

POSTCARDS
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First Place, Fiction

THIS WEEK IT WAS EGYPT. Mrs. Lyle didn't know much about Egypt, but the glossy image of creamy sand dunes and yellow pyramids on the postcard made her think it might be nice to visit.

She hung her sun-hat on the rack by the door, before heading into the kitchen where she made a cup of tea, and placed it on a tray next to two Anzac biscuits. She carried the tray into the sitting room and settled into her favorite chair and began to read the message on the back of the postcard:

All the bounty of the East is here—spices, perfumes, brass, gold, my eyes are full of treasure. We have taken rooms above the bazaar, below us a stall sells pancakes drenched in syrup and every morning I am woken by a toffee scented breeze. Parker says that I shall taste like honeyed sweets by the end of the week and teasingly asks me to offer him a bite. We have hired a guide and some camels for this afternoon. We are going to see the pyramids.

*Yours with love,
Harriet*

Mrs. Lyle took a bite of her Anzac and wondered what Egyptian sweets would taste like. The first postcard had appeared three weeks ago, every week since there had been another one, Mauritius, Paris, Africa, all from Harriet. Mrs. Lyle didn't know any Harriets. She was quite sure of that. She wondered who Harriet was.

She dusted the crumbs off her blouse, then got up and took the tea tray back into the kitchen; the postcard carefully tucked into the pocket of her grey wool cardigan.

That week, she got together with Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Murphy to help with the church jumble sale. They had tea and biscuits, and talked about their families, swapped recipes, and spent a lot of time extolling the virtues of their grand children.

While they chatted, they wrote prices onto little squares of cardboard and tied them to teddy bears, lamps, and teapots.

"Oh, look at this," said Mrs. Allen as she pulled a small red-lacquered Buddha out of the cardboard box by her feet. She held it up for the other ladies to see. Its chubby potbelly and laughing face reminded Mrs. Lyle of Father Christmas.

"Ugly little brute isn't he?" said Mrs. Murphy, "I can't abide these primitive idols. Shameless."

"I wonder, how much do you think?" said Mrs. Allen.

Mrs. Lyle reached over and plucked it out of Mrs. Allen's hand.

"I shouldn't think anyone would want it," she said looking at Mrs. Murphy, "I'll put it away for now."

That evening she placed it on the mantle, between the Franklin Mint pink bisque pig, and the photograph of her late husband Gerald. On Tuesday the postcard came.

We have arrived just in time for the Rio Carnival! We got off the plane this morning and I feel dead on my feet, but I can't possibly miss the all-night samba dancing parade. The streets are draped in glass beads and tiny lights, the footpaths packed with people in gaudy colored costumes. It is still early but already there is too much to look at. Even the people seem like pantomime come to life, mouths full of pearls and eyes like fireflies.

*Yours with love,
Harriet*

Mrs.. Lyle put the postcard into an old tin cigar case, along with all the others. She wondered what it was like to be Harriet.

The following week was uneventful. On Thursday she bought a bag of oranges at a dollar seventy-six a kilo, some panty hose, and box of Turkish delights. The Ginger Tom came around again early Monday morning, so she gave it a saucer of milk and the scraps from last night's chops.

On Tuesday, the postman found her in the garden, weeding the chickweed out from around the chrysanthemums.

"Afternoon," he said.

"Hello," she replied, squinting up from under her sun-hat.

"Got another postcard for you," he waited politely for her to remove her gloves before handing her the mail.

"Oh, thank you."

Standing in the sun with her gardening gloves peeping out of her apron pocket, Mrs.. Lyle read the message.

As I write this, I am sitting on Rome's famous Spanish Steps at the top of Via Condotti. The crowds are thick today. It is easy to tell the tourists from the locals, they in their knee length shorts and too big T-shirts, against the dark glasses, Prada, and Max Mara of Italian high style. I feel like an old rag doll amongst these porcelain ladies. Parker has found the place very agreeable and has decided to stay on, which means that I shall be on my own again.

*Yours with love,
Harriet*

Mrs.. Lyle tidied up and went inside. Her son, Garner, came around for dinner later in the week, and they ate ravioli in napoletana sauce.

The jumble sale was a great success, raising \$429 to help pay for the new Remembrance Grove, and all the ladies congratulated themselves on a job well done. On Wednesday, while grocery shopping, Mrs.. Lyle ran into Mrs.. Murphy in the frozen food section.

“My goodness, what an earth are you wearing, Betty?”

Mrs.. Lyle tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with trembling fingers as she avoided Mrs.. Murphy’s gaze. Peas were on special, \$2.49 a bag.

“It’s a, um, Navaho scarf.”

“Whatever you want to call it dear it’s positively dire. What possessed you?”

“Oh, well, you know. Who has the time these days? Rush, rush, rush, things are so, um, unplanned.”

“Yes. Well, love, do try to make an effort,” Mrs.. Murphy leaned towards Mrs.. Lyle and cupped a hand to her mouth, “you are representing the Church. One should endeavor to look one’s best.”

“Of course, Edith.”

Another week rolled by, the postman came and went, and Mrs.. Lyle was surprised to get no postcard. She checked the letterbox twice; reaching right to back, but all she found was an empty snail shell that crackled apart in her fingers, like dried leaves. She checked her chrysanthemums for any sign of a foreign destination, but could find no Mount Fuji or Big Ben among the stems.

“”Scuse me, Miss Lady.”

Mrs.. Lyle turned to find Mary holding out a gardening glove.

“You dropped it,” she said.

“Thank you, Mary.”

Mrs.. Lyle nodded towards the house next door as she put the glove into her pocket, “How are your parents?”

“Good. We have chickens.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, there’s nothing like fresh eggs on a Sunday morning.”

Mary nodded.

“Listen, have you seen any of my mail about the place?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, well let me know if you do,” said Mrs.. Lyle frowning at her letterbox.

“Sure.”

Mrs.. Lyle watched as Mary ran into her own yard and began making patterns in the gravel driveway with the toe of her shoe.

During the rest of week, she re-potted the geraniums, weeded the flower bed and pruned the honeysuckle. She went to the library and returned her books—*The Pickwick Papers* and *Yates Giant Book of Gardening*—and borrowed some new ones—*A Passage to India* and *A Taste of France: Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

On Saturday, her grandson came over. They cut animal shapes out of cardboard and painted them in bright colors. On the inside of an old shoebox they painted a jungle scene. They used green tissue paper for the trees and blue cellophane for the watering hole.

“I’m going to be an explorer,” said Simon, “like Marco Polo.”

She ruffled his hair as he roared, his pudgy hands making the orange lion dance across the jungle floor.

Another week went by and Mrs.. Lyle still received no postcard.

On Wednesday the ladies had a Devonshire tea. They compared their aches and pains, boasted about their children and complimented Mrs. Murphy on her delicious scones. Mrs.. Murphy claimed her scones were so good they once cured Harry Warburton’s shingles. Mrs.. Lyle watched the clock and felt herself being stretched thinner by every passing second.

The rest of the week she paced in distraction. She paced to the shops for milk, she paced to and from church, and she paced around the letterbox for most of Tuesday. That night she sat in her favorite chair clutching the postcards, a skinny finger tracing the outline of pyramids, date palms and stone monasteries.

On Friday afternoon Mrs.. Lyle didn’t arrive at the Church meeting as expected; the missing cupcakes caused a blue-haired riot. She didn’t attend the Sunday Mass. There was no one to empty the charity box on Monday, and there was no one home to answer the door when Mrs.. Murphy turned up planning to get to the bottom of all the absences.

Mrs.. Murphy peered through the windows but saw nothing out of the ordinary. She opened the side gate and walked into the back yard but nothing was amiss. She pounded firmly on the back door, a brusque “Hello?” dulling the air. Nothing. She’d been calling all week. She wondered where Betty was.

On Wednesday, amongst the bills and fliers, Mrs.. Murphy found a postcard. On the front was a picture of the Taj Mahal, bathed in the purple-red glow of sunset.

The air is thick with spice and musk. Today I bought a sticky dessert that was bright orange and shaped like a row of knots. My tongue is nearly aching from the sweetness of it. Little children with dark eyes eat them as they run up and down the busy streets, their mouths sticky and orange. They dart between mystic men with powder on their brows and women dressed in rainbows.

*Yours with love,
Harriet*

Mrs.. Murphy frowned. She didn't know any Harriets. She was quite sure of that.

