

## **The Postcard**

**By Patricia Crisafulli**

Rocky cliffs ankle deep in a churning sea, the sky dotted with birds pirouetting on wing, seeking fish below and open air above. The scene made Addie think of Nantucket and the cold and windy week she and Michael had spent there as newlyweds fresh out of college. Too poor for the honeymoon they had dreamed about to the Scottish moorland and the English Lake District, they had given themselves a substitute a few months later, at the end of October when most of the tourists were gone, and shops and restaurants posted “closed for the season” signs in their windows. “What season is that?” Michael had quipped. “The closed season,” she’d replied, and it had become their silly private joke for days.

Turning the postcard over, Addie read the description: “Rocky cliffs of Maine.” Below it was a three-line message in strong, rounded letters; half printed but connected in places like cursive. *Too perfect for words here. Just what the doctor ordered. See you soon.* The signature was only initials H.C., which sounded intriguing, hinting of secret lovers in Addie’s overly romantic imagination. The address dispelled the notion; the card being sent to “The Hendersons” -- implying at least a couple, and perhaps an entire family--at the house number, street, and city where she had Michael had lived for three years. They’d bought the townhouse from a retired

schoolteacher named Quenlin. There were no Hendersons among their neighbors to the left or right, although perhaps a previous occupant for one of the other units.

Addie tossed the postcard on the counter with the unopened mail: a bill from the electric company, a catalog of overpriced pretty things she would never buy, a newsletter from their accountant on the latest tax deductions. Inside a newsprint flyer, stuffed with ads for a local green grocer and coupons for air duct cleaning and a pizzeria she'd never heard of, was tucked her credit card bill. As she plucked it out from its hiding place, Addie felt the fatness of the envelope and groaned as to the imagined balance on the card inflated by Christmas shopping.

Holding the credit card envelope in both hands, Addie drew in a deep breath before tearing it open and peeking at the number on the left side of the payment coupon--not as bad as she had feared, but bad enough. They'd taken cutbacks at the university where she worked in the registrar's office, all part of the state's austerity program which had employees paying triple the usual health insurance premiums. Pay raises were a thing of the past, and would be for the foreseeable future. Michael's frame shop was still open, but just barely. He'd had to cut hours for the shop's long-time employee, Martha, who had worked for the previous owner. Stevie, the college kid who worked part-time, had to be laid off after the holidays. Whenever she'd ask Michael how things were going, he'd smile and say the same thing, "Tough, but hanging in there."

Addie put the credit card bill aside and picked up the postcard again. "*Too perfect for words. Just what the doctor ordered.*" Maybe they should get away. They could find a bargain somewhere, like Florida in the summer, which they'd done two years ago. Surely it wouldn't cost too much to go to the Cape this time of year; a cheap flight to Boston, a rental car, a bed-and-breakfast, if they could find one that was open...

With a sigh, Addie gathered up the loose paper to put in the recycling bin, and called for Maxie, a small ball of fluff who preferred standing outdoors to walking, but the vet had pronounced her a little overweight. After the holidays, Addie told herself, she and Maxie both needed the exercise.

At the front entrance, where an old-fashioned mirror with coat hooks hung on the wall, Addie stared into her reflection, counting lines around her eyes that she would have sworn weren't there before her birthday last September. Thirty-seven seemed so much older than thirty-six had been. When she'd made the comment over Christmas, her mother, at seventy-two, had waved her hand in dismissal and called her "a mere child." It was meant to be a joke, but the word "child" strangled her words in her throat after the last miscarriage. She had told Michael at Thanksgiving she wasn't trying any more.

Maxie gave a great shake, shimmying eleven pounds of wobbly flesh and cropped hair, as if in protest for having to go out on a damp January day when she could just as easily curl up in her doggie bed beside the heat register.

"Come on, Maxie," Addie coached in what Michael called her "doggie voice"--all short words infused with false enthusiasm. "Let's go. Come on. We're going now..."

She stooped to pick up Maxie and carried her out the front door. Once out in the world, Maxie seemed to perk up, sniffing here and watering there, until she reached the corner. After a moment's pause, Maxie scampered--that would be the word Addie would use later to describe the scene to Michael--across the street and headed down the next block. They stayed out for nearly an hour, not covering much territory, but at least a mile. When they reached their block on the return loop, Maxie sat down on the sidewalk, refusing to take another step. Addie scooped her up in her arms, cooing to her all the way home.

Michael's shop was open until five on Saturdays, and if business was slow he would be home around five-thirty. As the clock approached six, Addie became hopeful that he'd been swamped with incoming orders from people who needed to frame the posters and prints they'd received for Christmas. A better-than-expected January after a pretty good December would go a long way toward helping their finances. By six-ten, Addie had picked up the postcard again and mused about a summer vacation in New England.

The look on Michael's face when he came in at six-twenty told a different story. "Car refused to start."

"Why didn't you call?" Addie asked.

"Left my cell in the store." Michael moved over to the stove, where Addie had started rice to accompany the stir-fry she was making for dinner, and warmed his hands.

"I would have come to get you."

"I couldn't leave the car all night, they'd tow it. I went back to the store and called Stevie at home. Figured he'd have jumper cables since he's always tinkering. That's when I left my cell in the store, I guess."

Addie didn't dare ask how business was that day. If it was good, he'd tell her once he warmed up. If it wasn't so good, his lack of commentary would tell her all she needed to know. She pushed the postcard out of the way, back by the empty flour and sugar canisters.

"I'll call John. See if he can help me replace the battery tomorrow," Michael added as he slipped his arms around her. His voice and his hands were warmer now that he'd been home for a few minutes.

“Maybe Amy wants to come over with John. I can make turkey chili,” Addie replied, “although Amy probably has plans already.”

“Probaby,” Michael repeated.

While Addie cooked, Michael called his brother, John. Listening to his side of the conversation, Addie knew John had agreed to help in the afternoon. It didn’t sound like John and Amy would be staying for dinner though, which Michael confirmed when he ended the call.

Reaching for the plates in the cupboard, Michael spotted the postcard. “What’s this?”

“Sent here by mistake. I should put it back in the mailbox, I guess.”

“Who are the Hendersons?” Michael turned the card to the picture on the front and back again.

“No idea. H.C. needs to fix his address book.”

Michael slapped the card against the palm of his hand a few times and then went into the other room, coming back with the phone book, which he spread open on the counter next to where he had left the plates. “Henderson, Jack and Mary. 1512 Sylvania St.”

“Ah, so H.C. transposed his numbers--we’re 1215, the Hendersons 1512.”

Michael corrected the address on the postcard and put a note on the back for the mail carrier.

“You are so thoughtful.” Addie gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as she picked up the plates and brought them to the kitchen table.

“Tampering with the mail is a federal offense, young lady,” Michael drawled in the worst John Wayne imitation she’d ever heard.

“Oh, officer, arrest me.” Addie batted her eyelashes dramatically.

Michael's shoulders shrugged with a quick laugh. He turned the postcard over to the picture on the front. "That place looks nice."

"Yeah, reminds me a little of Nantucket."

"Right, Nantucket. That was a million years ago."

"Only ten," Addie said, and cleared her throat reflexively to ward off the lump that was forming there.

Michael set the postcard on the counter, photo side down. "You happy you married me?"

Addie left the silverware in the drawer and walked directly over to him, engulfing her husband in a hug that brought her face into the side of his neck. "You shouldn't even ask that question."

"You still care to answer it?"

"Yes, yes, and a thousand times yes."

John came over around one in the afternoon the next day, driving a late model SUV that looked to Addie like something that could transport an entire hockey team. Older than Michael by two years, John had taken the traditional route of political science undergraduate studies and then law school, whereas Michael had gone to art school. He still painted, but not as much as when Addie, the French literature major, had met him a year after graduation. As the two men left for the automotive store, Addie wondered if John would give advice, solicited or not, about the frame store and what Michael could do to improve business. There wasn't much Michael could do, she feared, other than wait for the economy to turn around.

Laundry and surfing on the computer ate up the hour or so that they were gone. When she heard their voices in the kitchen, she emerged from the corner of the living room where she kept

a desk and computer, and listened to the abbreviated version of buying a battery and getting it installed in the shop. “Can’t do it yourself nowadays,” John repeated. “Too much stuff on cars can go wrong if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Addie nodded in polite agreement. “Thanks for coming by, John,” she added, when her brother-in-law picked up his car keys and jangled them once.

“No problem. Let me know if you ever want to borrow a car. We’ve got an extra.”

Michael nodded. “Okay, thanks.” He waited at the back door after his brother left.

“I have an extra pair of socks if Amy wants to borrow them,” Addie joked.

Michael’s expression made her regret saying anything at all.

At four o’clock, her friend Carol called and suggested a walk even though it would soon be dark. “We’ll be fine until five or so,” Carol said. “I just feel like such a slug.”

Addie called into the living room where Michael sat on the sofa in front of the television, which blasted a football game. “I’m going for a walk with Carol,” she told him. “I’ll be back in time to start dinner.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Michael’s eyes never left the screen.

Addie wondered what she should not worry about, walking or cooking. She left without asking.

It was nearly five- thirty when Addie returned from a long walk and a good talk with Carol, her confidante who had heard everything over the years, every scrap of hopeful pregnancy news and every disappointment and setback. This time they talked mostly about Carol’s eleven-year-old son and his problems with algebra. On the way home, Addie had told her about the

postcard and her instant connection with Nantucket, explaining how she and Michael had gone there for a belated honeymoon, three months after they'd gotten married.

"Make plans to go back," Carol told her as they parted on the sidewalk. "You need to have something to look forward to."

Addie gave Carol a quick hug and headed down the driveway toward the back door. A sign fluttered there against a single tether of scotch tape. *Open for the season.*

Stepping in the back door, Addie found an envelope on the counter with the words "open me!" next to the postcard, which was propped up against a small budvase. The envelope contained two folded sheets of paper, decorated with a sketch of a rocky coast--a hasty jot on the paper with Michael's pencil, but art to anyone else. Above the drawing were the words, "Wishful Thinking Airlines" and pretend flight arrangements for a first class trip to Nantucket.

"Go get dressed for dinner. No need to pack." The smiley face drawn on the paper made a leering wink.

A call into the empty house told her that Michael was out with Maxie, maybe a walk but more likely a trip to the store, although she hated the thought of the dog waiting inside the car, even on a cold evening with a doggie blanket and the window cracked an inch. She headed upstairs for a shower and to put on some clean clothes.

As she towel-dried her hair, Addie heard Maxie's high-pitched bark downstairs, which ended quickly, no doubt because Michael had given her something to eat. She dressed in jeans and a sweater she knew Michael liked, a blue cashmere blend she'd bought on double markdown last spring. "I'm ready to leave," she announced, as she descended the stairs. "When is the limo coming to pick us up?"

“Leave? You just arrived. Welcome to Nantucket. Mind the stairs on the aircraft.”

Michael appeared at the foot of the staircase, wearing clean jeans and the flannel shirt her mother had given him for Christmas, and a smile across his face.

“Silly me! Of course I just arrived.”

Addie chuckled as Michael took her by the hand and led her into the living room, where the coffee table was set with two place settings. On the sound system Miles Davis played *Kind of Blue*.

“You made dinner?” Addie raised an eyebrow as she turned toward the kitchen and something that smelled rather good.

“Um, no. That would be unwise.” Michael led her over to a cushion on the floor by the coffee table. Returning to the kitchen, he came back with two glasses of white wine, and then brought over a plate of grilled scallops.

“Impressive!” Addie put one on her plate.

“You can thank Giovanni’s.”

“They do take out?” Addie cut the scallop in half and popped it in her mouth.

“They do if you call and explain that you want to do a special meal for your wife at home, and promise to get there as soon as it’s ready...” Michael lowered himself down to the cushion on his side of the table. “If I could take you away somewhere, Addie, I would. I wish we could go back to Nantucket. But the store...”

Addie rose up on her knees and leaned toward him. “I thought we were in Nantucket.” She met him more than halfway across the table with a kiss that tasted of sea scallops and grilled prosciutto, white wine, and promises made long ago but never, ever forgotten.