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# TREMULOUS

(adjective):

Nervous, timid, a little frightened.

The girl felt very tremulous at the  
challenging task ahead.

*INDIA WIMPLE COULD SPELL. BRILLIANTLY.* On Friday nights, she and her family would huddle in front of the TV in their pajamas, in their small house in Yungabilla, and watch the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee.

India adored her family—it was the thing that mattered most to her. There was her younger brother, Boo; Mom; Dad; and Nanna Flo.

Nanna Flo hadn't always lived with them. She'd moved in after she fell and broke her wrist during an especially enthusiastic yoga move. She wasn't happy about leaving the home where she'd lived with Grandpop for over forty years. She made kind of a fuss, mostly by stomping around and saying "Fiddlesticks!" a lot, which was as close to swearing as Nanna Flo ever got. But she soon realized she was much happier surrounded by her family, and the stomping and almost swearing stopped.

One particular Friday night, where our story begins, the Wimples huddled in front of the TV, as they usually did. But this night was different. It was the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee Grand Final and, as it happened, it was also the day the Wimples' lives would change forever.

India and Boo stretched out on the floor with their chins cupped in their hands, while Mom, Dad, Nanna Flo, and Ernie sat snugly on the sofa behind them.

Mom, Dad, and Nanna Flo were people. Ernie was a large statue of a bulldog that Nanna Flo insisted on taking with her everywhere, much to her family's embarrassment. Not only was Ernie remarkably heavy, but he was also incredibly ugly and had the unfortunate habit of scaring young children.

On the TV was a tiny, barely there girl with bouncy, black curls, whose mouth was wide open, as if she'd just had a very big shock. Her name was Katerina. After months of spelling bee heats held all around the country, there were only two spellers left. Katerina was one of them, and her mouth was wide open because her opponent had misspelled his last word. He moved aside with a shake of his head and Katerina stepped up to the microphone.

She looked so small standing on the main stage of the Concert Hall at Sydney Opera House. Dwarfed by its huge, arched ceilings, she took a deep breath, looking more like a girl about to fall off

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a mountain—a very high mountain—than someone who was simply going to spell.

Her body quivered. Her curls shook. It was indeed a *tremulous* moment.

The camera cut to her parents sitting in the front row. Her dad gave her a thumbs-up and her mother raised crossed fingers.

This seemed to make Katerina relax. A little.

But then she looked like she was on top of that mountain again.

Not far from her, sparkling in the stage lights, was the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee trophy. If she spelled the next word correctly, she would be the new champion and the trophy would be hers.

The Concert Hall fell deathly silent as the pronouncer, Philomena Spright, prepared to reveal the next word. Philomena had been the official pronouncer longer than India had been alive. Philomena's hair sat perched on her head in a perfect soft-serve-ice-cream swirl. She always wore very glamorous dresses and heels so high that India worried she might trip over one day.

But she never did.

Philomena Spright held a small card with her bright-red fingernails in front of her equally bright-red lips.

On the card was written, quite possibly, the final word of the competition.

Very carefully, Philomena pronounced, “*Tremulous*, an adjective meaning nervous, timid, or a little frightened. Using it in a sentence, I could say, *The girl felt tremulous at facing the next word of the spelling bee grand final.*”

The audience quietly chuckled before settling into an anxious silence.

Katerina took a few seconds to think.

In the Wimple family home, far, far away, India whispered the spelling of the word without hesitation.

“That’s the right answer, isn’t it?” Boo asked.

India’s auburn braids swung as she nodded. “I’m sure of it.”

Katerina crossed both fingers behind her back and began to spell. “Tremulous. T-r-e-m-u-l-o-u-s.” She finished by saying the word with one final, hopeful flourish. “Tremulous?”

Philomena Spright paused for effect, which she always did. It was her way of building suspense, of making the audience and the contestants lean in, eager to hear her verdict. She never revealed the result too early by showing a smile or a frown. She stared at the girl for several excruciatingly long seconds before saying, in her most serious voice, “Katerina, I’m afraid that answer is...*correct!*”

It was only then that Philomena Spright smiled a broad, victorious smile. “You are the new Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee champion!”

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Katerina's hands flew to her cheeks. The lights flashed, theme music blared, and a shower of confetti sprinkled down from above like a colorful snowfall. The audience was on its feet, cheering and clapping.

"You were right," Boo whispered to his sister. "As always."

Philomena Spright handed Katerina the trophy, which was almost too big for her to hold. Her parents rushed onto the stage, crying and hugging their daughter.

When the applause eventually died down, Philomena Spright spoke into the microphone. "Katerina, tell everyone at home how this moment feels."

Katerina hugged the trophy with both hands and thought for a few seconds before saying, "From the time I was a little girl, I've dreamed of winning the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee." She paused, a small tear forming in the corner of her eye. "And now it's really happening."

More tears flowed as Katerina's mom and dad hugged her tight.

"It most certainly is happening," Philomena Spright declared. "From thousands of spellers, competing in hundreds of rounds and one riveting grand final, you are our new champion! And now for your prizes." She took an envelope from the trophy stand. "As always, there is a five-hundred-dollar voucher for Mr. Trinket's Book Emporium."

Katerina accepted it with an awestruck “thank you.”

“And that’s not all. We can now reveal your grand prize.”

There was a drum roll.

The Wimple family listened with great anticipation. There was a different grand prize each time. There’d been a family cruise and a trip to the world’s tallest toy store in New York. Once it was a vacation to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter.

“You know how you like amusement parks?” Philomena Spright asked.

“Yes.” Katerina nodded feverishly.

“You and your family are going to...Disneyland, with five thousand dollars in spending money!”

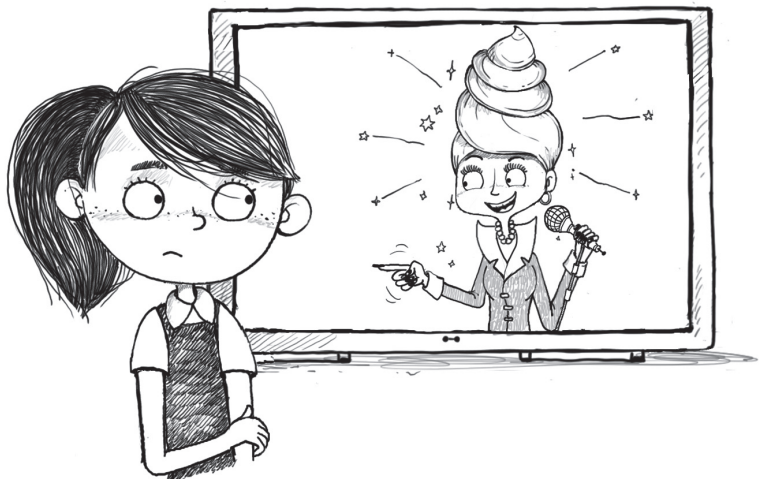
Katerina squealed. She couldn’t help it—it just came out. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“You are welcome, welcome, welcome!”

The family fell into hugs and even more joyful tears.

Philomena Spright turned to the camera. “That’s it for another Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee. I’d like to thank all our *sensational* spellers and our *astounding* audience. Were you able to spell all the words correctly? Would *you* like the chance to stand on this very stage? If you think you have what it takes, why not sign up?”

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She looked down the barrel of the camera and, for a moment, India Wimple thought the pronouncer was speaking only to her. “Because our next Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee champion could be *you!*”

Philomena Spright didn’t move for what felt like several minutes, pointing her shiny, red fingernail at India with the smallest of knowing smiles on her lips.

# DISCONCERTING

(adjective):

Unnerving, discomfiting, and more than a little bewildering.

The memory alone was really very disconcerting.

*BOO* NUDGED HIS SISTER. “*PHILOMENA’S* right—it could be you.”

India scoffed. “Me?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “Why not?”

“Because TV is only for the very rich, the very famous, or the very pretty...and I’m not any of those things.”

“I disagree!” Dad argued. “It’s true we’re not rich or famous, but as for being pretty, you are beautiful from your head down to your toes.”

“Thanks, Dad, but I think you might be biased.”

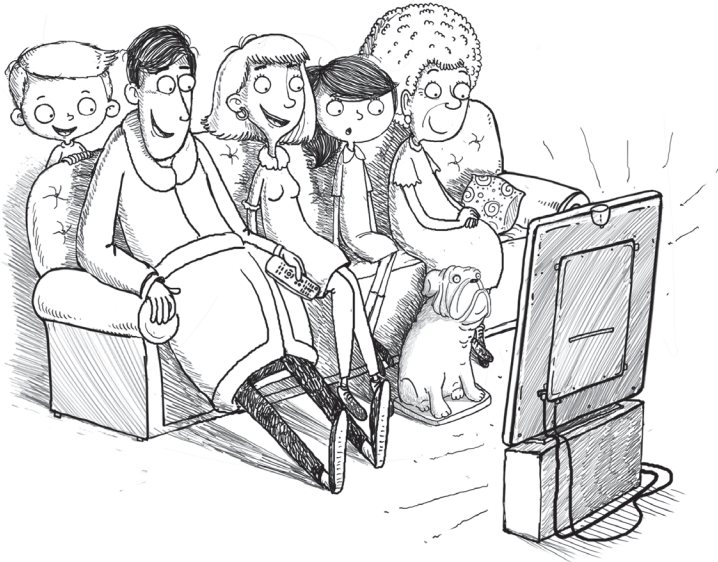
“Fiddlesticks!” Nanna Flo blurted. “What a load of codswallop! Your father’s right or you can dunk me in a barrel of barbecue sauce!”

“It would be exciting to see you onstage with all those other children,” Mom said, “showing the world how clever you are.”



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“It’s true.” Boo sprang upright in his pajamas, which were a little baggy and covered with planets and stars. “You’re the smartest person I know.”



“Do you really think I could?” India asked, sounding a bit tremulous herself.

“We *know* you could!” Dad scooted so far forward on the couch that he almost fell off. “Who do I ask when I don’t know how to spell a word?”

“India,” Boo answered.

“And who lies there spelling every word correctly every single time?”

“India,” Boo repeated.

The TV screen was jammed with people laughing and calling Katerina’s name, while photographers elbowed their way closer to take her picture. She was totally surrounded. India felt breathless and light-headed.

She sat up and sighed. “And who freezes every time she stands in front of an audience?”

There was a pause. Everyone knew who she meant, but they pretended they didn’t.

It was true. India Wimple was terribly, horribly shy, and whenever she found herself the center of attention, her cleverness seemed to disappear.

It all started a long time ago, when she had the starring role in her school play, *Matilda*. India loved Roald Dahl’s story of the shy but brilliant girl and had been rehearsing for weeks. At home, Boo had helped her practice every day, so she wouldn’t forget a word. On opening night, the school halls buzzed, while backstage, the actors nervously muttered lines.

But not India. She knew her role and was ready.

When the play began, India felt as if she were floating. The audience was enthralled and sat glued to every word.

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It was all going perfectly—until what happened next.

India saw someone moving in the darkness at the back of the hall. The figure scooped something into his arms and was staggering along the row toward the exit. Another person quickly followed behind. People stood to allow them past. Whispers rippled through the air.

And then she heard a faint series of coughs. India realized the shadowy figure was Dad—he was carrying Boo in his arms. And the person following was Mom. They reached the end of the row and hurried out of the hall.

India shivered and stared after them.

It was only when one of the actors nudged her that India realized the entire cast was waiting for her to speak, but she didn't know what to say. It was as if every line she'd rehearsed had vanished from her memory.

The audience shifted awkwardly in their seats. Some pointed. Others laughed behind their hands.

India froze. She stared at the glowing green exit sign. All she could think of was Boo cradled in Dad's arms, coughing and struggling to breathe.

Boo's asthma could sneak up on an otherwise perfectly fine day and squeeze his lungs so tightly that sometimes he'd even have to be rushed to the hospital and hooked up to special machines to help him breathe.

The play went on, but India missed every cue and messed up every line. The other actors even began saying them for her until finally, somehow, they made it to the end of the show.

Since that day, India had this small, snarky voice inside her head—one that actually got quite loud sometimes—reminding her that she had failed and *would* fail if she ever tried anything like that again.

“Don’t you think, India?”

Dad had obviously been talking, but India hadn’t heard a thing.

He got to his feet and tightened the belt on his bathrobe. “Because I’m sure of it. So sure, in fact, that I predict that we here tonight, in this humble home in Yungabilla, are in the presence of the next Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee champion.”

Nanna Flo, Mom, and Boo burst into applause.

India shook the *disconcerting* memory of the play from her mind. “Nice try, everyone, but I don’t think it’s for me.”

“Why not?” Boo’s eyes widened beneath his floppy hair. “You’d be amazing!”

“You’d wipe the floor with those other kids!” Nanna Flo sometimes said things that were a little inappropriate, especially if she was worked up.

“Now, now.” Dad held up a silencing hand. “It’s India’s choice. If she’d rather not enter, then, as a family, we need to respect that.”

He paused, only barely able to disguise his real hope. “But if she *were* to try out, she knows she’d have her family behind her one hundred and fifty percent.”

He waited for India to be convinced by his heartfelt speech and imploring look.

“There’s no such thing as one hundred and fifty percent, Dad, but thanks for understanding.”

There was a brief silence, filled with the Wimple family’s collective disappointment. But Dad was right—who were they to ask her to do something she didn’t want to do, something that would terrify her? She’d made her decision, and they needed to accept that—even if they didn’t want to, which sometimes happens in families, as I’m sure you’ll know if you live in one.

Dad tried to lift the mood. “Right then, my young Wimples, teeth brushing and story time before bed. Off you go!”

India got to her feet but snuck a quick peek before she left the room. Dad had sunk back onto the sofa, the collar of his bathrobe bunched up around his neck as if he were in danger of disappearing inside.

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# VALOROUS

**(adjective):**

Brave, fearless, maybe  
even a little daring.

She made a valorous decision to face her fears.

*INDIA COULDN'T SLEEP.*

Normally after the excitement of a Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee episode, she would nestle into bed, Dad would read a story to her and Boo, and she'd quickly drift off into a dream-filled slumber.

But this night was different.

She couldn't stop her mind from thinking, and the harder she tried to sleep, the more awake she felt. She kept seeing Philomena Spright pointing her shiny, red fingernail at her, telling her she could win.

But could she really?

It was true she spelled every word correctly as she followed along from home. And even when she'd never heard the word before, she had an uncanny ability to work it out.

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But it was also true that she was the girl who froze onstage during her school play, unable to remember a single line. What if it happened again? In front of millions?

This was one of those times when the voice inside her head got a little louder: *A girl from Yungabilla could never be the next spelling bee champion. Most people don't even know where Yungabilla is. It isn't a vacation destination. No one famous ever came from here. There are no natural wonders. There aren't even any unnatural wonders, like a giant pineapple or shrimp. It's a small, forgettable town with a town hall, a few stores... and not much else.*

India knew that was how most people would see where she lived, but to her it was perfect. She liked how quiet it was, and the frothy vanilla milkshakes at Gracie's Café, and Mrs. O'Donnell's Bakery, with her famous blueberry cheesecake. But what made Yungabilla *really* special was the people, especially in the last few years, when the drought drove families off the land and forced businesses to close down.

When anyone was having a hard time, a neighbor would knock at the door with a dish of lasagna, or the community association would come around to fix a broken fence, or the whole town would gather under the stars for a movie projected onto the side of the town hall. That made everyone feel better, for a while at least.

India felt at home in Yungabilla, and that's where she was going to stay.

She shook the image of Philomena from her head and wiggled farther into her blankets. She tried again to sleep when she remembered her family staring at her in their small, squished living room, their hopeful faces all wanting her to say yes.

And the hardest memory of all was Dad's disappointed look when he sank back on the couch after she'd said no. It'd been a tough few years, with Boo being sick, Mom quitting her job at school to homeschool him, and Nanna Flo moving in. Then Dad had lost his job when the local newspaper shut down. He'd started a handyman business called Arnie the Fixer. He was contacted at all times of the day and night, and often came home with a bandaged thumb or covered in mud or cobwebs. He wasn't a bad handyman or even especially clumsy, but his mind would often wander while he worked. He'd be fixing a drainpipe or unblocking a toilet and start thinking about his days at the newspaper. He'd remember uncovering mischief, like the time the bowling club's chicken mascot was kidnapped or interviewing people who'd done a good deed.

Those were his favorite stories.

He'd written about Daryl, his best friend, who rescued a puppy from the roof of the elementary school after it had been swept up



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there by a dust storm, and Beryl, who ran over fifty yards in her slippers and nightgown to stop a runaway baby carriage just before it hit the railway tracks.

India knew Dad missed those days, but he hadn't complained or lost his temper—and he never gave up. Not once.

It'd been a long time since the Wimple family had had anything to look forward to. Would it be that bad to stand onstage and spell? Was India being selfish not to even try? Every time Dad suggested it, his face lifted into a huge smile, and it reminded her of how long it had been since she'd seen him that happy. It was a smile she desperately wanted to see again, and if that meant entering the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee to make it happen, it would be worth it.

India made what could only be called a valorous decision.

It was then that Dad popped his head into her room. He did this every night, checking on Boo and India one final time before he went to bed. He leaned over, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered, "Nighty night. Sleep tight."

But as he stood to leave, India said, "I'll do it. I'll sign up for the next spelling bee."

And there it was—the smile. Again.

Dad sat beside her. "Are you sure, sweetheart? I won't let you do anything you don't want to."

“I’m sure,” she said, trying to sound as sure as she could.

Dad’s face lifted into an even more dazzling smile, but then he did something he absolutely wasn’t supposed to do, something that India hadn’t counted on at all.

He started crying.

“Dad? Are you OK?”

“Yes,” he blubbered. “I’m just so happy.” Then he blubbered some more.

“You don’t *seem* happy.”

“Oh, but I am.” He wiped his pajama sleeve across his teary face. “Really.”

“There are a few conditions,” India said.

“Anything.”

“I’ll need help practicing.”

“We’ll start first thing tomorrow.”

“And I’ll need the whole family with me. It’s the only way I’m going to be able to do it.”

“Try and keep us away.”

“And there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?”



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“I’ll need lots of Dad hugs.”

“Well, that’s lucky, because I have plenty to spare.” He held her close. Being wrapped in Dad’s hug was one of India’s favorite places; she felt as if nothing could ever go wrong when she was there.

“You’d better get some sleep!” Dad sprang to his feet in a way he hadn’t sprung for years. “We’ve got a spelling bee to win.”

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# ENDEAVOR

(verb):

Attempt, strive, make an effort.

She endeavored to give it her best shot.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.” BOO WAS sitting at a small table covered with the Wimples’ best tablecloth. “Welcome to the mock spelling bee trial for champion speller India Wimple.”

From the sofa, Mom, Dad, and Nanna Flo cheered.

“Here’s how the trial will work.” Boo held up a small notebook. “I will read out specially selected words, India will answer them correctly—as she always does—and we will stand back in awe of how brilliant she is.”

There were more cheers. The Wimples could be very excitable.

“India?” Boo asked. “Are you ready?”

A mop had been wedged into Dad’s toolbox as a pretend microphone. India pushed her auburn locks behind her ears. “Yes.”

“Go, India!” Dad called from the audience.

“Quiet please,” Boo said in a stern, principal-type voice. “Our

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champion needs to concentrate. India, here is your first word.” He looked at his notebook and read, “*Jocular*. This means comical or humorous. *My jocular uncle is very funny.*”

Ordinarily, if India had been lying on the floor next to Boo, watching the spelling bee on TV, she would have simply spelled the word without missing a beat, but standing in the living room, behind a mop microphone, it wasn’t so easy. She wrote the word on her palm with her finger.

She frowned, not sure she had it right, and wrote it again.

“You can do it, honey,” Dad whispered.

India took a deep breath and endeavored to answer. “*Jocular*. J-o-c...” She thought about it some more. “J-o-c...k...u-l-a-r.”

Boo checked his notebook, even though he already knew the answer. “I’m afraid that’s...incorrect. The correct spelling is j-o-c-u-l-a-r.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Mom said. “You’re just warming up.”

“You OK?” Boo asked.

"I'm a little nervous," India admitted.

"No need to be nervous, honey," Nanna Flo said. "You're with family."

"I know, but the real spelling bee will be in front of strangers."

"We'll be there too," Mom said. "Every step of the way."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," India said, not really sounding sure at all.

"Of course you will." Now Dad was sounding unsure too.

"Absolutely," Nanna Flo said. "Those other kids might as well give up."

Now they were all saying things they weren't so sure about.

"This next word is one of your favorites." Boo paused dramatically, just as Philomena would have done. "*Scintillating*. This is an adjective meaning witty or clever. *She had a scintillating way with words.*"

India winced and shifted from one foot to the other, as if her shoes were suddenly too tight. "Scintillating," she repeated shakily. She wrote on her palm. She stopped and started again. "S-i-n...s-i-n-t-a... No, wait. S-c-i..." India dropped her hands to her side. "I'm sorry, Dad. I think this is a bad idea."

"But you know these words," Boo insisted. "They're from the last bee, and you spelled every one of them correctly."

Then Mom stepped in. "Let's try something I did with my students when they were nervous." When Mom used to teach

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at Yungabilla Elementary School, she was an expert at helping nervous kids relax. “First, I’d ask them to smile. It’s a way of tricking your brain into feeling calm.”

India tried to smile, but her expression came out crooked and tense.

Mom soldiered on. “Then I asked them to say, ‘I’m excited.’”

“Did it work?” India was doubtful.

“Most of the time.”

“So I just have to smile and say, ‘I’m excited’?”

“Yes, but say it like you really mean it.”

“I’m excited,” India said without much excitement at all.

“And again.”

“I’m excited,” she said with a little more excitement.

“That’s it!” Dad said, getting a tad excited himself.

“I’m excited!”

Mom was right. India *was* starting to feel better.

“That’s the way,” Dad cried. “When you’re standing in front of that audience, they’ll never notice how scared you really are.”

India’s smile and excitement left her for the far more familiar feeling of sheer terror.

“Oh dear,” Dad said.

“I’m sorry,” India apologized, “but when I think of standing onstage in front of all those people, I start to feel sick.”

“Well, that’s no good,” Mom decided. “We’ll go back to watching it on TV, and you can be our champion at home.”

“I really thought I could do it,” India said softly.

Dad wrapped her in one of his hugs. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m as proud of you as the first time I held you in my arms. Prouder, even.”

India snuggled into Dad, closed her eyes, and tried to ignore the voice in her head that kept telling her she’d failed.



5

# PERSPICACIOUS

(adjective):

Perceptive, smart, canny.

He had a perspicacious plan he hoped would work.

DAD HAD A PLAN. A *perspicacious* one. Even though he'd have to think hard about how to spell it, he had no doubt that it was perspicacious.

The next Saturday, while Boo and Mom were at a doctor appointment, and Nanna Flo was at her judo class, Dad asked India to help him with a job.

"The roof in the town hall needs fixing, and I said I'd take a look. How'd you like to come along?"

India held a spoonful of cereal in the air. "Will we make it back before Boo and Mom come home?"

India always liked to be there when Boo got back from the doctor to know what she'd said.

"Um...sure."

India thought there was something sneaky about his answer. “Really?”

“Yep.” Dad grabbed the spoon from her hand and dropped it in the bowl with sudden urgency. “Let’s go.”

They drove to the hall in Dad’s battered van. On the doors of his van he’d painted a sign that read:

**ARNIE THE FIXER**  
**YOU BUST IT, I FIX IT**

Dad talked steadily all the way there—about the weather, his work, and a low-flying pigeon he suddenly found fascinating. In fact, he spoke almost nonstop, which was something he only did when he was nervous or excited.

“Are you OK, Dad?”

“OK? Of course I’m OK! Never felt better.”

He kept talking all the way to the hall and right up to the front doors, but when he flung them open, India’s nerves were instantly on high alert. Inside, she saw rows of chairs filled with people.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Dad hoisted his workbag over his shoulder. “A few of the gang said they’d help me out.”

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He took a step forward, but India tugged his sleeve. “All these people are going to help you fix the roof?”

“Not the roof *exactly*. There’s another problem I need help with.” He winked. “Come on.”

“But I...”

Dad didn’t hear because he was already whistling his way to the front of the hall. India wanted to sneak back to the van before anyone noticed her—which, unfortunately, was when Dad’s best friend, Daryl, did just that.

“India’s here!” Daryl jumped up from his seat and waddled over, pulling on the hood of what was—India blinked to make sure she was seeing right—a onesie cow costume. He threw out his arms. “How do I look?”

“Like a... cow?” India frowned.

The rest of the crowd was pulling on hoods too, and it was only then that India noticed they were *all* dressed in onesies. There were chickens, pandas, frogs, even a peacock.

“What’s going on, Daryl?”

“I had a conversation with your dad about how smart you are at spelling—”

“Which is true,” Dad called before he ducked behind the stage curtain.

“And we wanted to let you know that Yungabilla is right behind

you.” Daryl had a big, booming voice, which he always used, including now...when India wished he wouldn’t.

“Thank you.” She kept her voice low, hoping he’d take the hint. “But the problem isn’t my spelling. It’s my—”

“Nerves!” he boomed. “We know. Your dad told us. That’s why we thought we’d try another practice session.”

“Another *practice*?” India felt faint. “We tried that at home and—”

“But you didn’t have *us*. This time when you get nervous, just look up and see how ridiculous we look. It will take your mind off your nerves.”

The crowd of fluffy humans nodded.

“We’re here for you, India.” A large parrot, who looked like Mrs. O’Donnell from the bakery, flapped her wings.

India waved back and whispered to Daryl, “Thank you, that’s very nice of you, but I—”

“Don’t thank us yet. There’s more!” Daryl pointed his hoof toward the stage. “Take it away, Arnie!”

The Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee theme music blasted from the hall speakers. The curtains flew aside, and onstage, beneath a giant, hand-painted banner that read *Spelling Bee*, were Mom, Nanna Flo, and Ernie, sitting at a large desk.

Boo stood at a podium in an oversize, sparkly, blue suit. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said into the microphone with the flair of a circus

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ringmaster. “I’d like to introduce you to Yungabilla’s candidate for the Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee: India Wimple!”

The audience cheered, squawked, and mooed.

India’s skin tingled even more, and she wondered why the room suddenly started to spin.

Daryl held out his arm. “Ready for your big moment?”

India desperately wanted to say no and run from the hall, but Daryl hooked his hoof around her arm before she could move. He led her past the furry crowd and onto the stage beside Dad, who was now dressed in a crocodile onesie.

Everyone quieted down.

“India Wimple,” Daryl boomed, “we in this hall would like to make a few declarations to one of our favorite families in Yungabilla and one of my favorite little girls.”

India could feel her face turn a fiery red.

Daryl pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and held one hoof on his heart. The audience did the same with their paws, flippers, and wings.

Daryl began: “We declare we will support you in your attempt to be the next Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee champion.”

“*We do!*” the audience cried.

“Because we think you’re brilliant.”

“*It’s true!*”

“And we will happily wear these onesies for as long as it takes to do it.”

*“We will!”*

“This is our declaration to you here today.”

*“Hear, hear.”*

“What do you say?” Dad asked, hope all over his face. “You want to give it another try?”

An expectant hush fell over the hall. India recognized even more faces. There was old Joe Miller the butcher, Gracie Hubbard from the café, and kids from school, all staring at her with looks of anticipation.

India hadn’t stood in front of so many people since that day when she froze onstage.

She shivered at the thought of it, but despite what she knew she should do, India found herself nodding. “OK.”

“That’s my girl!” Dad shouted. “Let the spelling bee begin!”

Cries and hoots erupted as Dad gave India one last hug before he and Daryl left the stage and took their seats in the front row.

India scowled at her brother. “I thought you were at the doctor’s.”

Boo shrugged. “We lied, but it was for a very good cause.”

India looked back at the audience settling into their seats, waiting to hear her spell. She felt a wave of sickness and whispered, “I don’t think I can do it.”

Boo smiled at his sister. “India, you know you’re my favorite

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person in the world, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, but you're wrong. You're amazing, and we want the world to know it."

"You bet your sweet patootie!" Nanna Flo said, even though India wasn't sure what a *patootie* was.

"And remember," Mom said, wearing an exaggerated grin, "a smile will make you feel better!"

India tried, but her face looked more like she'd just stubbed her toe. She would definitely need more practice to get it right.

The crowd fell into an eager silence.

"India," Boo said. "Your first word is *embarrassed*. This is an adjective meaning to be self-conscious or shy."

At that moment, Daryl stood up in his cow suit.

"If I were to use it in a sentence," Boo continued, "I could say, *Daryl was embarrassed when he tripped in front of his friends.*"

Daryl strolled in front of the audience, swinging his tail, until he fell in a spectacular, hoof-waving tumble. The audience laughed.

India smiled briefly before trying to focus on the word.

"Embarrassed," she began. "E-m-b..." She seemed to lose track and began writing on her hand. "E-m-b..."

She paused and then looked up at the onesie-wearing audience. India was surprised: it did make her feel better.

She began again with a little more confidence. "E-m-b-a-r-r-a-s-s-e-d. Embarrassed."

“That is correct!” Boo cried.

Nanna Flo rang a cowbell with gusto and shouted, “Yee-haw!” The audience went wild, but this time they pulled posters from underneath their seats that read, “You can do it, India!” and “Go, India!”



There was even a sign that said, “India for President.”

“Your next word,” Boo said, suddenly serious, “is *songstress*. This is a noun meaning a female singer.”

A woman in a koala suit stood up. India couldn’t be certain, but she thought it looked a lot like her teacher.

“Mrs. Wild?” she asked.

“Hello, dear.” She waved her paw. “When your dad asked if we



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could help you get over your jitters, we were happy to. Weren't we?" She turned to the costumed crowd around her, which India now realized were the kids from her class.

"You can do it, India!"

Boo continued. "If I used it in a sentence, I could say, *Mrs. Wild is a wonderful teacher, but sadly, she's a terrible songstress.*"

Mrs. Wild burst into a high-pitched, operatic squeal. The audience plugged their ears and groaned. Some even fell to the floor.

India giggled. "Songstress. S-o-n-g-s-t-r-e-s-s. Songstress."

"That is correct!" Boo declared.

Nanna Flo rang the cowbell. "I knew you'd nail it!"

Boo read out more words. Audience members sprang from their seats to help act out each one. There was Hector, the policeman; Lois and Edna, the grocery store owners; and Ahmed, the bus driver—all here just for her. Gradually, India felt more at ease, almost as if she were in her living room on a Friday night.

The words became harder, but India didn't flinch, right up until Boo's very last word. "*Aficionado*," he said carefully. "This is a noun meaning a person who is very knowledgeable about an activity or subject. *India was a spelling bee aficionado.*"

India looked straight into the audience, each of their hooded faces willing her to get it right. "Aficionado. A-f-i-c-i-o-n-a-d-o. Aficionado."

“Correct-o-mundo!”

Nanna Flo rang her cowbell in one continuous *clang-lang-lang*.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Boo announced, “India has spelled fifty words without one mistake.”

The crowd sprang to their feet, cheering and hugging each other in a wild animal rumpus.

Dad scrambled onto the stage, his tail flopping behind him, and knelt before India. “So what do you think? Would you like to give the competition a try?”

“Do you really think I can do it?”

“I *know* you can do it,” Dad said. “We all do. You just have to convince yourself.”

A town hall filled with friends and family was one thing, but could she be onstage, in front of an audience of strangers, with cameras broadcasting her face into the living rooms of millions of people?

Even thinking about it made her dizzy.

“Will you, India?” Daryl asked, straightening his cow horns that had drooped a little to the side. “Anytime you get nervous, just think of us.”

A gathering of birds, frogs, and bears stood beside Daryl and nodded their onesie heads. India had known most of them all her life. Each one was there just for her, waiting for her decision.

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Even though being in front of a crowd normally made her feel queasy and scared, India realized she didn't feel *completely* terrified, and that's why she answered, "OK."

This time, there was no stopping them. Everyone in the hall was dancing and throwing their wings and paws in the air.

Nanna Flo and Mom joined in the hugging, while Boo simply smiled at his sister. "See?" he asked. "You're amazing, just like I said."

For the first time since that Friday night in front of the TV, India thought she might—*just might*—have a chance of being the next Stupendously Spectacular Spelling Bee champion.