

Postcards past

Picture the memories

- This is what “searching your inbox” used to mean: pulling a battered cardboard box off a top shelf, dumping its contents on the floor, then shuffling through a stack of yellowed papers seeking a certain handwriting style.

I’m hunting for the pointy A’s and sloping T’s of an old friend from high school who’s turning 40 tomorrow; another friend has planned a surprise party in Vancouver and had asked everyone to show up with photos and stories. I’m hoping I can do even better.

I don’t know what prescience led me to keep boxes of old letters and cards: some early foreboding that memories wouldn’t stick with me as long as many of the people in them. Most of all I’m pleased I’ve saved postcards, faded and soft from their time in storage and their journey from wherever it was they started before making their way to me.

A globetrotting father sent my brother and me countless postcards from the exotic places his work took him when we were children. My mother did the reverse when I headed east, then south, for school—sending me regular postcards from my hometown. “I thought you might be needing a glimpse of the mountains. I bet you’re missing Lions Gate Bridge.”

These days I send postcards to my nieces from all the far-flung places I’m lucky to visit with my own job. I hope they are keeping them in a box under the bed and that they pull them out from time to time, scrutinize the corny photos and stamps, feel the weight of a distance travelled in words. For all the ways that email, Skype, and Facebook are shrinking our big wide world, I’m hoping an old-school postcard might, occasionally, crack it wide open again with wonder. Make them want to get out there and explore it themselves. “Look at the crazy hats people wear here! The cheese pictured on the reverse is roughly half of what I ate for dinner last night.”

Sometime in my lifetime, postcards will go the way of

telegrams and Kodak film. I figure I’ve only got a narrow window in which to buy the kookiest cliché images and write a few choice comments on the back. These days, my hands are cramped and sore after writing six short cards; I’ve lost my stamina for handwriting.

Tonight, I’m lost in memories in this old box of dispatches, reacquainting myself with forgotten friends and kind of meeting, anew, the person they were writing to. Finally, I find it, a postcard from Alison, sent from the South of France where she was working as an *au pair*. In a fine and spiky script that wound up and around the postage, she’s recounted a hilarious brush with a parade of men dressed as Fred Flintstone pelting the crowd with small balls of chèvre during the annual festival in her little town.

I can’t make it to Al’s surprise party, and—a symptom of the times—I’ve left it too late to write her a personal letter to send via old-fashioned post. Instead, I prop my iPad on my desk and film myself, showing her old photos of some of our past shenanigans, and reading aloud to her the postcard she sent me more than two decades ago. I’ll post it on a private channel on YouTube and text her the link. **OL**