

twelve

Airwaves

WITHIN A WEEK after the article was published in *The Westfield Gazette*, the kids at the junior high and the kids at the high school had stopped using the word *pen* and had started using the word *frindle*. They loved it.

Nick became sort of a hero for kids all over town, and he quickly learned that being a hero—even if you're only a local hero—isn't a free ride. It has a price.

People noticed Nick when he walked into his dad's hardware store or when he stood in line at the Penny Pantry to buy a candy bar. He could feel it when someone recognized him, and it made him shy and awkward.

Kids at school started expecting him to be clever and funny all the time, and even for a kid as smart as Nick, that was asking a lot. Every

teacher, the office secretary, the principal, even the school nurse and the custodian, all seemed to be watching, always watching.

His parents were great about everything. True, his mom had been upset when the article first came out, and so had his dad. Nick had said, "But I didn't do anything wrong, Mom. And neither did that lady from the newspaper." And his parents could see that he was right. The things in the article were true, and the truth is the truth, and nothing could be done about it now. Even though it made them uncomfortable to have their boy talked about all over town, secretly, Nick's mom and dad were pleased. After all, a brand-new word is a pretty amazing thing. Their Nicholas was quite a fellow—no getting around it.

Someone else in town thought this brand-new word was pretty amazing, too. Bud Lawrence had lived all his life in Westfield, and when he was only nineteen years old, he had saved enough money to make an investment. He looked around for a good idea, and then bought the first Dairy Queen in the state. After a few years he bought a McDonald's restaurant. That was almost thirty years ago, and these two

restaurants had made him rich, one of Westfield's leading citizens.

When Bud Lawrence saw the article about the new word, he had his lawyer file a preliminary trademark claim on the word *frindle*. Within four days he had set up a small company that was selling cheap plastic ballpoint pens specially imprinted with the word *frindle*. He sold three thousand *frindles* the first week, and they sold so fast that stores all over Westfield couldn't keep them in stock. Then just as quickly, kids stopped asking for frindles. The sales slowed down, and Bud Lawrence started thinking about other projects.

A week later it was Halloween, the leaves started falling, and it seemed like the town was going to quiet down.

And it would have—if it hadn't been for Alice Lunderson. Alice lived in Betherly, a town seven miles away from Westfield, and she worked part time for the local CBS-TV station in Carrington, a town of about 75,500 people.

When there was important area news—disasters like floods or tornadoes—or sometimes if she came across little stories that seemed cute or original, Alice would call the

station news manager in Carrington. If it was a good story or if it was a day when not much else was happening in the world, then the TV station would send out a van with a camera crew to shoot some videotape.

Alice subscribed to all the small-town newspapers in the area to keep up with local events. Most of them were published on Thursday, and they arrived at her house by Monday or Tuesday. Then it took her a day or so to look through them all. On Wednesday morning she finally saw the article in *The Westfield Gazette* about the word war. She read it through twice, and looked carefully at the class photograph. She was sure that this story was a winner.

The TV station manager in Carrington agreed with her. He called the CBS station in Boston, because sometimes Boston picked up stories from the Carrington newsroom. The woman in Boston thought the story had some real zip to it, so she called the network news editor in New York.

When the fax of *The Westfield Gazette* article got to New York, the staff there loved it. They looked over the schedule sheet for the week and decided it would be the perfect clos-

ing story for the CBS evening news for the next day, Thursday. Orders flew back through the telephone links from New York to Boston to Carrington to Betherly. By Wednesday at noon, Alice had a "go" order to take the story all the way. It was her first piece to get onto the national news, and twenty million viewers would see it.

Alice Lunderson and her camera crew stood on Mrs. Granger's front porch Wednesday after school. Mrs. Granger was not impressed at all by the lights and the microphones. She looked right into the camera and said, "I have always said that the dictionary is the finest tool ever made for educating young minds, and I still say that. Children need to understand that there are rules about words and language, and that those rules have a history that makes sense. And to pretend that a perfectly good English word can be replaced by a silly made-up word just for the fun of it, well, it's not something I was ready to stand by and watch without a fight."

"And have you lost that fight, Mrs. Granger?" asked the reporter.

Mrs. Granger turned her eyes up to nearly full power as she looked into the camera, and

with a pale smile she said, "It's not over yet."

When Alice and the crew showed up at Nick's house, the Allen family was ready for them. Mom and Dad sat on the couch with Nick between them. Nick squinted into the lights. His mom had worked out with Nick what he could say and what he couldn't say. "You remember, young man," she had told him as she combed his hair, "these reporters are just looking for a quick story that will make some excitement. But you have to stay here and live in this town. So mind your Ps and Qs."

As they sat there on the couch, Mrs. Allen had her foot on top of Nick's under the coffee table, and if she pushed down, it meant that the reporter had just asked a question that she was going to answer for him. Mrs. Allen did not trust reporters.

"So tell me, Nick, why did you make up this new word, *frindle*?" asked Alice Lunderson.

Nick gulped and said, "Well, my teacher Mrs. Granger said that all the words in the dictionary were made up by people, and that they mean what they mean because we say they do. So I thought it would be fun to just make up a new word and see if that was true."

“And were you surprised when Mrs. Granger got mad about that?” asked Alice with a smile.

There was a push on Nick’s foot and his mother said, “We never felt that Mrs. Granger got angry. When everyone started using the word *frindle*, it just got to be a disruption, that’s all. She’s really a very fine teacher.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “I mean, I learned a lot about words, and without her, I wouldn’t have.”

“So what’s next for you and the new word?” Alice was wrapping it up. She could see that Nick and his parents were not going to be pushed into saying anything controversial. So she just kept it light and happy.

“Well,” said Nick, “the funny thing is, even though I invented it, it’s not my word anymore. *Frindle* belongs to everyone now, and I guess everyone will figure out what happens together.”

Alice also had a short chat with a worried looking Mrs. Chatham, and a smiling Bud Lawrence, maker of the official *frindle*. Then she shot her opening bit and her closing bit, and the camera crew drove back to Carrington to edit all the pieces and put them together into a two-minute news story.

The next night, when all the serious news about wars and oil prices and world food supplies had been talked about on the CBS evening news, the anchorman looked into the camera and smiled.

He said, "It is believed by many that the word *quiz* was made up in 1791 by a Dublin theater manager named Daly. He had bet someone that he could invent a brand-new word in the English language, and he chalked up the letters *q-u-i-z* onto every wall and building in town. The next morning, there it was, and within a week people all over Ireland were wondering what it could mean—and a new word had been created. *Quiz* is the only word in English that was invented by one person for no particular reason—that is until now. Now there is a new word, *frindle*, and here is Alice Lunderson in Westfield, New Hampshire, with the story."

Alice came on the screen with a short introduction. Then, right there on TV, Mrs. Granger and Nick and Bud Lawrence and Nick's mom were talking to twenty million people about frindles.

One of those twenty million people was a producer for the *Late Show with David*

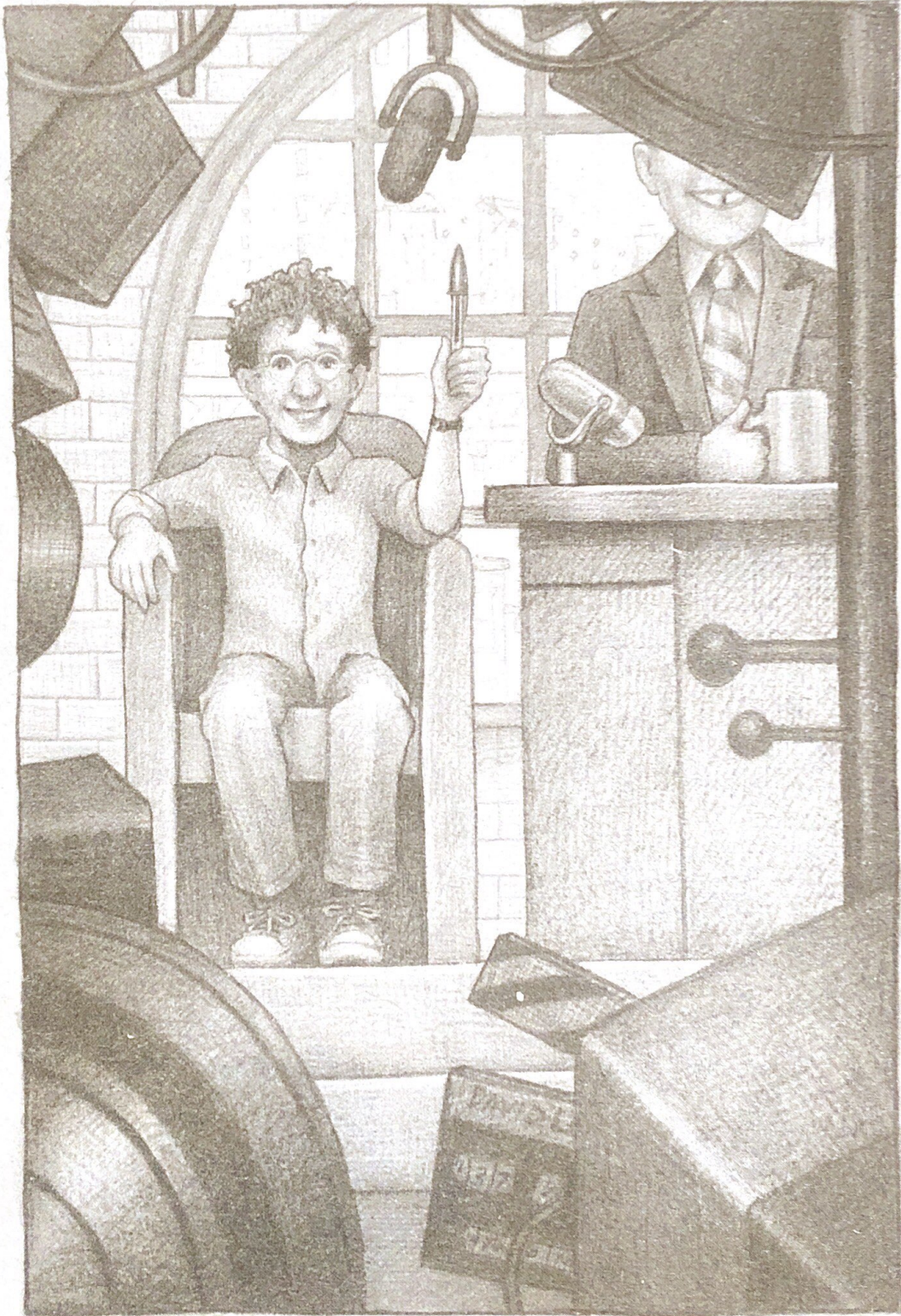
Letterman. And another one of those twenty million people was a staff writer for *People* magazine, and another one was a writer for *3-2-1 Contact* magazine for kids. Dozens of other writers and producers and marketing people saw that story on the news—and all of them smelled a great story.

During the next three weeks every man, woman, and child in America heard about this funny new word that kids were using instead of the word *pen*. And kids in Ohio and Iowa and New York and Texas and California started using it, too.

Bud Lawrence was suddenly flooded with orders for anything with the word *frindle* on it, and he quickly got interested again. But there were complications.

Bud's lawyer said, "You see that stack of orders there? Trouble. That's what that is. We got a trademark filed, but it's only like an application. The whole country knows that that little kid made up the word, and unless you make a deal with his dad, you're going to end up with nothing—maybe even a big fat lawsuit. That kid owns that word."

When Mr. Allen came home at lunchtime,



America heard about this funny new word

his wife told him that he had to call Bud Lawrence. "It's something about the new word."

This was not good news to Tom Allen. He was sick and tired of all the fuss. And being away from the hardware store so much while all this nonsense was happening had put him weeks behind on his paperwork. He'd be lucky now to get his Christmas order in time.

Even though he didn't really want anything to do with it, Bud was an old friend. So on the way back to the store, Nick's dad went to Bud Lawrence's office.

"Tom—good to see you," said Bud. He stood up and walked around his desk to shake hands. "Have a seat." Tom sat down uneasily, and Bud pulled another chair over. "Ever seen Westfield so stirred up about anything in your life? You and Ginny must be pretty proud of . . . that boy of yours." Bud couldn't remember Nick's name.

Tom shifted in his chair and nodded. "Yes, he's quite something, that's for sure. But I tell you, Bud, I'm ready for it all to just die down and blow away—too much fuss."

Instantly, Bud saw how to get what he wanted. "Well, Tom, I'm afraid it's not really going to go away. Looks like something's started up, and

people are real interested. You probably saw those bright red ballpoints around town with the word *frindle* on 'em? That was my doing. Just testing the waters. But your boy, he owns that word. I got my lawyer to apply for a trademark a few weeks back, because that's just the way I am. New thing comes along, I like to be right there in the middle of it." He grinned at Tom Allen, and Tom smiled back weakly.

"Right now, I got a shirt printer in Massachusetts and another one in Chicago and another one in Los Angeles making T-shirts with the word *frindle* above a picture of a pen—I mean a frindle. Each supplier has orders so far for over twenty thousand shirts. Profit on every one of those is going to be two, maybe three dollars. And I'm talking with some big pen and pencil companies in Hong Kong and Japan about a deal that could be worth some really big money. They've seen this frindle thing in the media, and they want to buy the rights to the trademark and make a new line of frindles for kids. I'm not kidding—this is a hot, hot idea!"

Bud guessed right. Just the thought of all this made Tom shrink back uncomfortably in his chair. It was way too much fuss.

"Tom, let me be direct with you. As the boy's guardian, you need to do the right thing about all this. I'd like to see where all this is going to go. I'm going to take some risks, spend some money, see what happens. But I need your permission. I need your signature on these trademark papers, and I need to strike a deal with you about permission to use that trademark. I know it seems like a big ruckus about a word, but we just can't tell what's to come of it unless we take some steps." Bud pointed at the papers on his desk. "That's a contract, and it's fair and honest. It gives your boy thirty percent of whatever profits I might make. That's a fair royalty, generous for this kind of deal. So what do you say—make sense? Let me take care of all the fuss, and see if some good doesn't maybe come of it all?" The papers and a pen were there on the desk next to Tom.

He looked at Bud, then reached over, picked up the pen, and signed both copies of the trademark papers and three copies of the contract. "I've got no reason to doubt you one bit, Bud, and I sure don't want to mess with any of this myself. Is that it?" he asked, standing up.

"Not quite, Tom. Here." Then Bud Lawrence

handed Nick's dad a check for \$2,250.

"What's this for?"

"That's what I owe Nick for the sales of frindles from the first three weeks," explained Bud with a smile.

Tom looked at the check and said, "This is terrific, Bud, and I'm really glad about it because it'll sure help with Nick's college. But I wish you'd just keep this between us. If Nick knew, he'd probably stop mowing lawns and I'd never get him to save another penny. So just between us, okay?"

Bud said, "Sure, Tom, I understand. Just between us." And they shook hands.

Mr. Allen left Bud's office and walked across the street to the savings bank. He set up a trust account for Nick, and the bank manager said he could make arrangements with Mr. Lawrence so any other money would be deposited automatically. That sounded good to Tom Allen. If he never heard another word about it, that would be fine.

As Nick's dad walked slowly back to the hardware store, he wondered if things were ever going to be the same again in his quiet little town.