

The Sharp Edge of the E

by Grace Chung

The letter *e* is the smallest thing that I ever held which felt like a weapon.

In the cellar of a print shop in Baltimore, the calendar read January, 1777. I stopped, wondering what could possibly happen in two hundred forty-nine years. The iron press exhaled clouds of cold breath, and the black ink in its well had thickened overnight into something like mud. The rag in my hand scraped the ink to wake it up, more or less silently.

Baltimore sleeps under a thick blanket of snow. My aunt Mary Katharine Goddard and I, her thirteen-year-old niece, were committing what men might call treason. She referred to it as *the work*.

She was the one who got the order from the Continental Congress. She would print the Declaration again. But with all the signers' names. To show the world who had risked and pledged their lives for some ink on parchment.

My aunt got straight to work.

She put me in charge of the lowercase tray.

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

I know these words. Everyone will soon. I've read them so many times, the words look as if they're spelled wrong. *Equal, Equal*. Just a shape, a sound.

I have to build that sentence myself tonight.

In typesetting, I can't just read the words. Hold each letter on its own, between your fingers, place it in the frame. The letters look wrong. They're backwards, a mirror image. The sentences are reverse before they become "true."

I set the line until the letter block in a word, *e* in *equal*.

It's small. Smaller than what I thought would be for an important word. In the candlelight, just a lead block, a backwards curve, and...nothing. The word it belongs to is *Equal*. My aunt,

who owns this shop, pays taxes on this business. I think about how she was the one who was trusted by the Continental Congress to print the important promise of this country.

I think about how her name might not even appear on it.

I think about the slaves down south in Virginia. How they were beaten by white men the moment they didn't do anything the white men wished for.

My hands turn the block over and over again. The edge is sharp. I press it into my thumb, not to bleed, but feel.

Equal to whom?

It doesn't answer. It leaves a red mark. It fades before the morning.

I put it in the frame.

We print through the night. Every time, the press makes a sound like a breath being released. *Thud, thud, thud*. And every time, fifty-six names appear out of nowhere and become permanent. My aunt stacks each sheet with hands that have been stained black for so long she has stopped trying to clean them.

J.O.H.N H.A.N.C.O.C.K

I remember my aunt using the biggest print for his name. Twice the size of everyone else's. Somehow, the size of the name made the biggest difference.

Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, men whose names I've heard my whole life but will never meet.

My aunt looks over at me.

"You're slow," she says, not unkind.

"I keep stopping at the same word."

She doesn't ask which one. My aunt glances at me. She already knows, because she's set this line more than a hundred times, and the word has probably stopped her too every time, for the same reason.

"Set it anyway," she starts.

"Even if..."

"Especially if." She turns back to the press. "That's why it matters. Anyone can print a promise they're already inside. It takes something else to print the one you're still waiting on."

I look down at letters that are reversed, that will turn out to be "true." I set the *e* and *q*, and the rest.

My aunt did the last thing.

She grabbed the smallest type, used for footnotes in fine print, sets her name in the thin strip of paper at the bottom of the frame.

Printed by M.K. Goddard, Baltimore.

Only her initials, like something someone would if they weren't entirely sure if they were permitted. Most people would never notice it.

I watch her do it. "They didn't ask you to put your name."

"No," my aunt says.

"They might not let you."

"They might."

Her hands are steady.

"Then why?"

The press breathes around us. Outside, Baltimore wakes up. The sky turns pale and the sounds of the city pass through the stone, wheels on the cobblestone streets, a dog barking.

My aunt doesn't answer. We both know it. Someday people will be wondering who printed the second version of the Declaration of Independence.

In the morning, I bring a huge stack of declarations to the square.

A crowd had gathered in the cold, and a man in a cart began to read it aloud. They erupted. Hats flew, and someone fired a pistol into the air, the kind you see in duels. The great names glided over the streets, as graceful as a hummingbird. Most people wept, as they saw it as the birth of a free country. I understood that, but also something they had not.

I held one copy up to the sky.

The paper was my aunt's best linen. The sun was enough, it passed through. The great names blurred, and the black ink turned translucent. At the very bottom, in the smallest type:

M.K. Goddard.

In the light, her name was the same size as everyone else's.

In the darkness, you had to look for them. But they're there. My aunt made it permanent.

I have never stopped at the word *equal* without thinking *not yet*. But the type's set, the press ready.

Someone just has to print it.