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This was a game Kyle Keeley refused to lose.

For the first time since Mr. Lemoncello's famous library escape contest, he was up against his old nemesis, Charles Chilton.

"Surrender, Keeley!" Charles jeered from three spaces ahead. "Chiltons never lose!"

"Except, you know, when they do!" shouted Kyle's best friend, Akimi Hughes. She was ten spaces behind Kyle and couldn't stand seeing Charles in the lead.

The life-size board game had been rolled out like a plastic runner rug around the outer ring of tables in the Rotunda Reading Room of Mr. Lemoncello's library.

"The game's not over until it's over, Charles," Kyle said with a smile.

He had landed on a bright red question mark square, while Charles was safe on "Free Standing." A shaky collection of drifting holograms hovered over their heads, suspended in midair beneath the building's magnificent Wonder Dome. The dome's giant video screens were dark so they wouldn't interfere with the ghostly green images creating what Mr. Lemoncello called a Rube Goldberg contraption—a device deliberately designed to perform a very simple task in an extremely complicated way.

Most Rube Goldberg contraptions involve a chain reaction. In Mr. Lemoncello's Rickety-Trickety Fact or Fictiony game, a new piece of the chain was added every time

one of the players gave an incorrect answer. If someone reached the finish line before all the pieces lined up, they won. However, if any player gave one too many wrong answers, they would trigger the chain reaction and end up trapped under a pointed dunce cap.

They would lose.

“Are you ready for your question, Mr. Keeley?” boomed Mr. Lemoncello, acting as the quiz master.

“Yes, sir,” said Kyle.

“Fact or fiction for six,” said Mr. Lemoncello, reading from a bright yellow game card. “At five feet four inches, George Washington was the shortest American president ever elected. Would you like to answer or do the research?”

It was a tough choice, especially since Kyle didn’t know the answer.

If he did the research, he’d have to go back one space *and* lose a turn so he could look up the correct answer on one of the tablet computers built into the nearby reading desk.

But while he was researching, Charles might surge ahead. He might even make it all the way to the finish line.

On the other hand, even though Kyle didn’t know the answer, if he said either “fact” *or* “fiction,” he had a fifty-fifty chance of being right and moving forward six spaces, putting him *in front* of Charles, and that much closer to victory.

Of course, Kyle also had a fifty-fifty chance of being wrong and adding what might be the final hologram to the wobbly contraption overhead.

“Do the research, Kyle!” urged Akimi.

“Please do,” sneered Charles.

“Yo!” shouted another one of Kyle’s best buds, Miguel Fernandez. “Don’t let Chilton get under your dome, bro. He’s just playing mind games with you.”

“Impossible.” Charles sniffed. “Keeley doesn’t have a mind for me to play with.”

“Uh, uh, uh,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “Charles, I wonder if, just this once, you might choose kind?” He turned to Kyle. “Well, Mr. Keeley? No one can make this decision for you, unless, of course, you hire a professional decider, but trust me—they are decidedly expensive. Are you willing to put everything on a waffle and take a wild guess?”

Kyle hated losing a turn when the whole idea was to *win* the game. He hated going backward when the object was to move forward.

He studied the teetering collection of holograms suspended under the darkened dome. He looked at Charles, who was sneering back at him smugly.

“I want to answer, sir.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “Let me repeat the question before the cucumbers I had for lunch repeat on me: At five feet four inches, George Washington was the shortest American president ever elected. Fact or fiction?”

Kyle took a deep breath. He remembered some teacher once saying people were shorter back in the olden days. So odds were that Washington was a shrimp.

“That, sir,” he said, “is a . . . fact?”

A buzzer *SCRONKed* like a sick goose.

“Sorry,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “It is, in fact, fiction. At six feet three inches, George Washington was one of our *tallest* presidents. It’s time to add another piece to our dangling-dunce-cap-trap contraption.”

Electronic notes diddled up a scale.

“Oh, dear,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “It looks like that’s the last straw!”

A hologram of a striped milk carton straw floated into place. It shot a spitball at a hologram of an old-fashioned cash register, which hit a button, which made the cash drawer pop open with a *BING!* The drawer smacked a holographic golf ball, which *BOINKed* down seven steps of a staircase one at a time until it bopped into a row of dominoes, which started to tumble in a curving line. The final domino triggered a catapult, which fired a Ping-Pong ball, which smacked a rooster in the butt. The bird *cock-a-doodle-dooed*, which startled a tiny man in a striped bathing suit standing on top of a fifty-foot ladder so much that he leapt off, spiraled down, and landed with a splash in a wooden bucket, which, since it was suddenly heavier, pulled a rope that struck a match, which lit a fuse, which ignited a fireworks rocket, which blasted off, which knocked the dunce cap off its hook.

The holographic hat of shame fell and covered Kyle like an upside-down ice cream cone.

“Loser!” crowed Charles.

Everybody else laughed.

By taking a wild guess, Kyle hadn’t gone backward or lost a turn.

But he’d definitely lost the game!

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Since the dunce cap was only a hologram, it couldn't actually trap Kyle.

But its laser-generated sides were equipped with motion sensors. So when Kyle tried to step out from under the flickering image of the giant parking-cone-shaped hat, he triggered some pretty embarrassing sound effects. Mostly gassy *BLATTs* and *FWUUUUUMPs*.

All the other players were cracking up, so Kyle took a goofy bow.

And activated the motion sensors again.

FWUUUUUMP!

“That’s Keeley, all right,” snickered Charles. “Nothing but windy blasts of gas.”

“You’re right,” said Kyle, taking another bow and activating another

FWUUUUUMP!

“And you were in the lead, Charles, so you win. Congratulations.”

He stuck his hand in and out of the laser grid to blare a gassy fanfare to the tune of “Happy Birthday to You”: *BLATT-BLATT-BLATT-BLATT, FWUMP-FWUMP!*

“All right,” cried a no-nonsense voice in the midst of all the laughter. “Shut it down. Need to iron out that glitch.”

There were six thumps and a loud whir, and then the holographic Rube Goldberg contraption disappeared. A bald man in a lab coat stepped out of the shadows, toting a tablet computer the size of a paperback.

“Switch on the Wonder Dome,” he said to the flat screen he held in his palm.

Instantly, the ten wedge-shaped, high-definition video screens lining the library’s colossal cathedral ceiling started shimmering as the dome went from black to its swirling, full-circle kaleidoscopic mode.

“Friends,” announced Mr. Lemoncello, marching across the rotunda’s marble floor toward the man in the white coat, “allow me to introduce you to the library’s brand-new head imagineer, Mr. Chester ‘Chet’ Raymo, the genius behind my new Mind-Bogglingly Big ‘n’ Wacky Gymnasium Games!” He cleared his throat and warbled, “*Mr. Raymo is a brilliant brain-o! What he does is hard to explain-o!*”

Mr. Raymo was so busy tapping his tablet he didn’t realize that Mr. Lemoncello was singing his praises.

The head imagineer wore thick black-rimmed glasses and a skinny black necktie and had seriously slumped shoulders. He looked like he could work at mission control for NASA.

“I believe we need to make a few minor adjustments before we roll it out to the schools,” said Mr. Raymo. “Those sound effects activated when the loser attempted to escape were supposed to be burglar alarm bells, not farts.”

“I know,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “I changed them.”

Mr. Raymo nodded. Tapped his tablet again.

“Duly noted.”

“Thank you, Chet.” Mr. Lemoncello threw open his arms and, in a very loud voice, addressed the players still standing in various spots along the game board.

“And thank you, one and all, for participating in this trial run of my newest gaming concept. Soon we will be able to take these same portable hologram projectors to gymnasiums, cafeteriums, and, if we hold our breath, natatoriums, so schools, even those with swimming pools, can use my life-size board games as fund-raisers—free of charge, of course.”

“I really enjoyed the game,” said Sierra Russell, Kyle’s bookworm friend. “I was able to read two whole chapters while I waited for everybody else to spin and take their turns.”

“It was awesome,” agreed Kyle, who loved all of Mr. Lemoncello’s wacky games, even the ones he lost.

“Totally!” added Miguel.

“It’s a rip-off,” scoffed Charles Chilton, who’d been trying to run Mr. Lemoncello out of town ever since the eccentric billionaire first came home to Ohio and spent five hundred million dollars building Alexandriaville the most extraordinary high-tech library in the world.

“I beg your pardon, Charles?” said Mr. Lemoncello, blinking repeatedly. “A rip-off?”

“It’s just a warmed-over version of that old parlor game Botticelli! You should be more inventive. Like the Krinkle Brothers.”

The Krinkle Brothers were a huge game company that, in Kyle’s humble opinion, made extremely boring board games and dull generic stuff like Chinese checkers, pachisi, and dominoes. In fact, Kyle had come up with his own ad slogan for the rival game maker: “If it’s a Krinkle, it’s going to stink.”

“See you later, losers.” Charles marched out of the Rotunda Reading Room.

Kyle sometimes wondered why Charles was still allowed to come to the Lemoncello Library. He and his parents had done so much to try to wreck Mr. Lemoncello’s dreams. Since Kyle (along with all the other “champions” from the recent Library Olympics) was now on the library’s board of trustees, he once suggested that Charles (plus the rest of the Chilton family) be banned from the building.

When he did, Mr. Lemoncello gasped, clutched his chest, and pretended that he might faint or have a heart attack. Maybe both.

“Why, if we did that, Kyle,” Mr. Lemoncello had said, “we couldn’t really call ourselves a library, could we?”

Kyle knew his idol was right. Libraries were supposed to be for everybody. Even jerks like Charles, who always pretended to be super polite around grown-ups—except Mr. Lemoncello.

“Not to be as nosy as Pinocchio,” Mr. Lemoncello said to Sierra, “but you seemed more interested in reading your book than marveling at my latest holographic extravaganza.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to be sorry about—a game, by the way, that I wish I had invented. I was just curious about what you were reading.”

“It’s called *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* by Laura Hillenbrand.”

Mr. Lemoncello waggled his eyebrows, put his hand to his mouth, and hollered, “Oh, Mr. Raymo? Is there a Seabiscuit in the house?”

Suddenly, a bugle blared, a bell clanged, and two Thoroughbred racehorses, their jockeys up in the saddles, came thundering into the rotunda from the fire exit!

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“Racing through the first turn, it’s Seabiscuit leading in a surprise move!” cried the scratchy recorded voice of an old-fashioned racetrack announcer talking through his nose.

Kyle and his friends leapt out of the way as the two horses and their jockeys whipped around the rim of the rotunda as if it were a racetrack.

The breathless announcer kept going.

“Seabiscuit is in the lead by one length . . . two lengths. War Admiral is right on his heels.”

Dust clouds billowed up behind the holographic horses’ dirt-churning hooves.

“Down the back stretch. There goes War Admiral after him. Now the horse race is on. They’re neck and neck, head and head, nose and nose. And it is either one; take your choice.”

Kyle could feel the floor quaking as the two powerful horses galloped around the room.

“Go, Seabiscuit!” shouted Sierra, waving her book in the air.

“Both jockeys driving!” cried the track announcer. “It’s horse against horse. Seabiscuit leads by a length. Now Seabiscuit by a length and a half. Seabiscuit by three! Seabiscuit is the winner!”

The horses vanished.

“Woo-hoo!” shouted Kyle.

“Whoa!” cried Miguel. “That was amazing!”

“That was Seabiscuit and War Admiral from their match race of 1938 at Pimlico—a racetrack near Baltimore,” said Sierra.

“It was unreal,” said Akimi.

“I know,” said Kyle. “It was incredible!”

“No, I mean *it wasn't real!* You could see through the horses!”

“Those stupid horses scared me!” whined Andrew Peckleman, sliding his goggle-sized glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger. “I thought they were going to run right over us. Then I realized they were just holograms!”

“Well, Andrew,” said Mr. Lemoncello, “let this be a lesson to us all: The first answer isn't always the best answer. Chet?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell them about our brand-new Nonfictionator.”

“Sorry, sir. No can do. That information is top-secret, classified, and, I believe, restrictified. I also believe that ‘restrictified’ is not an actual word.”

“Actually, it's a new word—one I invented and wrote down with my frindle! Plus, I hereby and forthwith—not to mention fifthwith—officially declassify and derestrictify the information in question.” Mr. Lemoncello turned to the kids. “Mr. Raymo is new here at the library and somewhat shy. Perhaps, if you clap your hands as you would for Tinker Bell, we can convince him to tell us about our new Nonfictionator!”

Everybody clapped. Kyle even whistled.

“Very well.” Mr. Raymo stood up and smoothed out his lab coat. “Thanks to its high-speed processor and enormous database, the Nonfictionator can generate historical holograms capable of conversing with our library patrons. Ask a question, they’ll answer it. The Nonfictionator can bring historical characters to interactive life.”

“With this new invention,” added Mr. Lemoncello, “nonfiction doesn’t have to be dry and dusty, unless, of course, it’s a horse race or Lawrence of Arabia. Chet, if you please—astound me!”

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Raymo. He tapped the glass on his tablet computer.

“Careful, dear,” trilled a voice from the second floor. “I smell horse poop.”

“I am very familiar with horse droppings,” said another.

“That’s Eleanor Roosevelt,” said Akimi, grabbing Kyle’s arm. “She’s my hero!”

“And Sacagawea!” added Miguel. “The Shoshone interpreter and guide from the Lewis and Clark expedition!”

The two holographic women descended a spiral staircase from the second floor.

“Go ahead,” said Mr. Lemoncello. “Ask them a question.”

Kyle couldn’t resist.

“Um, Ms. Sacagawea, how come you know so much about horse poop?”

“Because I know much about horses,” she replied. “In 1805, when I was the only woman traveling with Lewis and Clark, they needed fresh horses to cross the Rockies. I helped them barter a pony deal with the nearest Shoshone tribe, whose leader turned out to be my long-lost brother Cameahwait.”

“Fascinating,” said Eleanor Roosevelt. “We could’ve used your negotiating skills when creating the United Nations.”

The two women drifted across the library floor toward one of the meeting rooms before they vanished.

“Now *that’s* incredible,” said Andrew.

Kyle snapped his fingers. “With the Nonfictionator, we could create all sorts of new exhibits where historical holograms answer questions people ask them!”

Mr. Lemoncello slapped himself in the forehead. “Why didn’t I think of that? Oh, wait. I did. Several months ago.”

“Is this why we’re having that special board of trustees meeting this weekend?” asked Andrew. “To unveil your new invention?”

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Lemoncello mischievously. “I also have a very special announcement to make. Something that will definitely keep several board members from being bored! Oh—slight change of plans. Instead of meeting here at the library, we will gather at my new home!”

He handed out flashy business cards with an address printed on them.

“You have a new house?” asked Miguel.

“Well, it’s new to me! Moved in on Tuesday. I would’ve moved in sooner, but it took them longer than anticipated to install the floor in the living room.”

“Why’d it take so long?” asked Akimi.

“Because,” said Mr. Lemoncello, “it’s a trampoline.”

Okay, thought Kyle. Witnessing a famous horse race and chatting with historical characters was cool. But a trampoline floor?

That was going to be awesome!

4

In Kansas City, Missouri, the game making Krinkle brothers were facing a crisis.

Their newest game was a bomb. Children hated it. Parents hated it. Sales were plummeting.

In damage-control mode, the Krinkle brothers quickly convened a focus group to find out why the new product launch had been such a failure.

The two brothers, Frederick and David, who were both well over sixty, sat in a viewing room behind a one-way mirror. Both wore suits, ties, and crisp white shirts. Both fiddled with their golden “K” cuff links.

The “respondents”—children ages ten through fifteen—and a research moderator were on the other side of the glass, seated around a long conference table.

“So are you guys ready to help us make a good game even better?” asked the chipper moderator.

The children all shrugged.

“I guess,” said one, whose name tag labeled him as Jack. “I mean, you guys are paying us and all.”

“Good attitude!” said the moderator. “Okay, you’ve all had a chance to play with Whoop Dee Doodle Thirteen. Reactions? Thoughts?”

The children all shrugged again.

“It’s sort of boring?” said a girl named Lilly.

The other kids started nodding. “‘Boring’ is a good word for it,” said one.

“Stupid,” said a boy.

“And sad,” said a girl. “It’s just sad.”

“It’s the exact same game as Whoop Dee Doodle Twelve,” added Jack. “And Whoop Dee Doodle Eleven.”

In the viewing room, David Krinkle’s left eye started twitching.

“That’s not true,” he muttered. “We put a smiley face on the whoopee cushion!”

“Ungrateful brats,” mumbled Frederick, who was always a little grumpier than David.

The object of all the Krinkle Brothers Whoop Dee Doodle games was to get your teammates to guess a phrase or famous saying by using only pictures, no words. If the time in the sand dial ran out before your team guessed correctly, you had to sit on a whoopee cushion.

Whoop Dee Doodle 13 was the thirteenth edition of the game. A bright yellow starburst on the box top said it was “All New and All Fun!” The company’s lawyers assured the Krinkles they could legally make that claim because the clue cards and phrases were new. So was the sand dial. It used to be pink. Now it was purple.

But customers weren’t buying the claim or the game.

And it was the only new product Krinkle Brothers had in the pipeline for the coming holiday season—just six months away.

“My grandmother made me play Whoop Dee Doodle Thirteen when I was home sick from school last month,” said Lilly. “It was about as much fun as the stale saltines and flat ginger ale she gave me.”

“Okay, okay,” said the moderator. “I’m hearing you. Let me topline these notions.” He turned his back to the kids and started filling a whiteboard with words like “boring,” “stupid,” “sad,” and “stomach flu.”

While the moderator wasn’t paying attention, Jack showed Lilly his smartphone.

“Have you played Mr. Lemoncello’s Oh, Gee, Emoji! yet?” he whispered to her.

“No.”

“Okay, let’s put the phone away, Jack,” said the moderator.

Jack didn’t listen. “Guess the book or movie.”

He showed everybody the emoji clue:



Lilly studied the phone.

The other boys and girls leaned across the table to peer at Jack’s phone and try to solve the puzzle first.

“Got it!” said Lilly. “It’s *The Wizard of Oz!*”

“Is that game fun?” asked a boy.

“Fun?” said Jack, happily imitating the tagline on every Lemoncello TV commercial. “Hello? It’s a Lemoncello!”

“Enough,” fumed Frederick behind the one-way mirror. “Turn them off! I hate those stupid commercials!”

David flicked the intercom switch so they wouldn’t have to listen to the little monsters in the other room.

“Thirteen was bad luck,” said David, his eye spasming. “That’s all.”

“Bad luck? It could ruin us!” Frederick was seething.

“We just need a new idea,” said David. “A new game. Something spectacular. A home run!”

“We also need a way to stop Luigi Lemoncello once and for all,” said Frederick, working his hands together. “That ludicrous lunatic has been a boil on our backsides long enough.”

David smirked. “The answer is simple.”

“Oh, really? And how do you propose we create a new smash hit while simultaneously crushing Mr. Lemoncello’s Imagination Factory?”

“Easy. We just need to increase our research and repositioning efforts.”

Frederick actually smiled. “Hmm. Too bad Benjamin Bean is no longer in our employ. He was one of the best researchers we ever hired.”

“Don’t worry,” said David. “Our new recruit is already on the job.”

“Is he up to the task?”

“Oh, yes. In fact, *she* will start this weekend!”