

THE  
DRIVE

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Myriad Editions

Published in 2013 by

Myriad Editions  
59 Lansdowne Place  
Brighton BN3 1FL

[www.myriadeditions.com](http://www.myriadeditions.com)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-908434-31-9

Printed on FSC-accredited paper and bound by  
TJ International Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall



‘A fast moving car is the only place  
where you’re legally allowed to not  
deal with your problems.’

*Douglas Coupland*

PART I 

## chapter 1

I wandered into the rental car agency on a Monday morning, carrying a backpack filled with supplies: socks, boxer shorts, T-shirts, my sleeping bag, and six beers. Originally it had been eight beers but I'd drunk a couple of road pops on the bus ride over. The agency was out at the airport. It was called Budget or Thrifty or something like that. I'd found it on the net. They were the only company in the Lower Mainland that offered unlimited mileage, as a kind of sales gimmick. I guess they expected you to pay your money and putter around the city for a few days. That was obviously a huge mistake on their part.

The office was a dimly lit cubicle with four glass walls, like an aquarium, built into the airport's underground parkade. As I approached the counter, the clerk on duty looked up and smiled. He was an Asian guy wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a gold hoop earring. His hair was gelled into this retro quiff that stuck up stiffly at the front.

He said, 'How are you this morning, sir?'

I hadn't really slept for two weeks. Or eaten much. Eating was hard.

'Peachy.'

I gave him my driver's licence and reservation number. He started tapping the keys on his computer. His fingers were long and elegant, like spider legs. One had a ring on it.

'You married?' I asked.

He stopped typing.

'I'm engaged.'

‘I didn’t know men wore engagement rings.’

‘It’s fairly common, these days.’

He began typing again, keeping one eye on me – as if he already suspected I was going to be a problem. ‘Today’s your lucky day,’ he said. ‘We don’t have the car you reserved, but for the same price we can offer you an upgrade.’

He rattled off a list of vehicles I could choose from: different makes, different models, different manufacturers. The names floated in the air around us, meaningless as vapour. I’d never owned a car and didn’t know much about them.

‘Are you interested in any of those, sir?’

‘Sorry – what was that last one?’

‘A Ford Expedition.’

He said it like it should mean something.

‘Great,’ I told him.

He handed me a bunch of forms to fill out. As I did this, he received a text on his cellphone. He read it, smiled, and began texting back. I tried to peek at the screen without him noticing, but he caught me.

‘Is that your fiancée?’ I asked, still scribbling.

He frowned. ‘Why?’

‘No reason. It’s just nice to see other people happy.’

He turned his phone face-down, hiding the display from me. When I’d finished filling out the forms, he swiped my credit card and handed me the key, being careful not to actually touch me in any way.

‘That’s five hundred and eighty dollars and sixty-three cents.’

‘My reservation said it was three hundred-something.’

He blinked. ‘I asked if you wanted our Loss Damage Waiver Plan and you said yes.’

‘Did I?’

‘I can remove it, if you like.’

‘No. I might as well keep it. There’s a fairly good chance I’ll crash this thing.’

He didn’t smile. He pointed to the lot and told me where the car was parked.

‘Thanks – and say hi to the fiancée for me.’

As I left, I could tell he was still watching me.

The underground parkade was lit by cheap fluorescent tubes that flickered and hummed like lightsabers. My vehicle sat in the corner of the lot. It was a monster SUV with tyres as high as my waist, running-boards, and a crash bar jutting out from the grille. I ran my palm across the hood, feeling that smooth-metal sweetness, and imagined rumbling along the American highways. I would be wearing Ray-Bans, and listening to Springsteen. I’d have my windows rolled down and my sleeves rolled up. My forearms would be tanned, my hair tousled by the wind. I’d have a cigarette tucked behind one ear.

I climbed up into the driver’s seat to see how it felt. I sat gripping the wheel for about thirty seconds. Then I got out and walked back to the office. The Asian guy was talking on his phone. As soon as he saw me, he hung up and stuffed the phone in his pocket.

‘Is there a problem?’ he asked.

I explained that the Expedition was too big, and too fancy. He looked at me in a way that would become familiar in the following weeks: with a certain wariness, as if I were a dog that seemed friendly but might snap given provocation.

‘I’m driving it a long way,’ I said, ‘and through some fairly shitty areas.’

‘I see.’

‘I need something that’s good on gas, and won’t get ripped off.’ I pointed out the window. ‘That thing wouldn’t last two minutes where I’m going.’

I said it theatrically, and it worked. He took the key back from me and gave me new forms to fill out. I signed my name in all the same places and ticked all the same boxes.

‘Where *are* you going?’ he asked.

‘To the States,’ I said. ‘I need to get away. It’s pretty hard to explain.’

‘Right.’

He took the form from me, pinching it carefully, as if it was a piece of evidence.

‘Have a good trip,’ he told me.

The new car was a Dodge Neon, cheap and sleek, with pizza-cutter wheels and a lame little spoiler on the trunk. It was the kind of sedan my stepmom would drive. Actually, it was the kind of sedan my stepmom *had* driven. A few years back, she’d owned an earlier version of this same model. That car had been green. This one was maroon red. There were glittering flecks and sparkles ingrained in the paint job. It had been freshly waxed, and I could see a distorted version of myself reflected in the panelling.

I walked around the car, checking it out. I kicked the tyres a couple of times, just to feel as if I was giving it a proper going-over. I also popped the hood and examined the engine – a gleaming tangle of hoses and wiring and machinery. It looked good to me. The clerk was watching all this through the glass wall of his office. I gave him the thumbs-up, but he didn’t respond.

I figured I’d better get going.

I put my backpack in the trunk and got in the driver’s seat. It was an automatic, with only seven thousand kilometres on the clock. The interior still had that new-car smell of upholstery, plastic and glass cleaner. I eased the key into the ignition, feeling that satisfying click, and started the engine. It shivered to life. I bent forward to kiss the wheel.

‘This is it,’ I said, to my car and myself. ‘The start of our epic journey.’

I put her in gear and backed out. The tyres squeaked on the concrete as we circled the parkade. I was so excited that I kept missing the exit, but eventually I found it. Then my car and I emerged from underground into a world full of heat and light and noise and fury.

The terminals at Vancouver International are laid out in a horseshoe formation, with the parkade in the centre. The parkade is encircled by a one-way traffic system that forms

a kind of crescent. I slid on to the crescent and accelerated around it, leaning into the curves. Other vehicles were pulling in and out, making drop-offs or pick-ups. The windows of the Arrivals lounge flicker-flared in the sunlight. I left all that behind, and at the airport exit the road flung me out like a stone from a sling, unleashing me on to Highway 99.