The Word Eater

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THE WORD EATER

Hannah understood why Samuel kept his desk so tidy and why his first grade classmates picked on him. He was smarter than they were, his clothes didn’t fit, and the white wooden siding on his house had been treated like notebook paper. Hand-painted words lined every plank. Airplane, James, atheist. Different colors, some words fresh, some weathered.

Hannah made the sign of the cross on her chest. She stuffed four jellybeans into her cheek and a handful in her pocket and turned off her car. Dogs of various proportions sniffed her legs in the driveway. She swallowed the candy and licked her lips.

Samuel’s grandmother sat at an easel in her clay yard, the house behind her shaded by a pecan tree. Even in sunlight, she looked ashen. She didn’t seem surprised by the drop-in visit.

“I was hoping we could talk, Ms. …” Hannah had forgotten the woman’s name.

“Pal. Short for palabra, Spanish for word. Gets you to palindrome, too, if you wait long enough.”

Hannah relaxed, said her name. Palindromes were kind of her thing.

“Spelled right?”

Hannah nodded.

“Most things end where they started.” Pal coughed over her shoulder. Her head jutted forward as each bark cracked and popped in her throat. Hannah looked away. Face-shaped knots on the tree trunk scowled. The house was painted every shade of a Crayola 24-pack. Its second story leaned heavy on the front porch, which was surrounded by overgrown rhododendron. Two more dogs emerged from a hole in the purple lattice under the front porch.
Hannah rocked from one leg to the other. “Did Samuel tell you he won our class spelling bee yesterday? He’s very bright.”

“I never signed on to raise a grandkid.” Pal sat with her legs splayed ahead, like they wouldn’t bend at the knees. Hannah wondered where Samuel was and when he would be back. The conversation might actually be easier with him present. Pal picked up a whining brindle and flopped it over her shoulder. The dog hung limp, resigned. Hannah put her hand in her pocket and pulled it out empty, then reconsidered and retrieved another jelly bean. She turned to the house and slipped it beside her teeth and pressed her cheek into her jaw, forming the sugar against her molars.

“Aren’t you a mess of wet feathers,” Pal said. “Sit.” She nodded to a plastic chair. Hannah dragged it closer. She sat with her purse in her lap and crossed her legs, skillfully tucking one thigh under the other. She had unbuttoned her slacks, her last pair close to fitting, before lunch. She was about to speak when a beat bounced off the house and back again. A green sedan with kids sitting in open windows blew past, a blur in the gaps of a cornstalk fence line. All of the dogs except the one on Pal’s shoulder ran under the house.

“Slow down!” Pal shouted.

“Freak!” a passenger shouted back.

Pal coughed until her eyes watered. Hannah squeezed her purse. She didn’t support Pal’s line of work, but she hated to see anyone called names. Another prayer to add to her list. Her neighbor’s dementia; the grocery clerk’s mother’s dental implants; the fourth grade teacher’s broken femur, for which Hannah’s class had made the most glittery card; the fact that her classroom art supplies had been depleted by October; her free-lunch kids and the ones stuck stealing because their parents were too proud to send in the form; shooters. Hannah prayed morning, night, and noon. Every day at lunchtime she lined up her students to walk to the cafeteria. She turned out the classroom lights like every teacher, but before she opened the door, she told the class to bow their heads and silently
Nelle prayed for each one.

Pal zig-zagged her paint brush, adding colors at random, not bothering to rinse the brush between.

“Has Samuel mentioned any trouble at school?” Hannah said.

“You hungry?”

Yes. But Hannah shook her head. “There was a fight today, on the playground.”

“Does it start with an ‘E’?” Pal looped a cursive “E” on her canvas.

Elliott Parker. Hannah wasn’t supposed to report other kids’ names, just the incidents. Elliott Parker tormented Samuel. Samuel preferred books to people and mostly kept to himself, but he didn’t back down from a fight when necessary, and it frequently was. That morning at recess was the worst yet. Hannah tried to keep an eye out, but the playground was enormous. A panicked student led her, running, to the spot behind the tree where Elliott had Samuel pinned to the ground, knees to chest, and was shoving leaves into his mouth. Samuel had scratched Elliott’s face and arms but was now still.

“How does that taste, Pentagram Sam?”

“Elliott, he’s not breathing!” Hannah pulled him off. Samuel sat up, coughing and spitting leaves.

“He called me a bully,” Elliott said, panting.

“He said my parents don’t love me enough to live with me,” Samuel said.

They were both right, and Hannah was helpless. She patted Samuel’s back, furious and brokenhearted. “That’s no reason to hurt each other. Office, both of you.” Samuel leaned against her as she led them inside, squeezing his fingertips into her soft hip. She slipped him an M&M and motioned a silent shush. She hung all she could on his smile. Almost two years into teaching, straight out of college and a state away from anything familiar, she found every day more challenging. Her kids were young enough to wet their pants but old enough to do real harm. She called students’ homes every day, but it didn’t make
a difference.

“Your, profession, takes its toll on Samuel.”

Pal’s cheek flinched, but she didn’t interrupt the swirl. She stared at the center of the canvas.

“I don’t mean to intrude. I just wonder if we might work together.”

“It’s definitely an ‘E’ word.” Pal spoke slowly, in time with her pattern. “What trouble do you have with a word that starts with ‘E’?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Exhaustion?” Hannah laughed as she said it. Pal didn’t smile back.

“No.” Pal stared her right in the teeth, and Hannah knew she knew. She slipped her hand in her pocket but didn’t dare pull out candy. She wanted to list the bad foods she didn’t eat daily, all the fast food temptations she resisted. She made healthy meals. She packed salads for lunch, just to hear the other teachers call her a rabbit. And she rationed. She allotted herself a certain number of pieces, based on the type of candy, every morning. When her pockets were empty, that was it. It was her little award system, like a sticker chart for her class. It helped her maintain a good attitude.

But some days she cheated. She found herself expertly adept at rationalizing extensions. When she gave in, she let herself chew and swallow and chew until her stomach refused. She savored her moments of failure, of pleasure. No one was keeping tabs. Outside of school she was alone. She tracked her senile neighbor’s trips to and from the mailbox, but he didn’t know her name. She had been thrilled when the school nurse invited her to church one Sunday. Community. But the congregation spent the morning congratulating themselves for hitting their monthly visitor quota. “You’re number twelve!” they said, and nothing more. After the service, she ate all four versions of their potato salad and never went back.

“Say it,” Pal said.

“Eat.”

Pal shook her head again. She grabbed a brush and paint
and walked to the house.

Hannah followed across the sunburned yard, up the paint-
ed porch, through the heavy door. The front room was dim
and smelled like a brush fire. The wooden floor gave under-
foot. Pal closed the dogs out, but the words seeped in: ordinary,
Mexico, telephone. They wrapped the interior walls and flowed
onto the ceiling. Hannah’s eyes sought clearings. Samuel’s bed-
room was across the hall. His bed was made and a school library
book lay on the nightstand. She wanted to leave an “Exception-
al!” sticker on his door.

Pal sat at the kitchen table and motioned for Hannah to
join her. She reached for a basket of corn husks at the center of
the table and counted out five. She handed Hannah the paint-
brush and husks. “Write it. One letter on each leaf.”

Hannah sucked her cheeks between her teeth and painted
an “E,” dark blue against a pale husk, in perfect print. The col-
or bled into the creases, blurring the letter’s edges. She didn’t
know what came next. Pal coughed into her shirt, then lined
up the husks before Hannah, a card dealer’s invitation. Enjoy.
Erase. Exact. Hannah set down the brush. “I don’t know what
you want.”

Pal handed Hannah a bowl, homemade and palm-sized.
She ran her finger across the interior. “You’re empty, little
palindrome.”

At the sound of the word, Hannah felt the expanding shell
of herself ready to both float away and to smash through the
kitchen chair. What release, to be seen.

“I’ll eat it. $5 a letter, an extra $10 if you want a replace-
ment.”

Hannah filled in the rest of the husks. Pal blew them dry.
She stacked and rolled the leaves tightly, a fat, crude cigarette
with letter stuffing. She told Hannah to hold one end, then lit
the other with a kitchen match.

“Catch the ash in the bowl. Don’t drop any.”

Hannah did as Pal said. The husks burned slowly. The
leaves glowed red, then charred to a thin black and fizzled out.
Pal crushed the burnt parts into the bowl. The warmth expanded across Hannah’s palm. She didn’t take her eyes off the roll. Pal restarted the smolder. She coughed between match strikes. Each cough nudged the table closer into Hannah’s belly. She sat fixed and watched the husks go black. The burn was steady, consuming. It passed, little by little, across the hand-rolled letters, erasing emptiness, ash filling the bowl’s void.

Pal struck the final match. Swollen veins pressed against her thin skin. The burn crept up to Hannah’s fingertips. Pal licked hers and pinched it out. She mashed the remainder in the bowl, then scooped up the dust and plopped it on her tongue. Her face turned sour. She wet her fingers, swiped the bowl, then licked again until the soot was gone.

Hannah’s own tongue felt dry. “Water?”

Pal scrunched one eye shut. She smacked her tongue a few times and shook her head. “Replacement?”

Hannah didn’t know what to say until the word rose from her throat. “Visible.” Visible at school, at church. Seen by the people she supported. Noticed.

Pal nodded, then coughed so hard she bent over and held her head between her knees. Hannah filled a glass of water, took a sip, and handed it to Pal. Smoke clouded the room. Hannah didn’t feel changed. She felt a migraine swelling under her skull. Her anxiety returned. She felt silly for going along with the magic act. She hadn’t discouraged the process; she had joined it. She needed a way out. Pal’s coughing subsided. She stood and shuffled a few steps to lean against the kitchen doorframe.

“I should go,” Hannah said.

Pal found one of the few spaces left on her walls, alongside the door hinges, and painted in Hannah’s replacement word. Her script was sloppy and the edges were rough, but the word looked striking in blue, and permanent in a way Hannah hadn’t expected. Visible was an entry in the catalogue, beside distance and Dr. Marlow.

“You paint the replacement words on the walls, too?
“Only the replacements,” Pal said. “The rest are gone.”

Hannah read the room in disbelief. The more she tried to focus, the more the letters around her swirled. “Who would choose breast cancer as a replacement?”

“Woman thought if her cancer came back, it would clear up her husband’s leukemia.” Pal sat on the couch and closed her eyes. “It did.”

*Luck, Toyota, restaurant.* Hannah surveyed the gradients of hope and felt her muscles give up their pull. A dog scratched at the door. Pal spread a blanket across her lap. Sunk into the couch, Pal looked shrunken, vulnerable. She coughed into her shoulder. Someone should have read her a story, pulled the covers to her chin, prayed for her, if that mattered. Puppies whined outside. The sound grew louder until it became childlike, human. From the porch, Hannah heard a voice read the door, sound out *balance.* Samuel charged in, swinging his backpack. The daylight exposed Hannah, made her feel like she’d been caught naked.

Samuel stopped still. “Ms. Marshall?” His shirt was torn from the fight just hours before.

Hannah knelt but didn’t hug him. “I just dropped by to visit with your grandmother.”

“She’s getting visible,” Pal said, from the couch.

“You’ve been burning?” Samuel said. Hannah hesitated, then nodded.

Samuel smiled, revealing four tooth gaps, top and bottom. Hannah took his hand and pointed to the walls. “Show me your word.”