

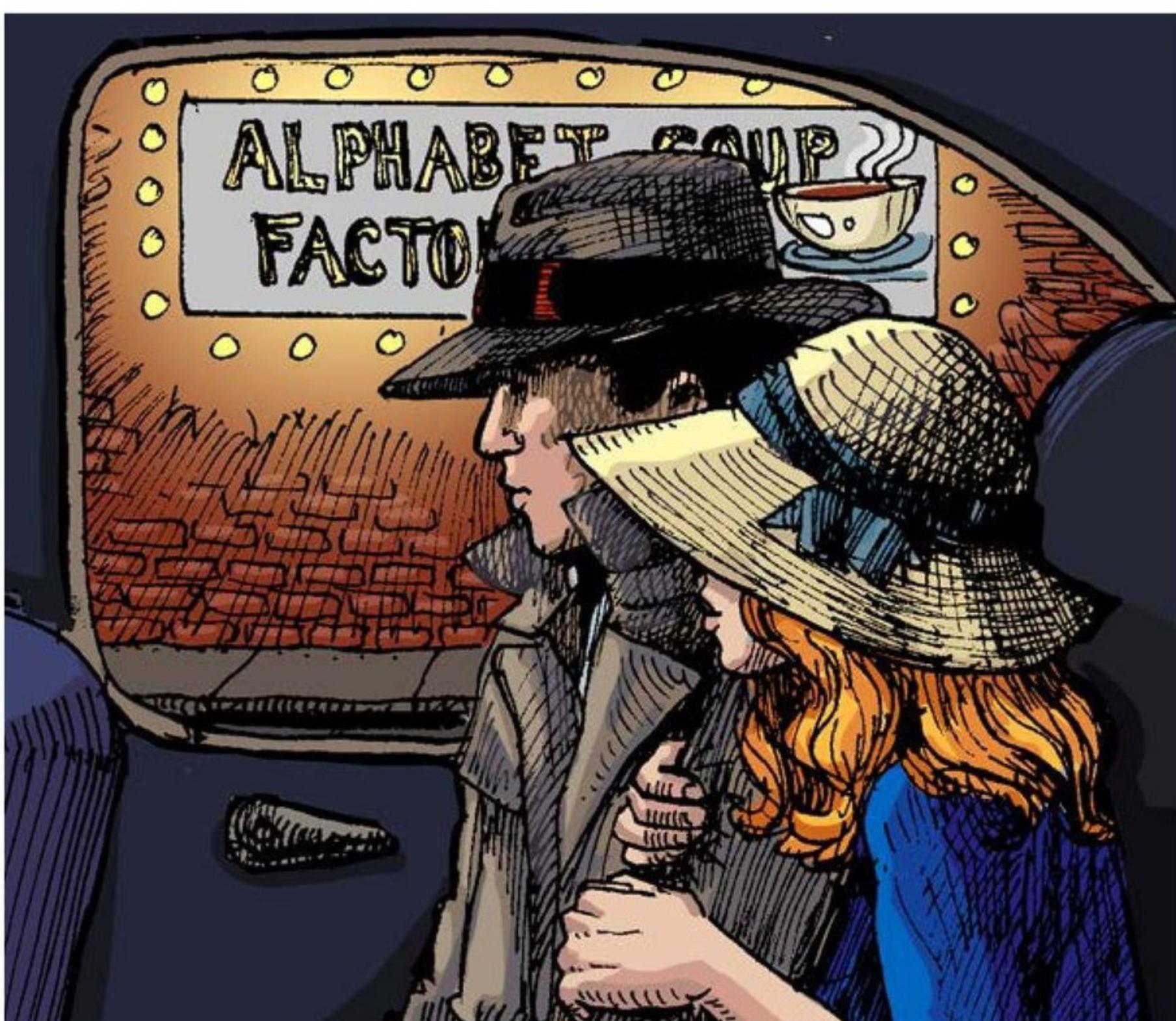
LEVELED Book • V

Word Smith, Private I



By Word Smith, as told to Blane Jeffries
Illustrated by Marcy Ramsey

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Anagrams and Palindromes

As I sat in my office penning the daily newspaper crossword puzzle, slits of light leaked through the Venetian blinds and onto my desk. Then, suddenly, she walked in, dressed to the nines with all her i's dotted and t's crossed.

"Are you Word Smith, the famous Private I?" she asked.

"That depends," I asked back, "on who's asking."

“My name is Hannah Eve Hannah. Maybe you’ve heard of me?”

Hannah Eve Hannah was the **heiress** of the alphabet soup fortune. I tried to remain calm.

“Maybe I have,” I said coolly, peering back at my crossword. “Ten down: ‘Mix up the letters to make a new word,’ seven letters starting with an ‘a.’”

“Easy,” she said, “**anagram**. ”

“And that’s ‘a yes,’ ” I said.

“Which is an anagram of ‘easy,’ ” she said. I could tell she was my kind of person—a wordplay person.

“Hannah, did you know that your name is a **palindrome**, the same word backward and forward?”

“I know that,” she replied, “but if you know that, then you must be Word Smith, the private detective, specializing in cases that have to do with parts of speech, punctuation, and language. Am I right?”

She had me pegged like a wooden hatrack, nailed like a post to a fence, cornered like a . . . like a . . . I couldn’t come up with another **simile**, so until I did, I figured I might as well take the case.

“What is it you need me to do? Find a misplaced modifier? Rescue a dangling participle? Subordinate a clause?”

“Nothing that simple, word-boy. I need you to decipher the meaning of these notes, which came wrapped around a brick thrown through a window in Daddy’s factory.”

She handed me three slips of paper, each one with a separate message: “Never odd or even,” “Runs a treat,” and “Live evil.”



“‘Live evil’ is a palindrome,” I said, “and the calling card of a master criminal, the PUNisher.” My old foe was loose again.

“‘Never odd or even’ is another palindrome, but also a riddle—what number is ‘never odd or even?’” I was drawing a blank, coming up empty, getting nothing, zip, zilch, zero—that was it—zero, zero is neither odd nor even, yet, I doubted zero could be the answer. Why? The PUNisher never gives a straight answer, so it had to be a clue—and to think that fiend used to be a friend of mine, until he stole the “r.”

“Another way to say ‘zero’ is ‘goose egg,’ right? That must be what we’re looking for, but where?”

“A farm?” suggested Hannah. “A pond?”

“Too literal—check the other note.”

“Runs a treat?” she read aloud.

“Anagram it,” I said. “Using the same letters, what type of place ‘runs a treat?’”

For a while we scratched our heads, contemplating, then Hannah said, “Restaurant!”

“Nice going, kid, eggs-actly.”



But what restaurant would serve a goose egg? A fowl place for sure. (Sorry.) We checked the Internet for poultry joints in the area: "Chicken Little," nah, "The Hen Pen," nope, "You Turkey," no—but I did like their slogan, "Where it's Thanksgiving 365 days a year."

"The Dead Duck." We were getting closer. "Your Goose Is Cooked," that was it!

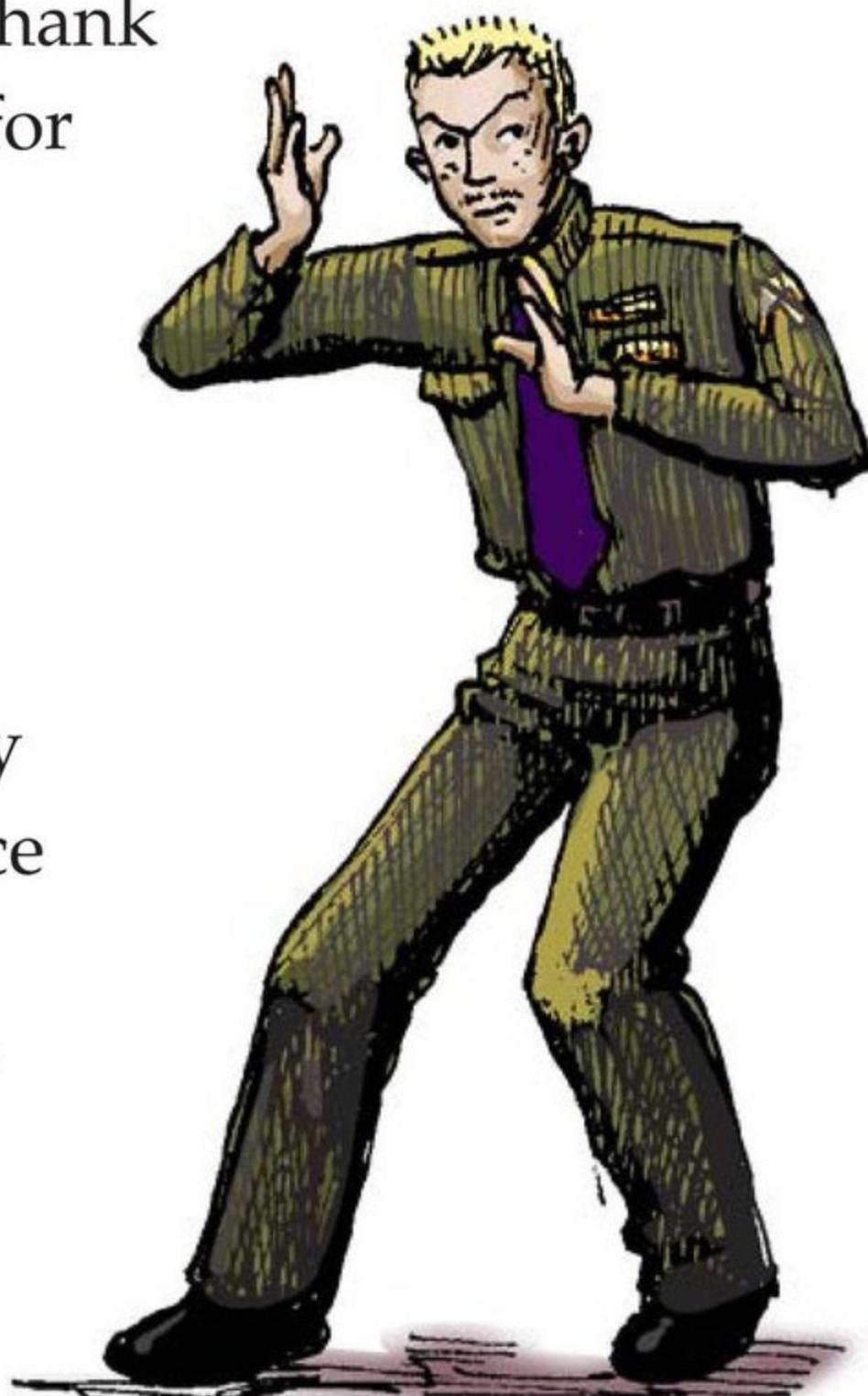
Hinky Pinky

On the way to the restaurant, I thought back about my days on the force—our days—the PUNisher and I were rookies together on the grammar patrol. We worked the streets, cleaning up people’s speech and fixing their spelling errors. Yeah, it was a tough job, but someone had to do it. Imagine a world where people put *i* before *e* even after *c*—there would be chaos!

The PUNisher, then known as Webster White, got mad when people told him to buzz off for correcting their **syntax**.

He thought they should thank him and invite him over for a game of Scrabble, but you can’t go into this line of work looking to make friends, you know what I mean?

Webster took it personally and wanted revenge. Since he felt unappreciated, he left the force to do the job on his own, his own way, even if it was against the rules of grammar.



Unfortunately, on the way to the restaurant, I got lost in thought: if the plural of mouse is mice, why isn't the plural of house 'hice' and if more than one man is 'men,' why isn't more than one pan 'pen?'

By the time we arrived at the restaurant, the PUNisher had vanished. I was correct, he had been there, and I confirmed this by interviewing his waiter, Otto. "A short time ago, faster than you can say 'a salami sandwich on rye, hold the mayo,' did you serve a man a goose egg?"

"Yes—and it was nothing, bada-bing," he said, sounding suspiciously like a third-rate stand-up comedian.





"Did he order anything else?"

"A jumbo hot dog that I know he took a mighty great pleasure in consuming."

"How do you know that?" asked Hannah. That was a mistake. Being a Private I, I could see—and hear—the painful pun coming.

“Well,” twitched Otto, holding back a smile, “he ate it with relish.”

“Oh,” groaned Hannah in horror, “that was a brutally bad joke.”

“Speaking of bad jokes,” said Otto, “what do you call a rabbit that tells jokes?”

“A funny bunny,” I said.

“What do you call a dog that falls into a pool?”

“A soggy doggy.”

“What do you call a squashed feline?”

“A flat cat.”

“Stop it,” cried Hannah, “I can’t take any more!”

These terrible jokes with rhyming punch lines are called Hinky Pinkys. As a wordplay pro, I knew that in the wrong hands, they could be deadly. Then it dawned on me, like the East Coast at six in the morning—the PUNisher had somehow turned Otto into a bad-joke-telling zombie! Consequently, an army of zombie jokers would make life miserable for everyone else with their nonstop punning and painful wordplaying. The English language would be destroyed!

My only hope was to get Otto out of this trance. So as any noble detective would do, I tied him tightly to a chair—but not before he got in a few more shots.

"That suits me, said the tailor."

"Ouch!" cried Hannah.

"That's shocking, said the electrician."

"Yikes!" she shrieked.

"Help, piped up the plumber, from under the sink."

"Please make him stop, Word!"



I thought of gagging Otto, but once the gag was removed he'd start gagging it up again. Therefore, my only hope was to tie up his tongue along with the rest of his body.

"Repeat after me," I said to the waiter, "five times fast."

"Five times fast," he said.

"No, quickly repeat what I'm about to say five times, you nitwit."

"Okay."

"She sells seashells by the seashore."

It was a tough tongue twister, and I knew I was taking a risk having him say it, yet I concluded that all that blubbering similar **consonant** sounds would either knock some sense into him, or knock him senseless.

"She sells seashells by the seashore, she sells seashells by the she saw, she shells seesaws . . ." and that's when he blanked out.



Who's That Knock-Knocking at My Door?

"Knock, knock," I said, knocking gently on Otto's noggin before he awoke, groggy and blurry-eyed.

"Who's there?"

"Word Smith," I said.

"Word Smith? Who?"

"Word Smith, Private I."



Technically, that wasn't a knock-knock joke, but I wasn't trying to be funny—or unfunny.

"Never heard of him," Otto said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a job to do."

"Torture innocent people with painfully bad jokes?" said Hannah.

"No, wait on customers."

So my tongue twister had done the job. The waiter was no longer under the PUNisher's spell, but we still had to uncover what that **fink** was up to—and to think that rat used to rate grammar with me, until he stole the *e*.

"Did your last customer leave you a tip?" I asked Otto.

"No," Otto said, "but here's his tip: 'Don't talk to strangers with your mouth full.' Then he continued: 'Today is a **red-letter** day, and by tomorrow, all the letters that are read will be mine.'"

Red letters? Letters that are read? What could that mean?

"I've got it," said Hannah, "the PUNisher's going to steal all the letters from Daddy's alphabet soup factory."

That was it: if the PUNisher had control of all the letters, he could control all the words and with that, the entire English language; proper spelling, proper punctuation, and proper grammar would be strictly enforced—anyone caught breaking the rules would be sentenced to hard labor, **splitting infinitives**.

“To the alphabet soup factory in a jiffy!” I declared, yet we couldn’t find a jiffy, so we flagged down a taxi.



Puns of Fun

We arrived at the factory just as the PUNisher was vacuuming up the last Z into a gigantic truck marked "A 2 Z 4 U," proving that Hannah was right: he was stealing all the letters.

"Webster," I said, "stop!"

"That's 'pots' backwards, or you can anagram the letters to make 'tops' or 'spot.'"

Same old Webster, I thought.





"I would have thought a flashy Private I could come up with a more difficult word for me to anagram like *halt* or *desist*. You're losing your touch with words, Word."

"Hardly, old friend, give me your best pot-shot."

The PUNisher fired up his pun-gun. "What do mummies dance to?"

"Wrap music."

"What does a clock do when it's hungry?"

"Go back four seconds."

"What's a barber's motto?"

"Hair today, gone tomorrow."

“Okay, so you’re still a punny guy, but I’m the one with all the letters, and soon, I’ll make sure all the rules are followed, period, exclamation point!”

“You’re the one who has lost it, Webster. You’re such a stickler for proper speech that you have forgotten how to have fun with **phonics**, play with pronouns, laugh at language.”

“Ha! My puns put the ‘ugh’ in laugh—I can beat you at any wordplay game, Wordy, so name your weapon.”

“All right, we’ll spin spoonerisms: I’ll say a phrase, and you’ll have to switch the initial sounds of some of the words to make a new phrase.”

“No problem, or shall I say, pro noblem?”

“Word, be careful,” cried Hannah. “He’s good.”

I knew he was good, but I was better—or worse, at least from the point of view of wordplay, where silly and stupid trump straight and narrow. “Here goes: ‘Know your blows because nicking your pose means you have very mad banners.’”

“Don’t you mean: ‘Blow your nose because picking your nose means you have very bad manners?’”

Round one, the PUNisher. Now it was his turn to try to stump me. “Hiss and leer. It’s time to send the mails of our cattle chips and bruisers.”

“Don’t you mean: ‘Listen hear. It’s time to mend the sails of our battleships and cruisers?’”

“Well done, Word, go again.”

“Wait,” interrupted Hannah, “you two are too evenly matched—we’ll be fear however, I mean here forever—let’s decide this dispute with one ultimate riddle. If the PUNisher answers correctly, he gets the letters and dominates the dictionary, but if Word is right, the letters stay, and the PUNisher makes like a tree and leaves.”



"A riddle? I invented riddles," laughed the PUNisher. "You're on."

"Hannah, he's the wizard of riddles."

"But you have the gift of illogical logic, Word." Then she gave me a hug, and I took it.

"You two have ten seconds," said Hannah, "so tell me: 'Two wrongs don't make a right, but three of these, do.'"

This was new for me, but it reminded me of my daily crossword puzzles—I stole a look at the PUNisher and spied a cocky smirk on his face.

"Seven seconds."

I got lost in thought again, walking one way, then another, then another.

"Three seconds."

Then it struck me like a clock at midnight. I snagged another glimpse at the PUNisher to see if he knew the answer. He hadn't moved. However, the smirk on his face had vanished.



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