

## THE MATHEMATICAL EQUATION

For Sashie, by Mom

Early one summer morning, a little boy named Bernard sharpened a handful of pencils and sat down at his desk with a new stack of math worksheets. He took a deep breath, inhaling the wonderful scents of fresh paper and pencil wood. “Ahhhhh,” he said, and smiled.

“Oh no you don’t,” his mother said, and she picked up the pencils and dropped them into the holder graphite down, blunting their pointed tips. “Not until you watch TV.”

“Aw, Mom. Please let me do math instead. I don’t want to watch TV every day!”

“Bernard,” she said with a sigh. “Why do we have to have this conversation every single morning? You know perfectly well that you can’t do math until you’ve watched at least five hours of cartoons. It’s okay to do it every once in a while, but too much math will rot your brain.”

Bernard thought he might cry. “But I LOVE math!”

His mother patted him on the back, and let her voice down to a hush. “I know, dear. I loved math, too, when I was your age.”

“You did?” he said, looking up and sniffing back his tears.

“Of course I did. Who doesn’t love to do math?” She gazed wistfully at a memory. “Subtraction, addition, division. Square roots and primes. Quadratic equations and common denominators. Oh, I would’ve solved problems all the livelong day if I could have.” Then she straightened her posture and looked back down at Bernard with a determined expression. “But when I found out how *bad* math is for your intellectual development, I stopped. And now”—she shrugged—“Now I don’t even think about math anymore.” She handed him the remote. “Now go on, the first cartoon has already started. You’ll have to rewind it back to the beginning.”

Bernard slogged over to the couch and sank down into the cushions. He pulled a soft blanket up to his chin and accepted the cup of chocolate milk his mother gave him. “Now you’re all set up,” she said.

He obediently watched cartoon after cartoon of rabbits chasing daffy hunters, and birds outsmarting cats, and monkeys racing cars. He ate his lunch on a TV tray without even looking down because he knew his mother would catch him dividing the number of peas on his plate by the number of carrots. All through the afternoon he watched and finally, finally after eating his dinner while watching the last cartoon of the day, he was allowed to get up.

He raced back to his desk and re-sharpened his pencils and re-stacked his pile of worksheets. His mother stood next to him with her eyebrows arched in the way that meant you-know-I-don't-approve. "Now not too many problems," she said. "You can do one for each cartoon you watched today."

"I'll only do a few, I promise."

She pressed her lips together severely and nodded. Then something caught her eye. "Is that...is that a *divisibility word problem*?" she asked, picking up the top worksheet.

Bernard smiled. "Would you like to help me solve it?" he asked. He jumped up and brought another chair to the desk and his mother sank down into it without taking her eyes off the page. She read aloud:

*A businessman goes to Chicago every 18 days for one day and another businessman every 24 days, also for only one day. Today, both men are in Chicago. Within how many days will the two businessmen be in Chicago again at the same time?*

"Oh one little math problem won't hurt," she said, and Bernard smiled. They sat side-by-side solving problems and puzzles all night long, and when the day finally dawned, they went to bed and slept happily through each and every one of the morning cartoons.