

Love Letters to k.d. lang

1/22

Shoot, honey.

I'd like to meet you.

I'm here in my everyday grind, dragging my little briefcase off to the office and listening to you on the CD player in my car. I bought the CD after your concert. I played it at home for my boyfriend, John, but he didn't care for it. He's into Whitney Houston, with her halter tops and big hair.

I'm working on a country western song myself: "I've got a sliver of love in my eye." Don't you think it has potential?

I just want you to know, I'm not some sniveling teeny bopper fan without a life. I'm not writing to you to fill up all the smoky places in my heart. I've got a lot of things going right in my life. I've got a great job; I just bought myself a brand-new Honda Accord, and then, of course, there's John. A good solid man who adores me.

But, like I said, my girlfriends from work and I saw you when you were here, and man! That was something! I loved the one about 'walkin', walkin', in and out of your arms." And the one about "Are you getting scared my dear?" And the way you threw your head back and belted them out. It reminded me of a million different things: furious women; wild horse; patient, aging faces. And when your voice got soft, it brushed the tiny hairs along the back of my neck like to softest imaginable hand.

Usually, I don't like country music; it's so whiney and self-indulgent. And stupid! "You must think my bed is a bus stop, the way you come and go..." I mean, seriously? But you were great. It was a great concert. I can't wait to see your next one.

Sincerely,

Alexis Mason

2/13

Dear k.d.,

Jeez, I feel a little silly writing to you again. But, man! I can't get that voice of yours out of my head. It echoes around in there like the cry of the world's last bird, floating out of a lost canyon.

It makes me think I've made all the wrong choices in my life, even though I've been pretty happy up to now. It's like I ordered this big dinner but I only saw the front of the menu, and all the tempting, exotic foods were on the back.

Suddenly, I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to finish school and get settled. I wish now I'd taken some time off; gone drifting out West and met someone with a rhinestone cowboy tie and glittery swirls sewn into a black shirt. A cowboy hat and a swagger.

I know I shouldn't complain, but my days are so ordinary. I'm a Customer Service Supervisor for Ramco. I get up in the morning and I put on my little dress-for-success outfits and my nylon panty hose, and I have myself some toast and coffee, kiss John on the forehead and get into my brand new Honda and drive into the traffic like any common commuter.

Lately, I've been noticing the colors and sounds on the highway: those outrageous billboards and the electrical lines stringing along like a cat's cradle. Even just the little blast of air that rocks my car when a big truck bullies on by. Then I think to myself, "God, am I wasting my life?"

I used to like my life a lot. I used to come in and have coffee with the girls and we'd make each other laugh, you know. They'd tell stories about their husbands and kids, and I'd fill them in on John and we'd all have a good laugh before we got to the phones. I even liked my job.

I'm good with customers. They'd call me with their problems and requests, and I had just the right tone in my voice to calm them down and make them feel important. I took them seriously. You'd be amazed how lonely these people are, k.d. They call just to talk, most of the time. They don't really mind if their electrical appliances break down and they can't get their toast in the morning, just so long as there's someone on the other end of the line who takes them seriously for five minutes.

Now, it drives me nuts. I had a little old lady today who wanted to request the Ramco Guide to Microwave Cooking, so I took down all her information and told her I'd send one out right away. Then I asked her if there was anything else? And she just went on talking. Conversationally, you know. And it was so weird!

She was telling me about her dogs. She had a whole bunch of Chihuahuas, and they all had Mexican names like Pedro and Cisco and Pancho, and she was going on and on, I swear to God this is true, about how she did eight loads of laundry every day, just for the dogs.

Well, God, it was so obvious that she was just so hopelessly lonely. And we have phone limits; you can't talk to a customer for more than three minutes exactly or the department supervisor writes you up. So, I'm sitting there ready to invite her to my house for dinner, either that or burst into tears, and I see my manager with her feathered perm and her Talbot's Work Shop outfit frowning at me and pointing at her watch.

So, okay I dealt with that. But next I get this asshole from Poughkeepsie, and he's pissed because he sent in a rebate on the Ramco coffeemaker and the fulfillment house in Kansas hasn't processed his check yet. It's been, like, two days since he sent it in.

Usually, I'm so smooth with these guys. I sound real concerned and I tell him I'll check on it immediately and I can bring them around but today I wanted to say "Look, you butt-head, do you think you're the only person in the whole universe, or what? Do you think this whole company is set up to drop its fucking drawers and bend over so you can ram it home for your lousy two dollars?"

Well, of course I didn't say that; I helped the guy out, but there was an edge to my voice that reminded me of tearing paper and everyone else heard it, too.

On my lunch hour I got out of there. I drove up through the foothills, parked above town, cranked up the heater and just looked out over the Ramco plant. It's like some fat, feudal lord and all the houses and schools that spread out under its shadow are like serfs. Me too. I go in and give them my fifty-percent bounty, my best years, my life... and they go on groaning at the feast table.

I crank up your CD and think about you, your lifestyle. Did you pick it? Did you consciously go after it? Did you understand the risks and sacrifices? Or did that big voice of yours carry you into it, just like my wanting to please everybody carried me into mine.

Are you happy? Wounded? Confused? Do you ever sit in your hotel room and wish you had a nice, quiet life, a husband, some kids? Do you ever wish you could just make chicken enchiladas for potluck suppers at church and be done with it?

Wondering,

Alexis

2/14

Dear k.d.,

This is ridiculous, I know, but it's Valentine's Day. And I'm thinking about you.

I don't even know where you are. In concert somewhere? At home, wherever that is? Cleaning up from a pot roast dinner and thinking about running your fingers through someone's hair?

John's in bed asleep, But I just lay there staring at the ceiling, so I got up and fixed myself some hot chocolate. It's snowing outside. You can't see it, but you can almost hear the little snowflakes crashing into one another with their mysterious and secret percussions.

I want to talk about love.

I love John and I know John loves me. He's a good man. He likes it that I can look good; that I can dress up and get decked out with my manicured nails and my jewelry. He likes it that I'm smart and that I can take care of myself. We share the same values. We value education; we value industriousness; we value family and community.

I like it that he's good looking and smart. He dresses in Brooks Brothers suits and paisley ties. He's easy going and logical. He's responsible. He's a compact, stocky guy with glasses and black hair. He'll make a terrific father. Even my parents like him.

He's in finance at U.S. West. We met when we served as loaned executives for the United Way. And we've been best friends ever since. But lately, little things

are starting to drive me crazy. He never hesitates. He always knows what's best, even when he doesn't have the first clue what he's talking about.

He's such a Man, you know? I mean, even when he's driving, he's like a little banty rooster. The other day we were driving behind this little old lady and she was driving really slow, you know, because she's old and insecure, and he started ranting and raving and leaning on the horn.

Of course, the poor thing got totally flustered, and her eyes kept darting up to the rear-view mirror. She was as nervous as a little bird. Finally, she just pulled over so he could pass. It was totally rude; it was brutish. And we weren't even in a hurry.

Men!

Do I love him? Yes.

Is it passion?

When you throw your head back and belt out those songs, it looks like passion; it seems like every song comes from some dark reservoir of mystery and promise and feeling. It's true art. And isn't that the whole point of everything — to respond to art and to respond passionately?

Sincerely,

Alex

4/1

Dear k.d.,

I can't stop writing these letters. It's Spring, you know, and suddenly I want to listen to old records: Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday. I want to experience everything new.

Last night, I talked John into going to this bar with a bunch of people from work. It's a jazz place in lower downtown — a dive, really, but smoky and blue and close and it has great music. So we're there, drinking martinis and getting into the music, and it's great, you know, it's getting to me. You know the feeling? And I'm feeling so close to John, so lovely and loving and we go outside and kiss awhile under the streetlights and it's like those high school kisses. God! So sweet

and full of promise. And then I can't wait and I want to go to the car and get after it, right there in the train station parking lot.

But he said no. And so we went back to the bar and ordered hamburgers and onion rings and finished the evening in an atmosphere of congealing grease.

My life is as stale as old toast — it's that crusty and dry. I don't care if you ever read these letters; I know you're too busy to write back. But it helps me to write them. It's like those spaceships that are flung into the void far beyond the stars in absolute silence, absolute loneliness — but they have a little picture etched into a steel plate: a naked human figure with one hand raised in greeting against some mathematical formula.

Greetings. Saluto. Love.

Alex

4/15

Dear k.d.,

God, it's so awful. Suddenly, we're fighting all the time. First, he found my letters to you and made fun of them. He couldn't believe it.

"You're writing fan letters to a country western singer?" he asked.

I didn't even answer.

I get more and more tentative, and he gets more and more fixed. He's a bronze statue and I'm a skittish pigeon, fluttering at every passing person, every word.

I've been calling in sick at work. Suddenly, it's too much, getting dressed every day and tottering out there in my high heels like some plastic Barbie doll. I need time to think.

So in the mornings, I lie awake in bed with an arm flung over my eyes and wait for John to go to work. He is grim and serious, and he bangs around the kitchen when he fixes his cereal. He slams the door when he leaves. Oh, he is so enraged and self-righteous!

I've tried to talk to him about it. The second day I called in sick, I fixed a real dinner. Rib roast and spinach casserole. Wild rice. A bottle of wine. A crisp salad with filberts and raspberries. A hunk of sourdough bread. But he is so steady. Nothing has changed for him.

He came in and turned on the news. "So, what did you do all day?" he asked.

Later, when we'd had some wine, I tried to talk to him.

"Don't you ever feel stifled?" I said. "Don't you ever feel like your whole life is planned out for you?"

He looked at me, truly puzzled.

"I mean, I feel like I'm on one of those moving walkways at the airport. I'm just moving along, unthinking, and eventually I'll end up at some destination," I said.

"I can see the whole thing," I continued. I'll stay at Ramco, get promoted every few years, make more and more money. We'll get married and have kids, then they'll grow up and go to work, and where will we be?"

"Where do you want to be?" he asked. Seriously, now, with his head tilted a little to one side, and his eyebrows crinkling together.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well," he said.

And that was the end of it.

What do I want? I want my life to mean something.

I'm so tired of being logical. I want to ride off into the sunset. I want to fall in love with a lanky electrician who's a square dance caller on the side. I want a petticoat under my skirt that shines like snow when I allemande left and swing on home.

Or, no, I want a studio downtown. Something urban and spare with some jazzy neon and a great sound system. I want to get up on Sundays and wander down to the Market for espresso and read newspapers from Paris and London.

I want things to be spontaneous and dangerous. I want something unexpected to happen. I want people to say, “God, can you believe what Alex did?” And shake their heads and be jealous and judgmental.

I want to meet you out on the road. Pick your brain and listen to old Hank William tapes. Find out about *your* love life. Smoke dope in the road bus and lean back against the pillows with my eyes closed and hear you singing torch and twang to me.

This is what I really want; this is my last request.

I want you to answer one letter.

Always, *always*,

A.