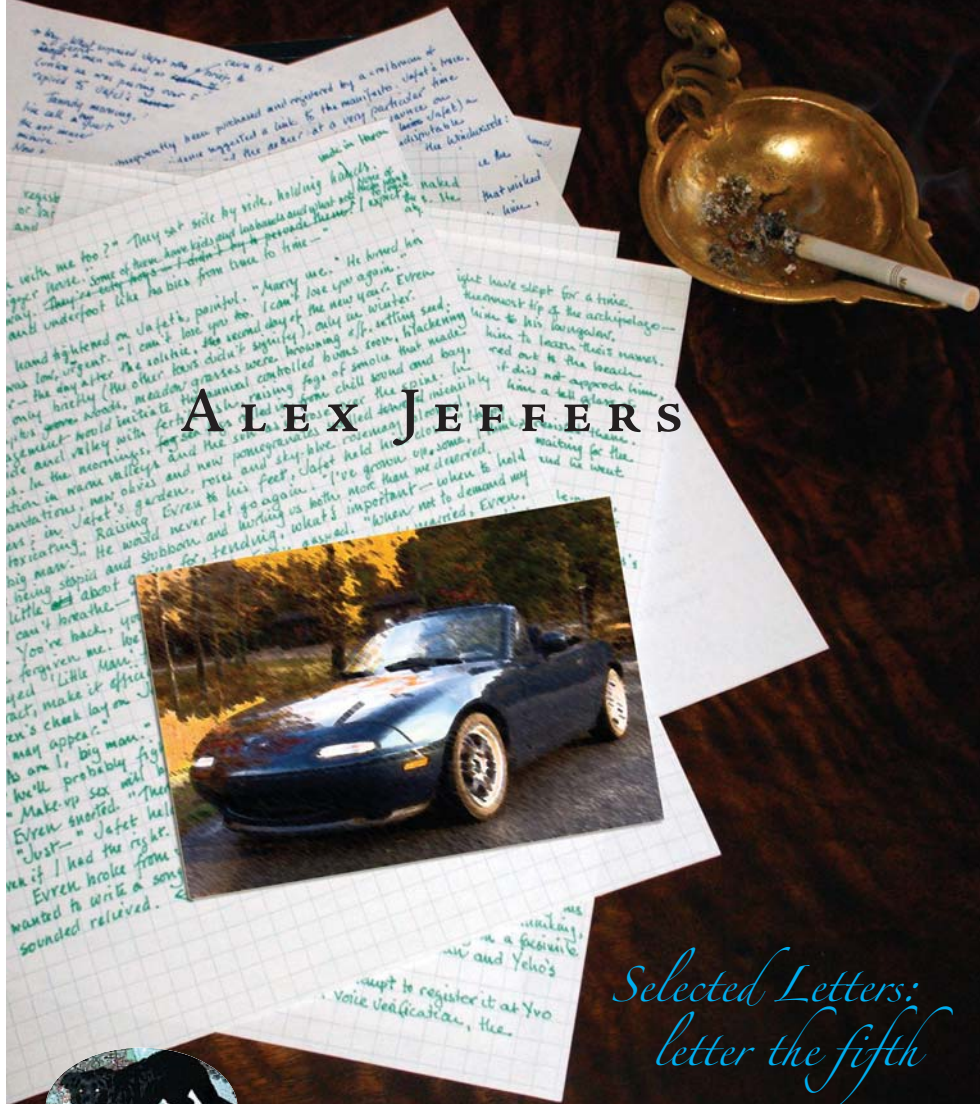


# Drive That Fast



ALEX JEFFERS

Selected Letters:  
letter the fifth



photograph

DRIVE THAT FAST

*I would never want to do that to you  
I would never want to drive that fast*  
—Kitchens of Distinction

1



Boston, 22 September 1993

*My dear Hene:*

Just as well you've never given me your phone number for I've no idea what time it might be in far-off Bayern and I'd be sure to wake you, gulping and snivelling like a maniac, or catch your lovely husband alone and wreck forever his opinion of me. Presuming he understood me: I remember his English as charming but far from perfect. That was, well, three years ago, of course. Circumstances may have changed. You see, I dare not dribble tears into the keyboard, a sensitive device, and this discipline will preserve me from myself. Ethan and I fought.

Fought! We fought like gods, enraged, immortal, unafraid. He called me *cousin* – I called him bastard. I struck first, but he is how tall, weighs how much: his wrists as big around as my knees. Ethan as he is, he held back – held my two fists in one of his and held me back – I am neither bruised nor battered but I struck first! And, dear Lord, how I love the man.

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Do you and your sweet husband fight? We argue, Ethan and I, what lovers don't argue, we wrangle and fuss and kvetch, we hurl invective and insult each other's ancestry for all that much of it's shared, piss and moan and whine and sulk, go for days when I'd rather die than speak to him and vice-versy – he threatens to kidnap my cats lest they grow twisted, living with me – we laugh, hysterical with relief, kiss and make up. Is this a Bette Davis movie, he asks, or is it Joan Crawford? And I say: You're the movie queen, sweetest heart. Never mind the four years between us, when he holds me against his broad chest, holds me in his manly arms, I feel a tiny child, secure, and the important years between us are not the four that separated his birth from mine but the nearly twice as many together. We fought!

2

He took me out to dinner: this was how it started, oh, weeks ago: he took me out to dinner, to celebrate his promotion, his raise. Around the corner from my place, around the corner from his, we met. You ask me how it is, what life is like – we met on the sidewalk in late-summer heat and you could never tell he'd been at work all day, wearing a suit in an air-conditioned office. He showed me the movies he'd picked up at the video store (I own neither TV nor VCR and so he cultivates my weaknesses) – one dirty (he blushed), the other merely, promisingly, inane. And then he greeted the maître d' and asked for a table outside, on the sidewalk. The wrought iron of my chair was hot under my thighs, through the sweaty fabric of my shirt, baked, enamelled, annealed. Knowing me – of course he knows me,

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how well he knows me – Ethan ordered Campari and tonic (*not* soda) and told the waitron, Mind the tonic's got bubbles!

Since the last time I sent pictures, I've cultivated a goatee and my hair has grown out a further two inches, but Ethan hardly changes. You ask if we kissed when we met on the sidewalk? We did, and I gave him the roses I had picked up on the way 'round the corner. The *maître d'*, a friendly woman, brought a carafe of water for the flowers, but we set them aside, on the pavement by our feet, because the table was small and I wished to look at him and he, I dearly suppose, at me. He sat across the small expanse of pale linen, facing the blaze of sunset far off to the west in Jamaica Plain or Brookline, features gilded, eyes starry, and he might have been the same twenty-four year old who met me at the airport all those years ago except for the two tiny baubles in the lobe of his left ear and his hair – since he admitted to its thinning, he cuts it brazenly short. The shape of his skull is so very fine, and I said I could never desire a man without a full head of hair.

Ethan had left a long message on my machine that afternoon with his news. In an inexplicably sunny mood, in any case, I might have bought him flowers without the excuse. He sipped at his drink, said, "Where were you when I called? You didn't tell me."

I said, "I went to the beach." By which I meant that, after my morning stint at the computer and my sensible lunch, I had strapped the 'blades onto my

feet and skated over to the Charles River Embankment.

“Through traffic?” he asked, perturbed. “I’ve asked you not to.”

4

“Ethan,” I said, patronizing, thinking of his motorcycle, which I’m in the nasty habit of calling the rice-burner.

He was thinking of it too – he said, “You’re the man who’s afraid to ride pillion, in leathers, wearing a helmet. You’re the one who insists you have no sense of balance – you fall over walking.”

And I recalled that you, too, advised me to purchase knee and elbow guards and a cyclist’s Kevlar-and-Styrofoam helmet. As a po-mo American samurai, you said you wanted to envision me, armored in day-glo-neon super-hard plastic and clingy spandex, slicing speedy through slick air on some rink or playground, safe. I would feel less a fool, a counterfeit or mountebank so than in the custom leathers he had made for me, against my will – black, although I won’t wear black – and which he would die laughing before ever allowing me to wear out to a bar. (We scarcely ever go to bars.) But he was perturbed, and I love him, so I lied: I said, “I stayed on the sidewalk.”

“How many innocent pedestrians did you bowl over?” But he was smiling, sly, and said nothing about sidewalks’ being as perilous to navigate as streets, and we went on: “Any cute boys on muscle beach today?” he asked.

“Cute? Yes, of course. Devastating? No – you weren’t there.”

Reaching across the table, he grasped my hand.

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“What,” I asked after a suitable pause, “are you going to do with all this new money? It *is* lots?”

“It’s hardly anything at all. I’m going to buy you dinner and then take you home and ask you, in celebration, to fuck the bejesus out of me.” He had not lowered his voice; two handsome women a table away smirked at us, delighted.

It was Friday, and though I often work through the weekend (since I work so little) Ethan doesn’t. “Dawn and Mark have the beach house this weekend,” I offered. “We’re welcome, they said.”

“All the way to Rhode Island? On the rice-burner?” Ethan grinned. “I’d love to.”

“I’ll call them later.” I was basking in his acceptance of this second-hand gift.

“We’ll take Champagne. We’ll eat lobster – don’t order it tonight. You’ll wear leather. Dawn keeps saying she wants to see you in it.”

“She wants to see both of us in it.”

“Dawn has an artistically dirty mind.”

“We’ll go skinny-dipping at midnight,” I said, musing. “It’ll be lovely.”

“I’ve never seen Mark without his clothes on,” Ethan murmured, suggestive, speculative. “Won’t he be scared to strip in front of two fags?”

Mark – you haven’t met Mark, something I regret, or Dawn – is someone both Ethan and I find inordinately handsome; he’s the most sympathetic straight man any gay boy could ever hope to know, a perfect best friend, and just the tiniest bit uptight. “Mark knows very well I’d beat the pants off you if

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you ever did more than flirt with him,” I said sternly. “If Dawn didn’t beat me to it.”

Flinching back, exaggerated, Ethan raised both hands in surrender, and then the waitron came back for our order. There’s hardly anything more to report of the evening – we’d slipped in and out of danger, from then on were gaudy, giddy, giggly, flirtatious, as though we’d fallen in love just within the last forty-eight hours. Never mind eight years. We went back to Ethan’s apartment. On the outrageously large screen of the TV in his bedroom the pumped-up inarticulate performers in a production I would blush to recall the title of, if I could recall it, performed, while I fucked the bejesus out of Ethan’s pretty ass, and then he, vicey-versey, returned the favor. On the bedside table the roses emitted their stupefying, intoxicating fragrance. On the street outside, a car alarm wailed.

6



*When* I am preparing myself to go to *the beach* on a sunny summer afternoon, I first put on my especially favorite swimsuit, a racy little number stitched up from panels of glistening fabric as brilliant as stained glass, gold, violet, rose, black, which luridly flatters what one used to call the basket and which Ethan gave me, then over it baggy faux-pro-soccer-player shorts. I tie my hair back with a length of blue ribbon; as added insurance against hair in the eyes, don a perky baseball cap. I wear heavy cotton socks and a bright t-shirt, or a sleeve-

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less singlet though Lord knows I possess neither torso nor arms that want to be shown off. (What *does* Ethan see in me?) I load up the knapsack with beach towel, sunscreen, a mason jar of iced coffee or lemonade, although the ice will have melted before I get where I'm going, cookies perhaps; cigarettes; Walkman and tapes; whatever book I happen to be in the middle of – Byzantine or Ottoman history these days; a notebook and pen. If I have, that day, received a letter or postcard from you, I'll slip that in as well, to re-read and savor.

7

In stocking feet, knapsack over one shoulder, blades clutched in the other hand, I'll trot downstairs. Sitting on the front steps of the building, I pull on the clunky, clumsy-looking wheeled boots, securely lace them up over my ankles. The laces are a peculiarly horrible turquoise; the armored boots, which make my feet look even larger than they are, ornamented with flashy orange lightning bolts; the wheels, like the fat plastic wheels of a toddler's pull-toy, a green nearly as ghastly as the laces. The first wobbly moment after I rise to my feet I can't imagine this odd form of locomotion is possible – surely it's a joke, surely you have to be a trained acrobat with grotesquely keen reflexes even to consider it – but then I rediscover something that is not quite balance or equilibrium yet serves a similar purpose. I could not learn to ride a bicycle until I was a teenager – I had never worn roller skates – a Californian, I have still never attempted to skate on ice.

But I love speed, velocity. My first car was a Triumph only three years younger than I (I was twenty-

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one), a scarlet rag-top two-seater that rode perhaps four inches off the ground on scarily fragile wire wheels, a car with a cockpit in which you reclined, reaching for clutch, brake, accelerator, rather than sat at ease. You felt the road with a tingling, thrilling immediacy – these terms make it sound as though driving the Triumph were as exciting as sex. The engine roared so loud you couldn't have heard the radio if there'd been one installed. The slipstream of your forward motion rolled over the raked windscreen, a smooth, continuous, unceasing, invisible wave overhead, until it caught itself up in the turbulence of your wake and curled back at you, from behind, so that you couldn't smoke while driving. My hair was never very long in those days but I had to wear a cap regardless – a beret: baseball caps were not yet fashionable. I reviled the rains of winter because I had to put the top up then and seat the wobbly sidescreens with their clouded isinglass windows in the doors; I despised the necessity of driving to and from work (twenty minutes, of which only five were on the highway) because the car (she was called Boadicea) – and I – wanted to be let loose. One of my fondest, giddiest memories remains the first time I took her to San Francisco – first the long, flat-out stretch of freeway running north to and through and beyond San Jose, so blindingly horizontal it felt purely vertical; then, because I had never driven in the city and was splendidly lost, simply careering up and down those splendid hills, scarcely restraining the shrieks of a good roller-coaster ride. Motoring sedately through the Castro, later, I got a good many looks

8

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that said, first: *Sexy car*, then: *Sexy boy* (who were they kidding), but this was scarcely as exhilarating as actually driving. You didn't even have to go over the limit (those were innocent times) to feel you were flying, in that car. Boadicea and I were never pulled over for speeding, as tempting a target for zealous cops as we must have made. Whereas in my second car, a sensible, businesslike little French toy with two Gallic mice (never mind Deux-Chevaux) on a treadmill under the hood, it happened rather often – one had to look at the speedometer to learn how fast one was going.

9

I love speed. Random acquaintances who hardly know me, who have scarcely penetrated the veneer of determined shyness and a speaking voice that can't be heard two feet away, who learn that I don't go out, don't go to parties, spend most of my solo time (and there's a lot of it, pace Ethan, after all) writing or reading rather than enjoying myself, who have read my work, meditative and measured as it often is, who hear *don't drive* as *can't* or happen to hear I'm afraid of Ethan's bike, imagine I must like folky, acoustic music – just perhaps, if they're properly imaginative and have figured out how old I really am, classic strings-and-synths disco, contralto at full bellow ... when in fact what I really want (what I play when I'm alone, writing, if not Baroque concerti of which the largo movements bore me tearless) is loud, fast guitars and insistent bass, pitched vocal slugged into the turbulent mix: marginally more sophisticated versions of what spotty, hormone-crazed suburban teenagers enrage their parents with (although, to be

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sure, I can't abide the heavy-metal tenorino screech). I hardly drink because I know I have it in me to become a thoroughly repulsive alcoholic, have scarcely ever touched the real stuff because it's too tempting to imagine myself a drooling, compulsive addict. I don't drive because driving is a holy sacrament of the open road of which city traffic is a vile perversion. Besides, I can't afford the kind of vehicle that would make driving worth my while. When I moved to San Francisco, I promptly sold the Deux-Souris to KB, who christened it (never her) Raoul – you'll remember it. I regret Boadicea, surely; I regret seldom ever giving her the exercise she wanted, needed; and I regret not having a chance to give Ethan a spin. Regret is not nearly so interesting as guilt.

10

Of course I don't stay on the sidewalks when I go 'blading. Boston's streets are in bad enough repair. Of course I'm scared spitless of the cars and busses and trucks, more specifically of their malevolently negligent drivers (secure on the sidewalk, walking, I'm scared of Massachusetts drivers), but I trust myself. I have to trust myself because I trust nothing else except possibly Ethan (when he's not on his bike) and you (you live too far away). As it is, I trust too much.

When I reach the Embankment, corkscrewing down the ramp from the Mass Ave bridge, there's a kind of relief to gliding onto the long, metalled path along the river, a path restricted to cyclists, skaters, walkers and runners – self-powered people, that is, maneuverable and aware of their surroundings – a relief that's generally a sad let-down. But here I can

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build up speed, not that one need go all that fast to feel it, racing the sinuous mile or so to the Hatch Shell or, further, under the shadow of the Longfellow Bridge, perhaps as far as the dam. Other 'bladers acknowledge you with a grimly amiable camaraderie, cyclists slip by as if you were standing still (but I'm far more unsteady, unsafe, unwieldy on a bicycle), grossly sweating runners make forward motion appear such grudging, purgatorial drudgery that you can't fathom why they persist. The air is thick, hot, humid, fragrant with the subliminal stench of the river, the green smells of grass and trees, noxious exhausts off Storrow Drive. My thighs and shoulders burn – my feet wear the wingèd sandals of Hermes: which myth never tells you weigh a ton, lock your ankles rigid, and, being padded, impenetrable plastic, retain heat as well as a Thermos.

11

Having reached my goal (a drinking fountain, generally), I'll turn about and proceed, less precipitately, back to one of the humped bridges over the shallow channel between mainland and island: *the beach*. Not a beach. The section Ethan calls muscle beach (when he doesn't call it queens' row) is a long meadow between the broad river (MIT and Cambridge away over there) and paltry lagoon (Storrow Drive and the backside of Back Bay), where astonishing numbers of buffed and polished young men sprawl about near-naked in the hammering, rain-forest heat: gleaming, jewelled, cold-blooded basking reptiles in full courting display. This in mid-week – I'd never go on weekends. Don't any of them have jobs? Wouldn't they rather be in P'town? I

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have never seen on an ocean beach (except in photos from Rio), the most extravagant beach, a man wearing what Ethan, grossly if aptly, calls a butt-flosser. A distressingly common sight on queens' row. Also many fake bike shorts, skin-tight spandex without the protective padding that's the proper point of bike shorts – shorts that cramp the parts that want protection into a lurid, painful-looking, defensive yet indefensible package down the thigh, and give one, I'd imagine, a sheerly ludicrous tan line. My own little bikini – to which, naturally, I strip down immediately I've found an agreeable spot – is downright modest by comparison.

12

Reading the preceding passage one could infer I despise these men. In a despicable way, I suppose I rather do. I have no regular job, I would rather be in P'town – if I could afford it, if Ethan were with me. For one thing, the Charles is not to be swum in. And yet, weekday afternoon after summer afternoon, I return, anoint myself with scented lotion, display myself just as flagrantly. I can tell myself I'd prefer the meadow deserted. I can tell myself I would have nothing to say to practically any of them, would in any case become panicked and tongue-tied if anyone tried to speak to me. Ethan's building, taller than those surrounding, has a private roof deck to which I have a key – I go back to queens' row. I like to look at them, I like how they look. Swimming or sunning, Ethan wears boxer-style trunks or, at best, if I nag, a sober, traditional swimteam Speedo (black) – Ethan has a beautiful ass and a fine basket – I would laugh myself sick to see him in spandex ball crushers, a

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thong, a bikini even as racy as the one he gave me. As would he, simply taking it out of the drawer, not even pulling it on. In top-to-toe black leather he looks alternately alarming, purposeful, and silly. After half an hour flat out on my back in the sun, I sit up, dazzled, drunk with heat and dehydration, gaze around at all the gorgeous men, delirious with a form of velocity that doesn't involve speed or any kind of motion at all.

13



*Well!* and am I now calm, calmer, able to go on? The ride down to southeastern Rhode Island hardly terrified me at all, in broad daylight, Ethan being especially cautious and considerate. In any case, I had the earphones of the Walkman in under my helmet, blasting Kitchens of Distinction (full volume, mega-bass, endless auto-reverse): fierce love songs and songs of love gone wrong, sung to other men by a passionate, gloriously sexy British baritone (he said he!), not over camp cocktail piano or PC acoustic guitars but full-throated dangerous electric, nasty drums, intricate, ferocious bass. I was in heaven – when I forgot I was on a motorcycle – pressed up against Ethan's hot leather back, my hands clenched in his gut, in love all over again (not that I'm ever out of it). There was one track about fucking – *hammer it home I want to hammer it in* – from the way Ethan reacted when it came around, although he couldn't hear it under his own helmet, he could very well feel how it affected me. The second time, he pulled over

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onto the shoulder, somewhere in the redneck wilds of Bristol County, approaching Fall River. Twisting, reaching back to grope me friendlily with one hand, he took off his helmet with the other and asked if he should be on the lookout for a sleazy truckstop that might have a glory hole in the men's room.

14

Abruptly aware, again, of being on the bike, two wheels that remained upright only by virtue of Ethan's straddled, sturdy legs, aware too of the crushing heat velocity had masked, I bade a timid farewell to my hard-on, dwindling even as Ethan groped after it. *Hammer it in* – hammer that head into sixty-mile-an-hour pavement. "I don't think so," I said. "Find me a bed," I said, "please, a mattress and four solid legs on a solid floor."

"It's not a good idea to get the driver excited," said Ethan, coy. "I have to concentrate." Then, considerate, he kissed me, and we were off again.

Dawn crowed with delight on seeing us leathered up, while Mark grinned knowingly. She had to take snapshots (see enclosed), while all I wanted was to strip the things off – I felt like a fish baked en croûte; stank like a tannery – and throw myself into the lukewarm bay.

We went to a beach on the sound instead. I drove Ethan in Dawn and Mark's car; they rode his bike (it was Mark who taught me the term *rice-burner*). Ethan gurgled inarticulately, distressed they didn't wear helmets. Ethan in his severe black Speedo was the handsomest man on the beach, even beating out Mark, while I was the luckiest man on the beach because he was with me. More photos. The tiny, skinny

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person plunging headlong off high rocks into deep water is myself: I did it repeatedly, scaring Ethan, he said, half to death: his heart was in his throat. That's not what ought to be in your throat, I told him. At this point we were back on the sand, happy families all about, I sitting forward between Ethan's crooked knees while he combed out my wet hair. He offered to comb Mark's, longer even than mine, was good-naturedly turned down even as Dawn, facetious, snarled, "Back off, bitch. He's mine."

15

Over the weekend (that night we fucked like minks, Dawn noted approvingly in the morning), Dawn and I talked books, talked TV – as much a connoisseur of junk TV as I, she actually watches the stuff (though she can't stand *Star Trek*) – talked cooking (how that woman cooks!), talked men. Mark and Ethan talked bikes. We left late Sunday evening, too late, dark before we got through Fall River, with fifty-odd miles yet to go. I had had a beer with dinner, a bad mistake, felt a migraine coming on, saw dizzying, illuminated, translucent veils before my eyes, was light-headed, querulous, demanding, put-upon, inconsolable. Unreasonable, I blamed it all on Ethan's motorcycle: on Ethan. If I had been in charge of the weekend's travel arrangements, we'd be riding in the back of a big, empty bus, side by side, holding hands, necking when the notion took us. I could give him a fast, discreet hand job (something I desperately, insanely, wished to do, my fists practically buried in his hot leather crotch) without worrying I'd cause us to crash.

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This was not the heroic argument: straddling the noisy bike spoon-fashion, muffled in helmets, we couldn't talk. We purred into Boston, into the South End, Ethan pulled over to the curb in front of my building. "C'n I sleep over, huh, Alex, please?" he asked in a little-boy voice, grinning not at all like a little boy.

16

"Ethan, I'm getting a migraine – already got one, practically."

"Oh, no!" he said, "oh, dear!" – words that, typed out in black print, appear inane, unhelpful. "Oh, Alex!" We did not fight that night: he helped me upstairs, fed the angry cats for me, fed me Coca-Cola and other arcane pharmaceuticals and fierce espresso, tenderly placed his own dark glasses over my eyes when I complained of a single sixty-watt bulb's being too bright. Tender, strong, he held me around the shoulders while I retched into the toilet bowl; held me upright under a cool shower; undemanding, held me in bed; never, ever reminded me he'd advised against that beer – he knows me well, knows my weaknesses, metabolic as well as psychic. I blamed it on his bike. Contribute, he didn't argue. In the morning we overslept because I don't have to get up at any particular time. I made him even later for work by insisting (I woke up giddy, drained, horny) on giving him a long and very detailed blowjob before I'd let him up out of bed.



*T*wo weeks later. We are on good terms – splendid terms – I am as happy as I’ve ever been. We’re planning a trip at Christmas: not California, not Pennsylvania, no family anywhere for thousands of miles: three weeks in Istanbul. Ethan’s suggestion (I would never dare). We’ll stop in Germany on the way back to visit you-know-who and her adorable husband. (*Yay!*) I’m so happy I’ll cheerfully let him pay more than his fair share. (How big *was* that raise?) I’ve reactivated myself at the temp agency, start a two-month assignment next week, to help pay my paltry portion (which I can write off my taxes as a business expense – first-hand research, you know). (Oh, God, I’ll have to get a laptop [another deduction] or learn all over again how to write by hand.) It will be strange going to an office every day again, but muscle beach has shut down for the season anyway. Getting up early with Ethan in the morning like a professional married couple, whosever apartment we happen to have slept in, making coffee together, shaving and showering together, running together for the T: I’m almost looking forward to it. I have dusted off my guides to Istanbul and my arm-chair-travel books, my teach-yourself grammar and dictionary – Turkish is the language from hell; I long to hear it spoken; I have to go to the library again – I have to get my passport renewed! When was the last time I needed to use it...? Ethan calls.

17

“*Seni seviyorum, Iskender,*” he says, first thing – this is the Turkish for *I love you*; we’re probably pronouncing it all wrong. “... I sold the bike.”

"You didn't," I said, appalled. "Not because – you didn't *need* the money?"

"Alex." Good natured, he humored me. "It's a ten-year-old rice-burner. As good condition as it's in I couldn't get enough for it to do anybody any good at all. I sold it to a college kid who wants to take it apart. I got the price of a nice dinner: you wanna?"

18

Suspicious, I said, "You're going to buy a bigger, newer, scarier, noisier one, aren't you?"

"Nope." He laughed.

Relieved, I said, "Did you sell it because you know how much I hate it?"

"You don't hate it – you're terrified of it." He was still humoring me. "Did you notice how fast I rushed to get rid of it? It only took eight years. Alex –" suddenly he sounded wistful – "I want to buy a car. I'm thirty-two years old, I'm going bald, I'm a goddamn senior editor, I've never owned a car. It's un-American. You, the non-driver – you've owned two. I want to buy a car."

"You want to pay hundreds a month to garage it and God knows how much for downtown-Boston, first-time-owner insurance, just to piddle fifteen city blocks back and forth to work?"

"Yes," he said miserably, "I do."

"Can you afford it?" I asked. I didn't say, and the trip too? – although this was (you may have missed it) the real beginning of the fight.

"Oh, yeah, easy."

"Okay, sweetest heart, babe. When do you want to start looking?"

"Tonight?"

“Tonight?”

“After I get off. Then that nice dinner.”

“Ethan,” I said. (I had missed it, missed it completely.) “Dearest, darling heart, baby, aziz sevgilim [this Turkish as well, and mawkish, sentimental: I won’t translate], handsomest man in the world, you’re not going bald.”

19

“Make that a nice dinner and some really good Champagne.”



*Did* you miss it? I missed it. First, the salesman who latched onto us the first (only) place we went was not the rumpled polyester motormouth from late-night-junk-TV hell: he was youthful, well spoken, well turned out, dressed with an Italian accent – he latched onto Ethan. Ethan of course was suited and tied, having come from work, the knot of the tie artfully awry to show he was off duty and not taking himself entirely seriously. His hair was short, his Harvard class ring regrettably conspicuous (one day – if he ever lets me back into his apartment – I’m going to lose it for him). He looked happy, prosperous, expansive, grotesquely naïve. He was the handsomest man in the world. Naturally the man latched onto him. I’d latched onto him, hadn’t I, eight years before. Anyone would.

The man’s name was Benjamin. He was a South Shore car salesman yet he called himself *Benjamin* – this was intended as a giveaway. Nevertheless, I got the distinct impression he didn’t actually want to

jump Ethan's bones. He wanted to be understood to be wanting to jump, he might not be entirely averse to being jumped himself although he didn't ordinarily go for that sort of thing ... (it doesn't ordinarily take me so long to catch on, but then I don't often encounter specimens so devious): he wanted to jump Ethan's platinum credit rating.

20

Benjamin had been showing us (showing Ethan) entirely the wrong kinds of cars, cars for a settled, confident, thirty-two-year-old gay professional, with the occasional puzzled glance at the peculiar boyfriend or whatever I was. Ethan made polite but disbelieving noises. Cars that were practical yet luxe, cars that made the correct statement, slightly stodgy cars, or, alternately, urban-woodsman cars, effete yet macho 4WD ski-resort cars. Naïve, Ethan let slip (he had never bought anything more expensive than his big-screen TV) the magic words *my first car*. You saw Benjamin's eyes light up as, fast as lightning, he connected the dots. Artful, he murmured a little homily on the theme of first-time-buyer discounts and steered Ethan across the lot. I trailed behind, apprehensive, dubious.

"They're jokey little machines, really. You can't take them seriously." Benjamin was putting on a good show of nervous affability; I really shouldn't waste your time with this. "I mean, that's not to say... The engineering's fabulous. Runs beautifully, never gives you any trouble. Even good mileage. But it's like the designers were given the assignment: make me the car I dreamed about when I was sixteen..."

They looked like little Matchbox cars, fresh out of the box – like the bastard offspring of Boadicea and a Porsche 911 Targa, sleek and fast and efficient but somehow friendly, soulful, eccentric: they looked wonderful. I was smitten. Worse, Benjamin saw I was smitten, made the calculations, turned just the tiniest fraction of his charm on me as if to say: If we just work together we can make each other very happy. Worse still, Ethan saw I was smitten. “The green one,” I murmured, helpless, and Ethan took me by the elbow, took me right over to it. “Can we take it out for a little ride?” he asked over his shoulder, hardly even a question, asserting his God-given right. You’d think he knew what he was doing.

21

There were lightning-fast calculations, a slight hesitation: it was a two-seater and there wasn’t a chance in hell of Benjamin’s occupying one of those two seats.

“Don’t worry.” Ethan offered up a smile of such charm as to melt lead. “Whatever I end up buying Alex will drive as often as I do.”

“I’ll just get you the keys,” said Benjamin.

The wheels were spinning too fast for me to follow. Just who did I think was naïve, open, above-board. I sank into the little car’s passenger seat, too limp with desire even to consider driving. The seat was gloriously comfortable, gloriously low to the ground. Folding up like an articulated marionette to fit behind the wheel, tall Ethan looked ridiculous. He drummed his palms on the wheel, approving. “Solid little machine. Is that a CD player?” And Benjamin brought the keys!

We were I don't know where, somewhere in the South Shore, hell to get to on public transit, some pokey little formerly industrial town reduced to flash and salesmanship – suburbia incarnata, a plump leech sucking its lifeblood from the city. Ethan found a freeway without any trouble at all. The man has an uncanny sense of direction. He took us out into something closely resembling country, conjured up a wandering two-lane byway as if by magic. It was still nearly light. Pleasantly cool, the air rushed over the top of the windshield, dipped into the narrow well behind the seats, and gushed up into my hair, blowing it all around. The engine noise was powerful, loud, but not obtrusive. Suddenly worried, I said, "Ethan, you shouldn't drive so fast, it's not yours yet."

"Yet?" (One heard the eyebrow raised.) "I'm only going forty-two."

Unlike my Triumph, this roadster had real side windows that rolled up and down – I rolled the one on my side down (wind rushed around the side of the windshield), then up again, marvelling. Ethan reached to turn on the radio. As if by divine prearrangement, it was tuned to the most sympathetic station in metro Boston, blasting wicked guitars. Not (surprisingly, you might say) Kitchens of Distinction, but acceptable. Wincing, Ethan lowered the volume. "Do you like it?" he asked. "Do you want to drive for a bit?"

"Yes," I said, and "No" – then, "Ethan, what did you mean when you said I'd be driving it as often as you?"

"I meant," he said, "just what I said."

Lap belt and shoulder belt webbed me securely into the leather seat, black leather as smooth and warm as Ethan's motorcycle duds, or mine. "I don't drive," I said plaintively.

23

"You don't drive because you can't afford the kind of car you imagine yourself driving," said Ethan, as cruel as only the one who knows you best can be. "That's all. But I can."

Outraged, I said, "You wouldn't dare."

"What? Buy myself a car you like as much as I do?" He looked up into the rearview mirror, flicked the turn signal, braked and downshifted and pulled over onto the shoulder. He switched off the radio. "I wouldn't dare – I wouldn't *think* of buying a car for you, but it seems only reasonable to take your preferences into account when I buy one for myself. Alex –" His hands gripped the wheel, 10.00 and 2.00 o'clock. He stared through the windshield straight ahead. A hedge of something blooming hung over my window, fragrant. "Everything I own is just as much yours – you know that. I wouldn't buy undershorts without consulting you. What – do you think eight years later that we're still just *dating*?"

"We don't live together. We don't have a joint checking account."

"And who cheerfully agreed to those choices?"

"I could dump you in a second."

"Of course you could," he said, soothing, reassuring. "Will you? Is this the last straw? I'll miss the cats. Shall I take you home?"

"I can find my own way home."



## DRIVE THAT FAST

He had put the car into first and pulled out into the road (hardly glancing to check it was clear – born to be a Massachusetts driver) before I could unlatch my belts. “Don’t be silly,” he said, “you don’t have any idea where we are,” and drove me back to the dealership without another word. By now it was dark. Under the lamps at the lot, Benjamin could not – or didn’t bother to – disguise his relief. I didn’t stick around to hear what he would say to Ethan or, worse, Ethan to him: I strode to the bus stop down the block, a quarter mile away, past all the illuminated plastic signs, the muffler shops and gas stations and fast-food outlets. I waited for the bus, a good long time – Ethan didn’t catch up with me. I rode the bus back into the city, to an inconvenient T station that meant I had to ride the Red Line all the way inbound to Downtown Crossing before I could change over to the outbound Orange Line to take me home.

24

Ethan was waiting. He’d taken a cab. He was waiting, sitting alert and expectant at my dining table with the espresso pot sitting before him on a trivet, heady steam dribbling up from its spout: alert, expectant, one cat in his lap, the other curled up asleep under his chair. Without a word, Ethan poured out two demitasses.

I cannot bear to go into it. (It was two weeks ago.) You know Ethan nearly as little as I your husband. When I tried to strike him, he began to weep, but he was in the right. Can there be any doubt in anyone’s mind? A brief but effective migraine stole up on me after he left (after I threw him out) and I

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DRIVE THAT FAST

have been in a rut without surcease ever since, staving off the onslaught with caffeine and worse, although I go to my tawdry temp job every morning, resentful, childish. I am acting entirely in character. Tomorrow I'll buy a cheery, noncommittal postcard and an airmail stamp. This letter goes to archive, stored on disk without ever being printed out.

25



ALEX JEFFERS

## DRIVE THAT FAST

26

*to continue: Boston, 10 October 1993*

*A*t Porter Square, for reasons I don't know, the subway runs very, very deep. This is the Red Line again, outbound in the opposite direction. Coming up from underground, from the platform, the escalator seems to take forever (four or five minutes), creaking slowly upward to dizzying heights like the California Street cablecar climbing Nob Hill in our – yours and mine, dearest – long-ago home, before I met the one or you the other heart's desire. But neither Muni-Metro nor BART tunnels so far underground where the lines run pickaback below Market Street in San Francisco, and I come to the surface on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge, a municipality I visit as seldom as ever I crossed the bay to Berkeley or Oakland. Why am I here?

Mid-morning on a Saturday. To the right, across the intersection, a little shopping center. To the left, a large concrete and plate-glass building housing a kind of mini-mall of specialty shops and cafés. Across Mass Ave and a little way back toward Bos-

ALEX JEFFERS

ton, a huge, handsome old apartment block, where lives an acquaintance from my temp job, John, and his girlfriend, whom I haven't met, Joan. (Charming, the alliteration of their names.) I am here to meet Joan, to have coffee with them, but more importantly to be introduced to an acquaintance of theirs, a man who lives in the same building.

27

Scarcely a month and already looking out a new boyfriend...? Lucien (I believe this to be his name) is indeed a handsome man, très charmant, who flirts in a voluptuous Québec accent with John, with Joan, with me, simply out of politeness, but he is moving back to Montréal in three weeks, his belongings already largely boxed, his lease with six months yet to run – while mine expires, yes, on the thirty-first of this month and I am desperate to get away from the South End where it is sheerly a miracle I don't crash into my heart's desire every time I round a corner.

Lucien's apartment is on the fifth floor, with views toward the Charles and those slender landmarks of Back Bay the Hancock and the Prudential. He leads me around: bedroom, bathroom, living room, eat-in kitchen. The four of us sit at the round table in the breakfast nook. Considerate, Lucien takes the seat that backs up on the windows, allowing us (me) the urban panorama – though this means he must sidle past Joan when the coffee's ready. We discuss practicalities: the rent, of course (lower than mine: Cambridge rent-control being more stringent than Boston's), the few pieces of furniture he would like to sell and I prefer not to buy, the cats I will (by this point not *would*) have to smuggle in. Not ideal

– management will allow him to sublet aboveboard, but have warned him all deals are off come April – not ideal, but I’m in a hurry. Who knows what I’ll want six months from now, where I’ll want to be...

28

Abruptly it’s lunch time: we’ll go out (Lucien shrugs winningly, indicates glass-fronted cabinets already empty, packed up), we’ll go around the corner to a Greek place he knows. Apologetic, uncomfortable, Joan and John make excuses. Winsome, Lucien pats the back of my hand, says, “But you, Alex?”

Lunch. The sky-blue and white flag of the Hellenic Republic, posters of the Parthenon, the throne room at Knossos, the Venetian waterfront of Mykonos. A dark booth at the rear below a poster of a nude, bronze, empty-eyed athlete. I decline a glass of retsina, explaining that I’m in migraine aura and anything might set me off... Lucien exclaims in sympathy and the story comes out. Not the story, merely the fact: eight years down the tubes in an instant and either I won’t forgive Ethan or he cannot forgive me. In any case, he reclaimed two suits from my closet and who knows what all else, when I wasn’t home to remonstrate; left a neat stack of my belongings (every book I ever lent him) but no note. Not the keys to my apartment, granted, something I might take for an opening but for this: the bastard (my only love) changed the lock on his door – and his phone number. The new number directory assistance nor any of our friends will give me, however desperately I humiliate myself. His mother and father (my aunt and uncle!) decline to return my calls.

"Ah, ah," Lucien is saying, reaching across the table to grasp my hands, "how terrible, how sad!" He and *his* friend have split up as well, quite recently: this is one reason he's moving home. (Should I contemplate returning to California? No. No. While hope breathes.) His friend had fallen in love with someone else. But the parting was amicable, if not amiable, and with half the apartment packed up and moved out, why not the other half? "You did not live together, though, you and your friend."

29

"No." I am staring across the narrow table at him, into his face. His eyelids are lowered, he regards his hands touching mine on the varnished wood. "It made it that much faster and cleaner and harder." He is handsome, his features small, precise, angular, his lips beautifully shaped and colored – he is easy to look at but not, as I gaze at him, beautiful, not in the way I believe Ethan to be beautiful (something Ethan always said was my imagination), but then he raises his eyes and his eyes are beautiful. He leans forward, rising up a little from his seat – he's as short as I – and, lifting one hand, crooks a finger around a lock of my hair, draws it through its entire length until it slips from his grasp and drifts down, falling over my eye. I push it behind my ear. He smiles, shy, sits back.

Abruptly, lunch is something to be got through: I don't know what I order, what I eat. I drink Coca-Cola and take one risky sip of his wine. Back in his apartment, Lucien begins to make love to me before we've begun to remove our clothes. He is gentle – unsure, I think – but his bed (one of the pieces

he wants to sell) creaks alarmingly and sways. He seems to know what *I* want, though, and it ought to be tawdry and cheap and fast and desperate, but it's not. His body is fine, slender but muscular, athletic, gymnastic, his nipples rosy and peculiarly sensitive on the paired plaques of a chest sown with soft, straight black hair, his prick surprisingly large so that I can't fit all of it in my mouth and he hesitates on the point of screwing me. "You are sure?" he asks, peering at me between my upraised legs, eyebrows drawn together to meet on the bridge of his nose, lovely eyes hidden by his squint. "Thomas would never let me, he said I was too big, I would split him apart," he says, "I do not wish to hurt you," and it strikes me he cannot be so young, so innocent as not to have discovered that a big cock is more valuable than currency. How young can he be? "Put it in," say I, harsh, peremptory, stealing lines from videos Ethan rented for us, "stick that monster cock in and fuck me to the eyeballs."

30

Still he hesitates, but in fact it's not particularly larger than Ethan's, only startling on Lucien's boyish frame. Straining, I reach under to grasp it in both hands, greasy with lube, slippery in the condom I rolled over it myself a few minutes ago, knowing what I wanted, and I press the crown against my asshole, push my own hips down. Going in, it hurts, hurts a good deal, a good, slow, lasting pain that causes my own prick to wince, then swell, distended, as if it were a sleeve of skin filled to bursting by Lucien's flesh and blood. "Oh," he breathes.

He screws me well and thoroughly, hammers it in, hammers it home. When he remembers to, he

jerks knowingly, expertly, callously on my cock until I'm nearly there, then, gasping, grasps me under the balls, pressing the ball of his thumb into the perineum, halting me, and then he plunges heroically to his own climax, grunting, groaning, before he lets me go, lets me loose, lets me come – writhing forward between my outstretched thighs to kiss and bite my lips while, moaning, I come, tender prick jerking and spurting between our two bellies....

31

But none of this happened. At a certain point Lucien had stood into the light, turned at the right angle, and I noted his improbable basket – his *extravagant endowment*, to use another fine old term: that's all. I wrote Lucien a check to cover the deposit and last month's rent he would not now forfeit and then, shaking his hand (not even a Gallic peck on either cheek), I left. He promised to keep me informed of his schedule, to be all moved out well before the end of the month. A relief, that.

To the station, down the first escalator, swipe my pass through the reader, push through the turnstile. I am not ordinarily troubled by vertigo. The long escalator plunges deep into the bowels of the earth. Because the ceiling is relatively low and plummets down at the same acute angle, one can't properly see the floor, the terminus, far below. One feels, though standing upright, that one is leaning forward, barely arrested in a steep fall, and therefore leans precariously back. The rubber handrail moves fractionally slower than the step underfoot – or is it faster? – throwing one off. I stand to the side, cowering, trembling, heart in my throat, because some



lunatic fool is sure to come yelling, running down from above intent on catching the train I hear pulling in, sure to trip and fall and tumble, bowling me over. The sharp metal teeth of the treads will tear at our clothes, rip our flailing limbs, crack our fragile skulls ... at last, at bottom, the teeth sliding under the grooved plate will gnaw tender shreds of flesh from limp, insensible fingertips and palms. My earphones are in, plugged in, fogging my hearing, the Walkman like a holstered pistol at my hip is loaded, but I have not pressed the firing stud. Too giddy, too afraid. *Take me away from these simple feelings I know I'll take that car and drive there faster.*

32

Some lunatic fool comes pounding down from above, past like a roaring train in a tunnel or a fast sports car, grabs the handrail and halts on a dime, teetering, spins on a dime to glare up at me. "Alex!" he shouts, enraged, "you oblivious little twit, I yelled and yelled."

I staggered. I sank down, crouched down, sat down on the vibrating metal stair. "Ethan," I murmured, inane, groggy. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Take out the goddamn earphones, Alex. I'm not going to yell anymore." Leaning forward, he gripped the handrail higher, climbed up to stand on the step just below mine and glowered down at me until I pulled the plastic buds from my ears and held them, helpless, one in either hand, unable to meet his eyes. "Now, you listen to me, Mr Jeffers," he said, his voice harsh. "Soon as we get to the bottom we're turning around and going back up. You're coming with me."

I am *not* putting up with any more of your shit.” Breathing hard, he was shaking, trembling, with fury – with terror. “Jesus!” he said, grinning. “It would have to be you to get me onto the scariest escalator in the known universe. What are you doing here anyway, sweetest heart? You know how this thing frightens me – I never come to Porter Square.”

33

I didn’t say, You’re here now. I gathered my dignity and said, “This is my station now. This is where I live.”

He blinked. “Since when?”

“Since three weeks from now. End of the month, when the lease runs out on the old place.”

“Three weeks.” Leaning over the handrail so casually you’d need to know him to know he was clutching it for dear life, he regarded me steadily. “That ought to be enough advance notice.”

“I don’t need your help, Ethan.”

“What you need, what you want –” he shrugged, grinning airily but still holding on – “what I can do, what I will – beside the point, really. But you’re right, it is time for a change. You’ve been in that apartment how many years?”

As many years, so to speak, as I’d known him. Not as many as he’d been in his own. “Ethan,” I said, standing up. A step below me, he was still taller. On the polished metal between escalator and stairway balustrades, at odd intervals, someone had tossed heavy work gloves, crumpled, abandoned, sad: they were bronze – art. “Turn around. We’re nearly to the bottom. You’ll have to get off.”

“Oh!” he said, brightening still further. “Yes – please!” Pivoting with the grace of a tall man, a frightened man, he allowed the escalator to carry him down the last, least fraction of grade, hopped lightly over the endlessly gnashing teeth at the foot, and in an access of relief danced away onto the platform. He kicked at one last discarded bronze glove, embedded in the tiled floor, and laughed. “Oh, Alex!”

34

“Ethan,” I said. I stepped off the escalator with a bit more composure – four years older, after all, thirty-six to his thirty-two, conscious of being in the wrong. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I was heading home – I saw you. You’re not to be missed, you with the hair. I honked and waved and yelled.”

“Honked?” Hardening my heart, I walked past him, my only love, handsomest man in the world. He was wearing ratty old jeans and a sweater ravelled at elbows and wrists, a bad color for his coloring to begin with: he looked like a prince. “You bought the car, then.”

“Of course I bought the car. I wanted it. Benjamin gave me a deal.” He was right behind me. “How could I be in Porter Square if I hadn’t driven here? Not the green one, though. Dark blue, almost black. Alex –”

“You changed your locks on me – you changed your goddamn phone number!”

“You were going to move without telling me.”

“Because every time I saw you in the neighborhood –” I whirled, glared up into his lovely eyes. He was frowning, concerned, an expression that made

his face heart-takingly ugly. I blinked and looked away. “– I would be reminded how very much I love you.”

It was Saturday afternoon – there were not many people on the platform. There were people on the platform, waiting for trains to take them hither and yon, Alewife one way, Ashmont or Braintree the other, points between. An Alewife train breezed in, rattling, grunting, bellowing incomprehensible announcements. I’ve never been to Alewife. I wasn’t interested. A few persons were, but more than that got off. Ethan and I stood far enough apart from each other that one or two of them, four or five of them passed between us, heading for the escalator. I could have turned away, slipped away, boarded the wrong train, headed out in the wrong direction. Ethan said, “It won’t work, babe. Azizim.” He touched my shoulder, stroked my hair. “Let me give you a ride home – or a ride somewhere else? Or you could drive me.”

35



*M* dear, this will give you my new address, 1 November the effective date, not that I expect to be there past April Fool’s. And where will this fool end up thereafter? It’s clear Ethan has resolved to become an adult – willy-nilly I, four years his senior, must be one as well. He bought his fabulously expensive little car. He transferred all his credit-card debt to a low-APR Visa that also promises to make donations to les-bi-gay charities. He’s dickering with his bank over financing for a waterfront condo

in Hull. A roommate would be helpful, he says, in making the payments. You want your name on the papers too, huh, Alex, pretty please? my darling asks. What can I say? – if I'm to be adult about it. Hull? I ask him, what the hell is Hull? and he directs me there, me driving his flashy, sporty, brand-new car ... the top down on a perfect fall afternoon, both of us smoking to beat the band, CD player loud – *I would never want to drive that fast unless you're ready, willing, happy* – driving fast along the South Shore, a territory entirely outside my experience. The car is Japanese. He calls her Murasaki, saying, "You're a novelist, I'm in publishing – appropriate, don't you think?" He could have done a gender fuck and called her Mishima. I'll accept what I'm offered – no help for it.

36

Hull. Like a miniature, attenuated Cape Cod, the peninsula crooks out of the South Shore to enclose Hingham Bay (I'm glaring at a map) and, with the Harbor Islands and Deer Island (a peninsula, in fact), to form a permeable barrier across the mouth of Boston Harbor. It's hardly even there, really, Hull, a sandbar. A good tide ought to wash it away. Hull itself, the town, was a whaling port, is a fishing port – in this context a water-girt bedroom suburb of Boston. It's ridiculous is what it is, a quaint, gim-crack little town that just recently understood the value of its position surrounded on three sides by water, isolated, yet within hailing distance of the city – you can see the glittering highrises of downtown. The building Ethan's contemplating is, naturally, one of many, and new.

DRIVE THAT FAST

He says, if we can't face driving, we can catch the commuter boat into the city, through Hingham and Quincy Bays and the islands, right to the wharves downtown. He says (he's pointing out the amenities), Look at the view (from balconies off living room and master bedroom)! He says (of the second bedroom, no balcony but a pleasant outlook through broad plate glass): Your office. He says, The cats will love all these stairs. He says, There's a pool in the complex, and a gym. He says (marvelling), The place has absolutely no character at all! He says (again), Look at the view!

37

I can only look at him.

Well. One makes what appear to be sacrifices. You, dearest, live in München, after all. And I – we – will see you there in January, you and your handsome husband, on our way back from the mysterious east. We'll all go to dinner at his father's restaurant (best Italian cooking in Bavaria, I tell everyone), gorge on pasta, and tell stories – love stories, of course, fabulous romances set in exotic places. Until then, dear, you know that this brings love to you and your man from mine and me – bemused, bewildered, wary, but true.

baci ed abbracci,

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 final letter.

PS: The commuter boat goes very fast.

ALEX JEFFERS

**DRIVE THAT FAST**

*(Selected Letters: letter the fifth)*

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