

One Down

by Dan Katz

Special Thanks To Craig Kasper

(10/8/02 Revision)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ALEX
JESSICA
SERENA

(A coffeehouse, off the beaten path in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The stage is focused on a small table with two nonmatching chairs. The décor is eclectic and the music is "hip" indie rock. ALEX sits in one of the chairs, backpack on the floor. He is engrossed in the New York Times crossword puzzle. JESSICA, a waitress, approaches him.)

JESSICA

Morning. Have you been helped?

ALEX

My usual's fine, thanks.

JESSICA

Actually, I'm new here. But I can try guessing if you really want me to.

ALEX

(looking up from the newspaper)

Oh, I'm sorry, you sounded like Tiffany. I didn't realize they were hiring any new staff.

JESSICA

It's okay. I'll try not to hold it against you.

ALEX

That's very kind of you.

JESSICA

Well, I promised myself I wouldn't alienate any of the clientele on my first day. *(pulls out a pad and pen)* So why don't you tell me this usual of yours so I can commit it to memory?

ALEX

Right. Medium cappuccino, two sugars, easy on the foam.

JESSICA

(jotting this down)

Medium cap, two sugars, light foam. *(looks at pad for a moment)* So what you want is a cappuccino, but sweeter and less foamy.

ALEX

That's right.

JESSICA

Can I propose something revolutionary?

ALEX

Start drinking lattes? Not so revolutionary, actually. I get that suggestion every time I order coffee.

JESSICA

Oh, good. For a second there, I thought I might have had an original idea.

ALEX

Honestly, I see where you're coming from, but it's just not the same. It's this weird preference I have. I'm picky, I guess.

JESSICA

Whatever you say. One cappuccino in latte's clothing coming up.

ALEX

Thanks. *(She begins to leave)* Hey... This might be a weird question, but do you follow college football at all?

JESSICA

A little, when it's actually being played. Not so much in the middle of April.

ALEX

I just need an six letter word for "Big Ten team." Starts with I-L-L.

JESSICA

Oh, "Illini." University of Illinois.

ALEX

See, that's what I thought it must be. I just don't recognize this actor's name on the crossing entry...

JESSICA

(sits in the other chair)

Do you do these often?

ALEX
(surprised)

Do you randomly sit with your customers often?

JESSICA
(starting to get up)

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude--

ALEX
Oh no, it's okay, I could use the company. But yeah, I solve the New York Times puzzle every day. Started a few years ago. I decided I wanted to get faster, so I was going to crack down and start doing crosswords on a regular basis. I did every Times puzzle for three weeks, and from there on it was just routine.

JESSICA
Impressive. I wish I could be that dedicated to something. Look at me, I can't even keep a steady job. This is my fourth waitressing gig in two months.

ALEX
Fourth? What happened to the other ones?

JESSICA
I was fired. I have a bad habit of chatting with customers when I'm supposed to be working.

ALEX
Go figure.

JESSICA
Yeah.

ALEX
Well, actually, this is my job. Crosswords, I mean. I construct them.

JESSICA
Really? For the New York Times?

ALEX
Oh no, no, no, no. You actually have to be talented to get your puzzles accepted by the Times. *(He digs a school paper out of his backpack.)* I construct for the Daily. At Tufts. *(hands her the paper)* Here, take one. I always carry a few spare copies on me.

JESSICA
Thanks. This is today's?

ALEX

Yup. Thursday. Second toughest one of the week... It's supposed to be, anyway. Of course, I can't be sure of how hard it is until Serena solves it.

JESSICA

Serena?

ALEX

My ex-girlfriend. She's late. As usual.

JESSICA

Oh. You're not here alone then.

ALEX

Well, I am right now. I wouldn't be if she'd show up on time for a change. We have a regular appointment, 10am every day. Of course, 10am Serena Standard Time is more like... *(checks watch)* Jesus, it's almost eleven.

JESSICA

Does Serena also have a "usual" I should know about?

ALEX

No, she orders according to mood. Which, given her moods, could be anything on the menu.

JESSICA

Ah, one of *those* ex-girlfriends.

ALEX

Oh, don't get me wrong, I love her to death. She's just a little bit passive-aggressive. The other waitresses have actually gotten the hang of her, I think. If she orders a chai, the coast is clear, but if she gets a mocha latte, they know to leave her alone.

JESSICA

A real mocha latte? Or a cappuccino with sugar, chocolate syrup, and no foam?

ALEX

Very cute.

JESSICA

I'm in a service industry. You get better tips when you try to entertain the customers.

(SERENA enters, disgruntled that her chair is taken.)

SERENA

Well, if I'd realized you had a date, I wouldn't have bothered to show.

ALEX

Oh, no, Serena, hi. This is... uh...

JESSICA

Jessica.

ALEX

Jessica. She's a new waitress. She just started today.

SERENA

(disdainfully)

How nice. Is she going to be sitting in my seat on a regular basis?

ALEX

(getting up quickly)

Go ahead and take mine.

SERENA

(she sits in ALEX's chair)

That's great. *(to ALEX)* So now that the two of us are comfortable, are you going to be getting our drinks?

JESSICA

(standing, ALEX takes her seat)

I can take care of that. Seeing as it's my job and all. *(to SERENA)* What can I get you?

SERENA

Large Bolivian. Black. *(JESSICA glances at ALEX, who shoots her a look and gesture indicating that this order is a bad sign.)*

JESSICA

All righty, I'll have those for you in a minute. It was nice meeting you... *(she thumbs through the paper to find the crossword and check the byline)* Alex. Thanks for the paper.

ALEX

Any time. *(JESSICA exits.)*

SERENA

You know, if you want to pick up women, thrusting your crosswords at them is not necessarily a good opening.

ALEX

I was not trying to "pick her up." She helped me with a clue, and we got to talking.

SERENA

(skeptically)

Mm-hmm.

ALEX

(taking another copy of the paper out of his bag and placing it on the table)
You know, I am capable of having a conversation with a girl that isn't intended to get her into bed.

SERENA

Well, man walked on the moon, I suppose anything's possible. *(She takes the paper and leafs through it.)* I take it you started your puzzle already?

ALEX

Almost done actually.

SERENA

You know, you could have waited for me.

ALEX

Well, I did for a while. Then I got bored.

SERENA

There's that attention span I love.

ALEX

Uh-huh. Where have you been for the last hour, anyway?

SERENA

Well, if you must know, Kevin brought me breakfast in bed this morning.

ALEX

(regretting he asked)

Oh. Right.

SERENA

Of course, there was more bed than breakfast involved...

ALEX

Yeah, okay, I get it. Let's move on.

SERENA

(condescendingly compassionate)

Awww, what's the matter, Alex? Single life escapades not going so well?

ALEX

(lying)

Actually, I happen to be having a very good time. For your information.

SERENA

Well, good. I'd feel guilty if I were having fabulous sex and you weren't.

ALEX

So are you going to do the crossword or what?

SERENA

Whatever you say, tiger.

(SERENA opens to the crossword, takes out a pencil, and starts solving. JESSICA enters with their drinks.)

JESSICA

One black Bolivian, one mangled cappuccino. *(She puts them down.)* Go ahead, taste.

(SERENA sips her coffee without making eye contact. ALEX takes a sip of his.)

ALEX

Hey... this is just how I like it! Not bad for a first try.

JESSICA

Impressed?

ALEX

Very.

JESSICA

Well, you shouldn't be... I asked Tiffany to make your usual. How's the Times puzzle going?

ALEX

I think I'm as far as I'm going to get. A couple of missing letters, both crossings of proper names I don't recognize.

JESSICA

Bummer... You could guess.

ALEX

I don't like to guess letters. I usually don't get around to checking the real answers so I assume my guesses are right. Then the same clue shows up in another puzzle, and I get it wrong... I spent a month thinking an agee was an S-shaped curve. *(chuckles to himself, then notices Jessica's not laughing)* As opposed to ogee. *(Silence.)* Forget it. It's just better I leave them blank and not worry about it.

JESSICA

Sounds a little paranoid to me... but to each his own. (*brandishes the paper*) I took a look at yours. I liked "Home of the brave" as a clue for "tepee." That was cute.

SERENA

Excuse me. I haven't finished this yet.

JESSICA

Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you'd have gotten that far by now. It's like the third entry-- (*SERENA looks up and administers a death glare.*) Would you look at that, I think I'm needed at another table. (*She exits.*)

SERENA

For the record, we're not tipping her.

ALEX

She seems really nice. Don't you think you might be overre--

SERENA

No, I'm not. (*looking at the puzzle and mocking her voice*) "It's like the third entry." For her information, I happen to be working from the lower right. What is this clue in, Welsh? What does "culms of munj" mean?

ALEX

Oh, that's "sirki." S-I-R-K-I. It's a really obscure word; there's no good way to clue it other than the dictionary definition.

SERENA

The *dictionary* definition is "culms of munj"?

ALEX

Yup.

SERENA

And they pay you to do this?

ALEX

Not very much. They get their money's worth.

SERENA

This isn't filling in right... Oh, "Captain James" is "Kirk," not "Cook." (*looks up*) Figures you'd penalize those of us more familiar with European history than Star Trek.

ALEX

(*as if quoting a motto*)

Ambiguity is the crossword constructor's best friend.

SERENA

Okay. That's another line you want to keep out of the pickup conversations.

(SERENA returns her attention to the crossword. ALEX looks at his, but is mostly concerned with SERENA. They are both silent for a short time.)

ALEX

Serena?

SERENA

(without looking up)

Alex?

ALEX

Do you ever... miss me at all? I mean, you know. Us.

SERENA

(looking up)

Alex. Are we going to have this conversation again?

ALEX

Well, I was just wondering--

SERENA

Maybe I was imagining this, but didn't you just say five minutes ago that you were happy being single?

ALEX

I'm not unhappy, exactly. I was just thinking about the way things used to be, and I started thinking, it's been a little while, maybe we could try again...

SERENA

Alex, desperation is very unbecoming on you. You should take that as advice.

ALEX

All right, I just thought I'd ask.

SERENA

Well, don't think it again. I've moved on, Alex. You should too. *(sighs)* You said we should keep doing the crossword thing, and I said okay, even though I knew things were going to get awkward. Which in case you haven't noticed, they have. I don't want to have to change my mind.

(JESSICA enters and taps ALEX on the shoulder.)

JESSICA

Um... Alex, if you have a minute, I've got a question about your puzzle.

ALEX

To be honest, this is a bad time.

SERENA

Oh, no, go ahead. I find it really amusing when you alternate between flirting with the waitress and then telling me you need me.

ALEX

A very bad time, actually.

JESSICA

Well, this is kind of important.

ALEX

Not right now. *(to SERENA)* Serena, I don't want to stop eith--

JESSICA

Alex, just give me one minute--

ALEX

It's a goddamn crossword puzzle. It can wait. *(JESSICA is visibly hurt by this. She regains her composure, nods, and exits.)* Sorry about that.

SERENA

Hey, you got rid of her. That's a worth a few points in my book. Is "buss" a word?

ALEX

Don't you ride one to get here every morning?

SERENA

Ha ha. Buss with two S's.

ALEX

What's the clue?

SERENA

"Display of affection."

ALEX

Yeah, that's right. It means "kiss." *(Beat.)* Geez, I used "buss" and "sirki" in the same puzzle?

SERENA

Yup. And they cross each other.

ALEX

Ugh, that's horrible. It better have damn good theme entries.

SERENA

It's a quote; I don't have much of it yet. I think the second part ends in "come back."

(ALEX has a realization and is momentarily frozen. He snaps out of it and speaks:)

ALEX

What's the clue for *(counts in his head)* 37 Down?

SERENA

Um... Woody Allen's "Everyone Says [blank]". Well, that's "I Love You." I can work from there, thanks.

ALEX

Uhhh... Serena, why don't you forget about the puzzle for a minute. Let's talk some more.

SERENA

Right. Because that was going amazingly well.

ALEX

I just... all of a sudden, I remember writing this puzzle, and it's just not very good.

SERENA

Oh, don't sell yourself short, Alex. Crosswords are something you're actually fairly good at. Save the self-deprecation for your real failings.

ALEX

You don't understand...

(JESSICA, passing the table, spills the contents of her tray onto the crossword in front of SERENA. She immediately jumps up to avoid the coffee, but still gets some on her blouse.)

SERENA

What the hell is wrong with you? You clumsy... *(restrains herself)* All right. I am going to go wash this off. When I get back, this mess had better be cleaned up. Or I'll have your job. *(She storms off.)*

JESSICA

I don't think she'd want my job. She doesn't strike me as a people person.

ALEX

Perhaps I'm just naturally suspicious, but I have a feeling that wasn't an accident.

JESSICA

Hm. Imagine that. Can I ask you my question about your puzzle now?

ALEX

Yeah, I guess. Listen, I should apologize for all the obscure definitions in this one; it's kind of out of character for me.

JESSICA

Actually I was wondering about the "Serena I need you, please come back" bit.

ALEX

Ah. You noticed that.

JESSICA

Yup. The "Moreover, I love you" in the downs was a nice touch too.

ALEX

I'm going to kill the editor at the Daily. They weren't supposed to print this puzzle. I wrote it in a moment of weakness. (*JESSICA looks at him skeptically.*) Well, technically it was about an hour of weakness. But you know what I mean.

JESSICA

So how did it get in the paper?

ALEX

Well, I was originally planning to have it printed. I thought Serena would solve it and think it was sweet. And not, say, psychotic. But then reality set in, I called them and I said, "Don't print it," and they said they wouldn't print it. That was weeks ago. And here it is in today's paper. I swear, it's like they staff the office with monkeys.

JESSICA

Can I ask a random question?

ALEX

It's a free country.

JESSICA

What do you see in her?

ALEX

What do you mean? Sure, I'll admit she's a bit of a handful...

JESSICA

That's funny, you seem to use the phrase "bit of a handful" in the same context where I'd use "controlling bitch."

ALEX

Watch it. That's my ex you're talking about.

JESSICA

And if this morning's little chat is any indication, she was getting the better end of the deal.

ALEX

You've been eavesdropping on us?

JESSICA

Oh yeah, did I forget to mention? I was fired for that once too.

ALEX

Well, if you must know, she's... I don't know. We're just right for each other.

JESSICA

Do you want to convert that into terms that actually mean something?

ALEX

We click. I mean, I can barely find a woman who shares one interest with me; Serena and I are practically soulmates. She listens to Jeff Buckley and Heather Nova. She reads Tom Fleming. And she does crosswords! Do you know how hard it is to meet somebody who's willing to do crosswords with you on a daily basis?

JESSICA

Has it ever occurred to you that your interest in crosswords might not be the end-all factor in compatibility?

ALEX

Look. You're an attractive woman, so maybe you wouldn't understand this, but I don't have people tearing down my door. It's not like I have much choice in the matter.

JESSICA

Maybe you do. Maybe you're just letting this obsession over the pushy chick blind you to the possible alternatives.

ALEX

Look, obsession or not, she's going to be back any minute, and she's not going to be happy with you. I'm sorry to be brusque about this, but I think it would be best if you got away from the table.

JESSICA

I understand. Just do me a favor... *(she kneels and looks into his eyes)* I don't know you very well, but you seem like a really good guy in a really bad situation. And I think you'd do yourself a huge favor if you gave yourself some space from this girl. I don't expect you to do it, but it would be great if you could just think about it. Seriously. *(She kisses him on the cheek and rises.)* Sorry to bug you.

(JESSICA begins to exit and runs straight into SERENA, who is entering. Her blouse has been dried, but there is an obvious stain.)

SERENA

Well, if it isn't Miss Butterfingers. Guess what, sweetie? I had a word with the manager on my way back from the ladies' room. I think he wants to have a talk with you.

JESSICA

Oh well. *(to ALEX)* Fifth time's the charm, they say. *(She exits, as SERENA sits.)*

SERENA

I swear, the nerve of that girl.

ALEX

I'm sure it was just an accident.

SERENA

She's clearly got something against me. Who knows, maybe she's actually interested in you. Lord knows why...

ALEX

Hey. That's a little harsh.

SERENA

I don't want to disappoint you, Alex, but the average woman is not looking for a man who obsesses over his ex-girlfriend and asks her to reconsider their breakup on a weekly basis.

ALEX

Look. I believe in being honest about these things. You know that. I was just telling you how I felt.

SERENA

I realize that, but I don't need to hear how you feel every fucking day! I'm sorry if I'm pissed off, but I've got coffee stains on my blouse, I've been attacked by an overamorous waitress, and I've had to put up with you clinging all over me for, what, the fourth week in a row? At this point I just want to finish the stupid crossword and get out of here.

ALEX

Hey. I'd appreciate it if you didn't call my crosswords stupid. You like crosswords...

SERENA

A trait which I think you have blown out of proportion! Yes, I like crosswords. They're fun now and then. That doesn't mean I want to solve one every morning at ten on the hour.

ALEX

Eleven.

SERENA

What?

ALEX

Forget it.

SERENA

I do these crosswords for you because I know they mean a lot to you. That doesn't mean they mean a lot to me. I am here doing these puzzles because of you, Alex. I just hope you fucking appreciate it.

(There is an awkward silence before ALEX speaks.)

ALEX

Well, you can stop doing them now.

SERENA

Excuse me?

ALEX

We're done. We don't have to do this any more.

SERENA

Alex, if you can cool it on the overemotional speeches, I'm willing to keep putting up with it--

ALEX

You don't get it. I don't want you to have to "put up" with it. That's not the way this is supposed to work. And I just don't want to keep doing this if that's what it means to you. No more crosswords in the mornings. In fact... *(he takes a deep breath)* To be honest, I don't think I want to see you for a while.

SERENA

(incensed)

What the hell?! I waste half my morning here with you, do half of your stupid "sirki" crossword, put up with your groupie waitress pouring cappuccino all over me, and suddenly you go from wanting to get back together to not wanting to see me? *(She stands.)* Well, guess what, pal. You want it, you've got it. I have no problem staying away

from you, Alex, no problem at all. Just do me a favor. Don't call me up crying when you miss me, because you're not taking this one back. It's done. No more coffee, no more whimpering, and no more fucking "culms" of fucking "munj"!! Goodbye!

(SERENA storms out, as ALEX stares after her, slightly dazed. JESSICA enters and takes SERENA's seat.)

JESSICA

Well, it sounds like that went well.

ALEX

In a Hindenburg type of way, yeah. How did it go with your manager?

JESSICA

He seemed to understand. He fired me very politely.

ALEX

Oh. I'm sorry. You know, he'd probably recognize me, I'm here often enough. I could talk to him for you...

JESSICA

Nah. I'm on a roll at this point. I think I may try to work at every coffeehouse in Boston over the course of two months. Maybe I can get into Guinness. So are you going to be okay?

ALEX

I don't know. I'm kind of numb at the moment. I don't think it'll really hit me until tomorrow. Around ten when I show up here and have nobody to solve my crossword.

JESSICA

Well, you could always bring me a copy again.

ALEX

But you won't be here. You were fired.

JESSICA

I won't be *working* here.

ALEX

I don't follow.

JESSICA

Alex, this may be a foreign concept to you... but a girl-- a girl who is not Serena-- is currently asking you out on a date. And I'm no psychiatrist, but I'm guessing it would be pretty good for your mental state to take her up on it.

ALEX

So you want to have coffee with me?

JESSICA

Yes. And do crosswords. And if we're feeling really crazy, we might even talk to each other.

ALEX

Do you mean it?

JESSICA

Oh, for Christ's sa-- Yes, I mean it, provided you don't ask me to verify it again.

ALEX

Well... You know, based on the way I've acted this morning, I can't say I have any idea why you'd want to go out with me. I've been kind of an ass. And a wuss. Sort of a wuss-ass combo package.

JESSICA

What can I say? You're cute. And I bet you'll be even cuter once we build you a spine. So... Tomorrow at ten?

ALEX

(after considering)

Ten. Which, by the way, is actually ten o' clock. Alex Standard Time.

JESSICA

I think I can remember that. Oh, by the way... that actor you couldn't get? Eric Blore. He used to do movies with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

ALEX

Oh good. That's what I have. *(double takes)* How did you know that was the word I needed? Did you do the Times puzzle today?

JESSICA

Actually, I wrote it. *(hands him a card)* Jessica Strausberg. *(She stands.)* I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be looking forward to it. *(She exits.)*

ALEX

(checking the author's name against the card)

So you did. *(He smiles and looks over the puzzle. After musing for a moment, he picks up his pencil.)* You know... This might be an A...

(Fade out.)