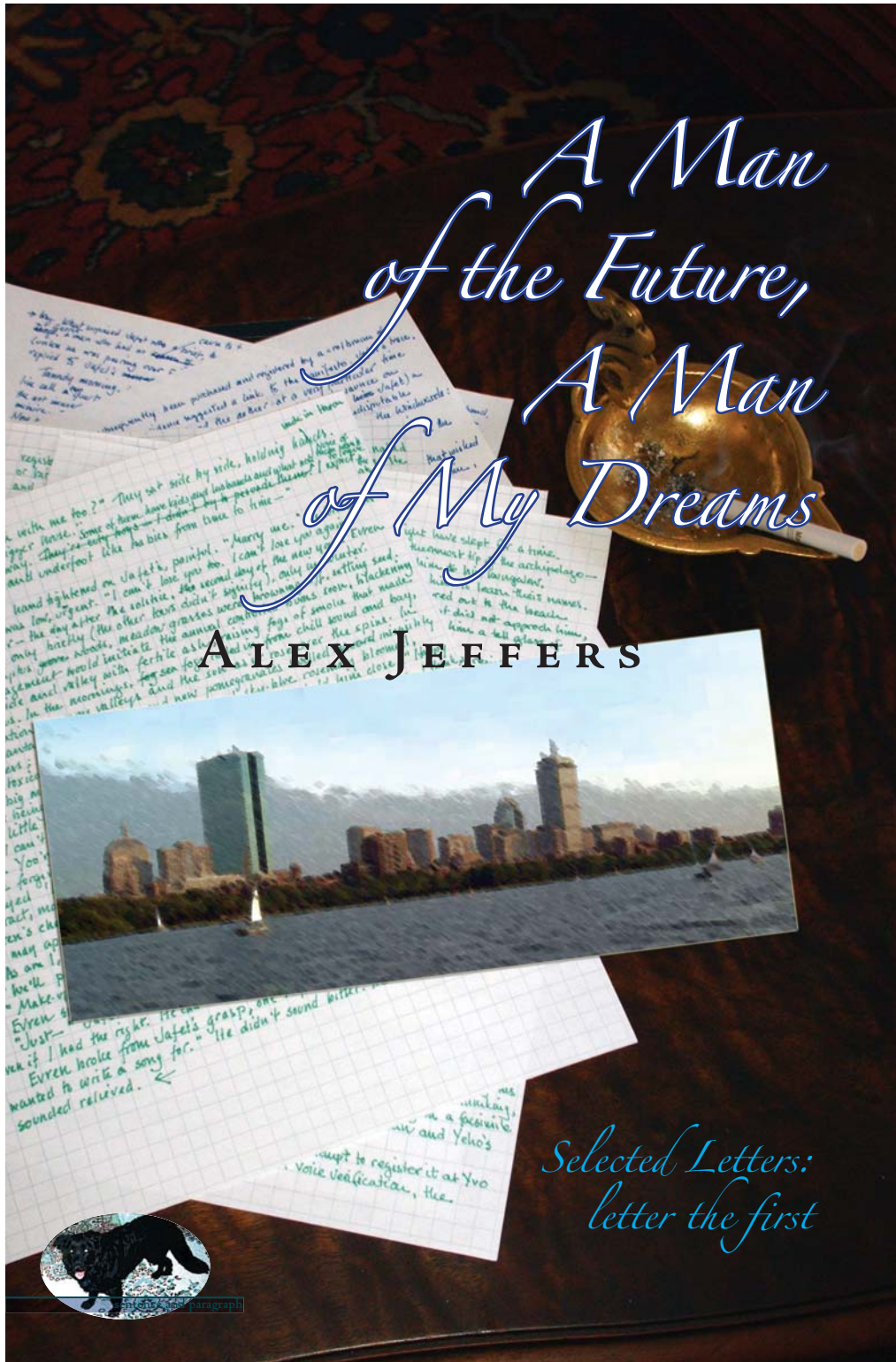


A Man of the Future, A Man of My Dreams

ALEX JEFFERS



Selected Letters:
letter the first



A MAN OF THE FUTURE,
A MAN OF MY DREAMS

1

San Francisco, 1 July 1985

Dear Ethan:

Since I don't as yet actually know you – since you are to me little more than a figment of a rather vivid imagination, a figment in fact less well realized than many of the characters in my fictions – I feel I can tell you anything. Almost anything. I can imagine you my ideal reader: courteous, sympathetic, attentive; a little impatient perhaps with my habits of digression and obfuscation – mildly intolerant of eccentricities of punctuation and sentence structure ... but in general a perfect audience.

I am not one who pays much attention to dreams. For one thing, I seldom remember them past waking, and on the occasions I do recall one it fades quickly unless I can tell it to someone soon after, whereupon it becomes more a creation – an armature on which (with dibs of motivation and daubs of symbolism) to build a fiction.

Last night I opened a door and entered an unfamiliar apartment. Unfamiliar – yet the first piece of furniture I saw was my old Chinese altar table. It had been polished recently (I haven't even dusted

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it in living memory); the carving on the legs glowed and the surface was bright as glass. It stood against the wall in a sort of foyer, an octagonal room with pale walls and a parquet floor. From a plaster medallion in the center of the ceiling hung a Japanese rice-paper lantern.

2

I closed the door behind me and went through the arched opening in the opposite wall, found myself in a long narrow corridor. The wall was hung with a series of prints I've owned for something like ten years now: unframed and rolled into a mailing tube; they were matted and aptly framed. Passing the door to a bathroom, I came next to a splendidly large, airy living room. Here I recognized a few more pieces of mine, and though the larger items weren't familiar – not part of my current inventory – they seemed to fit well into the scheme of my aesthetic: I didn't believe they belonged to anyone else. I recognized also, without doubt, my old grey cat Enkidu, who lay asleep in a patch of sunlight from one of the tall windows on either side of the fireplace. He didn't wake when I approached nor when I knelt and stroked him, although his reflexive purr started up like a tiny automatic rotor. That he shouldn't wake – he's middle aged and peevisish, sleeps poorly, constantly follows me in hope of a pat or a rump – seemed mildly unusual, but I let it pass and turned to inspect the room more closely.

There was a rank of tall bookcases organized rigorously by subject and author. My preoccupations were manifest in those subjects and many of the authors were old friends: as I scanned the shelves, what

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struck me as significant was the increasing percentage of titles I had never seen before. I had just pulled out a volume of Carlos Fuentes when a phone rang.

By the time I found it an answering machine had already begun its spiel. I turned up the volume. “– is only a clever simulacrum,” it was saying with my voice. “The authentic Alex has gone to California for three weeks of well earned vacation in the landscapes of his childhood. If you are calling for his cat sitter, Ethan, I presume he’s unavailable just now or I wouldn’t have been activated. You can leave a message for him after the tone. If you’re calling for Alex you can leave him a message also: Ethan’ll see that he gets it. If you’re calling for anyone else you have a wrong number and should politely hang up.”

3

I looked out one of the windows. The apartment appeared to be on an upper floor but I couldn’t see anything: everything outside was shrouded in a thick white ectoplasmic fog. I supposed this was a function of my dream state (I knew I was dreaming) and a symptom of my complete lack of knowledge of Boston. For I was certain, suddenly, that I was trespassing on my future life – the life I hope to build on the alien Atlantic coast: in a city so deep with history my own can be buried in its sediment.

I realized someone was speaking to the answering machine. I’d heard every word. He said he wasn’t calling for Ethan – was in fact calling for Alex and didn’t suppose Ethan would need to relay the message: Alex could replay it himself. He apologized for not being there when Alex got in from the airport. He’d been called away on an errand of mercy and

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didn't think he'd get back in time. He'd fed Enkidu and Element (my neurasthenic tortoiseshell; I hadn't seen her yet and was relieved to know she'd made the move too) before he left. Alex wasn't to worry about dinner: he had it all planned. "Hugs and kisses," he said, "love, Ethan."

4

He hung up. The telephone chirped and was silent. I lit a cigarette and decided to find the kitchen. The kitchen, I thought distractedly, was sure to reveal something about the state of my household.

Of course I recognized your name: *Ethan* is uncommon enough, and you are not only the singular Ethan of my acquaintance (however little I know you) but one of the very few people I can associate with Boston: my little cousin and erstwhile pen pal Ethan whom my mother told me recently (and why didn't *you* tell me?), not so little, had graduated from Harvard and was working for Little, Brown. She gave me your new address, too, and a snapshot your mother had sent her. Although no longer little, *Ethan is brown*.

It was the snapshot that helped me recognize – when I returned to the corridor – the framed drawing on the wall: although the Ethan of the snapshot was a few years younger and fully clothed. And looked somewhat dazed and put-off, as one does in photographs taken at family occasions. The man in the drawing had an expression of almost comical flirtatiousness as he looked out of the frame over the shoulder of the equally naked man he embraced from behind. Your companion, Ethan, was I: your hand splayed across my chest: my face was turned

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into profile and into shadow but I did not doubt my identity.

The kitchen was a long narrow room at right angles to the hall. It would have been dark – the back wall was exposed brick – if it weren't for the generous bay window at one end. The interior wall was lined with bright white cabinets. A fancy cappuccino machine sat on the counter near the table, beside an equally fancy electric burr grinder. On the table next to an ashtray and a coffee mug lay a box of stationery and an enamelled fountain pen. Beyond the window hung the same white suspension of fog.

5

I opened the refrigerator and found a carton of milk and, in the freezer compartment, a paper bag of espresso beans. Presuming on my own hospitality, I made myself a tall glass of caffè latte, and sat down with it at the table.

Someone had been interrupted writing a letter at the breakfast table. The hand was a fine, eccentric italic that seemed somehow familiar.

Dear Greg & Edward,

I've just received your card. Alex has already told me he'd missed you in San Francisco – 747s passing in the night, as it were. I trust you're enjoying yourselves in Bermuda. It seems unfair to me that everyone else in the world can take off for vacations in wonderful places. I haven't been farther than Philadelphia in three years. Of course, since Alex has family in California his is hardly a vacation ... not on a par with junkets to the

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Sargasso.

He will be back this afternoon. I think I can presume to offer his hospitality to you the week after next – surely he couldn't object to putting up his dear old friends? His apartment is large enough. I would offer you my own guest room – if I had one! – & if I didn't think you (& he) would prefer you stay with him. After all, I've never even met you.... Not that I don't long to. Not that I don't look forward to it. I desperately wish to know you – to know the friends of Alex's past (present too, of course! if hampered by transcontinental distances). I suppose I have, in a way, known Alex longer than almost anyone – we corresponded voluminously when I was a young tad & he a somewhat older one – but there are great chunks of his life I know only by repute, through the interstices of his reticence & the occasional letter from you or Ilene or KB that he shows me. He knows the roots of my personality (I've even taken him to see my childhood home, & he's met all my friends) but at such distance I know little of him. I want to. You will think me sentimental & obsessive. You may be right.

6

I put the unfinished letter down. I sipped my caffè latte, lit another cigarette, and felt chilled. I hugged my arms around my chest. Ethan must be the latest man to fall in love with me. You didn't sound like the others in my sordid string of love affairs – but they

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had all been dissimilar themselves: alike only in the pattern I followed with them. I hoped that by now I'd have learned. Learned not to become infatuated with someone simply because he was infatuated with me. I feared I would not have learned.

7

I heard a door open, slam shut. I heard the sound of heavy bags dropped to the floor. A voice called, "Ethan!" Then, with puerile enthusiasm, "Enkidu! How's my boyface? Did you miss me? Who's a foolish cat? Where's Ethan?" The voice had moved into the living room, and then I heard Ethan's message replayed off the answering machine. I wondered if I were about to meet myself – an avatar of my future. The future I had dreamt myself into.

An interior door opened, closed. Water rushed into a basin. I swallowed the dregs of warm milky coffee, stubbed out my cigarette, stood up. I had passed two doors on the way to the kitchen: while my future self freshened up in the bathroom, I'd investigate them.

The first door opened into a rather small room with walls painted a dull cinnabar and glossy black moldings: chair rail, picture rail, cornice, and the surround of a ceiling-high built-in bookcase over the fireplace mantel, between tall narrow windows. Large horizontal files below the windows were also painted black, and an octagonal black lacquer table stood in the middle of the room. A typewriter – a fiddly electronic machine (but you'd think I'd have the imagination, the hubris, to give myself a computer, so long as I was inventing my own habitat) – sat on the table before a Chinese Chippendale

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armchair. The chair's three mates stood against one wall; apparently the room did double duty as office and dining room. No – triple duty: for a sofa covered in Oriental chintz lounged against another wall, so this must also be my guest room that Ethan so blithely offered to Greg and Edward.

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I thought of Greg – little Gregorio, my adopted nephew, who is even younger than you, Ethan – and Edward. They live in Mendocino, now, in the real world, and although we're in the same state I hardly ever see them. I imagined I must have been disappointed to miss them, and would surely not countermand Ethan's offer. Greg and Edward have been together, even now, longer than any other couple of my acquaintance, and are still as devoted to each other as ever. That devotion is touching, and remarkable to me who have never been able to cohabit with anyone (save my cats) for more than eighteen months, and whose initial enthusiasm for whichever lover has always devolved into bitterness and bitchery.

Going to inspect the bookcase over the fireplace, I found (with a fatuous delight at the obvious wish-fulfilment my dream indulged me with) a shelf-full of volumes by myself and my close friends. I recognized only one title: *Tada Haija's Circus*, the ambitious magical-realist extravaganza Greg's been planning for three or four years – what he calls his parabolic novel – not a page of text has yet been written. The books attributed to me were dreams indeed, with peculiarly apt titles. I was afraid to look too closely at them.

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I went on to the next room: Alex's bedroom. It was a splendid room. The walls were deep blue. The one tall window hung uncurtained but a mass of large-leafed plants on a low platform obscured the lower sash while a shelf built across the upper third held plants with thick trailing foliage. The floor, stained and polished wood, was spread with a subdued Turkish carpet. In one corner stood a small, plain writing desk and a stool, as it were a pre-dieu. A length of black and silver brocade hung from the wall opposite the window: below it, laid on the floor, a futon covered in black and grey, black and grey cushions, a black and grey duvet. The only other furniture was a plain dresser. Pinned to the walls were framed pencil studies of nude men: I recognized the artist as the same who had drawn the double portrait of Ethan and Alex, and was not especially surprised by the signature ... yours, Ethan. You are talented – at least in my dream. I sat down at the desk, rested my chin on crossed arms and closed my eyes.

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After a little while I heard someone enter the room on bare feet. I didn't turn around, didn't look. Dresser drawers rattled, the closet door opened and closed. The rustle and hiss of clothes being put on. Then I heard the front door open and slam shut. A new voice called, "Alex!"

I turned. I was alone in the room. A bathrobe lay on the futon, and Element lay on the bathrobe. I knew better than to approach her. The voice, Ethan's voice, from some distance, said, "Alex. I've missed you. Did you have a good time?"

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“Exhausting,” said Alex as I stepped into the hall. “Hello, Ethan. How are you?” There was an edge of wariness in Alex’s voice that should have warned Ethan off. Neither was visible to me. They must be in the living room. I imagined Alex – a little older, a little more weathered, the white in his hair more apparent, but not an appreciably different presence than I: he stood in the center of the room – Enkidu, perhaps, in his arms. A scant few feet away Ethan would stand with his arms loose at his sides and a blank, hurt expression on his face: as though he’d offered to embrace Alex and been rebuffed.

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“I missed you too, Ethan,” Alex said more gently. I heard the quadruple thump of Enkidu’s feet hitting the floor and the Alex of my imagination looked away shyly, then moved into Ethan’s arms. “Were you a good boy in my absence?”

“No better than I had to be,” Ethan murmured.

I felt embarrassed to hear the intimate confidences of these people I didn’t, after all, know. And yet, since I was dreaming ... surely they were my own creations and I had more right than anyone to know what they were about. But as I approached the door to the living room I was overcome by ambivalence and continued on into the foyer. Alex’s suitcases stood abandoned inside the door. A brown-paper supermarket sack sat on the altar table.

“Welcome home, Alex,” Ethan said. I heard his voice as if I were in the same room.

“I suppose it is,” Alex said. “Home. At great length. I actually got homesick. My mother sends

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love. Everyone sends love – even the ones who don't know you."

"Do you?"

"Yes. In fact," Alex said, "I do."

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The paper sack was full of groceries. I gathered it into my arms – doing Ethan a favor – and carried it down the hall toward the kitchen. As I passed the living-room door I heard Alex say, "You mean a great deal to me, Ethan."

Wimp! I called myself. Prevaricator! Same old indecisive son of a bitch Alex, afraid to say no, afraid to deny the flattery of affection. I was incensed, barely restrained myself from entering the room and striking myself. What stopped me, ultimately, was a recognition of that turn of phrase: a recognition that I had never before used it. Perhaps I meant it. Generally, in the usual sordid state of my affairs – when, predictably, I am in love only for the sake of being in love and in love with someone in particular for no better reason than that he has expressed desire for me – my eloquence takes wing. It is, of course, a shoddy attempt to convince myself. Perhaps (only perhaps) I resorted to platitude, to cliché, because the real thing had surprised me: left me speechless.

Element padded out of the bedroom and I followed her down the corridor to the kitchen. I put the perishables in the refrigerator but left everything else out for Ethan. Element curled up on the table, on Ethan's letter. She paid no attention when I sat down and, tempting reality, began to stroke her fine fur – not even chirping as she does when anything moves.

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At least, I thought, they – we – don't live together. I hadn't rushed into that. I realized I had no conception how long Alex had lived in this apartment – in Boston – how long he and Ethan had been involved. From the evident care with which the apartment had been arranged, the opulence of its furnishings, I guessed Alex had been here some years. And been more successful and was more prosperous than I.

12

Music filled the air, the sonorous, rolling piano chords of one of Keith Jarrett's solo concerts. I had no idea of the time but the fog beyond the window had taken on a liquid grey edging toward dark.

Returning to the living room, I stood outside the door. No sound of voices reached me over the music. No lamps lit, the room was dim. I stepped in – more quietly, more carefully than I suspected was needful. And in fact there was no-one there. The record played to itself. I wandered through the room for a few moments, then sat gingerly in the low couch.

If this were a modern-day love story Alex and Ethan would be in the bedroom getting reacquainted, as it were: were it an erotic fantasy – a wet dream – I would spy on them. So far as I knew it was neither. In any case I doubted I could find them to spy if I wanted: the way the dream was going we eluded each other entirely: phantoms of different epochs we barely coincided: I missed them at every turn. What I expected to learn of this excursion I had no idea. In a well contrived fiction the I of the future would sit me down and reveal the pitfalls I must avoid on the road to Boston or ... whenever.

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The record ended. I got up to turn it over, and heard Ethan say, "Shall I make dinner now?"

"Not yet," Alex said. "Unless you're hungry. I'm still on California time."

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"How about a drink?"

"Aren't we solicitous? I have a better idea. Come back here."

I turned the album to Side Two. I was willing to bet Alex and Ethan hadn't even taken their clothes off yet: necking like a pair of adolescents. But then, I had my own illusions. Who was to tell? I went back to the kitchen, where Element had migrated from table to counter where she sprawled now in the cool porcelain sink. In passing, she'd knocked Ethan's letter to the floor. I picked it up, and turned on the lamp over the table. I hadn't noticed before that the stationery box had a transparent plastic lid. The paper within was a pale shade of moss green. The top sheet was defaced with the same firm, sloping italic. *Dear Alex*, I read through the plastic:

*I know you'll read this if I leave it out.
You're an incorrigible snoop (you eavesdrop
too) but I don't mind. I don't mind at
all. You're due back from California this
afternoon. Do you remember, when I was a
boy, when you wrote to me, how the simplest
things about California were marvels to me?
I've grown up a little since then, & if the West
Coast isn't quite a suburb of Philadelphia
for me, no more is it an outpost of the Isles of
the Blest. I wonder what you've thought of it,*

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revisiting old haunts & old friends, viewing
known landmarks from a new perspective.
I wonder if you've thought of me. I wonder
if you'll bring back a new perspective to me
– on us.

14

I am, in fact, happy (although I've
missed you dreadfully) with the status, quo
though it be. I am satisfied. I do not long to
live with you in domestic bliss (fat chance
of that, I know). I don't pine nor expire of
loneliness when we don't see each other four
days running. I am pleased to lead my own
life. I have no intention of asking you for a
commitment you're not able to make. What
I want, Alex, all I want to ask of you now
(returned from forays into your past) is that
you recognize this: there is no deficiency in the
life we lead, together & apart. You don't want
– can't cope with – a full-time, live-in lover;
well, nor do/can I. I want you to recognize
that in this at least we're alike. I want,
particularly, you to stop feeling guilty for not
giving me what you think I want, because,
in fact, my dear dense Alex, it is not what I
want. I want you on your terms; my terms for
your wanting me are the same.

Hello, dear Alex, hello. Welcome home.
Welcome, also, to mine.

Your affectionate cousin,

Ethan

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I put the stationery box back on the table, angled so Alex would be sure to see it. I looked in the refrigerator, reconsidering what Ethan had bought for dinner. (I felt I was conspiring with him against myself.)

15

I rinsed Element's hairs down the drain (she'd relinquished the sink of her own accord) and washed salad greens, shelled peas. I grated cheeses for quattro formaggi and put a large pot of water on the stove for pasta. That was as far as I felt I could go without some guarantee that I'd be able to attract Alex's and Ethan's attention when the meal was ready: I'd let Ethan handle it from here. So I went into the dining room, sat down at the table, and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter.

Dear Ethan, you will understand my surprise – stupefaction is not too strong a word – to find in my mailbox this afternoon a moss-green envelope addressed to me in a firm sloping italic that was, at that instant, as familiar to me as my own erratic hand. You will understand why I needn't check postmark or return address to know it came from Boston – from you. You will understand, I hope, why (although I long to meet you in the flesh, although I wish desperately to know you) I feel I must decline your kind invitation to put me up – even temporarily – when I arrive in Boston. I have, in any case, already made arrangements: put down a deposit and signed a short-term lease on a furnished apartment in Back Bay. Greg and Edward will come down to the city tomorrow to help me pack up and put my belongings in storage. Element and Enkidu will stay with

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my sister until I've found a place. I think two months should be enough to find an apartment – if not the one of my dreams! Particularly if you will help.

The offer I will accept is being met at the airport. My flight from San Francisco is due to alight at 5.35 PM on the fourteenth – my birthday. I hope I can look forward to seeing you then: I have the photograph from your mother, so I'll recognize you. Will you recognize me?

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Your affectionate cousin,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long, thin tail on the letter 'x'.

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