

# Postcards: A Love Story

We keep in touch via texts and  
DMs and emails. But as one writer found,  
a good old-fashioned postcard can help  
us connect so much more deeply.

BY JEFF GORDINIER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNA WILLIAMS  
LETTERING BY BABETH LAFON

**AS SOON AS LAUREN AND I REALIZED** that our long-simmering crushes on each other could lead to something serious, I faced a dilemma.

She was moving to Los Angeles a week later. I lived north of New York City, and I needed to stay put for a few years in order to be present for my two school-age children, who lived with their mother most of the time. How were Lauren and I going to make this last?

I knew enough about my own history and the predictable trajectories of long-distance relationships to realize that a romance dependent on and nurtured by technology—texts, emails, selfies, obligatory FaceTime sessions with unfortunate close-ups of my neck—would probably peter out in spasms of frustration. I needed another approach.



The objective was to let her know she was on my mind, and to do so in a gentle, low-impact way that would subvert the brain-melting frenzy of 21st-century electronic communication.

That's when I started sending Lauren postcards. Hundreds of postcards, enough to fill a couple of shoeboxes, over the course of a year. (I had been a passionate postcard aficionado in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a way of staying in touch with friends after college, but I'd let the practice lapse.) At her apartment in the Hollywood Hills, Lauren would sometimes receive four or five postcards in a single day. I concede, in retrospect, that this compulsive practice of mine ran the risk of bringing the relationship to a premature end, because it made me look a little overbearing. But postcards, as I have come to learn, have a way of disarming people. Postcards are intrinsically delightful. And they just might be the secret to deepening our connections with the people we care about.

**LAUREN CAME TO RELISH** the randomness of these deliveries—well, after a period of mild concern. “At first, I thought you were coming on strong with the postcards,” she says now. “But I was charmed and had them all on display on my bookshelf. I tried to reciprocate but could not keep up. I started finding myself disappointed when there was a pause, as I became so accustomed to coming home to postcards in the mail.”

Lauren never knew what she was going to get next. On any given evening, after coming back from the office, she might find a postcard bearing a portrait of Patti Smith, another graced with the cover of a vintage Italian cookbook, another with a Cézanne still life of apples, another with an image from *Vogue* from the Roaring Twenties. My work as a food writer can take me all over the world, so on my trips—to Oaxaca and Copenhagen and Seoul, to Houston and Seattle and Memphis—I hoarded local souvenir cards by the dozen. I created an international stockpile of serendipity so that every card Lauren received came as a surprise.

And what did I actually say on the cards? On plenty of them, of course, I would contort myself into fresh ways of telling Lauren that I loved her and missed her. But the objective was not to bombard my girlfriend with effusive declarations; even “I love you” can get a little monotonous if you scribble it on five postcards a day. The objective was just to stay in touch, to keep that element of surprise alive, to let her know she was on my mind, and to do so in a gentle, low-impact way that would subvert the brain-melting frenzy of 21st-century electronic communication instead of contributing to it. So sometimes the postcards carried arbitrary or quotidian observations, two lines of a poem, a song lyric, a snippet from an essay I had just read, a comic sketch of a rude passenger on a plane, gossip, mantras, complaints, recipes, childhood memories, descriptions of weather.

Through falling in love with Lauren, it turned out that I fell back in love with postcards too, and I learned that handwritten words on printed paper have a way of strengthening the bonds that social media can feel engineered to erode. I expanded my reach. I started sending out-of-the-blue postcards to my children, Margot and Toby, who are now 16 and 13, and to Ian and Jason and Rosie and Klancy and Pete and other friends. I became a Johnny Appleseed of postal caprice. Instead of seeds, my traveling sack contained stacks of fresh cards: colorful Marimekko designs, paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat, the Sibley Backyard Birding postcards, the Rad American Women A-Z set, depictions of flowers and fruit from the archives of the New York Botanical Garden, psychedelic posters from the Grateful Dead. Sometimes I would bang out a quick riff referring to the art on the front. But usually I wouldn't. The point wasn't to say anything profound. The point was to express, in a form so compressed that it flirted



PROP STYLING BY PAMELA DUNCAN SILVER

with haiku, the very core of connectivity: I am thinking of you. I am here, and you are there, but I want to tell you something that just crossed my mind.

People in my life started thanking me. They said they loved receiving the cards through the mail. If an email feels like a burden, a postcard ought to feel like the opposite of a chore—even an antidote. Because of its brevity, a postcard demands very little of its reader, and because the timing of its delivery to the recipient depends on the vicissitudes of the postal service, the whims of weather, and the fickle hand of fate, you can never be 100 percent sure when or even if the

card will arrive. Send enough postcards and you stop worrying about it. (I sent one card from Australia that didn't reach Toby and Margot for a month or so. I took perverse comfort in that: Delayed gratification turns out to be sweeter, and I liked the idea that a secret clone of myself appeared to have camped out for weeks on Bondi Beach in Australia.)

Doing this on a daily basis had unexpected benefits. The missives made me feel closer to loved ones, yes, but the centering quality of sitting down and shutting off the phone and scrawling a few lines of free-associative self-analysis started to bolster my own

## WHAT TO WRITE

Facing a blank page can be daunting. What do you say when your friend is going through a breakup?

When you've fallen out of touch? After losing her father to colon cancer, Ali O'Grady was inspired to launch the stationery company Thoughtful Human ([thoughtfulhuman.co](http://thoughtfulhuman.co)) to encourage others to support loved ones through difficult times.

In addition to nonstandard birthday and holiday greetings, the collection offers cards on topics like depression and estrangement. O'Grady shares five tips for writing meaningful notes anytime.

### RANDOM IS GOOD.

It's lovely to get a card on your birthday or to celebrate good news, but it's that much more special to receive an out-of-the-blue act of kindness. Send loved ones notes when things aren't going well—or even when there's not much going on at all. "Your life is the occasion," says O'Grady.

### SHARE A HAPPY MEMORY.

A birthday card or other happy message can be bulked up with recollections of fun moments you've had with the recipient. The same goes when you're writing sympathy or condolence cards. Many people who are grieving will be grateful to read the details you remember from a meaningful time you shared with their loved one.

**OFFER AN EAR.** Written words are an ideal way to remind someone you're ready and waiting to help. They may screen a call

or ignore a text that says, "Call if you need me!" but seeing those words on paper—repeatedly—might make them more inclined to respond.

### ADD LYRICS, A QUOTE, OR A FUN FACT.

Unexpected extra content is bound to make your recipient laugh, smile, or learn something new. O'Grady, the self-described "world's worst artist," adds drawings to her messages. "Sometimes the most ridiculous drawing can end up being the most special keepsake," she says.

### THINK OF A EULOGY.

If you're struggling to express how you feel about the person you're writing to, consider what you might say if you lost them. It may be morbid, but it can help you gain perspective and find the right words.

—Alli Hoff Kosik

emotional equilibrium too. Being on the road can get lonely, and mindlessly scrolling through your phone has a way of amplifying the feeling, but these experiments in writing with a pen seemed to settle my anxieties like shorthand (or longhand) therapy.

Maybe you've heard of the Slow Food movement, which has in part inspired people to celebrate the patience required to grow, harvest, cook, and eat food the way nature intended. Well, postcards are like Slow Texts. You express a thought to someone you care about, and that thought doesn't register on the other side for days, but the fact that you have forsaken the immediacy and disposability of the DM allows you to leave a more lasting imprint. In this era of broadcasting your feelings to the world via Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, there is something satisfying about the privacy of a postcard. It's from me to you—no one else—and even when it feels tossed off, it depends on a series of steps (writing, addressing, stamping) that layer the gesture with extra meaning.

As with Slow Food, though, you can't enjoy the good stuff without putting in extra work. Sending postcards—or making a sustained practice of sending postcards—



POSTCARDS IN TRAY: GETTY IMAGES (4)

requires preparation, supplies, and an unexpected degree of ingenuity. First off, you need pens. (I love the flow you get from an ultra-fine-point Sharpie.) It helps to maintain a stash of backup implements, just as it helps to tote around a new sheet of 35-cent postcard stamps. If you geek out as utterly as I do, you'll affix the stamps to the cards ahead of time so they're always ready for an impulsive mail drop. Speaking of which, should you find yourself far away from a familiar neighborhood, you'll have to track down a mailbox. Finding one in this digital era can be a more bewildering quest than you might imagine. (Pittsburgh seems to have plenty. Houston left me drenched in sweat as I walked for blocks and blocks in the summer heat hunting for a slot to slide a few notes into.)

Is the effort worth it? Put it this way: Right now I am writing this essay in my daughter Margot's room, and I see the evidence taped to her walls. There's the Bob Marley postcard I once sent her, and the David Byrne one. Our texted exchanges have vanished forever, but these cards remain. I need no further acknowledgment than that. Writing and sending postcards to the people I love has taught me that there is much to be gained from the practice of deliberateness.

Yes, you can text with anyone at any moment. But set aside a modest block of time—on a plane when the Wi-Fi doesn't work, at a table while you wait for a less-than-punctual dining companion—and you might discover, as I have, that there is a great deal to gain from the casual but concentrated enterprise of jotting down three or four sentences by hand.

How can I be sure? Well, Lauren lives with me now. We're married and we have baby twins, Jasper and Wesley. I proposed to her at Via Carota, our favorite restaurant in New York City, by sliding a postcard across the wooden table. One side of the card had an Art Deco illustration of the Manhattan skyline. On the other side I asked her to marry me. Postcards may be small and flimsy, but don't underestimate their power. She said yes.

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## NEW USES FOR OLD POSTCARDS

Got a stack of postcards and can't bring yourself to recycle them?

Try one of these four ideas for artfully repurposing, enjoying, and displaying them at home.

### CRAFT A ONE-OF-A-KIND TRAY.

Select a few postcards to arrange and secure on a plastic tray with a little glue or tape. Follow the directions for mixing epoxy (such as Famowood Glaze Coat, \$23 per quart; [tryglaze.com](http://tryglaze.com) for stores), and then pour it over your postcards until the base of the tray is completely coated and smooth. Let the epoxy dry according to instructions until it completely hardens.

### MAKE A FANCY FRIDGE MAGNET.

Attach your favorite postcard to a self-adhesive magnet (try Craftopia's four-by-six-inch sheets, \$10 for 12; [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)), trim as needed, and decorate your refrigerator.

### CREATE A THOUGHTFUL DISPLAY.

Showcase a postcard in an acrylic frame, such as Artifact Uprising's 12-by-14 inch floating frame (\$79; [artifactuprising.com](http://artifactuprising.com)).



### MAKE A TRAVEL BOOK.

On your next trip, send yourself postcards with notes about what you enjoyed each day or at each place. Back home, bind the cards into a mini travel journal with washi tape. Lay two postcards side by side. Flip the left-hand card over so the words are showing, and leave the right-hand postcard image side up. Line the cards up like an open book and tape the middle edges together. Fold the right card on top of the left, add another postcard to the right, and tape. Once you've taped all your cards together on the inside, bind the outside edge with washi tape. (You may need to layer your tape, depending on its thickness.)  
—Mary Honkus