

BLUE BALLIETT

**HOLD  
FAST**



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Summary: On a cold winter day in Chicago, Early's father disappeared, and now she, her mother and her brother have been forced to flee their apartment and join the ranks of the homeless — and it is up to Early to hold her family together and solve the mystery surrounding her father.

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## Ice: the third week of January 2011

It was the bitterest, meanest, darkest, coldest winter in anyone's memory, even in one of the forgotten neighborhoods of Chicago. Light and warmth seemed gone for good; mountains of gray snow and sheets of ice destroyed the geometry of sidewalk and street. Neighbors fell silent, listening beyond the *clang-scrape-chunk* of their own shovels for the snowplows that never arrived. The wind blew for so many weeks that people forgot what it felt like to walk in a straight, easy line. Life hunched over. Death whispered and whistled from around each corner. Those with homes hated to leave them, and those without wondered why they'd ever been born.

On this particular January afternoon, gusts battered the city and a temperature of zero nipped at flesh and stone alike. Suddenly: a squeal of brakes, a shout, and a thud; wheels spinning through the dusk; a blue bicycle crushed beneath a truck; a shopping bag spewing green peas, tomatoes, and oranges across snow.

At 1:11, a man was having lunch when told to notice the time. At 2:22, he was placing books on shelves and rolling a cart through math-straight channels of words. He glanced at his watch, nodded, and smiled. By 3:33, he was shrugging into

his jacket, noted the line of threes, nodded again. Pulling a black sock hat over his ears, he paused inside the lobby to write for several minutes in a small notebook. “What’s the rhythm, Langston?” he murmured to himself as he left the building. “What’s the rhythm?”

At 4:44, the police received a 911 call from a phone booth in the South Side neighborhood of Woodlawn. A muffled voice reported an accident involving a bicyclist and an unmarked delivery truck. When a squad car arrived at the scene minutes later, the street was deserted. There were no witnesses to be found. No one could remember seeing the young man that afternoon, but there were his bike, his groceries, and his pocket notebook, which was discovered beneath a nearby car. He had vanished three blocks from home.

The truck was also gone, leaving only the slash-print of tires in snow.

Packed ice allowed no footprints. Nor was there blood.

*Gone.* Four miserable letters. What does the word mean? Does 4:44, a measurement made of fours but shown by three, mean a family of four is still four, even when one is gone? Can a soul hide in a three that belongs to four?



**Click**, *uncertain origin*

*Noun:* a brief, sharp sound sometimes traced to a mechanical device, as with a camera or computer; a part of some African languages.

*Verb:* to select; to become a success; to fit seamlessly together.



## Click

Taken with a cell phone camera, this family portrait: Dasher Pearl, his wife, Summer, and their kids, Early and Jubilation, a daughter and a son. They live in Woodlawn, once feared as the home of Chicago's most powerful gang, but now a quieter place. The family sits in two tidy rows on the chipped steps of a brick building, knees to backs, parents behind kids, hands sealing the foursome. Boy by girl behind girl by boy: symmetrical and smiling. The father is pale, the mother dark, the kids cocoa and cinnamon. Eyes in this family are green, amber, and smoky topaz.



## Click

Dasher takes most of the pictures, so he's rarely inside them. Here is Summer, her profile echoed by her son Jubie's, as she reads Ann Cameron's *The Stories Julian Tells* aloud to him. Here is Early on the floor, with a pillow under her head, reading Roald Dahl's *The BFG*. Chestnut hair spreads in ringlets across blue cotton. Here is a pile of books, spines turned toward the camera.



## Click

Dashel Pearl offered words to his kids from the day they were born. A man who loved language almost as much as color or taste or air, he explained to his daughter, Early, that words are everywhere and for everyone.

“They’re for choosing, admiring, keeping, giving. They are treasures of *inestimable* value,” Early heard him say many times. Even when she didn’t know what *inestimable* meant, she understood from the careful way he said it.

Dashel played a game with Early and Jubie. It began like this: He would throw his arms out and yell, “Words are free and plentiful!”

From the time they learned to talk, one or the other would shout back, “Free! Plentiful!”

Each time Dashel sat down to read aloud, book in hand, he’d look sideways and whisper, “Words are . . .”

One or both of the kids would whisper back the next three words, finishing a sentence that then opened the story. *Three words with ee and if inside them, Early thought, sounds that could fly: syllables that became wings with feathers and bones, weightless and yet sharp.*



## Click

Here is a home in their neighborhood, one that invites dreams.

Two stories are tucked beneath a steep roof, the walls a butter yellow. White curtains frame the windows and a cat peers out. The front door is remember-me green, the echo of a pine tree; the steps leading up to it are lighter, the shade of spring leaves. On the porch, rocking chairs and an old swing wait in all weathers. Red roses bloom in the yard each summer and there's often a snowman with a carrot nose in winter. The Pearl family loves to stop and look at this house.

“One day,” Dashel says, his happy boom encircling, “we’ll have a home like this. A chance to stretch, to read in at least a dozen corners, and to run up and down stairs.”

“A chance to cook and eat in one place, and sleep in another,” Summer adds. “And to have a few secrets!”

“Like what?” Jubie squeaks, looking up at his mom. “I don’t want no secrets!”

“Any,” his mom says gently, her eyes dreamy. “Secrets can be lovely. They give you a chance to surprise people you love.”

Jubie brightened. “Like a present!”

“Exactly.”

Early was busy counting something on the front of the house. “I’d look out of each windowpane, and wait, there’s twenty of

them! Then I'd stick a Word of the Day on our front fence, just for people to take away in their heads."

Dashel grinned. "You my girl, Early! I'm on my way to getting us our own cozy home, and it'll feel so good, I can taste it. A home for my Sum and our babies." He put his arm around Summer and kissed her neck.

"Babies!" said Jubie, who was four. "No babies that I can see."

"You guys are embarrassing," said Early, who was eleven.

The four were silent for a moment, facing the house.

"If we had to eat beans and greens for a year — no, two years! — to get this house, would you do it, Jubie?" his sister asked.

Jubie nodded and reached for his father's hand. "Beans and greens," he repeated.

The cat in the window pressed its paw suddenly against the glass, as if to welcome them all inside.



## Click

The Pearl family rents the biggest apartment they can afford. It is one room. Walk up two flights of stairs, turn right, follow a long hall with a bare bulb overhead, and you'll be at their front door, which is a dull, metallic gray. A neat sign next to the door in kid-script says *Welcome to Our Home*. Beneath the letters is a bendy bathtub shape with four circles inside — an oyster shell sheltering four pearls.

Once in the door, here's a small, cheerful world: the kitchen in one corner, across from a tiny bathroom just big enough for one; a double-bed mattress on the floor, behind a screen covered with a sunburst quilt; two neatly rolled-up sleeping bags and a pile of foam mats beneath the only window with a view. Peek out: lots of sky and an empty lot nearby, haven to tall weeds and small creatures like mice and rats. The other window is over the kitchen sink and faces a crumbling wall, one that sprouts emerald leaves and the tiniest of purple flowers.

Dozens of pillows in bright colors line the edges of the room. The floor is speckled linoleum, cream with lots of red, yellow, and blue. Lamps sit on small tables made from piles of old encyclopedias tied into neat packages with yellow police tape. A coffee table near the kitchen has low seats around it, each made from a plastic milk crate with a lawn chair cushion tied to the top. Only the bedding in the house was bought; all else was scavenged or invented.

Everything has its place. "You could eat off this floor," Dasher says, with pride. Summer adds, "And we almost do," with a grin.

Once after dinner, Jubie slithered from under the table, where he was playing trucks-in-a-tunnel, with a piece of macaroni stuck to his elbow. "Elbow macaroni," his father boomed.

Dasher reached in his pocket and, *click!*, the elbow became a story.



## Click

Dashel left on his bike each workday morning, in all weathers and seasons, to reach the station and ride the train that took him to Harold Washington, the huge public library in downtown Chicago.

He worked on the sixth floor in History and Social Sciences, a tricky department that mixes fact, story, and legend. Dashel's job as Library Page, one he'd had for several years now, was to sort, shelve, deliver, and process books, and sometimes to answer the phone or update computer entries. The librarians soon realized that he was an amazing reader, a gifted and hungry thinker. They knew he wanted to earn a library science degree one day.

Dashel learned quickly that working in a library meant knowing how to find answers to almost any kind of question; it also meant understanding changes in what people want to read as well as finding a balance between the familiar and the new. A pleasure to teach, Dashel would hear or see something once and *click!* he had it.

He was obviously a Library Page who was going places.



## Click

“Ono-*what?*” Early had asked the first time she heard that crazy word *onomatopoeia*.

If you discovered that a word sounded like what it meant, Dash explained, then you could add it to the family Onomatopoeia List. Sometimes Early added a little drawing as well, an invented symbol that looked like it fit the word.

She loved the *C*'s (*crash, click, catch*), the *B*'s (*blurt, babble*), the *P*'s (*ice, itch*), the *S*'s (*slip, slither, sizzle*).

Early, like Dashel, recorded stuff that made her curious, and the Pearls always had a notebook or two available. They kept a family Quote Book, for collecting wise or delicious things that other people had written, and a Word Book, where any of them could note down a word they liked and include at least part of the dictionary definition. If Jubie chose the word, someone recorded it for him.

Early learned from her dad that a dictionary is a powerful and *underestimated* kind of book. First of all, it has the shortest stories in the world, and thousands of them: stories with sounds, changing shapes, history, and mystery. Open anywhere and you'll find layers of meanings. Choices. And when you put a word in your Word Book, you can pick what you want from the definition, like picking flowers from a garden. You don't have to take everything, and that is fine.

“Gather them as you meet them. Then you'll become a part

of their story, and vice versa,” Dasher said. Early wasn’t sure how that worked, but she got the message: Words are alive.

Dasher explained that words can have generations of scrambled-up history — some are hundreds or even thousands of years old. They come from Old English, Middle English, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and many other languages — those were just a few of the roots that could be part of a word, like a root on a vegetable. Sometimes experts couldn’t find a root, and then the dictionary said *origin unknown*. When the Pearls added a word to their family Word Book, Dasher called that *adopting* the word, welcoming it to a new home.

“Any word you adopt feels loved,” he told his daughter, scratching his right ear, something he did when an idea was making him happy. “Language reacts, you know.”

When he said this, Early pictured a word stretching and wiggling either tall or curly letters, or perhaps yawning with an O or an openmouthed C or U.

Her dad was still talking. “And when a word isn’t used for a long time, it dies and just about disappears. Sometimes that’s okay; it’s had its day. And once in a while a new word is born.”

One startling Saturday, when she’d just entered the words *adopt* and *adapt* in the Word Book, Dasher told Early that he had been adopted as a baby, like a word.

Early felt the world jiggle-slump for a moment and blurted, “What happened to your parents? Did they die?”

Dasher looked oddly blank. “I’m still wondering,” he said softly. “Maybe that’s why I like the family of words, the crowd of

meanings. The murky origins! I've always thought about my folks but never known who they were. Always imagined a face or a voice, but never had a definition. No story.

"The Pearls, who adopted me, died in a train crash when I was three. I only remember a few details from my life with them — a crib with tall sides, an orange cat. I lived in many foster homes. Some had love and some had none."

"You're a mystery and a part of the hugest family of all, the dictionary family!" Early hurried to say, wanting to make her father feel better.

"Yes, I am." He grinned at his daughter. "I like that. So now you know why you three are so, so, so important to me. You're *critical to my existence*. And that's why we're going to own the coziest home anyone has ever had, if it's the last thing I do!"

Early reached for the Word Book to add *critical*. She liked its crunchy, delicate sounds, the crisp *C*'s and *T* together with the light *I*'s and *A*. It sounded like a crown, the fancy kind made for a king. She pictured lots of people trying it on, like Cinderella's slipper, until *click!* it landed with a perfect fit on her father's head.



## Click

Early was born when her parents were still in high school. Her name came from the "promising surprise," as her parents explained it, of her arrival.

“So,” Dashed liked to say, “Early Pearl equals ready, ahead, and beautiful! What more could a person want?” He added that he and Summer were the happiest people in the world when Early appeared.



## Click

“What!” shouted Jubie when he overheard this. “What about special me?”

Dashed grinned and said, “Now, why do you think we called you Jubilation?” Out came *Webster’s Dictionary*. Dashed then looked up the word and read the meanings aloud. It grew from a Latin verb, *jubilare*, which meant it was over a thousand years old and was used when people celebrated without worries; they were loud with joy. Jubie puffed up with pride.

“Loud! With! Joy!” he shouted.

People’s names often affect who they become, Dashed explained. “Take your mother’s name,” he said. “The word *summer* makes thoughts of happiness and perfection pop up in most folks’ minds. You know: fireflies, bugs humming in the trees, barbecue with friends on a day by the lake, lots of sun and gentle blue sky. Just like this gorgeous, promising woman here!” Summer swatted an aw-go-on at her husband, but followed it up with a grin.

“So, how about *Dashed*?” Early had asked.

“Well, that’s got many facets. It’s kind of flashy,” Dashel said, with a wink. “The name comes from a French root, meaning a messenger. And I *do* work as one who delivers — how’s that for a name fit?”

“But the word *dash*, now: Are you ready? The origin is *dasshen*, Middle English. Verb, to break by striking, knocking, or hurling.” He closed the dictionary on his finger and looked at the kids.

“Should I *hurl* it?” he asked.

“No!” they shrieked with delight, and Summer said, “Dash,” her voice a gentle warning.

“No worries, just adding some *dash* to the moment.” He grinned, reopening the volume. “Okay, now here are some of the noun meanings: a violent burst or splash; the stroke of a pen; a punctuation mark that breaks the flow of a sentence; a small but crucial addition, like a dash of salt; a sudden rush; a short, fast race; part of a famous code, the Morse code, that is all dots and dashes. Whew, what a headful *that* word is! Wish me luck.” And Dashel boomed his got-it-all laugh.

This was a family of important words and their important histories. Words and life and home were all rolling together in the shell that held four.