

Dear Alan Bennett,¹

As you know our chats have traditionally taken place in the bath with Neal's Yard foaming oil, so writing a letter feels a little, well, upright.

You know my father is also an Alan. The good news is that he is still very much here in body. Good days his mind is too. The other day I noticed how he has a similar soft pallor to his face as yours. I suppose it's the increased oestrogen that older men produce, lending them a buttery softness to the jowls and lips. Skin smooth as scone-tops.

Recently I opened your '*Untold Stories*'² and found a one-day Travelcard dated 2005. I recalled carrying the book, as hefty as a breeze block, in my wheelie bag across the globe, as I was an air-hostess back then. The weight was impractical but the book served as a kind of anchor to home, albeit your 'Mam' and 'Dad'. Then, you were the kind of Alan I wished for in a father, because you had words, oodles of them – and they spoke to me and in a way no man ever had before.

Do you remember the 'Shed Story', in March? I was back at Mum and Dad's collecting a trunk from the garden shed containing all my diaries? Mum, the intermediary between me and Dad, was out shopping. Without her we had to communicate head-on. It was 5pm and dark. Dad comes down to the end of the garden with me. This is a man who never touches, seldom kisses, and has certainly never offered to help.

'Here', he says. 'Let me.' He takes hold of the key for the padlock and I shine a torch on the lock area. Over and over he misses by a centimetre or so. I do not fail to appreciate the magnitude of this gesture and, bathing in his attention, I let him carry on missing the lock until I have to take control of the situation.

This year has been a series of 'Untold Stories' to most of my friends and family. But you might recall the 'Finger Story' from July? A quick recap: Dad was released from hospital after another failed attempt at being diagnosed with a stroke and he falls over getting out of the mini-cab outside number 47 where they live. By the time I get there, Mum's face is blotched red with stress. In the front room with Dad settled into his T.V. chair I ask him how he is? He holds up his forefinger. I study it; crooked from years as a wicket keeper, a long manicured cuticle; a tower of blood, bone and

energy.³

‘Chaos’, he says, keeping the finger raised.

‘I... no’. His eyes dart about and then he thinks for a long time. I can feel the urge in my tongue to donate words, like you do when someone is mid-stutter. But he is speechless and frustrated.

August – Dad gives me £50 ‘pocket money’ to spend in France.

October – Mum and I find Dad in the Ladies stroke unit at the hospital. When we get to his bed, he is all scrunched up far down the bed uncomfortable. He tells me there is someone behind the curtain who is listening to every word he says.

After I kiss him hello, I tell him I climbed a tree for the first time. ‘A forty-year old woman!’ I say. He comes back into his eyes and laughs.

As Mum arranges the biscuits on his tray table he becomes distant again. I sit in the blue chair to the side of him. As I do this, I realise the chair is too far back and out of his field of vision. I decide to test his memory to see if he can remember I have come. I sit silently.

‘Where’s Karen?’ he says, after a minute or two. And I delight in this, in him speaking my name. I am a sad little girl, still wanting to be noticed.

Later that night, I am walking home from Mum and Dad’s house. On the other side of the road a driving school car slows down. The word ‘RED’ marks the driving school’s name on the doors and on the roof. An instructor leans out the window and makes a funnel with his mouth.

‘Ooooooh’, he says in a long growl. Then he mumbles something equally sexual sounding. It takes me a few moments to work out what the words are. Then it clicks, he’s said ‘Hello sweet-cheeks!’ I presume he is referring to my bottom. The car drives off and I am left speechless. I think of the blocks of blood, bone and energy at the ends of my arms. I raise both hands and shape my fore-fingers and middle fingers into V’s. Death is making a girl of me. I dart my hands up and down, flicking them at the car bumper, over and over and for too long.

No words needed. Daddy’s girl.

Speak soon Alan, probably Sunday when I’ll be in for a long soak.

Love, Karen

¹. Alan Bennett is a playwright and diarist from Leeds. You probably knew that already, but it's best never to assume. We will of course ensure that this letter reaches him.

². *Untold Stories* (Faber, 2005) is a collection of autobiographical pieces and essays which followed the hugely successful memoir *Writing Home* (Faber, 1991).

³. The writer's father has been diagnosed with a condition known as 'Lewy Body Disease', a form of dementia which shares symptoms with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and usually involves having hallucinations. Further information on the condition can be found at www.alzheimers.org.uk

Karen McLeod studied performance art in Cardiff, where she convinced audiences she was a drag queen. Struggling to make ends meet she worked as a long haul air hostess for British Airways. After publishing *In Search of the Missing Eyelash* (Jonathan Cape, 2007), which won a Betty Trask award, she left flying and is now writer-in-residence at the Bookseller Crow Bookshop in Crystal Palace, South London. Karen McLeod grew up in Penge, South London, and now lives in a tower block overlooking Croydon. Her new novel is set in a block very similar to the one she lives in. She divides her time between writing and performing, listening and thinking, and trying to work out whose voice is whose and whose voice is hers.

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place in the bath with
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