archers. Yes, just the one episode. An assistant vet. He's in a play at the moment. No, we hadn't heard of it either. It's touring. Middlesbrough, we think.' At the very least you need to show them a picture, a press cutting. Something. But I knew, I knew in my heart, that I didn't lack talent. I just needed the opportunity to prove myself as the Gavin Pollard I could be; not the bit-playing, spear-carrying walk-on, but the scene-stealing, balcony-scaling leading man. The prospect of becoming one of those unemployed older actors terrified me, a lifetime spent creaking about in the shadows, gradually filling up with a sort of Jimmy Porter vitriol, hanging around in WH Smith to skim read copies of The Stage. So I decided I wouldn't, couldn't let it happen.

This has all been my own doing, and I'm not laying blame at your door, but I do wonder, would this have happened if I'd had a chance sooner? Perhaps if you'd put me on for the occasional Wednesday matinee? Lets be honest, it doesn't bother a party of school children who's playing the lead, they're only there to show off in front of their mates - like that time one of them called out, 'Oi, Romeo, when you gonna give her one?' and the entire balcony erupted. But I never did get a matinee, and it was quite clear that Alex wasn't going to give way. So desperation took over.

After a couple of trips to a Chinese herbalist on the Old Kent Road, and a bit of experimentation, I found something that would do the trick: short term effects with no lasting damage. I was too cautious at first, sprinkled some into his pre-performance Campari and he barely noticed, just murmured something later about indigestion (as I said, Shire horse). So next time I was more generous, and it worked like a charm. Within fifteen minutes he was complaining about stomach cramps, and soon after that he was sleeping like a baby. Of course, I felt a bit guilty, rather like a benign Macbeth, but I knew he wouldn't be seriously affected.

How can I describe what it was like to stand there at last and do what I'd dreamed about all my life, to speak those lines, to move an entire audience to tears?

It's true, I gave an immaculate performance, but I needed to be seen by the people who mattered - the critics. So I got a mate of mine to round up some journalists and casting agents to come and see the performance the following night. I knew the part inside out, I'd studied every subtlety and mannerism. I was ready. So imagine how I felt when Alex phoned up the next morning right as rain and ready to go back on. The critics would be turning up to see me, it was my big chance. But Alex was fighting fit. I was in a fever. I wasn't being rational, as Shakespeare has it, 'These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumphs die, like fire and powder, which as they kiss, consume.' It was too late. I was already consumed. My entire professional life was hanging in the balance.

It was a blustery afternoon, and I remember there was a child flying a kite as I walked through the park towards Alex's house. I remember watching the wind toying with the kite, hardly conscious of my body, as if I were walking through a dream. When I got there I hid behind a Clematis bush beside the front door and put the masque on that I'd filched from the props department. I didn't know when he'd be back, but he was usually at the theatre by six, so I waited. My heart was going like a train, and I was sweating - let me tell you Malcolm, it was worse, far worse than any stage fright. At five o'clock Alex rounded the corner and as he put his key in the lock I sprang out swinging the cricket bat. It was going to be a mild knock on the head, a gentle concussion, but he turned at the vital moment and pushed me back - he has very quick reactions, it must be all that fencing. There was some kind of tussle and I was sort of swinging at him with the bat, then he made a lunge for me and that's when the masque became dislodged. We stood there staring at each other for a fraction of a second, and I could see the word beginning to form in his mouth, 'Gav...' and that's when I panicked and took another swing at him. You must believe me, I didn't want to harm him seriously. Perhaps I was in shock, because the next bit is blurry, but I remember kneeling down to check his breathing, which sounded regular. There was some blood, just a little bit of a trickle around the nose, which looked a different shape, sort of squashed. I called the ambulance from a pay phone and went home. An hour or so later you rang me to say I'd be on.

'Gavin Pollard gave a charged performance,' said The Times. But I wasn't acting that night, that was the real thing. I held Juliet to me as if she were my dying career, and all I could do was weep and rage. Afterwards I got on a plane and came here.

It's getting dark. They'll be setting up the tables soon for dinner, and I've said all I needed to say so I'll stop now. I hope Alex is willing not to press charges, but that seems unlikely, given the circumstances - after all, who wants to swap a career as Romeo for one as Richard III? I intend to write to him, I just need to find the right words.

Forgive me if I don't include a return address, I'm keeping a low profile for a little while. But then again, I suppose I'm used to anonymity.

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