

Signs, or One Down

By Frank A. Lauro

I.

They both know how close to the end they are. She is ready to accept it. He denies it. The distance between their positions is obvious, and easy to prove if we take a moment to examine the work that each of them has each been doing.

The building blocks, the letters and words, of her puzzles -- the very ones that perch below the "Jumble" and divert you daily -- act as bas-relief to her sense of resignation. *Fini. Crux. Void. Nihil. Utter. Broken. Remnant. Separate. Terminus.* They fit together, across and down and down and across, far too deliberately to be anything but a preoccupation. Her editor asks, jokingly, if things are all right at home, citing Freud and the subconscious. Inner workings. Signs. White squares to be filled; black ones as border and block; tiny numbers in upper left-hand corners; straight lines, vague clues, and grim resolve. If you're the type to let things pile up, look back a few months -- Octoberish -- and see for yourself.

His work, his mark, is as parallax. On your next lunch date or late-night take-out urge, keep an eye out for it. Watch for expressions of desperation in tiny red print as you crack open each lemony shell. *The dark period in your life will soon become illumined by hope. Or, Love is the conqueror, eternally victorious.* You might even have your dessert darkened by a *Please don't leave me.* Forget about tall, dark strangers or money in your future or the value of friendship this season. And don't try the numbers on the back as lottery winners, either. They are, without exception, combinations of numerical minutiae pertinent only to their life, the one they will share for just a short while longer: the month and day of their anniversary, his birthday; hers; her measurements; the room number from their honeymoon; and so forth. *To persevere is to live; to resign is to succumb;* [flip side] 3 31 6 12 12 9 36 28 38. Collect them all.

Not a difficult situation to assess at all, really.

II.

Jump ahead to January: it's over.

Documents have been signed, notarized, and filed. Children have been informed, counseled, and divided, if not equally. Two doesn't go into three. Property, once consolidated, is now some here, some there, some destroyed, some packed away. All through. And next?

Excerpted from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 18 January 1995:

ACROSS

1. Not together
6. Ipso _____
10. Purple-eyed icon
13. Weak
14. Finished
15. Solitary
17. Strike, backwards?
18. Charged particles
19. See 10 Down
20. Dickensian monogram
21. On fire
22. _____ Man
23. Requires
24. Treated like _____
25. Subdued
26. Keen
28.

ACROSS DOWN

1. Post
2. Discomfort
3. Head or back
4. Small state
5. Royal treatment (Init.)
6. "Curses! _____ again!"
7. Eschew
8. Coppers or common?
9. Belonging to a Rough Rider (Init.)
10. Last place
11. Bumbling
12. Without value
15. _____ Bundy
16. Star of Fame and VR5
23. Another small state
24. Fading fast
25.

...and so forth.

Similarly: excerpted from little white paper rectangles found in certain restaurants all around Chicago and its outlying areas at about the same time:

The person sitting directly across from you probably doesn't love you at all

You may as well start cheating now

Love is for fools to feel and lawyers to exploit

Sally is a filthy fucking whore slut bitch who likes it in the ass with no lube

Im drunk and; better then you and youre ugly date [sic]

My son doesn't even know where he is right now

This cookie has touched the dripping dick of your faggot slope waiter who has AIDS

Help me

...and so forth.

III.

She has a book, her first, coming out this Labor Day. *Crossword Buzzword Cussword: The Ultimate Guide to the Penultimate Pastime*. The name on the front will match the one on her birth certificate, the one she has back, the one that still feels strange to her. Her editor has become her agent, and more. The girls call him Uncle Todd and look forward to his chocolate chip pancakes on Sunday mornings. The advance is ample. A new city awaits, eastward, far away. At the last minute, she changes her mind about sending the requisite postcard the day she decides to relocate: it can, and does, wait until after the move.

He doesn't scream or curse as he tears it up slowly, exactly four times, across and down, exactly eight days later. His old job has long since been taken away; charges dropped; extenuating circumstances cited and sufficient. The new temp job keeps him awake and busy and almost pays the rent. He lives, with his son, in a small third-story walk-up where paint peels, light bulbs fizzle, and things smell. The boy grows, almost as quickly as he becomes increasingly quiet and withdrawn. He lets the boy watch TV alone with his Lunchables and stands in the other room to look out the window where he sees the same rusted-out car, a random neighbor's, every night. Old, beat-up, obsolete. But still, in each of its windows, the same cardboard sign. Red marker, big letters, two words: NO RADIO. Shorthand, in a way. *Don't break my windows. Don't come in. There's no point. I know I don't know you and you don't know me, but please, please heed me.*

He tears the cardboard backing from one of the boy's notebooks. In black laundry marker, then, carefully, evenly, big: NO LOVE. He looks at it for a long moment, then pokes a hole in each upper corner and looks around for some twine.