

Puzzles

by Tyler Koch

The man went into his backpack and pulled out his book of crossword puzzles. The deluxe edition with fifty percent more puzzles for free. It had been an impulse buy from the bookstore, cost him four dollars on sale. He flipped halfway through the book, opened to the page of a puzzle he hadn't completed yet, laid the book on the small tray connected to the seat in front of him. Next he went into his backpack and found a green pen. Always a green pen for crossword puzzles. A tradition. He took off the cap and placed it on the back of the pen. Finally he reached overhead and turned on the light. Then he read the first clue.

1. *Harry _____, a wizard*

He smiled and wrote in *Potter* in the empty squares for one across. Off to a good start. The next clue for one down was easy as well, and he wrote *Pity* in the squares.

"Those always looked like fun."

The man paused, his concentration momentarily broken by the woman to his right. He turned to look at her.

"I'm not very good at those."

"Oh," said the man, not sure what to say at all.

The woman smiled apologetically. "Do they get easier the more you do?"

The man, seated in the aisle seat, looked to his left—into the aisle—to ensure the woman was speaking to him. It seemed she was.

"Uh, yeah. They do."

"That's what I figured. Practice makes perfect."

The man nodded dumbly. He looked back down at the page and read another clue.

6. *To hurry*

There were three blank squares. He knew the answer, and he knew that he knew the answer. But the word escaped him. He tapped the pen against the paper leaving little green dots. *Run*. That was it. He wrote down the word in capital letters.

"That's what I thought too."

The word escaped his lips before he knew what happened. "Huh?"

"Run. I was thinking it was either that or flee, but that's four letters and it wouldn't fit."

He nodded his head, up and down, because he didn't know what else to do.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be disturbing you. I bet you like to do these on your own."

"Yeah." He paused, his eyes going wide as he registered his response. "I mean no."

"No?"

"No." He forced a smile. "I mean yes, but no."

The woman laughed, a gentle sound, and soft, close enough that only he could hear. "I'm sorry but I don't know what you mean."

The man took a moment to collect himself. "I don't mind if you want to help."

"Really?" Her face lit up, a beautiful smile.

"Really," he said. "Here."

He adjusted his position in the seat so she had a better view of the page. She leaned closer to him, their shoulders briefly touching. Her hair cast a shadow on the page and she tucked it behind her ear.

"How do you do this?" she asked.

"Usually I go across and then down. Like this." He pointed with his pen. "And if I know the clue, or if I think I know it, I'll check and see if the clue going down matches. If it does I write it in. If not I write what I think the answer is off to the side."

"That's smart," she said.

The man felt blood in his cheeks. "Thanks."

"So which clue are you on?"

8. "You're killing me Smalls!"

The woman looked at him. "I don't know that movie."

"I think it's the Sandlot."

"Oh!" Her eyes went wide. "You're right. I remember now. And it fits."

The man nodded, and he wrote in the word.

"So where are you from?" he asked, the words, to his own ears at least, sounding casual.

"Maryland."

"Oh? What part?"

"Near the university. I have a job working at a not-for-profit."

The man tried to think of something smart to say. "So what kind of not-for-profit?"

"We do work with the environment."

"That sounds exciting."

"Sometimes," she said with a smile. "Other times it's a lot of paperwork." She shrugged. "But I like the job, it's what I went to school for."

"Ah."

The man looked down at the page, having run out of material to continue the conversation.

"Are we on this one?" she asked.

15. Something unexpected

"Hmm."

"I'm stumped too," he admitted. He counted the blank spaces with the tip of his green pen. "Twelve letters. Might be multiple words."

“Ooh that's smart. I hadn't thought of that. So what do you do?”

“I'm in grad school right now studying physics.”

“That sounds hard.”

“Sometimes,” he said, hoping he wasn't coming off as flippant.

“Is that why you like doing crossword puzzles? Because you like the challenge?”

He'd never thought about it like that before. “Maybe.”

“I think so.”

He felt a smile come to his lips. “Okay.” She smiled back, and he felt his heart quicken. Emboldened, he asked, “So are you flying back from vacation?”

“A wedding, actually. My best friend just got married. I'm so jealous, she was such a beautiful bride. She's off on her honeymoon now but me and some of the other bridesmaids stayed after for a few days to explore the city. Bourbon Street didn't smell very good but otherwise we enjoyed ourselves.”

The man smiled. “Bourbon Street doesn't smell good at all.”

“Are you from there?”

“Just visiting, like you. It was my spring break this week.”

“Oh how fun. Did you go with anybody?”

“I met some friends down there. They took a different flight back.”

“Still. You must have had a great time. We might have even seen one another and not known it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he answered, knowing full well that if he'd seen the woman in New Orleans he would have remembered. He turned his attention back to the puzzle.

23. Emotional anguish

He penned *Heartbreak* in the empty squares. That led him to answering *Eskimo* and *Poker* next.

"You're really good at this," said the woman. "Maybe I should have been a physics major, then I'd be better at crossword puzzles." She laughed brushed her fingertips against his arm. "But I don't have the brain for that sort of thing."

She pulled her hand away, but the man still felt the weight of her fingers on his arm. He tried to sit as still as possible, tried not to move. Aware of how close their bodies were in the confined space.

The stewardess came on over the speaker, announcing in a tinny voice that they were preparing for landing and she'd appreciate it if everyone fastened their seatbelts and put their trays in an upright position.

"Wow. That was a fast flight."

The man thought exactly the same. Of all the times the plane was actually on time. In the back of his mind he entertained a scenario where the landing strip was busy and the pilot had to circle the plane for another thirty minutes.

"Let's try and get a few more clues before we land," she said. "I think I'm really starting to like crossword puzzles. I'll have to go and buy one of these books sometime this weekend. Then the next time we meet I'll actually be able to help."

"Yeah."

"Okay. What about this one?"

39. To turn back

"I think I know that one," she said excitedly. "I do. I know that one." She counted the squares on the page with her finger.

Inspiration struck. "Here," he said, handing her the green pen. "You write."

This time she placed her entire hand on his shoulder. "You're so sweet."

She took the pen and wrote *spurn*. Then she held up the pen in the air.

"Why green?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well I like it. I'll have to use a green pen just like you. Here." She set the pen back on the page and smiled. "Now I feel like I'm an official crossword puzzler. I'm in the club."

"You're in the club," said the man, trying hard to play it cool.

"Is there a calling card, you know, in case I meet another puzzler? Because if not we should make something. Like a super secretive coin or a handshake or something like that."

The man laughed. "There's nothing that I'm aware of."

"Well there should be." She pointed to the green pen. "Maybe that should be it."

"A green pen?"

"Why not? When else do you ever use a green pen?"

The man had to admit she had a point. "So our calling card is a green pen?"

She nodded. "I mean, we can have special pens made. But yeah, a green pen means you're an official crossword puzzler. That's how we'll know."

"You'll need to buy a green pen then."

"Oh I will. Don't worry about that. And I'm going to silently judge everybody who does crossword puzzles without a green pen from now on."

He laughed. "That might not go over so well."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll see. It's not my fault they're not in the club." She looked back at the clues. "What about that one?"

42. Not open for business

"Does 'closed' fit?"

The man shook his head. "It's eight letters."

“Eight letters,” she muttered, putting her hand on her chin. She mouthed different options silently, and while the man pretended to look at the clue, he was really looking at the woman out of his periphery. “I know another word that's eight letters but it doesn't fit.”

“What word is that?”

“Enamored.”

The man's heart skipped a beat, quite literally. His arrhythmia acted up from time to time.

“Enamored,” he repeated.

“It's a nice word, don't you think?”

The man adopted a look he hoped was non-committal. “Yeah, I like it.”

“That's the word my friend used to describe her new husband. She kept saying she was so enamored with this, and enamored with that. She loved everything about him.” The woman looked at the man and smiled softly. “That would be kind of nice, wouldn't it, to have somebody you cared for that much.”

Their hands were close, almost touching. No more than a hair's width between their shoulders. The man had to cough but he held it back, afraid he'd have to readjust. A quote came to mind, a quote that fit her perfectly.

“I heard this quote once,” he said. “It goes—”

And just then the plane landed. Their bodies jostled back and forth, heads bobbing. The woman reached out and grabbed the man's hand for support, wrapped her fingers around his palm and squeezed. Noise enveloped the small space and the plane slowed to a more manageable speed on the runway. The stewardess came on the speaker announcing that they'd arrived, and the local time was nearly nine o'clock. The man hardly heard a word, so focused on the woman's hand on top of his own.

“Oh!” The woman pulled her hand away. “Oh my goodness I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to grab you like that. I've never done that before.” She looked at him out of the side of her eye, embarrassed, her hair falling down the side of her face.

"I don't mind," he said.

"You're sweet," she replied softly. "I guess we didn't finish. I'll have to take a rain check."

"Yeah. A rain check."

The plane parked at the gate, the fasten seatbelt sign dinged off, and in a flurry of motion everybody began to stand and open the overhead compartments. The man went to put the book of crossword puzzles in his backpack, but he stopped halfway through the motion. Instead he looked at the woman.

"Here. I want you to have this."

"What?"

He tapped the book. "I want you to have it."

"But I couldn't take that from you," she said, shaking her head. "It's your book."

"But I want you to have it. Something—" he wanted to say that the book was something to remember him buy, but instead he said, "—to get you started. I have plenty more at home."

"But—" She bit her lip. "Are you sure?"

He nodded.

She held the book in her hands. "Well thank you. I promise to finish each and every puzzle in here, even if it takes me till I'm ninety. But I'll have to buy a green pen first, that way everybody knows I'm part of the club."

"Yeah. Part of the club."

By the time the woman put away the book of crossword puzzles it was their turn to exit the plane. The man put his backpack over his shoulder and grabbed his carry-on and led the way. The woman followed behind. When they entered the terminal the man slowed his pace, just enough to give the woman a chance to catch up but not so much as to be obvious.

"We're here," she said, taking a deep breath. "Feels good to be back."

The man nodded. The two followed the signs toward baggage claim and ground transportation.

"Any fun plans tonight?"

The man shook his head. "It's late."

"Ah. That's no fun."

"You?"

She smiled at him. "No. But I'm excited to sleep in my own bed."

"Not going to have any dinner first?"

"Of course I am. I'm starved. I was thinking I'd eat something on my way home."

The two turned the corner and exited the terminal, past a sign that said no reentry permitted. Ahead was a crowd of people waiting for the new arrivals, some families, some boyfriends with balloons. The man took a breath and steeled himself. He ran through the question in his mind, what he wanted to say, the best way to ask the woman to dinner, or coffee, or anything really, he wasn't going to be picky. He wiped his palms against his jeans.

"So I was thinking—"

"Oh look!" The woman pointed. The man was going to ask who she was pointing at when she continued. "My fiancée came to surprise me! He was supposed to be out of town. Oh I'm so happy!"

The word stuck in the man's throat. "Fi—fiancée?"

The woman nodded. "You should come to meet him!" She put a hand on his shoulder. "You really should. You two would get along so well. I'm sure he'd love crossword puzzles."

"I can't. I have—have errands to run," he finished lamely.

"Errands?"

"Yeah. I just remembered. Sorry."

"Oh but I know he'd love to meet you."

He shook his head, unable to form the words necessary to explain. "Good to meet you."

"But—well if you have to go, thank you so much for the book."

"You're welcome," he said, his smile feeling fake and useless.

“I hope we meet each other again one day, hopefully when we're doing crossword puzzles.” Her smile lit up her face. “I'm going to buy a green pen as soon as we leave.”

The man nodded, not wanting to speak. He gave her a small wave and turned and went the opposite direction, away from the crowd waiting for the arrivals.

“Goodbye!” he heard her call, but he didn't turn.

Outside the man found a taxi to take him home. He put his duffel bag and backpack in the back seat and watched the red numbers indicating the amount he owed begin to climb as they pulled away. He looked out the window but failed to see the passing landscape. The taxi hit a bump at one point and the man's backpack fell into his lap. He pushed it upright and saw that one of the smaller compartments wasn't fully zipped. The tip of one of his pens stuck out. The green pen. The man pulled out the pen and held it up at eye level. Half the ink was gone, the clear surface smudged with fingerprints and scratches. At the stoplight the man rolled down his window.

The next car that came by was a truck, four door, the large kind meant to tow trailers. It slowed down behind the taxi. The windows were cracked and a little girl sat in the backseat playing with her dolls. She heard something crunch beneath the tire.

“What was that?” she asked her father.

“I don't know honey.”

The little girl got on her knees and pushed the button to roll down the window completely. “It's a pen daddy.”

“A pen?” asked the father, disinterested.

“A green pen. Somebody was littering.”

“Mmm.”

The light turned and the truck moved forward, following the taxi. The two vehicles diverged at the exit several miles down the road, the truck north, the taxi south.

50. Fool's Gold

