

The Weight of Lead

Will liked letters because they were usually honest.

A lowercase *a* did not pretend to be an *f*. An *s* stayed an *s*. If you knew the cases and kept your hands steady, the letters did what they were told.

On the night of July 4, 1776, that felt less certain.

The print shop was thick with heat. Sweat stuck Will's shirt to his back. The room smelled of metal, lamp smoke, and ink sharp enough to sting his nose. Not long before, Mr. Dunlap had come in with a folded manuscript and told them Congress wanted copies by morning.

"No mistakes," he had said.

Will was thirteen, and most nights he got the smaller jobs. Tonight every line mattered.

He picked up the composing stick and began.

One by one, he lifted letters from their compartments and set them in place backward so they would print the right way on the page. Outside, Philadelphia was still awake. Wheels scraped over cobblestones. Voices rose and fell beyond the window.

When he reached the second paragraph, he slowed.

He knew these words already, or at least the shape of them. He had heard them all week in taverns and in the street, always in the voices of men speaking to other men, as if the whole city belonged to them.

He set the line carefully.

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

He paused and looked at the letters pinched tight in the metal stick.

Self-evident.

It was the kind of word meant to stop an argument before it started. A word that seemed to assume truth should be plain once someone important said it.

He pressed his thumb against the edge of the stick and kept going.

...that all men are created equal...

A bead of sweat slid off his chin and hit the back of his hand.

His fingers tightened, then slipped. The tiny lead *q* dropped, struck the floor, and disappeared into the dark between the boards.

Will sucked in a breath. “Blast.”

Across the room, Mr. Dunlap said, “No mistakes.”

“I know, sir.”

Will got down on his knees, feeling along the cracks in the floor while sweat dripped off his nose. For one sick second he thought the letter was gone for good. Then his fingertip found it, cool and dull in the dark. He stood, wiped it on his apron, and fitted it back into place, staring at the word *equal* longer than he meant to.

Will was not free, not exactly. He was apprenticed to the shop for seven more years, tied there by contract and by the fact that poor boys did not choose much for themselves. But one day his time would end. He would walk out the front door with his own name and his own trade.

The window near his case had been pushed open, though the air outside was no cooler. Through it Will could see the alley between the shop and the tavern next door. A boy stepped into view carrying firewood.

Will knew him a little. His name was Isaac. He looked about the same age, thinner, with wrists like sticks and one sleeve torn nearly to the shoulder. Once Will had traded him an apple. Isaac had broken it in half and handed part back so quickly it was almost a reflex.

At least Will's own time in the shop would end one day. He had no idea if Isaac could say the same.

Now Isaac shifted the wood in his arms and glanced up toward the window.

Will looked back at the line in his hand.

...all men are created equal...

Then Isaac bent beneath the load and disappeared through the tavern door.

For a moment Will did not move.

The letters themselves had not changed, but they seemed heavier now. He lifted them out and began again, setting the words from the start.

This time his hands did not shake.

When the line was finished, he locked it into place with the others. Mr. Dunlap rolled fresh ink over the type until it gleamed black in the candlelight.

"Paper," he said.

Will laid the sheet down.

“Now pull.”

The press bar was smooth from years of hands. Will wrapped both hands around it and leaned his weight into the wood. The machine answered with a low groan. He pushed harder until his arms trembled and the pressure left words that could be carried out into the street and read by people he would never know.

“Enough.”

Will let go. Mr. Dunlap lifted the frame, and together they peeled the sheet back.

There it was.

No longer backward. No longer scattered in trays. The words stood clear and black on the page.

Will read the line again.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...

Standing there in his stained apron, with the alley dark beyond the window, he knew the sentence was not true. He could still see Isaac’s wrists under the wood.

It felt strange to print a lie so carefully. But the letters had done what they were told, and the words were on paper now.

Mr. Dunlap handed him the fresh-printed broadside by two corners.

“Hang it to dry.”

Will crossed the room and clipped the page to the line overhead. It swayed a little in the candlelight. He looked up at it and thought of Isaac in the tavern kitchen.

The page shifted, and the fresh black words flashed in the candlelight.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...

The ink was still wet.