Arts & Humanities

Thinking of You: A Short Story

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1. My father told me to send a postcard. I thought postcards were too cavalier, too jokey. But he said it might help. My father says many buoyant things that I’d like to believe. He says, “Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself” and “Live in the moment.” He is a high school basketball coach who believes in manufactured motivation. I believe in the statistics I found on Wikipedia. I know that almost 70 percent of people own homes. I know that 62 percent of residential burglars commit

their crimes during the day. Including you. I know that over 65 percent of convicted felons will be arrested again within three years of their release.

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2. I’m in Antigua now. I realized that I forgot to mention where I was. You probably noticed the beach on the postcard and you know that’s not where I live. I’ve gone splotchy with freckles as if I’d been caught in a shower of deck stain. I’m usually pale. Perhaps you remember that from the pictures on my wall. My favorite is the picture on my desk of my father, brother, and me at Itasca State Park when I was seven. We’re standing in the headwaters of the Mississippi holding hands. It was the last picture my mother took before she left. That was the first time I remember coming home and trying to figure out what was missing.

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3. The great thing about postcards is that you don’t have to write back. No one replies to postcards. I suppose you could try to write to my apartment — I imagine you know the address — but I bet you would get in trouble. The yacht on this card is where I had dinner last night. I wore the necklace you took off the hook on my vanity mirror. It took months to get that back, since it was evidence. The detective who arrested you told me I was lucky. He said that because you confessed, I’d never have to see you if I didn’t want to. I wish now I’d gone and seen you at the sentencing. I feel like we’re uneven.

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4. I’ve been thinking of you. I’ve decided I know what you look like. I know your name: William Johnson. It’s a bland name — the name of a milquetoast man, with milquetoast parents. No one had the verve to call you Beauregard. Still, I know you’re tall. You took the silver down from the kitchen cabinet without moving the footstool. If you’re tall, you’re probably thin and maybe balding. You’ve got a big, soft nose and small eyes that are close together. They make you look fishy, which is likely how you got off on the wrong foot to begin with. And your mouth is thick and pale, barely any color in your lips at all. Your teeth are straight, though, and when you wear a suit and smile just right people might think you’re on the city council.

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5. I called my dad today. He wanted to know if I’d written you. I said I hadn’t. I didn’t want to tell him I’d written you and still don’t feel better, but maybe I have improved. I can’t remember the complete list of everything you stole anymore, just the highlights. I used to recite it to people, a party trick. That was when I used being

robbed as a conversation piece and I would laugh and say how strange it was, not like on TV at all. Then I'd laugh some more. Some people would get uncomfortable and glance around the room — I liked them best.

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6. I don't know what to say to you, but that's partially because I never know what to write on postcards. I'm writing you more often than anyone else, but writing you reminds me of writing to Santa Claus, or maybe sending a message in a bottle. It's empty to send mail with no expectation of a return. And what would you say? "It was good to hear from you. Let's keep in touch." Dad said the point is writing them, not sending them, but I bought a dozen postcard stamps. And I pick nice cards, as if they matter. The megaliths on this card were hard to get to, so I didn't go. I just bought the card and slept in.

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7. I'm on a cruise ship now, so I'll mail this when we get into port. I'm going scuba diving. You knocked my calendar with the coral reefs off the wall above my desk. I had a dentist appointment the next day that I missed. A few days later I got a voice mail reminding me to reschedule. Their office has the same automated voice system my high school used to call parents and tell them who'd missed class. When I skipped, I would sit next to the phone, waiting, and grab it before my dad could. I'd pretend it was Charlene. That's the closest thing to crime I've done.

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8. I told Charlene I was writing you. She said I was crazy. She said Dad was even crazier for suggesting it — that he was insensitive and didn't understand the depth of my violation. Charlene has a lot of ideas. She thinks you will turn into a stalker, but you're not the stalker type. You didn't steal my underwear. Nothing you took was personal: the TV, the silver, Bose speakers I never used, jewelry. I was relieved you'd taken so little — how well you'd focused on expensive items. You're good at what you do, the assessment part anyway. You wouldn't fall for the street vendors here, their paste baubles and "antique" carved figurines. But you're not good at reading people, or you wouldn't have tried to sell my laptop to an undercover cop.

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9. I wonder if you're reading these. Maybe you read them after dinner while you have a smoke. I heard they're thinking about banning cigarettes in state prisons. That seems a little Draconian. I had a boyfriend in college who smoked cloves. He smelled like Christmas, sweet and sleepy. I haven't got a boyfriend at the moment

— I've been too busy with work and this whole thing. It would be mean if I made a prison-boyfriend joke. I wrote a paper in college about prison culture, the way prisoners try to re-create normal life. It reminded me of children playing house. I was an urban studies major, but now I'm a notary. I'm not sure how that happened.

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10. You're probably getting a kick out of my cards, I realize. I guess it is pathetic that I'm writing to you, that I need to address you, but Scandinavians think that prisoners who accept the significance of their crimes are less likely to repeat offend. I read it in the New York Times. So I'm telling you, it was significant. It changed my life. I cried for days. I hate a person I've never seen. I don't feel safe in my own home. I don't feel safe in my cabin on this ship. I can't stop picturing you walking through my living room ransacking my apartment for valuables, like some pirate poltergeist. Go ahead and show this to your cellmate, laugh it up. Show him just what you earned.

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11. I'm sorry. That last postcard wasn't productive. I've only got two days left of my cruise and then I have to go back. My boss has been patient so far, but I don't think she understands why I took such a long vacation. I bet you can guess. I took it because I wanted to be in the opposite place as you. Here on the ship, which is filled with stupid cruise things, like rock-climbing walls and skull-sized margaritas, I can lie on the upper deck and stare at the sky and only see sky. Nothing between me and the ozone. You have lots of things between you and the ozone: concrete, guards, fences, three to five years. That's why this postcard has a sunset on it. You can put it up on your wall, if you want.

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12. I'm mailing this from the airport, which has crappy air-conditioning. There are only white people here, which is a change from the rest of the island. They are all puffy and pink and keep fanning themselves as their clothing wilts. I probably look the same, but I'm not slouching. My mother taught me to have good posture. I have an aunt who was a stewardess back when they were still called stewardesses and she says that airplane food is actually on par with what they serve in prisons. I'll think of you while I eat my half-hot half-frozen macaroni and the tiny packaged cookie. This is my last postcard. When I get home, my father will have moved everything. Charlene is lending him her pickup. I will be in a place you've never been.



Guide to school abbreviations