

# **BINGO BANGO BONGO**

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# **BINGO BANGO BONGO**

**By**  
**Matthew Dunn**

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## Prologue – Winter 1974

*F*ear requires a definite object of which one is afraid, Harry typed, the letters appearing one by one—click, click, click—on the paper, as his two index fingers pecked away in a robotic chicken dance.

Sitting alone in his dorm room—alone on the whole floor—blissfully immersed in the construction of his final paper for the human psychology course he would be taking next semester, Harry smiled. It was Christmas break and everyone else, including his roommate, had gone home. He would, too, in a few days, after he had completed the paper that wouldn't be due for months. "Stay a step ahead," Harry's father had preached to his two sons, Harry being the younger. "The respected and successful man is always one step ahead." Until then, quiet—wonderful, melodious, work all night—silence. He read the words back; *fear requires a definite object of which one is afraid*.

"No shit, Sigmund," he said aloud. Sliding out the pencil hooked over his ear, Harry scribbled the bibliographic reference on the pad of paper lying next to his typewriter, giving the renowned psychologist credit for the opening line of his essay on what can make normal, rational human beings act in abnormal, irrational ways. He would type the footnote in later, along with the dozens of other quotes from his boy, Freud, that he knew

he was going to use. Happily writing the thesis that had been formulating in his head since junior high, Harry had no idea it was 3:07 a.m. He was in the zone and everything else would have to wait, including his Christmas presents.

*The bogeyman*, Harry thought, *now there's an object of fear*. When Harry was seven, his older brother Dontrell and he would camp out in the backyard during the steamy Southern California summers in a pup tent that their father had bought from an army surplus store. It was made of heavy, green canvas and got so hot inside they had to cut flaps out of the top so they wouldn't suffocate. Since it wasn't waterproof anyway, they didn't worry about rain getting in. They would tell ghost stories all night, Dontrell especially fond of bogeymen-themed recitals that he knew scared the daylights out of his little brother. One especially hazy night, thunder booming off in the distance, Harry was dreaming that his face was bleeding black leeches from his nose and mouth. As his flesh disappeared beneath the blanket of slime, he awoke with a start to find several long, fat earthworms wiggling across his face. Spooked, he sat up in his sleeping bag and quickly brushed them off, staring unbelievably at the fish bait now snaking and squirming in his lap. Before he could think, heavy raindrops began drumming atop his head, only not raindrops, his trembling hands would find, but worms—at least chopped up pieces of worms—with black and blue guts spilling out all over his bed-headed hair. Harry shrieked. He then looked up to see a horde of worms oozing from the flaps above him, dangling like strands of brown spaghetti. He shrieked again, a blood curdling scream this time, that he prayed would wake his brother and, hopefully, his father and mother sleeping in the house only yards away from the tent.

"Dontrell!" he yelled. "Wake up!" It was then that he noticed the open entry flap and the weak glow of the

porch light illuminating his brother's empty sleeping bag. Dontrell was gone—eaten by the worms—his frenzied mind told him.

Dontrell!" he howled again. He began to hyperventilate, his breaths coming short and fast, everything before his horrified eyes spinning wildly. And the worms were falling harder from the sky now, covering his head, dripping down his face as if his brains were exploding like lava.

Harry began to cry, terrified whimpers, as he shuffled on his behind deeper into the tent. He tried to burrow into his sleeping bag, but his weight was holding it down, preventing his escape into its protective cotton membrane. Then, suddenly, he heard a thud and there at the mouth of tent he saw a pale, white, undeniably human skull. And it was staring right back at him.

Harry's eye lids peeled back, his jaw fell. A second passed and then another, an eternity in a terrified boy's mind.

"Dontrell!" he screamed over and over, a blind panic seizing his body and rendering it worthless.

"Boo!" Dontrell suddenly snapped, his amused face tilting in through the tent opening.

In the nanosecond of shock that followed, Harry could actually feel his bladder muscles collapse and then, to his mounting embarrassment, the warmth of his fright creeping slowly into his lap. But just that quickly, anger seized control and he crawled like a rampant sand crab out of the tent, leapt to his feet and tore after his sniggering brother, conspicuously-stained boxer shorts and all. Their father tore the two of them apart in the kitchen before Harry could exact his revenge—a knuckle sandwich with a side of noogie fries.

Harry wanted desperately to return the favor one day to his brother—the bogeyman—but had yet to come upon

the right opportunity. "When you least expect it," he would remind Dontrell when the two were home on breaks from school, "that's when I'll strike." And though he hadn't evened the score yet, Harry could still smile about that night. It had become the turning point in his life.

After securing a dry pair of shorts and calming his pounding heart, Harry began to wonder how his brother had pulled it off; how he'd gotten the hundreds and hundreds of worms to cooperate; where he'd gotten what turned out to be a real human skull. And after he'd pieced together the puzzle, he found that the bogeyman had lost his bite. He wasn't afraid anymore. Harry liked that feeling, he liked it a lot—it sure beat the hell out of being scared. His action had conquered his fear—the very basis of the thesis he was now composing. A few days after that night, Harry Olsen decided he was going to be a detective, the best one Los Angeles had ever seen.

Pulling a weighty dictionary from the shelf that sat next to the desk beneath his upper bunk bed, Harry began searching for the word *fear*.

*A feeling of agitation and anxiety caused by the presence or imminence of danger*, he read. "Ain't that the truth," he said, glancing at the picture of his family he kept on his desk and remembering the night of the worms, as it came to be known. His brother was the tall, grinning one in the middle surrounded by parents and cousins. "Isn't that the truth," he heard his mother's voice saying. "The word is *isn't*, Harry."

He then grabbed an equally massive thesaurus from the same shelf, flipped to a page he had already dog-eared and on a second notepad began jotting down synonyms that he could then sprinkle strategically throughout his paper. Apprehension, cowardice, dismay, distress, foreboding, fright, horror, panic, terror...the list went on

and on, Harry filling the page with two columns of words.

Fear, Harry believed, was one of the strongest human motivators. And, like his boy, Freud, he was convinced that early childhood experiences (like the night of the worms) played a major role in not only the level of fear one carried into adulthood, but the explanation for its very existence—it occurred outside of one's control *or* it was created from within. Did the bogeyman really exist and resemble his brother Dontrell or was it just a figment of an out-of-control imagination? By disarming his brother's attempt to convince him otherwise that perilous night, Harry had chosen the latter path, deciding to let fear serve as a teacher instead of a burden. With his fingers poised at the keyboard, his thoughts shuffling through choices for his next paragraph, Harry felt a twinge of sympathy for those in the world without the ability to reason through it the way he had.

Midway thru the third page, Harry was ready to stroke Sigmund again. *The experiences of a person's first five years, he slowly pecked out, exercise a determining effect on one's life, which nothing later can withstand. What children have experienced and have not understood need never be remembered by them except in dreams. But at some later time they will break into their life with obsessional impulses, govern their actions, and decide their sympathies and antipathies.*

*It could dictate your life, the future law enforcement officer thought, steamroll you into a life of crime or make you want to become a detective.*

"That's what I'm talkin' about," Harry then said, smiling. "My man was not into just sex and penis envy. He understood people; got up in their heads and poked around."

Excited over the way his composition was evolving, Harry continued until well past sunrise, hypothesizing on the decline of the traditional family unit and its link to the

rise in criminal behavior, lamenting on childhood trauma and its role in the life of murderers and rapists, until finally his complaining stomach persuaded him it was time for a break and breakfast. He rose from his desk and stretched his stiff muscular limbs, very satisfied with his progress, thinking that perhaps he might still get home in time for his parents annual Christmas Eve party, provided he could catch a flight west.

Striding over the icy remnants of a Nor'easter that had smothered the New England coast a few days before, his favorite diner just coming into view, Harry pulled the wool collar of his jacket tight to his chin not knowing that it would be thirty years before he came face-to-face with a true living and breathing example of his theory. Only not exactly the way he had written it.

# **Part I**

**Spring 1975**

## Chapter 1

Of all the brothers, Noah was the most like his father. After a half century of life and two billion beats of his hardened, and recently diagnosed failing heart, Max Torrick had three cherished sons and one treasured but dead wife. Moses, the oldest son, was twenty-seven and the spitting image of Maria Torrick, his late mother, inheriting her vibrant blues eyes, disarming smile and the quiet, resolute demeanor that had completely captivated his father some thirty years ago. It was in a sugar beet field in Los Alamitos, California, during World War II where the then twenty-year-old Max, an orphan supporting himself since he was fourteen, first laid his instantly smitten brown eyes on the young but already strikingly beautiful teenage “bracero,” the emblematic cattle brand used for the Mexican migrant workers allowed to enter the United States to replace American workers who had joined the Armed Forces and marched off to Europe. Maria had come to America with her parents, the three of them fleeing the grip of poverty that was choking their native land for the illusion of wealth and prosperity on the other side of the border. They found work, backbreaking labor as it were, as well as oppression, and a husband and son-in-law in Max, but never the American Dream. In 1955, Operation Wetback, a program created to find and return illegal immigrants back to

Mexico, deported Maria's parents and they never saw their only child again until her funeral three years later, just two days after giving birth to Joshua, now sixteen and still the baby of the family. One year before her death, Maria had delivered baby Noah into his father's arms from the front seat of his black and silver '57 Packard Clipper on the way to the hospital. It was the first new car the couple had purchased, and the birthplace of a bond between father and son that the two other Torrnick boys would slowly grow to resent.

From the moment he took his first step, Noah Torrnick followed his father everywhere, often times intruding on Max's restroom breaks from single parenthood with surprisingly precise anatomical questions pouring from the youngster's mouth faster than the old man could piss. It was during one such episode where Max, shamelessly hung over from a night of wallowing in drink and longing for Maria, listened to his then three-year-old son explain the benefits of drinking water and taking an aspirin before going to bed. He realized, as he emptied his complaining bladder, that his middle son was clearly his smartest son.

Noah was now seventeen; a grown man as far as Max was concerned and old enough to accept the responsibilities that came along with it. He had quit high school three years ago, trading in his little-used pencil for a hammer with his father's growing construction company. He toiled away from sunup to sundown, helping to renovate any commercial space his father could find while also learning the true secrets of the business as the lone pupil in his father's private classroom. "It takes a lot more than sweat and nails to put a building up in this city," Max had said to Noah as they drove to his very first job, an old mattress factory being converted into luxury condos. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Today was a beautifully sunny morning in the spring of '75 when the

temperature in Los Angeles was expected to hit ninety by midday. Final exam day for young Noah Torrnick, a test Max was confident his son would ace even though Noah had no idea the time had arrived.

"When's our tee time again, Pop?" Noah asked. He had just sat down at the kitchen table where his father was already settled in with the morning paper, and was gingerly cradling a steaming mug of black coffee as if it were a nest of bluebird eggs. He took a cautious sip, relishing the rich, unembellished flavor he'd learned to love since first being handed a cup when he was two. No cream, no sugar; straight up, just like Pop.

"Nine sharp," the unshaven, white-tee-shirt clad Torrnick patriarch answered from behind an imprisoning wall of newsprint. He looked like a typical father on a typical Saturday; a tired lion camped beneath a fig tree welcoming the restful shade after a wearisome weeklong hunt. But slumber was the last thing on the mind of this particular king of the beasts. Max was plotting his next quarry—his *final* quarry—and a meal that would feed his pride for many seasons to come. Max Torrnick, enduring widower and father of three was secretly preparing for his own crucifixion.

"You sure it isn't 8:57 or 9:05?" Noah said teasingly. His father had a thing about appointment times. To him everything should start at the top of the hour. Rise at seven, be to work at eight; lunch at twelve, come home at six; "I'll be out for an hour or two but I'll be back by eleven." In a few years, the unsuspecting Noah would act the very same way.

Just then, Noah's older brother Moses walked in, poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them at the worn, but steady, rectangular Formica-top table casually adorned with four grease-stained place mats, an array of coffee additives, an ever present bottle of ketchup, and a

pair of salt and pepper shakers in the form of Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Moses lived across the street in a hundred-year-old dilapidated Victorian he had just purchased for himself and his bride of six months, but had yet to surrender the habit of joining his father and younger brothers for breakfast each morning. It didn't thrill his amiable wife but she was learning to turn a blind eye, focusing instead on the home renovations she eagerly pursued with boundless energy and an over-extended Sears credit card.

"Why didn't you bring Nancy with you?" Noah asked, knowing that his brother had already entered into phase two of his first year of marriage—newlywed hell. He ribbed his older brother mercilessly whenever the opportunity arose, payback for the first fifteen years of his life when the elder boy held a significant size advantage over the younger son that Moses exercised to the fullest during the many disputes that erupted during their father's frequent evening absences. Physically, they were equals now; both of them a dead grasshopper over six feet tall and a slim, but sturdy 170 pounds. But while Moses had his mother's look, black hair and perpetually tanned skin, Noah had fairer skin, a stronger, more chiseled face with grey eyes and dark brown hair that he'd let grow long, causing his alarmed father to protest "you look like a sheepdog, boy, and a sad one at best!" It was the latest style and Noah had never been one to ignore style. Intellectually, however, there was no contest between the two boys and now it was Noah who exercised his advantage to the fullest.

"Why would I want to do that?" his brother replied with the look of bewilderment one might expect from someone who had just seen a pig fly. (He'd learned the hard way not to spar with his younger sibling.) He then proceeded to soften his coffee with a long stream of milk

and several spoonfuls of sugar before putting it to his lips, only to then pull away abruptly complaining it was too hot.

Max watched with melancholy amusement as his eldest son contaminated his coffee and cowered under its heat, feeling the presence of his wife's ghost sweep into the room and into his haunted heart. Moses was his mother not only in form, but in substance. That was why Max loved him deeply but it was also why he knew Moses could not be the one to succeed him. Maria's delicate hands had carefully molded her first born for ten years, tempering the steel he'd inherited from his father while carving out the foundation of what had become a dependable and caring man, but one ill-suited to run the demanding and often precarious family business that had evolved after her passing. Noah was the chosen one, of that Max was certain. Noah had never known his mother's tender touch and now, with his days seemingly numbered, Max Torrick, for the first time in his life, thanked God Noah had not.

"You best go wake up that lazy brother of yours," Max's voice emitted from behind the newspaper. Neither Noah nor Moses responded, each deflecting the aim of his words to the other with well-practiced and blatant, temporary deafness. "I'm talking to you, Moses," he added a few seconds later using his own seasoned perception. "I want both you and Joshua at the construction site before that new crane arrives. That thing is costing me a few hundred an hour, not to mention the blowjob I had to give old Jimmy the Freak to finagle it for today, so I don't want it sitting around with its fifty-foot boom up its iron ass."

Moses knew his father played golf every Saturday and the smirk that had just blossomed on his brother's face meant Noah would be hitting the links along with him

that morning. Sharing a foursome with the old man was a much coveted prize among the three Torrnick boys, but as rare as securing a mega-strength crane from a porn-crazed grease monkey like Jimmy the Freak that *didn't* require five pictures of Benjamin Franklin stuffed in an unmarked envelope along with the properly completed reservation form. Max Torrnick didn't play recreational golf, nor did he take his boys out on family outings to his beloved Bermuda grassed, open aired "conference room." Max Torrnick didn't do recreational anything. The golf course was the place where, in Max's words, "deals were made." He loved playing at his home course, the Yangna Vista Country Club, for its picturesque hills and embracing Pacific Ocean breeze that "softened and seduced his adversaries like the scent of an exotic temptress," according to Max. "Distract their minds with visions that their hearts will willingly follow and the deal is as good as sealed," he would later tell Noah as they drove to the country club. Twenty-seven-year-old Moses knew the capitalist sermon well, having heard it first hand many times, but he couldn't help wonder as he watched his seventeen-year-old brother's zealous grey eyes crow over his invisible trophy, what exactly his father was brewing this time.

## Chapter 2

Benjamin wanted to play in his father's foursome, while Samantha just wanted to drive the golf cart.

Richard Millard knew he needed to leave in ten minutes if he had any chance of making his 9:00 a.m. tee-time at the Yangna Vista Country Club. As he inventoried the contents of his golf bag with his two children lobbying incessantly at his ear, he could feel his normally unshakable patience abandoning him along with any hope of making it to the golf course on time. Now, he was just hoping to make it there with his sanity intact. His eight iron and putter were both missing and there were no balls to be found, even though he remembered buying a fresh dozen at a sporting goods store several days ago and depositing them into the kangaroo pouch of his ultra-lightweight, nylon reinforced, water resistant, stands-by-itself golf bag that he kept in the garage where, with no idea where else to look, he decided to expand his search with growing agitation.

"Bennie, have you been borrowing my clubs again?" Richard Millard asked his son in the best Mr. Rogers voice he could muster under the circumstances.

Bennie, as Benjamin's little sister insisted he be called, looked up at his towering father and started to deny the accusation but quickly thought better of it. "There is nothing wrong with making a mistake son, but I will not

tolerate a lie to cover it up," the six year old recalled his father saying for the umpteenth time just as the words "I didn't..." began to ooze toward his nervous lips. He caught them before they could escape and then turned and ran out of the garage only to return a minute later with the missing golf clubs in one hand and an old egg carton full of mud-encrusted balls in the other.

"I almost had a hole in one," Bennie said as he handed the goods over to his father, "but Sam kicked my ball just before it was going to go into the hole." Sam was the name his four-year-old sister insisted *she* be called, and the not-so-innocent perpetrator of a long list of criminal offenses such as the one her older brother had just charged. Their mother had beckoned her into the house while her brother harvested the backyard and so was not present to formalize her objection. But then, Bennie preferred it that way.

Richard Millard placed a consoling hand onto his son's small shoulder and said, "I appreciate your honesty, son. Now, do me a favor and wash off those balls lickity-split. But do it with the hose in the driveway so you don't get mud all over your mother's kitchen."

Relieved to escape without further penance, Bennie quickly set about performing the task as his father peeked at his watch while hurriedly striding back into the house. "Five minutes to spare," he chuckled to himself. "Imagine that."

"Please can I drive the cart for your golfers, Rich," Sam pleaded from her seat at the center island where a white sugar donut sat in front of her, poised to spread its sweet powder across the four corners of the kitchen like a convulsive, waterlogged dog. "Please, please, please!!!" she begged with her hands clasped in perfect Christian prayer form.

"Not today, honey. *Daddy* is playing with some

important men from work so you and Bennie will have to stay home. But you can drive the cart around the driveway while I'm gone *if* your mother says it's ok." He emphasized the word "Daddy" as part of his ongoing battle to get his daughter to stop calling him by his first name. She called everyone by their first names; her mother she called Beth, and her grandparents Jimmy and Rosie and Henry and Alice. The who, what, where, when and why the habit had started in the first place was mystery to them all, but Richard wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet. "It's a test of wills," he would often tell his wife, "and no four year old is going to get the better of me." His wife would always laugh as if she knew something he didn't.

From her seat at the kitchen table where she was checking the real estate advertisements in the morning paper, Elizabeth Millard threw her husband a good-humored scowl that complained "thanks a lot" in the silent language the two had developed during their ten years of marriage. The last three years they had lived alongside a golf course, the Yangna Vista Country Club's sixth hole fairway to be exact, where errant tee shots pinballed through the trees on a daily basis scrambling children, pets and the resident mourning doves alike. Finally, Elizabeth had had enough. After six months of searching for a quieter spot she was beginning to get discouraged.

"It's definitely a seller's market," Elizabeth sighed as she scoured the last page of the house sale ads. "The prices are outrageous on everything in our district. The ones we *could* afford would mean the kids would have to go to a different school."

"Bennie's only in first grade, so it's not like he's established lifelong friendships he couldn't live without," Richard said. "Besides, he's a resourceful kid; he'd adjust in no time."

"I know, but all of Samantha's little friends at daycare will be going to kindergarten next year in *this* district and it wouldn't be fair to her to have to start over."

"If Bennie can do it, *I* can do it, Beth," Sam quickly interjected as she set her sights on her sugar-fix breakfast. "And I prefer to be called Sam. Samantha is an old person's name," she added in very serious tone that triggered hushed laughter from her parents.

Richard couldn't help notice the similarities between "his two girls"; Elizabeth engrossed in the morning newspaper sentineled on either side by a steaming, kiln baked coffee mug and a garlic bagel; and Samantha with a cartoon cup full of chocolate milk and a donut guarding the puzzle book she worshipped like a banker with the Wall Street Journal. Secretly admiring his girls now as he often did, he felt lucky. Not like discovering a twenty dollar bill in the pocket of a pair of jeans you hadn't worn in two years lucky, but fortunate in the sense of where the path of life had led him. God knows he hadn't always had his eyes on the long and winding road in his teenage years, or his early twenties for that matter. He had been too busy with athletics in high school and college and career aspirations thereafter to contemplate a long-term future with a home and a family. But then, out of the blue, Elizabeth appeared, and now the thirty-seven-year-old investment firm Financial Analyst and City of Los Angeles local district councilman couldn't remember a time without her.

"I should be home in time for dinner," Richard said before kissing Elizabeth on her real-estate-obsessed cheek. "Unless the play is really slow or Torrick insists on treating us all to dinner at the club."

"If I recall correctly, you don't work for that man," Elizabeth said, her condemning eyes conveying her strong feelings about her husband's golf date, a man she'd heard

referred to on more than one occasion as "Torrick the Terrible."

"I know," he responded, grinning. "But who am I to turn down a free round of golf and a lobster dinner from a mobster wannabe."

His joke didn't ease his wife's worried mind. She responded by saying tersely, "He *is* a mobster and that's reason enough for me."

"That's never been proven and I for one have never bought into the rumors."

"He invited you to the club to bribe you, didn't he? Isn't that what mobsters do?"

"He wants to talk about the harbor project. *Talk*, that's all."

Elizabeth tilted her head and frowned. "Richard, you're a city councilman who, along with the other two councilmen Max has so *generously* invited today, control the fate of a huge multi-million-dollar project that's been six years in planning, a project that every developer in Southern California wants a piece of, including Max Torrick. I'm sure a few *acknowledged* mobsters who would stop at nothing to get their mitts on it."

"Mitts?" Richard chuckled.

"That's gangster talk," his wife blushed. "And don't try to slip past my point."

There was no way to *slip past* Elizabeth's logic. There never had been, Richard had learned that in the past ten years. She had a PhD in Mathematics and a Masters in Computer Science (neither subject came easily to her, but her determination and work ethic was unparalleled) and she now spent her days teaching those very same subjects at the University of California in Los Angeles. In other words, logic was her middle name.

"And so your point is?" he asked, just to get a rise out of her.

"You know exactly what my point is, Richard Benjamin Millard!"

Richard Benjamin Millard knew Max Torrick was no choir boy and that his reputation walked the fine line between acceptable business practices and corruption. He also knew there had been several unsolved murders in the past few months that the papers were labeling "mob hits" as well as a flurry of extortion charges filed by the District Attorney. Local television reporters (whom Elizabeth believed verbatim – so much for her logic) were currently spending ten minutes every evening hyping the increase in crime in Los Angeles while local law enforcement backpedaled, blaming the rise on a fast-growing and wide-ranging racketeering conspiracy that they desperately needed additional funding and manpower to combat. Having grown up in Los Angeles, Richard saw it as life in the big city, business as usual, a small blip on a jumbo screen. After thirty-seven years, he had gotten used to the smell of that kind of stink, almost to the point where he didn't notice it anymore. Even so, a gnawing feeling in his gut was telling him to watch his back when in the company of Max Torrick.

"*And so*, to conclude my original point that you don't work for that man, you can come home anytime you want," Elizabeth said with a knowing smile. She knew how much her husband loved to play golf; it was the only sport he had left after many years of organized and disorganized football, basketball and baseball. Bad knees and the addition of two children had introduced him to the game founded in Scotland a few hundred years ago. It had quickly become a passion, leading to a family membership at the adjacent country club that included lessons for Elizabeth, twice-weekly league participation, and the inheritance of an old beat-up golf cart from a neighbor, which at this late stage of its life could only

muster a meager nine holes before sputtering to a lifeless halt no matter where it was on the course at the time.

Richard draped his arms over his wife's shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "I will definitely be home in time for dessert," he whispered into her ear.

"I hear you *whispering*," Samantha said with a melodious voice inflection.

Richard walked over to his daughter and repeated his affections, only without the romantic suggestion. Samantha wiggled and giggled in delight.

"Give me one more riddle before you go," Samantha said with lips that looked like two snow covered red apple slices. "Please, please, please!" her magnetic hazel eyes pleaded. She was only four (almost five, she would contend) but she already had her father wrapped around her finger and Richard knew it (though he wouldn't admit it).

Richard glanced at his watch and even though his spare five had quickly vanished, he halted his flight toward the door and stood staring thoughtfully at the ceiling while his brain searched for a quest that would keep his daughter busy as well as garnish points with her mother. "You ready?" he finally said to his anxiously awaiting daughter, who then nodded excitedly.

"Ok, in Riddleland, an orange costs six cents, a fig costs three cents and an apple costs five cents. So, using the same logic, how much does a pear cost?" He then winked at his wife and headed for the door.

"Four cents!" Samantha shouted, stopping her father in his tracks. "One penny for each letter in the word," she added before shaking her head in disbelief. "Surely you have something harder than that, Rich."

It was sometime after Samantha had reached the age of two that Richard and Elizabeth Millard began quizzing their respective parents about their ancestral trees,

searching for the genetic source of Samantha's Mensa-like cerebral agility. But after much exhaustive research and a few hefty phone bills, the only one that came even close was Richard's great-uncle Herbert, a circus performer who had dazzled Europe with his ability to correctly add long lists of numbers recited to him by an audience volunteer while balancing a midget-occupied chair on his forehead. (He also doubled as the Wildman from Borneo, but that fact had never been divulged beyond the immediate family.) Samantha thus far had shown no interest in juggling furniture, or midgets for that matter, but her preschool test scores were well off the charts for children her age and today it was going to cause her father to be late for his golf outing.

Elizabeth struggled to conceal her laughter as she watched her husband turn to face his adversary—a thirty-five pound, take-no-prisoners wiz kid who was now busy licking the edges of a nearly bald donut. Richard sighed and once again searched his brain for something more challenging. *Ok, kid*, he thought to himself, *its time to take the gloves off*. But before he could come up with a new puzzle for Samantha, Bennie came in from the garage looking like he had just lost a heated skirmish with the garden hose. He headed straight for the kitchen sink.

"It wasn't easy but they're all clean now," Bennie said as he lathered up his dirty hands with soap. "I put them back in your bag right where I found them." He figured he'd say that before his father did. Then he grumbled a series of parent-tolerated expletives like, "stupid hose" and "dumb mud."

Richard thanked his son for his effort and then offered a second thank you, but this time silently to himself, for providing him a means of escape. "Do you know what a palindrome is, Samantha?" he asked. She nodded that she did but he explained it anyway, saying that it was a word

or sentence that reads the same backward or forward. She put down her donut and leaned toward him. He had her now!

"Your brother just said one a minute ago and I'll bet you can't figure it out before I get home."

Her smile lit up the room. "Do Bennie and me get ice cream if I get it right?" she asked.

"The same bet as always," her father assured her before offering a quick goodbye and making a beeline for the door. He knew she'd have it by the time he was rolling down the driveway ("dumb mud" spelled the same phrase backward and forward) but then it would be too late and Elizabeth would have to come up with the next puzzle. Still, he smiled all the way to the country club.