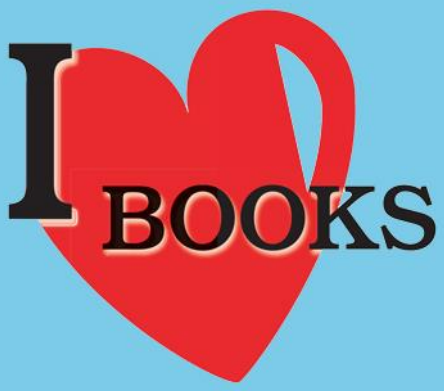


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Opening extract from

Word Nerd

Written by

Susin Nielsen

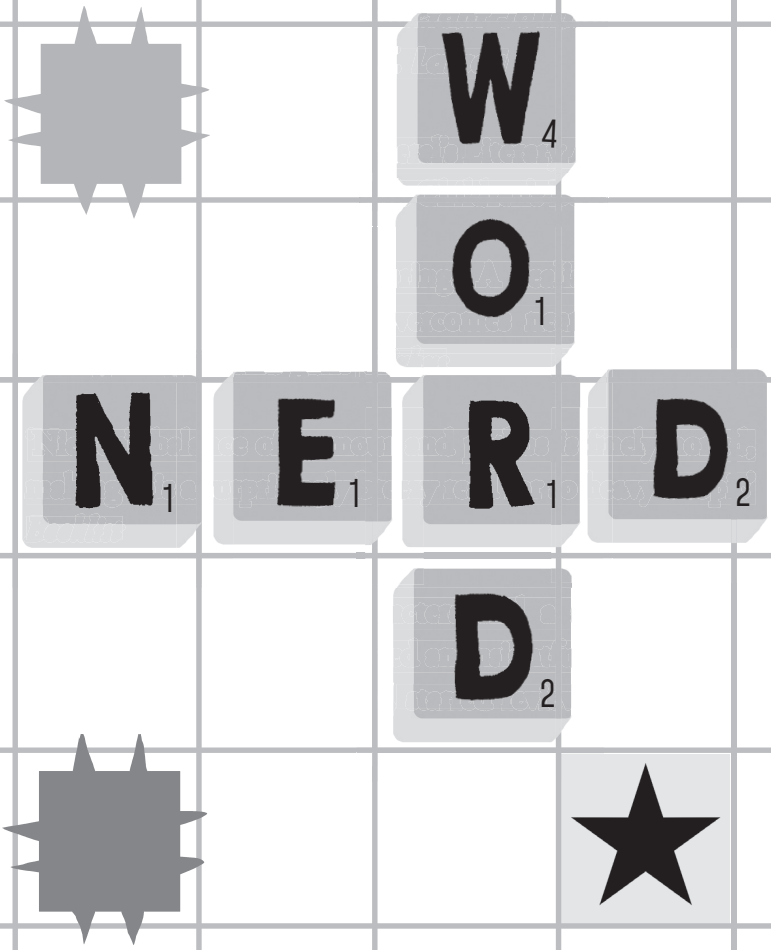
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WONDERD

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To my mom,

ELEANOR NIELSEN

for her unconditional love; and for being
the one person I can always beat at Scrabble.

1

L G R Y A L E

early, ale, all, gall, gel, leg, real, gear, largely, lag, gale

ALLERGY

The day I almost died, the sky was a bright, brilliant blue – a nice change from the rain earlier in the week. A few clouds hung over the North Shore mountains, but they were far away.

I was sitting at a picnic table on the school grounds, eating my lunch. Being mid-October, it wasn't really warm enough to eat outside, but I preferred it to the lunchroom, which was noisy and crowded and occasionally hazardous to my health if some kid tried to trip me. Sometimes a guy could feel lonelier surrounded by people than he could when he was alone.

I had another bite of my sandwich, then looked down at my feet. I was wearing my brand-new sneakers. Only the keenest eye would be able to tell they weren't Nikes. Mom could never afford Nikes, but when she'd taken me

to Chinatown on the weekend, I'd spotted a knockoff brand that was practically identical and a quarter of the price.

They looked good, my new shoes. Really good. Bright white, with a navy blue swish on the side and matching navy laces. In retrospect, I shouldn't have worn my neon orange socks with them, but even so, they looked mighty fine. They almost made me forget about my pants, which were getting too short, but as Mom liked to say, she wasn't made of money. New pants would have to wait.

On the field, Troy, Mike, and Josh were kicking a soccer ball around. For a moment I thought about asking if I could join them, but the last time I tried that they made me the goalie, then kicked the ball at my head over and over again until I had a headache. So I decided to stay put.

The sun felt good, and I closed my eyes. I could feel the warm rays on my face and imagined them zapping the blackheads on my nose into oblivion.

Then the sun disappeared and something bounced hard off my head. I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was the soccer ball, rolling away from me. The second thing I saw were three sets of big Nike-clad feet.

I looked up. Troy, Mike, and Josh were towering over me, blocking the sun.

'Oops,' said Troy. He was the tallest of the three by at

least a head and as broad as a tree trunk. He had short, thick black hair and his eyes were too small for his face.

'It's okay. Accidents happen,' I said, even though accidents between their soccer ball and my cranium occurred at least three times a week.

'What's for lunch, Spambrose?' asked Mike, who was what some people would call stocky and I would call fat. He had curly brown hair and a permanent scowl, and his jeans hung way below his waist, exposing a good four inches of his underwear, which I understood was supposed to look not dorky but cool.

'Ambrose,' I answered. 'Cheese sandwich, carrots, apple—'

'Your lunch sucks,' Mike said.

I laughed. It came out like a horse's whinny because, I confess, I was forcing it a bit. 'Yeah, my mom's big on nutrition . . .'

'Hey, Damnbrose, is it true you're allergic to peanuts?' asked Troy.

'Ambrose. Yeah, it's true.'

'I've been going to this school for, like, six years. For six years, I've eaten peanut butter and jam sandwiches for lunch. Then you show up, and suddenly our school's declared a peanut-free zone.'

'Yeah, my mom takes it pretty seriously. Have you ever tried almond butter? Because it's not a bad substitute . . .'

'Look at his shoes,' said Josh. He was the smallest of the three, but strong and wiry and tough, and his hair was shaved into a kind of Mohawk. For some reason, he scared me the most.

Troy and Mike looked at my feet.

'Ike,' said Troy.

'It's pronounced *Ikee*,' I explained. 'Like *Nike* without the *N*.'

Troy shook his head. 'You are such a freak.'

The good feeling I'd had about my new shoes started to fade.

'Close your eyes,' said Josh.

'Why?'

'Because I said.'

Now this made me a little nervous because the last time I'd closed my eyes for them, I'd opened them to find a dead crow in my lap.

But it's very hard to say no to the Three Stooges. I called them that (only in my head and never out loud because I am not suicidal) because my mom had taken me to a 'Three Stooges Marathon' a few years ago and we'd watched their old shows for about four hours straight. Troy was Moe, the leader; Mike was Larry; and Josh was Curly because his hair was cut so short, he almost looked bald.

It didn't really make sense because the Three Stooges

were funny. Troy, Mike, and Josh were one hundred per cent not.

So I closed my eyes, and to pass the time I scrambled the letters from 'Three Stooges' in my head to see what new words I could make. I came up with *ghettos, together, shooters, shortest*, and had just figured out *soothers* when Josh said, 'Okay, you can open your eyes.'

I did. Nothing was in my lap. I patted my hair. Nothing – no worms, no spit.

'What'd you guys do?' I asked.

But Troy just patted me on the back, a little too hard. 'See you, Peanut-butter-and-Jambrose.'

'Ambrose,' I said. 'See you guys in math.'

They walked away. I picked up my sandwich and took a bite, thinking that, all things considered, my chat with the Three Stooges had gone pretty well. In fact, I was thinking that maybe this was a step forward in our relationship when suddenly I felt itchy all over, followed by a distinct tightening in my throat.

I knew that feeling. It had been eight long years, but I still knew. I peeled back the bread on the top of my sandwich and, sure enough, there it was.

A peanut. Well, to be accurate: half a peanut. The other half was in my digestive tract, and I was going into anaphylactic shock. All the mucous membranes in my throat were swelling up and I could hardly breathe. I

reached for my EpiPen, then I remembered that it wasn't with me. It was in a fanny pack in my locker, where I hid it most mornings, even though my mom would kill me if she knew. When I wore the fanny pack, the Three Stooges called me a fag because it was hot pink – a free sample my mom got at a shopping mall in Kelowna, where we'd lived until two months ago.

So the shot that could have saved my life was inside and two floors up, and I was outside in the schoolyard gasping for breath. I caught sight of Troy, Mike, and Josh doubled over with laughter as they watched me. Just before everything went black, I pictured the headline of my obituary: *FRIENDLESS NERD KILLED BY PEANUT*. And the byline: *DIES WEARING IKES*.