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Cartes Postales

On her first day in Paris, Chloe writes a postcard to her dead husband. *I'm sitting in a café near Sacré Coeur and smoking. Remember how you hated it when I'd smoke? You were always so afraid I'd get addicted again, die some painful, lung cancer-filled death. But ha! Joke's on you. You're the one who died. Or, I guess, joke's on me. Wish you were here, Moi.* She imagines Ethan reading it and shaking his head, thinking, "My Chloe, and her dark humor." But when she moves her hand to the address section of the card, she starts to cry. Where should I send it, she wonders.

She goes back to her hotel and drifts in and out of sleep to the sounds of a soccer match on television. What Ethan would be watching.

The next day is the first meeting of her cooking class, the very reason she's come alone to this most romantic of cities. A month after Ethan's accident, her mother sat her down in Chloe's tiny kitchen and had her write a list of the things she'd like to do. She said she was worried because Chloe was staring at the television night after night. Sitting with the blank paper in front of her, Chloe wrote whatever popped into her head, including, on a whim, baking éclairs in Paris. Ethan had loved the chocolate covered pastries, and she had always meant to learn how to make them for him.

The next thing she knew, she was on a plane to France, a gift certificate for a pastry class tucked in her bag.

She gets to the teacher's home early and chain smokes three cigarettes on the curb of Gregoire, the tiny street of the cooking school. Uneven cobblestones line the street. Chloe imagines a horse-drawn buggy coming towards her in place of the horse-powered *voiture* that passes by. She feels nauseated by the time two other students arrive, a couple maybe five years younger than Chloe. At their appearance, a woman swings open the door. "Bienvenue!" she says. "I am Marguerite." Another pair arrives, a silver-haired couple in their sixties. "We are all here," Marguerite says. "Bien." She twirls and ushers them into the house.

They walk through a modern, open space and up a tightly winding staircase. The third floor probably had bedrooms on it before it was renovated to contain a massive kitchen. An island with four stovetops, four ovens, and four sinks takes up most of the room. "Before we begin, why don't we get to know each other, eh?" Marguerite pours red wine and hands a glass to each of them. "Tell us, what is your name, and why do you want to learn to make pastries?"

"We're on our honeymoon," Jane, one half of the young couple, giggles. "We wanted to do something—"

"Different," her husband, Jack, finishes for her.

Chloe rolls her eyes and drains her wine glass.

"Et vous?" Marguerite asks the older couple.

Silvia explains that she and Richard have been to Paris a few times, and they thought a cooking class would be a fun experience.

Marguerite looks to Chloe, who looks down. "Well, my husband. He loves pastries. Whenever I try to make them for him, something goes wrong." She doesn't mean to talk in the present tense.

"And where is he?" Marguerite asks.

Chloe looks up, startled. "At the Louvre." The lie makes her feel like Ethan is really there, a few kilometers, a few Metro stops away. And it relieves her not to have to be the poor widow. She never handled pity well, and so, as soon as she woke from the fog that descended right after Ethan's death, she had lied about how well she was doing. She told her mom and anyone else who asked that she was fine, really.

Marguerite says, "We will make some extras so that you can bring them home to him."

Chloe smiles, picturing Ethan waiting in the hotel room for her and her éclairs.Marguerite explains that on day one, they'll learn to make pastry dough. She demonstrates how to shell vanilla from its bean, how to separate egg whites from yolks, what she means by "stir until there are no lumps, but not so long that the flour and milk and eggs are gooey." All the time, Chloe thinks of Ethan. She stirs the ingredients together with a wooden spoon, smelling mostly vanilla, and wonders which exhibit at the Louvre he might be in at that very moment. Probably the Mona Lisa. He loves watching tourists parade past famous paintings, taking photos. She thinks about what he is wearing: black pants and a yellow button-down shirt. He is overdressed in the crowds of jeaned and sneakered tour groups.

As the class stirs and measures and mixes, Chloe learns that Silvia and Richard have been married 35 years. Chloe shakes her head, amazed. She wonders what she and Ethan will be like when they've been married that long—30 years to go. Silvia gets paired with Chloe to get a batch of the mixture into a pastry bag so they can squeeze out éclair shapes onto the baking sheet. With Silvia so close that she can smell her floral perfume, Chloe wants to ask her what it is like to be married for so long. She feels the same nagging curiosity she does around new mothers—women who can watch close up as a person comes into being, which Chloe can only view through the filters of camera lenses and anecdotes. But she stops herself, knowing that she can't learn what it's like to be a mother or to love someone for thirty years from hearing about someone else's experiences.

An automated voice announces that Chloe is at the Louvre Metro stop. She looks up to see if Ethan might be boarding. A man about his size runs toward the train. From her seat in the middle of the car, Chloe wills someone to hold the doors open for him. Her heart quickens as the train bells ring to signal its departure. She smiles when he squeezes in just before the doors clap shut. The man walks down the aisle towards her. Tears come to her eyes before the smile fades from her lips. She sees his face—this man's brown eyes are set too close together, nothing like Ethan's perfectly spaced green ones. They snap her out of the dream she has been living in since the pastry class began. She will never see those eyes running toward her again.

After a nap, she sits in bed thinking of the post cards Ethan had sent her when she went to London on a study abroad trip shortly after they met. She has them all in a wine crate that serves as her out-of-order scrap book. She can see each, four in all, for the four weeks they spent apart. On that first card, after they had known each other only eight weeks, he had written, *I love you. I couldn't say it before you left. But I can write it. I love you.* The card had a photo of a fish in a fishbowl. She wondered at the meaning. Was it some reference to her fish not needing a bicycle? To fish not having long-term memories? When she finally asked him, Ethan said, "I just liked the picture." He never was one for games.

Day two in cooking class, they make éclair filling. More milk and eggs, less flour, more stirring.

Chloe is paired with Silvia again, and she watches as the older woman works. Silvia asks her about her and Ethan, and Chloe gives their vitals: five years married, dated for four before that. At the sound of her voice describing Ethan, he comes to life again. He is just her husband, a man who leaves his underwear on the floor of the bathroom, who never puts his coffee mug into the sink, who loves the smell of her hair when she hasn't washed it in a day. Not the man who made her a too-young widow.

"That's just like us," the younger woman, Jane, interrupts. "We dated for four years, too." Her voice rises at the end of each sentence, and she bounces on the balls of her feet as she talks.

Chloe wonders, was I ever like her? So excited and doe-eyed? Then she remembers a photo from their wedding, one that Ethan loves. It's of her, alone, staring at Ethan, who is outside the frame. Her smile is small, but real, her face open, and her eyes, she realizes now, large and innocent. Doe-like.

Chloe thinks of the Neruda poem Ethan read to her as part of his vows on their wedding day: "I crave your mouth, your voice, your hair," he said. The rest of the poem drifts through her head as she and Jane and Silvia talk about weddings and love. Even on the Metro, later, the musical lines drown out the clacking of the train. When she gets to her empty room, she realizes that, unlike the speaker of the poem, no matter how she hunts and hunts, she will never find the liquid measure of her lover's steps.

Sitting in the window of a café on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens, she watches women in scarves walk by and smells the croissants from the oven behind her. Ethan's second postcard bore a simple image: a black and white photograph of stones set up in the shape of a heart. On the back he wrote, *People say it all the time, I can't live without you. But really, I can't. Don't ever die.*

She fumbles in her bag for the blank postcards and a pen. She scrawls, *Prescient, were you? I will never die, at least according to you, you who went flying through the windshield. You who, if you could, would still manage to find a way to argue against the use of seatbelts. You, whose battered body I hardly recognized when I had to identify it.*

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On day three, the class learns to fill the pastries. First they pour the gooey filling into the pastry bags, then they massage the full bags so the filling sinks to the bottom. They squeeze, the pudding bursting out of the tip of the bag, and into the éclairs, which, Chloe notices, are awfully phallic in shape. Chloe can't help but giggle as she thinks of telling Ethan about that day's activity. The series of classes is more than halfway through, a thought that reminds Chloe of Ethan's third postcard: *I'm more than half way through your absence. I'm stronger than I thought I could be.* It pictured Underdog on the front, his cape flapping behind him as he flew through the sky. She opens the oven, feels the dry heat on her face and asks herself, When will I hit my half way mark? When I'm 60? Dear God.

That night, she stands at the bar of a restaurant the hotel concierge recommended. She had been buying cheese, bread, and wine at the market, eating in her room and drinking wine from the bottle until she slept. She convinced herself that it is okay to go to Paris and not eat out much, that it is more authentic that way. But it is Sunday, and the market is closed.

She sips a glass of Cabernet. A man walks up to her and in a New Yorker's English says, "Mind if I join you?"

How do Americans always spot each other? she wonders, and nods. He sits next to her, a man maybe ten years older than she, blond hair turning ashy, a tan face that reminds her of Robert Redford. Something about his flat nose, the way his eyes are set.

"You here on business?" he asks.

"No, vacation." She drinks her wine. "You?"

"Business."

She's usually good at small talk. Ethan used to tease her about it, because, she knew, he was jealous of how she could talk to even his most awkward colleagues at his company Christmas party. But at bars, she loses her loose tongue. Even in the years before they were married—especially then, actually—she hated talking to men in bars. Unlike in line at the post office or on an airplane, a conversation between her and a man when a drink sat between them was heavy with meaning Chloe didn't intend.

"You traveling alone?" he asks.

She wants to lie, but how can she, when she'll be seated at a table for one in a few minutes. "Yes. I'm here to learn to make pastries."

"Fascinating," he says and seems to mean it. She tells him about her class.

At the end of her second glass of wine, the maitre d' comes to seat her. "Mind if I join you?" the man asks again. "My table won't be ready for a half hour. And what fun is it to eat alone, anyway?"

He asks her about her life, and she tells him the basics. She grew up outside of Baltimore, went to Ohio State, is relatively happy at her job keeping the books for a nonprofit. She says that she got married five years ago to her college sweetheart, and then he… before she can finish the sentence, she starts to cry.

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He reaches across the table and pats her left hand, the one that's not wiping away tears with a white linen napkin. "I understand," he says. "I've been divorced seven years now. It's hard."

She thinks, you don't understand anything. At least your ex-wife has an address. A place you can mail postcards with pictures of the Eiffel Tower lit up in the colors of the French flag. But she nods, grateful to not have to explain.

Their dinners arrive. Roasted chicken for him, steak rolled into a pinwheel, with mushrooms between each layer of meat, for her. "Want to try a piece?" he asks.

She doesn't even like chicken, not enough to order it in a restaurant. But it looks delicious, tanned on the outside with flecks of green herbs. He passes a forkful to her. It's delicate and moist, in a way chicken usually isn't. "Now I know," she says, "why they say the French make the best chicken." He nods and closes his eyes at his next bite, and she giggles lightly, both at him and at herself.

They walk outside after dessert—crème brûlée and mousse au chocolat, set in the middle of the table so they can share, like they've been doing this for years—and he asks her back to his hotel.

She remembers Ethan for the first time since the bite of chicken. Her eyes well up, but it's dark, her date doesn't seem to notice. He's talking about how this is the perfect time to be in Paris. "They say spring is the best time. You know, 'April in Paris' and all that. But it rains. All the time."

She says, "I'd like to see that. Paris in the rain. Water rushing down the sides of these old buildings, into the *jardins*. I bet it'd still be romantic here." She wonders what Ethan would think of Paris in the rain. One of the many places he didn't get to see. It had been next on their list, and then… He kisses her. *I guess I invited this. Using the word romantic. In Paris. After a dinner he paid for.* But once she concentrates on his lips, the feeling of his tongue caressing hers, his hands rubbing her back, the back of her head, she realizes how nice it is. She can't remember the last time she felt this, this… tingly. Even when Ethan was alive. They hadn't kissed like this in years. A first kiss. She had forgotten the feeling. *Maybe, this is the benefit of being a widow at 35.* She can feel herself begin to cry, but his mouth on hers brings her back to the moment. This first kiss. In Paris, not in April, after a bottle of wine.

At the Metro station, he takes too long reading the ticket vending machine. She wants to push him aside, press the buttons she knows by heart at this point. But she doesn't, knowing it will spoil the mood.

In his room they undress each other with haste, a button pops off her shirt in the process. Their actions are clumsy as they try to maneuver zippers and sleeves without letting their lips separate. Once naked, they slow down and she is amazed at how satisfying touching and petting and licking can be. Another set of feelings she forgot existed.

She sleeps a thick, gooey sleep and wakes in the morning feeling like she might have been out for days and days. She dreamt about Ethan, about them being in Paris together. Her hand brushes Ethan's arm. She rubs it, feeling more course, thick hairs than she expects. When did he grow all this, she wonders. She doesn't care. It's just so nice to lie next to him.

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It's the last cooking class, and all they have to do is bake the pastries. After they put their trays in the oven, the class works together to create a light lunch—Silvia slices three different cheeses. Jane washes and dries salad greens. Their husbands cut up apples and pears. Marguerite wipes up the counters. With nothing to do, Chloe watches and drinks wine. She concentrates on the different flavors, and, if she tries hard enough, she notices a hint of blueberry. Ethan loves dissecting wine like that, but she just likes to drink it. After a moment of trying to notice the flavors so she can report back to him, she begins gulping away. By the time the food is ready, Chloe can't quite remember what glass she's on.

As they eat on a picnic table in Marguerite's backyard, they exchange information about what they've done in Paris aside from the class, tidbits about their lives back home. Jack asks Chloe, "How come you didn't drag your husband to this class like Jane did me?" He winks at Jane.

Chloe smiles and shrugs. "I didn't want him to be bored. And this way, he won't realize how easy it actually is to make the éclairs." The table laughs. She can hear Ethan's voice reminding her to bring him the biggest éclair, and she feels the soreness of her thighs, between her legs, where he had touched her the night before. She can't wait to get back to him.

Later, after more wine, the light lunch, and an éclair each, Marguerite walks them all to the door. She hands each person a pink rubber spatula tied with a ribbon that says *Marguerite's Pâtisserie*. Chloe is last in line and Marguerite presents her with a cardboard box. "Pour Ethan" She emphasizes the second syllable of his name.

"Ohmygod! I almost forgot. He will be so happy."

On the Metro, she loves the feel of the pastry box on her lap. A man sits next to her, his thigh warming hers, and she closes her eyes, thinking, I'm married, don't get too close. She imagines Ethan lying on the bed in one of the fluffy white robes hung on the back of the bathroom door. Maybe there's another soccer match on, and he can enjoy it without understanding what the commentator is saying.

She thinks about how much she has liked knowing more French than Ethan, getting to lead him around for once. He usually knows where to go and how to do things days before Chloe figures them out. But not here. Here he will never catch up to her high school French. She thinks back to a fight they had. Was it yesterday? Two days ago? Who cares. He took too long to buy tickets from the Metro vending machine. She started translating the screen's prompts for him. "I can figure this out," he said, interrupting her. So she bought a ticket from the next machine over and went through the gate, leaving him to fumble with a palm full of Euros. When the train rushed into the station, she thought about jumping on without him, but then decided at the last minute not to be that spiteful, to let him get through the gate with some dignity.

She gets off at Vavin. She loves their Metro stop, with its machines vending chocolates and Oranginas. She wonders if she could live in Paris, how long it would take her to become fluent, whether Ethan would ever learn, or always rely on her. She could teach English here. He could freelance for American IT companies. Quelle romantique, she thinks.

"Bonjour!" she greets the man at the concierge desk. She has said hello to him every day, but this time she sings it, swinging the box of éclairs by its thin white string. She climbs the three flights of stairs to her room, her excitement mounting with each step. *Maybe Ethan will have brought me back something from the day's sightseeing. A snow globe replica of the Eiffel Tower.* Those are the things they make fun of at the airport, and always end up getting each other anyway.

She pushes open the door to a dark, quiet room.

"No games on?" she asks. He doesn't answer. He must be sleeping. She walks straight to the bathroom, puts the box down on the sink and starts the shower. She'll wash up and then surprise him with the éclairs. She runs the washcloth over her body, imagining Ethan's hands touching her. She tingles in the places that still ache from their night together.

She dries herself and wraps her body in the robe she thought Ethan would be in. Maybe he's awake now. She opens the bathroom door, the steam leaking into a still dark room. She goes to pounce on the bed, to wake her tired husband, who couldn't still blame his exhaustion on jetlag. Then she remembers: the éclairs.

She steps back into the bathroom, unties the package. The two pastries look so beautiful, their kidney-bean shapes spooning each other. She thinks: I wish I had a plate. She takes the top of the ice bucket, uses that. Ethan will laugh at her ingenuity.

Walking into the room, she feels like a bride, the éclairs her bouquet, the robe her gown. She figures her entrance will wake him. But it doesn't. The covers don't move at all. She puts her knees onto the mattress and shimmies her way across, the éclairs still in front of her. She sees the sheet stirring, thinks about the best way to wake him. With an éclair below his nose, so that the first thing he smells is powdered sweetness.

She picks the more perfectly formed one of the two éclairs, the one that looks like she could've bought it at the patisserie. She brings it toward the pillow. She can't find his face. The sheets. The white, silky sheets. There are too many of them. She drops the ice lid, the less perfect éclair falling to the white bedspread. She claws at the blanket, the sheets, the pillows with her free hand. There are too many of them. That's why she can't find Ethan. He's buried under the sheets. There are too many. She drops the other éclair. She tears at the covers. One of the éclair shells cracks under her knee. The crème oozes out, chocolate smears the white bedding. Where is he? She shuffles her knees over, the other éclair cracking and oozing. He's there. She just needs to get to the right spot of the bed. It's too big. Too many sheets. He's there.

She throws the pillows off. Kneeling where they once were, she shoves the bedspread to the floor. She hears the shells crack again. Her perfect éclairs. If only Ethan weren't such a heavy sleeper. Then her éclairs wouldn't be ruined.

Lines of tears stream down her cheeks, into her mouth. They roll off her chin. She clutches the flat sheet, pulling hard to undo the maid's tightly tucked corner. The sheet floats up like a parachute and she sees. Nothing.

The tears come faster now. She can't breathe. The empty, white bed. It's too much. She crawls across and falls off it, onto the bedspread. She hears more cracking, feels the gooey cream beneath the bed sheet that separates her body from the broken éclairs.

She searches through the sheets again, this time for something she knows she will find. She eats the éclairs, not tasting them. Not remembering making them. Not remembering why she feels so nauseated. So tired. So sad. She licks the cream off the sheets.

Standing in the customs line, she holds the final, blank post card. She leans it on her guidebook and writes, *I'm back home. You're not. You'll never be.* She stops for a moment and then continues. *I'm not sure what I'll say to my mother about the trip. Maybe I'll tell her the whole sordid truth. Maybe I'll let her help me. I wish I could help you. But I can't. You're dead.*

She is at the head of the line, and the man behind booth five waves her over. He takes her passport. "Purpose of your trip?" he asks without looking up.

She wonders, what was I thinking? Did I think I could bake him back to life? That his death wouldn't translate into French? She says, quietly, "I don't know."

"Pardon?" he asks and looks up at her. He must see something in her eyes, in the bags under them (she hasn't slept in two days), or the skinniness of her face (she hasn't eaten either, after those éclairs.)

The man stamps a page in her passport and pushes it back to her. "You're free to go, ma'am."

On the other side of customs, she spots a mailbox. She fumbles through her bag and gathers the four postcards to Ethan. She places them in the box and thinks about Ethan's fourth and last postcard: *This might not ever reach you. Or maybe it will go to London after you've left and then get redirected to Boston, arriving in your mailbox after you've returned. Something profound in the possibility, this little piece of paper making the same trip back and forth that you have.* But the card arrived on her last day in London. She remembers wanting to lie to Ethan, to pretend to be amazed at what arrived in her Boston mailbox after being forwarded back and forth across the Atlantic. But the place and date stamps would've revealed her. It's hard to get away with lying, she thinks, even when your intentions are good.