

# *Faith, Hope and Fiction*

## **Ordinary Valentine**

**By Patricia Crisafulli**

Meaghan hadn't been looking for anything exactly, maybe the garage door opener that, as it turned out, was on the kitchen counter, or a pen that had enough ink left in it to write the grocery list. Whatever sent her into the kitchen drawer in the corner, the one directly below the telephone with a handset that was constantly sticky from the residue of cooking and eating, she found the card. It was an ordinary valentine: the front of it three quarters pink with a band of red at the top. In the middle was a little cartoon figure, with oversized hands stretched palms outward. "You know what Valentine?" the words on the cover asked. Meaghan opened the card to find the answer: "You're the best!"

She flipped the card to the front again and then to the inside, harboring a little disappointment that of all the cards to choose from, this was the one Jake had bought for her. But at least he remembered, she told herself, as she slipped the card back into its place, face down in the drawer. Yes, she would have preferred one of those oversized cards with words that spoke of soul mates and true love. Then again, they'd been through a little too much in the past nine months to gloss it over with silhouettes of couples walking hand-in-hand on an exotic beach or a pair of anthropomorphized doves cuddled in bliss. They'd gone to the line with a trial separation that had lasted six months; they'd seen marriage counselors and lawyers, but in the end decided

to give it one more try, for the sake of the five years behind them, especially the ones which they remembered as being better than good.

Meaghan busied herself in the other corner of the kitchen with the coffee maker, slipping in the cartridge of flavored grounds and positioning her mug to catch a perfectly made brew-for-one. She reached into the refrigerator for a yogurt, which she ate standing up, leaning against the counter. Maxie appeared at the back door with her low woof and waited patiently to be let in. She smelled of mud and dampness, and Meaghan groaned at the trail of footprints that now led across the kitchen to Maxie's red plaid doggie bed by the heater.

“So Maxie, chase any squirrels this morning?” Meaghan stooped from the waist to wipe the floor as she smiled wistfully to herself. Maxie, an eight-year-old basset hound adopted soon after she and Jake got married, wasn't running after anything these days.

Jake came into the kitchen in a suit and tie, his jacket held by the collar and immediately deposited over the back of a chair. The crispness of his shirt made Meaghan want to finger the fabric, but she clutched her coffee mug instead. Something about the card in the drawer had made her feel like withdrawing, as she always did when her feelings were hurt. That was their pattern: hurt, anger, sadness, withdrawal, a cycle that spun them into separate orbits until Jake moved out. During those six months apart, he had seen someone else. They never talked about her anymore, this woman named Elise whom Meaghan had never seen. She couldn't accuse him of anything, not really; they'd been separated for three months with no likelihood of reconciling. Then Elise faded away because Jake wanted his marriage and his old life back, or so he said.

“What's going on with you today?” Jake popped a new coffee cartridge into the machine and hit the brew button.

“Not much: client meeting this morning. Then I’ll swing back here and take Maxie out for a bit.” Meaghan finished her coffee and put the mug in the dishwasher.

“She spoils you, Maxie.” Jake leaned down to pet the furrowed brow. “No dog walker for you--just Mommy every day.”

Meaghan bit her lip; would Maxie be the only one they parented? They had both wanted kids in the beginning, but then as they drifted it was out of the question. She wondered if they’d ever get to the point where they could commit to having a family, before her biological clock ran out of time.

“I’d like to go to the gym after work,” Jake told her. He stood with one hand at his waist, which he kept trim by exercising religiously. During their six-month break, he had actually lost weight, slimming down to his college form. Sometimes Meaghan wondered if he’d done that for Elise.

“No problem. I might go for a run later. Maybe you can get Chinese or something on your way home from the gym.”

They’d married too young, perhaps, although at twenty-six and twenty-seven they had seemed to know their own minds. Five years later, many of their friends were tying the proverbial knot, while it looked like theirs was about to be cut permanently. Marriages these days didn’t last; relationships were as disposable as the two empty coffee cartridges now in the trash--spent and wasted.

Meaghan’s law office in town, where she handled most real estate and probate, was twenty minutes away. Although she sometimes thought about working for one of the big firms, she liked the pace and schedule of a smaller practice. Jake rode the train to Chicago every day,

thumbing emails on his Blackberry along the 45-minute route or editing a report on his laptop. He called the 6:50 train his “mobile office”; Meaghan knew that wasn’t far from the truth.

At twelve-thirty, Meaghan took a break and went home to walk Maxie, something she’d started doing about six months earlier when she’d come home one evening to find a puddle and a sad-looking dog. It wasn’t the accident, but the look of dejection (although Jake said bassets always look like that) that had made her decide to walk Maxie mid-day whenever she could. Slipping into a pair of boots to guard against the mud, Meaghan grabbed a granola bar to eat as they strolled.

After a few minutes, a light rain mixed with snow began to fall. Maxie, who hated anything resembling precipitation, turned toward home and pulled at her leash. Meaghan tried to find a sheltered place for Maxie to stand and sniff, but gave in after few minutes. Just outside the back door, Maxie took care of business and wagged her tail at the anticipation of going back to her doggie bed.

“Who loves you, Maxie girlfriend?” Meaghan rubbed the velvet-soft ears.

Maxie rolled to her side and laid her front left paw on Meaghan’s wrist. Tears sprang in Meaghan’s eyes at the gesture. “Oh, Maxie, what’s up with me?” Meaghan straightened and went in search of a tissue.

It was the stupid card, she told herself. After all her self-talk about taking it one day at a time, of managing expectations, and all the rest, she had convinced herself that Valentine’s Day would be the moment when she and Jake really clicked again. As cliché as it was, that was their day.

She’d been the girl with the long brown hair, and he was the guy with the dark curls and mustache. They’d been acquaintances of a sort their freshman and sophomore years, but by the

time they were juniors their circle of mutual friends had tightened, and suddenly they found themselves face to face--literally--at a Valentine's Day party. They'd both come with friends, but soon found themselves paired off, which led to a slow dance when someone finally changed the music and then a kiss. They were twenty then, and had been together ever since--except for most of 2011, that is. The break had been long in coming, too much pressure at Jake's job, too much clinginess on her part, a feeling that they didn't connect any more. When Jake moved out she was glad to see him go, except everywhere she turned his absence took up more than the presence of everything else.

Friends counseled that she'd adjust eventually; one had even suggested she just "get on with her life." What life, she had wanted to demand. For most of her adult life thus far, Jake was at the center of a life--a shared life--where they raised their hopes and made their plans. For the first four months of their separation, they had barely spoken to each other, and it was during that time--for six or eight weeks only, Jake had told her--that he had seen Elise. Then, at the six-month mark, they began seeing each other again, so slowly at first, and then more steadily--a weekend together at home, and then one away. Finally, with some intense counseling, they decided to give it another try, just before Christmas. They still saw the counselor once a week.

"Gotta go, Maxie," Meaghan said, breaking off from her thoughts that dragged her backwards to places she needed to leave behind.

Over the course of the next week, Meaghan avoided dropping hints about Valentine's Day, hoping that Jake would bring it up. Finally, on the Friday before, she couldn't stand it any longer. "You know what Tuesday is, don't you?" Standing at the sink, rinsing their dinner dishes before stacking them in the dishwasher, Meaghan cast a look in Jake's direction.

“Huh, Tuesday? Groundhog’s Day? President’s Day?” He snapped a lid on a tub of hummus and put it in the refrigerator. “I know what it is and I’ve got it covered.” Standing behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist. “You have trust more.”

Meaghan sucked her breath in, knowing that was exactly the problem; an inherent lack of trust that lingered in spite of the fact that they were back together and, she might be tempted to say, as good as they’d ever been. She turned and put her arms around his neck. “I know. I’m trying.”

No more was said about Tuesday until that morning when an email arrived from him, asking her to meet him at the train station at six-thirty. Racing home at five-fifteen, she took Maxie out and then changed into a dress she knew Jake liked, leaving her lawyer suit and sensible shoes behind. At six twenty-five she waited at the station, wondering where they were going.

Her excitement bubbled up as she waited for the train, feeling the anticipation that had made their early years so special. Who cared if she got an ordinary valentine; what mattered most was that they were together now and, having been tested, would probably stay that way.

Jake carried only his briefcase; no flowers in sight. He kissed her and got into the passenger’s side of their car and gave her directions to Adler’s, a new steakhouse by the highway which had gotten good reviews. Their reservation was for seven.

The hostess greeted them warmly and handed Meaghan a long-stemmed red rose. Jake’s hand rested in the small of her back as Meaghan walked to their table for two in the corner.

“So I remember going to this dorky Valentine’s Day party at some frat house. I didn’t want to go, but my friends made me, and then I saw this beautiful girl with long brown hair who was all by herself.”

“You knew me before that,” Meaghan protested with a laugh.

“Yes, but I didn’t really see you until that night. And I thought to myself, ‘Wow, who do we have here?’” Jake reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a long thin card. He laid it on the table between them.

The pale pink of the card faded to nearly white in the dim light of the restaurant. On the cover, centered below the wording “For the One I Love,” stood the silhouettes of a couple embracing. Inside, the words were plain and simple: “Always and forever. Yours, Valentine.” On the side, Jake wrote a note: “Meaghan, you were the one I wanted to be with that night, and you’re the one I want to be with now. We’ve been through a lot -- tough times I wish we could erase. But they have made us stronger. I love you and I always will. XO Jake.”

She clutched the card to her heart and then leaned across the table to kiss him. “I forgot yours at home,” she giggled. “I was in such a rush I left the card on the counter.”

The card, she realized--the other valentine. The one that said “You’re the best.” Had he forgotten he’d bought it, or maybe he decided against it at the last minute? She tried not to think of the possibility that it was for someone else.

Jake reached for her hand and held it until the server came to take their order.

There comes a point, Meaghan told herself as Jake went to the coat check, that she needed to let go of the past; to stop dwelling in the fun and romantic college days, as well as the months when they parted from each other. All they had was now, this moment, which she would squander with comparisons to previous times that seemed so perfect then and with brooding over their time apart. Elise wasn’t the problem, Meaghan knew; she was. She couldn’t let go of the

fear that things might not work out after all or that Jake might leave again. Life held no guarantees.

Maxie waited at the back door when they arrived home. Jake clipped her leash to her collar and took her out for a walk that lasted longer than Meaghan had expected. When they came home twenty minutes later, she had stepped out of her shoes with the too-high heels, but didn't change out of her dress.

"Guess both of my girls wanted to go out today," Jake laughed. "We'd be half way to Cincinnati by now if I didn't manage to turn the corner and point her home."

Maxie shook vigorously; her tags jangled against her collar.

When Meaghan kissed him, she felt the cold on his face. "Here's your card." She handed him an envelope.

Jake smiled as he read the words. "Thanks, honey. I love you, too." He set the card on the table.

"Speaking of valentines." He reached into the drawer and pulled out an envelope. "Somebody else had one for you."

Meaghan opened the card, scanned the pink cover with the red band at the top, and glanced at the cartoon figure with outstretched hands. She read the familiar phrase: "You know what, Valentine. You're the best." The card was signed "Maxie" with two paw prints drawn in ink.

"Thank you, Maxie," Meaghan joked. Still holding the card, she bent down to pet the dog who brushed her ankles. When she straightened, Jake was there with an embrace.

Letting go of the card, she heard it land on the table next to the other two--three valentines in all, and each one extraordinary.

