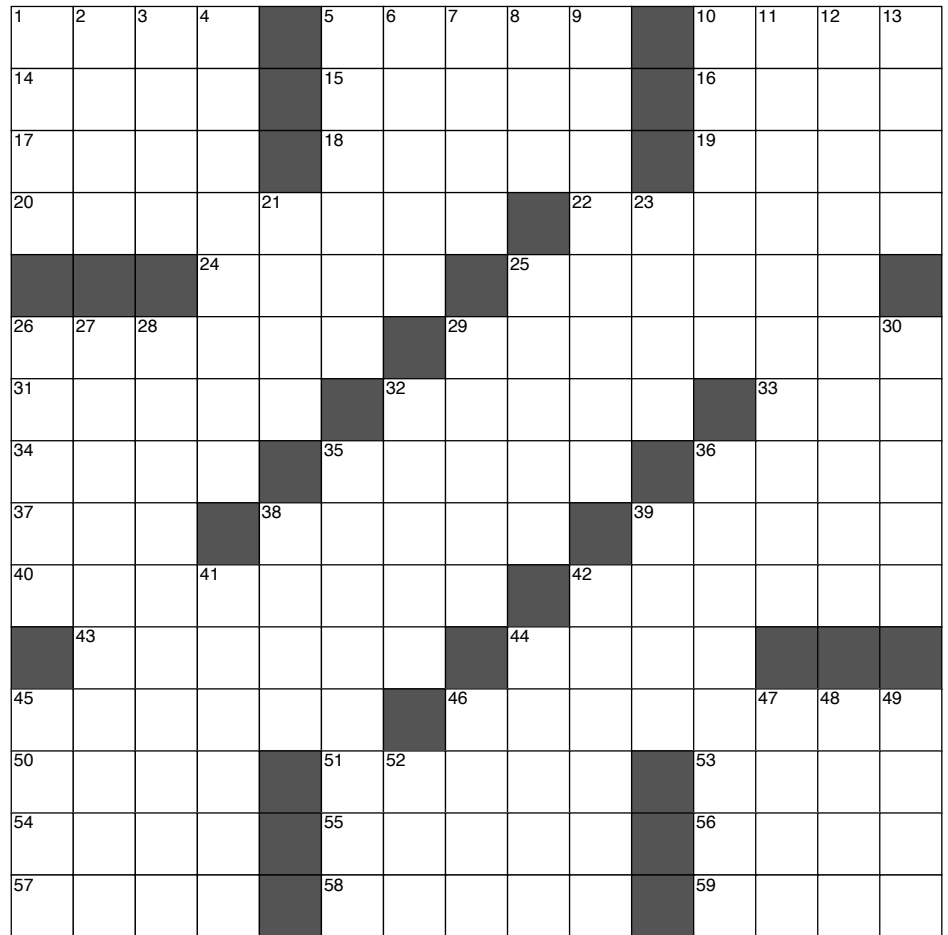


A short story and accompanying crossword puzzle by Jill Marbach

**ACROSS**

- 1 Captain Morgan and Malibu
- 5 Edge
- 10 Dungeons & Dragons beasts
- 14 Puzzled
- 15 "Les Misérables" setting
- 16 Sweetheart
- 17 Teller's partner
- 18 Cheerful
- 19 PDF alternative
- 20 Naive
- 22 Way out
- 24 Superman's alias
- 25 Signify
- 26 Loft
- 29 Of Bucharest
- 31 Once more
- 32 Something built on?
- 33 Mao \_\_\_-tong
- 34 Season before Easter
- 35 Before
- 36 Plant pest
- 37 USN rank
- 38 College VIPs
- 39 Angry
- 40 So darn cute
- 42 They're doomed ...doomed!
- 43 2001 French film featuring Audrey Tautou
- 44 DJ Steve
- 45 Ballroom dance
- 46 Familiar
- 50 School on the Thames
- 51 Retort to "Is so!"
- 53 General Bradley



- 54 Head of Versailles?
- 55 Papal cap
- 56 All
- 57 Iowa college town
- 58 Away
- 59 It knows

**DOWN**

- 1 Engrossed
- 2 Social media member
- 3 List of options
- 4 Classical language of India
- 5 Dash
- 6 Woody Guthrie's "\_\_\_ Got No Home"
- 7 RuPaul's art form \_\_\_
- 8 "Hamilton" creator \_\_\_-Manuel Miranda
- 9 Decorated
- 10 Shakespearean king
- 11 This clue is this clue is this clue is
- 12 Make waves
- 13 Hoagies
- 21 Young adult
- 23 Pesky bug
- 25 Spanish ladies
- 26 Roman helmet
- 27 Topic for a meeting

- 28 One might be written with letters cut from a magazine
- 29 Volleyball ace Gabrielle
- 30 Desires
- 32 Gunwale pin
- 35 Desire
- 36 Quick getaway for newlyweds
- 38 Batman Christian
- 39 Trickster god
- 41 Catches up with old classmates
- 42 Understood
- 44 Lizard
- 45 Facebook's parent company
- 46 \_\_\_ the finish
- 47 Bullets
- 48 Browns
- 49 Pennsylvania Great Lake
- 52 "No seats" initials



I had just settled in, dug my desired page from the middle of today's paper and deposited the rest back in its bin. Someone else could have the Sports or Classified pages. I wanted the crossword.

I was only able to write in one answer (1 across, **RUMS**) when I was interrupted. I'd like to say the man was approaching me, but that felt presumptuous. Something about his gaze made it clear he only had eyes for the puzzle in front of me.

"What day is that?" he asked by way of greeting. He took the seat across from me, still only looking at the paper. I took the opportunity to take him in. He was probably about my age with sharp features partially hidden under shaggy blonde hair.

"Today's," I told him.

He nodded solemnly, finally looking me instead of the puzzle. "A bit of a challenge then." I raised my eyebrows, and he explained, "They get harder as the week goes on."

"Sounds like I could use some help then."

As I slid the newspaper his way and we both leaned in for a better look, I was suddenly transported. Where a moment ago there had been a room full of people, clicking on keyboards and asking librarians questions, now it was just us and 60 odd clues. All that mattered was me, him, and solving this puzzle.

I decided to start at the top. "1 down, *Engrossed*." I considered the R in rum and debated what the other three letters could be, but he was one step ahead of me.

"**RAPT**," he said. Clearly, this was not his first crossword. I handed over the pencil and let him fill in his guess in a clunky, boyish scrawl.

I couldn't help but watch his face as he read through the clues. His dark eyebrows creased together, lips turned to a slight frown. His eyes scanned the page, reading it once to himself and then out loud for my benefit. "*They're doomed...doomed*," he said without an ounce of humor.

He glanced up at me and I found I was grinning. "You take this really seriously, huh?"

"Being doomed is no joke," he said in that same serious voice. He was smiling now, too. "And neither are **GONERS**."

"I take the demise of others very seriously," I assured him.

Truth be told, crosswords could be hit or miss for me. A five letter word for *Gunwale pin* meant nothing to me. The same went for six letters for *2001 French film featuring Audrey Tautou*. But "*Les Misérables*" setting I could get, and so I dutifully transcribed **PARIS**. Crosswords required a certain amount of random knowledge I didn't always possess. Luckily, he was enough of a film buff to get **AMELIE**. We vowed to return to the pin later.

We continued like that, volleying answers like **LIN** and **MITE** back and forth or skipping over clues. The real fun came in the answers we both felt we should know. We debated the merits of **IS OUT** versus **NOT IN** for *Away*. We threw out eight word answers for *So darned cute*. "You" was five letters too short or else I might have made a joke. That was for the best - crosswords weren't a joke, and I couldn't be entirely sure I was joking.

He seemed to have some kind of a method I couldn't follow. I started going through the clues in order, 1 then 14 then 17 across, while he jumped from 35 across to 25 down. As he wrote down **DONAS** without hesitation, I found myself wanting to get in his head. Was he eliminating the easy answers first? Trying to fill in the gaps where clues above and below had been added? Or was he simply tackling this at random, pointing to any number and giving it a go?

I wanted to hear him explain not only his thought process but everything else: did he have a passion for finding just the right word in other aspects of life? Was this a fun pastime or something he felt he had to complete? Where had he learned what **GALEA** meant in Latin? Had he done crosswords with other women, and did it feel like this?

An eight letter word to describe how it feels when my hand brushes his as I reach for the pencil. Or when he looks up to ask me about a clue and I realize just how close our shoulders are. Or the smile he flashes me as I correctly identify the *Classical language of India*. **INTIMATE**. We were completing the same puzzle octogenarians across town did daily, and yet it felt like something that could only be shared between the two of us.

Was it all in my head? Was I being, as 20 across suggested, too **TRUSTING**? Would this moment only last as long as this puzzle? We had completed about half of it so far. What would happen when it was done? Or worse, what if we weren't able to complete it? What if we never figured out *Woody Guthrie's "\_\_\_ Got No Home"* or its connecting clue *Edge*? Was he the type to walk away and come back to it? Just give up? Or, worst of all, start Googling the answers?

"You seem lost in thought," he said, snapping me back to the present just as he wrote down **ROMANIAN**. "What are you stuck on?"

I skimmed the clues at random for something reasonably challenging. "*Something built on?*" The ones with the question marks always throw me. What, the puzzle creator wasn't sure about it but decided we could figure it out? How is that fair?"

He laughed at that. "If the question mark is done right, it usually ends up being a pun."

"Add that to the list of reasons I don't like puns," I muttered, turning back to the clue and searching for some wordplay in it. Could it be a *block*? That felt too literal to be a pun. Something to do with construction? *Brick* and *stone* didn't fit with the rest of the puzzle.

I felt his eyes on me as I kept trying to work it out. I checked to see if the connecting clues would give me any hints. We had an N in the center thanks to **DONAS** and a T from the end of **GNAT** which could mean...

I stole the pencil out of his hand and wrote in **TENET**, then glanced over for approval. He grinned. "See? A pun." He looked at the clues again. "Or this one - *Head of Versailles*? How about **TETE**?"

"It's like a club where you need to know all of the secret codes. And French, apparently."

"I can teach you the secret codes. The French might be a little more difficult," he said, smiling. "There are some words that crossword authors love to use. Err, eerie, epee," he told me, skimming the clues for places to use them.

"Sure enough, *Pennsylvania Great Lake*." I pointed. He gave me a look that said *see?* and filled in **ETLE**.

Just because we were right about Erie didn't mean we had a perfect track record. It quickly became apparent that **HAPPY**, as right as it might seem, didn't fit as a five letter word for *Cheerful*.

He was kind through these blunders, both to me and himself. He clearly cared, certainly more than I did, but he also understood that part of the game was figuring out how everything fit together. It was fun to watch him go back to a wrong word and see what it had to be instead.

We continued on. The farther we went, the more questions I asked. Sometimes I was genuinely curious, and sometimes I just wanted to keep him talking. "What are the rules around acronyms? Technically any set of three or four letters is probably an acronym for something." We had just added **ENS** to the puzzle.

"You're not wrong. There are established dictionaries that puzzle constructors use, but some acronyms are better than others. And sometimes they put new ones in there. I did a puzzle recently where an answer was 'SMH' for, like, unbelievable or something. You wouldn't have seen that five years ago."

"You do a lot of these." It was part statement and part question.

He looked sheepish. "Lately, yeah. I can get really into things like this—I had a jigsaw puzzle phase and a sudoku phase. And, of course, I was too into Wordle for a minute."

"Weren't we all?"

"Something about putting all the pieces together is just so satisfying."

I looked up at him and said, "I can understand that." I was still trying to put some pieces together myself.

With this admission on his part, I decided to test my luck a bit further. As I was leaning in to write **BEAU**, I brushed my foot against his. It was almost subtle enough to be seen as an accident, but I kept my leg stretched against his for a long second. He looked at me for a moment before deliberately pressing back into me. We stayed like that, barely suppressing smiles as we moved on to the next clue.

Before I knew it, we had filled in boxes across most of the grid. A few stragglers remained. They had originally seemed tricky, but filling in the connecting letters helped us get **SPIRIT**, **OTCS**, and **ETON**.

We only had a few boxes left, all under 44 down. "Okay, we decided on **NOT IN** for 58 across, we have NO from **INTIMATE** and **IS NOT**," I recap. We were left with **\_NO\_I**.

"You were pretty sure **AOKI** is spelled with an AO. I think *papal hat* is **ORALE**, there's nothing else that would make sense there."

I filled in the L and looked at the puzzle. "So that's it? *Lizard* is **ANOLI**?"

He leaned towards me and looked too. "Yeah, I think that's it. We did it!"

The euphoria of having finished the crossword was tampered down by the feeling that it was over. We had no reason to stay here, no more words to worry over. It was done.

I read through it all again, making sure there wasn't anything we missed or any answers that didn't seem to fit anymore. I saw him scribbling something at the bottom of the puzzle, but I tried not to watch too closely. Maybe he was signing his work? Or calculating his time? Was that what serious puzzlers did?

None of our answers seemed amiss, or so I thought, until he said, "Wait, there's one more bonus question." He pointed to the bottom of the page where ten boxes were drawn in. Next to his boxes, as 60 across, he wrote **YOUR PHONE NUMBER**.

"Would you do the honors of finishing this puzzle?" he asked, holding the pencil out.

"I didn't know they did bonus questions. Or that we were allowed to write numbers in." I took the pencil and pretended to think over what the answer could be.

"Must be a special edition. Something new they're trying, maybe?"

"Well, lucky for them, I know this one," I said, writing in my cell. "There. Now I guess we're really done."

"For now," he said with a knowing smile.



**60. YOUR PHONE NUMBER**