

Living in a Christmas Card:

A very long time ago in a very big city, around the holidays each year, I would look in wonder at pictures of snowy forests with cardinals, impossibly red and holly, astoundingly green. The greeting cards, arriving by the hundreds from everywhere, showed evergreen hills and frozen creeks that tumbled into each other. Tangled thickets were alive with implied birdsong. A vigilant doe sheltered her fawn and never wavered. It was a perfect world.

My parents, who were well loved and universally respected, were deluged by mail during the holidays. My favorite task was to open each card, which I did with a letter opener. By the way, always use a letter opener if you want to really enjoy your mail. It lends dignity to the process and builds excitement for the anticipated enclosure.

Bills are another story. Bills should be opened with a cleaver or, better yet, by a goat.

But this is a story about the good mail. I climbed into those holiday card images as easily as I climbed into bed at night. I got lost in them. Could it be that places such as these exist somewhere? Might there be a world without factories and apartments and choked traffic passing slowly, our replacement for scenery? Could there be, could I wish myself to, a world that is quiet and beautiful and timeless and right? I suppose other kids, other New Yorkers of all ages, maybe my neighbors, were wondering the same thing. I wish someone had said so. I thought I was alone.

I had no idea that the places I imagined, the places pictured in the cards, were real. They seemed so impossibly beautiful. The peace they promised was a fantasy of the highest order. They were, simply, a picture of heaven. And that's how I thought of them.

You know what I think now? I think most of the artists who design the cards are city kids too. They conjure up their ideal world. They imagine a world with all their favorite flora and fauna and then try to put it down on paper. They too are hoping that what's in their head might be for real somewhere. It's not belief and not conviction. It's hope. There is, sometimes, an action element of hope. The action comes in wishing so hard for something to be real that you make it real, in your imagination. And, since it's real up there, you can make it real down here, on paper. That's what they do, the artists. Bless them all for their hope.

And now I live in the Christmas card that I always wondered about. Amazing. Thanks to this marvelous patch of the planet where sky and green and water and birds all fit the continuous page of their own picture, thanks to them, I live in one. How wonderfully lucky am I. How privileged we all are.

I am looking across the valley, now that the leaves are pretty much gone. I see long, curving lines where the road runs next to the pasture that bends into the corn stubble that folds into the forest. I see the sweep of these lines running out of sight to the south and off my page to the north. I know that if I shifted my perspective in either direction I would simply be adjusting the frame, scrolling across the continuing page. Beyond where I can currently see, the scene keeps scrolling, the hills go on rolling. They roll into and across the next person's page. They curve through another imagination. Someone else lives in that Christmas card. I hope that they see it.

You know, we shouldn't let a day go by, not a single day, without stepping outside and pausing to look around. Just a minute or two or twenty- five to take in the sights and sounds. Not to do so is to run a restaurant and never eat the food. It would be like having a fabulous library and not reading a book or keeping shelves full of music and never listening to it. What a shame that would be, to be surrounded by all of it but standing in none of it, to be missing from the picture.

The early fog is giving way to a muted gray, a soft wet day. The cardinals appear, impossibly red. The deer wander down to the creek. The county road turns and re-turns out of view to my left. It snakes up the rise and over the top. It wanders all the way back to my childhood. It occurs to me that I got exactly what I wished for. Living here, in a Christmas card.